Creative Spaces for Qualitative Researching

Living Research

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Creative Spaces for Qualitative Researching: Living Research. This book looks inward at researchers who are seeking to live their research – to embody the principles, methodologies and ethical conduct that comprises their research strategies. And, it looks outward at the living world as the focus of qualitative research. From both perspectives the editors and authors of this book have created spaces for qualitative research that provide critical and creative frameworks for conducting and living their research. A rich variety of research voices and lives are illuminated, liberated and revealed in the book. There are five sections in the book:

- Researching Living Practices
- Doing Creative Research
- Being a Creative Researcher
- Co-Creating Qualitative Research in Creative Spaces
- Becoming Transformed Through Creative Research.
Creative Spaces for Qualitative Researching
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This series examines research, theory and practice in the context of university education, professional practice, work and society. Rather than focusing on a single topic the series examines areas where two or more of these arenas come together. Themes that will be explored in the series include: university education of professions, society expectations of professional practice, professional practice workplaces and strategies for investigating each of these areas. There are many challenges facing researchers, educators, practitioners and students in today’s practice worlds. The authors in this series bring a wealth of practice wisdom and experience to examine these issues, share their practice knowledge, report research into strategies that address these challenges, share approaches to working and learning and raise yet more questions.

The conversations conducted in the series will contribute to expanding the discourse around the way people encounter and experience practice, education, work and society.

Joy Higgs, Charles Sturt University, Australia
FOREWORD

This book reflects the intersecting journeys of a group of qualitative researchers – Joy Higgs, Angie Titchen, Debbie Horsfall and Donna Bridges. And it celebrates our encounters with various groups and networks of researchers and research participants across these journeys.

In this book we extend, burnish and revise previous research discussions and experiences in the 2007 book *Being Critical and Creative in Qualitative Research* (Hampden Press) edited by Joy Higgs, Angie Titchen, Debbie Horsfall and Hilary Armstrong. Plus we draw into this critical and creative space, new narratives and innovative research practices.

We present this book to readers who are, or want to the possibility of doing critical and creative qualitative research that seeks to illuminate or transform human life and activity.
SECTION 1: RESEARCHING LIVING PRACTICES
1. RESEARCHING LIVING PRACTICES

Trends in Creative Qualitative Research

Qualitative research has come a long way since its origins in anthropology well over a century ago (Loftus & Rothwell, 2010). Numerous influences have shaped the development of qualitative research, which has flourished and branched off in many different directions such as grounded theory, narrative inquiry, the many approaches shaped by phenomenology, critical inquiry, and action research.

There was a long period in which qualitative research had to justify its existence as a valid form of inquiry in many disciplines, the so-called “paradigm wars”. Qualitative researchers were challenged because what they were doing did not seem to be rigorous or methodical in the same way that quantitative researchers claimed for their projects. There were convenience samples as opposed to random samples. There were no attempts at accurate measurements of phenomena that enabled cause/effect mechanisms to be explained. Above all, there was the acceptance within qualitative research of subjectivity as inevitable and actually desirable, whereas quantitative science prized objectivity and detachment. It is now more widely accepted that qualitative research has come of age. It does not set out to test theory, rather it generates theory. Qualitative research is more about understanding phenomena than explaining or predicting them. Subjectivity is present in all research to some degree and subjective experience is itself a source of valuable insights. So where is qualitative research going? And, as we consider creative spaces for qualitative research in this book, where are we going in terms of creating spaces for doing creative qualitative research? In this book we examine these questions through several key themes or trends: researching living practices, practice-based researching, and creative spaces for qualitative research.

RESEARCHING LIVING PRACTICES

The problem with researching human practice is not what to do but how to talk about it (Judt, 2010). How do we articulate and illuminate practice? Traditionally, research has been about the generation and testing of theory (or what we know as opposed to what we do). New theoretical, propositional knowledge has often been seen as the “be all and end all” of any research project. Even applied research is traditionally firmly grounded in theoretical knowledge. In recent years, however, there has been a growing interest in the world of practice, what people do, as opposed to what people know. There is a need to creatively open up intellectual spaces so that we can explore and articulate this world of practice. This is seen in
the work of scholars as varied as Bourdieu (2000), Wenger (1998) and Schatzki (1996).

Bourdieu (2000), for example, argued from a sociology perspective that our practice is not exclusively the result of rational decision making but, in large part, an embodied sense of what is to be done that comes from an implicit understanding of our place in the relationships that make up our social world. Bourdieu exercised his own creativity when he devised new terms to conceptualise the various aspects of these social relationships. He spoke of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. *Habitus* is the set of dispositions and ways of acting that seem entirely natural to us and that come from the “normal” activities and experiences that are part of our social world. Constellations or microcosms of practices, such as the family, the university or workplaces are fields. Fields are relatively independent and have their own structure and rules. Bourdieu also devised the idea of *symbolic capital*. According to him, the reason that we engage in much of our practice is not just for economic gain but to acquire symbolic capital, which can include such things as social status.

