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A MANIFESTO FOR PERFORMATIVE RESEARCH

Abstract

Researchers in the arts, media and design often struggle to find serviceable methodologies within the orthodox research paradigms of quantitative and qualitative research. In response to this and over the past decade, practice-led research has emerged as a potent strategy for those researchers who wish to initiate and then pursue their research through practice. This paper examines the dynamics and significance of practice-led research, and argues for it to be understood as a research strategy within an entirely new research paradigm: performative research. Taking its name from J.L. Austin's speech act theory, performative research stands as an alternative to the qualitative and quantitative paradigms by insisting on different approaches to designing, conducting and reporting research. The paper concludes by observing that, once understood and fully theorised, the performative research paradigm will have applications beyond the arts and across the creative and cultural industries generally.

We stand at a pivotal moment in the development of research. Established qualitative and quantitative research methodologies frame what is legitimate and acceptable. However, these approved approaches fail to meet the needs of an increasing number of practice-led researchers, especially in the arts, media and design. Within the binary of quantitative and qualitative research, these practice-led researchers have struggled to formulate methodologies sympathetic to their fundamental beliefs about the nature and value of research. This paper reviews the tensions and strains inherent in the current situation, and concludes by proposing that a new paradigm for research is coming into being: a third paradigm best understood as performative research.

The traditional paradigms of research

The quantitative/qualitative divide is one of the most durable methodological distinctions established in research. Although almost every contemporary writer warns against seeing them as hermetically sealed, the categories of 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' mark out serviceable, distinctive and opposing notions about the purposes and conduct of different approaches to research.

Quantitative research embraces a set of scientific, deductive approaches and establishes 'research questions and hypotheses from theoretical models and then tests them against empirical evidence' (Flick, 2003: 3). In ruthlessly testing such hypotheses, this research approach measures and quantifies phenomena, constructing them in terms of frequency, distribution, and cause and effect. The ultimate goal is to isolate principles which allow for a generalisation of findings and the formulation of invariable laws. Protocols have been formulated to drive methods of inquiry and

underpin the statistical analysis of data. The result is a set of research methodologies which aim to eliminate the individual perspective of the researcher (and, if human subjects are involved, the views of those subjects being studied).

Qualitative research operates quite differently. It prefers inductive approaches, and necessarily encompasses a wide range of research strategies and methods, embracing the perspectives of both researchers and participants. Because qualitative research has a primary aim of 'understanding the meaning of human action' (Schwandt, 2001: 213), it quickly becomes clear that the processes and methodologies through which the research occurs are of paramount importance. In some academic traditions, such as cultural studies, artefacts (things), behaviours and responses are constructed as qualitative texts. They are studied during the research process, and research findings are represented as drawing upon a range of sources and approaches. This prompts Flick to note that 'qualitative research above all works with texts' (Flick, 1998: 11).

Clearly, these are two different species of research, arising from fundamentally different views of the world. They embody alternative understandings of how knowledge is created. However, the stark and abiding difference between quantitative and qualitative research lies in the way that research findings are expressed. Quantitative research is 'the activity or operation of expressing something as a quantity or amount — for example, in numbers, graphs, or formulas' (Schwandt, 2001: 215). However, qualitative research, with its concern to capture the observed, interpreted and nuanced properties of behaviours, responses and things, refers to 'all forms of social inquiry that rely primarily on … nonnumeric data in the form of words' (Schwandt, 2001: 213). Historically, quantitative research has been seen as the more robust methodology, while qualitative research is positioned as 'softer', more tentative and somewhat subservient (Green, 1991).

The practice of research and researching practice

The principles and beliefs discussed above have resulted in the different research practices adopted by qualitative and quantitative researchers. But how are these research practices applied to the study of meaning-making practices generally, those involving 'the actual application of a plan or method, as opposed to the theories relating to it' (OECD, n.d.)?

In general terms, quantitative researchers are not much interested in the phenomena of human practice (unless they can be measured, of course — as by Masters and Johnson (1966)). Similarly, mainstream qualitative researchers established research strategies that informed *research on practice*, and the whole panoply of observational methods developed for qualitative and quantitative research bears testimony to this positioning of practice as an object of study, not as a method of research.

Within the qualitative tradition, there are well-established strategies and methods designed to investigate and understand what Donald Schon calls 'the situations of practice — the complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflicts which are increasingly perceived as central to the world of professional practice' (Schon, 1983: 14). These are *practice-based* research strategies, and include: the reflective practitioner (embracing reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action);

participant research; participatory research; collaborative inquiry; and action research. Invariably, these strategies reinterpret what is meant by 'an original contribution to knowledge'. Rather than contribute to the intellectual or conceptual architecture of a discipline, these research enterprises are concerned with the improvement of practice, and new epistemologies of practice distilled from the insider's understandings of action in context.

