Symbolic self-curation
A reflexive activity for practice, life and scholarship

Nita Cherry
SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

This article explores symbolic self-curation as reflection, and its application in professional practice and research into professional practice. Symbolic self-curation is framed as a way of developing praxis fit for complexity, inspired by Schön’s (1987) rendering of practice as artistry; Bleakley’s (1999) holistic reflexivity; Higgs and Tichen’s (2001) exploration of professional practice development as knowing, doing, being and becoming; and van Schaik’s (2005) development of self-curation as pedagogy and research.

Despite the announcement of Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) ‘seventh moment’ in research, the status of research that investigates issues of professional practice in situ remains ambivalent in universities (McWilliam 2004). Candidates who bring significant practice issues into the research space are often asked to simplify their research questions and create texts that are verbal, linear and limited in their capacity to represent and explore their lived experience of complex practice.

Many researchers are taking up the challenge, however, of developing new texts that can hold the complexity of professional and life practice (O’Neill 2002). Symbolic self-curation is a form of reflexive practice intended to add to those efforts. Its key elements are the gathering and arrangement of ‘apt’, often non-verbal symbols to represent our ‘not-knowing’ as well as our ‘knowing’; creating for those involved new experiences of respectful and robust dialogue with others (in person and through literature); testing of the insights gained by immersion in action of some kind; and construction of an exegesis.

Self-curation not only involves the self-curating practice but eventually the curation of the self as practitioner, encouraging a ‘gathering’ of the self and meta-reflection on that self in ways that are reflexive.

This article also offers a theoretical analysis of the elements of self-curation, which might have the further value of explaining what is going on more generally when alternative texts and sites are employed in research. It is hoped that it will be useful to other scholars who are seeking to describe, explain, and ‘justify’ their use of alternative texts.

Key words: symbolic self-curation, reflective practice, artistry, praxis

THE BOWLS

A friend and colleague, Ern Reeders, intrigued by the possibilities of working with timber, has produced a series of bowls. Each one represents a particular experience in working with and against the grain of encounters with self and others. Some are gnarled with bitter confrontation, others blessed with fluid and contemplative grace, while others represent complex and intricate patterns that seem frozen and rigid in time as well as space.
‘The bowls offered me the option to express something else. I was learning to turn at the same time as learning a new form and context for practice. Both occurred in an uncertain environment. Both entailed successes as well as failures. So my first installation consisted of bowls of both types. But as with practice, the subtext was exploring the conditions needed for success and responding well to challenges that arose in the course of the work.’

‘One piece of flowering gum had beautiful colour but a wide wormhole through one side. I did my best to imagine in three dimensions where to mount the piece and where to cut away to get a bowl without a hole. I failed completely; the wide trace of the worm ran right through the wall of the bowl. I am still struggling to envisage a work process in three dimensions—that seems to me to be an important metaphor for complex work with groups—changing the approach on one axis will affect others.’

‘The second was a lump of red gum salvaged from the woodpile, a bit like our group. As it was hollowed, three long cracks appeared. Usually some superglue and sanding dust is enough to stabilise the piece. But this had to be done repeatedly as the cuts removed the glued surface. I didn’t know how deep I could go before the bowl flew apart—on the other hand, it was a handsome piece and I wanted a good shape out of it. The tension was between keeping together and going further. In the installation dialogue it was suggested that one role I played in the group was to do with keeping it together. That started me on a reflection about how aware I was of what I did bring to the group.’
In time I found my turning reflecting key dynamics and moments in my life as well as my work. I have found stuckness at work paralleled by a piece part-turned on the lathe and my not knowing where to go next with it. There have been pieces of superlative timber that deserved the best treatment and I have sat with them for months wondering how to proceed. There have been pieces that should have presented no problems but nonetheless did so. There have been bowl profiles that flowed without effort and others that demanded stepping back and trying again and again (Professor Em Reeder 2005, personal communication).

ENGAGING WITH COMPLEXITY

As Bowden and Marton (1998) point out in *The university of learning* higher education is challenged by high levels of ‘not-knowing’ as happens when knowledge creation increases exponentially, disciplines collide, and complexity and uncertainty are part of the global condition. They speak of the practical challenge of preparing people to face situations, which are yet unknown, to use knowledge that has yet to be invented, and to remain a lifelong learner in the age of complexity.

Others (for example, McWilliam 2004) have highlighted the reluctance of the academy, even in the face of these challenges, to embrace cultures of research, which are not limited to simple positivistic thinking—thinking of a kind now questioned by present-day science itself. Despite Denzin and Lincoln’s (2000) articulation of the ‘seventh moment’—a time in qualitative inquiry when no form of research or research text is to be privileged over another—it has been a struggle for researchers in business, education and other areas of social science to gain acceptance of cultures of inquiry such as ethnography, autoethnography, action research and cooperative inquiry.

This creates a particular challenge for candidates who bring to the academy professional issues and problems, which are complex and novel, expecting they will be offered research methods that do justice to their questions. When they are asked to frame their curiosity in ways that fit with more traditional texts and linear accounts,
they find the true complexity of the core issues is neither represented nor open to rich inquiry. This is so when the complexity of the practice issues is not reducible to matters of technique or intellectual analysis, but involves the practitioner’s own being and becoming (Higgs & Tichen 2001).

Many researchers have persevered, however, and some have gone much further in drawing on artistic and performance disciplines to create hybrid and alternative texts and sites, which hold the complexity of professional and life practice (see for example, O’Neill 2002). Such texts include performance, poetry, music and visual imagery and seek multiple intelligences and ways of knowing. They also create different sites for the work, well beyond the conventions of scholarly writing and discourse.

