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A Creative Writing Research Methodology: new directions, Strange Loops and tornados

Abstract:

Just like metaphors, models can be taken from almost any source. In order to move from the margins to the mainstream of research prestige, to be recognised outside the discipline by the rest of the academy, creative writing needs to describe the research practice of writers. For memes to be used as metaphors for what we do shows a certain poetic aptness, for metaphors are already part of our tools of trade. In this paper, I will examine the research methodologies which have come before, issues regarding their appropriateness as a global method for the discipline, and propose a new one of my own which attempts to describe how creative writers research.

Biographical note:

Nicola Boyd is a part-time PhD student in Creative Writing at Griffith University, Gold Coast and a full-time statistical officer with the Queensland Government. She has a background in the publishing industry and project management. In her PhD exegesis she examines the creative thesis using strange loop theory and the history of confession to explore the possibility of creating new models and research frameworks for creative writers in the academy. The thesis includes a detective science fiction novel dealing with the nature of intelligence, rights and reality. Her paper, 'Describing the creative writing thesis: a census of creative writing doctorates, 1993-2008' was published in Vol 13 No 1 April 2009 of *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*.

Keywords:

Methodology – Strange Loops – meme – metaphor – tornado

Creative arts and creative writing specifically, have shied away from the idea of methodology until recent years. Some academics¹, have tried to shoehorn creative arts into existing methodologies or disciplinary frameworks. While other academics support the view that practice itself is the centre of all research in the Arts and thus put forward practice as the discipline's central methodology.²

It appears that there is a need in creative arts to dispel the mythology that we are unable to articulate what we do, that we are muse-ridden and irrational. We may not have hit on the right methodology to comprehensively describe how we research, but I and others are making the attempt. In this work, I am looking to describe the research practice of writers (in particular), but Arts in general, irrespective of the form the output takes – scholarly, creative or a combination of both. This means that the methodology needs to be flexible enough to include any research practice a writer may have. While we may be able to approach describing the novel's research process, the explaining of it usually occurs in our scholarly work.

Before I describe this new research methodology, I would like to examine some of the other methodologies which I have seen used and used myself.

Quantitative Research is '[e]mpirical research in which the researcher explores relationships using numeric data. Survey is generally considered a form of quantitative research. Results can often be generalized, though this is not always the case. (Colorado State University n.d.)

Creative writing could use more statistics – there are plenty of things to be counted and many research projects that would benefit the discipline, raise its profile and help us to understand ourselves better. Webb and Krauth advocate for this in *TEXT*'s April 2009 editorial:

TEXT would welcome further contributions that lay out data, and provide analysis, of what does and does not work in the research system that seeks to shape our practice, and of how we might productively intervene in - and contribute to - that system. (Webb and Krauth 2009)

Quantitative research is about numbers, testing and replication. Essentially, the idea is that research results from a science experiment or a survey should be repeatable and yield the same results using the same tests. This kind of research is considered the purview of the sciences. Methodologies are often expressed mathematically, but essentially this methodology can be encapsulated in one key method:

Hypothesis → Test → Action

Scientists deal with complexity; they just deal with it using a different methodology from creative writers. Their methodology, in a simple, generally understandable way, describes what they do.

A method is defined by The Macquarie Dictionary 2nd edition as:

1. A mode of procedure, esp. an orderly or systematic mode: a method of instruction.
2. A way of doing something, esp. in accordance with a definite plan.
3. Order or system in doing anything: to work with method. (Delbridge, Bernard et al. 1991)

This definition covers all of the particulars of what a methodology should contain specifically, it can be taught or replicated, used to plan or works within existing plans and be used systematically.

Qualitative Research is:

Empirical research in which the researcher explores relationships using textual, rather than quantitative data. Case study, observation, and ethnography are considered forms of qualitative research. Results are not usually considered generalizable, but are often transferable. (Colorado State University n.d.)

