

The curious nature of negotiating studio-based practice in PhD research: Intimate bodies and technologies

Francksen, K

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Routledge Handbook for Practice-Based Research

Title: The curious nature of negotiating studio-based practice in PhD research. Intimate bodies and technologies.

By: Kerry Francksen

Abstract

This short retrospective considers some of the important activities involved in negotiating practice in PhD research. By reflecting on my investigations into the embodied and somatic practices of moving in media-rich environments, I focus on my project *Intimate Bodies and Technologies: A Concept for Live-Digital Dancing (Intimate Bodies)* as a specific case in point. In my retrospective, I contemplate the often complex, changeable, and multi-layered processes of negotiation practice-based research, and discuss key topics such as methodology and knowledge as practice. Specifically, I reflect on some of the practicalities of exploring practice via a studio-based investigation and highlight a number of key discoveries that were encountered during the process. While the subject of *Intimate Bodies* is particular to the areas of dance performance and digital media, the methods and strategies developed are also applicable across a range of practical subjects. For example, the interconnections between practice and theory, as they played out in the studio context, highlighted some key landmark activities that necessitated a changed approach. This helped to define the emerging thesis and ultimately enabled me to explore the production of knowledge via practice. As such, some of the discoveries made pose interesting questions for the practice-based researcher.

1. Introduction. Negotiating the terrain of practice: Why a PhD?

I work as an artist primarily engaged in the medium of dance as a choreographer, dancer, and educator. I am fascinated by the exceptional capabilities dance has to convey and articulate human nature through embodied expression. My passion over the last 20 years has been to explore the unique knowledge a dancer has as both a maker and a performer. A dancer's valuable insights can be tricky to identify because of the indefinable and often ineffable nature of movement. I have therefore been examining how a dancer's embodied inventiveness and understanding can both be realised and ultimately understood. To do this, I have been seeking new situations in which to inspire movement making. Over the last ten years, I have been engaged with the exciting developments in digital dance performance. My work focuses on the dancer's unique understanding of this new medium and, importantly, champions the rich perceptual and embodied knowledge she has of moving within media-rich environments (for example, see figure 1). This is both the subject and originality of my PhD research.

My exploration into *Intimate Bodies* comprised a largely qualitative and empirical study. In terms of my practice-based research, embodied experience was crucial for the knowledge I uncovered. My study was therefore conducted as

an original investigation into the dancer's insights and appreciation of perceiving and generating movement from inside the embodied experience. It was through an ongoing and principled enquiry into the practice itself that enabled me to explore and test such insights. Without the practice, my discoveries would not have arisen. Essentially, it was searching into the what, how and why of moving that took me on an interesting journey into PhD research.

Importantly, I recognise Candy and Edmonds' suggestion that, "an important distinction between personal practitioner research and doctoral practice-based research is the form that the knowledge generated takes" (2018:66). For me, the work I was doing was not personal practice research because the knowledge and insights gained were centred on the dancers' embodied experiences, and my study was largely based on the continuous discovery of new movement potentials. And so, rather than working towards a commission, or focusing on making an end product (i.e. a dance piece), my motivation was based on exploring an emerging set of behaviours, which could reveal a unique way of approaching movement within digital dance performance from which others could benefit.

Figure 1 *Shift digital dance (2011)*

Source: Photograph: Kerry Francksen

I began to discuss each work as an encounter within a generative system. For that reason, I did not create fixed works as a predefined sequence of movements; rather, I created an ongoing practical enquiry into working in real-time within this system. These were distilled into three moments when the work was shared with an audience. Sharing the work with an audience, in effect, concentrated those explorations into what might be called a performance. However, throughout the process, I was very clear that these works were a measure of the ongoing journey, and each one was a constituent feature of the other. Consequently, the written submission became an analysis and document of the overall process or methodology. My submission includes images from the three works and was interspersed with dancer testimonials and significant moments of interaction. There was no video documentation included in the submitted thesis (purposely); however, the examiners were given video recordings of some of the ongoing practical investigations, and crucially they were asked to experience a version of the work live.

