A connective model for the practice-led research exegesis: An analysis of content and structure

Abstract

Since the formal recognition of practice-led research in the 1990s, many higher research degree candidates in art, design and media have submitted creative works along with an accompanying written document or ‘exegesis’ for examination. Various models for the exegesis have been proposed in university guidelines and academic texts during the past decade, and students and supervisors have experimented with its contents and structure. With a substantial number of exegeses submitted and archived, it has now become possible to move beyond proposition to empirical analysis. In this article we present the findings of a content analysis of a large, local sample of submitted exegeses. We identify the emergence of a persistent pattern in the types of content included as well as overall structure. Besides an introduction and conclusion, this pattern includes three main parts, which can be summarized as situating concepts (conceptual definitions and theories); precedents of practice (traditions and exemplars in the field); and researcher’s creative
practice (the creative process, the artifacts produced and their value as research). We argue that this model combines earlier approaches to the exegesis, which oscillated between academic objectivity, by providing a contextual framework for the practice, and personal reflexivity, by providing commentary on the creative practice. But this model is more than simply a hybrid: it provides a dual orientation, which allows the researcher to both situate their creative practice within a trajectory of research and do justice to its personally invested poetics. By performing the important function of connecting the practice and creative work to a wider emergent field, the model helps to support claims for a research contribution to the field. We call it a connective model of exegesis.

Introduction

Since the formal recognition of practice-led research in the mid-1990s, postgraduate research candidates in art, design and media have increasingly submitted creative works along with an accompanying written document or ‘exegesis’. Practice-led research is a unique research paradigm because it situates creative practice as both a driver and outcome of the research process; it also positions the researcher in a unique relationship with the subject of the research. The exegesis, therefore, cannot simply replicate the traditional thesis models of the sciences and humanities. It initiates a new form of academic writing.

During the past decade various exegetical models have been proposed in university guidelines (see Milech and Schilo 2004) and in the literature on research methodologies (see, for example, Scrivener 2000; Milech and Schilo 2004; Barrett and Bolt 2007; Biggs and Büchler 2009). Some authors have differentiated the emerging genre of the exegesis from the dissertations or theses of other academic fields (indeed this is part of the scope of the TEXT Journal in Australia and the Writing PAD project in the United Kingdom). And some writers have begun to evaluate small sample groups of exemplars (for example, Melles (2007) has compared three design exegeses and Paltridge (2004) has compared eleven art and design Master’s exegeses). However, most academic writing on the exegesis remains at the level of proposition, and, as Grieg (2009) has suggested in his recent review of the literature, much concerning the exegesis remains subject to debate – including its function, its form, its relationship to the creative work, and even the term itself.

Meanwhile, practice-led research students (and their supervisors) have faced the challenge of developing an exegesis that allows them to position their practice as a form of academic research and, at the same time, do justice to its invested poetics. Across many faculties, in several countries, there has been much experimentation around what content to include in the exegesis, how to structure it, and what voices and writing styles to employ.
Now, with a substantial number of exegeses archived within university libraries and online repositories, it is possible to progress discussions from what the exegesis might be to what the exegesis is becoming. By analysing the many examples that have been submitted for examination, we can move beyond speculative and propositional discourse to empirical analysis. In addition, we can draw upon a substantial evidence-base as we consider the strengths and challenges of particular models.

In this article we present the findings of a content analysis conducted on a large, local sample of exegeses. Through this analysis, we have identified an emerging model of exegesis, which includes particular types of content and, perhaps more surprisingly, a quite particular structure. We map this model onto other models previously described in the literature. We then go on to consider why this model may have arisen – despite the challenges it presents – and reflect on the value it offers to the researchers.