Flick in *Designing Qualitative Research* states that qualitative research is used:

...to understand, describe and sometimes explain social phenomena 'from the inside' in a number of different ways:

- By analysing experiences of individuals or groups. Experiences can be related to biographical life histories or to (everyday or professional) practices; they may be addressed by analysing everyday knowledge, accounts and stories.
- By analysing interactions and communications in the making. This can be based on observing or recording practices of interacting and communicating and analysing this material.
- By analysing documents (texts, images, film or music) or similar traces of experiences or interactions. (Flick 2007: p. ix)

The third bullet where Flick states that qualitative research is used to analyse creative works might suggest that other methodologies in creative writing are redundant, but the intent of the methodology does not fit all creative practices. Despite this, qualitative research is the place where creative writers appear to be most comfortable. In many of the PhD theses I read, creative writers, when talking about methodology, tended to gravitate toward the qualitative. For instance, there are several ethnographically focused creative writing doctorates using this method, notably with Rebecca Housel's 'My Truth: Women Speak Cancer' which 'is a creative non-fiction based on three years of interviews with twelve survivors told through the lens of the author's experience as a three-time, sixteen-year survivor of multiple cancers.' (Housel 2007: p. i)

This leads me on to what is called variously; Practice-led, Practice-based or Practitioner-led Research (PLR). I am not convinced that PLR is really ready to become the research panacea that its advocates appear to believe.

Current debate, as aired during the AAWP conference, questioned the relevance of developing a methodology which describes what is already occurring in PhD theses – especially considering PLR is available. What I am looking to do in this paper goes beyond PLR, in search of a unifying language, model or framework with clearly states how we conduct research and brings together the multitude of research processes into something which is specific, explanatory and usable as a platform to refine these processes.

According to Carole Gray PLR is:

...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)

Which describes what it can be used to do, but not what each element means. Josie Arnold says that PLR:

...enables the academy to look at practice as the way of bringing forth the research both in itself and in an interaction with the ideas and debates that may be teased out of it. Thus the practice both underpins and interacts with the research. The practice is not only important as research in its own right, it also leads the research as a significant and new contribution to knowledge that can be situated fruitfully within current academic debates and insights. (Arnold 2007: p. 3)

I am still ambivalent about considering the novel as a piece of research. I know this may not be a particularly popular view in the discipline and certainly I think that creative output should have research equivalence – because it is well researched. Perhaps this is sophistic, but I see this as subtracting from the obvious value of the scholarly work that is occurring in the discipline and as only having come about because of funding necessities. In her exploration of PLR, Arnold tells us what it can do, ‘*underpinning*’ and ‘*interacting*’ with the research.

If PLR is a methodology, then shouldn't we be describing ‘practice’; specifically giving a guide to how to implement the method? The problem here is that no one seems to describe how PLR is actually used. In their book *Visualizing Research* Gray and Malins claim PLR is a bit like the elephant in the Hindu story being described by blind men. (Gray and Malins 2004: p. 25) Coming from Carole Gray, the original author of the method, this may be most telling of all.

In the theses and papers I have read, academics in the creative arts appear to describe their research for both scholarly and creative works as having the same process with different outputs. I noticed while researching to compile the data for ‘Describing the creative writing thesis: a census of creative writing

doctorates, 1993-2008' published in *TEXT*, many theses described their methodology in detail, but because they used a variety of methods and practices across their exegesis and creative works, there was no unifying language around this process. Also, due to the nature of having to describe, rather than apply a methodological framework, the explanation of the research processes were often quite long – which is time and space which could have been devoted to other important topics in their research. The level of scholarship in the Creative Writing theses was high, but it became clear that a single methodology which enabled writers to unite and explain both scholarly and creative research processes would be useful.

Stewart defines the framework of research for the creative artist as 'concerned with either identifying or evaluating the theories underlying and shaping our practice.' (Stewart 2003) She goes on to offer:

I argue that as practitioners we can become researchers of our own practice and that our visual, performance and textual outcomes importantly serve to demonstrate the kind of knowledge about the field generated by such practice. Whether these are ultimately presented as 'exegesis', 'thesis' or 'dissertation' is a moot point. More critical is how the ingredients and protocols described illuminate the praxis and illustrate a living form of theory. (Stewart 2003)

Stewart suggests that reflexivity is important to 'explore and uncover theory embedded in, rather than applied to practice.' She is interested in 'creating living forms of theory' (Stewart 2003) in which practice can 'embody and express theory.' This is an extension of the idea of 'practice-based' theory which is explored in her earlier paper in *TEXT*, 'Practice vs. Praxis'.

