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In Search of a Wisdom-Seeking Creative Research Approach: Intimacy, creativity and rasa

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Abstract

Despite the development of Practice-Led Research (PLR) to acknowledge the centrality of practice in the pursuit of research outcomes, the methodology still seems to be confined by the necessity to separate out the cognitive/conscious processes (of writing, for example) from the phenomenological and body/mind dynamics at play in the creative process. This confinement seems to be a product of duality or a binary research system as espoused in the West. The central thesis of this paper, therefore, is to attempt to demonstrate a potential strategy that circumvents or collapses this dichotomy. This paper sets a triadic relationship between/among practice-led research, Kasulis' (2002) theorising of intimacy in understanding, and the eastern philosophy of Rasa, in the pursuit of wisdom.

Keywords: Rasa, practice-led research (PLR), neuroscience, creative process

Introduction

The advent of Practice-Led Research (PLR) over the last decade or so has led to the actual creative process becoming central to the research process. In this, the designers, with their own abilities, training, philosophical and theoretical context, political and cultural positionings, gender and race situational views and related idiosyncratic identity has centralised the design process in research. Nevertheless, the demands of research itself has opened up a duality between, in simplistic terms, offering solutions to a problem that design procedures engage in, and the necessity to find some way of documenting the process, justifying (or explaining) the process and offering some form of 'finding transferability' that might arise from the creative act. Instead of the final design manifesting as the findings, the necessity for the justification act can also be seen to guide the process of problem resolution, resulting in a dualistic, visual-to-verbal-and-back-again dichotomy.

This 'dual thinking' demand runs the risk of the potential alienation of the one side of the creative equation from the other. Following Hatchuel and Weil (2003) and others, this split between conceptualisation and knowledge generation/justification, as captured in their C-K

notions of design, can be argued to be deeply embedded in a Western approach to problem engagement and solution-seeking in design. This paper suggests that this alienation can be obviated by an approach that is monistic in its conceptualisation and can be found in the Eastern philosophy and practice of Rasa.

To make this argument, I first open up the tensions between such a Western, dualistic approach to dealing with problems, and an Eastern, monistic approach. To do this, I turn to the work of Kasulis (2002) and his understanding of a Western, duality manifested integrity model of dealing with the world, and the Eastern, monist, intimacy model of engagement with and in the world. Following this, I outline the precepts and dynamics of Rasa and then proceed to suggest ways in which Rasa can operate in the field of design. I suggest that the 'bridge' between the two approaches can be conceptualised through an understanding of neuroscience, as several neuroscientists have made this argument.

I speculate, therefore, that Rasa can be a process, a strategy, an underpinning and the like to be used as a way of 'rediscovering' the fields of the unknown in pursuit of new wisdom (the supposed hallmark of research objectives. A pursuit that is, by its very nature, emergent, iterative and creative (Hallam & Ingold 2007) and therefore the domain of practice-led research. As such, the potential contributions to new knowledge lie in engaging in the possible efficacies of the interweave of the processes, and in fostering the notion of transferability.

I start this journey by drawing on a central Kasulis metaphor from his book titled *Intimacy or Integrity Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (2002, p. 68) the role of salt and water in seawater, and sand and water where shore and sea meet. When salt and water are mixed, the one is dissolved and appears no longer to be salt. They have become one, inseparable, displaying an act of intimacy. If one removes the salt from the seawater, it is no longer seawater. In the act of becoming seawater, salt is no longer salt, and seawater is no longer water. To attempt to deal with each aspect individually loses the very essence of seawater – seawater suffers loss in analysis, dissection and duality. Its 'seawaterness' exists after dissection only as a memory, so to speak. However, in the case of where the sand of the shore meets the sea, the shore influences sea flows, currents, energies and the like, and the sea influences shorelines, shapes, intensities and the like, yet the sand and sea retain their individual identities of self-sufficiency and purity. Separation does no 'damage' to either entity. Although they influence each other they are discrete and maintain their integrity (to a large extent, although an argument can be made about the power of the sea to erode the sand particles – no metaphor is complete).