Influenced by their ideals and borrowing from Bleakley (1999), I have been keen to explore the proposition that to continue fertile engagement with the anxiety and ‘not-knowing’ associated with complexity, we need to cultivate not just practice but praxis. I define praxis as practice formed through integrating what we do (what we have learned or has become habit) with the surfacing and acknowledgment of what we believe, think and feel, informed by critical and creative consciousness of the physical, aesthetic, ecological, social, moral, spiritual and cultural milieu that shapes us and on which we, in turn, impact.

Sustained praxis of this order is not only important in life and work, its integration and development does indeed require something special from our institutions of research and education. Research into practice, including development and testing of robust theories of practice, shares all the problems and complexity of professional practice itself and, I believe, the same need for approaches that can hold lasting complexity. The challenge is to not so simplify the issues that research becomes limited to looking under lampposts where the light is better.

I’m proposing symbolic self-curation as a form of reflection that encourages creative, scholarly engagement with a set of practices found in work or life, in ways that clarify the past and present, while producing significantly new possibilities for the future of that practice set. The framing tries to bring together constructs: curation, reflexive practice, praxis for complexity, and artistry as scholarship. It is ambitious in scope, exploring symbolic self-curation’s scholarly application in the development and integration of professional and life practice, teaching and learning, as well as research. These three fields of application can be understood as scholarships in their own right (Boyer 1990) and supervision of research into practice is a context that all three can play out.

Self-curation not only involves ‘the self, curating practice’ but eventually ‘the curation of the self as practitioner’, encouraging a ‘gathering’ of the self across the dimensions of doing, knowing, being and becoming (Higgs & Tichen 2001).

This article also offers a theoretical analysis of the elements of self-curation, which might have the further value of explaining what is going on when alternative texts and sites are employed in research. It is hoped that it will be useful to other scholars who are seeking to describe, explain, and ‘justify’ their use of alternative texts.

THE NUB OF THE IDEA

Reduced to its essence, symbolic self-curation involves:

- gathering, arranging and rearranging symbols and objects that represent practice issues of life and work (even a body of practice) and the way we engage with those issues or have created that body of practice; it invites the use of media and develops intelligences that are strikingly different from those typically used by the curator.
• creating new experiences of respectful and robust dialogue (in person and through literature) as we reflect individually and collectively on the issues raised through the curation
• testing of the insights gained by immersion in action of some kind
• encouraging a ‘gathering’ of the self and meta-reflection on that self in ways that are reflexive; construction of an exegesis: challenging and enriching the experience and insights that both created the curation and were produced by it; developing and testing theories of practice; and offering a meta-analysis of the processes used to present, describe, explain and critique all that has been revealed through curation.

FROM CURATION TO SYMBOLIC SELF-CURATION

For curation and curator, the Shorter Oxford English dictionary (1993, p. 572) offers the Latin root (cura—care) and these associations:

• to heal or cure
• to care for
• to preserve or store
• to record, testify, keep the evidence
• to be a guardian, keeper or custodian.

These associations sat easily with my understanding of curation: temporary and permanent collections of works of ‘made’ art (such as paintings and drawings), of crafted objects from earlier cultures and of preserved natural objects (such as fossils and stones). Such curations are often accompanied by written texts, such as catalogues, ranging from a list of titles and dates, to extended commentary on the context, intent and impact of made objects, and on the scientific significance of natural ones.

For an individual artist or maker, curation has the intention of collecting in one place a representative body of that person’s work. An entire lifetime’s work might be represented. Some curations represent the contributions of a group of people, known as a ‘school’ of practice—such as French Impressionist painting.

The roles of the curator can include selecting and gathering the pieces to be included in the collection, arranging its presentation, preparing the commentary and caring for it. Commentary might focus on each individual piece, but could also be holistic, surfacing meta-themes embedded in the work, highlighting the evolution of content and technique, and exploring these from the perspective of social, geographical, cultural, economic, political and spiritual contexts. The commentary on a curation is sometimes provided by the artist, but my impression is that this is unusual, the commentary usually being offered by others.

This description of curation so far aligns with the dictionary definition offered earlier, with its connotations around preserving or restoring something. It was through my encounters with postgraduate students and other academic colleagues that it dawned on me that curation could be about creating new perspectives, new options for the integration, enrichment and future application of practice.

I have no formal background in the arts, and little familiarity with the ideas and practices of professional curation. This is an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage is that I am easily excited by the possibilities, look with fresh pleasure and awe at the curations of others, and take nothing for granted. The downside is that I can take gauche liberties with ideas and practices that have been painstakingly developed by people whose insight and skill I can glimpse but never comprehend.
In any event, my debt to several people is enormous. Some are doctoral students who have successfully used art and design in their theses on business and management (see Loi 2005 and Burrows 2004 as examples). Dr Laura Brearley and Dr Carlene Boucher at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia have had the courage to clear the spaces for many postgraduate students in the disciplines of business and education to be able to use alternative texts and sites for their work.

Professor Leon van Schaik (2005), also at RMIT University, has used curation of practice as a central element in academic work. It was from Leon that I first heard the term self-curation. He offered some interesting examples. The shoe-box theatre is a delightful case in point, taking us back to childhood play and absorption: the game of cutting the end off a shoe-box and making a series of drops and curtains. He builds a model like this before a piece of writing, imagining the perspectives of the audience and the different atmospheres or theoretical frames, which can be put around an idea that sits in the middle of it all. The curtains and the footlights add other layers of meaning and angles of illumination. He has found this tool helpful for people undertaking doctoral work, who are engaging with evolving complexity over long periods of time. He extends the invitation to established architects who are invited to reflect on the nature of their practice and spoke of the man who created an exquisite inlaid cabinet containing slide-out models of everything he had done in his career.

