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Transferring Experiences from a Photography Practice Research PhD Study into a Creative Practice-Teaching Context

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on the transferability of the experience of completing a practice-based, as well as the findings of this PhD into my current teaching context in relation to recent developments and relevant literature. While my own study might have made several contributions to my field, and to my own personal development, I critically examine the scope and scale of my final PhD submission in relation to requirements stipulated by various South African institutions that are currently offering PhDs in visual arts and design, as well as recently awarded practice-based (or practice-led) studies in these fields. With this paper I develop a strategy for guiding and developing future practice-based doctoral, master's and even undergraduate studies in art and design based on Candy and Edmunds' (2011) notion of the practitioner framework that guides the making processes; provides a way to articulate the contribution made through practice and eventually also forms part of the contribution to the field in itself.

Keywords: Practice-based research, practice-led research, creative practice research, supervision, transferability

Introduction

The direction of PhD research I embarked on was primarily influenced by a desire to add value to my teaching within a Photography practice program (De Klerk 2019, p. 414). In the final PhD thesis I wrote that, "the practice-based methodology presented the best way to contribute to the field in which I teach and work, namely photography practice, because it offered an intermedial and more multidimensional approach to my engagement with theoretical knowledge, aesthetic sensitivity and technological mastery I subsequently looked for a research problem and research questions within my own experiences as practitioner" (De Klerk 2019, p. 414).

In this paper, I reflect on experiences of completing practice-based research (PbR) PhD in light of progress made in recent years regarding postgraduate qualifications and research that incorporates creative practice in South Africa. The purpose of this reflection is to trace the transferable aspects of my research process into teaching and supervised practice. I aim to develop such practice for future implementation in creative practice education with its growing importance and impact in the economies of developing countries such as South Africa, according to Peters (2012, p. vii–viii). Allpress, Barnacle, Duxbury and Grierson (2012, p. 1) maintain that creative practice research is gaining in importance and impact globally, and that "creative and applied knowledge is defining and leading cultural, scientific, technological and creative economies" in this global context. Developing strategies to guide students towards contributing to this development in South Africa, therefore, is becoming imperative, and should be worked towards from undergraduate level up to PhD research.

Towards the aims stated above, I first highlight some of the progress made towards validating 'creative and applied knowledge' as quoted above. I do this through a short review of relevant literature. By further providing a brief overview of PhD qualifications and some master's-level qualifications in South Africa that make allowance for creative practice-based methodologies, as well as considering some completed creative PhD studies I situate the present discussion within the current context. In this discussion, I focus on the structures and requirements rather than specific content.

I then consider two related challenges that remain for creative research as recurring themes in recent literature on creative research. The first theme revolves around the inconsistencies in how especially 'practice-based' and 'practice-led' research are used. Here I support Schroeder's proposal to use the over-arching term, 'practice-research' (PR) instead of in relation to a brief outline my own PhD study. The second theme relates to the challenge of articulating the knowledge contribution in the writing component. I develop Candy and Edmunds' notion of the practitioner framework towards assisting with this articulation and further argue that the term PR would be better suited for most creative research studies that have been completed through South African universities within the past five years.

Background and survey of literature

Throughout this article, I use the first person 'I' to emphasise the situatedness of knowledge involved in PbR studies, even as this situatedness builds up towards intersubjective understanding or insights that are so valuable to creative practitioners. For the purposes of this study I use the definition of practice-based and practice-led research developed by Candy and Edmunds (2018, p. 64) as follows: "If a creative artifact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based; If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practise, it is practice-led".

An important publication, titled *Supervising Practices for Postgraduate Research in Art, Architecture and Design* (Allpress & Barnacle, 2012), indicates the scope of creative research across all creative disciplines from performance to creative writing, sound, design and architecture. In this publication, the complexity of supervising in this context is highlighted. Within this remarkable diversity of projects, these forms of research seem especially daunting. Newer developments, exemplified by Candy and Edmunds' pragmatic approach, however, are presenting a much more settled structure, even though innovation is still encouraged.