The idea of the “practice turn”, generally attributed to Schatzki, shifted the concept of practice firmly into social theory arenas (Schatzki, 1996; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & Von Savigny, 2001). The practice turn is an umbrella term for a wide range of approaches to studying and understanding practice. Practice is shaped by meaning, knowledge, power, and social institutions, as well as “timespace” (Schatzki, 2010). Schatzki (2001, p. 2) has described the *field of practices* which is the “total nexus of interconnected human practices”. The argument is that a focus on practice can illuminate many phenomena in new ways. For example, Schatzki pointed out that conventional scholarship on language has focused on aspects such as semiotics and abstract discourse, whereas a practice approach looks at language as discursive activity; he cited Foucault’s (1976, 1980) work as an example of this.

Wenger (1998) drew our attention to the importance of communities of practice and the ways in which practitioners need to come together and share stories of practice so that they can learn from each other and enrich their practice. Wenger pointed out the importance of the ways in which an individual develops an identity as a practitioner through participating in such communities of practice. A community of practice also needs to develop as a community in which the members are willing and able to support each other in their practice, be they novices or experienced practitioners. The community of practice is a vitally important means of giving meaning to what individuals do as practitioners. Thinking in terms of communities of practice is another way in which we can creatively explore what people do.

It is clear from this body of literature that it is very difficult to make one’s practice meaningful all on one’s own. As isolated individuals it would be difficult, if not impossible, to learn how to effectively conduct a practice, let alone give it meaning. For example, Wittgenstein (1958) argued that the apparently simple practice of expressing pain to others is something learned and made meaningful through social interaction. The meaning of our practice is as important as the fact that we engage in it. Humans engage in practice for reasons, even though they may
be only dimly aware of those reasons and other people (such as researchers) may find a variety of plausible and different reasons to explain particular practices. This is part of a greater realisation that practice is as important as theory. For too long it has been assumed, for example in professional education, that if we can only get the theory right then the practice will follow. There has been a reaction against this idea, with several scholars proclaiming the “primacy of practice” (e.g. Toulmin, 2002). Toulmin pointed out that ever since the time of Descartes in the seventeenth century there has been a preoccupation with establishing the propositional knowledge (episteme in Aristotle’s terms) that is assumed to underpin all practice. This preoccupation implies that the job of researchers is to establish what this propositional knowledge is so that it can be applied more effectively. Toulmin argues against this, claiming that what has been forgotten is that practice often depends on a form of practical wisdom (phronesis) that is contingent upon the circumstances around a particular practice problem. Such localised and timely practical wisdom may be the best available theory for dealing with a practice problem. There is no need always to subordinate practice to timeless propositional knowledge or any sort of general theory.

It can be argued that theory and practice are interdependent, with each being equally important. Rather than arguing for the primacy of practice, perhaps we should be arguing for the primacy of the theory–practice nexus. You can’t have one without the other. There is no cause–effect relationship between theory and practice; rather an intense dialogical relationship, with each dependent on the other and interpenetrating the other. This interdependency is evident in the notion of praxis, which has been defined as morally informed and morally committed action (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). This is practice in which a large part of its meaningfulness is an ethical awareness that shapes it through and through, affecting not only how the practice is acted out but what it means to those involved.

All this raises the question of how we might open up the intellectual spaces where we can articulate the combination of theory and practice. This is where researchers, especially qualitative researchers, need some degree of creativity. Pedestrian, routine research might get away with merely documenting phenomena, but if research is to be truly useful and move our understanding forwards then it also needs to be creative and transformative (see Higgs & Titchen, 2007). The creativity comes from seeing things in new ways that can open up our thinking and our insight. Great artists such as the Impressionists helped us see the world differently by using their creativity to paint pictures that showed it to us in new ways. Their creativity lay both in being able to see the world differently themselves and in being able to express and share this new vision through their artwork. Likewise, qualitative researchers need to be creative, both in seeing the world differently, and in being able to express this new understanding in ways that help the rest of us understand the world in these new ways. It is not easy. As Davey (2006, p. 152), inspired by Gadamer, pointed out, “the sensitive use of words brings to light what is held within intense experience and thereby opens the possibility of extending it.”
For the vast majority of qualitative researchers, creativity entails being creative with words, both in the ways in which textual data are read and analysed and the ways in which creative insights are then articulated for the rest of the world to share. Examples include the way in which clinical reasoning can be “revisioned” as a complex linguistic phenomenon rather than a simplistic process of cognitive computation and calculation (Loftus, 2009) or how the critical insights of Habermas can be used to understand and extend physiotherapy as an emancipatory practice so that it becomes much more than “only” a physical therapy (Trede, 2008). New ways of articulating a practice can open it up so that we can see what were formerly hidden depths and help us to be sensitive to new and better ways of conducting practice.

