Practice Makes Perfect

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Political imperatives impose a contradictory synthesis of command and market models of education and research which are inimical to disciplines of inquiry guarding “pure” preserves of scholarly and scientific research. Corcoran & Priest (1999).

Upon reading the reflections of Corcoran and Priest (1999) in their journal article, From Both Sides Now: Disciplinary Aspirations and Postmodern Research, printed in Southern Review, Volume 32, Issue 2, it is apparent that any discussion of research in the Academy mobilizes disparate discourses, with each foregrounding value-laden terms of approbation. And whilst initially I perceived my entrance into the PhD by Artefact and Exegesis at Swinburne to be a time when I could indulge in “pure” research, a quest for knowledge for its own sake, this naivety was quickly erased. The knowledge I needed to articulate would by necessity be new and ‘organic’ having grown from the practice of creating an artefact. Thus, the notions of creativity and generativity were immediately fore-grounded in my mind as I embarked upon this praxis-led journey of inquiry.

The excitement has subsided, I’m off and running in the most challenging academic quest of my life. The Libran scales have been teetering out of balance for a fortnight, swinging from despair to elation. I have read the suggested model for an exegesis and attended the seminar so why am I wracked with self-doubt?

First journal entry February 2007.

Very early into my academic readings I noted how the public discourse throughout the University has changed from when I left in the early nineties. I am also becoming aware
of how my own reactions to the exegesis process, journal writing and research experience will inevitably have to play itself out through the written text and then will subsequently frame the experiences I am selecting, in both the portrayal of my characters and the plot manipulations in the novel/artefact.

Perhaps, one of the most telling entries in my journal grapples with the issue of content for exegesis and artefact, writing style and tone, and of course I am beginning to allocate an important space for the reading audience/s.

How can I reflect on all this throughout the writing process? How can I theorise this process in the language of the academy, a language and path I have previously rejected? Whenever, I encounter feminist theory as a catchall phrase I am struck mute. Years ago I would have said that I was a radical feminist, but categories seem to be affected by ideological slippage.

There also appears to have been much intellectual debate in the 90s since I first left the Academy. As an outsider I too despair at the apparent lack of activism in the public arena by younger women. Like Anne Summers I wonder who will take up the baton. Our rights as working women and mothers are being eroded under the reign of the conservative political forces, yet at a time when we need to feel solidarity, there is resounding silence and division along generational and racial lines.

As a white educated woman I have been silenced. I can no longer speak of the sisterhood as I can be accused of colonizing the discourse of other racial and ethnic groups. There is a fear that as a privileged white woman I have no place in the most pressing debates, and anything I have to say seems to be out of sync with the thoughts
and beliefs of younger women. There is no common ground for us. They blame my
generation for saying that we could have it all, motherhood and careers, yet at the same
time neglect to see that we needed sympathetic partners to shoulder their share of the
burden. It is not our fault that men did not want to let go of their comfortable positions
and are still reticent about seeking true gender equality, as it means a lessening of their
power base.

It is also not my fault that feminism has become a ‘dirty word’. I am angered at the
“I’m not a feminist but…” line of argument, as younger women take advantage of the hard
fought gains, whilst bemoaning that we are out of touch and irrelevant nowadays. It is
these women who are standing passively by and allowing the Howard Government to
undermine these very gains, and wind back our victories.

I am also angry that our daughters are conned by the whole ‘raunch culture’ thing
and cannot see that they are still sexually exploited by their boyfriends and casual sex
partners. Phallocentrism is the dominant cultural framing in popular culture. I despair that
Paris Hilton is the most Googled name on the Internet rather than Pink. The whole body
image industry is designed to victimize women and female curves, and now with the
obesity epidemic fat people, particularly women are allowed to be verbally abused in
public spaces by obnoxious young males, for whom their social alienation bestows a
perceived right to victimize others, particularly women and those from the non-dominant
cultures. How can I bring all this into an exegesis about writing my story? Where to begin?

February journal entry

What has happened in the intervening months is that I have become more politically
attune and have decided to mobilize pro-feminist discourse in both my exegesis and my
narrative framing within my novel is feminist poetics, which I hope will represent women’s collective experiences and voices. As a consequence, in my novel writing, my characters are becoming increasingly ‘real’. Although they are not autodidacts, they have small-p political points of view to articulate; the very plot/dialogue selections I choose inevitably ensure a position for my text as a post-modern morality tale. Thinking in this way is frightening in the midst of the creative ‘flow’. It feels as if I am forcing issues through my characters mouths.