The recent South African publication on PhD supervision, *Strengthening Postgraduate Supervisio*n (Clarence-Fincham, Boughey, Mckenna, Wels & Van den Heuvel 2017), is notable here because it includes creative approaches and methodologies, which is an indication that research in creative practice is moving closer to the mainstream and enjoying greater validation across academic spheres.

A further encouraging development is the recent approval of the Policy on the Evaluation of Creative Outputs and Innovations Produced By Public Higher Education Institutions (2017) for subsidy, which provides motivation for further innovation through creative practices beyond master's and PhD studies and also provides a way for practitioners-academics to gain recognition for their work if they continue with their text-based after their qualifications are obtained.

In their 2018 article, Candy and Edmunds provide a clear overview of practice-based research towards PhD qualifications that they were involved with over more than 35 years. The structure and guidelines developed by Candy and Edmunds, especially through their involvement with the Creative Cognition Studio (CCS) seem to have influenced the majority of creative PhD offerings in South Africa which allow for the production of creative work to be a significant aspect of the doctoral submission, and would then also require a written supporting document or 'exegesis' of a minimum of 40 000 words. The University of Kwazulu Natal's (UKZN) PhD in Digital Arts is the exception in that they require a minimum of 70 000 words, even for PbR studies with substantial creative components.

In general, no specific differentiation is made in the various PhD guidelines between PhD projects in the creative arts based on specific methodologies. The trend seems to be for departments to offer options within the same qualification, such as either PhD by thesis or by a combination of shorter a thesis and creative work within a variety of disciplines. Based on information provided online, universities that follow this trend include the University of Stellenbosch, University of the Witwatersrand, Vaal University of Technology, UKZN School of Arts, Michaelis School of Art (UCT), as well as the Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture (UJ) in no particular order. This example from Stellenbosch University (2019) serves as illustration:

> Doctoral degrees in the arts are research degrees culminating in a dissertation. The study as a whole can consist of theoretical work, or it can be the results of an integrated study of the creative processes and theoretical work, which are reported in a dissertation. The unique nature of the integrated option is derived from the coherence and interdependency of the study of the creative process and theoretical dimensions of the research leading to an original contribution to knowledge and insight into the arts.

This seeming consensus among most universities as to what constitutes a PbR PhD in creative fields and the growing number of universities that regard PbR as an accepted methodology is a positive development that has had the result of shortening the study periods (three to five years) and instilling confidence in prospective candidates. The growing number of practitioner-researchers with PhD qualifications in a variety of creative fields (even if mostly under a fine arts or general visual arts qualification) has expanded the supervision capacity available in South Africa and in turn, encourages the development of PbR skills on undergraduate level.

Although this level of consensus has positive effects on creative practice education at the moment, Brook (2012, p. 1) cautions that academics should not become too complacent. Brook raises "a concern that the notion of practice-led research had achieved something like a 'practical consensus' within university creative arts programs, and that this consensus was increasingly counter-productive for the field". Brook thereby calls for a continual critique of practice-led approaches. The current level of consensus, however, would hopefully encourage a greater number of studies, which will also serve to strengthen the field.

Even in light of the progress outlined above, PbR remains a challenging methodology. In the following section, I focus on two specific challenges that are recurring themes in recent literature.

Remaining challenges: selected recurring themes

Although there are many challenging aspects of a PbR study, I focus here on two related themes that I experienced in my own research process, and with which students that I work with also have difficulty.

Terms and definitions

Although Candy and Edmonds differentiate very clearly between PbR and PlR as mentioned earlier, these terms are interchangeable in some countries, and many more terms exist to describe more or less the same things (Candy & Edmonds, 2018; Schroeder 2015; Skains, 2018; Stewart, 2016, p. xi, among others). For the sake of brevity, I will not repeat a discussion of all these terms but instead focus on the terms that are most prevalent in South Africa, namely PbR and PlR. I find the emphasis on the difference between these terms problematic because, in my research experience and in several PbR/PlR PhD studies that have been completed within the past five years, aspects of both occur.

