

Creativity's crossing forces: a danced interplay

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Abstract:

This paper examines various perspectives on creativity fuelled by a current collaborative research project, *Dancing Between Diversity and Consistency: Refining Assessment in Post Graduate Studies in Dance*, in an attempt to arrive at some position on the value of creativity and critical reflection from the point of view of artistic practitioners within academic parameters. Within the array of guises and manipulations pervading attributions of creativity, artists seem to be discarding their long association with its rebellious nature in favour of intellectual endeavours that emphasise plumbing the unknown. Singular intention and methodology, however, suggest that rebellion may not be extinguished but merely transferred to another stage of unfolding.

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When you begin to examine what might be the value of post graduate education of the 21st century, creativity enters the equation. Most descriptors of PhD require an original contribution to knowledge, which infers an element of creativity in prizing new ideas from what has been previously unthought. In this generalised perspective, the creative element could be seen to run through various elements of an investigation as, for example, in the speculation of perceived problems, the choice of analytical lens for examining selected materials and/or within the experiments and interpretative conclusions drawn from results.

By contrast, practice-based arts' doctorates introduce a more direct creative intervention by way of the vexed issue of imagination devoid of proof or obvious function thereby, ostensibly, unconcerned with the betterment of human society. At best, these kinds of researchers posit notions of perceptual variation, at worst, they offer red herrings that may question but never achieve any resolution. Simply put, in practice-based doctorates, no thing may be resolved, no precise conventional knowledge may be accumulated and documented but the action of pursuit may have significance. As Finnish commentator Tuomas Nevanlinna observes, artistic research is "knowledge about *the singular*. It cannot be generalized into laws in itself, and it applies only to the unique, but it is knowledge nevertheless and makes truth "happen" in a singular way" (Nevanlinna, 84).

The creative as a mark of uniqueness

This idea of a singular knowledge and its alignment with creativity has its roots in the Romantic Era when artists sided with explorations into the irrational in opposition to a sharpening intellectual reliance on rationality. In retrospective Marxist readings, these expressions of intuition were perceived as means by which individual artists could distinguish themselves as free agents against a growing proletariat conformism to industrialisation and science (Williams 1988). Creativity as such was understood to be

politically confrontational, often aligning with revolutionary forces though normally at an aesthetically safe distance from the main physical action. Romanticism's appeal to supernatural states or pantheistic understandings gradually gave way to the more forthright protestations of the avant garde in the 20th century. The 'shock of the new' assumed prominence and, though these artists tended to reject the markers of their predecessors' difference, conceptually they continued to adhere to the potency of a singular creativity. There is thus an inherited view of creativity as one attribute (or set of attributes) which sets an individual, most pointedly an artist, apart from society in general.

However, Nevanlinna's "knowledge about the *singular*" places an inflection on the artist and knowledge conjunction which points as much to the expectations of dominant methodologies within academic paradigms as it does to a uniqueness which creative artists have historically cultivated. The perspective is framed, as it were, by the recent presence of practice-based creative arts' research within, rather than outside, universities and, as such, is an idea of its time which needs to be examined within that context.

Intelligence, access and the mass of creative individuals

That said, it is also important to consider more general views on what creative practices might be in the 21st century. Lars Lindström's mapping of the characteristic elements of creativity in Swedish schools reflects a general shift from ideas of singularity to those of access and education. In one sense, the radical anti-establishment challenges of avant garde artists have been embraced by the new institutions. In another sense, Lindström's list, outlining investigative work, experimental daring with the material properties involved and integration of production with critical perception and reflection, aligns artistic creation with sound intellectual practice, regardless of the discipline (Lindström, 2006, 62-3). There is nothing in Lindström's evaluation which sets artistic processes apart from regular research qualities, except perhaps the reference to materiality which, as Susan Melrose (2003) and Paul Carter (2004) observe, is equally applicable to acts of writing in an academic sense.