Like the cartoon character, Linus in the Peanuts strip, I immediately reach for my security blanket. In my case it’s books. I seem to have stopped reading for pleasure, and am feeling under siege to catch up with all the feminist discourse and debate I have not been part of in my years away from Deakin. I left with a scant knowledge of Cixous, Irigaray, and Haraway as I found their writing too dense. I felt that they had been forced by the Academy to obscure theory in order to fight the masculine hegemony. I believed that it was a hurdle us younger feminist academics were being forced to face, a weeding out of the intellectual weak links, and I was just such a weak link, and had been a pretender awaiting discovery... unable to mount the necessary critical discourse to challenge the academic writing style and orthodoxy. Yet I have to unlearn all that I learnt was true. I have to avoid resorting to out of fashion theoretical parameters, avoid the dualisms and oppositions so correctly challenged by the post-structuralists.

March journal entry
As Corcoran and Priest (1999) point out, ‘In a strategic discourse of command and surveillance, “research activity” is defined by governmental authority as simply one among many cost-benefit funding programs monitored by policy protocols.’

So if my progress through this practice-led research minefield is to be one of vigilance, (my own), and surveillance (the academy), what exactly am I seeking to produce that will pass a cost-benefit analysis? *Publish, Perish, Publish, Perish...* has been the mantra chanted throughout Universities for as long as I can remember. In the Arts and Humanities where dollar spin-offs and patents are rare, the academic publications and research reports have been the measure of academic success (and indeed personal worth.) Cost-benefit analysis, seems to be especially pertinent to us in the PhD by Artefact and Exegesis. Our Artefact must be deemed “publishable” in order to achieve the Doctorate. Interesting, the way that two things can remain distinct: publishable/ published. Ah, the defining line is commercial imperative. If my novel is indeed publishable and sought after for publication, who, then, owns the rights and royalties? Myself as author? Or Swinburne, as I was paid by the Institution, and the Artefact is part of the “Thesis” that they own, or at least, are the intellectual property rights owned by the Institution?

Ah ha, the market raises its ugly head again. Is this the site where value judgments impact on the research activity? What research is therefore “worth doing”, “where” and “by whom” and as Corcoran and Priest (1999) demonstrate these questions and discourses are actually normalized and sublimated “as decisions about resource allocation”.
How then to pretend that my writing, even my free-ranging journal jottings are not going to need to be drawn into the research methodology and process? Inevitably they will need to be honed and shaped into a publishable product (this article perhaps?).

Some eight months down the track I can no longer pretend that my academic research and creative production is immune to the pressures of the ‘education commodity market.’ The whole concept of publication divides along two tracks simultaneously; the artefact must be deemed publishable in a commercial sense and the exegesis must be publishable in the academic sense of the word. Throughout the process of practice-led research I have often found these two parameters to be literally ‘at war’ with each other. This is not how it is ‘supposed to be’ if I pay attention to the wisdom of supervisors. The process should by ‘rhyzomatic’ or ‘organic’ with each component feeding into each other.

Well, sometimes they do, often they do not. They stand isolated waiting for the missing link, the one phrase of theory or quote that will bridge the gulf between creation and critical analysis. Creation and reflection has symmetry between the processes, but creativity and analysis seem uncomfortably juxtaposed; two opposing forces vying for attention and demanding writing time of me. And a very different writing style and tone is employed by each. I feel like the monkey of the nursery rhyme juggling the hats on his head to trick the passers by.

I have been reading Annemarie Jagose text on Queer Theory and other articles in the same field. It has been interesting to note how far my own thoughts and reactions to bisexuality has come and changed over the years of my life… I now see that sex-role
identity is also caught up in categorization that does indeed emanate from a specific social, class and chronological era, as a social construct.

This is a useful insight that need to bring into my 70s section of the artefact. I hope that this knowledge can also help me avoid stereotypical portrayals of my gay characters, yet they are drawn from real people whose behaviour matched the stereotypes quite closely. These sociological underpinnings for my artifact can illuminate both the general population of suburban Melbourne and the ‘bohemian’ sub-culture of the Melbourne arts scene of the time.