Essentially, I see the danger of PLR is that it divides the discipline, saying that only those who write or produce art can engage with the key methodology of the discipline. It also seems to exclude research in the discipline which is not directly about practice. It suggests that in creative arts research comes predominantly out of practice – discounting contributions about broader disciplinary issues.

While I have no doubt that practice is a central part of creative writing and that creative output is a product of research, PLR does not give me a method for describing what *I* do, in both scholarly and creative terms. There appears to have been some kind of disciplinary cringe in expressing our research practice as it is – predominantly focused on reading and writing (or creating) with other items thrown in the mix. While I remain unconvinced by PLR, the movement in the Arts in seeking a methodology is a very important one. A discipline can find it hard to be welcomed into the academy when it can not convincingly express how its research occurs. Kroll highlights this in her seminal 2002 *TEXT* paper:

We must translate our understanding of the nature of research *about, in and for* the creative arts – of the connection between praxis and theory – so that non-experts can comprehend the significance of what we do. (Kroll 2002)

So, why bother with a methodology at all? The creative arts remains a marginalised discipline, despite the healthy 7% of the higher education market it maintained in 2007 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations 2008). This may not sound like much, but compared with Engineering's 5%, Information Technology's 6% or even Education's 11% and Health's 12%, the creative arts have significant market share, but despite progress over the last twenty years, remains a site where research outputs are not taken as seriously as those in engineering or other disciplines.

A clearly defined methodology or set of methodologies, which are embraced by a body of academics in the discipline – providing a somewhat unified front – might go a long way to move the discipline from marginalised to mainstream. This need not mean one methodology for all or close the door on new methods; the method itself could include the ability to hybridise a number of methodologies to explain the individual's method.

I do not propose that the methodology I put forward here is definitive. Instead it is a demonstration of how a model might be built or explained; it is the beginnings of a language or a different way of thinking about methodology, one which focuses on trying to describe what we already do. Bunty Avieson argues that:

Writing can, and should be, a rigorous and exacting intellectual process requiring constant critical appraisal, editing, re-working, testing, more editing, reflection, editing again, reworking, more editing, more reflection, more critical appraisal and so on. In arts-based practices, the process is as important as the outcome. It is not just about 'output'. In this it is similar to the most rigorous of scientific and mathematical research. They too show their workings... (Avieson 2008)

With a tool to test and backtrack through these kinds of processes, the writer can measure – or test – the success of their research process or creative work to see what worked or didn't, so as to improve for the next project.

To understand the method, I must first explain the model. I have used the Strange Loop because it seems to best describe the state in which writers research. A Strange Loop is a meme, a unit of culture, albeit a small one. I use this meme as a metaphor for how creative writers conduct their research.

The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started....Sometimes I use the term Tangled Hierarchy to describe a system in which a Strange Loop occurs. As we go on, the theme of Strange Loops will recur again and again. Sometimes it

will be hidden, other times it will be out in the open; sometimes it will be right side up, other times it will be upside down, or backwards. (Hofstadter 1979: p. 10)

Hofstadter clearly understands the complexity of creative writing.

What then might a strange loop look like?