This metaphor or analogy opens the duality of 'practice' as 'research', in that, seen separately, the West has traditionally seen 'practice' as the 'work in the studio' and 'research' as 'the work in the laboratory', so to speak. These two working methods seem to need to maintain their integrity, although, of course, the results in each case, speak to and engage with the other, yet, upon 'retreat', the 'studio' delivers product or conceptualisation, and the 'laboratory' delivers knowledge. Both can exist without the other. Given this position, how might this be changed so that the studio *is* the laboratory, the product *is* the knowledge, the practice *is* the research? In other words, how can one 'intimately collapse' the duality into a monist sense of creative being in the world? I suggest that Rasa provides this opportunity and strategy.

Integrity and intimacy in research

Kasulis (2002) explains the integrity mode as independent of emotions, sentiments or feelings – a sense of objectivity (or, in this argument, two sets of subjectivities that interact objectively, to be able to retreat, their subjectivity intact). Kasulis identifies integrity and intimacy as generalisations or heuristic patterns. Integrity is described as something that retains its wholeness, is self-sufficient, pure and impersonal. Kasulis further describes integrity as seeking

objectivity through external verification where the 'truth' is verified by the five senses and in this Kasulis, through his heuristic model, provides another avenue on how we see, think and interpret the world we work and live in. The cognitive changes that occur transform from inspiration to desired outcomes, transcending both the physical and mental. Knowledge is gained through the dualistic, objectivity-driven, disembodied and discrete, integrity model (of the West).

Kasulis's intimacy lens focuses on the knowledge of seeking objectivity (seen as 'wholeness') through assimilation of emotion, experience and holistic analysis of the phenomenon itself in the 'coming into existence of the phenomenon'. The intimacy orientation engages with the heart of the human being and how we see and interpret/engage with/operate in the world. The Intimacy model, therefore, speaks of the interweaving of everything, of Yin and Yang, because if you remove Yin, there is no Yang. As Kasulis argues, separation or discreteness brings loss and the loss of intimacy, where intimacy can be seen as a persistent moving forward of and toward the emergence of subject formation. Tentatively, this approach acknowledges and settles into the 'seeming' of the past through memory, embeds its being in the present and celebrates the promise of becoming in the future. As a narrative journey, it fosters the inseparability of the designer and the design, the context as an intimate whole in the process of making, and therefore, and inevitably, it locates me as designer in the emerging and renewing hybrid self in the processes of subject formation. It also, inevitably, embraces empathetically, the presence of those for whom the design is to be used in the pursuit of flourishing. Thus, it becomes extraordinarily difficult to shed my intimate design presence to take on my/an 'intimate' research presence, for example. Furthermore, because design is, by its very nature, intimately involved with those for whom and with whom the design is 'made', it becomes futile to exclude them from the process.

Introducing Rasa

(Before proceeding to a discussion on Rasa, two matters need to be clarified. Firstly, much will be made of the presence of the 'emotions' in the matter. Through neuroscience, as discussed below, one is aware that the primary emotions are the driving forces of cognitive activity and the regulation of being in the world, and so the use of the term in this paper is embedded in that definition. 'Feelings' are the conscious realisations – both in terms of manifestations and in terms of conscious recognition – of the emotional drives. Therefore, 'emotions' can be seen to be closer to 'life forces' than feelings. Secondly, in an ironic twist to this paper, much of the describers of Rasa who operate close to the source of Rasa, have been compelled, in their writing about Rasa, to take on the dualistic, Western, objective language usage that is, therefore, often problematic because it cannot, almost by obvious implication, capture the 'essence of an emotion'. In this regard, I am aware that my own effort, in this paper, is laden with the same 'flattened and flattening' potential!)