1. The study
In 2006, co-author Jaaniste conducted a detailed analysis of a large, local sample of completed exegeses. The aim of this study was to investigate what types of content, topics and information were covered, how the content was ordered, and whether any structural patterns emerged. The sample group comprised 59 Masters and Ph.D. exegeses, produced by practice-led researchers in the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology between 2002 and 2006. The length of the exegeses varied considerably, from 5000 to 60,000 words, depending on the degree type and proportional breakdown of the practical and written components. The disciplinary bases of the researchers included visual arts, creative writing, film, contemporary performance, dance, music and interactive media. (Candidates in other disciplines in the faculty – including fashion, visual design and journalism – have also been awarded practice-led research higher degrees subsequent to the sample period.) Twenty-five principal supervisors were associated with the sample group, and the entire supervision pool (including the secondary supervisors) totalled 39.

1.1 Methodology and methods
The methodology employed in the study was content analysis. An established research tool in the social sciences and humanities, it is commonly used for the quantitative and qualitative evaluation of written and visual texts. Content analysis involves the identification of patterns within a communication or across related sets of communications, through the observation of recurrent words, themes or content sets and categories (Stemler 2001). Holsti describes content analysis as ‘[a] technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages’ (Holsti 1969: 14). The ‘inferences’ to which Holsti refers include the
antecedents, characteristics and effects of a form of communication. All of these are of interest to us in relation to the exegesis, and will be considered in relation to this study’s findings.

Methods used in the study included the compilation of a list of recurrent content-types (25 in all). This was followed by the systematic charting of each exegesis into a matrix, with the occurrence of each content-type recorded and cross-referenced by page number. This mapping of content, order and overall structure was then modelled to allow for comparison across the sample.

1.2 An observed pattern

Out of this arrangement of the data, an observable pattern emerged that showed the consistent inclusion of particular types of content arranged in a persistent structure. This structure contains an introduction and conclusion and three main sections, which can be described by the following terms:

- **Introduction**
- **First main section:** SITUATING CONCEPTS
- **Second main section:** PRECEDENTS OF PRACTICE
- **Third main section:** RESEARCHER’S CREATIVE PRACTICE
- **Conclusion**

The contents and functions of each of these sections can be summarized as follows.

The *introduction* announces and frames the research project. It typically articulates the research topic and provides a synopsis of the project as a whole (including both the exegesis and creative works, and how they relate to one another). It briefly situates the project within its field of practice and outlines the overarching methodology and methods used (which may include strategies of making, presenting, documenting, reflecting, reading and conceptualizing). Some researchers also begin the introduction with a short explanation of the personal or social background of the research, or its impetus.

The *situating concepts* section frames the research through an explanation of the key concepts that situate the research and practice. As the ‘theoretical’ or ‘conceptual’ part of the exegesis, this section includes the definitions of key terms, an explication of key issues and concerns in the field(s), and an explanation of how they have been understood within the literature. It also establishes a theoretical framework for understanding the practice. Some researchers focus on one central concept and theoretical perspective, while others work through a cluster of themes. The more hybrid and inter-disciplinary the project, the more likely it is that multiple concepts are covered, and in the larger doctoral projects, discussions tend to be more complex, multi-faceted and nuanced.

The *precedents of practice* section situates the practice in relation to its broader field(s). This section might also be referred to as a ‘contextual review’ or ‘repertoire review’. It examines the key precedents.
in the field and positions them in relation to the broader cultural world in which they operate. It thus establishes the ground for understanding the relationships and distinctions between these key precedents and the researcher’s practice. Some researchers map out a long history of associated practice, stretching back decades or even centuries, while others focus on recent exemplars, depending on the fluidity of the field. Some researchers focus on a few practitioners or exemplars and provide an in-depth discussion on them, while others draw on many examples in a broader discussion of the field.

The researcher’s creative practice section describes the creative process, including the methodology and methods, as well as the creative works at the heart of the project. It may include how the research unfolded in practice, the process of discovery, and the methods of development, iteration and review. It may include a discussion and description of the creative artifacts that have been realized within the research project. It may also include an analysis or discussion of the reception of the creative practice in exhibition, performance or implementation. Some exegeses include the process or form of the documentation as well as the archival process. Importantly, this section tends to link back to the situating concepts and precedents of practice sections, and thereby draws a relationship between the researcher’s practice and the established field.