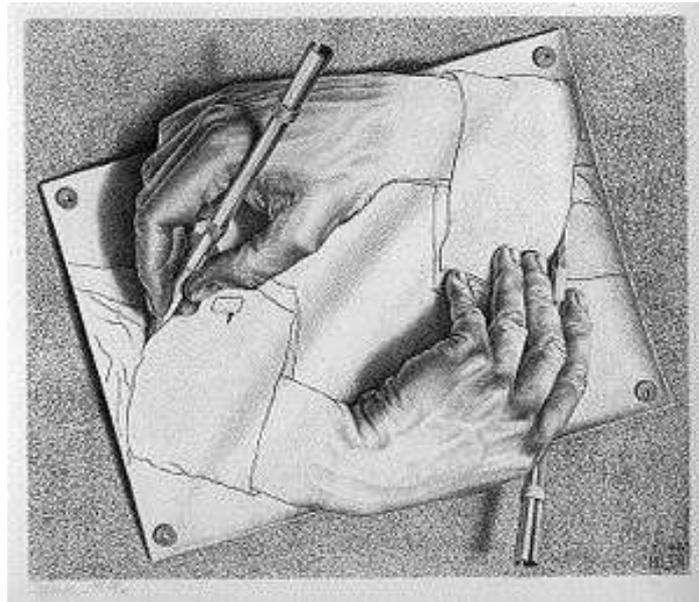
A spiral?



A tornado?



Two hands drawing?

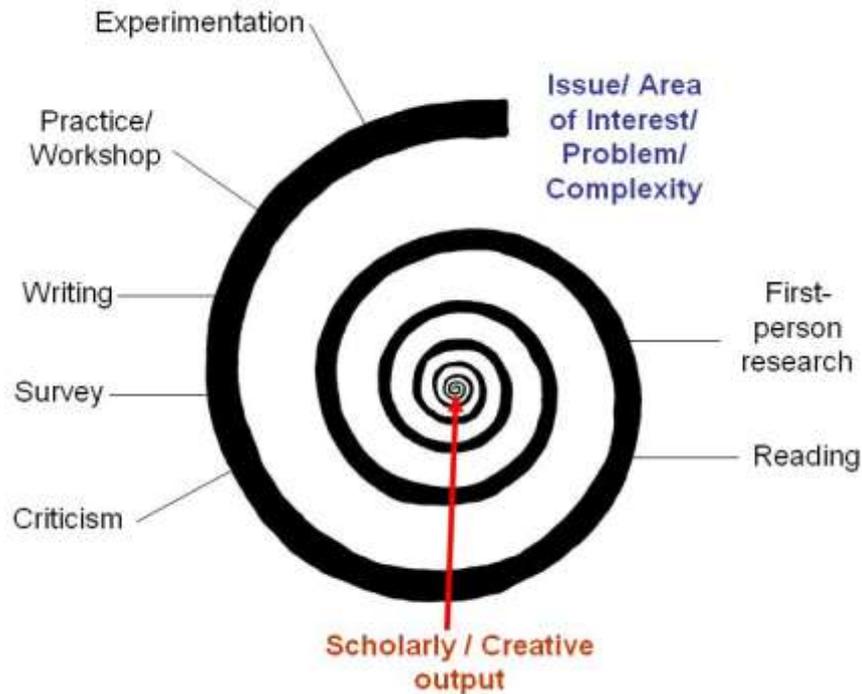


M.C. Escher's "Drawing Hands" (c) 2008 The M.C. Escher Company - the Netherlands. All rights reserved. Used by permission. www.mcescher.com

Escher probably encapsulates it best with his two hands drawing. However, the tornado is a compelling image as the sharp end of the spiral jumps from one point to another compelled by the wider part of the funnel – this has particular poignancy when considering Converging Strange Loop Research Methodology (CSLR Methodology). As research occurs in the wider spiral, the creative or scholarly output may jump from one form to another, changing focus and direction. This is encapsulated in the method itself.

There then comes the question of how to use this method, well creative writers academics in the discipline will do what we've always done.

1. Specify an area or areas of interest, problem and/or complexity, acknowledging these may change as a result of the research process
2. State an initial intention of what will be included in the first 'loop' of the research (e.g. writing, reading genre, reading theory, experience, sketching, survey)
3. Conduct the research
4. Add or subtract items in the research 'loop'. Steps 1 - 4 will spiral the researcher toward a closer understanding of the issue
5. Restate the area or areas of interest, and
6. Reiterate and refine until the output is complete.