Leon explained that when working with doctoral students this entire process has more requirements, but that typically the first third is about biography (through modelling and mapping), the second third is about energised activity (the person is working on new projects, motivated and inspired by the reflective activity of the first third), and the last phase is about communicating the nature of their proficiency through an exhibition.

Throughout is the implication of engagement—things that matter to the heart as well as the mind, that are expressed in different levels of energy and activity, in the fear of exposure and the thrill of mastery, debate and challenge. This is not an exercise purely of the intellect. The reflective dynamic potentially calls up what matters to the person at a level and draws in all their resources. Emotion, imagination, enactment (the doing, acting self), cognitive critique, values and ethics are all at play.

The question I started to pose was ‘what would happen if we invited people who do not think of themselves as artists or designers to curate their own work or life—or parts of it—as a form of reflective practice?’

ANOTHER EXAMPLE—THE MINIATURES

In 2002, I was feeling deeply stuck. The consulting work begun years earlier was no longer a pleasure—in fact, the reverse. Instead of feelings of proficiency and accomplishment, I was experiencing the work as a burden. The excitement I would have once felt was missing and I would often feel dread as the day for delivery approached, plus much anxiety over small details. At the same time, purely routine work felt boring and I had to push myself to be alert and fully ‘present’.

Writing in my journal simply took me round in circles. Natalie McDonagh, a doctoral candidate and colleague, suggested that I make something instead. I hadn’t made anything for years—I don’t even cook or garden much, so working with my hands is not a common experience. I had no idea what to make. I was intrigued by the idea but nothing came to mind.

One day in a gallery I saw a collection of works from China and Japan. Its centrepiece was a manuscript that was four or five metres long, consisting of a series of pages that
could be folded together like a concertina. On each page was a painting and some Chinese characters, and above each page a short description in English. The entire manuscript told a story and each page brought a scene to life.

I was intrigued and delighted—not only by the beauty of the work but also by the sudden burst of energy and intent that filled me. Since I couldn't tackle any big projects, I would create some pictorial miniatures, in the same concertina-like format. My journal provided the raw material for my scenes—many of them vivid pen pictures of experiences ranging, in my memory, from the excruciating to the exhilarating.

I felt clumsy as I attempted to draw my pictures and so I didn't persist. Instead I found pictures and images in magazines that would express feelings and thoughts. Often the pictures and images seemed to be finding me. I didn't always see a connection with the practice issues but they appealed to me somehow and it felt right to put them into the story.

There were about fifty of them, pasted on to pieces of light cardboard, linked with tape. The first was a vast crowd at a tennis match, focused on a tiny figure stretching to return a ball from an impossible angle. The caption read: 'Aussie fails again'. The second was a magnifying glass, the sun burning through the glass and scorching the ground beneath. There were a great many other images—a baby grinning on a rug, a young horse being 'broken in', a face horribly disfigured from a road accident, and members of an orchestra distressed by the theft of their instruments. Scattered throughout were pictures of someone or something being subjected to intense scrutiny—with nowhere to hide.

All the pictures were aesthetically compelling and mericulously arranged. It was a beautiful and pleasing document, cut from high quality magazines, printed on paper that was smooth and expensive.

A friend commented that what I left out might be as important as what I put in. I usually destroy working notes, because I like to be 'tidy'. For some reason, I hadn't thrown out my crude attempts at drawing and so started putting them into the story. These pictures were different from the cut-outs—on scrappy bits of paper, more scribble than pictures. I didn't like fitting them into the beautiful project I'd created that now had to be dismembered and remade. It wasn't what I had in mind, inspired as I was by those dazzling miniatures in the gallery. The completed work now put the gauche and inept side by side with the well crafted and accomplished.

The work slowed down and I didn't look at it again for some weeks. When I did, it occurred to me the difficulties I was experiencing in my practice—the boredom and the fear—flowed from my lifelong need to be seen by others as competent. Indeed, I needed tidiness and beauty—as well as competency. Process needed to be as elegant as outcome.

The clients I worked with liked me to be tidy and competent too. Intolerant of confusion and anxiety, they liked me to bring order and calm to upsetting and messy confrontations. The difficulty I’d created was boredom in the tidiness I achieved, but terror at the prospect of messiness and complexity that I couldn’t engage with smoothly, competently, elegantly.

This realisation is simple to describe but I experienced it emotionally and intellectually as an enormous breakthrough. To be at ease with ‘not knowing’ has been life-changing in its impact. It is possible for me now to sit with situations that feel complex, and to say ‘I don’t know what to do either, right at this moment, but let’s stay with and see what we can do’. I can do that with enough calmness and authority to relax others, avoid us all leaping to simplistic closure and finding someone or something to blame. I’m still frightened in advance sometimes, but I think my work is much better when I turn up—and I’m never bored!
I can’t say that I would not eventually have come to this conclusion through therapy or the use of my journal. But I was intrigued by the power of the insight that came in this way. It was not simply a matter of knowing something in my head, but of feeling and acting from a deep and integrated sense that something had markedly shifted in my self that was now effortlessly playing out in my practice.

Describing the preparation of the miniatures led to several requests to help others work on symbolic self-curations and that, in turn, led me to write a more scholarly account of my own experience.

**THE PROCESS OF SYMBOLIC SELF-CURATION: A CLOSER LOOK**

I need to emphasise that a symbolic self-curation is not a product, a composition, an exhibition or an installation, although it might use those as a means to its end. Symbolic self-curation as reflexive practice is a process that invites individuals or groups to enhance their capability, energy and confidence for engaging constructively with complexities and opportunities that significantly challenge their professional and life practice. Although it usefully begins with exploring a particular challenge, it eventually invites them to reveal, acknowledge and respect their professional and life practices as a body of work and experience, and to explore and refresh them. The particular is the microcosm, the essence of the whole. Just as significantly, it invites engagement with fields of experience and inquiry that have been avoided.