Another twist in the changing usage of the term creativity centres on the co-option of singular artistic imaginings to generate and, more pertinently, to sell new commodities. There is a sleight of hand involved wherein individualisation 'stands in' for the new proletarian masses, who can be seduced to buy individually en masse. This marketing ploy has not occurred as some kind of take-over conspiracy since arts practitioners have been complicit in its development, at least in Australia.

In the 70s, community arts' pursuit of access went hand in hand with a pedagogical advocacy of creative arts as integral to every child's education. Both movements, steeped in a democratic belief in participation, nonetheless, argued for the viability of professional artists at the elite end of the scale. At the same time, professional artists and their champion, the newly formed Australia Council, found themselves in a situation where the viability of their specialised mastery had to be defended against government scepticism. Tabling the economic value of the wide demographic employment and service provision generated by performances, exhibitions, broadcasting and publishing became a strategy in debates to secure more funding for the arts. Over time, these co-existent arguments fused and emerged as the self-sustainability entrepreneurship underpinning creative industries. Increased connectivity by way of the new technologies made way for the other factor in the equation, the ability of marketing organisations to

customise information to the individual and promote products on the principle that 'the special individual', in other words the masses, would benefit from the purchase of this or that object or service. In a sense, the rebellion against bourgeois values has ricocheted back on artists for, according to Microsoft promotion, everybody can be creative and/or special at the touch of a keypad. Today, creativity is a marker of sameness and, ironically, idealistic belief in access, in one respect, has been achieved.

Higher education and the 'creative economy'

Ramifications within higher education of this transformation of creativity vis-à-vis artistic endeavour are expressed by Stuart Laing and Tara Brabazon (2007) who caution against the prevailing individualising tendency and, from their perspective, industry's control of post graduate pursuits, principally because arts' courses have been directed to bolster the 'creative economy.' Their views challenge creative industries' entrepreneurial objectives arguing that such channelling can sacrifice the open-endedness of disciplinary knowledge to graduate aspirations of salary increase and the narrow interests of industry. In other words, these authors see circumstances driving creativity into a functional impasse which would seem to contradict its historically-shaped rebellious spirit whether from an academic or artistic standpoint.

In contrast, Richard Cherwitz and Gary Beckman propose that artistic doctoral graduates (in this instance from visual arts) have the potential to act as 'intellectual entrepreneurs' with capacities to increase learning

across disciplinary boundaries; forging collaborations between the academy and society, resulting in greater synergies among the many institutions in the public and private sectors that discover and put knowledge to work; and encouraging and promoting creativity as the primordial spark of this effort (Cherwitz & Beckman, 2006, 15).

Graduate artists are thus envisaged as boundary trespassers, using creativity to move laterally to overcome a current disconnect between "communities, the arts, the academy, and public university funding" (Ibid). In contradistinction to Laing and Brabazon's emphasis on intellectual constriction, the rhetoric here suggests an imaginative freeing of restraints and the abilities of current and future graduates to make unusual connections regardless of obstacles. Rebellious nuances are maintained but they are diffused, perceived as working for society rather than confronting societal structures head-on.

What this particular debate signals is the complex set of factors that impinge on the perceived position of creativity within society and how artists' singular types of knowledge can be employed for diverse ends. It is a three-way dialogue between society, academia and industry to which the new practice-based degrees may be able to contribute because their as-yet-unfixed substance tends to exacerbate the tensions and/or provide further contradictions within the debate.

Value and postgraduate dance practices

This background survey of creativity's malleability emerged in the light of observations arising from a current Carrick Institute funded study, *Dancing Between Diversity and Consistency: Refining Assessment in Post Graduate Studies in Dance*. This collaborative venture between Deakin, QUT and the WA Academy of Performing Arts at ECU has involved interviews with candidates, supervisors/examiners and research personnel together with state dance community forums in tandem with a review of the literature. A crucial step towards determining more effective examination protocols is an attempt to identify the purposes and value of practice-based research degrees. It is these perceptions that pertain to this discussion.