For example, the clinical encounter between doctor and patient was traditionally seen as little more than a mechanical exchange of information between doctors and patients in which the patients were assumed to be rational agents simply handing their bodies over for repair. However, Svenaeus (2000) used Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to creatively articulate medical practice in a way that offered new and more compassionate insights into what happens in the clinical encounter, so that more attention is focused on the reality that patients are worried, help-seeking people. This new and more creative articulation revealed the weaknesses of the more traditional view of the clinical encounter, and could draw attention to the ways in which practice might not be as morally informed or as morally committed as we believed it to be. Qualitative research needs to focus on creative articulation if it is to be truly interesting and useful.

Novice researchers might worry that creative articulation means moving away from accurately describing practice as it really is. Such a concern shows a misunderstanding of what description involves. It is worth remembering the words of Rorty (1998), who wrote:

Human beings, like computers, dogs, and works of art, can be described in lots of different ways, depending on what you want to do with them – take them apart for repairs, re-educate them, play with them, admire them, and so on for a long list of alternative purposes. None of these descriptions is closer to what human beings really are than any of the others. Descriptions are tools invented for particular purposes, not attempts to describe things as they are in themselves, apart from any such purposes.

For too long the Western world has simply assumed that the scientific description of something is the most accurate and reliable. Rorty’s point is that the best description or portrayal of a phenomenon is the one best suited for the purpose of the description. There is no one best description or interpretation. In qualitative research we need to be quite clear about the purpose of the research and creatively come up with an interpretation that best suits that purpose. This means that the same practice can be portrayed in quite different ways depending on what the research is meant to achieve. A portrayal (articulation) that seeks to emancipate people from an oppressive practice needs to look and sound quite different from one that seeks to come to a deeper understanding of what that practice entails and
means for its participants. Each interpretation can be equally valid. The point is not which description or interpretation is true but which is most credible by being true to its purpose and true to the strategy that generated it.

CREATIVE RE-PRESENTATIONS OF LIVING PRACTICES

We can conclude from the section above that living practices are understood to be situated, cultural, moral, dialogic, historical, embodied, relational, technical, creative, propositional, craft, political, personal, strategic, procedural, intuitive, discursive, informal, contextual practices. In short, living practice is conceptualised as something much more complex and ambiguous than technical skill and competence. Researching such practice can benefit from creatively re-presenting research data and findings (Willis, 2000; Galvin & Todres 2007; Todres & Galvin 2008). Researchers have drawn on expressive, aesthetic, arts-based, poetic, and performative approaches to re-present their research findings.

Key purposes and tasks of creatively researching living practices are to richly describe practice phenomena so that we can appreciate and come to know (what are they like? what do they feel like?) and more deeply understand (what are their perceived meanings?) such living practices. Some of the reasons to conduct research into living practices are to evoke an aliveness of practice, to facilitate an experience of emotional homecoming, to empathise with others, to reduce suffering. One of the foundational concepts of qualitative research that underpins these purposes is the notion of multiple interpretations of experiences and the rejection of the notion of one external reality and universal truth. Experiences cannot be accurately and objectively represented. This crisis of representation opens up creative spaces for new approaches (Winter, 2010). Researchers who use creative approaches seek symbolism rather than authenticity in their re-presentation. Symbolism avoids explanatory written words and can potentially unleash the imagination of the reader/consumer of such research, ultimately creating openness and readiness for other possibilities of being, knowing and doing in practice. The task of creative approaches to researching living practices is to reveal and symbolically re-present them. This task is most credibly accomplished through collaborative, participative and co-productive strategies. There is an inevitable reciprocity between researcher and researched. Qualitative research seeks to explore the diversity, uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity in and of practices. The acceptance of multiple perspectives welcomes creative and diverse ways of collecting, re-presenting and interpreting data. Qualitative researchers assert that knowledge generation is a complex process of interwoven and interrelated interpretations. And they seek to establish interdependent connections and relationships between knowing, feeling and doing in practice.

Although written academic texts remain the key mandatory requirements for presenting and publishing research work there is a growing movement that accepts other ways of re-presenting research of living practices (Higgs, Cherry, & Trede, 2009). A creative qualitative paradigm enables researchers to explore other than the dominant ways of knowing, being and becoming in practice and to powerfully
reveal and interpret ambiguities, emotions, social justice stances and embodied knowing in practice. Such creative approaches to re-presenting practice can be categorised into three broad modes: creative writing, which includes stories and poems; visual arts, which include painting and sculpture; and performances, which include drama, film and dance (Willis, 2000).

FT has used all these three creative modes to mirror back practice situations in different ways and modes in order to assist patients and their carers as well as clinicians and their managers to rediscover practice and practice experiences, and to appreciate them with different eyes. In a large emergency department of a teaching hospital in Sydney, FT and her research team used patient complaints data and in-depth interview data with emergency staff (including receptionists) to extrapolate eight themes that led to miscommunication and misunderstandings between staff and patients (Trede, Jochelson, & McCarthy, 2005). They then employed a script writer/film director who wrote eight prototypical scenarios based on the eight themes. These scripts were read out to emergency staff members, to check with them that the scripts sounded real and credible and resonated with them. They employed actors and produced eight film vignettes. These vignettes are creative re-presentations of research findings about health communication issues in an emergency department. These films are creative due to their performative nature and symbolic value.

