

EMBODIED ENGAGEMENT IN ARTS RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is to argue the case for embodied ways of knowing in arts research. Recognition of embodied ways of knowing and embodied research has been relatively recent. For too long, arts research had been marginalized in academia, particularly performing arts, due in part to the somatophobia of Western academic cultures. While grounded in dance research myself, I argue that embodied engagement is crucial for performing arts and arts research in general.

It is through rigorous and reflective practice that theoretical knowledges and lived experiences can be embodied, made meaningful, and thus contribute to the generation of new understandings. I contend that such embodied knowledge is then available to artists and researchers for subsequent expression and aesthetic communication via a wide range of mediums and interdisciplinary practices. I discuss embodied ways of knowing and suggest some guidelines for undertaking embodied research. I conclude by emphasizing the continuing relevance of performing arts in expressing individual human embodied experience in an increasingly virtual, self-destructive and global world.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I argue the case for recognition of embodied ways of knowing in arts research. While grounded in dance research myself, I argue that embodied engagement is crucial for performing arts research in general. I begin by discussing creative arts practice and academic research, then discuss and present an understanding of embodiment, before moving to articulate an epistemological strategy I call embodied ways of knowing. I relate my discussion throughout to current literature on embodiment, creativity, experiential learning and creative arts practice as research.

Throughout this paper, I wish to reinforce that I believe artists have the potential to significantly contribute to the generation of new understandings, not only of artistic practice, but also to knowledge and to society in general. For those of us engaged in research in the arts, there has been a welcome shift towards the legitimization of artistic practice in education (Dewey, 1984; Eisner, 1998, 2004), and as a form of research (Bannon, 2004; Brew, 1998; Grove, Stevens & McKecknie, 2005; Hong, 2005; Ness, 2004; Piccini, 2005; Tertiary Education Commission, 2003). This shift has provided room for the creation of new research methodologies and forms of research representation through which we can share research with a wider social audience. Particularly in performing arts, this shift has been propelled by the growing acceptance of experiential and alternative ways of knowing (Bannon, 2004; Dewey, 1984; Eisner, 1998, 2004), and a move away from 'somatophobia' or fear of the body as a site of knowledge. There has also been the development of 'the performance turn' in qualitative research (Denzin, 2000; Languellier, 2000; Ness, 2004; Sykes, Chapman & Swedberg, 2005) in which researchers continue to grapple with embodiment and the notion of constructing and creating through performativity (Denzin, 2000). Alongside the 'performance turn', specific research projects have explored the nature of practice as research in performance or PARIP: research that explores relationships between theory and practice (Piccini, 2005). (I note that I focus my discussion of embodied engagement in arts research on 'performance', by which I mean live performances of theatre, dance, music and multi-disciplinary performing arts by specific artists (as distinct from performative written texts)). It is my contention that one way that artists might contribute to new knowledge is through embodied engagement in arts research.

CREATIVE AND ACADEMIC PROCESSES

As indicated above, there is growing academic acceptance of research processes involving practical performance outcomes, as well as film, video and audio-tape outcomes (Piccini, 2002; TEC, 2003). To assist academic institutions in validating artistic practice as research in performance, the processes of academic research and creative arts processes have been aligned. As Anglea Piccini commented "It is perhaps more useful to think of practice as research as formalizing an institutional acceptance of performance practices and processes as arenas in which knowledges might be opened" (Piccini, 2002, para 6). This move has also helped guide artists into academic research. A number of creative process models have been proposed by music, dance and theatre educators (for example Ashley, 2002; Balkin, 1990; Bannon, 2004; Coe, 1999; Janesick, 2000; Schrader, 2005; Van Dyck, 2006), and these creative process models can be seen to sit alongside standard qualitative research processes (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Creative and academic processes*

Creative process (Balkin, 1990; Bannon, 2004)	Choreographic process (Ashley, 2002; Coe, 1999; Janesick, 2000; Schrader, 2005) Devised theatre process (Van Dyck, 2006)	Academic research process
Preparation	Research / Setting the scene	Literature review
Incubation	Vision / ideas / themes Experiment/ improvise/ explore	Perspective / Question Design / Methodology Methods
Illumination/ insight	Choreograph/ select/ score Rehearse/refine	Action Discussion
Verification/ elaboration	Performance Audience feedback / reflection	Conclusions

As illustrated above in Figure 1, the creative processes involved in preparation and research for an artistic work can be aligned with exploration of a subject area through academic literature review. Incubation of creative ideas and themes, and subsequent experimentation, exploration and improvisation, might be related to the development of a research perspective and question, and the design of relevant

methodology. Moments of creative illumination or insight that occur as we choreograph or score an artistic work, also occur in research when we put specific methods into action to undertake our research and as we begin to discuss and analyse our findings. And the verification or elaboration stage in a creative work when we rehearse, perform and receive feedback can be aligned with the research processes of discussion, development of conclusions and implications. (This is generalized; there are of course, more specific processes that individual artists and researchers use, and new processes that evolve as challenges arise.)

