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The role of documentation in practice-led research

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Main Article:

The Role of Documentation in Practice-Led Research

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Abstract

Practice-led research in the field of art and design usually involves a study of the interplay between a researcher-practitioner and her artistic work in process. This article seeks to illustrate that documentation of art practice can be a means to record that interplay and it can be used as relevant material in practice-led research. The article will present an account of documentation in practice-led research highlighting two principal aspects: phases of documentation and the role of documentation within the overall research process. The account will capture reflections of the author's own practice-led research in fiber art, which investigates the relationship between materials and artistic expression, in the context of contemporary art.

Keywords: documentation; art practice; artifact; practice-led research

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1. Introduction: Practice-Led or Practice-Based Research

This article is based on my ongoing doctoral research in the field of art and design, focusing on my work in fiber art. The purpose of my research is to explore the relationship between materials and artistic expression, in the context of contemporary art. In my research, I am not only a researcher but also a practitioner who investigates into her own art practice. The integral part of this relatively recent form of research is the interplay between I, as a researcher-practitioner, and my artistic work in process. That interplay can be recorded through proper documentation, which can be used as research

material. In this article, I will explain how I apply documentation methods to record my artistic process and how I relate the documentation with the overall research process.

Practice-led research is a fairly provisional term for classifying this recent form of research in art and design that can be conducted by a researcher who herself is a practitioner. This is also known as *practice-based research*. These two terms have been used rather spontaneously in the field. Although the concurrent use of both terms has been widely debated during the last 2 decades by art and design scholars (Biggs, 2002; Frayling et al., 1997), no clear conclusion has been reached.

The UK Council for Graduate Education report (Frayling et al., 1997) defines practice-based research, thus:

[T]he practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice. An original/creative piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work.

Practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial contextualisation of the creative work. This critical appraisal or analysis not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the basis for a judgement as to whether general scholarly requirements are met. (p. 14)

Coumans (2003) explains the scope of practice-led research, as follows:

Within practice-led research it is the design process moving from problem to solution that is the point of departure for the rhetoric research direction of the thesis. . . . The research direction of an artist/designer--other than the art and design process--is a transparent process in which conscious steps are taken, in which knowledge is used, or knowledge is searched for and articulated in the process. . . . The artist/designer, therefore, must also demonstrate that he [sic] possesses sufficient knowledge to justify the choices he [sic] has made. (pp. 65-66)

According to the above statements, there are two significant distinctions between practice-based and practice-led research. First, the difference is drawn on the nature of art/design practice. Practice in practice-based research can be carried out freely for its own sake in order to produce artifacts. This is fairly similar to the general conception of art/design practice. On the contrary, practice in practice-led research is conscious exploration with the knowledge involved in the making of artifacts. Second, the difference is in the roles of practitioner and researcher. In practice-based research, the practitioner's role may be more dominant than the researcher's role. The emphasis seems to be on practice, since a practitioner-researcher carries out her research solely based on her own practice. In practice-led research, the two roles appear to be equally important, because research becomes an intertwined part of practice.

As a practitioner-researcher belonging to the art and design research community, I would rather define this form of research in a broad sense, as an interpretive engagement with artistic production and experience. Such research feeds on practice as well as the practitioner's reflections, such that the practical and the reflective parts could stimulate each other. What would be a suitable method for conducting this type of research? Since practice (i.e., artistic production and experience) plays a significant role in such research, it is usually performed in dialogue with practice. Research questions generally originate from within practice. In order to answer the research questions, the artistic production and experience--both facts and feelings--are to be captured, whether in visual or textual formats. The captured visuals and texts become data that can be used as research material.

This article illustrates how the documentation of art practice can be used as research material. It is a means to record the interplay between a researcher-practitioner and her artistic work in process. In order to demonstrate this, the paper will present an account of documentation focusing on two principal aspects: phases of documentation and their role within the overall research process. The account is based on the reflection of my own art practice that is part of my ongoing doctoral research. The article explores the issues of documentation through my research journey, from the search for suitable methods for my research through the contextual review of research in art and design, and eventually to the development of the acquired methods to suit my own research. I use the term *practice-led research* throughout this article because the narrative describes my ongoing doctoral research, whose form appears to be somewhat close to the definition of the term presented above.

