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## Practice as Research within the Undergraduate Curriculum

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### ABSTRACT

Currently, 'Practice as Research' (PaR) offers a mode of study relevant to arts practice in many post-graduate programmes. "Practice as research, in any disciplinary area, privileges action as a methodological imperative" (Sjoberg & Hughes, n.d.). It offers a process in which practical knowledge is recognised as a foundation from which to build and develop new knowledge through research practices which synthesise theoretical and bodily investigation. As such, it could be suggested that HE undergraduate programmes which include elements of creative practice should recognise the importance of being able to investigate and research through doing, and the value of experiential learning, and should therefore consider the relevance of PaR within their curriculum. Differentiating between research-led practice, research-based practice and practice as research, this paper questions what PaR is, drawing on a range of postgraduate practices to provide examples, and raising the debate of whether PaR is a relevant mode of learning and assessment for undergraduate study. This paper provides a reflective evaluation of the tentative steps towards the introduction and development of PaR as a teaching and assessment process within the formation of a 'choreography as investigation' module on the FdA Contemporary Dance programme at Newcastle College. It highlights PaR concepts and questions how these could be adopted to enhance undergraduate practices. The article considers the benefits of Practice as Research within a vocational based HE programme, suggesting that PaR concepts support a reflective and considered approach to practical work, encouraging students who may not initially consider themselves academic to participate in and be discursive in academic debate relating to processes and experiences within the arts.

**Keywords:** practice as research; undergraduate; assessment process; creative practice.

### Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to analyse and reflect upon a current shift in the assessment process of a cohort of level five dance students within a choreography module instigated through the application of Practice as Research (PaR) concepts. The case study investigates underpinning theories and methodologies surrounding the submission and assessment of creative knowledge. It highlights, selects and justifies the application of these within the current assessment process and raises a number of questions: Is the creative process a practical research process? What is practical knowledge? What is an appropriate submission format to communicate and evidence this? How is it best assessed? Finally, the paper evaluates what could be gained by considering the creative process as a research process to nurture and assess practical 'knowledges', highlighting the success of this assessment procedure as the first step towards refining a creative assessment model appropriate for undergraduate programmes.

The core influential factor of this assessment shift is the consideration of choreographic practice as a research process. Currently, PaR offers a mode of study relevant to arts practice in many postgraduate programmes. "Practice as research, in any disciplinary area, privileges action as a methodological imperative" (Sjoberg & Hughes, n.d.). As such, it offers a process in which practical knowledge is recognised as a foundation from which to develop new knowledge through research practices which synthesise theoretical and bodily investigation.

To understand the potential of PaR methods within the delivery of undergraduate assessment, it is important primarily to understand what PaR is and how it is currently utilised within postgraduate study. While this discussion is based around dance practices, other

subject areas have been considered in order to maintain an open discussion on the potential of the method.

According to research undertaken by Picinni (2002, p. 1) for the Practice as Research in Performance (PaRiP) project, in 1992 PaR was not widely accepted in educational institutions. By 1996, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) included the notion of PaR in their criteria for assessment, stating that the panel gave "equal value to practical research outcomes" (RAE, 1996), and it was agreed that "any creative practice may qualify as research when the practice can be shown to interrogate itself, it locates itself within its research context, and gives rise to other forms of discourse" (SCUDD, 1998, as cited in Picinni, 2002). Highlighted by Nelson and Andrews (2003, p. 1), the regulatory practice of PaR was varied across HEIs: "Some HEIs have developed clear guidelines specifically to address PaR for PhD applicants. A significant number, however, have no specific guidelines at all on PaR".

Over the past decade, huge progress has been made and many HEIs have bridged this gap, offering PaR projects at postgraduate level with some presenting the option to submit the traditional level six dissertation as a PaR project. In 2013, the Standing Conference on Dance in Higher Education (SCoDHE) opened discussion into relevant texts for level six students to inform practical dissertation submissions. In response, many sources initially used at postgraduate level were suggested. The request to develop a specific body of undergraduate texts was a clear indication that this is a very current and dynamic field and one which may be full of potential across the undergraduate curriculum.