So, as a practicing artist, why undertake research in this way? Nelson makes a caseⁱ for arts practice as knowledge producing, which in and of itself articulates a research inquiry (2013). In my case, the dancer was presented with a challenge: *How might the integration and influence of digital media within her performance environment inspire her to generate and open-up to new movement potentials?* Because my intrigue was based on the very act of making movement, I needed to find a basis for enabling the dancers to engage in a fluid and open-ended process.

That is not to say that such an enquiry could not have been explored in a purely artistic context. On the contrary, such an exploration could just as easily be undertaken outside of the academy. However, I realized very quickly that this project needed a different approach, and that my usual artistic and choreographic methods were too reliable for extending the dancers' decision-making processes in this scenario. On reflection, it was framing the dancing through academic scrutiny that helped me to explore a process that was based on discovery rather than adhering to the conventions of [my] dance making per se. Those challenges I encountered enabled me to unpick my understanding of some of the landmark activities of movement-making in both a deep and sustained way. For example, I began to explore a number of situations, some of which were designed to integrate the mediated image into the dancer's physical and perceptual environment (see figures 2 and 3). In such situations, her responses to the emerging real-time digital media meant that her perceptual awareness and subsequent management of the movement changed. This, alongside other interactive environments I designed to heighten and extend her responses further, helped me to develop an effective framework for generating new forms of embodied knowledge within a generative and dynamic system.

Figure 2 *Shift digital dance (2011)*

Source: Photograph: Kerry Francksen

Figure 3 *Shift digital dance (2011)*

Source: Photograph: Kerry Francksen

All the research questions that arose came from the experiences of moving that were explored during my practice-based research. Essentially, my PhD sought to discover how moving in media-rich environments might afford the dancer with new and/or alternative choices for perceiving and making movement in such situationsⁱⁱ. The dancer's abilities to activate movement as part of a living process meant that the methods I used to understand and assess the developing research were constantly shifting and being redefined. This is what sat at the heart of the practice itself. In the end, the PhD became its own generative system, and my originality of knowledge was the method itself.

Consequently, the interconnections between the mediums of dance, image, sound, and the concentration on academic enquiry called for approaches that were multi-modal and theoretically varied. By its very nature, the creative process did not follow a linear logic, and the integration of conceptual ideas and philosophical readings emerged as part of the developing practical explorations. For that reason, I set about designing an appropriate testing ground for embodied discovery, which meant that the research needs were driven by both the physical and conceptual insights of the dancers. The research process itself had to provide the dancer with a challenge: how to encounter technology not as prosthesisⁱⁱⁱ but as a characteristic and qualitative function of her evolving movements. In the end, the very nature of my research helped to define the overall shape of the PhD and the studio environment itself became an important breeding ground for change.

2. Journeys through the mire: establishing methods and creating positive frameworks for practice

Given my focus on the continual discovery and transformation of movement, my approach needed a level of flexibility and openness. This meant that the research process was dependent on establishing methods that could inspire the dancers to move differently. Significantly, the experience of moving was fundamental to the construction, evaluation, and development of any new knowledge, and this played out most meaningfully within a practical setting (for me this included a number of settings: a video-recording studio – see figure 4 – my kitchen, a basement, a variety of corridors, and any other corner I could commandeer to set up a screen, a camera and a projector – guerrilla style studio set-ups where a must!).

As Matthew Reason describes,

The particular forms of knowing that can be generated through arts practice are those of embodied, tacit and material knowledge, where discovery happens through the action of arts making, and in reflection in and upon that action. Located within action, the particular claim of practice-based research is that it offers not just a different way of doing things than more traditional research methodologies but rather, and more importantly, access to different forms of knowledge (2012: 195).^{iv}

The usefulness of having to establish what new and original knowledge might be as the dancers embarked on a journey of discovery became instrumental in helping me to define my approach and is what led me towards a practice-based research enquiry. Most notably, the degree of uncertainty and serendipity that my enquiry necessitated, did, as Smith and Dean remark, challenge the idea of “knowledge as being an understood given” (2009: 2). The idea that knowledge, as they propose, “take[s] many forms and occur[s] at various different levels of precision and stability...” (2009:4) became a way for me to articulate different forms of knowing through movement practice.

Understanding the nature of my research was a massive clue for defining the method. It was tricky trying to narrow-down or define those methods I should follow. In many ways, these struggles for definition were important for making me realise that my PhD’s fundamental features (i.e. the somatic and perceptual insights of the dancers) would become instructive of the methods I needed to use – much like being able to let go of my usual methods for choreographing described earlier.