As a dancer myself, I have been engaged in creative choreographic processes for most of my life. A crucial part of my change from artistic practitioner to dance researcher has been in engaging in academic research processes alongside my choreographic processes, and in articulating how it is that I come to know. I appreciate that my epistemological strategies as choreographer are different from traditional ways of knowing. I realised that I came to know through other ways as well as the traditional methods for establishing propositional knowledge (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how) (Risner, 2000). There is much that I know as a dancer that is tacit, that is knowledge in action, that I am unable to translate directly into words and that is better expressed through moving in the world. However, as a researcher I've also come to appreciate that I can still contribute to new knowledge based on my epistemological strategies – what I describe as embodied ways of knowing. Consequently, I want to clearly put embodiment at the centre of my research, an agenda I share with a number of feminist writers.

EMBODIMENT

Feminist theorists, such as Elizabeth Grosz (1994) argued that philosophy "established itself on a profound somatophobia" (p.5) and articulated what I have experienced in dancing; that bodies have "all the explanatory power of minds" (p.5), and that my gender, race and age are relevant to how I understand my world (Grosz, 1994, p.vii; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1964; Sheets-Johnstone, 1999; Young, 1980). My explorations into feminist and phenomenological research led me to understand that my specific and continuous embodiment was the means for my lived experience, and both a site of genetic marking and a filter of socio-cultural and political influences (Albright, 1997; Bigwood, 1991; Braidotti, 1994;

Cheville, 2005; Diprose, 1994/1995; Flax, 1993; Gatens, 1995; Grosz, 1994; Weiss, 1999). While feminists have expressed a range of understandings of embodiment, many tended to reinscribe a biological / cultural distinction, even when trying to theorise some sort of relationship between them (Braidotti, 1994; Cheville, 2005; Flax, 1993; Grosz, 1994; Weiss, 1999).

From my perspective, 'embodiment' incorporates many things as one, rather than expressing a relationship between mind and body as separate aspects. Embodiment encompasses an individual person's biological (somatic), intellectual, emotional, social, gendered, artistic and spiritual experience, within their cultural, historical and geographical location. I want to emphasise that embodiment is not arbitrary – it must include recognition of diversity in terms of race, gender, sexuality, ability, history and culture. Embodiment therefore indicates a holistic experiencing individual.

Given my experience of embodiment, I also wanted to articulate how I came to understand through moving as an embodied activity.

MOVEMENT AND KNOWING

A number of theorists have offered partial understandings of moving, or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (Gardner, 1999), but it was the work of phenomenologist Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) that resonated most strongly for me. She argued that movement was "the originating ground of our sense-makings" (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999, p.161). Sheets-Johnstone (1999) stated that people learned about themselves and others initially through moving; by attending to bodily sensations of movement, rather than by looking and seeing what was moving (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). Movement was experienced through the kinesthetic sense, which provided information about space, time, movement and objects, and our relationship to these things (Stinson, 1995). In short, movement was in itself a source of knowledge: movement experience was of profound epistemological significance (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999).

Satisfying as it was to affirm my experience in Sheets-Johnstone's (1999) research, I remained convinced that more could be articulated about how movement was epistemologically significant. Recalling the much read and discussed research into women's ways of knowing by Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger & Jill Tarule, I explored new possibilities for

articulating how I came to know through moving by building on this research (1986; and Goldberger et.al., 1996).

Belenky et al., (1986) and Goldberger et al., (1996) derived five epistemological strategies from their interview research with women: silence, received knowing, subjective knowing, procedural knowing and constructed knowing. While I note that these strategies should not be regarded as universal, fixed, exhaustive, or necessarily exclusive to women, I found them a useful beginning for the development of my research. A great deal more can be discussed¹, but in this context I focus on the strategy of constructed knowing because it resonates with feminist agendas and postmodern research, in the sense that those who attempted to integrate their own and other voices "had learned the profound lesson that even the most ordinary human being is engaged in the construction of knowledge" (Belenky et al., 1986, p.133). Belenky et al. suggested that individuals came to constructed knowledge "as an effort to reclaim the self by attempting to integrate knowledge they felt intuitively was important with knowledge they had learned from others" (1986, p.143). Such individuals were characterised by self-reflectiveness and self-awareness, a high tolerance for ambiguity, awareness of the inevitability of conflict, attempts to deal with the rich complexity of life as a whole and the desire to share their knowledge in their own way.