This research methodology can include any other methodology you like, first person research, experiential research, quantitative research and reader/writer research –whatever is initially thought needful to understand the area of interest. This methodology embraces different practices, as whatever the researcher finds most important to examine the object of research, can be added to the converging loop and it can be used for either academic or creative output.

Some research involves moving from one question to another in a pattern akin to a spiral staircase, which takes us towards our goal via a circular path and not always one forward step at a time. (Sutherland 2008)

Strange loops use a system to move from one place to another to arrive in a similar but not identical place. With CSLR the researcher starts with an area or a broad idea and through a spiralling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves toward a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative works. The advantage of conceptualising research in this way is that it encourages movement through various research and production modes, flexibly discarding and adding aspects of the process when needed, while enabling creative writing and other arts researchers to describe and control their research process. This process is an ongoing one, Hofstadter asserts that:

Implicit in the concept of Strange Loops is the concept of infinity, since what else is a loop but a way of representing an endless process in a finite way. (Hofstadter 1979: p. 15)

So too, the converging spiral is infinite, with its ability to spawn new research spirals and modes of research engaged in quantum entanglement as the creative writer researches.

To contextualise the CSLR in the current debate regarding methodology, I see Practice-Led Research is just one of many options available to the creative writing researcher. While it hasn't suited my own research practices, it has many advocates in the discipline. However, due to the nature of the research conducted in creative writing, often a multiple of methodologies are used. What I am exploring in this paper is the possibility of drawing these various methods together into one methodological framework. I have created a methodological hybrid in my own PhD exegesis. I have combined quantitative research in the census; a qualitative research item in the case study of Edith Cowan University's history of writing programs; and combined this with CSLR as a process of continually spiralling reading, writing, thinking, experiencing etc.

We are still surrounded by a large number of colleagues from other disciplines who are unaware of the nature of our work and who think, for example, that a novel can be written in the summer break. That this belief is so prolific is an indication that we have not taken the trouble to deconstruct our research and process and to publicise that deconstruction. (Brady 2000)

I put what I see as the central threats to the discipline less elegantly than Brady, put bluntly:

1. We do not know enough about ourselves as a discipline in the academy, specifically at the discipline level rather than individual writer or pedagogical levels, in order to further disciplinary goals of increasing the profile, influence and funding of Creative Writing
2. Some of us still cultivate an adversarial relationship with the scholarly aspects of the discipline (which stops us from making the most of the scholarly outlets available, especially the exegesis), and
3. Ironically, we are bad at convincing other disciplines – in writing – that we are serious scholars.

This does not mean that we can not convince anyone, *TEXT*'s recent escalation to being recognised as rank A journal by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative shows decided progress. The concern is if the creative writers in the academy do not take ownership of the problem, then institutional and government decisions will be made without regard to important voices within the discipline. In a recent study, a working group at the University of Technology, Sydney, examined the effect of peer review on creative writing, specifically a novel, and 'the planned introduction of a peer review process for creative works to be conducted and monitored by the ARC (Australian Research Council)'. (Nelson 2009)

One of the principle issues highlighted by the UTS study - which will also become more pressing under ERA - is the extent to which the discipline of writing lacks any sort of consensus about its aims, objects and methods. For the reality is (in the absence of robust aims), that whatever criteria are ultimately imposed by the ARC for the purpose of peer review are bound to have a strange driving effect on academic - and artistic - behaviours. (Nelson 2009)

This idea, that the lack of clear direction in the discipline is likely to affect how the creative writer interacts with the academy, is a warning signal for writers to take action toward collective self-determination.

Endnotes:

¹ such as Paul Magee - experimental method (Magee 2003) and cultural studies models (Magee 2006); Bunty Avieson's personal/journal methodology (Avieson 2008), Alyssa Ryan hybrid rhizomic practice-led methodology (Ryan 2005)

² Carole Gray *Visualizing Research*, Josie Arnold *Practice Led Research*, Robyn Stewart 'Praxis vs Practice', Brad Haseman 'Tightrope Writing' etc.

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