



Towards a definition of studio documentation: working tool and transparent record
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Introduction

Practice-based research in art and design refers to those research projects in which creative practice plays the most important role in the cluster of research methods used. It is also referred to as practice-led research and is usually initiated by the artist or designer in response to their own particular studio or design practice. This paper proposes that documentation of studio practice is the core issue for a better understanding and articulation of practice-based research. It examines a range of recent student documentary activity in relation to studio practice and assesses the potential of this methodology to function as the location within which theoretical and practical concerns can be negotiated.

The arguments presented here are built on an assumption that creative practice can be the basis of a research project. It is argued that studio documentation, when combined with reflective practice, decision making and a plan of action, is both a valuable learning process and an indispensable script for the writing of an exegesis as part of the postgraduate submission for final examination. Practice-based projects in art, design and the performing arts can be defined as research even when they are not oriented towards an empirical world of data and information. For this reason and because it is a contested position, it is all the more important that studio methods are defined and applied to reveal the intellectual and creative substance of the artwork or design. The evidence of practice-based analytical and critical thinking has not been well articulated in the past. This leaves the research field open to criticism within the domain and from outside.

Art and design studio practice results in artists and designers acquiring knowledge about concepts, materials, processes and applications. In the process they develop an intimate understanding of their practice, which is held at various levels of consciousness, depending on the activities in which they are engaged. Participation in a postgraduate degree programme changes creative practice to the extent that candidates are required by the university to produce analytical and critical information as part of their examination submission. The framework within which artists and designers create and refine their work can reveal much about the work itself and about the core issues of importance to the artist. These insights allow the process to become more accessible to others and in this way

open the work to critique. The exegesis that accompanies a practice-based research project is the form in which the supporting and contextualising information is presented.

A typical practice-based Masters thesis in art and design consists of an exhibition or installation of artefacts or designs accompanied by an exegesis. The exegesis contains the candidate's explanation and interpretation of their work. A good exegesis locates the work in an appropriate context, discusses methods and theoretical orientations, identifies and discusses the problems encountered in the work, describes practical responses to those problems and provides documentary evidence of the development or evolution of the work.

The construction and communication of this information can be facilitated through the use of a combination of typical studio practices that will be called active documentation. The term refers to a planned and strategic method of producing tangible visual, textual or sound/video documentation of work in progress in such a way that normal studio practice is temporarily suspended and it results in specific strategies being implemented. The visual and textual documentation produced at these events forms the basis of the emerging exegesis. Central to this method is the associated reflective practice, which can be described in this context as planned and deliberate activities that engage the artist or designer in a critical manner with the relationship between conceptual, theoretical and practical concerns. This definition of reflective practice in art and design is grounded in the work of Boud, Keogh and Walker who reworked Dewey's five aspects of reflective thought into three. They are:

- 1) Returning to experience - that is to say, recalling or detailing salient events.
- 2) Attending to (or connecting with) feelings - this has two aspects: using helpful feelings and removing or containing obstructive ones.
- 3) Evaluating experience - this involves re-examining experience in the light of one's intent and existing knowledge etc. It also involves integrating this new knowledge into one's conceptual framework.

(Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985: 26-31)

The Research Question

This study is designed to investigate the ways in which postgraduate students in art and design experience their individual studio practices, particularly in relation to perceived learning and conceptual shifts during the course of the programme. The aim is to explore student perceptions of their practice to assist them in the better management of their studio work. A better understanding will allow us to steer future postgraduate students towards improved practices that will ultimately prepare them for doctoral degrees. The key questions are:

- 1) How do students perceive the relationship between their practical work or performance and their creative/research methodology?
- 2) How do students understand the manner in which they engage with and reflect on their work?

3) How can programme structures be improved and the content of taught modules modified to optimise methodological strengths?

The study is not intended to compare specific creative methods or artistic practices in the studio. Students in the MA Art and Design programme who took part come from many different backgrounds and their projects and practices are all different so that comparisons of their methodological orientations would be of little importance to the research questions. See Appendix I for a sample list of student projects.

Course development requires, among other things, feedback from students. The first step is a scoping study of students' perceptions of their learning experience. According to Marton and Booth (1997), the ways in which events or phenomena are experienced can be seen in certain patterns of variation. Through interviews, discussion and a questionnaire, information was obtained on the variations in student responses to their work in progress over a period of time in an attempt to identify student attitudes to their studio working process and their understanding of their own practice-based methodologies. The new information from this study supplements observation of student activity made over the last few years and is considered alongside the results of other studies. In the education environment, this phenomenographic approach is considered to be useful for the identification and formulation of research questions about learning and understanding. In light of this, it was decided to set up the study using interviews as the primary method of collecting information.

