Artistic Research and Assessment: A Creative Practice Perspective

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Abstract

This article uses a reflexive, autoethnographic, and explanatory approach to suggesting assessment design for practical performing arts in higher education. Focusing on the communication of critical accounts of practice, rather than the assessment of practice itself, the idea considers how to create equitable opportunities to excel amid mixed-level starting points upon entry to the university. Imagining an "art first" environment that views assessment activity as a moment of knowledge transmission, this working example is supported by the history of Artistic Research and Practice-Research, given the basis in knowledge transmission and documentation. The idea around critical accounts of practice is driven by a desire to clear more time and space for practice as it exists as an artform in a necessarily time-based way, where skills and training are acquired over long periods of sustained practice. A case study is offered from the point of view of the author, based on the making of and featuring in *Exhaustion V* from *The Exhaustion Series (2015-2018)* by Sandy Williams IV, with the aim of providing example content for learning and assessment in this way.

Introduction

This article proposes an argument for the assessment of practical performing arts activity in higher education, through critical accounts of practice rather than assessment of the practical work itself. The suggestion aims to contemplate equitable and accessible assessment design, negotiating typical factors of diverse student entry points of knowledge and experience, coupled with having less student-teacher contact time than more industry-focused centers like conservatories in the treatments of time-based activities of performance technique training, rehearsal, and performance itself. With this in mind, the paper first searches for improvements in the equal opportunity for all enrolled students to excel regardless of starting points and, second, argues that the subject area in the university should be allowed to thrive in a student-welcoming, healthy ecology of knowledge encounters, exchange, and research.

Drawing from my own practice of teaching and assessing, I work reflexively to arrive at suggestions and conclusions, additionally offering a creative practice case study. This aims to illustrate a perspective that considers the possibilities of process and product within a performance subject area context. The case study also suggests that the specialty of the university is manifested in the opportunity to operate in a research space where originality, innovation, and new insights are valued. Given the proposal around a documentation method of sharing knowledge for assessment submissions of practical work, I necessarily locate this research alongside the ever-evolving Artistic Research (AR) and Practice-Research (P-R) histories and debates. This is also in support of the consideration of the facilitation of a realistic and conducive treatment of space and time that is appropriate to the special conditions and cultures that define the epistemological space of performance and its variations (such as the time required, as well as the events and equipment needed to train a technique or rehearse a performance). In light of this, I hope to establish viable ways to prioritize a space in learning design that can be at one with the epistemological space — made up of technique classes, workshops, rehearsals, and performances, for example—so that originality, innovation, and new insights can be accessed by the students and shared for assessment in ways that fulfill the knowledge-based stance within the specialist space of the university. In this idea of assessing through critical accounts of practice rather than

the practice itself, I seek to make more time for technique training and creative practice. This is with a view to removing the high stakes of assessment from self-expressive performances, so that these can benefit from an open-ended environment that values emergence of skills and crafting ability, along with the time it takes to acquire them. Through a critical accounts of practice submission design, the idea being explored is that more chances for original and unexpected discoveries are available and valued, where performance culminations can be present, but not seen as a final end to that piece of learning.

Literature Review

If the specialty of the university is the generation of new knowledge, then the notion of research as a general approach will arguably be present in the student learning experiences and their outcomes. This, then, arguably defines and distinguishes the choice to participate in arts subjects at the university, as opposed to pursuing another type of training or educational institution. The Vienna Declaration on Artistic Research 2020 (VDAR2020) asserts that "Higher Arts Education Institutions have a responsibility to conduct AR" and are "required to offer learning and teaching programs based on state-of-the-art knowledge" (Culture Action Europe). As such, this consideration of optimal ways to assess the practice of performing arts is based in the field of AR and its context.

VDAR2020 states that AR is an area of research that has developed rapidly in the past twenty years. Peter Thomson's (2003) compilation of the email-based debate on the relationship between practice and research shows activity at the start of that twenty-year period following the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK, where international conversation around defining practice as research was subsequently instigated. Practice as Research in Performance (PARIP), a project directed by Baz Kershaw that occurred from 2001 to 2005, investigated creative-academic issues as raised by the notion of needing to define practice as research in response to the incoming assessment exercises for research in universities. These activities in the early part of the twenty-year period highlight the concern to debate the difference between practice and research, if there is even a difference; how to communicate outputs (documentation); the

details of representation and participation; and the influence on higher education subject learning, teaching, and assessment. Prior to the year 2000, consultations and quality assurance approvals for practical performance subjects agreed that mixed-mode assessments were acceptable, in that practical performances could be submitted for assessment, along with a supporting document of written work. (Melrose, as cited in Thomson, 2003).