Perhaps the first point to note is that dance practices only entered postgraduate education just over a decade ago. Research in the practices of dance developed within the profession itself where an emphasis on the attainment of technical performance virtuosity is, in most instances, inextricably linked with experimentation and innovation via choreographic processes normally instigated by the 'researcher,' the dance-maker. There are many variations to this pattern but, in simplified terms, this situation means that when dance entered academia via practice-based degrees, dance research deviated in two respects from the usual conventions of academic study. Firstly, the practice-based researcher is dependent on specialized and embodied theory acquired as much in his/her performance profession as it is in an initial undergraduate training and, secondly, high level researchers, the dance-makers, generally choose to undertake postgraduate study after some ten to twenty years as professional practitioners. Both points suggest that there is a logical progression for the advancement of the discipline wherein industry involvement plays a fundamental if not a formalized role. This fluidity between the university and industry fundamentally infuses vitality into the discipline across the board and avoids traps of a one-way dependency suggested by Laing and Brabazon.

Dance community as well as supervisor/examiner respondents in the *Diversity* project make the complementariness of the professional and academic relationship clear on many levels. Validation of embodied knowledge, of the dance profession's processes and innovations and, by consequence, of individual practitioner's legitimacy proved to be common responses across the board to questions about the value of postgraduate study. Set at a remove from the time and resource limitations of professional life, the spirit of independent inquiry of doctoral study was seen to support boundary challenges and intensive experimentation within the practice. Indeed, the interrogative quality of postgraduate research is viewed as necessary to prevent industry complacency. As one participant put it "an irritant to the [artistic] work is a positive thing," while another ventured an extreme position on the issue:

should it come to the point where we all realise that dance is a moribund form that we ought to exterminate, that would be something that would also come out of the academy. It is not necessarily simply an act of preserving something or endlessly extolling a particular set of aesthetic values. It's as much about interrogating and putting [the discipline] up to radical scrutiny, so that's why we should have [PhDs].

So instead of industry impeding disciplinary freedom and depth, dance investigations within universities are seen as an integral stimulus for the system of dialogic forces produced by partnership with the profession/industry.

As well as weight given to disciplinary reflection and interrogation, articulation and the value accrual by way of documentation, distribution and contextualization was acknowledged and not limited to merely giving visibility to processes normally obscured in professional public interactions. In overtones of Cherwitz and Beckman's boundary trespassers, exponents of practice-based dance degrees are perceived as having the potential to contribute beyond disciplinary parameters through their embodied nature. This supervisor's response encapsulates observations arising in many of the interviews. Embodied research is

a way of thinking about research that is very different from the traditional ways and so the requirement for the field [is] to articulate where this approach connects with traditional research paradigms and where it departs from them and why it departs from them is a very important task.

Signalled again is the verbal/written articulation crucial to how knowledge whether embodied, visual or auditory is both understood and conveyed in university contexts. Verbal communication marks the crucial distinction between new knowledge discovered in the profession (articulated through performance), and that revealed through university conventions where words supplement corporeal findings.

The values of legitimacy, interrogation, documentation and sorely needed time and space resources do not come without hesitations and difficulties. Fluency in delineating ideas in words is also the most difficult challenge for artists criss-crossing between the two environments. In their efforts, they can encounter what Fiona Candlin terms as the conflicting competencies (and integral management matrices) of academia and the arts. "The practice-based PhD ... effectively posits that artists can speak from the positions previously occupied by academics alone. This inevitably creates problems concerning competence" (Candlin, 2000, 4). For Candlin, the bias invariably lies with the 'academic' location and degree conferred. If interrogation is a stimulus for the dance profession, it must by extension be a useful attribute to also direct towards academic arbitrators of knowledge?

