

Constructing pedagogy: The nexus between artistic practice, research and teaching

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Abstract

This paper draws on the results of research with artist academics – artists employed as academics within universities principally to teach artistic skills - over a period of almost four years. Through this research we have sought to understand the experience of working in academia within an artistic discipline, one of which has been music. Effective music education is shaped by a complex set of relationships, including those between the musician as educator, practitioner and researcher. Within the higher education environment, all three activities are increasingly required, and we argue that the link, or nexus, between practice, research and teaching cannot be denied. Specifically, we ask: How does the knowledge contained within the process and product of artistic practice construct and inform pedagogy within undergraduate and postgraduate university teaching programs? In responding to this question, the paper draws on a diverse literature including our own previous research.

Introduction

Teaching within an artistic discipline such as music requires understanding of the knowledge inherent in the practice. This knowledge can be found within the creative process (Blom, 2006; Hannan, 2006), the creative outcome (Bolt, 2006; Crossman, 2006), both (Odam, 2001), or in artistic research about some closely related aspect (Thome, 1995). It can also come from researchers not engaged in the arts practice being discussed (Barrett, 2006; Blank & Davidson, 2007). These forms of knowledge and the relationships between them have led us since 2007 to consider the nexus between artistic practice, research, and teaching. We refer to this as the ART nexus.

Our previous interviews have revealed that artist academics are similarly curious about the forms of knowledge embedded in artistic practice, and about how this knowledge can be taught. Participants have suggested that artistic practice generates knowledge through all forms of intelligence and communicates beyond its medium; that it is about being a public intellectual and being part of a broader tradition, drawing on other disciplines including science, psychology and philosophy; and that it concerns being part of an international community of arts practitioners. When speaking of their personal understanding of their artistic process, participants have used words such as intuitive, serendipitous, unfolding and unexpected: for example, theatre director Fiona spoke of there being “a sense that you are entering a world of mysticism when you are talking about processes of acting” (Blom, Bennett & Wright, forthcoming). The knowledge generated through artistic research has been described as being about the collaboration between artist and technology, about gaining aesthetic understanding of a piece of music before the practicalities of practice can start, and about transferring one culture into another. These insights necessarily contribute to the base from which pedagogy is constructed.

Within the literature, the issue of teaching research-based practice or practice-based research is often addressed only marginally or by implication. This suggests that there is much more to be learned about the teaching-research nexus, and the inclusion of artistic practice adds a third level of complexity and interest. Against this background, our paper considers how pedagogy is constructed or informed by the ART nexus.

Approach

For this paper, we draw on results from an ongoing study involving fourteen Australian artist academics (eight male and six female) who work at Australian universities. During three distinct phases of research since 2007, between one and three interviews have been conducted with each participant. We began by focussing on issues arising from the review of literature, and with each successive phase we sought to refine the work to reflect both emerging themes and changes within the higher education environment. Interviews took place in person and were recorded, and each researcher coded independently before the team discussed the results.

Findings and discussion

We frame our discussion around three key themes which emerge strongly from our study and which also align with eight of the factors identified by Neumann (1996) in her research on the nexus (or lack thereof) between teaching and research. The themes are: 1) a strong belief in the teaching-research nexus by academics; 2) the need to take a broad approach to the question of a nexus between teaching and research; and 3) the role of the

institutional reward system and conflicting signals to academics about the importance of teaching and research.

Three of our participants noted an especially strong nexus between their teaching and their practice. Clare, a composer, described the constant stimulation of undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and its influence upon her thinking about music, its contexts and its meanings, as a “peculiar orientation” that benefitted both roles. Similarly, Simon, a violinist, acknowledged the flow between teaching and performance, reflecting that teaching had reinvigorated his playing. His involvement with students at the undergraduate level had prompted a need to research technical and music sector issues that he felt would benefit the students. Ivan, a performer/composer, reported that he learned a great deal from his post-graduate students, with some student projects triggering for him a raft of research and new learning. He described this as “a dialogue of enquiry” more akin to knowledge exchange than to instruction.

Not surprisingly, Neumann’s call for a strong belief in the teaching and learning nexus tended among our cohort to incorporate artistic practice. Whilst this additional aspect sometimes resulted in conflict and complexity, it was spoken of as a positive step. Songwriter Damon was one of several participants who agreed that the three roles “necessarily nurture each other”, but avoided analysing their artistic practice for fear that it would be compromised. Ellen, a dancer, observed that for students to see their work objectively and analytically takes both unselfishness and curiosity, and she tried to foster this attitude at the undergraduate level. Gina, the ceramicist, spoke about the impact of research on her artistic work and on the practice of students, noting: “I’ve noticed students struggle whilst they’re in the research process, but in the end they all say it was one of the most important things they had every done as an artist”.