Later, during this twenty-year period (VDAR2020), the momentum continued with further interrogation of the functionality and applicability of AR and P-R. John Freeman, in *Blood, Sweat & Theory*, discusses examples of Practice as Research (PaR, the research concept name coming before P-R), in its various forms (Freeman 2010). Adopting an expert's case study method, the account demonstrates different ways the practice of performance can qualify as research, in the shifting environment of the time, with regard to RAE (now REF, Research Excellence Framework in the UK). In 2012, Henk Borgdorff (2012) published *The Conflict of the Faculties*, which shares analysis of and insight into AR's offer, asserting a seven-element list of "Ingredients for the Assessment of Artistic Research" framework. Borgdorff's contribution here aligns AR through the structures of the Frascati Manuals, a perspective that was later adopted by the VDAR2020 itself. Annette Arlander, et al. (2016-2021) ran a significant and far-reaching research project entitled "How to Do Things with Performance." It examined performance itself and what happens when it actualizes, is documented, and is written about, addressing the ontology of performance through epistemological questions.

The fast and furious development during this twenty-year time frame reflects a period where the "relatively young field" is perhaps more precisely "young" in its experience of responding to incoming metrics systems such as RAE and REF. Florian Cramer and Nienke Terpsma (2021) instigate public debate around the contents of the VDAR2020 and make a case for AR being a much more mature field, with at least sixty years of citable examples. The authors phrase how VDAR2020 does not address artists themselves and is not, itself, written in "the spirit of art" in its use of language, which they show as relating to organizational and institutional requirements. For me, this "spirit of art" expresses

something of the case that Ben Spatz (2015) makes for "technique as knowledge." This argument goes to the very heart of artistic practices themselves, to the origin of participation that embodies a whole world of meaning, experience, and reality for those involved, as I will later demonstrate through autoethnographic detail that resonates with Richard Sennett's claim that "Technique has a bad name; it can seem soulless. That's not how people whose hands become highly trained view technique" (Sennett 2009, as cited in Spatz 2015). In my experience of teaching and researching in higher education to date, I have observed that people come to learn and to teach the art form itself, down to the very beginnings of technique itself. Responses of "We just want to dance," and crestfallen expressions upon being reminded that "the show" is an assessment submission, begin to substantiate this observation. Spatz's argument is extremely welcome in defending the epistemology of the subject area of embodied knowledge through performing arts techniques.

Therefore, in this article, I aim to explore how to preserve and continue the development of the subject's epistemology, whilst not mismatching that to academic undergraduate level assessment requirements that may be better transmitted and measured in other distinctive ways.

AR perspective and process vs. product

    Climenhaga's commentary on Pina Bausch's notion of "Process over Product" bears correlation to my thinking into equitable assessment of practical performing arts in universities:

> Bausch inverts the priorities of process and product in her rehearsals. Rather than striving toward some terminating end, Bausch concentrates on the getting there, how it is we arrive at the attitudes we have and how we express that striving in our everyday lives. […] The technique and the message of the piece stand as separate entities with the former at the service of the latter. But the technique stands as a given, and the process becomes drawing on that technique in such a way that something might be expressed. (Climenhaga 2018)

This description from Climenhaga also connects with the second part of this paper, where I explore an enhancement of freedom and continuation of practice as an ongoing

environmental condition, which need not be stopped due to performance event-based assessment submissions.

Through sharing some of the experiences from this piece of creative practice carried out within my university context as a dance and movement lecturer in the North of England, I aim to look inside this process at a range of factors and details in action. I posit that this could provide example content for assessment through critical accounts of practice and, further, for providing equitable assessment design no matter a student's starting point.

Case Study: Exhaustion V

A project conceived and made by Sandy Williams IV (USA), comprising ten installments called *The Exhaustion Series 2015-2018* found its fifth entry during the artist's residency at my university.