Newcastle College offers a vocational FdA Contemporary Dance programme with delivery at levels four and five. With no dissertation module at level five, practical choreography modules were highlighted to see if PaR concepts could be applied to enhance theoretical

and practical choreographic connectivity. If so, this would act as preparation for level six and further postgraduate study, in addition to developing practitioner skills required within the industry.

Currently, whilst there is action-research and vocational-based learning and assessment taking place across Newcastle College, the institution has yet to develop specific guidelines for addressing or guiding PaR projects. This paper opens the debate of PaR within undergraduate projects, looking to other institutions, academics and practitioners to clarify the essence of PaR and gain insight into its potential value within the undergraduate curriculum. The aim of this is to enhance creative methodology and develop research-based thought processes through practical work, thus raising the profile of PaR and moving some way towards formulating a PaR learning and assessment framework for Newcastle College.

## PaR versus practice-based research and practice-led research

Within the sciences, PaR is a common methodology with hypothesis-led practical experimentation integrated at all levels of the FE, HE and postgraduate curriculum. However, Artistic Practice as Research (APaR) is a relatively new phenomenon which is seeking definition and clarity in its own right. In relation to APaR, there is an on going debate within HEIs on the precise meaning of Practice as Research, and many questions around “how it might challenge or confirm traditional academic, methodological, presentational and examination procedures” (Gardner, 2012, p. 138), with many practitioners and academics placing their own slant on the term and its application.

Initially, Kershaw (2000) (as cited in Picinni, 2002, p.1) considered PaR as “research through performance practice, to determine how that practice may be developing new insights into or knowledge about the forms, genres, uses, etc. of performance”. Debate through the Practice as Research in Performance project (PaRiP) offered an account of practice-based research which highlights the common understanding of different modes of ‘practice’, each offering a different relationship to research depending on the contexts and methodologies utilised. In a study of over 20 HEIs, Robin Nelson and Stuart Andrews (2003, p. 4) “identified the following forms in operation: Practice *as* Research, Practice *based* Research and Practice *through* Research”. Dance practitioner Sarah Rubridge (2004, pp. 4–5), in agreement with this, outlined PaR as an umbrella term, introducing the term Practice-led research and finding only a minor difference to Nelson and Andrews, claiming “Research into Practice, through Practice” as the final category.

Outlining the differences in dance research, Rubridge (2004, p. 5) defines practice-based research as projects in which “the research question/s tend to be clearly stated at the start of the project”. The hypothesis-led process uses practice as a research method to interrogate the question from within. This is supported with more traditional research methods, and the findings of both are synthesised as process. “The results of the practical research, which may or may not be an art work, lean towards an illustration of and/or demonstrate the researchers findings with respect to the original research question” (Rubridge, 2004, p. 5).

It is acknowledged that practice-led research may not be linked to any pre-articulated questions, but questions may arise as part of a process where the “main focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice” (Creativity and Cognition Studios, n.d.). This process suggests an exploratory journey, akin to ‘blue-sky’ thinking (Rubridge, 2004, p. 6), which develops gradually as experiences are responded to, happenings are noted and questions are generated, leading to further cycles of exploration, investigation and interrogation as a means of discovering and developing new artistic insights.

This distinction is echoed across the creative industries. In art and design, Coumans (2003) (as cited in Nimkulrat, 2007) moves on to make an interesting observation of the participant as practitioner-

researcher, with these two roles being played out in varying degrees within each process. “In practice-based research, the practitioner’s role may be more dominant than the researcher’s role [...] In practice-led research, the two roles appear to be equally important, because research becomes an intertwined part of practice”. Although this suggests a slight inconsistency between Coumans’ PaR definitions and those of Rubridge, defining and applying the role of practitioner-researcher would prove necessary to fully understand the expectations of the student within the PaR assignment.

## The practitioner-researcher

Foundation Degrees are historically vocational, focusing on the development of students as practitioners within their industry (QAA, 2010). This focus advocates the use of PaR, which is adopted by many practitioners who question and push the boundaries of their art form. As such, it made sense to apply the notion of practitioner-researcher to the role of the student choreographer within a PaR project.