My experience is that there is always an aspect of the contribution that comes from the textual part of the submission that can stand without the practice, as well as from the practice, which when articulated in the text-based submission, cannot stand without the practice. It has mostly been accepted that for practical purposes, the practice cannot stand without the text-based part. In my experience, the dichotomy between the two is starting to erode, and multimodality and even multi-mediality and inter-mediality are emerging as a typical characteristic of creative PhDs.

Schroeder proposes an over-arching term to include different ways in which practice can play a role in research, namely Practice research. Schroeder argues that practice and research need to be brought closer together without equating the one with the other. As she puts it, "rather than thinking of a delineated and bipolar way of practice on one side and research on the other, referring in unnecessary apologetic ways to Practice as …, Performance as …, Practice-based …, Practice-led …, Practice as Research in Performance […] I want to suggest that we refer more resolutely to Practice Research […] and in that way deny elevating research over practice, but indeed, that we put to practice before research" (Schroeder 2015, p. 245). The term 'Practice research' also has the advantage that it can easily be differentiated by specifying the field of practice in front of the term as is already being done by authors such as Skains (2018, p. 84) when she refers to "practice-based methodologies in creative practice research". In this way, the terms PbR and PlR and possibly others become methodologies within the overarching context of practice-research. Candy and Edmunds agree that it is counterproductive to equate practice with research as is implied with the term 'practice as research'. According to them, "the danger of conflating the two activities leads to misconceptions about both and gives rise to much misunderstanding about what practice-based research really is" (Candy & Edmunds 2018, pp. 63–64). Another advantage of this term is that it acknowledges that various methods and strategies are often combined in creative PhD studies, that result in knowledge contributions of different kinds, expressed in a variety of modes and media, including writing, or the textual component of the submission. The term 'Practice research' furthermore does not exclude the multiple disciplines such as healthcare, theology and education, into which this approach has made inroads since the 1970s (Schroeder 2015, p. 343).

One of the aspects of practice research that requires articulation in words is the 'practitioner framework' (PF), which is a term that was first used by Candy and Edmunds in 2010. Although this term, with its combination of 'practitioner' and 'framework', has the disadvantage of these words being associated with practitioner enquiry and specifically action research, which perhaps makes it too general, this same generality is also an advantage because it corresponds with the fact that both practice-based and practice-led research occurs within a diverse array

of fields outside of arts and design contexts. Indeed, action research as method is often incorporated into creative PbR and PlR projects.

Articulating the contribution

Another challenging theme is the articulation of the research or knowledge contribution made through creative practice. As formulated by Candy and Edmunds, the practitioner framework is useful throughout the research process, and particularly towards the stage where the practitioner framework itself can be articulated as an aspect of the contribution, as well as becoming an evaluation framework which then also assists the researcher in articulating what the research does, how it shifts concepts; processes; thinking (Bolt 2016, p. 141).

According to Bolt (2016, p. 136), knowledge that originates from arts practice is "a particular form of understanding that is realised through practice – our dealings with ideas, tools and materials of production (including our bodies) in practice". Yet, she maintains, it remains difficult to articulate because it cannot be tested immediately. The full impact of new forms of expression can often only be realised after a while (Bolt 2016, p. 141). We need to ask what the research does rather than trying to explicate what the works mean. In the following section, I develop Candy and Edmunds' idea of the practitioner framework a little further.

The practitioner framework

> When practitioners carry out research in parallel with making works, they engage in a process of developing frameworks that guide their practice and the evaluation of the outcomes of that practice, i.e. artefacts that are submitted along with a written text (Candy & Edmonds 2011, p. 127).

