

ISSN: 2178-7727

The Function and the Impact: Practice Research Approaches Across Creative Industries & Visual Communication

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ABSTRACT

We find ourselves at an interesting intersection. As supervisors of practice-led research higher degree students in both art and design, we find ourselves consciously using different vocabularies when we teach our postgraduate students research methods. We encounter stark differences in project designs and we find ourselves switching hats as we alternate between draft exegeses and consider, for example, the poetic goals of an installation artist one day and the pragmatic aims of an interaction designer the next.

KEYWORDS: art and design; exegesis; practice-led research; methodologies; postgraduate supervision.

INTRODUCTION

A SPECTRUM OF DIFFERENCES

We find ourselves at an interesting intersection. As supervisors of practice-led research higher degree students in both art and design, we find ourselves consciously using different vocabularies when we teach our postgraduate students research methods. We encounter stark differences in project designs and we find ourselves switching hats as we alternate between draft exegeses and consider, for example, the poetic goals of an installation artist one day and the pragmatic aims of an interaction designer the next.

The contrasts are quite apparent on the ground, yet when we turn to the literature on practice-led research, we find that the fields of art and design are largely undifferentiated. While considerable work has been undertaken to articulate the research paradigms of creative practice (Gray and Malins 1993; Sullivan 2005; Haseman 2005; Biggs and Büchler 2008), and to exemplify it through multidisciplinary case studies (Barrett and Bolt 2007; Bourke et al. 2005; Brien and Williamson 2009), much of the available literature does not distinguish between the approaches of art and design. Research processes, outcomes and knowledge contributions are often undifferentiated and are discussed through reference to incommon traits. At times they are bracketed together as a single term (art-anddesign) or treated as inter-changeable terms (art/design) and discussed as if one domain encompasses the other.

We can trace the conflation of art and design research back to the mid 1990s and early attempts at formulating practice-led research for the academy. For example, Darren Newbury's positioning report for the United Kingdom Council of Graduate Education (1997: 3) summarised the knowledge contribution of practice-led research as follows:

Contributions of research in art and design may include: the realisation of new design solutions aesthetic development new methods or techniques for art/design practice methodological innovation new understanding of 'creative' processes new models of practice new theories of art/design empirical novelty.

Acta Sci., 25(4), Jul./Sep. 2024 DOI: 10.57030/ASCI.25.4.AS05



Laying out such broad, largely in-common claims was undoubtedly valuable early on in the practice-led research debate when it was institutionally and politically important for the 'creative sector' (arts, design and media domains) to collectively argue for the significance of practice-led research in relation to the already respected research traditions of the sciences and humanities. However, when we provide texts that present a unified field to students who are setting out on their research careers they can be confusing; they can set up a false expectation that the research frameworks of art and design are interchangeable; or they can perhaps lead them to assume the research processes and frameworks of a field at odds with their practices, experience and training.

We have come to characterize the differences in practice-led research across art and design through a spectrum, which ranges between approaches we describe as *the effective* and *the evocative*. While both produce 'artefacts' (creative work, product, event, or technique), we would argue that they differ markedly in terms of the contexts in which they arise; research intent; the research questions asked; the methods and processes of production; the role of the artefact in the resultant knowledge claims; and the explications of the value of the research in the exegesis.

In this paper we articulate the distinctions we have encountered in practice-led research in art and design through postgraduate supervision, research methods training, and an empirical study of over sixty postgraduate, practice-led projects completed at the Creative Industries Faculty of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) between 2002 and 2008. We also draw on an article by Stephen Scrivener, entitled 'Reflection in and on action and practice in creative-production doctoral projects in art and design' (2000), which provides a useful starting point in articulating the differences. Like us, Scrivener was working with both art and design postgraduates, and faced challenges in accommodating approaches that seemed similar on the surface yet held remarkably different assumptions. But while Scrivener's position paper was written quite early in the discussions on practice-led research, little work has since been conducted to clarify or extend his initial distinctions, or to provide examples that illustrate the differences. We extend Scrivener's work here, further mapping the distinctions he identified.

Throughout the paper, we illustrate the differentiating research aims, principles, practices, outcomes and knowledge claims through reference to two prime examples. Both are successful doctoral research projects that were supervised by Hamilton and are familiar to Jaaniste as a colleague of the two researchers. While both exemplars dealt with digital media and interaction, they did so in such different ways, and for such different ends. Sitting at either end of the spectrum of possibilities, these projects serve to illustrate and make concrete the differences we describe.