Similarly, reading, exploring and analysing methods related to this particular field of research was helpful; but in my experience, it was paying attention to the needs of the practice, or more excitingly the problems^v inherent in the practice, which enabled me to develop an approach that was more meaningful to me. In essence, I allowed the work to tell me what the appropriate methodological response should be. This was at once both scary and exhilarating!

This realisation supported the prospect for my developing practice-based research to be unstable, unpredictable, and somewhat unsystematic in its presentation of originality. Once I realised this, I was able to begin to conceive of the practice in a new and dynamic way. For any artist, in any discipline, I believe that searching for the character and essence of an individual's work is key to defining the right approach. Some of the most exciting moments of my research were delving into the characteristic features and qualities of what I do and why I do it.

Figure 4 *Betwixt & Between* (2013)
Source: Photograph: Michael Huxley

In my thesis, I describe my research process as an iterative cycle of *moving, responding, reflecting, programming, and experiencing*, in which the practical and theoretical insights gathered became interchangeable. This draws on Candy and Edmonds (2018) and Nelson (2013) who discuss variously the reciprocal processes of practical, reflective, and conceptual methods in practice-based research. My creative process was by no means orderly. The nature of the research required the dancers to constantly change and adapt to respond to the experiential insights being gathered in the studio. Thus, my working methods developed from establishing a systematic approach, rather than following a codified method. However, that was due to the practical characteristics of the research, which became instructive of a self-generating process. This was practical, theoretical, and philosophical in nature.

In many ways, grappling with what my method should be in the end made me realise that I could not fit my research into any tried and tested methods. There was no off-the-shelf approach that I could follow. Consequently, the knowledge that arose comprised a method for understanding and subsequently generating new movement potentials within mediated environments. Something I learnt through my process was that the work itself – practicing in the studio – could reveal the specific method. Whilst a challenging and somewhat scary thing to do, I would argue that there is a case for encouraging any practice-based researcher to remain unfixed in their pursuit of the right method (if there is such a thing?). In many ways, one of my 'ah-ha' moments was realising that I needed to let the work lead me.

Trying to articulate such a continuously changing and slippery process can prove tricky, particularly when it comes to presenting your findings at, for example, a formal or annual review. The need for constant re-invention, therefore, became a key factor for my analysis and evaluation, and this was written into the formal documentation throughout the PhD. Being clear that the research was based on rigorous inquiry and research was of course important, and this helped me to structure my thinking. However, not only did I apply academic scrutiny to help explain and validate the practical outcomes, but I also found that my theoretical and philosophical engagement became a mechanism for allowing the practice to be unraveled. In accordance with Candy's chapter in this handbook, the trajectory of my research was dependent on what I consider

to be a type of theory-in-action, whereby the dancers were able to identify, act upon, and ultimately effect a change within an emerging and generative system. In effect, this process became a way to un-pick my understanding. I became more interested in finding ideas or theories that problematised what I was doing over and above trying to identify a logical method of practice, although of course contextualizing the work within current paradigms was important.

3. Unravelling practice

Once I was able to trust that the method was in the process of revealing itself, I was able to reach another turning point: managing the relationship between theory and practice. Rather than thinking about writing as a means of explaining, my theoretical and philosophical application helped me to challenge what was arising, and importantly helped me to manage a process that placed me in counterintuitive position of actively wanting to become less familiar with what I was doing. My initial feelings of wanting to demonstrate the success of the practice gave way to a somewhat alarming but exhilarating process of placing myself in situations that could inspire a sense of the unknown. Consequently, by recognizing a need for spontaneity and risk, I began to find different ways to define the research imperatives.

As a consequence, certain theories became instructive for the arising practice, and in equal measure, the practical enquiries helped to drive the theoretical questioning. Crucially, the performance works I submitted as part of my PhD became instruments for uncovering a number of key insights concerning the dancers' perceptual and experiential responses. Notably, my PhD was submitted as a portfolio of works accompanied by a written document that provided a textual analysis of the significant insights gained throughout the research process.