The conclusion summarizes the key issues arising from the research in terms of what was discovered, achieved, established and argued. It can also point to possible pathways, practices and concepts that have opened up as a result of the research, and propose potential directions for future research.

In the majority of cases, these sections (concepts, precedents and practice) are not discrete, but operate together to form an integrated whole. Through the assistance of thematic frameworks and through-lines, sections refer back and forth to connect the creative practice to the broader field(s), and illustrate how the creative practice extends and makes a contribution to the field.

1.3 Correlation

The content clustering and structural arrangement that is described above is evident, in principle, in approximately 85 per cent of the exegeses analysed, while approximately 50 per cent of the exegeses have followed the pattern almost exactly. This is a significant correlation. However, it is important to note that variation exists within the model – in relation to the relative size and emphasis given to each section, the names used for each section, and the way sections are mapped across chapters. For example, in some instances the situating concepts and precedents of practice sections appear together under one chapter title, while the researcher’s creative practice occupies several subsequent chapters, each with different themes. And, in some instances, content listed within the sections described above (such as methodology) may occupy its own separate chapter. Variation also exists outside the model – some exegeses covered the sections in a slightly different order, and a small number of outliers did not cover all of the sections, omitting either a discussion on the researcher’s own creative practice or a discussion on established precedents and concepts in the field.
2. Discussion

We begin our discussion with some important caveats. First, while the model that we have observed relates to some aspects of various exegetical schemas that have been proffered by methodologists (e.g. Scrivener 2000; Gray and Malins 2004; Barrett and Bolt 2007; Biggs and Büchler 2009), we would emphasize that what we have presented is not a proposition for the exegesis, but a description of what we have found. Second, it should not be interpreted as a 'prescription' or 'recipe' for the conduct of research or the process of writing an exegesis. Neither the practice-led project itself nor the writing of the exegesis tends to unfold in a linear fashion, but rather through an ongoing dialogue between the practice, concepts and precedents. That is, there might be no correlation between the final ordering of an exegesis and the chronology of investigations, progression of ideas, answering of research questions, and the realization of outcomes during the course of the research project.

What is of particular interest to us in these findings is that the consistencies we have observed appear to have arisen despite the largely independent research journeys of the candidates. While small subsets of students have shared supervisors, the sample is large and ranges across numerous disciplines, and therefore the widespread commonalities cannot be attributed to in-common supervision. And, while postgraduate guidelines and research training in our faculty have stressed the importance of connecting the exegesis with the creative work in recent years, neither a detailed set of contents nor an exegetical structure is explicitly prescribed. Therefore, it would appear that the emergence of this three-part model (situating concepts; practical precedents; researcher’s creative practice) is not directly attributable to local personalities and active policies. Instead, we propose that many students and/or their supervisors have arrived at this model because of the benefits it offers.

In the discussion that follows we will therefore consider the model we have identified in relation to established traditions and models, and consider the relative advantages it offers to the researchers. That is, having discussed the characteristics identified by the content analysis, we will consider the inferences that can be made from them, including the antecedents of the model and the effects and implications that arise from it.

2.1 Antecedents

To understand the emergence of the exegetical model we have described, we must first consider its antecedents. These include the thesis models that are long established in other academic fields, as well as models that have been proposed or identified in the academic literature on the exegesis.

The traditional thesis model

The most commonly cited model for the thesis in the research methodology literature could be described as the five-chapter (plus introduction and conclusion) structure of the empirical sciences.
Its contents occur in the following order: introduction; literature review; methodology; data collection; data analysis; findings; and conclusion (see, for example, Thomas 2009; Birley and Moreland 1998; and Paltridge 2002). While some practice-led researchers and their supervisors inevitably turn first to this model and try to adapt it, this structure is not entirely appropriate for practice-led research projects. Some sections could be of use if modified (for example, the literature review might be recast to include precedents in practice), but other sections, such as ‘data collection’ and ‘data analysis’, would require the practice-led researcher to frame their practice as generating (or as inherently being) a form of ‘data’ that they can objectively interpret. The researcher would be cast as an impartial observer/analyst of their own practice. This would set up an inherent contradiction in which the researcher/practitioner’s internal and contingent relationship with an emergent practice is awkwardly recast as an external and ‘disinterested’ relationship. Therefore, new approaches have proved necessary.