It is important to establish at the outset however that it is not our intention to draw a hard distinction between practice-led research projects in art and design. Not all projects sit at these poles – some projects occupy something of a middle ground and there are always exceptions. However, marking out the poles at each end of the spectrum provides a useful guide to understanding the possibilities and dynamics at play. It is also important to establish that while it is possible to play politics, elevating the status of one form of creative practice as research at the expense of the other, this is not our desire. We see different approaches as just that – simply ways of doing something; in this case carrying out research through creative practice.

MAPPING THE EFFECTIVE – EVOCATIVE SPECTRUM

(i) Differences in research intent and the role of the artefact

At a fundamental level, the differences between practice-led research approaches across art and design arise out of a distinction in research intent and the role of the artefact. Scrivener (2000) provides initial distinctions in this regard by contrasting problem-solving projects (typically associated with design) and creative-production projects (typically associated with art, as well as some forms of craft and design).

Scrivener argues that the primary goal of problem-based design research is the pursuit of a solution to a problem, which is important to, and can be identified with, a particular community. The artefact produced



through the research functions as an innovative (new or improved) solution to this problem. It might therefore be understood as an intervention that makes something, or some situation, better (more efficient, more effective etc.). In reference to its intent to effect change, we describe this form of research as *effective research*.

On the other hand, research that emanates from an artistic practice may differ considerably. As Scrivener suggests, it usually arises out of an existing practice, which remains central to the research process. The research is not the pursuit of a known problem as such, but is driven by individual, or broader cultural issues, concerns and pre-occupations. The artefact that embodies the research is, in turn, not the solution to a known problem and it may have no obvious use as an object. Instead, it contributes to human experience more broadly. We would extend Scrivener's interpretation and say that the research intent, and the role of the artefact, is to produce affect and resonance through evocation. We would therefore describe it as *evocative research*.

We recast Scrivener's distinctions through the terms effective and evocative research because these descriptions embrace the spirit of the comparative research intentions and roles of the artefact, and underwrite a range of contingent characteristics of the research.

A prime example of effective research is Oksana Zelenko's 'Visualising Resilience' doctoral project (2005 to 2009). It built on research by the Department of Health at QUT, which had identified principles of resilience (the capacity to bounce back in adverse circumstances) and methods for the experiential acquisition of them in primary education. Oksana's research goal was to incorporate these principles into a set of digital tools for use in school curriculum and home settings. The project was thus problem-based, asking 'how can we effectively support children to acquire resilience through an experiential digital application?' It was contextual (located in primary schools). And the role of the (digital) artefact was to help children acquire resilience (to effect change in the children).



Figures 1 and 2: Oksana Zelenko: Visualising Resilience prototype interfaces, 2008

A prime example of evocative research is Ali Verban's 'in an other light' (2003 to 2007). This project extended from the researcher's established practice in digital, intermedia art. It involved producing an installation that evoked the artist's embodied memories (the antiphonic choirs, refracted light and lofty, gothic cathedrals she experienced as a child; immersion under water; being adrift at sea). The project goal, and the role of the artefact, was to trigger such embodied experiences within the 'neutral' space of a gallery through other means: digitally manipulated sound, image and video installations; that is, to produce affect by evoking embodied memories and sensory perceptions of immersion.





Figures 3, 4 and 5: Ali Verban in an other light, 2006, in tide out, 2006, Passage, 2006

(ii) Differences in the Creative Process

The distinctions between research intentions and the role of the artefact in effective and evocative research necessitate differences in how questions and topics arise, as well as how the creative process plays out.

In effective, problem-based projects, the making practices do not tend to lead the research. Instead, the practical, or production aspects of the project begin after the researcher has established a contextual framework. This not only involves establishing the research question, but determining what is needed in the situation or context (perhaps through ethnographic or 'social science' methods and as a user needs analysis). It also involves developing a set of guiding principles and processes for the practice. Only when this (substantial) contextual research and planning has been conducted is the practice initiated to form part of the solution, or an instantiation of an answer.