According to Nimkulrat (2007, p. 4), “The practitioner-researcher analyzes and contextualizes the resulting artifacts as well as the creative process that went into it using the documentation created during the process and any relevant theories”. Three critical observations which influenced the development of the choreography module were made. Firstly, a clear indication was given that both the ‘creative process’ and the ‘product’ or resulting artefact should be considered by the practitioner-researcher. Secondly, that ‘documentation’ created during the process should be utilised as evidence and finally, that ‘relevant theories’ should be apparent throughout. These were all considerations which fed into the formation of the assignment task and assessment methodology.

## Practice as process, practice as research, practice as product

Highlighting the significance of the creative process to the practitioner-researcher was vital in adopting a PaR methodology within the choreography module. This raised questions on the relationship between ‘process’ and ‘research’. Ashley (2003, p. 1) in her article *Shape shifting: Choreographic process as research*, states “the process of choreography itself is research.” However, this was not agreed upon by all. Although the title PaR seems to suggest otherwise, fundamentally “the concept of ‘practice-as-research’ does not necessarily suggest that practice is research” (Gardner, 2012, p. 138) but that practice “can be both a form of research and a legitimate way of making the findings of such research publicly available” (Painter, 1996). This confirmed the concept of ‘practice’ through the notion of practice as a physical process, practice as research and practice as product; that the value of practice was triplicate:

- a creative / physical activity / action which may be experiential but need not be considered research;
- a creative / physical research process;
- a method of making findings available (performance or sharing).

In this, the dance PaR project is distinct from a traditional research project which omits the purely experiential element of the process and the development of ‘bodily knowledges’. “Rolling for a dancer is also a form of thinking and questioning that can lead to discovering and creating concepts” (Gardner, 2012, p. 146). While rolling, or any action, may lead to or result in findings, it may also simply be a practical form of ‘knowing’ that is not distinctively research. These ‘bodily knowledges’ remain a key element in practice as research projects, where the relationship of knowledge and practical action is central to the research process.

In a debate redefining the relationship between action and knowledge in the academy, Whitehead (2004) suggests that

practitioner-researchers believe “education’ is an activity directed by process values rather than objectives which refer to extrinsic outcomes of the activity”. Hence the knowledge discovered within and through the action should be the central focus. Greater emphasis was placed on the choreographic process both as research and as bodily knowledge, and less value on the product or extrinsic outcome of this process. This defining moment answered questions relating to the role and value of the choreographic process within assessment. If the process was not only an element evidenced through the final product, but also demanded recognition in its own right, then it clearly should be a major consideration within the construction of the assessment task.

In previous versions of the choreography module, ‘solo choreography’ was used naïvely to assess only the final dance product with focus on the choreographic content of the live work, preceded by a short introduction by way of programme notes. Under this new vision, this seemed insufficient in relation to the significant role of the creative process and different ‘knowledges’. The omission of process within the assessment left gaping holes in the assessment of students’ understanding of choreography. Essentially, what had been assessed was what the assessor saw of value within the work, with no clear evidence that everything which was given value was an *intentional* product of the creative process. The realisation that students were not always aware of the content and artistic value of their work placed a false emphasis on the assessor as interpreter. This meant that, potentially, credit could be given where it was not due.

To further exemplify the assessment of knowledge and understanding of choreography with a centrally placed practice/process, a broader approach to assessment evidence would be needed within the assignment task. This required a task which would combine assessment of the student’s theoretical awareness, knowledge and interrogation of their chosen choreographic principle within their own practice of ‘dancemaking’ (Burrows, 2010), through their exploratory, physical journey, developing bodily ‘knowledges’ and understanding of the final work as a product of their creative decision making process. This would give a clear indication of the academic, creative and bodily knowledge and skills synthesised within the project. It was from this that the concept of PaR began to inform the delivery and assessment of choreography within the newly proposed *Choreography as Investigation* module in 2013.