Rasa is metaphorically defined as sap, juice or nectar to refined connotations of desire, love and beauty that evolved into the intellectual sophistication, and reflected as a life-resonating force or energy (Prasad 1994; Nair 2007; Kumar 2015). Rasa is defined by Kumar (2015) in his web article *Rasa theory and its application in translation with reference to Shakuntala of Kalidas* as "the structural analysis of the totality of human experience and behaviour, and is based on the conception of experience, being knowledge and cognitive mechanisms". The argument is that cognition emerges through/following the act of experiencing. Whereas cognition (concrete realisation, in both senses of the word 'realisation', that is, 'bringing forth' and 'making conscious') is sentiment/feeling-based (see the section on neuroscience, below), exploratory expressive actions are driven through the emotions (or life-forces). Rasa is translated (problematically) as a 'sentiment' or 'mood' and *bhava* as an emotion or feeling (also problematically). The difference between the artist/designer and the aesthetic is that the

artist is embedded in experience-driven action, whereas the aesthetic is traditionally seen as perception. Following Kasulis, however, aesthetics in Rasa should also be seen as an action-driven experience. Thus, this creative, emergent, cognitive and/or emotion-driven experience is metaphorised as the sap or juice that spills into and ‘fills up’ the ultimate metaphysical experience of attaining a sense of an elevated state of consciousness. Rasa’s strategic creative focus is on the three main areas of design and meaning-making, firstly **form** (the world, the shapes of the world, the designerly shapes in the world, the world as designerly shape, my form as designer/a design as and in the world, and so on), secondly the **experience** (the action, moving in and through time and form, driven and energised by emotion/bhava/the life forces), and thirdly the **meaning** (ever emergent, contextual, present and shaping). Phenomenology and Rasa engage with the human, lived experience, a search for and through the senses including awareness and reflection and encoding/decoding of the emotion to understand or be in the moment of design practice.

Drawing closer to the (Western dichotomy of) designer and ‘the act of designing’, I define Rasa emotion as an expressive state during an interaction. Rasa requires the designer to connect the outside atmosphere/world/experience of all to a deep-seated inside emotional connection, and this transformation is considered to enunciate the elements of beauty (wellbeing) and sense of joy in a subject formation. This inside/outside connection has an almost symbiotic relationship shared between the artist/designer and their work. The philosophy embraces how art universalises emotions, making them a channel of appeal to those for whom is designed. The designer, the designed and the observer mould/transform together in the moment of emotion-driven, interaction. Western philosophy defines this as a moment of supreme empathy brought about by an emergence in (a) shared experience. According to Bhat (1984, n.p.), Rasa can be presented and “interpreted as an intense emotional experience revealed through certain structures, leading to an awareness of universally shared emotion resulting in pleasurable relish”.

Experience is core to transcending. Here Rasa acknowledges the seeming, being and becoming of experience. In this way, one becomes ‘experienced’ through practice, through skill acquisition, and through acting in time and context. As one enters the experiencing of the ‘now’ this ‘past experience’ guides, supports, channels, and directs the present experience. The channelled current experience points towards the becoming of the transcendent, the future, the sublime, the oneness with the world. The promise of ‘Becoming’ allows one to access the creative, emergent world (of subject formation, following Kaiser [2012], for example) and abductive thinking in what we become after the experience.

It is critical to realise that such Rasa-driven moments are not isolated in the experiences of the designer (in this case) alone but are always seen in intimate relationship or oneness with the world. As a designer I am in (and of) the world, and it is through the intimate moment of design action in and for the world, that I become/transcend, the design becomes/ transcends, and the world becomes/transcends, so to speak. Inevitably, therefore, those for whom the design is intended becomes part of that empathetic, embedded, designerly process.

Neuroscience

The human mind or intellect is in constant probe or searching for the connection between the body, mind, and spirit. This curiosity (*jigyasa*) is the foundation of the embodied experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1976) describes it as a state of flow. Drawing on neuroscience to explain emotion as a ‘subjective experience’, Peil (2014, p. 81) describes it as primal perceptions/experiences of time, space and self, self-moving constituting a feeling of being. He further describes emotions as rooted in self-reflexive feedback loops that could be both positive and negative in nature and in the embodied experience. The mind-body relationship

within the intimacy context is that the mind has the creative potential and the physical body follows as a duplication of the creative image and that the mind and body are simply an immaterial-material continuum that supports and complement each other. We are body and mind, material and immaterial, yin and yang.