Journal entry from March 2007

So my exegesis must extrapolate on how my writing is influenced by my theoretical readings and readings within the genre, whilst at the same time maintaining an ‘objective authorial position’ in accordance with traditional academic writing? But this is totally at odds with my own philosophical stance, that in post-structuralist discourse, truth is not a unified unchallenged entity and varies according to the perspective of the author. This is where the interplay between gender and socio-economic status can find a position; the place where subtext is made manifest. This is the writing style I find most compatible with my own voice. I feel that everything I have to say comes about from the experiences I have lived through and the social environs I was born into. If this can be argued with sufficient intellectual rigour throughout the exegesis, then I should be able to travel the journey with less impediments (and self-doubt).

One month further on it seems that my confidence was again premature. The focus for my next PhD supervision meeting is ‘where my artefact will fit in the market”. Oh no, not back there again. This notion of ‘publishable’, the commercial imperative again! The problem as I perceive it is that my artefact does not sit comfortably within the market as
epitomized by the bookshelves of my local bookstores. The only way I can ensure publication is to follow the trends and push my novel towards the “chick lit” genre, a thing I am loathe to do, but am unsure at this stage whether this is simply literary snobbery? This has suddenly become the crux of a Conference Paper to be presented in Madrid this October. (I hope I have a handle on all this by then).

My journal notes: April 13, as the day Kurt Vonnegut died. As a young drama student one of the first plays I work-shopped was Happy Birthday Wanda June (1971) at The Actor’s Theatre in Richmond, probably around 1973. Perhaps, my way through my novel writing woes is to follow the template left by this great man which sits in prime position on my notice board above my desk.

**Kurt Vonnegut's Eight Rules For Fiction Writing:**

1. Use the time of a total stranger in such a way that he or she will not feel the time was wasted.
2. Give the reader at least one character he or she can root for.
3. Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.
4. Every sentence must do one of two things — reveal character or advance the action.
5. **Start as close to the end as possible.**
6. Be a sadist. Now matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them — in order that the reader may see what they are made of.
7. Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.
8. Give your readers as much information as possible as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Readers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should cockroaches eat the last few pages.

[http://www.americanstate.org/vonnegut.html](http://www.americanstate.org/vonnegut.html)
Ah yes, the next dilemmas for my immediate attention with my artefact: character, voice, setting, mood and plotting. Not to mention content and genre style. I literally have to read heaps of “chick lit” before I can answer these “how do I” questions.

Yuck! I am not looking forward to it, but I must read within my field. Please, please do not let “chick lit” be the genre I settle on and have to defend in my exegesis.

_The problem is not the reading of them so much as the typing up the notes and then deciding on the quotes to put into Endnote. It seems like I am selecting pieces that ‘ring true’ yet may be of no use to cite in the final written exegesis._

_I also have not put in the time it takes to synthesize the “chick lit” texts into my thinking via this journal. I need to create a formal journal writing time block to do exactly this. Sometimes I find myself focused on the artifact (when I read fiction) then I focus on the situational literature to colour in the time and place elements in the areifact. Then I’m off into the theory reading again, which sits uncomfortably (at present) across the divide. Amongst this I am also feeling like writing but putting it way down the priority continuum. This has to change. It’s seems all about organization again._

Journal entry from April 2007

Grrr. I cannot write this “chick lit” stuff, and I won’t. I have been trying to re-position these books as part of Anna Kiernan’s ‘democratization of literature and culture’ but to me they are integral parts of the global malaise ‘dumbing down’ our cultural products.

Yet I cannot discount the fact that these novellas sell in the market. They have found

readers throughout the Western world, be it in Australia, United States or United Kingdom. Thematically similar, these books feature young professional thirty-something ‘singletons’ caught in the quest for happiness and true love. Often this quest for happiness in sublimated in the desire for the newest and most sought-after designer product. Shopaholism is the metaphor for loneliness and lack of feminine fulfillment. The power of female desire as a motivating factor in these women’s lives remains in the realm of the subtext, with no comprehensive take on women’s sex-roles in the new millennium. Again I’m drawn in two directions: the direction the market wants my narrative to go and the way my exegesis pushes my narrative. I want to locate this dialectic within my text without hitting readers over the head with my ‘message’… …So this is how the two processes play into each other. I think I get it now. Is this what makes the PhD by Artefact and Exegesis so ‘innovative’ and yet threatening at the same time?