From being a self-curation of engagement with a practice challenge, it becomes a curation of the self. And it invites a form of witness in the Buddhist sense, a capability for ‘detachment’ that allows us to be deeply ‘in’ the work but able to ‘notice’ it, ‘being’ it without judging it or interrupting it (Rinpoche 1994).

That’s not the same as logic- or language-based ‘critical subjectivity’ or ‘critical knowing’ (Reason 1988), ‘critical attitude’ (Zuber-Skerrit 1992), ‘bracketing’ (Heron 1988) or reflexive ‘thinking against oneself’ (Bleakley 1999). It is the core and difficult art of simply noticing what is there and what is not there, of realising that everything about this process ‘counts’—the manner of the gathering, the objects gathered, the choice of text, the space or container chosen for the work, the content and tone of the dialogue and those with whom we have it, those who are not invited, the reflective processes we use, the form and outcomes of the exegesis. The witnessing self sits both inside and outside all that, simply noticing.

**The gathering**

The work begins with selecting the element of practice or life to be curated. In the context of research into professional practice, it is likely to be an area of significant continuing practice challenge.

It involves a gathering of our experiences and actions about the chosen area of practice: our aims and expectations, the ways we engaged, how we’ve framed the practice challenge, our experiences of the engagement, and the outcomes from that engagement. A researcher might draw on field notes, the contents of a reflective practice journal or interview notes.

Symbolic self-curation involves finding unfamiliar ways to represent those experiences, actions and outcomes. So the practitioner or researcher might bring a paper or report they have written and then search for music, pictures, dance or objects that can represent the events and experiences that produced and surrounded it. For some, the words of poetry or theatre might be different enough to provide a new form of expression.
Three-dimensional materials and objects can be natural—like bones, leaves and water—or made by humans and other living creatures. They can be found materials and objects, or objects and forms that we already possess or borrow from others, we have loved or simply tolerated, we have made ourselves or commissioned another to make.

The preliminary gathering begs the beautiful question (for practitioners as much as researchers): what counts as data or experience here? As Bantock in *The museum at purgatory* observes: ‘It would seem that we spend our waking days gathering information—our experience, thoughts, and feelings all constitute a form of data’ (2001, p. ix).

In curation, everything counts as ‘data’—especially the manner of the curation itself, its gathering, assembling, arranging, exegesis, dialogue, introspection. Curation is a process, not a product. An alertness to deep assumptions about what counts as data can be confronting for both supervisor and researcher. We can begin to notice not only what we include, worry about or treasure, but what our gathering leaves out, what is absent, what has been ignored or deleted, what is rejected or disowned, what is overlooked, not valued or acknowledged. Gathering helps us order and edit our world, but can also send us ‘searching among the absences’ (Emmett 1998, p. 22).

The value of becoming aware of our *gestalten* is that we notice borders we put around experience to make sense of it, and witness what becomes the background and not just the foreground of awareness and attention. By paying attention to something—whether central to what we gathered or brought to awareness by its absence—we bring it into presence. By attending to something with care, with respect, we allow ourselves and others to acknowledge that something has happened or exists or could exist: we invite it to make its presence felt, to turn up in some shape or form, to manifest.

Such gathering reveals the stance of the gatherer and of those who witness or attend. If the gatherer is short-sighted, only those closest are gathered. If long-sighted, the most glaring might be ‘overlooked’. If angry, the gathering might be more like shoving things—or throwing them. If tender, the collection might be protective, like wrapping the delicate in tissue paper.

Many things turn up in this way: tacit wisdom we take for granted, personal scripts running so deep we don’t even know they are ours; assumptions about the way things are; the limits of our capability and confidence, past and present; energy; stuckness; aspiration. The supervisor, as witness, has many choices about how to be present: as active inquirer, as silent observer, as self-reflector, but not, at this stage, as critic.

The gathering continues. More things turn up, are replaced, chucked out, given a decent burial—or put in a box or file, ‘for later’. The psychology of acknowledgment and active listening (Rogers 1961) is important here—listening that simply allows things to turn up, be revealed as present, absent or immanent, without judgement to usefulness or relevance. Whether something is thrown on to the table or placed more cautiously in the collecting bag, it is simply allowed to be, in the form it arrives.

As things are gathered, they are progressively arranged and rearranged. This opens the consideration of deeper connections between individual elements, the ways the whole is different from the parts. That might result in changes to the installation. Reflective processes now could be both individual and collective, and might involve the use of several different modes and texts, including dialogue, journal work and experimenting with the installation itself.

**The creation of the alternative ‘text’**

The whole business of creating and selecting ‘text’ is revealing, as what we ‘knew’ in one form becomes ‘re-presented’ to us—reconfigured, transformed, recognisable and yet
Symbols that are not words can carry complex meanings, which have yet to be understood conceptually. They have subtle ways of making meaning manifest or visible—through emotion or momentum to act—while yet remaining unnameable. There are paradoxes here: sources of creative tension if we don’t allow ourselves to be immobilised by them.

The first is the paradox suggested by the French poet Mallarme that to define is to kill, to suggest is to create. In cultures used to controlling things through the names given them, it can be hard to grasp how much of our ‘reality’ and ‘identity’ is created by words. When something is named, we can nail it down, put it in its place, manipulate and direct it. But when something is unnameable or unspeakable, it can be scary, even shocking. It remains mysterious, out of comprehension. The Jewish faith knew this when naming God ‘Yahweh’—the unnameable.

