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## Practice research, a new terminology

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## Practice Research: a new terminology – Derek Neale

Over the past few years I have had reason to consider disciplines that involve practice - that is, disciplines other than Creative Writing. Writers often think in terms of other art forms. But my considerations have been slightly different in the respect that they address how other artistic practices are set in Higher Education and how they are perceived as disciplines within the academy, how they are accepted, labelled and assessed (as everything is within the university system). The rest of this article is (more or less) a reproduced blog post from the Practice Research Advisory Group (PRAG) website. (<https://prag-uk.org/>) PRAG decided that there should be no hyphens in their title, a bold move which was only lessened slightly by the need for the word 'advisory'. On greater scrutiny of the site, a 'steering group' becomes apparent. It feels as if this is a new vessel, just launched, and piloting requires caution and guidance. 'Practice' has been allowed to stand without any qualifiers (practice-based, practice-led, practice-focused), but can it stand free? Should it? 'Practice research' suggests a purer form of practice, unadulterated by the demands and restraints of the educational setting. Our answer is, or should be, undoubtedly 'yes', because this feels like an important release, a finding of our feet. What follows is some context.

Many practice subjects have their more academic cousins. Creative Writing is no exception. It is the obvious younger relative within its usual (but not exclusive) academic setting: English Studies. The first UK Creative Writing MAs were launched in the 1970s, the undergraduate single and joint honours programmes proliferating in the 1990s. The first UK PhD was completed in 1990, with the Jordanian novelist Fadia Faqir at UEA. The rise of Creative Writing was popular with students, HEI accountants were starting to take note. This coincided with the first iterations of the question: what is Creative Writing research? As I have noted elsewhere and on numerous occasions, there were alternately ambitious and wry observations from those present at the subject's birth. Malcolm Bradbury, co-leader of the UK's first MA, aimed for a psychological and literary theory of creativity, relating to an exploration of 'the ways in which the instincts, the structures, the modal forms of imaginative expression can take on their purpose and pattern not as textual slippage but as original humane discovery'.<sup>i</sup> But he also described writing as playing in the sandpit and said 'it seemed somewhat strange for us to be announcing the Death of the Author in the classroom [in reference to Barthes], then going straight back home to be one'.<sup>ii</sup> In the US, the history is longer and has links to philology (see Cowan, 2018 for a fuller history <https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/current-wip-edition/articles/the-rise-of-creative-writing.html>). There Creative Writing had started earlier, there had been a different evolution and the MFA became the ideal destination qualification rather than the PhD.

In our newcomer status in the UK Creative Writing gleaned much from other practice subjects. For instance, the QAA benchmark statements for Dance, Drama and Performance and Art and Design informed and influenced the first Creative Writing QAA statement (2016) as much if not more than the English benchmark. The prequel to that inaugural QAA document was a joint teaching and research subject benchmark (2008) developed by NAWE. This prequel was itself heavily influenced by other practice subjects. Perhaps the impasse faced by all practice subjects is the impossibility of translating practice (process and output or artefact) into anything other than what it is. That is no less true for Creative Writing; the fact that the common currencies of our practice are words and narratives make it no easier and make practitioners no more willing or able to re-narrate their work. This is partly why at the end of my PhD, for instance, I felt that my critical commentary on the relationship between writing and remembering was just as much a fiction as the novel it accompanied; a different kind of fiction admittedly, but, of course, both kinds are fictions in a very positive sense, a sense that signals a route to a kind of truth.

NAWE has attempted to keep up with responses to the Creative Writing research/practice conundrum and in so doing has expanded on the three pages devoted to research in 2008's prequel benchmark document. The more recent updated research benchmark (see <https://www.nawe.co.uk/writing-in-education/writing-at-university/research.html>) asserts, perhaps in the way that younger cousins are prone to, the discipline's right to difference, its research principles: the centrality of practice and the various forms practice research might take.

The updated research benchmark has learnt from English Literature and Language, but also from other disciplines. We've inherited perspectives that can be applied to practice, if often retrospectively. These include but are not confined to critical analysis, theoretical methodologies, literary history, ethnography, as well as formal, stylistic, narratological and linguistic approaches. These opportunities form chapters, books, articles and commentaries about process, but generally fail to supplant practice as the central research method in the discipline.

In a seminar recording from 2018, a collaboration between the OU's Contemporary Cultures of Writing research group and NAWE, Robert Hampson talks through possible research outputs and research assessment strategies. See <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/contemporary-cultures-of-writing/node/25> This offers evidence of how REF assessment of Creative Writing research has evolved and continues to evolve. Practice is now more commonplace and more accepted. Typical practice outputs include novels, short story and poetry collections, creative nonfiction, scripts and performance, but these forms are constantly being expanded upon, as evident in Hampson's seminar. An interesting pointer arose in that discussion. With such outputs it is often the case that the 'research questions' – the term common to all University Research Schools - didn't precede the writing or the collecting of the creative works. Research questions become apparent retrospectively in practice subjects such as Creative Writing. I find this is a useful attitude to adopt, one which relieves the unnatural fit between creative process and bureaucratic necessity. 'Not knowing' is more important in the writing process than any obedience to a preconceived research question.

The quest to establish what practice research means in Creative Writing continues to produce vibrant responses, ones in which practice is acknowledged as central but where research significance, or what a previous blogger on the PRAG site has called *researchfulness*, has been flushed out and illuminated, hopefully without forfeiting the writing's tacit route to knowledge. Unshackling the term 'practice' from its hyphens will no doubt continue to aid its progress, along with the acknowledgement that artistic practice is an undoubted route to knowledge. The question – what is Creative Writing research? – is still being asked, but it is now firmly coupled to the awareness that playing in the sandpit is an important part of the answer.

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<sup>i</sup> Bradbury, Malcolm. 1993. "Graceful Combinations." In *The Agony and the Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, edited by Clare Boylan, 57-63. London: Penguin.

<sup>ii</sup> Bradbury, M. (ed.) (1995) "Introduction", in *Class Work: The Best of Contemporary Short Fiction*, London: Sceptre. p. viii