Candy and Edmunds describe the practitioner framework as "a conceptual structure that is used to influence practice, inform theory and, in particular, shape validation or evaluation" (Candy & Edmonds 2011, p. 126). In my own experience, however, the practitioner framework should not only be a conceptual framework but also can include a set of practical guidelines. As such, the practitioner framework can guide every step of the research, but importantly also develops and evolves through every stage (Candy & Edmonds 2011, p. 130). Because it evolves in this way, it is an important result of the research process that is potentially the most easily transferable aspect of PR. Transferability as a criterion for good research is of particular importance in PR studies. According to Jensen (2008, p. 886), "in transferability, it is the researcher's responsibility to paint a full picture of the context and then allow the reader to determine if the work is transferable to their context". Within the context of developing a practitioner framework for PR, it would then be the researcher's responsibility to map the development of the practitioner framework and ensure that each aspect is well motivated and justified. Therefore, it is imperative that such a framework is made explicit and shared as part of the textual component of the study (Candy & Edmonds 2011, p. 131).

The development of a practitioner framework Starts with identifying a problem (often from within the researcher's prior experience as a practitioner) and the research question, but because the practitioner framework needs to evolve continuously, the research question also needs to be revisited. Skains proposes that it be revisited at least twice after it is first formulated. Once after the 'literature review' or 'state of the art survey', to make sure that it is still a relevant question, and again after the practice has been developed to an advanced stage to determine whether engaging with the practice changed the problems and questions. Skains also proposes that an important step in developing the research question is to introduce a difficulty or an unfamiliar element (Skains 2018, p. 88) that pushes the practitioner to operate outside of what they are already comfortable with. This 'difficulty' and how it is handled then also becomes an aspect of the practitioner framework.

In my own study, I was able to use such a framework developed by Bren Unwin (2008) (although she did not use this term) which I could then build on and develop in my own research practice into a new practitioner framework. When I started contemplating possible areas of research towards a PhD qualification, a key factor that influenced my decision making was to consider what kind of research would add value to my role as lecturer in a photography course that focuses on practice. The practice-based methodology presented the best way to contribute to the field in which I teach and work, namely photography practice, because it offered an intermedial and more multidimensional approach to my engagement with theoretical knowledge, aesthetic sensitivity and technological mastery. I subsequently looked for a research problem and research questions within my own experiences as practitioner. A good place to start with the development of a practitioner framework is to describe one's own prior practice, as proposed in an earlier article (Doman & Laurie 2010).

With my own PhD study, which explores landscape photography practice, I structured it as two phases that I then consolidated in a final concluding chapter. The first phase dealt with the act of photographing and the second phase dealt with the presentation and exhibition of the work. Although I worked with an overarching research question and aim, each phase required its own more specific question that required its own theoretical investigation, creative processes and form of literature review (even though there is no specific literature review chapter, which seems to be a trend in South African PhDs).

While writing the second phase of the study, I started realising that the first phase served to develop a framework for the curatorial process I engaged in the second phase. Through the interaction of the act of photographing, and reflecting on this act in relation to theory, I developed a framework for my curatorial process. The actual process of developing a statement of intent or practitioner's framework is non-linear and is revisited continuously as the creative outputs take shape.

Effective results within the performative research paradigm rely on the transformative power of art and its function as catalyst for 'movement in thought': doing something in the world, rather than just providing an exegesis of existing works (Bolt 2016, p. 142). As Bolt (2002, p. 141) confirmed, "these shifts or movements are not confined to, or unique to, artistic research, however, it is imperative that artistic research is able to argue its claim to new knowledge, or rather new ways of knowing". The methods and strategies of PbR, however, cannot guarantee sufficient conceptual shifts or change, which is often only realised over time. For this reason, the mapping of the research process and *potential* impact is essential, and the development of a practitioner framework plays a central role in this mapping process. It is also through the development of such a framework that values and criteria for evaluation of the project are identified and refined.

Figure 4: Installation view of *Telling Places* exhibition as installed at the Bodutu Art Gallery, Vaal University of Technology, from 4 to 10 May 2018. (The full exhibition documentation can be viewed at www.annekedeklerkphotography.co.za.)