Context and commentary models
Two alternative models of the practice-led research exegesis have been identified by Milech and Schilo (2004). The first can be characterized as a context model in which the exegesis performs the role of a contextualizing text. The researcher develops a topic related to one or more of the wider contexts of the creative practice, such as a theoretical or philosophical framework, a historical or critical analysis of related practitioners and precedents, or a review of professional and industrial conditions of the practice. We have also observed a form of the context model that provides a discussion on the subject matter of a narrative-based creative work (such as the theme of a documentary film, play or novel).

Content types and writing styles used in the context model might be adapted from various forms of arts and humanities writing genres, such as disciplinary or topic histories, theory, criticism, policy, advocacy, the codification of technique, studies of practitioners and audiences, and so on. Such writings assume an external, objective, interpretive situation of the writer as theorist, historian or analyst.

While the context model offers the reader/examiner useful insights into the broader field of the practice, it provides a limited perspective. As Frayling (1993) has memorably argued, the types of writings described above relate to research into practice (usually that of others) as distinct from research through practice. In its extreme form the context model does not discuss the researcher’s own creative practice and outcomes at all, but provides a parallel text or ‘minor thesis’, which is related to the broader field of/around/inside the project, but could effectively stand alone as an objectively voiced historical/theoretical paper. The problem with such an approach is that the researcher’s creative practice is absent. Therefore, an ambiguity arises and the practice may appear...
to be tangential to, or even irrelevant to, the thesis (and hence the degree). Moreover, an argument is not made for the value of the practice as research, since the practice itself is not discussed.

The second exegetical model identified by Milech and Schilo (2004) can be described as the commentary model. It takes the opposite approach, focusing squarely on the creative work. It performs the role of what Milech and Schilo define as an ‘explanatory annotation’, describing the creative process, the creative works, and/or the reception of the works by audiences/participants.

Various types of professional practice texts might be drawn on as genre referents for the commentary model, including artist statements that appear in the art or design exhibition catalogue, the preface in a novel, the liner notes of a music album, and so on. So might forms of writing associated with the studio process, such as reflective journals and process diaries that chart ideas, influences and processes. Milech and Schilo suggest that describing the project in the language and terms of research methodology is also a form of the commentary model (it might also be called a ‘compliance model’ because it overtly aligns the exegesis with university research guidelines and protocols that require an explicit methodology for the conduct of research). In summary, the commentary model is a personal, self-reflexive account by the researcher who speaks as an insider and who draws on what they uniquely know and have experienced in relation to their creative works and processes.

While the commentary model is insightful, and appears to solve the problems of an externally oriented objectivity and dissociation from the practice that are inherent in the context model, when used in isolation it presents a different problem. It does not connect the research project and creative practice to the wider fields that precede or surround them. Because the commentary model is internally oriented and introspective, it might create the impression that the practice is of peculiar interest to, and therefore of value only to, the researcher. More importantly, if the exegesis does not refer to what other practitioners in the field have previously achieved, it does not establish a research trajectory for the practice. It therefore cannot substantiate a case for advances of the field that might have been made through the research. That is, it weakens any claims to an original contribution to knowledge through the creative practice.

The content analysis of our faculty’s submitted exegeses identified some examples that took one of these approaches. And it should be noted that, in relation to the wider sphere, choosing one of these models might conform to particular practice-led guidelines of some universities (as noted by Milech and Schilo 2004). Both the context and commentary models have strengths and, as we will go on to discuss, are expedient approaches to the writing. However, both models, when used alone, leave the exegesis with a deficit that limits its capacity. In the context model there is an absence of discussion on the practice and processes (and sometimes even the outcomes) of the research. And in the commentary model the research and the creative practice are not framed within, or associated with, the wider field. In both models the creative practice is disconnected from the field of research in which it is situated.
2.2 A hybrid, connective model