In evocative research, the term practice-led is much more suitable. As Barrett (2006) and Bolt (2004) have established, the research arises in and through the materiality and advent of the practice. It is through an ongoing dialogue between practice, theory and topic that the research question begins to make itself clear, and the shape of the research project resolves itself. Gray (1993, p 4) refers to as an expansive syntheses and Barrett (2006) describes a dynamic interplay of understandings and experience drawn from theory, practice and the researcher's situated knowledges, which form an emergent relationship with the artwork. And, as Scrivener notes, "the student is usually exploring manifold interests and goals and the priorities given to them may change as the work progresses [and] new issues and goals may emerge in response to the work in progress" (2000, p.2). The research question may therefore remain open-ended for some time and resist reduction to a single, specific problem. It is such an open-ended approach that allows the practice and artefact to remain irreducible in its meaning.

In the 'Visualising Resilience' (effective) research project, pursing the research intent (ie. designing an interactive tool to effectively support children to acquire attributes of resilience) first involved establishing the sample schools' community contexts and priorities through observations, interviews, focus groups and creative workshops. With the children cast as co-researchers, it then involved identifying interface and interaction design principles and processes to contribute to an effective design solution. It was only then – more than a year into the project – that the design of an artefact (a digital tool) began. Indeed, the researcher never referred to her project as practice-led, describing it instead as practice-based.





Figures 6 and 7: Oksana Zelenko: Visualising Resilience workshops with primary school children in a school setting, 2008



In her 'in an other light' (evocative) project, the researcher staged two exhibitions before she identified her research goal. While the factors that contributed to her own embodied experiences of immersion in natural or grand architectural environments were being (re)produced in the sound sculptures, video and light projections of these installations, she did not consciously set out to evoke (or provoke) such experiences, or even ask whether this was possible. Instead this research pursuit (to consider the contextual and physical elements that contributed to her perceptual and sensory experiences of immersion), and the research intention (to see if these conditions could be produced in a neutral gallery space) emanated from, and became apparent through, the unfolding practice.



Figures 8 and 9: Ali Verban, incidental infinity, 2005, Flux and Mutability: a precarious poise, 2005

Understanding these differences in process helps to explain why, at presentations a year into the candidature, we sometimes see design students who do not yet have any practice to show and why (to those looking through the lens of the evocative paradigm at least) they might appear to have over-scoped the contextual framing of their practice, rather than getting on with it. It also helps to explain why we sometimes see art students who have plenty of practice to show but are as yet unclear as to their goals or even their question, and why their projects might appear (from the perspective of the effective paradigm) to be unformed.

From the differences we have described, it might be assumed that the distinction between effective and evocative research is between the analytical and intuitive. However, it is important to note that, while analysis of the problem and context tends to come first in effective research, as in all research, it is intuition that leads to innovation. And, on the other hand, while evocative research may evolve intuitively through the interests, concerns and cultural preoccupations of the creative practitioner, it is rounded out and resolved by analytical insights.

Because of this combination of the intuitive and analytical, both ends of the spectrum may draw on bodies of theory such as Donald Schön's (1983) theories of reflective practice and principles of tacit knowledge and reflection-in-action, to frame an iterative development process. However, differences can be identified between the form and outcomes of the iterative cycles and the type of feedback that informs the reflective process.

In effective research, an iterative design process may involve an action research model and prototyping (paper prototype, rapid prototype, functional prototype and so on). Each iterative stage is evaluated through user testing by a representative group of end users (through quantitative or qualitative surveys or observations of use, for example). The purpose of this testing is to gauge the artifact's functionality, usability and efficacy. The gathered data informs changes and refinements in each cycle.

On the other hand, an artist might stage a number of preliminary exhibitions, but these are not staged to gather 'data', or to obtain successively closer approximations of a solution to a problem. Instead, they are part of an exploration of unfolding possibilities. Feedback might be sought from respected colleagues, and gathered in an informal setting (in the manner of a peer 'critique'). The purpose of gathering such insights is



to allow the artist to reflect upon the project and its evocation and affect and to see their work through the insights of others, which may shed new light on the practice and its possibilities.

This is not a definitive distinction. All researchers might seek feedback from expert peers and artists receive feedback from audiences through visitors' books. Rather it is a matter of emphasis. While both effective and evocative research engage in reflective practice, the primary source of the feedback, its staging and its formality have different inflections.

The 'Visualising Resilience' design project included detailed, formal user testing by a sample population of students and teachers. Participant observations, surveys, focus groups and semi-structured interviews occurred throughout the project's iterative development, and the data gathered was collated and carefully analysed. These measurements of the application's efficacy then fed into the next development stage.