> I first began making these exhaustion videos as a college student, in the midst of my three-year chemotherapy treatment for Lymphoma. I trace my interest in time back to my experiences with cancer, when I first began to reflect on the beauty and sadness of endurance, or acts of resistance. In *The Exhaustion Series*, I ask each participant to perform one specific task until they are completely exhausted. The camera runs from the first motion, until they can no longer continue. (Williams 2017)

At the end of an initial introductory lecture in May 2017, Sandy called for offers to collaborate during the residency, which is where I became involved to participate as a dance performer in creating *Exhaustion V*. After I accepted the invitation, we then went on to engage in a variety of activities as we worked towards a filming day, when the video would be shot. The outcome was a thirty-five-minute YouTube film of me, in the studio where I most frequently taught, repeatedly performing the short phrase I especially choreographed for the project, until I could no longer continue. Sandy walked in a circle while filming me, equally engaging in an act of physical endurance as they maintained constant movement around me. A mirror in the space gave rise to some interesting perspective options, such as both me and my reflection being filmed simultaneously, with

Sandy also in the shot at certain moments. As I eventually tired, the movement simplified and adapted as I took on the task of endurance to keep going as long as I could.

Using the experience of this collaboration as field or "reservoir" of researchable data, as described in the post-positivist research in dance discussion by Green and Stinson (1999) in Fraleigh and Hanstein, I reflect analytically and find a way to view AR in four parts: technique, creative practice, scholarship, and critical inquiry. In my experiences of the university setting that is a research context, I find that these four elements are always at play, forming an ecology where each relies on the other. Dance performance, concept collaboration, framing in theory, and drawing new insights are examples from the *Exhaustion V* experience that account for each of the elements, respectively, with many more examples available.

This case study example came to be through multiple factors: the artist researcher originating interest, an exploration of self-expression, and a space in which to communicate, exchange, and collaborate. The leading factor was artistic practice, such as filmmaking, concept design, dance performance, and choreography, for example, a free flow of creative practice supported by expressively developed technical skills. I believe that this "art first" energy, stemming from an ongoing creative practice coming from both Sandy and myself, could define a good environment for undergraduate students, in that their own interests and motivations could be at the forefront of their studies, while the epistemology of the subject area could take priority in the domain. Could the crafting, creating, filming, and performing be the starting point language and, in "the spirit of art," allow art to find its own way and breathe the type of air it needed, for the academic standard to be met and demonstrated in the most suitable way for "the spirit of the academy"? If the two spirits are distinct from each other, as is implied by Michael Hiltbrunner, it is here where I feel passionate about there being a differentiated approach and that one need not conform or try to become the other (Hiltbrunner, 2019, as cited in Cramer and Terpsma 2021). I hope that through my suggestion for assessment design in this article, more art can be made, not less, as I suggest the assessment of degree-level academic skills through critical accounts of artistic practice instead of the art itself.

Author context and point of view

I got into dance training at the age of eight years old, circa 1988, in a dance school setting in the Northeast of England, having looked down at the soles of my feet one day and said to my mother, "I want to be a tap dancer." I must have known about this dance form from seeing it, perhaps on the television or another source. "That's what I want, right there," commented Will Lawton, a Bronx based martial arts studio owner describing the moment he decided to dedicate to martial arts practice, based on the specific time and place of experiencing the conditions of a room, the people in it and what they were doing (Murphy 2006, as cited in Spatz 2015). Perhaps this initial draw was also to do with making sounds through bodily expression, as dance soon became a vital way for me to express myself, make noise, and have a voice in a way that was not accessible without the medium of dance. The dance school was formal in structure, as we worked through exam syllabi and took part in repertory performances, whether in a theatre or other cultural venues such as museum or city parade. Performance, style, and technique were the main areas of focus under an overall umbrella of self-expression. I studied tap, but then quickly accumulated more styles into my weekly attendance of modern jazz, disco (a freestyle competitive dance form), and Latin American forms. Choreography and creativity were present only in small amounts, such as choreographing a personal introduction to a set syllabus dance or interpreting beats and rhythms in my own way to demonstrate competency in tap dance. Both examples were reserved for the more advanced and senior stages, as I worked up through exam grades and medals.

When I entered the contemporary dance world at age 16, through an after-school course in GCSE dance[1] (then, not on offer as an academic subject in my mainstream school education), my particular draw was the element of theatrical performance. The aspect of bare feet and requirement for pure alignment (as in: no flicked wrists—so habitual in my disco and Latin training) was something new for me, something to question and have to understand. This course, in contrast to my dance school training, placed much more emphasis on creating new movement, choreographing, and composing. Movement could be original and unique; it did not have to follow a technique syllabus, and the participants had a range of backgrounds, including those who did not have dance school training like

me. Creative practice and being exposed to contemporary movement techniques united this mix of backgrounds, as we all discovered our own creativity and found new ways to move on an equal footing. In the end, I never completed this year-long after-school course, as by the time the spring came, I had a chance to be part of a production of *West Side Story* in an Amateur Operatic Society in a large professional theater. It conflicted with the course, and I opted for the stage performance experience, connecting more to my dance school experiences of performance and dance styles and perhaps to my ambitions to perform.

