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A Methodology for Practice as Research

Melissa Trimmingham

Abstract

Amidst all the continuing debate as to what constitutes and validates practice as research, there is an absence of a clearly articulated methodology, particularly one that might be of practical use to lecturers working with students within an academic establishment. This article argues for the necessity of using a guiding methodology within all practical research in order to evaluate outcomes and validate its designation as research.

As a participant in the 2001 PARIP symposium in Bristol University, and following the completion of my doctorate based on practical research, I offer this article as a contribution to the current debates over PAR (practice as research) in theatre and performance studies. This is partly because it was clear from the symposium that for practitioners themselves everything concerning PAR is at present still in a state of flux, and yet it is very likely that rules and criteria validating PAR may be fixed before the debates are concluded.

The different types of work taking place under the umbrella of PAR need to be recognized, both by a forum like the PARIP symposium and by those who validate the research. It was clear from the symposium that academia is funding researchers who could be described only (and who would prefer to describe themselves, I suspect) as practising artists engaged in research. Whilst this is a very exciting development, and most of the symposium seemed to share this view, I was troubled by a perceived indifference to and perhaps even faint suspicion of traditional demands of research in terms of clear methodology and the need to communicate and disseminate research findings.

PAR is doing itself no favours by claiming that 'all practice is research'. All practice is relevant to research but does not necessarily contribute to research until it is subject to analysis and commentary, using a language that aims to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. We cannot afford to dispense with the most basic (and moral) of research intentions: put simply, it must be for the benefit of others apart from the researchers themselves. Artistic insight is not necessarily a research outcome. Neither is communication through a work of art the same as research communication. Research outcomes cannot be kept as the personal insight of the practitioner and/or viewer, claiming for example that the knowledge is 'embodied' and untranslatable into words, or too complicated to translate into terms everyone can understand. Such knowledge may of course be uplifting, exciting, valid, or however one chooses to describe it, to the person who acquires/experiences it. However, it is the task of the researcher

to translate such knowledge, however approximately, however unsatisfactorily, into analytical language, using metaphor, analogy, images, generously attempting to share with others the insight and understanding they have reached through their practice. This is of course especially and sadly true when researching the embodied art of performance, where the very act of analysis once again returns us to the Cartesian modes of thinking from which, some hoped, PAR offered an escape. But if we want to understand and not just experience we have to think.

At the PARIP symposium there was also a lack of contributions from others, like myself, who might be regarded primarily as academics, hopefully with plenty of creative skills, and in my own case extensive previous experience of working as an artist (a performer, puppeteer, maker and director). Lecturers may be involved in creative practice and research in work with students, but hesitate to describe themselves *primarily* as artists, directors and so on. Researching academics have specific questions to ask of the material they study, and turn to practice as the most suitable means of answering these questions. Unlike the work of many of those contributing papers to the symposium, such PAR sometimes begins from historical starting points. This surely demands a rigorous methodology that can encompass issues around historiography. Moreover, it is likely that an academic working in a university is working with a group of students and the research outcomes are likely to depend on the creative processes of others in addition to their own. We need a methodology that can account for the disorderly creative process and yet demonstrate rigorous planning.

Methodology underpins research and gives credibility to research outcomes. In the same way a teaching module which seems to offer some interesting possibilities for research ought to be structured differently if research outcomes are specifically sought. Such outcomes cannot be garnered in retrospect, any more than desired educational outcomes can be left to chance, since research demands purposeful activity towards a specified end. The suggested methodology here outlined, which can cope with the demands of such necessary planning, is hermeneutic, that is, it is aware that the question asked ultimately determines the answer; and it consequently allows for constant change within a specified structure of working. Connected to this problem of change is the number of researchers (such as Ph.D. students) struggling to articulate research proposals when they are based on practice that has not yet taken place. If a suitable methodology can be cited to underpin research whose every move forward depends on a previous unpredictable outcome, then a university, funding body or whoever it is can hardly demand to know the exact planned course of the research in advance.

My own doctoral research took an historical starting point, which is clearly not the case for performance practitioners exploring their own work. History offers particular problems to researchers trying to reconcile issues of historiography with current practice. At the same time I believe there are elements of the methodology here outlined that may have very wide application. However, how far such a methodology is useful to those who consider themselves primarily as artists engaged in research I leave for them to judge or adapt as necessary. In my own case I needed to develop a

1 I use the terms 'aim' and 'objective' in the following way: 'aim' indicates a more abstract goal or intention (e.g. 'to discover some relationships between the body and light in a stage space') which is fulfilled by the 'objective', that is, the actual piece of work to be completed (e.g. 'to create a two-minute stage piece that employs the body and light as its only elements').

methodology which would guide my chosen area of research: 'The Practical Application of Principles underlying the work of Oskar Schlemmer at the Dessau Bauhaus, 1926-9'.