The exegetical approach taken up in the majority of cases within our faculty, which we have described in detail above, combines the context and commentary models within its three-part structure. The contents and approaches of the context model are adapted within the ‘situating concepts’ and ‘precedents of practice’ sections for the purposes of reviewing the existing field (established ideas and practices), and the contents and approaches of the commentary model are adapted for the ‘researcher’s creative practice’ section (the researcher’s own ideas, processes and creative works). That is, the approach that we have observed incorporates these discrete and seemingly dichotomous models of the exegeses, which are respectively underpinned by academic objectivity and personal reflection upon the creative practice. The model we have identified is not simply a conjoining of these models, however. It has a distinct form and purpose: it adapts and integrates the context and commentary models to overtly connect the creative practice and its processes with its broader theoretical and practical contexts. For this reason, we call the model of the exegesis we have observed a connective model.

Challenges of the connective model – a dual orientation

Combining the context and commentary models is not a straightforward or simple process. It requires a synthesis that presents numerous challenges. These challenges pivot around the issue of orientation, by which we mean the position, posture or perspective that the researcher assumes in the writing in relation to their practice. When it comes to the exegesis, the practice-led researcher must inevitably consider the issue of orientation. This issue is implicit in various writings on the paradigmatic differences between established research traditions and the emerging field of practice-led research (see Gray and Pirie 1995; Press 1995; and more recently Sullivan 2005; Haseman 2006; Barrett and Bolt 2007; Biggs and Büchler 2009; Büchler et al. 2009, among others).

In terms of orientation, the context and commentary models are clearly dichotomous; the context model orientates the researcher to look out at what precedes, contextualizes or frames the practice, while the commentary model orientates the researcher to look inwards and to assume the perspective of an internally situated intimate relationship with the practice. In the connective exegesis, the researcher adopts a dual orientation – looking both outwards and inwards. Instead of denying one of these orientations (as the context and commentary models do), the researcher embraces and integrates them. The connective model therefore poses the challenge of how to combine two differently orientated perspectives or points of view.

Assuming a dual orientation introduces various complexities in the writing. It necessitates the adoption of multi-perspectival subject positions, and a reconciliation of the objective and disinterested situation of the observer/analyst adopted in some sections with the internal, invested position of the
practitioner assumed in others. This means that the researcher must contend with a hybrid of writing styles and genres (synthesizing theory, history, analysis and interpretation, with journaling, reflection and so on). It also requires integrating a range of voices that these different forms of writing adopt (from the formal, critical and polemical third-person voice of the theorist and historian to the personal, explorative, questioning and sometimes emotive first-person voice of the diarist and reflective practitioner). That is, the dual orientation of the connective model requires the researcher to adopt a duality of subject positions and a polyvocality.

Furthermore, the connective model carries a risk. If the differing orientations, styles and voices are simply divided into different sections or chapters of the exegesis, the research might appear to be juxtapositional or kaleidoscopic and fractured, rather than a unified and coherent account. Producing a connective exegesis that reads as an integrated whole can be genuinely complex and difficult to achieve. From a purely pragmatic perspective, choosing one or the other of the context or commentary models is much easier because it allows the researcher to assume a single orientation and hence a consistent subject position, style and voice in the writing.

**Benefits of a dual orientation**

While the complexities we have described are surely encountered along the way, the connective model we have identified does appear to have been pursued by the majority of candidates in our faculty. Clearly, this model offers a substantial benefit, which must outweigh the degree of difficulty it presents. In this section, we will discuss these benefits and argue that, through its integration of the context and commentary models, the connective model offsets the problems and deficits that arise when either is used alone, and, most significantly, provides the opportunity to situate the creative practice as a research pursuit.

