

New Knowledge in the Creative Disciplines – proceedings of the first experiential knowledge conference 2007

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Abstract

This article presents the combined guest editorial for the special issues of Journal of Visual Arts Practice and Working Papers in Design on “New Knowledge in The Creative Disciplines”, which contextualises the proceedings of the first Experiential Knowledge Conference 2007, held by the University of Hertfordshire in collaboration with London Metropolitan University in June 2007. The conference was concerned with the nature and role of experiential knowledge in creative and practice-led disciplines, and its significance for the emergence of new knowledge and understanding in both research and practice. The issue presents a selection of the conference papers which fall into three areas: Experience and Knowledge in Research and Practice, Knowledge Management in Art, Design & Media, and Education & Knowledge Communication.

Introduction

The problem of the nature, creation, and communication of (new) knowledge and understanding in the creative disciplines is both old and new. It is old in that creative practitioners have for a long time been concerned with the new artefacts and practices, concerned to extend and advance their fields, arguably thereby creating new knowledge and/or understanding. It is new in that the creative disciplines have only fairly recently joined other academic disciplines in their engagement in and with academic research in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding (Durling, Friedman, and Gutherson, 2002; Scrivener, 2006)

The integration of the creative disciplines into the academy in the UK as well as many other countries has brought two disparate sets of practices and beliefs into close proximity: on the one hand practices and cultures of research, characterised by debate about questions, methods and what counts as knowledge, and by requirements of communicable as well as generalisable and transferable results. On the other hand practices of creating, designing, inventing, and making, in which the experiences of the body are traditionally conceived as playing an important role. The middle ground, and place where these two sets of concern overlap are embodied practice, and debates and literature on embodiment and research: the attempt to articulate and represent aspects of creative practice that have hitherto existed in tacit form principally acquired through experience, and passed on through vocational training; combined with the search for concepts, questions, and methods, from the creative and other disciplines that might be usefully debated in the ongoing attempt to define ‘research’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘understanding’ in the creative disciplines.

Out of this discrepancy has emerged the need to study the nature and role of experiential knowledge in practice and research in order to recognise and integrate better the vocational basis of the creative disciplines within research and, to make it available as a valuable source of knowledge has emerged. While there are individual initiatives in the creative disciplines in this respect (Niedderer 2007a, b), more significantly this problematic has also been recognised and developed with some more depth in other disciplines such as philosophy, knowledge management, education, and nursing (e.g. Eraut 2003, Higgs and Titchen 2001). It therefore seemed important to provide a forum that would bring together the individual directions and voices and to engender dialogue between them to learn from each other and thus to advance the debate. The Experiential Knowledge Conference 2007 was convened to provide such a forum.

The Experiential Knowledge Conference 2007

The first Experiential Knowledge Conference was held by the University of Hertfordshire in collaboration with London Metropolitan University. It addressed the theme of 'New Knowledge in the Creative Disciplines' with the aim to explore in an interdisciplinary context what is understood and accepted as new knowledge in research and in creative practice, and what their role and relationship might be.

The interest in knowledge at the University of Hertfordshire has grown out of the Research into Practice Conference Series which gave the debate about "what do we mean by knowledge in art and design?" new profile in 2002 (Biggs 2002). Since then, the debate about knowledge in research, about what we mean by a "contribution to knowledge" and how new knowledge advances the field, has developed a significance in its own right, which was recognised by the University of Hertfordshire through the Experiential Knowledge Project (2005-2007). The Experiential Knowledge Project has been concerned with understanding the nature and role of knowledge in research and practice in order to clarify fundamental principles and practices of research in practice-led disciplines. A central interest has been the clarification of research requirements, such as the contribution to knowledge, in relation to the aim of advancing respective fields and of advancing practice in these respective fields, because currently research requirements prioritise explicit (propositional) knowledge, while practice-led disciplines traditionally draw on a multiplicity of different kinds and formats of knowledge. (Niedderer, 2007a). At the core was therefore to understand the relationship of explicit (propositional) and tacit (experiential) knowledge, and how the latter can be managed to facilitate its inclusion within research (Niedderer, 2007b).

The Visual Arts Practice Research Group of the Sir John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design London Metropolitan University has also a longstanding engagement with the problems and ideas of knowledge. It grew out of the Art and Epistemology research group, which convened to consider epistemological debate in relation to arts practice, the thorny issue of the nature of 'knowledge' for the arts. Terminology was discussed: such as the usefulness of 'knowing' over 'knowledge' since the term clearly refers to a practice and, is less encumbered by association with arguably unhelpful epistemological positions (such as 'objectivism' a doctrine incompatible with the idea of experiential knowledge) (Reilly 2002).