Raising the profile of process and PaR within the assessment led to yet another fundamental problem brought to the forefront of the debate by Dewey and Melrose (as cited in Gardner, 2012, p. 141), who highlight “the difficulty of making the actual practice of art count—and count in language”. To place this proposed project and assessment firmly and without question in an academic framework as a research project, solutions to the wider implications of how the student could communicate their knowledge and skills, inclusive of academic and bodily knowledge evidenced in the creative process and product, were needed.

## The reflective-researcher-practitioner

Gardner (2012, pp. 144–145) states that practice-as-researchers need to communicate in language applicable to the broader constituency of the university. This implies a “need to record creative development during the making of dances, and to parallel this with academic endeavour” (Ashley, 2003, p. 6). Again this is not a belief held by all. Sjoberg & Hughes claim that “importantly, practice as research may never include the action of writing anything down [...] and may not lead to academic publication in the conventional sense” (Sjoberg & Hughes, unknown). While this may be true of post-doctoral research by the experienced practitioner where such work could stand alone as a mode of research, this seemed insufficient for a level five assessment.

This raised further questions relating to how the PaR project could and should be recorded, documented and communicated. With reference to the process, Nimkulrat (2007, p. 4) suggests that

the aim of documentation “is to make the creative process somewhat transparent by capturing each step the practitioner-researcher takes in the process, both consciously and unconsciously”. As it is this transparency which informs and validates assessment of the creative process, the main inquiry was to ascertain what form of documentation was most appropriate for communicating the research process.

Although Rubridge (2004) argues that the systematic reflection of practices is not needed for work to be considered research, this is again in the context of established artists who fully understand their processes and art form, where reflection is embedded and embodied within the practice. As this is unlikely to be true of FdA level five students, it seemed necessary to include ‘systematic reflection of practices’ as an integral element of the PaR project and assessment. Encouraging this reflective documentation process meant that the identity and role of the student had to shift. Not only did the student need to develop as a researcher-practitioner but also as a reflective-researcher-practitioner. This additional component seemed critical to the formation of the assessment tasks required. Understanding the term ‘reflective practitioner’ as used by Schön (1983) (as cited in Rubridge, 2004, p. 1) in relation to “the processes through which academic research is actualised” meant that in addition to the final product, the underpinning practical research process needed to be made real through a reflective process.

## Documentation

Having established that written documentation in the form of reflections was necessary for undergraduate PaR submissions, further consideration of other types of documentation to aid the transparency of process and allow the assessor to engage more closely with the underpinning knowledge and creation of the work was needed. Such performance documents, otherwise referred to as ‘trace materials’ by Picinni (2002, p. 13), are inclusive of all documents created during the process, “script drafts, notes, call sheets, camera reports, continuity notes, costume designs, laboratory reports, treatments, set designs, choreographic notation, sound scores, etc.” Through this, an understanding of how the PaR process may be evidenced by reflective writing and documentation emerged. However, questions surrounding the recording of this process as a *live* event still remained unanswered. White (2000) raises the question how “could the often-ephemeral practice maintain itself as a, perhaps the, key element of the research rather than be subsumed in the medium of print?” It was clear from this that a PaR assignment would require assessment methods which allow for the intervention of both textual and visual forms which are easily accessible to the assessor so as to avoid any unnecessary bias on either the textual or visual elements.

While the practical and theoretical research process required detailed documentation and recording within a PaR assessment, the evidencing of final work as a product of research demanded equal consideration. The obvious method, to video-record the live performance, is the medium of choice for most performance practitioners (Rye, 2003, p. 2) and a practice currently utilised extensively within performing arts, where extrinsic outcomes are assessed within the product. Rye agreed that from an internal/external verifier perspective it may be necessary to utilise video-recording to evidence work. However, interrogation of how video evidence might influence and effect the assessment of a PaR project encouraged further debate.