However, in recent years some researchers have become impatient with the methodological restrictions of qualitative research and its emphasis on written outcomes. They believe that approach necessarily distorts the communication of practice. There has been a radical push to not only place practice within the research process, but to *lead* research through practice. Originally proposed by artists/researchers and researchers in the creative community, these new strategies are known as creative practice as research, performance as research, research through practice, studio research, practice as research or practice-led research. In this paper, to clarify, performative researchers are constructed as those researchers who carry out practice-led research. Practice-led research is intrinsically experiential and comes to the fore when the researcher creates new artistic forms for performance and exhibition, or designs user-led online games or builds an online counselling service for young people.

This fresh crop of emerging research methodologies depart from the more traditional practice-based approaches which form part of the arsenal available to qualitative researchers. First, they set up a different relationship with the research problem which drives the research study. It is well accepted in the literature on both quantitative and qualitative research that research design needs to flow from a central research question or problem statement, or (in grounded theory) from the experiences and understandings of the population being researched. The importance of identifying 'the problem' or 'the issue' is evident both in competitive grant processes and in framing research proposals for doctoral study. As a matter of course, applicants are asked to give a clear statement of the problem, to set out aims and objectives and the research questions to be answered; and researchers are often asked to list the hypotheses to be tested. Statements of purpose, background, relevant literature, significance of the research problem and definitions of key terms follow. These requirements constitute problem-led research, and this can be addressed both by qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

However, many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of 'a problem'. Indeed, they may be led by what is best described as 'an enthusiasm of practice' — something which is exciting, something which may be unruly, or indeed something which may be just becoming possible as new technology or networks allow (but of which they cannot be certain). Practice-led researchers construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in', to commence practising to see what emerges. They acknowledge that what emerges is individualistic and idiosyncratic. This is not to say that these researchers work without larger agendas or emancipatory aspirations, but they eschew the constraints of narrow problem-setting and rigid methodological requirements at the outset of a project.

The second characteristic of practice-led researchers lies in their insistence that research outputs and claims to knowing must be made through the symbolic language

and forms of their practice. They have little interest in trying to translate the findings and understandings of practice into the numbers (quantitative) and words (qualitative) preferred by traditional research paradigms. This means, for example, that the practice-led novelist asserts the primacy of the novel; for the 3-D interaction designer, it is the computer code and the experience of playing the game; for the composer, it is the music; and for the choreographer it is the dance. This insistence on reporting research through the outcomes and material forms of practice challenges traditional ways of representing knowledge claims. It also means that people who wish to evaluate the research outcomes also need to experience them in direct (co-presence) or indirect (asynchronous, recorded) form.

Over the past decade, a number of qualitative researchers have drawn the same conclusion. Constrained by the capacity of words to capture the nuances and subtleties of human behaviour, some researchers have used other symbolic forms to represent their claims to knowledge. In their analysis of future trends in qualitative research, *Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations*, Mary M. Gergen and Kenneth J. Gergen write:

> Investigators are invited into considering the entire range of communicative expression in the arts and entertainment world — graphic arts, video, drama, dance, magic, multimedia, and so on as forms of research and presentation. Again, in moving towards performance, the investigator avoids the mystifying claims of truth and simultaneously expands the range of communities in which the work can stimulate dialogue. (Gergen and Gergen, 2003: 582–83).

Lincoln and Denzin applaud this development and welcome what they see as a 'performance turn' in qualitative research. They relish the instability created by these messy forms of research, arguing that they have 'reshaped entirely the debates around "appropriate" scientific discourse, the technical and rhetorical conventions of scientific writing, and the meaning of research itself' (Lincoln and Denzin, 2003: 7).

Not surprisingly, not all qualitative researchers are comfortable with the way these 'messy forms' appear to be moving research away from long-held and fundamental principles. For some, the danger is that 'questions of methods and how to apply them are strongly pushed to the back or filed as being outdated' (Flick, 1998: 206), while others wonder whether this 'performance turn' (in this case applied to ethnographic qualitative research):

> will take us further from the field of social action and the real dramas of everyday life and thus signal the death knell of ethnography as an empirically grounded enterprise (Snow and Morril, 1995: 226).

Here we see established qualitative researchers, anxious about the 'performance turn', keen to establish orthodoxies in a manner analogous to the process by which qualitative research was made subservient to quantitative methodologies. And such tensions are symptomatic of a category under strain. The host of new practice-led research strategies, methods of data collection and forms of reporting developed over the past decade and incorporated under the qualitative banner have over-stretched the limits of the 'qualitative research' category to the extent that it now seems a portmanteau title capturing anything which isn't quantitative research and reported as numeric data.