The practitioner framework for *Telling Places* (Figure 1) eventually consisted of a premise that summarised a set of six guiding principles that informed the development of further selection strategies, spatial arrangement strategies, strategies for display technology selection and implementation and the development of written elements that contextualised the works within the exhibition (Figure 2). The premise mentioned above reads as follows:

> Landscape photographs are telling and 'tell' places in that they are a chronicling of the photographer's emplacement, which constitutes a crossing of body and world but also continue to come about through the particular co-constitutive relationships and tensions between human (photographer and by extension, exhibition visitor), technologies, and environment, thus highlighting the tensions and struggles involved in looking at, experiencing, and documenting land which also emplaces the viewer (De Klerk 2019, p. 332).
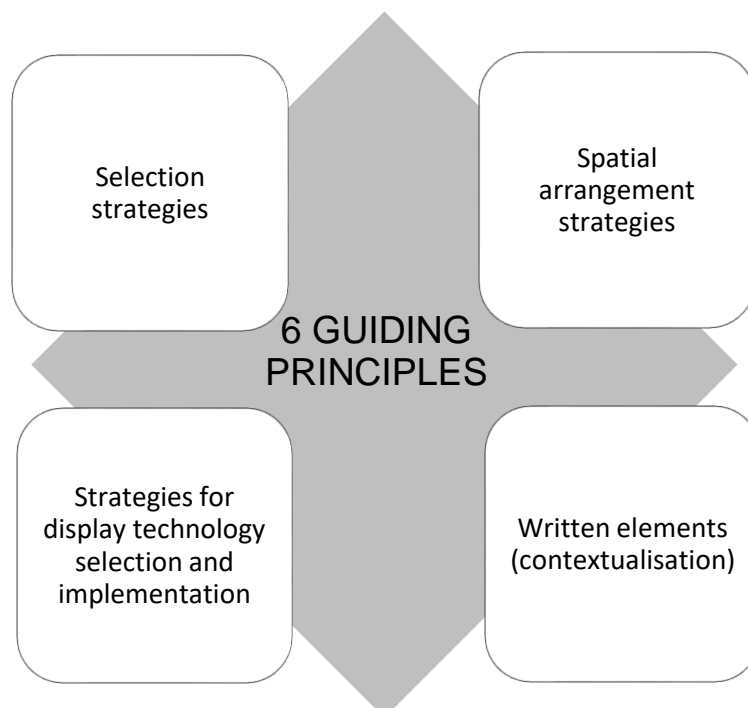

Figure 5: Structure of Practitioner Framework of *Telling Places*

From my own experience, I can confirm Candy and Edmonds' (2011) statement that the practitioner's framework and the practice develop together. In this sense, the making process functioned as method, data, and aspect of the result as it evolved through various stages of the study. By reviewing theoretical perspectives, photographing, and reviewing the photographing and theory in relation to each other, the development of a customised practitioner framework was the result of a discursive process between theory and practice. The framework for this study was developed with the purpose of applying it in the curation of the creative work developed in which in turn contributed to its development and eventually became the evaluative framework. This framework can also now be implemented in initiating future landscape-photography practice, and through further PR it can be modified and more refined.

The evaluative approach that Candy and Edmonds (2011) propose does not merely ask whether the artwork produced is good or bad art, but this does not mean that the categories of 'good' or 'bad' art are irrelevant. It merely means that the criteria used to evaluate art is more concerned with categories like open-endedness, inclusivity, multimodality, self-awareness than 'mere' form or content. Within PbR, art becomes part of a continuous discursive process. The research processes that are not normally part of the artist's processes now become part of the making process and therefore change the results.

Conclusions

In this article, I argued that the term PR is more suitable for the kinds of PhD studies that have been done in South Africa in the past five years. This term acknowledges that various methods form part of creative PhDs, and it also validates both the creative works that are produced and aspects of the textual submission as potential new knowledge contributions. I further then propose that the practitioner framework is an important and useful aspect of this new knowledge and emphasises the transferability of PR results.

However, if this notion of the practitioner framework is to be applied in the supervision of undergraduate research and higher levels of study, one would have to guide the development of such frameworks to ensure that it stimulates the appropriate level of thinking and making for each qualification. This scaffolding needs to be developed in future research, most likely making use of various forms of Practice Research.

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