Facility with words creates both the exquisite pleasure that comes with apt naming and—through overuse—the capacity to kill the thing it names as a source of energy, insight and inspiration. Isn’t that why, paradoxically, we admire the wordsmith who takes our own worn, rigid words and gives them back to us in anew? And derive joy from the artist who helps us ‘forget the name of the thing one sees’ (Weschler 1982), who makes the familiar strange and new again (Emmett 1998) and ‘re-enchants everyday life’ (Moore 1996).

By inviting people to work with less familiar media, we invoke another paradox—offering both challenge and release to the practitioner. When taking the risk of working in unfamiliar modes, of working with the other hand, we lack calibration, comfort and finesse. We are engaging with issues and situations with a machete, not a scalpel. It can feel clumsy, lacking the subtlety and control that accompanies familiar ways of working. But there is a paradox here—things that could not be expressed or encountered in familiar idiom become accessible and recognisable in different form. We gain fresh energy for the task because we don’t have to be ‘competent’ in the usual way, simply happy amateurs or joyful children.

If we can bear the uncertainty, we can all be artists using different symbols, texts and materials, which suggest possibilities, invite inquiry and don’t readily collude with us to put unhelpful boundaries around our ‘knowing’. The idea of developing transdisciplinary skill and multiple-intelligences (individually—Gardener 1983, and globally—Houston 2000) is to extend both the range of issues and experiences we allow ourselves to acknowledge and engage with, and the repertoire of how we take on the engagement. The more varied the ways we can ‘know’ and ‘do’, the greater the range of things we can know and do—and conversely.

Creating or finding containers or spaces for the work

Another relevant issue is creating or finding the space or site for self-curation. This question is both metaphorical and literal, since work is happening on both the inner plane of the psyche and the outer physical plane. With supervised research, the supervisor both metaphorically and literally co-creates with the researcher one of the possible sites for reflection on the curation, but might also visit the physical site of the curation itself.

In either case, a key skill for both researcher and supervisor is the capacity to recognise and hold moments that don’t dilute complexity and challenge. Such moments can expose our discomfort, confusion and incompetence. They are moments of vulnerability, embarrassment—and nerve.

Slowing down the action, revisiting a previous event or statement, deliberately leaning into a difficult conversation, asking can you say more about that? Or what else
is going on here? Or is there some other conversation we should be having?—are all examples of holding the moment. Such interventions require courage or persistence when others are in a hurry, don’t see the same potential in the moment, just want to get to closure, are anxious. Sometimes they just require a good ear or a good eye in real time for the way we keep playing out our own difficulty or stuckness over and again.

Such work, paradoxically, might need both robust containers that will hold us while we do this and spaces that are unbounded, able to release us to roam freely, without hindrance. These latter might take us into the ‘Terrain Vague’, which Leon van Schaik (1999) describes as neglected, deserted, dangerous places, the ‘sites of abandonment’—old rubbish tips, quarries and wastelands—fertile space where dreams are not structured like the manicured bike-paths of our cities, places where one can be assaulted—even wounded—by uninvited and unexpected forces, and where not-knowing is the norm. This resonates with the more extreme invitation to ‘find disturbing projects that disturb people’s existing sensibilities’ (source unknown).

By contrast, I’m intrigued by the Buddhist notion of the ‘clean’ or empty space, where nothing can pollute the true form of whatever turns up or is brought into the space. Emmett, in his poetic commentary on the work of Australian artist Janet Laurence, writes of her ‘teasing place out of … in-between spaces’, of creating ‘psychic space beyond time’ (Emmett 1998, p. 11).

For those who self-curate, the requirements are physical and psychological; for containers, crucibles and boundaries at some times; for spaces without limit—even voids—at others; and for the in-between passages that Emmett writes. Whether the creation or selection of the spaces and containers is carefully considered and designed—or accidental, pragmatic, even careless—it becomes an intrinsic and deep dimension of the work—perhaps, in some respects, the deepest.

Creating the exegesis

For those engaged in research, teaching or learning, the process of exegesis (or interpretation) is critical. It is one that can be tackled in many ways, including verbal or written commentary, orchestrated forums for dialogue and challenge, formal feedback and critique—including, where appropriate, that associated with examination of a thesis or refereeing of a journal article.

An exegesis involves describing, explaining and critiquing all that has been revealed through every aspect of the curation—through the gathering as much as the gathered, the assembling as much as the assembled, the character and subtext of the dialogue as much as its content, the tools of critique as much as its outcomes. It also involves deep attention to the ‘texts’ or symbols chosen for the curation, to the space or container where it plays out, and its deeper context in the overall cycle of the life practice or professional practice in question. The surfacing, articulating and testing of robust theories grounded in practice, and theories of practice, are critical elements in this process.

Some of the questions arising during the exegesis are: what’s being revealed about experiences that we haven’t acknowledged or noticed before? In particular, what is being revealed about our aspirations; about our assumptions about the work we are doing; about our perceptions of the systems we work in; about the ways we engage with anxiety, paradox, and rejection; and about the effectiveness of our practice? Also, what does it reveal about the world we practice in; our care for that world; our impact on it; its impact and shaping of us; and our underpinning, implicit theories?
KEY CONSTRUCTS AND PERSPECTIVES THAT INFORM THE NOTION OF SYMBOLIC SELF-CURATION

In this section of the article I offer a brief overview of the main strands of thought that have informed the framing of symbolic self-curation offered here.

Practice in the age of complexity

My own practice has grown out of day-to-day engagement with people striving to make useful and noticeable differences in complex practice situations. The world where they try to do this is, paradoxically, both more promising and more problematic than ever.

Every age has its challenges and it can be an egocentric view of the world that claims ‘our age is the toughest’. Even an optimist would say that we are confronted not only by boundless opportunities but by genuinely ‘wicked’ problems—ones that have multiple causes, many symptoms, complex systemic dynamics and stakeholders with varying and inequitable interests and norms.