To explain more precisely what we mean by situating the creative practice as research, we must first consider the functional and formal definitions that govern higher research degrees and academic research in general. The *functional* definition is concerned with the purpose of higher research, namely that the function of research is to produce a significant and original contribution to knowledge. In high-level research guidelines, this is expressed variously as ‘the creation of new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way’ (ARC 2009: 10), ‘to contribute to [or gain] knowledge and understanding’ (TEC 2005: 20; RAE 2005: 34), and ‘to increase the stock of knowledge’ (OECD 2002: 30). The *formal* definition, which is in the service of the functional definition, relates to the key elements that a research project generally requires in order to produce new knowledge, namely that it should describe a specific topic; use appropriate methods; differentiate the project within a broader field; and be communicated in an enduring, archival and professional format. These formalities can be found in higher research degree guidelines in general, as well as in the research funding guidelines of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC 2009: 66).
The content areas we have observed in the exegeses of our faculty correlate to the substance of the formal definition. The introduction clarifies the topic. It also provides the methodology and methods, which are followed up with a discussion on their application in the later ‘researcher’s creative practice’ section. The ‘situating concepts’ section further clarifies the topic by defining terms and concepts. It also establishes a relationship with the existing field of research by drawing an association with its theoretical frameworks. This relationship is elaborated further in the ‘precedents of practice’ section, which positions the practice in a trajectory of the field. The ‘researcher’s creative practice’ section details the primary research outcomes and findings of the creative practice and documents the creative practice in an archival form. The ‘researcher’s creative practice’ and ‘conclusion’ sections articulate a differentiation between the project and the field that was earlier described in the ‘precedents of practice’ section. Thus, the content areas that we have identified in our content analysis are tied, at a pragmatic level, to the formal requirements of higher research.

When integrated by a through-line and cross-referencing that connects the ‘concepts’, ‘precedents’ and ‘practice’ sections into a coherent explication, this model substantiates the creative practice as an important element of a research project that produces a contribution to new knowledge. It situates the creative practice within a wider field of concepts (first section) and precedents (second section), and then differentiates it from this established field by showing how the methods and processes of production have led to creative outcomes that advance the field in some way (third section) on the trajectory to future directions for the research (conclusion). That is, it relates the contribution of the practice to an advancement of a field (or fields). From the point of view of framing the creative practice as research, there is a clear function and value for each section of the connective exegesis, and the sections combine to create the overall argument for a contribution to new knowledge.

Moreover, while this model positions the practice as a form of dedicated research, it is also mindful of the practice itself, which is situated at its core. It allows the practice-led researcher to retain a voiced relationship with practice, and to do justice to the internal poetics and contingencies of the creative process and outcomes.

What this connective model achieves then is the positioning of the creative practice as a research pursuit while retaining the practitioner’s invested relationship to the practice. This is, we suggest, a possible explanation for why so many researchers in our faculty have independently pursued this model. They are not simply following a previous tradition (though echoes of previous traditions are retained within it), nor are they making an expedient decision, which would have led them to adopt a context or commentary model (which, as we have already suggested, are easier to contend with). Rather, the connective model offers a substantial benefit by meaningfully articulating one’s practice as a personally and poetically invested research outcome that advances the field of practice.
3. Conclusion

In this study we have sought to understand, through field evidence, the types of contents and structures adopted in postgraduate practice-led research exegeses. In doing so, we have identified the emergence of a new, connective model of the exegesis that includes specific contents and an identifiable structure. In presenting the findings of an empirical study of a substantial sample of submitted exegeses, it is our hope that they might be useful to students and supervisors in art, design and media disciplines by providing them with insights into how others have tackled these aspects of the exegesis.

In seeking to map the contents and structures of these completed exegeses, we did not set out to consider the evidencing of new knowledge, nor the orientations and voices that are at play within them, but we have nevertheless come up against these issues here – as surely as we do in our own research and supervision. It would appear that practice-led researchers are developing a new, hybrid genre of writing around creative practice, which combines a dual orientation and multiple perspectives, as well as a polyphony of voices – theorist, critic, historian, reporter and reflective practitioner. In this new genre of practice-led exegesis, the claims for new knowledge and how they are presented, as well as the situated position, orientation and voice of the practitioner-researcher, are crucial considerations, which would benefit from further consideration and discussion.

References


Suggested citation


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