In an acute cardiac ward of a teaching hospital in Sydney, FT and her research team collected stories from staff (about what it is like working with people with acute cardiac conditions) and patients (about what it is like living with a heart condition, and what they learned about their condition on the ward) through dialogical interviews (Trede & Flowers, 2008; Trede, Flowers, & Bergin, 2008). We summarised their stories and gave their stories back to them for editing to ensure that the stories were credible and truthful. We also employed artists who were present at the interviews. Each storyteller was asked to tell us what colours, shapes and symbols they would use if they were to paint their story. The artists used these suggestions to create an oil painting for each story; we called the story and accompanying painting a storyboard. All the storyboards are exhibited in this cardiac ward.

The key focus of these creative research methodologies was to privilege embodied, cultural and relational knowing, and to re-present experiences by including, if not foregrounding, emotions and bodily perceptions. Our purposes were to reveal the diversity of perspectives in practice, to enhance empathy and appreciation of what it is like to practise and to receive such practice, and to open up possibilities for genuine dialogue at a reciprocal compassionate level. Creativity was used as an ontological existentialist stance as well as an epistemological process of coming to understand practices.

The abovementioned projects adopted arts-based approaches because the arts are implicit in character, opening up the imagination and creating possibilities for interpretation. Further, the arts-implied symbolism was a powerful tool to allow co-researchers to re-present themselves in different ways. The aim of these approaches was not to accurately and authentically represent practice; because they
worked in a creative, qualitative framework. Symbolic re-presentations in the form of storyboards, vignettes and creative writing are used as a transformative force where the symbolism re-presents reality, triggers reflection, and stimulates debate.

CREATIVE SPACES FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In the first theme we looked at researching practice; the second theme focused on the multiple dimensions of living practices that researchers seek to illuminate; this third section addresses the implications of these two pursuits. We ask here: what is needed for researchers conducting qualitative research in these areas? Our answers lie in considerations of creating spaces within us, between us and around us.

Creating spaces within us entails first seeking to know ourselves: what are our present understandings and prejudgments, what are our goals, interests and values, what are our preferred or desired ways of being in the research space, where do we want to go in our research journeys, how do we want to be – as self and with others. This reflection can be painful, cathartic, illuminating, bewildering and empowering. From reflection come choices to change or reassert the known or unknown choices we have already made about all these questions. Then we set forth into our next research adventure with our choices made – or at least made enough to get started, with the reminder to review again later. Our space for self as persons doing research then becomes one of seeking authenticity, agency and capability to pursue these choices.

Creating spaces between us first asks the question: Who is us? The answer is likely to be our co-researchers, because that’s the rather obvious thing about being in a team. But how often do we identify the need for shaping the living and “to be lived in” space of the research team (e.g. through an exploratory values exercise)? Or do we just concentrate on articulating the task space (e.g. roles, tasks, timelines)? Another answer that is needed relates to the type of space we wish to create both for and with our research participants. Is this space ideally (for this project and philosophical frame of reference) one of appreciation for their contribution (“Thanks for your input to my/our project”), one of process collaboration (“How can we all participate in this task?”), one of shared project leadership (“How shall we go about doing this research together?”).

Importantly, the spaces we create are evolving, not static phenomena. In research supervision journeys, for instance, we commonly aim for the novices (students) to gain superior knowledge in their specific topic areas, to experience times of high agency where the supervisor takes a back-seat role and times when they need help from their wise mentor. For a research group engaged in an extended term project there are likely to be members coming and going, changes in leadership, tensions that need resolution, times of shared achievement, even exhilaration, and times of redirection and revisioning. Research needs to balance rigour (rather than rigidity) and creative endeavour (rather than disorganised chaos) to achieve credibility and meaningful knowledge of human being and practices.
Creating spaces around us is, in essence, creating spaces in which to be creative. The following poem seeks to reflect such spaces. Consider the value of these ideas for research spaces.

We met to start our research journey
We came in all shapes and sizes
of ideas, lives, experience – multi-hued people.