The creation and effective application of knowledge through practice is the great learning work that engages us all, whether through major innovation or day-to-day practice. This poses a significant problem for educators and researchers, as well as practitioners (Cherry 2005). Building knowledge and expertise that is engaging helpfully with this complexity sometimes challenges the fundamental paradigms and ‘disciplines’ that define and organise what we think we ‘know’ and can ‘do’. It requires us to bring multidisciplinary perspectives to bear on issues and possibilities, and sometimes think outside the existing boxes.

What practice represents

I would argue the challenges for educators, and for those interested in the development of research into professional practice, are even more fundamental than those just described. The evolution or crafting of a practice is itself complex to describe, and it is even more challenging to ‘teach’ or ‘facilitate’.

By practice, I mean any complex, integrated set of behaviours where a human being or group of people consistently engages with tasks, problems and issues that regularly confront them about their life and work. It represents the composite of the ways learned to cope with phenomena and situations that recur in life or work.

Practice consists of many ways of ‘knowing’ and sense-making and of many ways of linking knowledge to effective action. It implies both variety of repertoire and its organisation into skilled enactment. It can involve both long and conscious deliberation and rapid choices that are made inside and outside conscious awareness. As Polanyi (1967) has pointed out, many aspects of it become tacit and we know more than we can say.

I would go further and suggest, with Higg and Tichen (2001), that practices—whether of an individual, group or society—are the embodiment through doing of what they know, what they have learned, what they are learning and who they are. I assume with Gardner (1983) that practice demands applying multiple intelligences.

Schön’s framing of reflective practice

The effective integration of practice (how it comes together) and its skilled use is extraordinarily complex. It was recognition of this inherent complexity that led Schön (1987) to use the term ‘professional artistry’ to refer to the kinds of competence
practitioners sometimes display in what he labelled unique, uncertain and value-conflicted situations of practice.

Schön explored the circumstances under which skilled practice can be developed. He used the term ‘reflective practicum’ (Schön 1987, p. 37) to denote a setting designed for the task of learning a practice. Such settings include spaces like those created in studios and conservatories, freedom to learn by doing in a low risk setting, with the ‘right’ coaching.

Schön refers to the importance of creating ‘virtual worlds’ as contexts for experiments where everyday blocks to reflection-in-action can be suspended or controlled. These virtual worlds are constructed representations of the real worlds of practice. An example from architecture would be the graphic world of the sketchpad where ‘the drawing reveals qualities and relations unimagined beforehand’ and ‘moves can function as experiments’ (Schön 1987, p. 77).

There are many other elements of Schön’s writing that usefully could be quoted here, including his references to Polanyi’s (1967) ideas about ‘tactile intelligence’—how our ‘fingertips make sense of things’—and to the importance of what might be called ‘attending skills’. The essentially creative nature of even basic ‘attending’ behaviour has also been nicely captured by Donaldson’s (1992) observation that even as we pay attention to and ‘recognise’ things, we are already ‘constructing’ them and potentially transforming them.

Human thought deals with how things are, or at least with how they seem to be, but it does this in ways that typically entail some sense of how they are not—or not yet. It deals with actuality and with possibility, but some recognition of possibility is already entailed even in the discovery of reality whenever this is achieved by the characteristically human means of asking questions. Is it like this? Or is it perhaps like that? (Donaldson 1992, p. 9).

Schön (1987) was describing not only cognitive behaviour—a thinking process where we can make overt what we ‘know’—but also the intuitive and kinaesthetic ways that tacit wisdom and skill (knowledge-in-action) are accessed and strengthened. As Brookfield (1987) notes, this was one of Schön’s major contributions: focusing our understanding of reflection not only as mental or cognitive but as grounded in practice and action.

**Bleakley’s (1999) holistic reflexivity**

The notion of reflective practice has been used across discipline areas. In work, the linkage between reflection and practice has been expressed by working in a wide range of professions and disciplines, and reflected in scholarly work in the fields of health (Johns 1998), education (McKernan 1991; Moran & Dallat 1995), business (Howell et al. 2001) and architecture (van Schaik 2005) among others.

Bleakley (1999, p. 317) has suggested that reflective practice ‘is in danger of becoming a catch-all title for an ill-defined process’. He goes much further, and argues for a shift from reflective practice to reflexivity. He seeks reflective practices not confined by the privileging of language as the primary means of sense-making, nor dominated by an essentially human-centric preoccupation. This is the radical phenomenology, in which reflection is neither detached nor narcissistic thought but rather ‘a … critical, reflexive, ethical, aesthetic act of participation in the world, and one which is ecological, or sensitive to difference …’ (Bleakley 1999, p. 328).

He offers a view of reflective practice that looks out, on to everyday phenomena, and encourages a careful noticing of, and attendance to, that world as an act of participation.
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(Bleakley 1999, p. 320). This is not simply personal agency acting on a world (emancipatory empowerment), nor world-making through cultural construction and thinking against oneself (post-modern deconstructivism), but thinking with the world. He describes this as engaged agency with an outside-in, rather than an inside-out, focus.

The locus for reflection is then not ‘in’ the individual (decontextualised), but ‘in’ the total event, involving embedding the act in a context that itself guides or moulds the act. Importantly, the reflective act can then be framed as a sensitivity … an aesthetic event rather than a functional or technical adjustment … This would give further meaning to Schön’s notion of ‘professional artistry’—it is not just a ‘doing’ but a ‘being’, an apprehension … a play of sensitivity within a habitat, based on immediacy … It is … a mode of being grounded in passion and body rather than cognition and mind, with an outside-in, rather than inside-out, focus. Primarily it is eco-logical, rather than ego-logical: worldly rather than personal … reflection as action may be described as a thinking with the world, as an engaged agency (Bleakley 1999, pp. 323–4).

