Reflections on the impact of creation research, practice-based research, and practice as research, and how to define and maximize that impact

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Abstract

In this contribution, I reflect on creation research/practice-based research/practice as research. I mostly explore the notion of the impact of such practices. I underline the fact that impact can mean various things depending on the type of projects: it can be emotional; it can be a way to influence; or it can act more subtly on the subconscious mind. But impact is always about the intention to induce change. I also discuss the difficulty, most of the time, to have a quantitative approach to impact, since it is often difficult to measure. I suggest, instead, to include a reflection on the planning of impact and its maximization before embarking on a project. I illustrate those points with various examples taken from my own practice.

Keywords: impact, inducing change, creation research, practice-based research, practice as research, epistemology

Introduction

I will mostly address the question of the impact of creation research/practice-based research/practice as research by detailing some strategies to define, anticipate, and maximize that impact.

What is at stake here is the impact of creation research, as well as the recognition of that impact by institutions. Impact is not something that can easily be defined, planned, or measured. But it has more to do with intentionality. What is often asked is not so much what the impact of such practice will be, but, mostly, what steps are planned, in order to take into consideration the possible impact of such practice, and to implement strategies to maximize it.

Several examples taken from my practice will be used to illustrate the impact of creation research. What is the impact of art-making with patients of a psychiatric day hospital? What is the impact of producing theatre as a benefit for health research, or for the victims of terror attacks? What is the impact of making short films that encourage empathy and compassion in the viewer?

What is Creation Research?

Let us start by defining creation research / practice-based research / practice as research.

We find various names for this paradigm of research that are close to each other but not rigorously equivalent: practice-based research (Candy, 2006; Candy & Edmonds, 2018), art as research (Macleod & Holdridge, 2006), practice as research (Elkins 2009, 2014), practice-led research and research-led practice (Smith & Dean, 2009; Easton, 2011), art practice as research (Sullivan, 2009), artistic research (Borgdorff, 2012), research in art (Borgdorff, 2012), research-creation (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012), creation as research (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2015). In the French language, we find 'recherche création' (Gosseling & Le Coguiec, 2006; Bruneau & Villeneuve, 2007), 'recherche et création' (Fourmentraux, 2011), 'recherche-création' (Giacco, Didier et al., 2020; Stévance & Lacasse, 2013), and 'recherche en création' (Martinez & Naugrette, 2020). I personally advocate, in the French language, for the term 'création recherche', which we could translate into English as 'creation research'.

Despite the polymorphous nature of this concept, which these various names are trying to embrace, we can start to grasp it by saying a few things about it. First, there are various ways of generating new knowledge, and there are various types of new knowledge that can be generated. Through practice, and through art practice, in particular, there is new knowledge to be generated, and art practice is one way to generate new knowledge. What, then, are the conditions for this knowledge to be incorporated, admitted, in the pool of "Scientific Knowledge"? Every scientific community tries to follow some concept of what constitutes science. Every scientific community comes up with its own criteria, and they change from community to community. Therefore, for research to become qualified as research, it needs to federate around it a community that would then set up its own rules for what can enter the field, and what cannot. It is not to say that every art practice has the goal of generating new knowledge to be admitted as scientific knowledge, but as soon as the word *research* is added, and this art practice is done in the context of the academic world, then this is usually the case.

As a practitioner, I am confronted, through a practice, to this notion of knowledge. Through the decisions I make while practicing, I have to mobilize some knowledge, part of it practical, part of it theoretical. But through the practice, I also generate new ideas, new concepts, new ways of making some decisions: that is, new knowledge. Part of this knowledge might not gain the status of scientific knowledge, but part might. It all depends on the ability of the practitioner to articulate this new knowledge in relation to what has already been accepted as scientific knowledge by a community. And then we come to a paradox, which is that if the knowledge resembles previous knowledge enough, it is more easily accepted by the community; but if it is too disruptive, and, therefore, mostly innovative, the risk of rejection is higher.

To make this concept of creation research clearer, let us give an example and show how practice can inform research. The example I want to use is work I did in a psychiatric day hospital a couple of years ago. In that hospital, they were experimenting with institutional psychotherapy and the therapeutic club, along the lines of work by Tosquelles (2007), Oury (2003, 2016), and Delion (2011, 2018). I met with patients and professionals, who were interested in the idea of creating a video workshop together. We discussed possible activities, and made some collective choices about the activity itself and its content. In just over 12 months, we made three short films, one of about 20 minutes, and two of about 30 minutes. The themes of the films were also chosen collectively, as well as the way to work on them. Everyone participated in the project: patients, professionals, and me. Each person could decide, at each meeting, what they wanted to do that day. How did this practice inform my research? Behind that activity, there is, for me, the intention to understand better how to help patients with psychological problems to feel better. My practice informs my research.

Let us now say a few words about the situation in France concerning creation research. In France, there have always existed two ways of studying art. One way was practical and was the prerogative of the art schools. The other way was theoretical and was the prerogative of the universities. Because of that cleavage, it has always been difficult to articulate practice and research. It is only recently that there has been some effort to bridge this gap, by asking the art schools to start developing research programs, and by asking the universities to start developing practice programs. In some cases, universities and art schools even collaborate to devise research programs that are strongly based on practice. It has become a bit easier, but still challenging, to

address some work handling both the practical and the theoretical side (see Martinez & Naugrette, 2020, for a good account of the issue).

What is Impact?

Let us now have a look at what *impact* is. There are several components of impact. One is emotional. Something or someone can impact someone or a group of people at the emotional level. Another aspect of impact is influence. Something or someone can influence someone or a group of people through doing or saying something. And there is a third and more subtle dimension of impact which we could call impressionistic. Something or someone creates an impression in someone or in a group of people, that can stay with them and subtly operate on their consciousness.