Noting that there was no focus in this research as to how embodiment might more specifically be involved in knowing, my project became to articulate embodied ways of knowing.

EMBODIED WAYS OF KNOWING

I developed an articulation of the epistemological strategy of 'embodied ways of knowing' to integrate my alternative understanding of embodiment (Barbour, 2002, 2004). An embodied strategy for knowing acknowledged explicitly the importance and influence of who a person is (Barbour, 2002). So, individual differences (including gender) could not be denied in the pursuit of knowledge or the quest for self, but needed to be made prominent. As I outline an

¹ For further discussion see Barbour 2002 and 2004.

epistemological strategy of embodied knowing below (Barbour, 2002, 2004), I integrate research literature on creativity.

Using an embodied way of knowing a person can view all knowledge as constructed, contextual and embodied. As was the case for me, one can experience him or herself as already embodying knowledge and as able to create knowledge, valuing their own experiential ways of knowing and reconciling these with other strategies for knowing, as they live out their life (Barbour, 2002). As an individual using an embodied way of knowing, I attempt to understand knowledges as constructed or created rather than existing as independent truths, and more importantly as embodied, experienced and lived. Knowledges that seem intuitively important become integrated and assimilated with knowledge I learn from others (Belenky et al., 1986; Stinson, 1985), and with a conscious awareness of how I might embody them. In this way, knowledges can be woven together with passion, experience and embodied individuality.

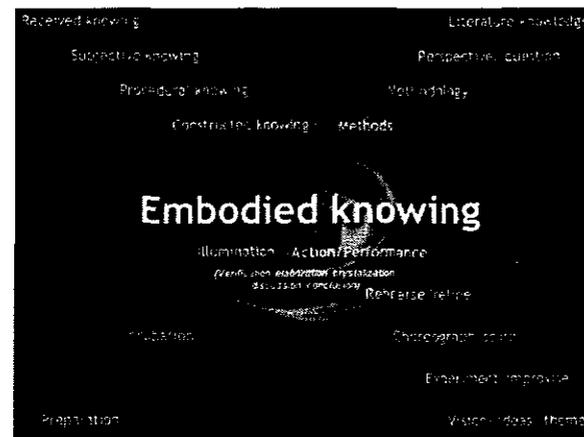
It seems to me, that in engaging ourselves in embodied ways of knowing we are creatively searching for and judging potential new combinations and juxtapositions of familiar and perhaps seemingly unrelated knowledges and experiences; what Einstein (1953) called 'combinatory play' (Abra, 1970; Gardner & Dempster, 1990; Eisner, 2002; Fraser, 2004). Insight and intelligence are required to engage in accommodating internal representations in relation to experiences in the world (Stinson, 1985), and to understand a wide range of sources of existing knowledge, from which we might perceive gaps and subsequently create new knowledges (Fraser, 2004). Redefining problems, considering recurring themes, recognising patterns and relationships to see things anew, are all part of embodied ways of knowing and this requires new questions, new methods of research, new ways of representation, and no small measure of flexibility (Eisner, 2002; Fraser, 2004). For those of us using an embodied knowledge strategy, living alternative knowledges to dominant knowledges creates challenges and tensions that I know I continue to have to resolve personally throughout my life (May, 1975). Creative people are often required to deal with tensions and to tolerate ambiguity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Davis & Rimm, 1998). I find that any resolution does not necessarily come through rationalisation, or through intuition, but through embodying and actually living out the possibilities. In living out the possibilities, I experience and evaluate

knowledge, sometimes discarding knowledge that is not relevant or liveable in my own life. In this sense, embodied ways of knowing foreground knowing as creatively living in the world.

The potential of embodied ways of knowing as an alternative epistemological strategy, moves with the recent shift in academia towards the acceptance of alternative ways of knowing, alternative research fields and new qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Piccini, 2002, 2005). Certainly for myself in New Zealand, my choreographic work has been acknowledged as standing alongside more traditional written dance research outputs using qualitative or quantitative methods (Tertiary Education Commission, 2004). However, developing the rigour and fulfilling the processes necessary for masters, doctoral and on-going research has necessitated creativity in resolving the tensions immediately apparent in articulating theoretical understandings and methodology through movement, and in communicating these to examiners and colleagues. From my perspective, embodied ways of knowing are required.