Just read an article which made me very uncomfortable, yet relieved at the same time. It is entitled, ‘Just a Prude? Feminism, Pornography, and Men’s Responsibility.’, written by Robert Jensen for the Journal of Politics and Culture, Issue 3, 2006... He says exactly what I want to articulate about, how sexuality, fantasy and desire may be private but it is also socially influenced and constructed and the ‘freedom of speech/thought’ argument against censorship is inadequate in a moral sense. We are all complicit in the objectification of women, and argues against the notion of ‘free choices’ between ‘consenting adults’ as proposed by the sex industry and some feminist apologists for pornography.
His tears were heartfelt and I also felt humiliated on behalf of womanhood. Yet I could never have articulated all this as well as he did. It also made me mad that a man had to say this first, and it goes some of the way to describing my private discomfort with porn flicks, etc. They are constructs for male masturbation and reduce the women participants (and co-viewers) to as Jensen describes “three holes” rather than human beings, let alone women. This is all too disturbing, especially as it becomes a part of my deconstruction of phallocentricism as a hegemonic cultural phenomenon.

Journal entry May 2007

I am now noticing that the most challenging aspect of participating in practice-led research is the way in which I am constantly challenged to re-examine everything I thought was obvious or self-explanatory. How can I progressively travel through an arena that is so prone to slippage and change, with no definitive right and wrong perspectives or answers?

At this stage in my research my main concern is that both my situational literature and subsequent conceptualizing of my realm of inquiry does not constitute a ‘research question’. The definition of this question seems impossible as my thinking is as yet unclear, clouded and prone to slippage. After today’s supervision meeting I seem to have been ‘let off the hook’ in that I am not expected (at this stage) to have formulated a definitive research question so my inability to articulate my question/hypothesis would necessarily work against the generative or rhizomatic nature of practice-led research.

Further journal entry May, 2007
Just when I am totally submerging myself in the research/writing process and coming to grips with the structural issues and theoretical dilemmas, the everyday world imposes itself and demands my attention as a mother and friend. Even my own mental alacrity is challenged. I do seem to suffer from SADS when winter descends on Melbourne. Grey and (thankfully) wet days should happily ensconce one in the study with a heater and mugs of hot chocolate. But for me, I just want to curl up under the doona and have ‘doona-days’ and let the world go spinning on without me.

This is the aspect of having your workplace that no-one ever talks about: The difficulty in separating the home environment from the work environment. When I am working outside the home and am under the spell of the SADS at least I am forced to get up, shower and make the move to work. When the workplace is a comfy study just along the hallway, the temptation to steal those extra half hours under the doona is so strong. Like everything about this practice-led research, self-discipline is perhaps the most crucial personal attribute for success. And when one is working on a creative project it is so easy to become captive to the mood swings of inspiration and barrenness. The only way through the blocks seem to me to be rigid compliance with the journal routine, even if it is all about ‘real life’ impinging on the creative process, as was the case for me this winter.

It is surprising how, when one is working from home on the computer, other people’s perception of what constitutes work impacts on your actual productivity. My journal for this time is quite clear in noting how my eighteen year old son sees my presence at the computer in my study as a cue to enter and begin deep and meaningful conversations about the woes in his life. Every teenage trauma, including car write offs, party drug
experimentation, sexual dalliances all seem to be pressing for attention and my work is expected to take second place. Even the necessity to spend some time quietly reflecting and reading is deemed to be leisure time buy those outside the journey. I am beginning to put a distance between myself and my friends also as their lack of empathy takes its toll. Pity I can’t switch off the mother-guilt drive as easily.

After having written about 1,000 words for Dina (using a pen and a notebook !) I reward myself by searching out Youtube send ups by Red Symons and the Chaser team. Classic avoidance again! I make a vow to myself that I will be more disciplined tomorrow. I will write the diary entry each day then move straight on to some writing, even if it is crap. I need to write through my blocks. I must ignore the quality and just get back into the habit of writing. I can turn on my inner critic later when I need to deliver something substantive in content and resonance


On the good days or weeks all this material accruing in my journal does seem to gain relevance. My situation speaks volumes about social attitudes to women and work, women’s roles within the family and general relationship dynamics. All of this by necessity will find a place within my fictional narratives, and probably have some place within the exegesis. At the moment I am unsure where, other than here in this small reflective piece, but I know in my heart that it will all be grist to the mill.