Creation of ways of being
together was a constant happening
spontaneous and planned
– preset and like breathing
We met sometimes
in work places
for convenience and
to bring others in remotely
Often we met
in “our space”
This was a large
sunroom leading out
into a wide verandah
and a leafy garden
in an old family home
– it was Grandma’s place
belonging to
one of our group
There was plenty of space
for sitting and coffee
For eating by
grazing or feasting
For lots of laptops
to be plugged in
And drawing on
newsprint on the floor
The cooking
created such aromas
I will always relate
these to creative thinking
And good times
and shared endeavour
“Our space” was where we
debated, argued and disagreed
where we collaborated,
shared insights and made plans
where we collaborated,
Our space was physical, it was people, it was ideas
It was word and wordless knowing
It was being and being there

FROM HERE

One of the exciting things about being involved in qualitative research is that we can give ourselves permission to open up new intellectual spaces and be creative, from the time we start to think through the questions we might ask all the way through to the final articulation/creation of what we have found and what it means. This is probably true of all research and scholarly activity to some degree. There is the well-known story of the famous physicist, Nils Bohr, who once reprimanded a student for being logical all the time and not thinking. To think means to be creative. There is still a need to be rigorous and to keep ourselves firmly grounded in the data that we gather, but beyond this we can (and should) use our creativity to open up our understanding of the many ways in which humans engage in living practices. The rest of this book provides many examples of the diverse ways that people have exercised this creativity in qualitative research. We hope you enjoy it.
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2. RESEARCHING IN WICKED PRACTICE SPACES

Artistry as a Way of Researching the Unknown in Practice

Practice confronts us with “wicked” problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973) that constantly challenge our commitment, courage and expertise, as individuals, as organisations and as societies. These problems are messy, circular, aggressive and feature ill-defined design and planning problems. Such challenges can seem very difficult and personally demanding. Even without these stimulating opportunities and wicked problems, our individual and collective practice constantly needs to develop to keep pace with the perpetual change of our globally connected world. (Higgs & Cherry, 2009, p. 4)

We live in interesting times. Global connectivity creates opportunities and problems that have multiple drivers, many spin-offs, and stakeholders with varying and often incongruent interests. Building knowledge and expertise that is capable of engaging helpfully with this complexity sometimes challenges the fundamental research paradigms and practice disciplines which define and organise what we think we know and can do. It requires us to bring multidisciplinary perspectives and creative research strategies to bear on issues and possibilities, and often to think outside the existing boxes. And it poses some significant challenges for educators, researchers and practitioners.

But sitting under this are some even more fundamental issues. Creating and effectively applying knowledge through practice is the work which engages us all, whether through major innovation or less dramatic day-to-day practice. Even without the pressures of contemporary innovation and change, the development, or crafting, of an individual’s professional practice is a genuinely complex phenomenon. The challenges – and opportunities – this presents for researchers who care to investigate the development and application of professional practice are very interesting. Something as basic as describing the way an individual’s professional practice works – the countless unconscious and conscious choices that are made about how to intervene and when – represents a major undertaking for research practice, let alone more complex tasks such as explaining how this practice developed or why it works. This chapter explores these issues and suggests some ways in which qualitative researchers might usefully engage with them.
WHAT PRACTICE REPRESENTS

By *practice*, we mean that set of behaviours, strategies, frameworks and underlying beliefs and knowledge through which a single human being or group of people consistently tries to engage with the tasks, situations and issues that face them in the context of their life and work. In the context of professional practice, practice comprises a range of complex phenomena, responsibilities and situations which the person is charged to deal with. The development, integration and application of professional knowledge draws on many forms and ways of knowing (Scott, 1990; Eraut, 1994; Higgs & Titchen, 1995; Drury Hudson, 1997). Beyond theoretical or conceptually derived knowledge, practice requires personal knowledge (derived from life experiences and what seems to the individual to be either shared or personal ways of understanding or doing things), practice wisdom (deep practical knowledge born of reflexive experience), procedural knowledge (knowledge of context and local rules) and empirical knowledge (derived from systematic research and theory testing). Professional practice is also profoundly personal. Professional associations try to codify key elements of practice, but it is the individual operating in a particular context who must exercise judgment about what to do and how to do it. Practice also requires that knowledge can be translated into skilled, effective and wise action in particular and specific situations. To be successful in practice over time, practitioners must possess a range, or repertoire, of skilled behaviours; this in turn implies that choices, whether conscious or not, must be made as to what to do at any particular time. Some time ago, Revans (1982, p. 493) made a very cogent observation about the connection between practice and theory:

> The science of praxeology – or the theory of practice – remains among the underdeveloped regions of the academic world. And yet it is, or should be, the queen of all … successful theory is merely that which enables him who is suitably armed to carry through successful practice. This is the argument of the pragmatists, William James, John Dewey and even Karl Marx: to understand an idea one must be able to apply it in practice, and to understand a situation one must be able to change it. Verbal description is not command enough. It is from consistently replicated and successful practice that is distilled and concentrated the knowledge we describe as successful theory.