Rubridge (2004) discusses problems which occur with respect to recording the products of PaR. This debate, initially raised by Rye over ten years ago, has somewhat been alleviated through the advancement of technology; however, the main concerning principles are still relevant. These essentially comprise documentation problems relating to ‘live’ work due to the “fundamental differences between ‘the live’ and ‘the recorded’ which means that there is no simple way of translating between the two”

(Rye, 2003, p. 2). Essential elements such as the “qualities of the live encounter [and the] production of embodied knowledges” (Rye, 2003, p. 1) which are not embedded in any written documentation, yet are required for assessment, may indeed be lost within the recorded translation. So when, and how, should the reflective-researcher-practitioner utilise this medium, and is it appropriate to replace all live evidence with video for assessment purposes?

A return to the process/product debate offered an initial obvious solution. To allow insight into the creative research process, students should be encouraged to record their process using various methods of written documentation in addition to video recording. However, a live performance should be maintained to evidence the final research findings. This partial solution could result in a collection of quite separate artefacts; various textual documents, video recordings and live performance. The synthesis of these disparate materials would again seem to lie with the assessor’s ability to connect the evidence and could create an awkward or inaccurate assessment process. Access to, and integration of, new technology would allow for innovative approaches to these documentation and assessment issues, and solutions lie fundamentally in the decision of which assessment tool would best ensure that students’ work was easily accessible to assessors and examiners (Nelson & Andrews, 2003, p. 7).

Following FdA principles, a method adopted in the industry offered the solution: an integrated online portfolio in the form of a blog or webpage, inclusive of trace materials, production evidence, video recordings of the research process and evidence of textual documentation such as initial questions, research and reflections. Within this medium, elements could be more easily interconnected, and the process could be mapped with greater clarity. Portfolio-building in the widest context was considered and, as the project would be addressing live bodily ‘knowledges’, students would also present a final live performance as an extension of the portfolio. In this the aim was “not to give priority to one or other media of documentation, images or writing, particularly at the expense of the live performance which grounded the research” (Rye, 2003, p. 7) but to find an assessment tool in which all media would be equally accessible and cross referenced. This would avoid a hierarchy of either written, recorded or live presentation which could essentially undermine the principal of practice-based research (Rye, 2003, p. 7).

## Defining the assessment task

On reflection of their own practices, Dadds and Hart (2001, p. 166) offer further defining factors, in relation to the role of practitioner-researcher, which influenced the formation of this choreography assignment. “What practitioners chose to research was important to their sense of engagement and purpose [...] [and] how practitioners chose to research, and their sense of control over this, could be equally important to their motivation, their sense of identity within the research and their research outcomes”. Here, two significant points were advised. Firstly, students should select their own area of interest, however diverse. Secondly, they should be encouraged to formulate their own research process. The first seemed obvious, although students with a limited knowledge at level five may require guidance in relation to the possible area of research. This guidance, offered in the form of introductory workshops in order to highlight a broad range of choreographic principles from somatic to multi-media works, from site-specific work to screendance, would inform the scheme of work leading to assessment. The second suggestion, which seemed appropriate for the postgraduate researcher, again appeared out of the reach of level five undergraduates, setting expectations a little too high for the majority. Varying levels of guidance would be essential to support individuals as they formulated their research and reflective frameworks. This would also require monitoring, reflection and adjustment to further refine the assessment procedure over the next few years.

Grounded within a practice-based process, utilising an open

choice of initial questions, a list of objectives was abstracted to guide and underpin the assessment task presented within the new module guide for Choreography as Investigation.

PaR guidelines:

- “Define a series of research questions, issues or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research.” (Arts & Humanities Research Council, n.d.)
- Allow for greater autonomy in selecting research questions which interest students, encouraging differentiation.
- Highlight process over product.
- Recognise the importance of practice within process, product and in the very nature of movement.
- Include reflection as a significant method of communicating what the student understands about their work.
- Offer alternative modes of communicating knowledge and synthesising documentation such as online portfolios/blogging for ease of assessment.
- Consider portfolio building in the widest sense, offering the opportunity to perform live work as an appendix to the main portfolio.
- Present a 50/50% split of textual and visual evidence and documentation.