An emerging paradigm: Performative research

Accepting the concern of traditional qualitative researchers about the 'performance turn', it is possible to argue that a third methodological distinction is emerging. This third category is aligned with many of the values of qualitative research, but is nonetheless distinct from it. The principal distinction between this third category and the qualitative and quantitative categories is found in the way it chooses to express its findings. In this case, while findings are expressed in non-numeric data, they present as symbolic forms other than in the words of discursive text. Instead, research reporting in this paradigm occurs as rich, presentational forms. For Suzanne Langer, presentational forms are not bound by the linear and sequential constraints of discursive or arithmetic writing. Rather, their 'very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation' (Langer, 1957: 97). And so, when research findings are made as presentational forms, they deploy symbolic data in the material forms of practice; forms of still and moving images; forms of music and sound; forms of live action and digital code.

When a presentational form is used to report research, it can be argued that it is in fact a 'text' — in the way that any object or discourse whose function is communicative can be considered a text — and should be understood as such within the qualitative tradition. However, this is not the universally held view of 'text' used to report research within the qualitative tradition. Schwandt is quite explicit in his definition: text refers to 'nonnumeric data in the form of words' (Schwandt, 2001: 213). Creswell makes the same point, setting 'numbers versus words' (Creswell, 2002: 58) as one of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research.

But how can presentational forms be understood as research? What makes a dance, a novel, a contemporary performance the outcome of research? One clue is provided by J.L. Austin's (1962) notion of performativity. For Austin, performative speech acts are utterances that accomplish, by their very enunciation, an action that generates effects. His influential and founding example of the performative is: 'I do (take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)' enacts what it names. The name performs itself and in the course of that performing becomes the thing done. (This leaves unexamined the pervasiveness of the action accomplished — that is, how long the state of marriage persists, along with the notions of the longevity of the following performative statements: 'to love and cherish her, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer …')

In this third category of research — alongside quantitative (symbolic numbers) and qualitative (symbolic words) — the symbolic data work performatively. They not only express the research, but in that expression become the research itself. The context, as Austin makes clear, is crucial to this:

> In these examples ['I do'; 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*'] it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it … the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.

When research findings are presented as such utterances, they too perform an action and are most appropriately named performative research. It is not qualitative research: it is itself.

A simple way of capturing the key differences between these three research paradigms can be represented as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key differences between the three research paradigms

Quantitative research	*Qualitative research*	*Performative research*
'the activity or operation of expressing something as a quantity or amount — for example, in numbers, graphs, or formulas' (Schwandt, 2001: 215)	Refers to 'all forms of social inquiry that rely primarily on qualitative data … i.e. nonnumeric data in the form of words' (Schwandt, 2001: 213).	Expressed in non-numeric data, but in forms of symbolic data other than words in discursive text. These include material forms of practice, of still and moving images, of music and sound, of live action and digital code.
The scientific method	Multi-method	Multi-method led by practice

The 'practice' in 'practice-led research' is primary — it is not an optional extra; it is the necessary pre-condition of engagement in performative research. It is important to note that, in using the term 'performative' to define this field of research, I am seeking to go beyond the way performative is currently being used in the research literature. For Langellier, performativity 'articulates and situates personal narrative' (Langellier, in Lincoln and Denzin, 2003: 447), while Bauman (in Lincoln and Denzin, 2003: 451) looks to the performance paradigm as a way of enabling scholars to 'provide an integrated account of social structure and a wider sense of cultural context as they focus on personal narrative as situated practice'. Perhaps the most performative example of the shift from 'textual ethnographies to performative [auto] ethnographies' (Denzin and Lincoln, in Saldana, 2005: ix) comes in the form of ethnotheatre which 'employs the traditional craft and artistic techniques of the theatre production to mount for an audience a live performance event of research participant's experiences and/or the researcher's interpretation of data' (Saldana, 2005: 1).

However, performative research represents something larger than 'the performance turn' (which for many is a form of emancipatory action through embodied and enacted storytelling). This paper proposes that performative research represents a move which holds that practice is the principal research activity — rather than *only* the practice of performance — and sees the material outcomes of practice as all-important representations of research findings in their own right.

Of course, it would be foolish to argue for a watertight separation of qualitative research from performative research for they share many principal orientations. Certainly, performative research is derived from relativist ontology and celebrates

multiple constructed realities. Its plurivocal potential operates through interpretative epistemologies where the knower and the known interact, shape and interpret the other.

Finally, recognising and adopting this third paradigm of research would reassert some of the original definitional clarity to the category of qualitative research. We have already noted the tensions which are causing fissures and fractures within the field and among qualitative researchers: perhaps these may now ease.