However, as Polanyi (1967) has pointed out, many aspects of skilled practice become tacit and we come to know much more than we can say. And the precise ways in which individual and collective practice integrates knowing and doing remain, arguably, among the biggest conundrums of human development. We know that it happens, we see it and experience it every day, but it remains a challenge to effectively, credibly and reliably influence practice, as every parent, every teacher and every leader knows.
Psychologists and sociologists for decades have produced many theories of how we make sense of things, learn and apply skilled behaviours. However, many of these theories are only capable of exploring individual elements of learning. Capturing the holistic nature of practice has called for metaphor, and it was his recognition of the complexity of practice development that led Donald Schön (1987) to frame practice in terms of artistry. Schön’s starting point was the same as that of Polanyi (1967). He was struck by the kinds of competence and knowledge that do not depend on our being able to describe what we know how to do, or even to hold in consciousness the knowledge our actions reveal or imply. We know the “feel of things” – the feel of driving a car or swinging a golf club, and we can readily detect when something is wrong, but it is often easier for us to describe deviations from “normal” performance or experience than it is to describe the norm itself. Schön used the term knowing-in-action to describe spontaneous skilful performance which we are unable to make verbally explicit.

Schön suggested that much of the skilled behaviour which we associate both with the arts and with the traditional professions cannot be taught in a literal sense. In this framework, the facilitation of adult learning involves a dialogue between facilitator and learner, in which the learner experiments, takes action, reflects (both alone and dialoguing with the facilitator) and reflects on further experience. The dialogue is not about prescription or rule-giving, but it is about creating or crafting something that emerges gradually, individualistically, and on the basis of extensive disciplined practice. It is not about one person simply handing to another a blueprint or vision of effective performance. He observed that the vision – if it exists – is often difficult to articulate, let alone share or prescribe. And the discipline is that of reflection, close attention to the experience, the doing and the remembering:

The design studio shares in a general paradox attendant on the teaching and learning of any really new competence or understanding: for the student seeks to learn things whose meaning and importance she cannot grasp ahead of time … [She] knows she needs to look for something but does not know what the something is. She seeks to learn it, moreover, in the sense of coming to know it in action. Yet, at the beginning, she can neither do it nor recognise it when she sees it. Hence, she is caught up in a self-contradiction: “looking for something” implies a capacity to recognise the thing one looks for, but the student lacks at first the capacity to recognise the object of her search. The instructor is caught up in the same paradox: he cannot tell the student what she needs to know, even if he has words for it, because the student would not at that point understand him. (Schön, 1987, pp. 82–84)

The paradox Schön described becomes even more troublesome when practice must engage with situations that are more complex and novel, that require the practitioner to dig more deeply. To help us understand what is going on in these situations – which he referred to as indeterminate zones of practice – Schön used the term artistry, which he defined as:
an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from a standard model of professional knowledge. It is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms; and we can learn a great deal about it ... by carefully studying the performance of unusually competent performers. (Schön, 1987, p. 13)

RESEARCHING THE UNKNOWN IN PRACTICE

Schön’s articulation of the paradox of practice development, both under normal circumstances and in the indeterminate zones of complex practice, poses particularly interesting questions for both researchers and educators in universities. How is the development and application of practice wisdom described and articulated? How is it explained? How is it turned into theory? How is theory used in practice? How is practice wisdom taught? And in an age of juicy problems and wicked problems, how is the convergence of multidisciplinary constructs and paradigms connected with practice wisdom? How do we engage with the problematic knowledge generated by contemporary innovations such as surveillance technology, the human genome project and access to euthanasia?

Since Schön’s elegant articulation of the dilemma, others have taken up the theme. The issue, for some at least, is not only about being able to learn fruitfully despite not “knowing” (where “not knowing” is framed as an obstacle to be overcome), but about deliberately cultivating and sustaining a state of not-knowing as a research and learning strategy. From this perspective the practitioner values tacit knowledge and understands the power of forgetting the name of the thing one sees (Weschler, 1982), making the familiar strange and new again (Emmett, 1998) and re-enchanting everyday life (Moore, 1996). Consider the images and opportunities created for rethinking the familiar in the following figures (2.1, 2.2).

Figure 2.1. Making strange the natural elements

In this “strange” space, nothing is taken for granted, everything can be seen with fresh eyes, some issues and experiences now become problematic, while others can be experienced without the clutter of previous expectations and baggage.
Paradoxically, we may feel both freer and more challenged. In this space, some things that were undiscussable become open to discourse, while the need to justify and explain other things simply falls away. Here we might come to experience both our inner and outer worlds in different ways, and even the distinction between those worlds in different ways. This space can become a container or site for tremendous creative activity for researchers, and the rest of this chapter explores the ways in which research practice might take on artistry.

![Figure 2.2. Making human touch abstract](image)

**ARTISTRY IN RESEARCH PRACTICE**

As a term or idea, artistry is often associated with an aesthetic dimension in seeing and engaging with the world. Certainly that particular notion of artistry in research practice is not new, and aesthetic modes of knowing (Eisner, 1985) have taken their place in qualitative research practice over the last three decades. Many of these offer helpful ways of researching how practitioners develop their practice and how they apply their practice under conditions that challenge it. However, artistry in the sense that Schön suggested implies something different from aesthetic forms of engagement. It is a way of approaching professional practice in almost any professional or disciplinary setting that draws attention to the way knowledge is exercised and the way things are done. Schön’s own exposition of artistry as a way of knowing and doing centred on reflection in practice, involving reflection-in-the-midst-of-action (not post-event) and reciprocal dialogue with others during this “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1987, p. xii). In his own extended exposition of reflective practices, Bleakley suggested that artistry in higher education is an act of what Heidegger (1993) would call “care”, “under which each act is an apprehension collapsing history, presence and future implications in the moment, embedded in an informing and intentional object world” (Bleakley, 1999, p. 328).