From these common interests, the Experiential Knowledge Conference emerged as a joint project between the University of Hertfordshire and London Metropolitan University in order to address the issues and problems of knowledge in research and practice by bringing together researchers and practitioners from different disciplines to engender a multi-vocal debate on these issues and to facilitate exchange and cross-fertilisation between the creative disciplines and other practice-led disciplines such as education, health, and knowledge management.

Purpose and Scope

The theme of the Experiential Knowledge Conference 2007 was 'New Knowledge in the Creative Disciplines'. The theme of the conference emerged from the current situation of the creative disciplines as described above, and from the joint interests of the conference organisers (Kristina Niedderer, Linden Reilly, Chris Smith, Rob Godman) and editors (Kristina Niedderer, Linden Reilly, Chris Smith) at their respective Universities.

The theme of 'new knowledge' was chosen to address the common aim of both research and practice to advance their field, and to examine the different meanings and interpretations of 'new knowledge' with regard to research and to practice. For example, the concern for 'new knowledge' has arisen for research because it is defined in terms of the original contribution to knowledge or understanding through which it seeks to advance its field. However, practice also is interested in an advance of its respective field and claims to achieve this advance through its own processes and outcomes. For example through the creation of new artefacts, products, services etc., creative practice can be understood to create new experiences. In creating new experience does it thus create new knowledge? How might the creation of new artefacts, products, services etc. create new knowledge, if at all? And for whom, the creator and/or the viewer/user? What sort of contributions to knowledge might practice and practice-led research make? How might new knowledge in the creative disciplines be created and, what form might it take?

In order to address these issues, the conference has sought to bring together people from different fields and disciplines to discuss these problems as well as different approaches to their solution. We invited contributions from the creative disciplines (art & design, music, film & media etc), philosophy, education and knowledge management that are concerned with the nature, role, and management of knowledge within research; and with the role and use of creative practice (both as process and outcome) as a medium by which to include experiential knowledge within research. Questions of interest were, for example:

What constitutes (new) knowledge (or understanding) in the creative disciplines?
What constitutes (new) knowledge (or understanding) in research in the creative disciplines?
Are the two the same?

In which forms does knowledge (or understanding) appear?
Where is knowledge situated or contained? (E.g. in the artwork, or in the explanation, or in the experience of the artwork or explanation?)
How is new knowledge (or understanding) communicated in research and in practice?
For whom is new knowledge or understanding relevant?

(How) can knowledge management serve to manage, or negotiate between, different kinds of knowledge?

How can education deal with the communication of experiential knowledge?

How does education promote the production and/or acquisition of new knowledge or understanding?

Responses

The conference call received a great international response with submissions from over 20 countries including Australia, Barbados, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Swiss, Taiwan, Turkey, UK, USA. Submissions were interdisciplinary and from a variety of disciplines and discipline areas including fine art, applied art, design, design management, music, performance, film, knowledge management, education, philosophy, and sociology.

Conference contributions were selected in a two-stage process through a double blind review process by an international review panel and, a further selection was made by the editors for the present special issue of JVAP.

From the contributions, three strands emerged:

1. *Experience and Knowledge in Research and Practice;*
2. *Knowledge Management in Art, Design & Media;*
3. *Education & Knowledge Communication.*

The three strands were headed by a keynote by Professor Mark Johnson from the University of Oregon. Johnson's keynote with the title "'The Stone that was Cast Out Shall Become the Cornerstone": The Bodily Aesthetics of Human Meaning' provided a particular perspective and contribution to the debate in which embodied experience becomes central to, and the basis of the practice of 'knowing'. He presents us with a theory in which practitioners' experiences of practicing can provide the basis and means of 'knowing', and clarifies the conditions under which, in his view, arts practice can be part of research.

Johnson's concepts of 'knowledge' and 'knowing' illuminate his position with regard to practice-led research. The concept of 'knowledge' is often, traditionally, and in his view wrongly conceived as referring to a 'body of information'. 'Knowledge' conceived as a 'body of information' is sometimes associated with ideas of immutability, objectivity, facts, truth, and is often held distinct from that which is imagined. In contrast to this Johnson emphasises the usefulness of the idea of 'knowing' — the gerund unequivocally declaring that this term is about action, about practice, and make the term less likely to be associated and confused with objectivist notions of knowledge:

'... *knowing* is a process in which we employ our intelligence to reconstruct a problematic situation in a way that makes it possible to move forward in our experience. *Knowledge*, by contrast, is an achievement term signifying that some process of enquiry has been more or less successfully carried out.'(Johnson 2007).