Methodology

The project has two parts. The first is an investigation of student understanding of their studio practices and their methodologies. Fourteen students were interviewed for approximately one hour each during which a series of questions were posed in order to prompt responses on several topics. The focus of the discussion was on the articulation of project methodology, documentation and reflective practice. The questionnaire was designed to guide the interview and provide space for the recording of responses and notes (see Appendix II). The interviewer took notes so that the participants were not distracted by having to write down their responses. They were able to talk freely with further questions arising out of their responses. Summarising notes were made when something of significance was revealed and these notes were modified in consultation with the student, to their satisfaction, before moving on to the next question. All students were interviewed over a two-week period and the assembled information was reviewed at the end of that period. Similarities and points of variation between participants' responses were identified and the students were invited back to participate in a focus group. The purpose of the group session was to explore some issues more fully and to note response variations resulting from group dialogue.

The second part of this project is to be a comprehensive series of interviews to facilitate more detailed analysis. The questionnaire will be revised at a later stage to improve the focus and to draw out more detailed responses. On the basis of this information it is expected that strategies for mentoring and programme improvement will be identified.

Students who participated in the first part of the study noted that the interview and focus session had both been positive and valuable experiences in helping them to clarify for themselves aspects of their own practice. As a result of this feedback, a subsequent project is planned. This is the development of a self-administered questionnaire as a learning tool for first year MA (Art and Design) students to reflect on their own perceptions

of research methodology. This learning tool will be adapted from the questionnaire and will incorporate suggestions for studio management strategies.

Analysis of Results

Documentation as method

Three important facets of studio practice were explored during the interviews. The first dealt with the perception students have in relation to specific research methods that they use. The second explored the way in which students document their completed work and work process. The third aimed to draw out the activities associated with documentation such as reflective practice. The results show that few students identified documentation as one of their working methods (2 of 14), but when they were prompted by a list of research methodologies that included visual and textual documentation, they all included documentation as a research method. Some (3 of 14) also identified video and audio documentation as well. The interviews also revealed that the majority of participants (12 of 14) perceived documentary practices such as digital photography, journals and web site image and text files, as both an accumulation of material for later reference and as a way of making decisions for moving on with further work. All students with recent undergraduate experience of art and design courses (12 of 14) were familiar with documentation as a course requirement and valued it as a necessary activity for professional artists and designers. They all understood the importance of documentation for later reference and for possible inclusion in their thesis or exegesis. In the majority of cases (12 of 14) it was evident that they were not actually using this practice as a research method.

There is a difference between documentation used as an active research method and the straightforward recording of studio experiments and completed work. When documentation is applied to practice in direct association with critical and reflective engagement, it becomes an exploratory tool that has the potential to influence work in progress and be used constructively for this purpose. The process of moving intellectually or creatively from the known (present position) to the unknown (next position) is an inherent part of studio practice and evidence of its occurrence is an important aspect that should be included in an exegesis. Dewey (1993: 190) comments on this: "What is present carries or bears the mind over to the idea and ultimately the acceptance of something else". This process of inference should be documented and later edited so that significant aspects can be communicated. Half of the participants in the study stated that documentation helped them to understand what they were doing when they had made intuitive decisions and wanted to explain those choices or actions. Most (9 of 14) could recall incidents of clarity associated with preparation for programmed seminar events or critiques, points at which they had taken a more objective perspective on their work. Clearly, this awareness needs to be harnessed into a systematic and strategic process if it is to become a valid research method.

The range of documentary activities that were reported varied in detail between students, depending on the projects undertaken but they were characteristic of three studio working practices commonly used by artists and designers. These are: 1) keeping a text journal; 2) photographic, video or sound recording of work in progress or displayed in trial situations; and 3) collecting and categorising of relevant material. The results of interviews revealed that almost all students (13 of 14) perceived their use of particular studio and research methods as a direct result of previous experience. Their practices were acquired in undergraduate courses and also, though less often, were the result of current lecturer or

course input (7 of 14). From their responses, it appeared that a few (5 of 14) sometimes used documentation in conjunction with analytical and reflective practices, even though they did not initially identify this as a research method. The interconnection of reflective practice and documentation was not evident.

