Experience and Communication

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> Intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary theorizing is one practice amongst others and is itself intelligently or stupidly conducted.
>
> Gilbert Ryle

> Still, what would theory be worth if it were not also good for *inventing practice*?
>
> Gérard Genette

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Introduction

Western thought has supposedly favoured the life of the mind over the life of the body since Plato, leading to a marginalisation of experience and its subordination to 'purely' *intellectual* pursuits. Artistic practice, during a comparable period, has not infrequently relished the excavation of sensory, or sometimes visceral, *experiential* content. So do we need *theory* to precede a work of art in order to *recognise* it as art (as, for example, Arthur Danto has argued)[1]. Or does practice, experience's 'semaphor', itself generate a form of knowledge that mere critics and academics struggle to put into words? These kinds of questions are implied in our current interest in forms of knowledge based on *practice-based research*, *reflective practice* – or *knowing how*, as distinct from *knowing that* (in Ryle's terminology).[2]

The pairing of the terms *practice* and *research* – not infrequently through Christopher Frayling's oft-cited prepositions (1993) research *into/through/for* practice; but also *research by practice*, *practice-led research* etc. – implies a central role for *communication* (a more peripheral role would, after all, condemn design to the shadowlands of research, beyond the reach of *analysis* and *understanding*, incapable of addressing an *audience* outside its own professional practitioners, and, accordingly, its research *significance* significantly diminished). In staking a claim that practice is capable of articulation as a form of research, we are forced to confront the consequences of our chosen mode(s) of expression, its material, technological, political and epistemological assumptions, its generic, grammatical and philosophical implications – and, not least, its *appropriateness*. Thus if we must consciously design our modes of communication, communication itself becomes a core consideration in undertaking both design *and* research.[3]

Yet communication can be said to be central to *all* research activities – without appropriate articulation and effective *dissemination*, research *results* would have little or no *value*. Why, then, should communication be particularly challenging in practice-based research?

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[1] See, for example, Arthur Danto (1981) *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

[2] See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), 26-60. In regards the question of order between theory and practice, Ryle is emphatic: "Efficient practice precedes the theory of it; methodologies presuppose the application of the methods, of the critical investigation of which they are the products." 31.

[3] *Communication* is here understood, after Richard Buchanan, not in accordance with semiotic or grammatical theories of communication, nor dialectical theories that treat communication in relation to an economic or spiritual truth, but in the context of rhetoric – i.e. "the inventive and persuasive relation of speakers and audiences as they are brought together in speeches or other objects of communication." (Buchanan 1989, 91). *Design* is understood in its generic sense, denoting a family of concepts that include architectural design, engineering design, industrial design, planning, operations research, systems design and related activities dedicated to changing ourselves and our environment in order to enhance the quality of our lives.

Theory as performance

Unlike the architects of the library of Alexandria (and some contemporary internet obsessives), we suspect that knowledge today resides less in a collection or archive (library or database), than in how a person *actualises* – performs or expresses – their knowledge *in practice*. There is both a private (silent, reflective) and a public (expressive, performative) dimension to this performance.[4] It may include an element of interpreting, adapting and applying the information stored in various collection systems (historical, methodological, educational or technical archives), but it equally involves a range of emotions related to our desires to connect and communicate while simultaneously acknowledging the unavoidably partial, limited or situated nature of our cultural, disciplinary, biological and historical perspectives.[5] This (emphasised through the use of the spatial term *perspective*) reminds us that research is typically *purposive* and thus *positional* – we set out to *investigate* or *explore* from a particular point of *origin* (or set of origins), orienting ourselves *towards* a particular concern, with particular *goals* (*outcomes* and *audiences*) in mind. So the ways we choose to conduct our inquiry, the nature of our questions and ethical purposes, as well as our behaviour towards colleagues and collaborators in the research process, all influence our supposedly "objective" research perspective.