In this same way the news and current affairs programs filter through my consciousness and find places within my journal.
One June entry typifies this:

**News report on radio.** There’d been a fatal train and truck crash near Kerang – the Swan Hill Melbourne train. God, that puts things back into perspective. Here are all these people just going about the lives until a suddenly catastrophe occurs. I seemed perversely enthralled by the drama as it unfolded. I listened to every update and waited for the death toll announcements crying over the numbers dead and injured. I turned on Skynews and watched the banner headlines. I began to count up the names of the distant relatives that I have living in Lake Boga and wondering if anyone in my Mum’s family were on the train. The odds of that being infinitesimal, yet I always try to connect people to these catastrophes. Is that normal or is it the only way I can humanize the event and relate to the strangers involved? Why do I feel the need for that attachment? Why do I need to cry and grieve for strangers? Am I overly sensitive? I heard of a fifteen year old being airlifted to the Royal Children’s hospital and I suddenly remember all the days looking out over the helipad and seeing just such an air ambulance land when Carlo was in hospital. More connections! These fragments all belong somewhere. I need to get the emotions out somehow in a constructive way to hold on to my tenuous sanity. I must spend some time nutting out the selected moments of my past that can inform my writing.

**Journal entry June 2007**

And always, always the constant questioning and self-doubt momentarily derails the writing processes. Why are writers always shown living (well) in magnificent foreign climes with heaps of time to participate in the social life of the village? Why too do they always have to be shown with a trusty old Olivetti irrespective of when the movie is set? I suppose small villages in Tuscany may not be on cable but there are telephones for dial up internet. Always the publisher or the agent representative has a laptop although in the
movies are rarely seen using it. The myth of the solitary genius in his studio lives on. The mystique of the creative process is reinforced again. How to de-mystify the process is one of the pressing concerns that I will feature in my exegesis. From these fleeting thoughts and journal jottings, the journey of knowledge is beginning to meander to its unknown destination.

I am reading Dominique’s Mythfits. This reminds me that I just do not have a solid classical education. Can I make up for this and be able to build allusion into my fiction to give depth. The problem for me is I am very familiar with Lysistrata, Medea and Lady Macbeth and none of my protagonists fit these profiles. They remind me more of characters written by Sylvia Plath or Virginia Woolf and the male characters more likely to emanate from the Bloomsbury Group. God I wish I could generate the Algonquin humour. A few Dorothy Parker lines wouldn’t go astray. The secret is command of language and not just colloquial speech which seems to be my expertise, that and my inability to write evocative descriptive passages. I must practice. Perhaps in this journal? Now there’s a thought. Avoid this dialogue to the imagined reader (Dominique/Josie) and begin to imagine it is a story for my use later in my character development.

Journal entry July 2007

Apart from the constant Siren call of the characters voices, the academic process must be woven together as the months pass. I seem to be well in control of the mechanics of the research, especially having identified my theoretical parameters and the methodology is rapidly taking shape through the journal writings and ideas sitting in the folder-named exegesis, on my laptop. This latter half of the first year demands some discipline from
me. I can now see that the literature review has been drawing together many major foci: genre reading and theoretical reading, methodology reading, discourse analysis. All these separate streams need to have bridges and linkages built between them. From all this material I need to start articulating hypotheses based upon a synthesis of my readings for the first six months. But again I do not have to reinvent the wheel. I have a journal article by D. Mullins entitled, “It’s a PhD, Not a Nobel Prize” which puts everything into perspective and renders the tasks less daunting. It is reassuring to know that simply by participating in practice-led research we are already adding to the realm of knowledge in the field and are actually at the cutting edge of this type of research methodology in the Arts.

Another, more practical text that I have found useful in demystifying the process of social science/arts research has provided me with a framework to work within in the coming months as the year draws to a close.

“…the process of research synthesis will be conceptualized as containing five stages: (a) problem formulation; (b) data collection or the literature search; (c) data evaluation…;(d) analysis and interpretation; and (e) presentation of results.”

Ah, I am finally passing stages (a) and (b) and am currently formulating hypothesis to analyse and interpret. This does sound like tone of the discourse for the exegesis at last. The words to that old song are tumbling around in my head…“the road is long, with many a winding turn, that leads us to who knows where, who knows when…” I know when. December 2010, but the journey will not always be straightforward, so I need to just relax and enjoy the adventure.

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