Almost all of the students (13 of 14) agreed that their habits in relation to documentation were primarily a result of their previous undergraduate experiences. At undergraduate level, despite curriculum ideals, documentation is often put together by art and design students only as evidence that sufficient work has been done in an assignment. At AUT, documentation is usually required as part of an undergraduate submission for assessment. It is thus more often associated with the verification of working processes rather than with the interrogation of ideas, reflection on practice and the initiation of new work. Students said that they were prompted to document their work when they were finished, as a record of completion or evidence of something ephemeral. However, most of the students (9 of 14) described their documentation activities on the postgraduate programme as an on going process; for example, saving digital files at regular intervals in a web design project or photographing studio experiments. Occasional instances where an integration of reflective, documentary and writing activities had taken place were recognised by half of the students (7 of 14), but few (3 of 14) felt that they could describe this as a planned, strategic working method. In order to change this perception, it will be necessary to cultivate the idea of active documentation and to promote it as a specific studio working method, the purpose being to engage with the research ideas, images and objects in an inquisitive and reflective way.

Reflective practice as a working tool

Reflective practices were most often (10 of 14) described by participants as on-going, something taking place frequently while they are working, even when they are away from the studio. From the data collected, there was insufficient evidence that these activities were conducted in a manner that effectively distanced the student from the generative mode, allowed them to view the work under review from a critical or questioning perspective, or that it resulted in explanatory or analytical writing.

Four factors emerged from the analysis of the results:

- 1) In general, students understood reflective practice as something indistinguishable from customary, intellectual and productive behaviour.
- 2) The specific tools that students employed for their reflective actions were the same tools that they habitually used for visualising, recalling, sketching, selecting and editing.
- 3) What students described as reflective practice was a direct response to work rather than as a result of strategy.
- 4) Only two students identified specific strategic actions or plans that resulted from documentary activity. The majority (11 of 14) commented their decisions were not recorded at the time and their practice continued as before.

Active documentation is a way of validating existing modes of practice or identifying new directions. It can refocus or confirm the theoretical platform and research directions. In a practice-based research project it should not be seen as the research itself, but the method through which ideas can be developed. An important advantage of reflective

practice as a part of active documentation is that in combination they can result in the early identification and recording of particulars that need to be carefully documented in a non-textual manner. For example, some areas of artistic knowledge associated with materials or with aesthetic judgement can be difficult to articulate and may be neglected in the exegesis writing because of the difficulty of conveying the information. These cases are best dealt with through non-textual documentation, such as photographic images, sound, narrative media, or diagrams and are likely to be recognized through active documentation.

The complexity of overlap

Art and design students engaged on practice-based projects face several distinct difficulties in relation to their methodology. One is the "complexity of overlap" concept that refers to the complex mix of personal intentions, critical orientations and working or studio methods that are typical in art and design research. Students in this study all agreed that this is a complex issue, particularly in the first year of the programme, and most (10 of 14) described a degree of uncertainty in dealing with the problem. In a qualitative study of problems encountered by supervisors of practice-based research degrees in art and design, Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2000) uncovered many tensions related to the balance and interconnectedness of analytical and creative components of these degrees. They also noted that many supervisors reported difficulties relating to the systematic recording of decisions made and the detailing of work routines. The effect of this can sometimes be seen in exegesis submissions that include examples of strained theoretical connections having been contrived for the enhancement of the exegesis. These cases typically result from the application of an inappropriate theoretical framework or the inappropriate inclusion of currently fashionable theoretical perspectives that may have only a tenuous connection to the particular project or methodology. This is less likely to happen when strong and appropriate connections between theory and practice have been constructed through systematic reflective practice as part of active documentation.

Active documentation, used as a research method, can uncover difficulties associated with the merging of theoretical, personal and practical intentions at an early, developmental stage of the project. The resulting availability of visual and textual documentation would assist critical assessment and discussion with peers and lecturers. In this way, problems related to the disconnection between the practice and the written analysis of that practice could be alleviated and the frequency of a student's reflective interaction with their work could be monitored. The resulting visual and textual records would accumulate as evidence of the working process. According to Glassick et al. (1997), good scholarship involves 1) making a substantial contribution to knowledge, 2) the effective application of methods appropriate for the goals which are set and 3) reflective critique, peer review and public dissemination of the results. Active documentation takes care of two of these three requirements. It is an appropriate method that encourages and facilitates reflective critique, peer review and public dissemination of results.