Knowledge is thus not only situated, embodied, personal, but also (being communicated) *connective* and *performative* in a particular kind of way. These aspects cohere within the concept of *experience*. "To be knowledgeable," Churchman writes, "one must be able to adjust behavior to changing circumstances."[6] The capacity to adjust behavior to uncertain or changing circumstances arises from familiarity with a repertoire of practices. As Thomas Kuhn has shown, for science to advance, emerging scientists must acquire not merely a methodology but also a "way of seeing" – an ability, that is, to identify the salient features of a problem situation and evaluate their significance in the appropriate context. What is acquired is the ability to directly discern the parameters of a situation in a manner analogous to what is involved in the appreciation of a work of art. Kuhn's analysis of the role of "exemplars" in effective scientific problem-solving illustrates the centrality of reliable judgment, acquired through practice, to scientific inquiry and research.[7] Trained judgment involves the ability to recognise the relevant features in a situation, the appropriate combination of operative factors and patterns, their harmony or disharmony, and the weight they should have in a particular context. This "way of seeing" is thus a skilled performance achieved only after exposure to a range of problems and the types of strategies employed for their resolution. It shares much in common with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* (practical wisdom); like phronesis, it is acquired through training and practice, and the development of a

[4] The silent, solitary aspect of thinking is, of course, historically and culturally contingent. Ryle, for example, points this out while inadvertantly using an already-dated analogy: "Theorizing is an activity which most people can and normally do conduct in silence. They articulate in sentences the theories that they construct, but they do now most of the time speak these sentences out loud. They say them to themselves. Or they formulate their thoughts in diagrams and pictures, but they do not always set these out on paper. They 'see them in their minds' eyes'. Much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue or silent soliloquy, usually accompanied by an internal cinematograh-show of visual imagery." Yet Ryle also emphasises that this internal dialogue is acquired with some effort, and only after we have learned to talk intelligently aloud and heard and understood other people doing so. In a salutary reminder to those of us concerned with research communication, he adds, "People tend to identify their minds with the 'place' where they conduct their secret thoughts. They even come to suppose that there is a special mystery about how we publish our thoughts instead of realizing that we employ a special artifice to keep them to ourselves." Ryle (1949), 27-8.

[5] Churchman writes, "Knowledge is being at once at ease with a subject and deeply engrossed in it. Knowledge carries with it both a tremendous joy and a great despair—a joy at being at one with a whole area of living human activity, and a great despair at recognizing how little this oneness really is compared to what it might be." C. West Churchman (1971) *The Design of Inquiring Systems: Basic Concepts of Systems and Organization* (New York: Basic Books Inc.), 10-11.

[6] Churchman, 11.

[7] See Kuhn (1970), 187-91

given level of skill creates the conditions for still more skilled performances in the future. And as practical wisdom becomes second nature to the *phronimos*, so good judgment – an essential attribute of a successful designer and researcher – becomes second nature, or so we hope, to the person who can reason in an innovative and useful manner.

But is "problem-solving" (with its associations of intervention in localised situations of intellectual spillage or accident) an adequate description – or even a desirable goal – for practice-based researchers? The problem-solver works within prescribed limits – fix it and be gone. Yet practice-based design research typically involves synthesising a broad range of information from a diverse range of knowledge traditions. Even a 'simple' architectural project, for example, would likely involve research-related activities spanning behaviour that can be classed as teleological ("goal seeking"), explorative, conceptual, analytical, evaluative, quantitative, qualitative, hermeneutical ("interpretative"), generative, explorative and so forth. Each activity produces its own class of outcomes which needs to be syntheised without damaging the integrity of the findings or the coherence of the design project as a whole.

Representing the practitioner's knowledge

If the practitioner's knowledge is partly or largely rooted in *experience*, then the consequences of adopting an inappropriate form or inauthentic language for *giving an account* of such experience (out of insecurity, perhaps, or an ill-conceived desire to rhetorically construct an authoritative tone of voice), are potentially damaging.[8]

Michael Biggs has characterised practice-based research as i) prioritising some property of experience arising through practice, over cognitive content arising from reflection on practice and as ii) able to be communicated or disseminated ("this being more desirable than research that cannot be communicated or disseminated, because it will have greater impact in its field.")[9] It follows that practice-based research involves an experiential component that is communicable to others; the core of the problem, Biggs claims, is precisely this communication of experiential content – the meaning of an experience, its significance, and how it might be related to a shared context. It is a problem inseparable from considerations of *representation* and thus of *form*.[10] For Biggs, a philosopher and sculptor, the "most intractable problem" of research in this area underpins exactly this – the representational challenge of experiential knowledge:

> The problem is that the experiential feelings that represent experiential content are private to the experiencing individual. Experiences must be expressed in the first person; "I feel...". While they remain private experiences they cannot reasonably be regarded as research because they do not meet the criterion that research should be disseminated (assumption 2). But the problems of identifying and communicating first person experiences to second and third persons is notoriously difficult. For example, it has come under sustained attack from Wittgenstein in his so-called private language argument (Wittgenstein 1953: §§243-315).[11]

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[8] A point illustrated by Caliban's retort to Prospero "You taught me language; and my profit on't/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!" in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act One Scene 2.