The 'in an other light' media art project included feedback from respected peers, such as other artists, academics and critics. This feedback was informal and was not recorded or analysed in detail. Nonetheless, the insights it provided helped the researcher to reflect upon the evocation of the practice and inform and enrich its emergent development.

In this range of ways, the creative process unfolds differently in practice-led research that sits at either end of the effective–evocative spectrum. In some aspects, the differences are quite distinct (for example, the comparative place of the research question/s and the commencement of the practice in the project timeline), while in other aspects they are a matter of emphasis (for example in the balance of tacit knowledge and analytical thinking). And in some regards, the differences in process may be matter of form and formality (for example in the gathering of feedback).

(iii) Differences in the artefact as a research outcome

Besides the differences in research intentions and the creative process that we have described so far, there are also marked differences in how the artefact functions as a research outcome and the way in which new knowledge is evidenced. The production of new knowledge (new to the world and not just the individual researcher) is fundamental to all research projects; without it there is no research, only replication (of existing knowledge and practices). In both effective and evocative research projects, the artefact is presented as an outcome and framed within an exegesis. However, the knowledge contributions claimed for it, and the explication of its value in the research, differ markedly.

Scrivener's (2000) article helps to establish some differences. He argues that in a problem-based design research project the resultant knowledge is embodied within the artefact as an instantiation of a solution to the problem the researcher set out to solve. This suggests that we can therefore test the knowledge claim by considering the efficacy of the artefact: how well it solves the problem, improves something, or makes something more efficient or effective. In addition, Scrivener argues that the knowledge contained within the artefact must be describable and generalisable to other situations and similar problems. He writes, "knowledge reified in the artefact is more important than the artifact" (2000: 1). When considering an effective research project as a whole then, we might not only consider how efficacious the artefact is in dealing with the named problem, but the potential extrapolation of the research to other contexts (and how well all of this has been understood, distilled and communicated). There are, of course, also a raft of other research contributions that might result from an effective research project such as knowledge about the problem itself or the community for whom the problem exists, as well as the methodologies of production or testing.

In his 2000 paper, Scrivener appears to be less sure about the knowledge that results from what he describes as creative production projects. Indeed, in 2002 he wrote a subsequent essay entitled 'The artwork does not embody a form of knowledge'. But his explanation in this later paper of what he thinks artworks do contribute is, for us, the answer. He writes that, "[artworks provide] deep insights into emotions, human



nature and relationships, and our place in the world ... we experience these insights as possibilities rather than conclusions" (2002:1) and, "art making is concerned with providing ways of seeing and ways of being in relation to what is, was, or might be" (2002:12). Scrivener may have overlooked the knowledge connected within the artefacts of what he refers to as creative-production research because he appears to assume that the term should be reserved for applied research, specific analytical description and propositional arguments based around *know-that*. However, knowledge is a broad enough term to include the *knowing-of* the world that is experienced through evocative artefacts.

Because it is poetically and purposefully ambiguous and irreducible in meaning, the knowledge, insight and embodied experience that is evoked by an artwork is not consistent or measurable. Its value lies in its capacity to open up possibilities, experiences and insights, rather than trigger a particular affect or resonance. Therefore, asking whether it has produced a specific effect in an individual audience member or group cannot validate the artefact. Rather than seeking an empirical (quantitative and/or qualitative) validation, evocative research tends to be framed in the exegesis within a philosophical tradition. When taking the research project as a whole, we consider how the artefact evokes its particular cultural preoccupations, and how well has this been understood in relation to its field of practice, related theories and philosophies, and broader cultural domains. Other contributions to knowledge might also arise from an evocative research project, such as knowledge of the cultural preoccupations themselves, production and exhibition practices, and the ways that the research and other practitioners are engaged with them.

The artefact/outcome of Oksana's effective research project was a digital prototype, which served to demonstrate the concepts and interaction design principles that had been developed. It was tested by a representative sample of users, who evaluated its capacity to help students to understand resilience and become more resilient. This quantitative and qualitative analysis was presented as evidence of its efficacy within the exegesis. The outcomes presented also included a guide, and an outline of the development process. These outcomes allow the uptake of the project's design principles, as well as its unique project methodology (a form of participatory design), into other educational, design and mental health projects. That is, Oksana facilitated the generalization of her research in the exegesis.