To enable students to successfully complete their PaR project, there were certain skills and academic expectations which would define the scheme of work and facilitate this project. These were to:

- Develop an understanding of theoretical consideration of dance principles (Burrows, 2010) and potential underlying questions.
- Understand the importance of transferring academic research skills to underpin and inform practical research.
- Develop practical research skills through a variety of practices such as improvisations, trial and error, games and scores, and ‘blue-sky’ tasks.
- Open dance discourse to challenge students to reflect upon their practice and their works.
- Raise awareness of the variety of trace materials and documentation available for students to evidence the process and product of their research.
- Provide skills for the students to “engage with the creation of appropriate performance documentation” (Rye, 2003, p. 1).

## Delivery and application

Research into PaR projects and their utilisation across HEIs has presented invaluable advice in the formation of the assessment of the FdA Choreography as Investigation module. However, the real value of this process was discovered in the delivery of this project. This was not without typical problems, as outlined by Nelson and Andrews (2003, p. 6). “While most students were able to make adjustments to their work once they developed new understandings of PaR, some students encountered difficulties”. Some experienced difficulties in selecting a principle and developing related questions to guide their research process. This wasted valuable time and suggests that at this level, a series of questions relating to a broad variety of choreographic principles formulated as part of the assignment brief would allow for a more structured and directed starting point.

Once the students had progressed from this initial dilemma, and began to develop an understanding of PaR, steady progress was made. Verbal reflective skills developed easily, yet utilising written reflection and on going documentation of their process was less successful. Further integration and support of reflective writing within choreographic modules at level four may prepare the students for this. In spite of repeated discussion around the research

process, it was difficult to wean students away from the idea that the product was more important than the process. This restricted knowledge and experience of choreography as the students held back in their practical research and stayed in their comfort zone, not fully interrogating their own questions.

Perhaps the most broadly successful element of this assignment was the consideration of the portfolio in the widest context. Students adapted easily to the multi-media application of blogging and, with minimal direction, were able to submit an eclectic mix of documentation and evidence. This medium was most successful in synthesising theoretical research, practical research process, trace materials and findings with reflective and evaluative commentary. Assessment of this project proved more interesting and reliable as it offered greater clarity of the integrated theoretical/choreographic and bodily knowledge within the practical research process. Formative and summative assessment feedback and guidance was more specific as progression of ideas and physical thoughts were more easily tracked. Support was given to the process at its roots rather than trying to retrospectively deduce where problems and difficulties may have stemmed from as a result of only assessing the end research product.

Overall, while examples of postgraduate study in HEIs have guided this assessment shift, the distinction of traditional BA(Hons) undergraduates and FdA students on a vocational programme at Newcastle College is vital as the student body offers a very different perspective, moving not from academia to practice, but more from a practical viewpoint towards synthesised theory. This pilot has highlighted the benefits and potential not only in the field of dance but much more broadly across the Performing Arts Section and the

wider college and HE environment. PaR concepts support a reflective and considered approach to practical work, encouraging students who may not initially consider themselves academic to participate and be discursive in academic debate relating to processes and experiences within the arts.

In conclusion, the creative process can indeed become a practical research process adopted by and assessed within a multitude of undergraduate programmes. The hierarchical shift of process above product fundamentally alters the nature of creative learning and assessment, foregrounding practical 'knowledges' in all contexts. Practical knowledge requires careful consideration and nurturing in both delivery and assessment, and when recognised as equal to more traditional theoretical knowledge could potentially, through true synthesis, lead to more in-depth understanding and insight. To achieve this, assessors could be more daring in formulating their assignment tasks and assessment methodologies. In making the shift to work more directly with multifaceted assessment tools in order to gain a more holistic experience of students' process and product within an integral assessment, they will further challenge the student as creative and theoretical interpreter of their own work.

### *Biography*

Mandy Rogerson is a lecturer in Contemporary Dance at Newcastle College with an interest in semiotic encoding as choreographic process and pedagogical approaches to choreography which engage students in experiential learning. She values the concept of the student as reflective practitioner and is an advocate for practice-as-research methods for undergraduate advancement.

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