Agreeing with Olafson (1993) Bleakley suggests that ‘language neither transparently describes the world (the classical view), nor does it reinvent the world (the Kantian view), but it brings the world into “being” or “presence” …’ (Bleakley 1999, p. 326). Our own selves are ‘presenced into being’ through interaction with things. Human beings understand themselves from their daily concerns—‘the activities we pursue and the things we take care of’ (Heidegger 1988, p. 159). It is impossible to do justice to Bleakley’s thinking and readers are strongly recommended to seek out his writing.

What is important here is to try to convey that Bleakley has significantly raised the bar in his move from reflective practice to holistic reflexivity. A practice fit for an age of complexity surely demands a reflective stance that ‘is at once critical, reflexive, ethical, aesthetic, worldly (rather than personal) and ecological, or sensitive to difference’ (Bleakley 1999, pp. 328–9). And it requires ‘… not just a “doing” but a “being”, an apprehension’ (Bleakley 1999, p. 324).

Artistry

In developing practice fit for complexity, reflexive practice needs to be able to thrive in creative ‘not-knowing’ at the limits of existing practice—that place of ambiguity, possibility, paradox, confusion, excitement and vulnerability where the habits and mindsets, which created our predicament or opportunity, are not equal to the task of moving forward, and where we have only two choices: to regress or grow.

Reflexive practice allows us to build, access and share with others complex capabilities and wisdom when we ‘know’, but ‘know more than we can say’ (Polanyi 1967) or can easily explain to others. It is helpful to revisit Schön’s (1987) framing of reflection not purely as a mental event but as practice or act, and professional practice as ‘artistry’, and Bleakley’s (1999, p. 315) suggestion that reflective practice itself can be seen as artistry or, at least, as grounded in ‘an aesthetic value complex’. Bleakley suggests 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).

In searching for the aesthetic, he speaks of the need to value the symbolic and emotional dimensions of learning, to educate an intuitive ability, an implicit knowing and the tacit experience. Noting Pinar’s (1996) consideration of the curriculum as an aesthetic text, he reminds us of Schön’s prompt to engage with the ‘swamp’, with the
messiness of uncertainty, with conflict, with the unexpected, unique, irregular, vague areas of practice, where the invitation is to engage with wonder, improvisation, risk and—ultimately—with artistry.

In similar vein, he cites Eisner’s (1985) description of ‘aesthetic modes of knowing’. Reflection, he suggests, ‘needs body, passion, sensitivity to context and above all, begs for style … reflection-in-action is a ‘hands-on’ business, rooted in the immediacy and heat of practice, the sticky moment of indecision, feeding on sudden shifts in circumstances …’ (Bleakley 1999, p. 319).

Advanced praxis for complexity: gathering of the self through knowing, doing, being and becoming

All the strands of thinking I have described so far have profoundly influenced my thinking about reflective practice. The framing of praxis I offered right at the start of this article borrows heavily from Bleakley’s thinking in particular. I appreciate his requirement for a holistic reflexivity that is ethical, worldly and eco-logical (thinking with the world) as well as critical and aware of the relativity of the self-as-knower. I also deeply appreciate his framing of the reflective stance as not just a ‘doing’ but a ‘being’, an ‘apprehension’.

My fundamental assumption is that in life and in work, ‘knowing’, ‘doing’, being and becoming come together (Higgs & Tichen 2001). I believe that it is not possible—or helpful—to try to separate practice from the practitioner. Because a person’s practice reflects their individual and idiosyncratic integration of knowing doing and learning, it is profoundly influenced by who they ‘are’ and in turn influences who they ‘become’. I am deeply troubled when practitioners take themselves out of the equation and focus only on their ‘technique’. In these situations, I believe both technique and its products potentially become disconnected from a transparent and responsible ‘conscience-ness’.

This has led me to find ways to help do two kinds of work: the outer work (resonating with the world as well as seeking to make a constructive difference to it) and inner work (making a difference to one’s own capability and taking responsibility for how one influences what happens in the world). For me, inner and outer work need to continue in tandem and when one runs ahead of the other, the integrity of the whole is threatened. I believe that applies to individuals, to groups, to organisations and to societies.

Praxis results when action is enriched by exploring the questions suggested by Reason (2001): why am I doing what I’m doing? Thinking what I’m thinking? Feeling what I’m feeling? How much am I the product of my culture and time? How can I or we transcend that context to clarify and enrich what I do and who I am?

And it is further enriched—ethically, practically, as well as ontologically—by the dimensions suggested by Bleakley: reflection-as-action; careful awareness of the world; the play of aesthetic … sensitivity within a habitat; immediacy; agency with an outside-in, rather than an inside-out, focus; thinking with the world and not just with narcissism or against oneself.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMY

To the extent the academy is interested in informing and contributing to developing praxis for complexity, then all the challenges I have just described should deeply resonate for academic colleagues. For universities, I believe the burning questions are the same: How can we explain past, present and evolving practice, and produce both new confidence and marked humility (Reason 2001) as dimensions of ‘wise practice’? How
can we mobilise and replenish the personal and collective energy needed for sustained engagement with the most complex and rich practice challenges?

This is a confronting idea. Adding to Morgan’s (1983) contention that through research, we ‘meet ourselves’, Bleakley’s requirement is that as researchers we move beyond the personal to being in and thinking with the world. In that sense, the potential of self-curation is enormous, with its invitation to gathering the self for the habitat, which both creates and is created by the self. I’d suggest that it could sit comfortably within any culture of research inquiry that encourages and values reflective practice, especially ethnography, autoethnography, narrative, action research and collaborative inquiry.

**ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

As I indicated earlier, I’m not only offering this framing of symbolic self-curation as another form of research practice. I am trying to find conventional words that help to describe and explain what is going on often where researchers, practitioners and educators are using alternative or hybrid texts and sites for their work. The proof of that pudding will be in the eating, and I can only hope that if others find it useful in that way, they will take it up.

Elsewhere (Cherry 1996) I have described how the traditions of gestalt psychology and the work of Gendlin (1970) suggest a theoretical explanation for what might be going on here—how finding ‘apt’ symbols to represent our ‘not-knowing’ as well as our ‘knowing’ enables reflective activity to bridge past, present and future. And the essentially creative nature of even basic ‘attending’ behaviour has been acknowledged in the domains of cognitive and social psychology. Even as we pay attention to and ‘recognise’ things, we are already actively making or ‘constructing’ them or potentially transforming them. Paradoxically, while deeply engaging with what is, we both create something new and enhance our capability to deal with it. It remains now to comment on the ontological underpinning of this framing of self-curation.

Any degree of reflective practice faces the dilemma that the observer is included in the systems of description. Reflective practice is a social act, embedded in a social context and there are serious traps in the temptation to frame reflection in individual or purely personal terms. This goes beyond the observation that social contexts ‘mandate’ practice, to the recognition that socially constructed paradigms—whether carried through language or tacitly—are not simply lenses through which we experience the world. That would imply a pair of glasses that we can—perhaps with difficulty—put on or take off. The more radical postmodern, post-structuralist perspective would be that subjectivity—the sense of being the wearer of the glasses—is itself a social or cultural construction, rather than one that is biologically constructed. However, as Bleakley observes, a focus on language, while pervasive in much thinking about the social construction of ‘reality’ (Berger & Luckman 1966) and even of self and subjectivity in the postmodern perspective, possibly distracts us from the other ways in which we are ‘formed’. The role of physical environment in shaping the unconscious is a compelling idea, and an apt one in any discussion of artistry and aesthetic in practice. *House as a mirror of self* (Marcus 1997) draws on Jung’s theories about the power of the physical and aesthetic environment in creating archetypical experiences and how we find universal symbols or archetypes that transcend cultural boundaries. Bleakley’s (1999) central ontological (and epistemological) proposition is that the locus for reflection is not ‘in’ the individual (decontextualised) but ‘in’ the total event, involving embedding act in a context that itself moulds or guides the act (Bleakley 1999, p. 323). James Yandell, in the prologue to *House as a mirror of self* (1997), typifies some of Bleakley’s thinking when he writes:
We create our immediate environment and then contemplate it and are worked on by it. We find ourselves mirrored in it, see what is not yet visible, and integrate the reflection into our sense of self.’ Bleakley notes the limits of humanistic, critical, emancipatory and postmodern perspectives and invites us to ‘look again’ at the nature of ‘text’. These are deep waters, going to the heart of the great ontological debates—the assumptions one makes about ‘reality’, about the nature and essence of consciousness, being and existence—and the role of language, discourse and other socially constructed symbols and dynamics in our epistemologies, our ways of ‘knowing’.

Bleakley (1999) was referring to language, but the idea applies equally to other symbolic ‘texts’ when he borrowed Heidegger’s (1993) concept that language neither describes nor invents the world but brings it into being or presence. This thought sums up nicely the role that I see for symbolic self-curation.

CONCLUSION

As educator and researcher, my search has been for reflective practices that are fit for praxis in an age of complexity.

As research application, symbolic self-curation has much potential; for example, attending to, describing, clarifying and ‘explaining’ what has been experienced or done over time by an individual, group, organisation or community. This might be something as specific as debriefing a project or as big as engaging with a lifetime.

Another research application lies in preserving, guarding and caring for what has been experienced or created. This is not only about ‘defeating the terror of time’ (Emmett 1998, p. 11) but acknowledging, recording and celebrating the contribution of people to our collective culture, work and life—the notion of testament or witness to what we have been, are or might become.

Yet another is its capacity for experiencing situations, people and ‘things’ freshly and to help create the conditions—the capability and the confidence—for constructive change. Still others are developing deeper insight into complex issues; working through life transitions or crises; entering unchartered territory with courage, inspiring innovation, and creating sustainable vision.

As researcher and practitioner, I have witnessed its helpfulness in integrating wisdom from different disciplines to solve difficult problems and to create new knowledge as we engage with the ‘white spaces’. My highest hopes for the practice of symbolic self-curation lie in holding the tension and paradox that accompanies genuinely ‘wicked’ problems: the deep dilemmas, fraught with uncertainty, with things that can’t be controlled; the stone that can’t be removed from the shoe or the burdens that must be carried and that become profoundly damaging and diminishing unless we find a way to hold them ‘lightly’, with humanity and with care for the planet.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Nita Cherry BA (Melb), MA Occup. Psych. (Melb), PhD (RMIT), MAPS, ASH (Assoc.) is Professor of Leadership in the Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. Nita has over thirty-five years’ experience combining the roles of senior executive, management consultant, director, practicing psychologist, educator and researcher. She has worked in both the private and public sectors, in large corporations and small entrepreneurial businesses, and in the not-for-profit sector. Over the last twenty years she has worked in many parts of Australia and in the Asia-Pacific region. Her major areas of practice and interest include how people perform under conditions of uncertainty and complexity in organisational settings. Nita is also a Chief Investigator in a team recently awarded a significant Australian Research Council grant to study experiences of policing in the Vietnamese community in Australia.

Professor Nita Cherry
Australian Graduate School of Entrepreneurship
Faculty of Business and Enterprise
Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218
Hawthorn VIC 3122
Australia
Phone: +61 03 9214 5901
Fax: +61 03 9214 5645
Email: ncherry@swin.edu.au