The strategies and methods of performative research

To successfully propose performative research as a third research paradigm, it is essential to answer the test (framed by Lincoln and Denzin) of all disciplined research methodologies: what constitutes the 'bundle of skills, assumptions, and practices that the researcher employs as he or she moves from paradigm to the empirical world' (Lincoln and Denzin, 2005: 25)?

From the outset, it is clear that performative research will move beyond current qualitative research practices for, in order to do its work, new strategies and methods have to be (and some have been) invented. The new strategies and methods are dictated by the phenomena being investigated and the recognition that the current repertoire of quantitative methodological tools — particularly discursive prose — will not accommodate completely the surplus of emotional and cognitive operations and outputs thrown up by the practitioner.

For performative research, the necessary and foundational research strategy is practice-led research, defined by Carole Gray as:

> firstly research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray, 1996: 3)

While Gray's practice-led strategy offers a fresh and distinctive formulation, strategies from the qualitative research tradition will also be used to develop the research project, but these will typically be inflected differently from their qualitative application. Most commonly, performative researchers progress their studies by employing variations of: reflective practice, participant observation, performance ethnography, ethnodrama, biographical/autobiographical/narrative inquiry, and the inquiry cycle from action research.

For each of these research strategies, particular methods are used to record, manage and analyse data in performative research. Keeping in mind Gray's proposition that the research strategy uses 'predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners', it is not surprising to find practice-led researchers repurposing established methods from the qualitative research tradition. For example, practice-led researchers have used interviews, reflective dialogue techniques, journals, observation methods, practice trails, personal experience, and expert and peer review methods to complement and enrich their work-based practices.

As well as modifying existing research methods to create new ways of looking, interpreting and representing knowledge claims, performative researchers are

inventing their own methods to probe the phenomena of practice. For example, one emerging method — known as an artistic audit — is explicitly designed to transform 'the literature review' into a more layered and rich analysis of the contexts of practice within which the performative researcher operates. Undertaking an artistic audit is essential for the practice-led researcher who, for example, is investigating the interrelationship between the live body and projected image in performance. As researchers 'practise' and make such a work, it is essential they reach beyond their own labours to connect with both earlier and contemporaneous productions which contribute to the overall research context for their work.

While 'an artistic audit' may at first appear to be taken from unsmiling accountancy practices, it takes its name from music educator Keith Swanwick's (1979) use of the word 'audition' to describe the process of attending to the symbolic form of an art work in performance. For Swanwick, auditing demands that the 'auditor' possess a certain empathy for the performers and the performance context, an understanding of the traditions and conventions present in the piece and finally a willingness to 'go along with' the performance — to take it at face value in the first instance. Such a perspective underlines Austin's (1962) recognition that 'the appropriate circumstances' are all important to the process of performativity.

Attending to the symbolic form of particular artworks provides a powerful focus for the performative researcher (and their audience) as each symbol functions as a means to conceptualise ideas about aspects of reality, and also as a means of communicating what is known to others. Consequently, auditing a work is never neutral — never the simple gathering of sensory impressions. Rather, it is theory-dependent, as the experienced and informed 'eye' (or rather 'mind') is able to detect (and the 'brain' make intelligible) subtleties and nuances in the performative phenomena audited. In this way, 'auditing' goes beyond the straightforward act of 'witnessing' required of other spectators and audiences.

While there is much still to do in formulating and developing the theory and practice of practice-led research, a rapid expansion of the field is inevitable. Over the coming years, an increasing number of performative researchers will be turning their techniques of practice into rigorous and specific research strategies and methods for use by others, including those operating in the quantitative and qualitative research traditions.

Conclusion: Applying performative research

The funding and structures of research are being transformed in many countries. Research assessment exercises, quality frameworks and national priorities now frame the research industry. Within this mix, one unchanging call is for the commercialisation of research — for innovation and R&D agendas to play a key role in the task of national wealth-building. In this environment, it seems certain that performative research will become increasingly important as a methodological approach across the arts, humanities and social sciences. Performative research — while it has been fuelled by the practices of artist/researchers and is the most appropriate research paradigm for all forms of artistic practice — is also being used by researchers involved in content creation and production across the creative and cultural industries, especially those engaged in user-led and end-user research. The practice orientation of practice-led research is aligned with the processes of

trialling and prototyping so common in applied commercial research and in the development of research applications for online education, virtual heritage, creative retail, cultural tourism and business-to-consumer applications.

In this evolving research dynamic, we are witnessing a maturing of the conceptual architecture of performative research and sharper clarity about the actual research practices of practice-led research. However, documented applications will be the hinge upon which our understandings of this evolving research paradigm will turn, and in that turning — especially in a environment preoccupied with innovation and commercialisation — performative research will come to be recognised and valued as one of the three major research paradigms.

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