Deferral of the writing

Some students also discussed the writing of their exegesis during the interviews. Most of them (6 of 7) acknowledged that although they kept text journals and had written assignments as part of their course work, they had delayed the actual writing of the exegesis until the last quarter of the programme. This created unnecessary anxiety in the later stages of their project. Active documentation is a productive way of dealing with this problem of deferral. When it is strategically planned and managed as a studio working

method, it brings together those strands of the project that tend to unravel during the working process. They are

1) the original or subsequently modified propositions, questions or speculations; 2) the tangible evidence of work progress such as photographs, models, digital files etc; and 3) the theoretical perspectives. Active documentation offers an opportunity to go beyond regular journal notes and fragmented annotation, offering occasions for reflection when the raw material for an exegesis can be richly mined. Many significant details that are part of the working process are observable and distinctive before they have been obscured by subsequent phases of work. At these points of active documentation the student can resolve issues of methodology, compare alternative possibilities, discuss difficulties encountered in the research process and decide on a course of action. Active documentation brings the writing of the thesis forward and anchors it to the actual work. Analysis, explanation and reflection (theorising) become a part of the progress of the project through a formal detachment from immediate practical concerns. This step aside is the point at which theoretical and conceptual orientations may be legitimately reconnected with the work.

The Virtual Studio Experiment 2001

Many of the students in this study (8 of 14) had participated in an experimental seminar presentation of their work as part of their first year of coursework. Students were required to maintain a simple web site on the university intranet for the purpose of documenting work in progress, recording written assignments and maintaining an edited reflective journal. They were then required to present a research seminar to their peers using only the documented material on their Intranet site. The purpose of the virtual studio project was to encourage early and regular documentation activity. It was an attempt to associate that activity with reflective practice and with plans for action. The seminars that the students presented were conducted away from the studios where they work in a generative mode. Although the trial was affected by technical and scheduling problems that prevented it from working effectively for all students, it did live up to expectations for some of them and has become their preferred location for continued documentation, reflective and planning activity. After the seminars had been presented, informal student feedback indicated that the digital format required a more intense commitment on their part. This was seen as a positive factor. Some students agreed that it had been a valuable technical learning curve. For example, one student said that it helped her to focus elements that tended to "go off at tangents" in the studio and another described how the process of bringing together essay material from one module with images produced in another module had assisted in clarifying his theoretical position. Feedback also suggested that for some students, it was an inappropriate form for documentation and reflective activity. Further trials are planned.

Conclusions

The study has uncovered a number of complexities faced by postgraduate students in practice-based art and design research projects. This type of research is characterised by specific difficulties associated with the articulation of subjective decisions and aesthetic judgements, the combinations of methods that may be applied and the evolutionary nature of many projects. The study has revealed differences in how students perceive their research methods and the application of those methods to their practices. On the whole, their understanding of reflective practice was indistinguishable from their customary, intellectual and creative activity while generating work. What students described as

reflective practice was a direct response to developments in their work rather than as a result of strategic research methodology. Furthermore, the interconnection of reflective practice and documentation was not generally evident. There are implications here for the improvement of programme structures and module content in order to enhance the methodological strengths of postgraduates and better prepare them for doctoral degrees.

Studio documentation is a common practice among artists and designers. Active documentation, as defined in this paper, is a process of knowledge construction that may be regarded as a distinct research method appropriate to practice-based research projects in art and design. It can be used to: a) identify the evolution of a work process; b) capture accidental progress or problematic blocks; c) articulate those phases of work that become invisible with progress and d) provide the detached record that is necessary in the abstraction of research issues. Active documentation could be developed as one of the distinctive research methods that characterise creative practice in postgraduate education, a method that reveals one of the fundamental differences between the research orientations of studio-based artists/designers and other academic researchers.

Active documentation, encouraged as a formal rather than informal practice, can promote improved awareness and recording of studio processes, procedures in use, reflective practices and decisions taken throughout the duration of a project. As a research method, it is an appropriate hybrid tool for critique, strategic planning, decision-making and exegesis writing. As a method for locating and negotiating theoretical and practical concerns, it could play a role in theory construction relating to art and design research.