I give this context to illustrate just one example of a whole world of knowledge and perspective that every person brings to university. I query the precision of purpose in grading and therefore making comparisons based on individuals' self-expression and personally arrived at performances through various kinds of practical performance work submissions. What could be gained from making space for everyone's unique and individual self-discovery and self-development and removing the prospect of fitting this to assessment criteria and then placing a grade on it? From my vantage point, it seems that a fairer assessment design in practical performing arts in universities, is one that focuses on knowledge transmission through ways that are relevant to general academic standards whilst also appropriately expressive of the epistemological world in question. If there is a communication for assessment purposes (a submission) that is based in thoughts, ideas, solutions, analysis, and critical skills that result from the ballet classes, the creative project, the interdisciplinary collaboration, the musical theatre performance, then I believe this could allow for a healthy, motivational climate: a climate where personal inquiry and self-expression through practical performance work need not be limited or "scared off" due to the prospect of it being graded, having a value metric attached to it.

The desire to make improvements through these autoethnographic and reflexive methods connects to operating in the unique and special environment of the university. As commented on already, it is an overall research context that is sustained by creativity, innovation and critical thinking inclusive of all who are academically engaged in subject areas, not least of all the students.

Conclusion

Ben Spatz talks about the ways in which degree programs are becoming instrumental in their application in relation to a world of employment, but they defend the subject area itself as existing as epistemology and literacy. I perceive that in the same way; I too have this response, to keep the cultures of the epistemology in focus and prioritized, so that "applied" versions can stand a chance.

On the other hand, the investment of studying at university pays off in increased employment opportunities, in many if not most cases. If qualifications are based purely on academic standards, and not professional or industry vocational skills, as I have suggested, how do assessment outcomes and skills or knowledge acquisitions translate into, say, a professional dance world? How do they qualify? Does there need to be an additional safe or unsafe marker of work that could be either awarded by the university and wrapped into general assessment or alternatively through a partnering, external body to provide an industry-based validation?

Student perspectives show potential for this vision for assessment. For some within my context, the assessment of practical work through critical accounts of it, was at one point going to be an enforced reality anyway, due to the compromised viewing possibilities created by various 2021 UK lockdowns that meant teaching practical work online needed some adaptation. Feedback from students showed an understanding of the need for assessment options, while there was an idea of disappointment at a perception of nothing being at stake in everything that had been worked for in a culminating performance. One student who tried out the method in a final year assessment, a solo project that I supervised, spoke of initial concern that not submitting a dance performance of the "exploring somatic practice project," would affect their ability to properly meet all of the learning outcomes. However, these concerns were then far outweighed by the protection of the practice offered by the critical accounts assessment design, and the student spoke of the extra time that could be spent developing and reflecting on the practice right until the end of the module. This student also spoke of several real-world benefits to working in this way, including making performance and setting up a business. Thanks to the performative document that

was submitted, as an assessor, I could focus on the knowledge and insights gained from the extensive dance studio work explored and completed, as well as the quality of how it was being communicated with regard to criticality, academic rigor, and structure of the case presented. The document contained scholarly writing, writing to convey practice, images, video, and sound. It was formatted through presentation slides that aided the cognition of what was being presented, in my experience.

The idea of assessing practical work via critical accounts of practice, in the context of the university, throws possibility towards potential online or remote methods, which have seen rapid growth and demand since 2020. Better access for some has ensued during this time, as well as greater ease in bringing together worldwide networks. The idea of assessing practical work through critical accounts of practice rather than the practice itself is arguably worthwhile, but perhaps on the flip side, the argument for it, more importantly raises questions of fairness, democracy, equity and equality for students in higher education assessment situations. Ultimately, my idea and application come from a place of wanting to promote, grow, and advocate for the subject area, including others that revolve around practice. There will exist many ways to address these challenges and areas for improvement, and here I have offered one working perspective.

Endnotes

[1] GCSE (General Certificate of Education) is a qualification normally taken at age 16 in schools at England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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