Another tricky aspect of my work was how best to document, what was, a living and evolving process. It was extremely important that all my works were experienced. Due to the nature of the knowledge building, those individuals who shared the work with me (both collaborators and audience alike) also became instructive of the emerging behaviours. Significantly, the experiential encounters of all who experienced the work became affective^{vi} within the system. This meant that traditional forms of documentation did not always capture the important nuances of my practice, or the embodied experiences generated throughout the system. This is why I used a combination of video and photographic documentation, reflective journals, audience interviews and performer/audience feedback. It was also very important that the examiners were able to experience my work for themselves via live performance events (which also presented its own set of challenges, i.e. having to perform right before one's viva voce examination – something I do not recommend).

4. In summary – breeding grounds for practice

The key to the knowledge I uncovered was the dancer's awareness of how to 'be' in such environments. The explicit focus on embodied practice was therefore

crucial for developing such a perspective, and particular methods for creating an encounter with visual and aural materials continued to shape the portfolio of works. While my thesis does not propose a step-by-step guide to making what I termed 'live-digital' dance, it does offer a purposeful framework for re-considering the difficult relationships between bodies and mediated images (see figure 5 for an illustration of how these live-digital encounters materialized). What is more, such a process brought about methods that, in and of themselves, established a non-binary relationship between a human dancer and her mediated presences. This was what ultimately answered the main question of the thesis: *how to challenge the dominance of the digital*, and which allowed me to present an original methodology to the field.

Figure 5 *Betwixt & Between* (2013)

Source: Photograph: Michael Huxley

For any artist, the decision to undertake PhD research is fraught with many challenges and wonderful opportunities. On reflection, my own experiences point towards allowing practice – or otherwise said the doing of the practice – to guide you through the academic rigor of PhD research. For me, it was forefronting the experiential encounters and charting the exciting happenstances of live and digital materiality that helped me to unpick some of the fundamental building blocks of my own artistic practice. Gathering knowledge through embodied, practical, and philosophical exploration helped me to define and expand the knowledge I discovered *in* practice. Significantly, it was the practice itself that formed the basis for new knowledge. As I have described, this journey could only have taken place in the breeding ground of practice, within a studio setting. In the end, it was the curious nature of having to negotiate what Nelson describes as “the making visible of an intelligence which nevertheless remains fundamentally located in embodied knowing” (2013:40), which inspired an ongoing method for practice that I am still pursuing to this day.

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ⁱ As an artist engaged in embodied practice, I found Robin Nelson's discussion of 'doing-knowing' particularly useful. In his book he develops the idea that different modes of knowledge production can be achieved through a multi-modal research enquiry. Via his model titled, "Modes of Knowing: Multi-mode Epistemological Model for PaR", Nelson illustrates how 'doing-knowing' can encompass different 'modes of knowing (tacit, embodied-cognition, performative' (Nelson 2013: p. 38). Significant to my research was how new knowledge can be gained through perception and experience.

ⁱⁱ Please see my chapter 'The Implications of Technology in Dance: A Dancer's Perspective of Moving in Media-Rich Environments' (Francksen 2018)

ⁱⁱⁱ I refer here to Erin Manning's notion of 'prosthesis in her article *Prosthetics making sense: Dancing the technogenetic body*.

^{iv} For a similar reading of dance as a form of knowledge see Ann Pakes 'Knowing through dancemaking. Choreography, practical knowledge and practice-as-research', in *Contemporary Choreography. A critical reader* (2009).

^v I use the term problem here to represent the positive opportunities in rethinking the relationships between choreography and performance described by Bojana Cvejić. She states, "Choreography doesn't merely precede performance as the creative process that then culminates in an event, nor can it be reduced to a technical, craft orientated definition... The making continues to operate in the performing in the sense that its problems persist and give rise to different solutions in the performing of, attending to, and also thinking beyond the spatio-temporal event of the performance" (2015:14).

^{vi} I use the term affective in the context of Erin Manning's discussion of an ecology of forces, she states, "Affect, understood along the lines of Whitehead's concept of feeling, is a transductive force that propels being to become across the phases of its individuation. Affect is of milieu... Affect activates the very connectibility of experience" (2013:26). Such theories therefore became useful as a means to understand the experiential encounters of the work, especially in terms of the dancers' connectivity within an evolving situation. Again, the nature of the work directed me towards particular theories/concepts that were meaningful to the practice.