Endnotes

1 The inter-relationship between theory and practice usually takes place in cycles during the creative process. According to Cornock's (1984) observations, a population of art students alternate between practice and reflection on practice. When practical processes are evolving, the student is engaged with her practice-based methodology. Moving into a reflective mode, the student needs to engage with both the practice-based methodology and critical methodologies that are appropriate or to which she will be subjected in examination. The process can also contain a more personal layer of reflection that is related to the student's deep-seated personal artistic intentions or manifesto. Navigating between these layers and around the cycle, in and out of different methods is complicated. There is an overlapping of methodology here, referred to as the "complexity of overlap" (de Freitas, 2000).

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Appendix I

The following list of practice-based projects is typical of the range encountered in this study. In response to the first question at the interview, "What is your MA project?" students offered simple versions of their projects that revealed something of their practical concerns. They show the wide range of interests that were included in the study. While the titles for these students' proposals are submitted to the postgraduate board in a more formal and academic manner, these responses were quite casual and they reflect something more characteristic of the students' on-going practical studio concerns.

1 I am integrating personal (hybrid) culture with non-linear systems as the basis for making creative artefacts. Submission for examination: exhibition of artefacts and written text (exegetics).

2 It is a study of multiples in relation to collection practices and their presentation or display in spatial terms. Submission for examination: exhibition of artefacts and possibly a video plus exegetics on CD-ROM.

3 I am investigating the process of designing educational environments for better learning. Submission for examination: written text and web site.

4 It is a photographic project. I am investigating the relationship between costume and identity within the queer community. Submission for examination: exhibition, book and exegetics.

5 I am exploring the sculptural and installation possibilities of surface designed textiles. Submission for examination: installation exhibition possibly including a video and a written text (exegetics).

6 I am designing a web-based gallery in association with a new design archive and my focus is on the information architecture. Submission for examination: three web sites and an exegetics.

7 It is a design and plan for a site-specific public space that explores the potential for that space to function for the local and business/working community. Submission for examination: CD-ROM and exegetics.

Appendix II - The Questionnaire

This questionnaire is part of a study of studio documentation as a research method in art and design practice.

This questionnaire is designed to collect information on the perception of first and second year students in the Master of Arts (Art and Design) programme on their understanding of aspects of their own practice-based research methodology and on the organisation of their studio process.

It is not connected in any way with your current programme or your assessment and is intended only to inform decisions made in the future about course structure and content.

Information collected may be used in written reports but will not reveal the identity of any respondents. Names are requested on the forms for the sole purpose of allowing follow-up contact for clarification or further information, should this be necessary. All copies of the questionnaire will be destroyed after compilation, analysis and reporting. No names are to be used in reporting.

Name:

Undergraduate degree in:

Years of tertiary study in art or design:

First year full-time

Second year full-time

Part-time - Year

Graduated _____

1 What is your MA project?

NB IMPORTANT PREPARATION FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS

Bring to mind a time when you are working in your studio, in the lab or wherever you normally work. Try to remember and keep in mind through the time that we are talking, those periods when you were working well with extended time at your disposal for your work - the uninterrupted times.

2a) How would you describe the various research methods you use in your MA project?

2b) Refer to the list of specific research methods attached.
Which methods would you add to your list above?

3 How did you decide to use these methods?
Personal history - advice from lecturers - reading to inform the proposal - other

4 What systems have you set up to record/document your processes and methods?

5 When did you begin documentation?
How often do you record/document your ideas, developments, processes?

6 What prompts you to record/document your work?
Something that you recognise in the work or a predetermined work schedule?

7 What do you do with that documentation?
What activities are associated with the documentation?

8 How often do you engage in deliberate reflective practice in relation to your work?
Is this associated with documentation practices?

9 What form does that reflection take? How do you go about being reflective?

10 What is the usual outcome of your reflective engagement with your work in progress?

11 Have you made any methodological shifts/ conceptual breakthroughs or changes to your methodology as a result of your documentation practices?

12 Are there some aspects of your practice that you do not intend to (did not) reveal in your exegesis?

13 Why?

Aid for the identification of personal methodologies

General methodological orientation

Interdisciplinary, Scientific, Exploratory, Social science evaluation, Emergent methodology (grounded theory),

Practice-led (researcher as participant/observer), Collaborative,

Other:

Specific Methods

Contextual review Literature search Review of relevant objects, designs, performance
Creation of a database

Interviews Market research Development of a personal design process Research design

Laboratory/studio experiments Tests User or market tests/surveys Site specific
installations Commissions

Case studies Textual documentation Visual documentation Audio documentation Video
documentation

Exhibition Prototype production

Other methods:

Submission will include

Written text Video Exhibition of artefact Report

Other:

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