Again aligning with Neumann’s key themes, artistic practice appears to provide the impetus for, and broader approaches towards, teaching. Within a new fine arts unit, for example, Ken designed pathways that encourage students “to take these strange journeys to places they are unfamiliar with”. By adopting a broad approach focused more on “imagination, imaginative capability, capacity to connect things, metaphoric jumps”, Ken drew on the excitements and creative possibilities he had experienced, and which “potentially can be activated in the students as well”. He deliberately connected artistic practice and teaching by undertaking projects he had set his students, because otherwise “you don’t have an understanding of what the outcome is”. Composer Leo was very clear that he approached his undergraduate teaching from “an artistic point of view, not from a purely academic one. Reminiscent of Ivan’s dialogue approach, Leo described himself as “just facilitating the process whereby the composers learn a little bit more but they are still free to be creative”. These responses align with Cuskelly’s (2006) ‘significant interplay’ and they remind us that the knowledge flow is multi-directional.

The difficulty of negotiating a nexus between artistic practice, research and teaching was compounded by the need to meet the various demands of institutional and governmental frameworks. These difficulties include pressure to upgrade qualifications and produce traditionally notated research papers, which can call for vastly different skills to those required for teaching or artistic practice. In part, participants’ concerns related to the time required to enact all three roles, along with administrative responsibilities, to a high standard. Issues of time also related to the different mindset required for each activity. Artist Gina described “the free dynamic of potential” within artistic practice compared to a different kind of focus needed for academic research. She found it “extremely difficult to jump from creative critique to creative practice” and saw the same dilemma in her postgraduate students.

Closing summary

Belief in the ART nexus seems to stem from careful consideration of the relationship between the roles of artist, researcher and teacher. It is this thinking that influences the construction of pedagogy by and through the nexus. Indeed, all of the participants who were successfully negotiating the nexus expressed a strong belief in the relationship between these three roles. Participants not engaged in research around their artistic practice were not overtly engaged in deliberate reflection and research, and the nexus was, therefore, not acknowledged.

The importance of this belief becomes even more apparent in the second key point: artist academics who take a broad approach to the question of a nexus between teaching and research are those who tend to report innovative pedagogies. Our research indicates that this broad approach requires understanding that the knowledge emerging from artistic practice, and which informs teaching, includes psychological, phenomenological, technical, structural, historical, musical, performative and creative aspects; that it can be

explicit or tacit in form; and that it can be systematised and constructed into models or structures of learning that guide teaching approaches.

A third important factor emerging from the study relates to institutional reward systems and the signals sent to academics about the importance of each role. This comes as many institutions seek to understand and recognise artistic practice in line with the new Australian research evaluation framework. Recognising and encouraging pedagogies and research that is not in written form, and understanding the innovative approaches employed in artistic research, offers new opportunities to explore how these approaches can move beyond, and complement, traditional modes of teaching and research.

Rather than a linear progression, participants refer to a true nexus, or connection, that enables artist academics to position themselves within the questions that surround artistic practice and the scholarship of teaching. Thus the addition of artistic practice as both contributor and beneficiary of the teaching-research nexus calls for a fluid model that accommodates a range of approaches, directions and connections. We draw this from Griffith's (2004) typology, which posits four orientations stemming from the relationship between teaching and research (in Jenkins & Healey, 2005, p. 21):

Research-led teaching:	Emphasises research findings with little focus on the impact of teaching on research;
Research-oriented teaching:	Emphasises both the process and outcomes of research, and draws on the research experiences of teachers;
Research-based teaching:	Integrates research and the design of student learning, lessens the divide between student and teacher, and fully explores interactions between teaching and research;
Research-informed teaching:	Consciously and systematically inquires into the teaching and learning process.

Griffith's approach is particularly useful when considering the addition of artistic research, because negotiating the complexity of such a nexus requires the adoption of a suitable orientation for each new situation. This fluidity can be variously determined by the needs (or requirements) of the university, the sector, students, curriculum, teaching approaches, research, and artistic practice. For those participants successfully negotiating the nexus, it was the orientation they adopted that enabled them to situate their work.

Our findings raise questions such as how the artist academic balances a practice of professional standard with teaching, research and the requirements of academia; and also how the flow of knowledge within ART, and the innovative approaches adopted by arts practitioners, can inform and refresh the teaching pedagogies and research paradigms of other disciplines. Whilst the conflict arising from this nexus remains, the fluidity of approaches and knowledge within ART are worthy of much greater attention.

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