Over the past decade, The Centre for Creative Leadership in the United States has articulated a suite of six creative competencies that they also associate with what they call crafting or artistry in professional practice (see Palus & Horth, 2002). They suggest that these skills are particularly helpful when professionals engage with issues that are complex, novel and important. Although developed with professional leadership practice in mind, we suggest that their ideas open up some interesting possibilities for researchers trying to get to grips with how they might explore practice from any discipline under conditions of complexity. Three
of their original six competencies or skill sets struck us as being of particular potential value to researchers: paying attention, serious play and co-inquiry.

**Paying Attention**

Paying attention at the outset is the first – and in some sense foundational – competency Palus and Horth (2002) described. Their argument is that practitioners across many disciplines spend as little as ten percent of time in diagnosing or framing situations up front, and respond to a range of pressures to move to action as quickly as possible. When issues are genuinely complex and critical, the trade-off for speed can be oversimplification and serious errors of judgment. Certainly researchers at all stages of their practice frequently find themselves under exactly this sort of pressure: to tightly frame complex research questions to apply for grants; to specify all details of methodology in order to obtain ethics approval; to write definitive literature reviews ahead of creating data.

The advice of Palus and Horth is to use whatever time is available for diagnosis more effectively, engaging with the issues in ways that do justice to their complexity. Paying attention can incorporate the skill of shifting between different modes of attention. What they call “high-gear attention” provides speed when the terrain is smooth, and is the kind of attention associated with experienced performance in familiar terrain. But when we need to dig deep, in the face of the novel and complex, they suggest that we need low-gear attention, where we take the time to look yet again, to suspend assumptions that we know what we see, and to make the familiar strange to us. They also contrast left-mode and right-mode attention: the contrast between word-based deductive logic that is sequential and analytical and non-verbal, intuitive perception, operating in the moment, based on images and patterns, in the moment nonverbal. For the researcher, this might take the form of making a deliberate effort to use contrasting modes during initial engagement with a research project, perhaps using narratives, images and metaphors alongside analytical and logic-based approaches.

A more radical suggestion is that we use kinaesthetic attention based on physical movement and the wisdom of the body. This can range from something as simple as walking and talking about issues rather than opposed to sitting and thinking, to something more sophisticated and time-consuming making things – objects or models, that physically represent the issues. Also we can pay attention to the negative “white” space: the space between issues, like the unoccupied space in a picture or text. While we focus on the objects, the words or the issues, we are attending to the familiar, going straight to what we think we know.

The activity of drawing is a powerful device for understanding negative space … drawing a picture of a specific tree can be difficult when your preconception of a tree … gets in the way of your ability to see the real, individual tree. But you have no preconceived symbols for the shapes between the branches of a tree. So if you faithfully attend to and draw these negative spaces, the real tree gradually emerges … not your symbol for one;
in addition, the tree will appear woven into its context, not abstracted from that environment (Palus & Horth, 2002, p. 19).

In this way, we focus on the particular, “attending to the question: What is this?” (Palus & Horth, 2002, p. 20). This is a very powerful idea, because it focuses attention on the context which helps to create and define the issue, raising questions like: To whom is this important and why? Why is it important now? How has it been approached in the past? With what result? What was learned? What has been ignored? Qualitative researchers can have a belief that knowledge is contextual but still fail to get to grips with the quite fundamental way in which the context – the negative or white space – shapes the phenomenon with which they are trying to engage. By listening for what is not said, the voices that are absent, we pay more attention to what is excluded from our first framing of the more obvious.

Paying attention also includes asking powerful questions – a skill familiar in the research context, where we understand that framing good questions is fundamental to the journey of generating useful answers. Palus and Horth invoke the metaphor of poking the embers to stir up the flames, creating heat and energy, and suggest that powerful questions have three qualities: they invite exploration, they resist easy answers and they invoke strong passions, pulling attention to the otherwise unnoticed white spaces. This is a very different mode from expecting ourselves as researchers to be always in control, having all the answers and being definitive about what we are doing. Powerful questions can come from the different modes of attention mentioned already: right-mode questions that ask, What are the patterns? left-mode questions that ask, What is the dominant logic operating here? questions from negative space that ask, What are we neglecting to ask? and questions from other perspectives: the what-if questions that explore unexpected scenarios, and the questions of appreciative inquiry familiar to many researchers: What’s right about what we are doing? What’s already well built and fit for purpose? What is unappreciated and therefore possibly under-leveraged or taken for granted?