From Johnson's perspective 'knowledge' is inextricably tied to 'knowing': it becomes an attribute of 'knowing'. Both 'knowledge' and 'knowing' are related to an aim. Building on the work of MacIntyre (1984) who conceived morality as a set of practices, Johnson conceives 'knowing' as a set of practices, with values and aims that emerge through the interaction of the people who know how to do something and, are internal to that practice. Knowing relates to the achievement of something that is valued, an interest, purpose, or goal; knowledge also relates to the achievement of this aim and indicates that a process of enquiry has been satisfactorily carried out which allows movement towards that aim.

Secondly, Johnson proposes a conception of 'research' that relates to his conceptions of 'knowing' and 'knowledge'.

On my view, any debate in the artworld about whether there is anything in art that corresponds to 'research' in the sciences and humanities is a somewhat misguided question, mostly because of traditional mistaken emphasis on *knowledge* as a body of information. However, if art making is regarded as a form of enquiry — with crucial dimensions of reflection, critique, and creativity involved — then the idea of 'art research' can make sense. Experiential knowing through the making of art will, on my account, necessarily employ all our embodied modes of meaning making. (Johnson 2007)

From Johnson's view, creative practice can be part of research but only under certain conditions: only when it is a form of enquiry, with reflection and critique and creativity. Practice in the creative arts that is not enquiring, not reflective or analytical, which is repetitive or routine for example, is from this perspective, not research. In this it is not incompatible with what the UK Research Assessment Exercise excludes from research:

[It] excludes routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research. (RAE 2005)

The first strand to follow Johnson's keynote is concerned with *Experience and Knowledge in Research and Practice* in a general way. Its contributions by Estelle Barrett, Ian Sutherland and Sophia Acord, and by Christopher Crouch follows seamlessly in that their inquiries evolve around the same key concepts, but now embedded in the context of the creative disciplines. Barrett addresses the problematic of aesthetic experience in the academy inviting listeners to rethink concepts of experience based on 18th century dualist understandings in favour of a holistic understanding of experience that restores the link between lived experience and knowledge. With similar intentions, Sutherland and Acord offer an account of knowledge in art and music as social construct, addressing questions about the construction of knowledge in the process of the reception of art and music. Crouch considers the problem of art knowledge in relation to research in an institutional context to achieve acceptance and integration.

The second and third strand of the conference were titled *Knowledge Management in Art, Design & Media*, and *Education & Knowledge Communication*. The contributions by Yassaman Imani, Irit Alony and Michael Jones, and Philippa Ashton are concerned with the communication of knowledge, in particular experiential and tacit knowledge, from a knowledge management perspective. Imani's contribution is an exploration of the links between art knowledge and knowledge management for the mutual benefit of knowledge

communication in each. Alony and Jones present a thorough account of the problems of knowledge communication in the Australian film industry in relation to recognisable levels of creativity. Ashton considers the problems of knowledge transfer in the design industry in the UK using a number of case studies. The contributions by Fred McVittie, Chi-Kang Peng et al, and Sasi Victoire are questioning how we deal with knowledge in a practical and educational sense. Peng et al. investigate the different stages of the design process, the knowledge involved, and how the different stages are related. McVittie reports on the use of methods of knowledge communication from AI for the understanding and improvement of actor training. Finally, Victoire explores the communication of knowledge through the visual medium of the exhibition.

In summary, the conference has provided a stock-take and résumé of the current thinking on experiential and tacit knowledge in the field. It has confirmed and brought to the fore the importance of experiential knowledge for the field, and it has highlighted the need for both practice and research to develop their practices: on the one hand research needs to strive to recognise and accommodate creative practice, its knowledge and processes, and on the other hand practice needs to ensure the rigour and transparency of its processes where it aspires for these to be counted as part of research (Barrett, Sutherland & Acord, Crouch). Further, the conference has shown that there is much value in interdisciplinary inquiry to compare and complement relevant theories from different disciplines to help understand relevant concepts of knowledge transfer more comprehensively and to aid dealing with tacit knowledge in application (Imani, Ashton, Peng). Moving from reflections on tacit knowledge in research and practice to studies of tacit knowledge in application, the importance of tacit knowledge has been highlighted through demonstrating direct linkage between tacit knowledge and the learning experience. While tacit knowledge is at the basis of creativity, importantly it is at its most effective where tacit and explicit knowledge are seamlessly integrated with each other as is apparent in the film industry (Alony & Jones) as well as education (McVittie, Victoire).

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Acknowledgements

The extended version of the editorial of the Special Issue 6 (2) of the Journal of Visual Arts Practice is published in Working Papers in Design with kind permission of JVAP.

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