2. My Research Journey

Describing the terrain of research in art and design, Gray and Malins (2004) suggest that research can be seen as a process of resolving issues, problems, and challenges raised in practice. They also emphasize that the process needs to be credible and the results should be available for critical assessment later. As a practitioner, I have questions arising from my art practice, for example: Does the material at hand communicate with me by any means? How can my thoughts, feelings, and imagination be transmitted to tangible artifacts I create? With a set of such unanswered questions, I began my research journey by setting myself three basic tasks: (a) to define my research focus, (b) to clarify the relevance of my research, and (c) to develop an appropriate methodological thinking in order to select specific methods. The last of these tasks has become particularly problematic, as discussed below.

2.1. Methods in Practice-Led Research

The issue of methodology in art and design research, especially in practice-led research, has been a topic of scholarly debate in the United Kingdom and Finland. Still, there is no standard package of methods for a novice researcher to follow. As Gray and Malins (2004) point out, research in art and design involves multiple methods, primarily visual,

originating from practice or adapted for practice-led research from other research paradigms (p. 31).

Most art and design research projects in Finland tend to be practice-led, i.e., are conducted in dialogue with artistic production, however, with reasonably equal emphasis on both practice and theory. From my viewpoint, a researcher-practitioner in a Finnish institution seems to play two roles, researcher and practitioner, in an alternating manner. Although the practice is carried out quite freely and expressively, it differs slightly from the general conception of art/design practice, as the practitioner-researcher documents her creative process, by writing a diary or photographing the intermediate stages. The aim of this documentation is to make the creative process somewhat transparent by capturing each step the practitioner-researcher takes in the process, both consciously and unconsciously.

After the creative process ends and the artifacts eventually get displayed in an exhibition, the practitioner-researcher plays the researcher's role and looks back at the preceding artistic process. The practitioner-researcher analyzes and contextualizes the resulting artifacts as well as the creative process that went into it using the documentation created during the process and any relevant theories. While playing the researcher's role, the practitioner-researcher may use reflections on the artifacts and elements from the artistic production process to facilitate the inquiry she is interested in. Then, the practitioner's role takes over again. The process will continue and the two roles will be played alternately, until the process yields somewhat stable answers to the research questions being pursued. This is the point when a written dissertation is prepared. In her dissertation, Mäkelä (2003) used the expression "retroactive gaze" to refer to such a process of looking back at one's own practice in order to answer one's research questions.

Having been a novice researcher myself, reading through completed doctoral research projects in art and design helped me appreciate the important--yet rather unclear--issue of research methods. After critically examining the methods used in earlier research projects on topics similar to my own, I subsequently defined my methods and tried them out in my project.

The method used in my research allows an interaction between art practice and theoretical discussions, such as those on the visual and tactile interpretation of materials. My research consists of three key components: (a) surveying literature, (b) making artifacts and reflecting on my own artistic experience, and (c) comparing with others' artifacts and artistic experiences. These components have been employed rather simultaneously in my research process, influencing one another with the support of documentation that records my experience as I go through the process (see Figure 1).

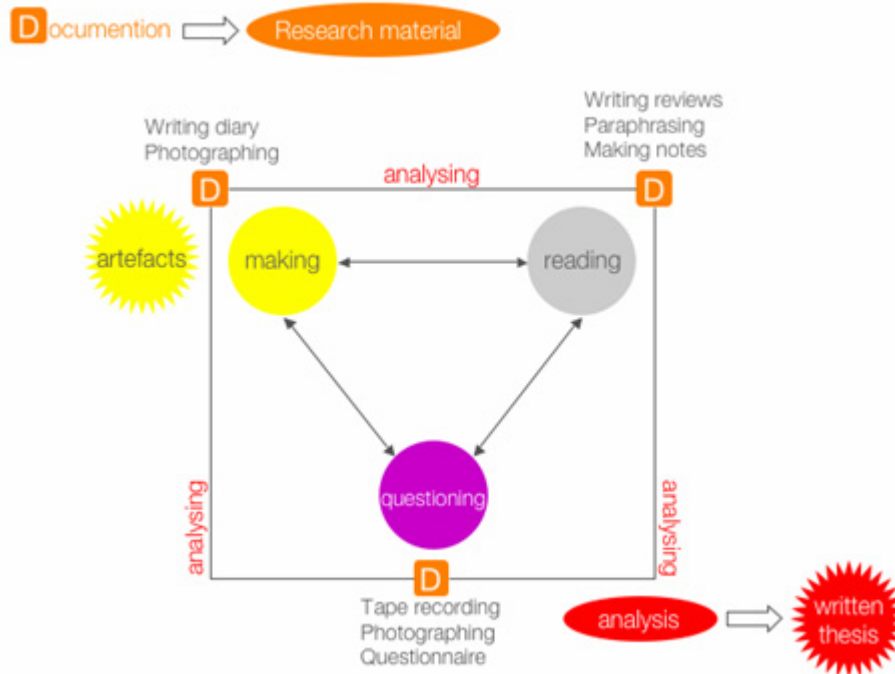


Figure 1. Process of practice-led research.