The resulting methodology is developed from three sources: hermeneutic research methodologies, many developed within Anthropology over the past thirty years or so (and none of which were written with performance studies in mind); social science methodologies concerned with evaluating qualitative data; and the methodology of Action Research in business and education. The practical research took the form of three performance projects working firstly with a third-year examination group of stage design students, then the following two years with second-year stage design students who had volunteered for a special project. Regarding the working group, many researchers/lecturers are increasingly required to deliver research through existing teaching modules within undergraduate or Masters degrees. In this case it is vital that the educational aims and objectives are fulfilled alongside the research. The methodology here outlined allows for such discipline.

Assuming the researcher has the place, the space, the people and the resources, how can the work be structured towards a research purpose?

The problem of methodology centres on the fact that the material on which the research conclusions are based depends almost entirely on a creative process, and the process, in fact, has many disorderly features. However, we do not have to pretend that the process is more orderly than it really is: only that the planning is orderly. The 'disorderliness' of the creative process must be incorporated into the methodology. The paradigm model of progress that allows for this is the 'hermeneutic-interpretative' spiral model where progress is not linear but circular; a spiral which constantly returns us to our original point of entry but with renewed understanding. Originally developed by a Gestalt thinker, Kurt Lewin, this spiral indicates that as one part of understanding changes, the whole changes too. In this way, in my own case, the principles upon which the creative work and evolving performances were based, i.e. the principles underlying Schlemmer's work at Dessau, *were themselves subject to change* as the work progressed. This was inevitable as my understanding of the type of work we were producing developed and shifted. The in-built dynamism of the spiral is the only paradigm model that can account for such change in theory in relation to the on-going practice, whilst also successfully defining the area of research, and preventing it spiralling out of control. Moreover in my own case understanding of history is also part of the spiral and as this understanding develops, it also affects the practice. Renewed understanding, whether of history, stage dynamics, or whatever it might be, changes the directed tasks set to the group who are helping the research. This *could* also apply to someone working alone creatively, though I realize not everyone may be willing or able to set themselves a series of specific, discrete and differentiated tasks in this way. What I am suggesting here is that setting tasks, at least when working in a group, guided by very clear aims and objectives, keeps the research on course and maintains control over a very disparate and unpredictable process.¹ When linked to the spiral model the researcher is not bound by such tasks; it is perfectly possible to

abandon the original intent in the heat of creative work, and go with what is working well; however, I suggest that the very process of later evaluating such work (that is, revisiting the point of entry, and reviewing theory in the light of the journey just undertaken through practice), then formulating and articulating *new* aims and objectives and *new* tasks (i.e. as a continuous part of the process, each evening, each lunchtime or whenever) is a necessary discipline for keeping the research process under control and reviewing progress. Earlier the problems of lecturers conducting research within taught modules in a university was mentioned. The discipline here outlined of establishing research aims and objectives and continually evaluating and reforming them in the process of the research practice also applies to teaching aims and objectives. They need to be thought of alongside those of research. It is perfectly possible to fulfil educational outcomes depending on the quality of thought and planning that informs the project, both in advance and during its execution.

The spiral of course indicates an arbitrary starting point of entry, and this is true for any practitioner. We bring our own level of understanding and knowledge to research and no two people would start at the same point. Similarly the point of exit or 'pausing' in the spiral is arbitrary: the research could continue indefinitely and may well be picked up again later, but for the purposes of a writing-up we 'exit' the spiral temporarily. We move on again when practice is resumed. Yet the point of entry is worth more consideration, as the knowledge the researcher brings to the project will shape the answers eventually found. In other words, the question asked always determines the answer. This is basic hermeneutics. The aim therefore is not to attempt to enter the spiral in ignorance (as this is impossible anyway) but to ask as open a question as possible; and the aim as the research progresses is always to ask a better question, not to reach a point where no more questions need to be asked (as might be the case in a linear model of progression). Ironically, the more a researcher knows, the better placed they are to judge the 'openness' of the question. Such a method of open questioning derives from a phenomenological approach that is acutely aware of the accretions of culture, habit, prejudice and so on that cling to the phenomena we investigate and cloud our perceptions. The process is in part one of stripping away these preconceptions and in part acknowledging, as Moustakas says, that this is not always possible (10). The orientation of my own specialism – theatre – predetermined that my subject, Schlemmer, would be analysed in theatrical terms; a dancer would have found different answers, and so would a performance artist. The solutions found are merely *an* answer, but never *the* answer.

Mixing hermeneutic methods (the spiral) and logical positivist ways of proceeding (identifying clear aims and objectives to tackle a specific problem) may seem odd, but the latter is a practical useful tool which gives direction to the work, however often that direction changes. Richard Schechner proposed in his introduction to the controversial *TDR* issue 'Performance and the Social Sciences' in 1971 that performance theory could combine 'aspects of the "scientific method" with some of the traditionally intuitive methods of the arts' (3). Linked to the constant evaluation is the need to write up the practical research as it unfolds, since this clari-

fies where the research stands, and where it needs to proceed next. These initial write-ups will need rewriting in the final book, thesis, article or whatever it might be, if the spiral has done its work, since ideas and understanding will change, but they are invaluable as reference points to understand progression within the hermeneutic spiral.