The problem seems to arise (in the West, and therefore in research matters) when this experience needs to be made conscious, to be 'converted' to data, words, disputation, and logical and defensible rationalisations. This puzzle of consciousness represents a struggle between the epistemology and the phenomenology of Rasa, intimacy, aesthetics and its engagement in artistic/design practice, on the one hand, and formalised research, on the other. Here the connection between neuroscience and artist/designerly collaboration to create new awareness/a changed world is important. Intimacy is related to the personal subjective experience having an introspective ability. Ramachandran, Hubbard and Butcher (Nair 2013, p. 1) explain the concept of the synesthetic as "a theory explaining the neural mechanism of aesthetic experience where a set of neurobiological principles form the very nature of human perception and its multiple modes of emotional experiences relating to external stimuli that evoke a specific functional reaction" a view also shared by Hubbard and Butcher (2004). Indeed, Ramachandran's description of this theory neatly captures the core dynamics of the Rasa moment, yet using concepts that arise from neuroscience. According to Bhattacharjee (2018, p. 1), "consciousness has as a property the neurons in the brain". This insight places the artist/designer at a critical juncture to delve more deeply into the structuring of thoughts, ideas and emotions experienced during creative output because it is reinforced by neural mechanisms, as explained by Johnson (Nair 2013). Creativity, according to Wiggins and Bhattacharya (2014, p. 1) attempts to bridge the gap between the scientific, cognitive and the human element. Consequently, research, or the seeking of wisdom, about the designerly process opens up avenues that can move towards justification. Yet it does not preclude the enfolding of those for whom the design is made into the emergent process through empathy, for example.

Argued in this way, it seems that, by redefining research demands to move away from 'new knowledge' (or documentable information and strategies to be applied elsewhere) and toward 'new wisdom' (seen as embodied empathetic flourishing in the world) or, *phronesis* (practical wisdom), Practice-Led Research (see below) is explainable through both Rasa and neuroscience. To all intents and purposes, *phronesis*/practical wisdom refers to the ability to engage with current forms, times, actions and problems in the world in such a way that they are transcended into solutions for the future. Practical wisdom is the ability to realign the future by drawing on the experiences of the past and the present – the task of the designer, one might argue. It is also the working mechanisms of Rasa (both as designer-in-practice, and as designer-in-community), and, as I shall argue in the next section, of Practice-led Research in design.

Practice-Led Research

The argument now proceeds to interrogate the dynamics of practice-led research as temporal, iterative, contextual, and emergent and driven by *phronesis* (practical wisdom) (Hallam & Ingold 2007).

I wish to argue that the wisdom of intimacy and the knowledge of integrity demonstrate how Rasa is an effective methodology for practice-led research. According to Candy (2006), practice-led research brings new understanding about the practice and advanced knowledge within the practice. Rust, Mottram and Till (2007, p. 11) define practice-led research as a methodology that includes "an explicit understanding of how the practice contributes to the inquiry and the research is distinguished from other forms of practice by that explicit

understanding". According to McIntyre (2006), the writing process – together with the knowledge gained through the reflective activity – exercises the space for academic analysis. Once again, I approach the position laid out by Kasulis (2002) as he explores the tensions between an Integrity approach to understanding (discrete and therefore binary) phenomena, and an Intimacy approach (the yin/yang of existence) that resonates so strongly with embodiment and the act of making. It also opens out the phenomenology of essence and Rasa. Haidet (2012, p. 76) points to "knowledge [that] often is gained or transmitted in a non-discursive way" and "intimate knowledge gained through praxis allows the artist or creative [designer] in intimate relation to having inside knowledge". The frame adopted by this paper is around the change in research from an Integrity model, which draws on the notion of discrete units and phenomena, including discrete units of people, places and the like, on the one hand, to the intimacy (of) the immersion and emergence – the becoming which fosters understanding. The argument that follows suggests a move from 'designing for' – with its Western notion of the separation of designer and 'receiver' – towards a notion of 'designing with' – where the intimacy of shared experience is foregrounded.