The outcome of Ali's evocative research project was three immersive intermedia art installations. This work was framed in the exegesis through reference to art historical precedents (minimalist installation, sound art, post-minimalism, media art and so on) and philosophical understandings of phenomenology. Ali resisted, absolutely, any suggestion that she ask specific questions of the audience that would lead ask them to interpret, analyse or verify the perceptual sensations or embodied immersion she had set out to produce. Instead she invited open-ended responses. Often poetic evocations themselves, these diverse responses were testament to the depth and breadth of the evocation of the work, how it drew attention to the contingencies of the body/self, and how it provided diverse insights into the subjective qualities of awareness and perception (ways of seeing, being in and knowing-of the world). The work itself, and the experience of it, was thereby presented in the exegesis as more important than the knowledge that could be abstracted and generalised from it.

SLIDING ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Of course not all practice-led/based research projects sit at either end of the effective–evocative spectrum, and it is possible for the research activities of students in one discipline to assume the research tendencies of the other. There are therefore positions and situations to consider besides the ones we have presented so far. While exploratory art tends to gravitate toward the evocative and problembased design tends toward the effective, some research projects sit in a blended or hybrid position, embodying both effective and evocative goals with their attendant processes and outcomes. That is, some applied arts practices aim to be practically effective, and some design practices can be highly evocative. For example, a design Honours student, Gavan Bright (also supervised by Hamilton) produced an evocative digital story and concluded, through the evaluation methods of effective research, that it was more efficacious in educating gay men about safe sex than many didactic HIV education poster campaigns. Another example is the ongoing, large-scale,



interdisciplinary project entitled *Intimate Transactions*, which was directed by Keith Armstrong who has a background in both visual arts and communication design (see Hamilton, 2006). While this project is on one hand an interaction and interface design project that investigated the design problem of how embodied communication can be supported in the distributed network, and how tangible interfaces, screen avatars, sound and game metaphors might make such communication more effective; on another level it engages the audience in evocative experiences of environmental depletion and the ethics of sustainability.

Some postgraduate researchers may even begin a project at one end of the spectrum and find themselves shifting to the other end as their research unfolds. This was the case with MA researcher Chris Denaro, as is evident from the research journey he maps out in the exceptical component of his project. Entitled *Dialogues with a Prototype* (conducted 2006 to 2007), it describes his background in the 3D animation profession, which is steeped in the assumptions and methods of design workflows, and his gradual transition during his higher research degree into the production of evocative animated works.

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

If there are many positions to occupy along the spectrum of effective and evocative research, then it might be possible to place a research project at the wrong end of the spectrum. Problems can arise in a range of ways. The researcher at one end of the spectrum might inappropriately adopt the methodologies and processes of the other. Or the forming context could be wrongly framed, forcing evocative production into overt problem-solving descriptions or effective production into evocative reflections. Or the evidence and judgement criteria of one end of the effective– evocative spectrum might be wrongly ascribed to a project (empirical user-testing for evocative creative-production projects, or poetic critique and aesthetic criticism of effective, problem-based design projects) with the effect of expecting artists to function like designers in their projects or vice-versa.

Mis-readings might also occur and cause the positive elements of a project to be missed or mistaken as deficiencies. The candidate and supervisor have two main ways of guarding against this problem. The first is to frame the research project and creative artefacts as either effective or evocative research by overtly establishing the project's orientation, research intent, goals and aims within the exegesis. The second is to judiciously select examiners whose situated position is empathetic to the research project.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have marked out some key distinctions to guide our understanding of the spectrum of research approaches across art and design. If the broad principles of the effective and evocative we have mapped out through reference to visual art and interaction design examples prove durable, then there are many issues to be investigated. We might test whether they are generalisable through comparisons of completed art and design research projects from a cross section of universities. We might investigate whether the spectrum of effective and evocative research might be useful to other disciplines across the creative industries such as creative writing, performance, film, music, and fashion. We could also extend the discussion on how researchers might navigate the spectrum and use the evocative in service of the effective and the effective.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to acknowledge the generosity of Oksana Zelenko, Ali Verban, Gavan Bright, Chris Denaro, and Keith Armstrong for agreeing to the inclusion of their research projects as examples in this paper. We also would like to thank the many colleagues within and outside of our faculty who have provided feedback on the draft paper, including all of the researchers discussed within the paper. This paper was presented at the ACUADS conference through the support of the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology.

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