[9] Biggs (2004) writes, "Artistic enquiry is not just artistic enquiry about the nature of the physical world but is also artistic enquiry about the artistic world. Nearly all research in Material Culture could be described in this way, and that is what makes it different from enquiries concerning the same objects in physics or engineering. Therefore the observation that questions about experience arise through the process or as a consequence of experience, is valid." 8-9.

[10] Biggs (2004) remarks, "Experiential feelings do not have the same form as experiential content, i.e. experiences present themselves as experiential feelings whereas we reflect cognitively upon the content of those experiences, hence my claim that experiential feelings represent experiential content. With some experiential feelings the experiential content represented may be trivial, e.g. pain. However, other experiential feelings represent significant aspects of human experience, e.g. the aesthetic response. Thus there are both sensory and cognitive elements to experience, although I do not mean to imply that the cognitive element is necessarily synonymous with linguistic form." 10.

[11] Biggs (2004), 10.

Hybridization

The development of any field of research or professional practice involves privileging particular cultural metaphors and analogies, references and examples, and, in the process, cross-pollinating, hybridising (or repressing) existing assumptions and methodologies[12]. We might explore forms of practice that demand more than the formal properties of reason alone by appropriating strategies, methods and concepts from other material and discursive regimes. This places particular emphasis on our capacity to discern connections across diverse discourses, changing language games, shape-shifting input, and material or non-linguistic data. Herbert Simons writes of Method being replaced by "variable, creative, non-algorithmic" methods, of generalised laws being displaced by "contingent, historically situated truths, reflective of values and interests, and found more or less useful by cultures and communities which are themselves symbolically constituted". Furthermore, he writes:

> there are faint suspicions that scholarly communities are no less influenced by "fuzzy" logics than by formal, deductive, "closed-fisted" logics: by arguments from sign and analogy, by anecdotes and exemplars; and even by appeals to authority, tradition, convention, intuition and aesthetic goodness-of-fit.[13]

This is particularly the case in contemporary contexts of interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary ways of working. The many convergences taking place today – between biology, technology, economics and the arts, for example – are symptomatic of a more generalised reconfiguration of cultural, national, and political boundaries, all of which contribute, as Klein argues, to reversing "the differentiating, classificatory dynamic of modernity and increasing hybridization of cultural categories, identities, and previous certainties. […] All cultural categories, identities, and certainties have undergone de-differentiation, de-insulation, and hybridization. All boundaries are at risk."[14] Since there are as a result a growing number of problems "without a discipline", this skill in *seeing connections* – a skill that blends creative and critical (or design and hermeneutical) modes of inquiry (or curiosity) – will become increasingly important.

It may be that practice-based research similarly acknowledges alternative, competing or even contradictory belief systems that nonetheless organise diverse and variable (culturally, professionally and historically) conceptions of reason. In this sense, practice-based research may serve not merely to *deconstruct* systems of logic which depend on a process of self-validation for their support, but also to *reconstruct* the question of how we might investigate, make reasonable comparisons, judgements and evaluations, and use language in contexts where there can exist no "proof" as such. If this is so, the need to explore forms of argument appropriate to identifying and representing the elements of our practice, and the expressions of our shared and evolving professional knowledge, becomes for practice-based researchers a central challenge, if not *the* central challenge. Accordingly, we arrive at an account of practice-based research as an architectonic strategy for orchestrating, enacting, or curating, the interplay of discourse, material practices, and experiential content in forms that represent arguments for artistic and scientific signicance beyond the relatively narrow concerns of an audience (or readership) limited to fellow practitioners. And so the work begins.

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[12] See Rolf Hughes and John Monk (eds.) *The Book of Models* (1998, reprinted 2003), as well as Rolf Hughes and John Monk (eds.) *Hybrid Thought* (2003).

[13] Herbert Simons, "Rhetoric of Inquiry as an Intellectual Movement" in Simons, Herbert W., ed. (1990) *The Rhetorical Turn: Invention and Persuasion in the Conduct of Inquiry* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).

[14] Julie Thompson Klein (2004) "Interdisciplinarity and complexity: An evolving relationship" E:CO Special Double Issue Vol. 6 Nos. 1-2 2004, p.8

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