In Figure 2 below, I have attempted to link together some of the processes of research, knowing and creativity. In attempting to write or map experiences and ideas, I find inevitably I need move to express my embodied knowledge through dancing, an on-going frustration in engaging in embodied research (Barbour, 2005; Markula & Denison, 2000). As a consequence Figure 2 cannot capture the richness of embodied research experience.

Figure2. *Embodied engagement in arts research.*



Embodied ways of knowing can be articulated as an epistemological strategy that may be aligned with the creative and academic research processes I discussed and outlined in Figure 1. In Figure 2 above, there are further relationships apparent between the various epistemological strategies and the stages within creative and research processes. In a sense however, embodied ways of knowing might ripple outwards to encompass all research stages, such that a dance researcher might undertake 'literature review' through engagement in embodied experiences, and devise choreographic methods working in the dance studio.

Engaging in embodied research prompted questions for me as to how I might develop my research skills and creative processes to support research through embodied ways of knowing. I now wish to offer some guidelines I have derived for embodied engagement in arts research. I note that the wider educational research I draw from is the context of experiential learning (Kolb & Fry, 1975). The experiential learning model, outlined by Kolb & Fry (1975) and later developed by others (Bright, 2005) places the 'concrete experience', or arts practice, within a cycle of ongoing reflection and engagement. Following a concrete experience is a phase of reflection on the experience, then re-evaluation and finally, conclusion, outcomes and a future action plan that feeds back into arts practice. Many models of creative process in the arts, such as those indicated in Figure 1 also compliment the basic experiential learning cycle.

GUIDELINES FOR EMBODIED ENGAGEMENT IN ARTS RESEARCH

Based on my arguments and experiences, and drawing from literature on creativity and experiential learning, I offer seven general guidelines for arts practitioners and researchers to refer to when engaging in embodied ways of knowing. These guidelines are practical, assisting arts researchers to participate in academic scholarship in relevant ways. However, they are also broad guidelines that necessitate creativity on the individual researcher's part to implement.

Allow that everything is possible and potentially relevant, including movement, intuition and lived experiences. (Barbour, 2002, 2004; Belenky et al., 1986; Brew, 1998; Fraser, 2004).

Engage in relevant literature and in art-specific learning, practice and collaboration (Fraser, 2004; Green, 1996).

Play in active experimentation and improvisation with new questions and challenges (Ashley, 2002; Balkin, 1990; Barbour, 2002; Bright, 2005; Einstein, 1953; Eisner, 2002; Fraser, 2004).

Learn from life, as understandings and resolutions may emerge throughout everyday life as well as within arts practice and/or research (Barbour, 2002, 2005).

Look again, explore through trial and error, and recognise, rehearse, redefine, recreate and reflect on themes, patterns, combinations and relationships (Ashley, 2002; Balkin, 1990; Barbour, 2002; Brew, 1998; Bright, 2005; Eisner, 2002; Fraser, 2004; Kolb & Fry, 1975; Schrader, 2005).

Be flexible and allow many methods or means of representing yourself as researcher and artist (Barbour, 2002; Eisner, 2002; Fraser, 2004).

Proceed with courage, passion, commitment and unbending intent to explore tensions, paradoxes, anxieties, conflicts, ambiguities and resistance to new knowledges (Barbour, 2002, 2005; Belenky et al., 1986; Brew, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Green, 1996; May, 1975).

The value and implications of these general guidelines will likely be different for each arts researcher, and the context and medium of their artistry.

ASPIRATIONS - EMBODIED ENGAGEMENT IN ARTS RESEARCH

Finally, I wish to make more explicit why I believe that engagement in arts research through embodied ways of knowing is so relevant to research here and now. In our increasing virtual and globalized world it seems that humans are increasingly virtual, disembodied and self-destructive, making a re-engagement in lived experiences in specific local contexts crucial to survival. From my perspective, embodied engagement in arts research can lead to:

- improved personal health and well being through action in a local context;
- embodied knowledge that is available in not only in performance and research, but also in everyday life;
- the enhanced capacity for audiences to empathize kinesthetically with embodied research and performance;

- and the potential to engage actively with society, culture and the environment as an artist.

Through embodied engagement in arts research I feel that we can be empowered to act, and aim to be responsible human beings. We can, as Andrea Olsen wrote expand our ability to respond, our response-ability, and recognize ourselves as contributing to the world (Olsen, 2002).

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