Because of the hermeneutic spiral, researchers should be honest with themselves in advance about their hypotheses. Hypotheses are a logical positivist element and may be shunned by some researchers for that reason; but as Colin Robson rightly says: '... there is a sense in which hypotheses form a part of all forms of enquiry' (28). An hypothesis may take the form of a declared statement or only an undeclared hunch. Research, generally speaking, begins with some kind of starting point of belief which will be modified. Practical theatre research needs to make these initial and subsequent (since they will change) hypotheses *explicit*. It is here that I part company from the claim that practice (i.e. *all* practice) is research. By making the hypothesis/es explicit in advance it is possible to examine the openness or otherwise of the question being addressed: it becomes subject to subsequent evaluation in the light of practical research. In my own case of course, the principles I believed to underlie Schlemmer's work acted as the hypotheses subject to modification as I progressed.

Earlier the particular problems of an historical starting point were touched on. Clearly there is an issue when one is apparently purporting to clarify events that took place long ago through practice in the twenty-first century, remote from the cultural climate of the work we seek to illuminate; and this yawning gap is present whether the work took place ten decades or ten centuries ago. We need to be clear and not assume the obvious: practical research illuminates the nature of performance and does not reveal historical facts. Practice may be regarded as of dubious or no value when theatre history is being studied for its social aspects (what Vince describes as 'a concern with the process underlying a sequence of historical events' (14)). However, the insight practice gives us into what performance is, or can be, or could have been does have impact on our historical understanding, revealing the prejudice and unspoken assumptions clustering around accepted historical interpretations. Canonical views become open to question in the light of practical research. It is clear in my own research that exploring stage dynamics reveals insights into established historical viewpoints about the Bauhaus stage. Too often (because of its visual motifs) the stage work is not differentiated from the work and approach in the rest of the Bauhaus. Schlemmer was involved with an embodied art form that took the modernist obsession with form beyond the visual and into the physical and felt. This has huge implications for understanding one aspect of modernist thinking of the time. This questioning of established theory is exactly what Glaser and Strauss seek in fieldwork; their solution is to generate theory entirely from the research rather than setting out to prove or disprove existing theory (1-18). As argued above, a better way is to identify and declare prejudices in advance in order to ask better questions. However, and although they are writing in 1967 in relation to social science research, Glaser and Strauss's concerns about pre-deciding the issues have resonance in practical performance research.

The spiral model of understanding originated in Action Research in education and business studies; and it is this branch of research which has the closest parallels to practice as research in performance studies. Action Research, particularly in its recent forms, is the most extreme hermeneutic-interpretative research method; that is, it acknowledges that the researcher is intimately involved in the research, and affects the outcomes. In Action Research, such an involvement is the only reason such research can even take place. It is conducted by the practitioner(s) in whatever profession is involved and it is research that seeks to bring about change in practices – changes, obviously, for the better. The method of course acknowledges the ‘hermeneutic circle’ – that is, that the whole is intimately affected by the parts, and the parts by the whole. Action Research, like the hermeneutic methodologies developed within Anthropology, also acknowledges the so-called ‘double hermeneutic’ whereby the researcher’s experiences affect the research and so do those of the participants, a situation which has obvious similarities with practical theatre research. When the spiral was first used by Kurt Lewin in 1948 it retained positivist features, since although the stress was on a cycle of discovery, planning, testing evaluating and re-planning, the researcher was still the expert who stood outside the organization rather than being a practitioner within it. Gradually, as ideas in Action Research developed, the researcher became more involved with the object of research until researcher and practitioner became synonymous. Sometimes the researchers are a whole group of people within an organization sharing the same research intentions; this has obvious parallels with practical theatre research.

The history of Action Research reveals continuing debates about the exact nature of the spiral and the relationship of action to reflection, most of which is irrelevant to formulating a basic model for proceeding in theatre studies.² Amongst education researchers there is some debate as to whether Action Research can properly be designated research at all. However, judging from the atmosphere at the PARIP symposium, there is a refreshing openness to new approaches and ideas, which I have no wish to destroy by pleading for more rigorous methodologies to guide the work.

In the confidence that this is so, I offer these ideas as both a practical tool and as a contribution to the vital current debate discussing how we should engage in practice for research purposes, practice that most of us feel passionately will play a crucial role in the future of research in theatre and performance studies.

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2 For a summary of these debates, see Robson, pp. 438–43, and for a typical example of an attempt to refine the methodology of Action Research see Ian Bryant, ‘Action Research and Reflective Practice’, in Scott and Usher, pp. 106–19.

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