I have used research logs, diaries, and journals to do the documentation. Writing while making art has facilitated self-awareness of the evolving thoughts, intentions, and decisions, leading to an appreciation of the whole process (Harrison, 2002). This self-awareness is difficult to disseminate only through a textual medium, because of the limitations of language (Biggs, 2004). This explains why artifacts may still be necessary for a fuller communication of the research process and its outcome.

2.2. Documentation: Recording the Journey

Documentation is of vital importance in performing practice-led research. Artifacts produced in the practice without the documentation of the artistic process may not be sufficient to support a research claim. In order to demonstrate the importance of documentation in my research, I elaborate on two key aspects of documentation: documenting the artistic process and the role of documentation within the overall research process.

2.2.1. Documenting the Artistic Process

The artistic process is a series of interactions among different actors, such as materials, practitioner, and artifact. For example, I am a fiber artist who works with paper to create sculptures. When the artistic process is performed, it needs to be presented as evidence for practice-led research. To transform an interactive process into evidence, it needs to be represented in textual and visual forms.

In my research project, I examine the relationship between materials and artistic expression, in the context of contemporary art. The main research question is how expression arises in the artistic process of making and viewing artifacts. My intention is to explore the *expressive potential* of different materials. When physically experiencing a material, an artist senses the visual and tactile aspects of the material. The material influences the artist's sensation, feelings, emotions, and cognition. In order to investigate the expressive potentials of different materials, I selected dissimilar paper strings and used the same in two series of comparable sculptures, using similar technique and mold. These two factors were fixed, whereas the material factor was variable. This allowed me to study the effect of dissimilar paper strings on artworks of the same technique and composition.

I recorded every step of my artistic process from conceptualizing to manipulating the materials and executing the artworks in multiple ways, including a written diary, sketchbook, my own voice recordings, and photographs. These are documents that could affirm my consciousness in my artistic process. As Polanyi (1969) asserted, knowing and doing are rarely exercised in isolation and their combination is present in the working of our sense organs. I not only recorded the concrete and tangible parts such as the choices of materials used and the reasons for choosing them, but also the less tangible ones such as my feeling when touching and manipulating a material. The tactile and visual experience is difficult to record; it requires utmost care and thoroughness. In addition, both successes and failures are to be recorded.

2.2.2. Role of Documentation in the Overall Research Process

I started with various questions regarding art practice that could not be answered by the practice itself. I had noted down the questions in my research log. As I sought answers in the literature, inevitably entering into multiple disciplines, I noted down the relevant points as well as my thoughts in the research log. I answered some questions and raised a few more, to be clarified in practice; recording these in the log. Thus the logs facilitated an interaction between my readings and my art-making, within the overall research process.

I exhibited the two series of sculptures in a modernistic gallery. Visitors to the exhibition were given questionnaires which asked them to interpret the artworks. The purpose of the questionnaires was to document the viewers' response to the works and examine how materials could influence the viewers' interpretations. The interpretations of the viewers were rather divergent from my interpretations. This result raised several questions that led me to the study of some theories such as phenomenology, semiotics, and museology. These questions will require further explorations both through literature survey and also my own artistic practice.

3. Conclusion: The Journey Continues

The role of documentation may be underestimated in practice-led research. It connects practice with the world of research. Documentation renders the implicit artistic

experience accessible and discussable in the context of disciplined inquiry. In this essay, I have attempted to describe the role of documentation in practice-led research.

My research has been going on for a couple of years. I have learnt a few lessons from my research journey regarding the role of documentation. As a researcher, I would not have realized how I could employ and analyze my artistic process as evidence relevant to my research without the help of documentation. As a practitioner, without multiple methods of documentation, I would have never been critical of my own creative process. Finally, as a practitioner-researcher, documentation has raised my understanding of how practice-led research could be carried out.

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