**Serious Play**

So far, we have considered the application to research of a set of skills that Palus and Horth (2002) associated with what they called paying attention. They offered two other ideas that are worth consideration in the context of researching practice: the skill sets associated with serious play and co-inquiry. They noted that the idea of serious play has some currency in the social sciences, citing Gergen’s (1991) perspective that serious play allows people to communicate even in the face of entrenched differences, drawing on a way of communicating that:
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explores similarities and differences, not by deconstructing the other’s point of view (an all too frequent response) but by playfully exploring new combinations of perspectives for something fresh and useful. Serious play … is matter of learning to hold your deepest beliefs lightly for a moment, rather than squeezing more tightly when they are challenged (Palus & Horth, 2002, p. 107).

Serious play challenges the idea of being in control at all times, creating the possibility for surprise, for the kind of creative disruption (Schumpeter, 1934) that precedes innovation. Even if it doesn’t produce radical innovation, serious play might just loosen our tight grip on concepts or methods that restrict our capacity to see, experience and engage with complex issues in ways that do appropriate justice to them. Palus and Horth (2002) had some ideas about serious play that are very relevant to the research enterprise. For example, they suggested that “serious play is matter of building a toy in the best sense of that word – a model or a prototype – and then batting it around with others exuberantly and creatively; often it breaks” (p. 108). Although many academic forums are not the site of serious play in these terms, and indeed can be the scene of just the opposite, there is no reason why a researcher should not invite a group of colleagues to experiment with the kind of play that is being suggested.

Radical sabbaticals are another idea: deliberately choosing to spend time with people in contexts, on projects, and working in ways that are very different from our own. And of course this doesn’t need to be a sabbatical in the literal sense; it could be a week or a day each month spent in the company of people and ideas that are unfamiliar and deeply enriching. What they call “the aesthetics of imperfection” (Palus & Horth, 2002, p. 181) involves capitalising on experiments that have failed, learning deeply from things that have gone wrong. This is a useful idea that emphasises the value (rather than the down-side) of things being not quite right at our first attempt, or even being quite wide of the mark. When we don't have the mastery we would like, we might be forced to think again about our assumptions, our understanding, our technique, even our intentions.

Co-Inquiry

Co-inquiry is the third broad skill set that Palus and Horth (2002) offer us that raises some interesting possibilities for researchers. Of course, co-inquiry is well established as a research method, perhaps most beautifully articulated by Heron’s (1988) framing of it as co-operative inquiry. Indeed, we would argue that in a time of converging disciplines and messy problems and opportunities, it is a requisite for being an effective researcher in almost any context. The newer twists raised here include a focus on crossing borders, improvised relationships, inviting others to play, playing kindly, and deliberately seeking feedback. Crossing borders in the academy means not just spending time with researchers from other disciplines but actually inviting them to sit with us and use some of their lenses and methods to see and engage with our issue in different ways: a practical way to make the familiar strange or, indeed, to engage with the unfamiliar.
Improvised relationships are built opportunistically, by taking advantage of unplanned meetings, accidental connections, and casual conversations with people we haven’t met before, whose perspectives are unfamiliar but potentially interesting and valuable. Inviting others to play is about being proactive, not simply waiting to be asked, and deliberately crafting rich descriptions and striking frames for the issues of interest – and for the methods of co-inquiry themselves – that are likely to attract the attention of others.

Co-inquiry does not have to entail long-term associations; it can be about time-limited encounters where the value comes from a different kind of conversation. Instead of debate and advocacy, immediate critique and evaluation, this kind of dialogue is intended to cultivate ideas, to allow them to emerge with respect – perhaps a kind of appreciative inquiry. Unlike brainstorming, that encourages many ideas to emerge and then parks them for later consideration, the idea is to deliberately build on an idea, to take it somewhere. This kind of inquiry would certainly profit from the range of ways of paying attention that were described earlier in this chapter. Another suggestion from this skill set that draws on those mentioned previously is the idea of putting something in the middle: an object or a physical prototype, or a symbol, picture or image that somehow represents or invokes the issue in question, that engages both the collective attention of the group and also invites different kinds of attention and diverse perspectives.

RESEARCHING PRACTICE WITH ARTISTRY

In this chapter we have suggested that adopting the stance of artistry can be helpful when researching issues of professional practice that challenge existing practice wisdom. Studying the ways that practitioners themselves engage with these issues is also a fruitful space for researchers, but a challenging one, as practitioners struggle to name what they don’t yet know. Researchers share the dilemma of the practitioners in both these situations: having to engage without being able to satisfactorily describe or even name the issues and processes in play. By adopting a stance of artistry that combines reflection-in-action (Schön, 1987) and care (Bleakley, 1999) with the sorts of creative competencies suggested by Palus and Horth (2002), we might enhance the skills that we bring as researchers into the unknown spaces.
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