A creative silence

But what do the participants in the *Diversity* project say about creativity? Interestingly, they say very little about creativity *per se*. Is artistic creativity then not a component of practice-based arts' degrees? In hindsight, no questions directly addressed the role of creativity within artistic research which demonstrates a lack of foresight in the framing of the investigation. Questions posed both generally and within university contexts probably deterred responses alluding to imaginary as opposed to intellectual accountability because dance, as with other creative disciplines, is still proving itself in the territory. In one sense, participants' silence confirms the tension between competencies that Candlin identifies but, in a related sense, the lack of acknowledgement indicates insecurity with the singular knowledge pinpointed by Nevalinna. Instead of creativity, articulation, rigour and conceptual understanding are emphasised. By the same token, grappling with the unknown, new vocabulary and practices and interdisciplinary connections are almost

unanimously considered as advantageous. Notions of creativity are arguably implicit in such responses but, nonetheless, what is enunciated in every aspect is an affirmation of Lindström's tabulation of creativity's defining features. The responses do suggest that 21st century artists value the intellectual dimensions within their art works but does this mean that they privilege affirmation of their intellectual capacities over and above the freedom and distinctiveness associated with creativity?

Lingering intangibility, lingering questions

There is one facet to grappling with the unknown relevant to Nevalinna's notion of singular knowledge that is highlighted by the alternative mediums of expression and articulation of practice-based research that deserves a final comment. It is not that the same problem and advantage does not also emerge in word creations. Nevalinna the novelist would be quick to point out that, although a conciseness of explanatory power is embedded within the conventions of the word, the wealth of alternative historical evidence of exegetical interpretations of 'the' texts like the Torah, the Bible and the Koran as well as latter day commentators like Derrida, make words as fallible as any other medium of communication. Meaning is a complex matter and certainly is not to be resolved here. However, insight into that complexity may be fruitful.

Audio visual researcher, John Adams, argues that

practice research is both socially constitutive and a practical material activity that cannot be determined or defined primarily in terms of language: material practice ('making things') encodes and embodies an intricate, integrated weave of intellectual and sensory perceptions that circumscribe and elude linguistic determination, although, of course, elements of a work may be extracted and located as an illustrative strand within discourse (Adams, 2007, 206).

Critical reflection, in Adams' estimation can 'recover' the work but when that reflection is confined to discourse through word there is a danger of "exposing one aspect as it simultaneously represses or obscures other allusive strands located within the discourse; [thus] the power of paradox, resonance and allusion, which is the essence of constructive provocation, is systematically denied" (Adams, 2007, 215). Adam's point is that knowledge can be other than a precision that is assumed to be implicit in verbal articulation. In dance, not unlike within the written word, movement articulation is a prized technical accomplishment that contributes to but does not fully explicate the meaning that a particular movement might provoke. Reception of kinaesthetic intelligence is typically non-linear, not necessarily by the dance-maker's intention but because there is a complexity in human communication, both in the giving and the receiving that enables phenomena like paradox to seep into acts of engagement. Though tantalising for neurologists and cognitive scientists, such questions lie outside the parameters of this discussion. However, the point is that the open-ended features typical of creative arts' inquiries can be apprehended within communicative environments but, at the same time, cannot easily be translated into words. This diffusive comprehension may feasibly lie at the core of Nevalinna's pronounced singularity, producing yet another paradox and this time within language (or communication) itself?

From the point of view of the 21st century, creativity's artistic distinctiveness could be said to be a matter of indeterminacy and intangibility expressed via a methodological singularity which may differ only in degrees to all those forces which strove for difference, shock and, even, the contrary currents of equity. The test of practice-based degrees in dance or in any other creative practice may well emerge from crossing singular perspectives with self-directed interrogations and maintaining fluid relations between academia and the profession. Maybe, re-examinations of the collisions between difference, rebellion and access can lead to a deepening knowledge of communication and its reception? And maybe, artists have to cultivate concepts of intelligence in order to claim a singularity which might, or might not, reveal something about the elusive nature of creative impulses in words driven by motion? Or maybe, the next generation simply has to leave creativity behind and enable artists in partnership with their scientific colleagues to be different because of a questioning, stubborn and freedom-seeking intelligence? And might not this unfolding become another example of imagination framed by its time?

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I would also like to acknowledge the contribution of my colleagues in the *Dancing Between Diversity and Consistency*, Cheryl Stock and Kim Vincs and the participants who have so generously contributed their perceptions about post graduate studies, dance and value.