Practice-led research is described as no single set of ideas but varies from discipline to area and individual depending on the type of questions been asked/problems encountered/contradictions and obstacles to flourishing, that is being and investigated.¹⁷ This fluidity spills into the domain of research practice that plays a critical role in research inquiry or investigation. Since practice-led research is described as purposed for working through process with a certain aim in mind, this further ties in with Schön's (1983) reflective practise leading to new insight. Practice-led research further concentrates on how issues, concerns and interest can be examined and the knowledge that stems from the investigative experience lies in the tangible final product, and evidence/experience-based. Bruner (2017, p. 27) describes practice-led research as a "methodology for designers to access and grasp such implicit understanding in a manner that is most intuitive to them – through the act of designing". Drawing Rasa into this description foregrounds the nature of the implied empathetic experience of those for/with whom the design is generated.

Mafe and Brown (2006, p. 2) point out that the area of interest and approach in practice-led research is also attributed to "individual interest, skill and context". The creative and analytical seed is initially planted by a thought, experience or a belief, which, then, following McNamara (2013) asks that the designer-researcher take cognisance of the shortfalls, elaborations and descriptions arising from the temporal, iterative, contextual, and emergent design, which is driven by *phronesis* (practical wisdom) (Hallam & Ingold 2007). This then sparks, I would argue, the Rasa journey. Whereas this description seems to emphasise the designer's experience, the argument being made is that it needs, *ipso facto*, to embrace all involved.

Smith and Dean (2009, p. 47) note that practice-led research "aims through creativity and practice to illuminate or bring about new knowledge and understanding, and results in outputs that may not be text-based, but rather a performance (music, dance, and drama), design, film or exhibition". This adds to new knowledge across different fields. In 'traditional' integrity-driven research, the methods to be used in capturing the emergent data parallel the autoethnographic strategies through exegesis and growing the practice. Rasa would argue, perhaps, that the data is not 'captured' but 'lived'. Uneasy as this may seem for traditional research, it suggests, through Rasa, the embodied and experience design is the research,

17 It is perhaps significant that the word 'investigate' contains the concept of 'investing', which is to say that, following the argument being developed, all are 'invested in' the pursuit of flourishing towards experiential transcendence.

because it pursues the transcendence of conventional knowledge and occupies a realm of empathetic experience.

Practice-led research, seen through the emotions of Rasa, allows that intimate insight to expand in the reflective process to understand the mechanics of experience and emotion better when engaging with different designerly projects. Through the integrated nature of the intimacy model, students need to be led to towards an empathetic and therefore shared experiential plane of design briefs and projects through lived experience, tacit knowledge and idea generation. Rasa strategies trace the 'seeming' of technique, the 'being' of empathy, and the 'becoming' of flourishing. The learning platform is a space for self-discovery along this journey, a space that is fluid and allows the designer to engage with the experience and the mapping of the emergent thoughts of the mind, beginning from embodied doodles, sketching and writing, with the target of a shared and transcendent human flourishing. The Intimacy model speaks of the interweaving of everything, of Yin and Yang. As Kasulis argues, separation or discreteness brings loss while intimacy brings a persistent moving forward towards the emergence of subject formation. After the assimilation takes place, there is an interconnectedness with the designer, their work and community. Such a 'research process' transcends into wisdom.

Conclusion

Emotions are complex, rich and fundamental life forces, and enhance a different kind of awareness that is universal in nature and features across cultures. Rasa intimacy fosters the interconnectedness of all things. These mental states are manifested in the world through experience. New knowledge, through Rasa, is experiential knowledge, tacit knowledge and self-knowledge – in other words, practical wisdom or *phronesis*. Tacit knowledge is temporal, iterative, contextual and emergent, is not (often) part of traditional research paradigms. Rasa could allow practice-led research to foster new concepts of knowledge that are continuously being created. This is the new knowledge that is required by research that is not discreet but is acquired by experiential knowledge or Rasa. Connecting to core somatic states also connects life and design narratives with emotion and feeling states, which drive and energise action and perception. Through Rasa, the designer/designing 'is the experience'. The phenomenology of awareness allows the design-researcher to enter into and 'experience' the transitional-towards-transcendental space and to connect with the self (also known as the inner being or inner voice) and with/through this the flourishing world. Such design is, inevitably, research.

And the design/designer/world emerges into the world/designed/design/designer.

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