Ultimately, impact is about change. When we say we want to impact someone, it means we want to induce some change in them. Each creative project is an opportunity to create some change, to modify the representations that people have about something, to provoke some action from them, or to implicate them in an activity whose goal is to produce some positive change in them.

Before dealing with a few examples of creative works and their impacts, I would like to address two last issues concerning impact. The first one is the issue of measurement. Can we measure impact, and how? It is usually quite challenging to measure the impact of a creative activity. Sometimes, some cues can be observed, that someone has been impacted and has possibly started doing something differently. Sometimes, the success of an endeavour can be measured by quantitative data, like money that has been collected, or the number of people who have enrolled. But in a lot of cases, impact can only be approached qualitatively.

If we cannot always easily measure impact, can we at least plan for it? Can we anticipate what kind of impact our work can have, and how to prepare for it, and optimize the chances of having a bigger impact? This is usually the wisest thing to do, and is often asked by institutions offering grants for instance.

Examples

Let us review now a few examples that will help clarify various approaches of impact, its anticipation, its planning for maximization, and, in some cases, its measurement.

Let us go back, first, to the example mentioned earlier, regarding creation research. When working with patients of a psychiatric day hospital, the goals are multiple. First, the goal is to propose an activity that will be stimulating enough for them to want to invest some time in it. Second, and in my opinion, this is the major goal: we aim to induce some well-being in people whose main experience is either extreme anxiety, or lethargy, when taking medication. Therefore, the main goal is to propose an activity that will allow them to feel better, to have a better image of themselves, and hopefully to make progress towards an autonomous functioning in society. In this approach, the therapeutic goal is first, but it is a shared opinion among the proponents of institutional therapy and therapeutic clubs that an artistic practice contains all the ingredients to reach the therapeutic goal.

A patient's well-being is not so easy to measure. To decide if a patient is doing better after having participated in an activity is even harder. But there are a few things we can plan in that situation, in order to maximize the possibility that the patients will feel better. First, we can involve them in all the decisions concerning the activity: its definition, its content; and, in that case, the themes, the characters, or the role they want to play in the activity. Listening to them carefully and observing them can also help maximize the impact. When something makes them uneasy, it is very important to be able to talk about it, to create a space where they can express themselves in relation to the experience. Finally, by observing their behaviour and listening to what they say, it is often possible to orientate the activity so that they feel even better while being involved in it. But a big part of this ongoing evaluation is highly subjective, and very difficult to quantify. Even though I observed some growing involvement in the activity, and some manifestations of emotions having a positive valence, I could not say for sure that it helped the wellbeing of those patients. In this particular case, I had to rely on the previous work of some pioneers (Tosquelles, Oury, Delion), and on some conviction.

Finally, the impact of such activities is not just on the patients, but also on the professionals and on me. I have learned a lot about the patients, about myself, about what it means to suffer psychologically, and about the daily experiences of the patients. This is also an important impact of this type of work.

I also want to point out here, that the evaluation of the impact of such activities is done at several levels. The first level is the level of the activity itself, and implies the person leading the activity, that is, myself, the patients participating in its definition and in the activity, and the

professionals who are involved in it, including the psychologist in charge of the psychiatric day hospital. There is another level of evaluation at the level of the whole structure, the psychiatric hospital and, in particular, the psychiatrist in charge of the whole sector to which this particular day hospital belongs to. He decides whether to continue such activities or stop them. And he responds to a board, which constitutes a third level of evaluation. Ultimately, it is a mixture of trust between levels of evaluation and of certain indicators about the merits of an approach. One such indicator would be the number of patients that become autonomous in a given psychiatric day hospital, compared to other psychiatric day hospitals of the same sector.

The second example consists in producing shows to raise funds for charity. For instance, I directed a short play, *An Honest Arrangement* by David Wiener, for free and the actors performed in it for free, in order to collect money for the Mercy Ships association. I also directed a friend in *First Love* by Samuel Beckett, as a benefit for the Institute of the Young Blind People in Paris as well as for bone marrow research. Finally, I produced and directed a show, *Choices*, in New York, with actors performing for free and the owner of the performance space letting us use it for free, in order to collect some money for the Life for Paris Association, which supports the victims of the November 2015 terror attacks in Paris.

I must make clear here that in the example of the short play *An Honest Arrangement*, the play had already been directed in a different context, and we were simply asked if we were willing to do it again, this time for a benefit. The artistic gesture had therefore already been done, independently of the goal to collect money for the Mercy Ships, and it was merely a question of redoing it for a different purpose. In this new framework of the benefit, the question of impact then becomes more important.

In the example of the show *Choices*, the idea to do a show and the idea to do a benefit emerged together. But it had a positive effect, as generosity is often a stronger motivator to get something done than the pure will to produce art. It also makes the production of the art a bit easier as it is easier to motivate people for a benefit rather than just for an extra line on a résumé.

In these last examples, the impact is easy to measure: it is the amount of money collected, and what the various beneficiaries of this money could do with it. But there is another impact to these sorts of endeavours, which is on the people doing it. Doing something good and generous opens the heart, increases the capacity for empathy and compassion, and creates strong feelings that can also bring about some change inside ourselves. Here the process is subordinate to the

outcome, and this is subordinate in turn to the goal of raising money. But at the same time, the goal to raise money is a pretext to get some art done.

The financial impact is easy to measure, and is evaluated by the people initiating the benefit. The impact in terms of what the money is used for is measured directly by the structures who receive the money and decide how best to use it. The impact on the well-being of the people involved in doing the benefit or buying tickets for it is harder to measure, and it can only be evaluated by the people themselves.

The last example consists in trying to impact the audience of a work. When developing an artistic work, as an artist, I imagine an audience and how I would like to impact them. For instance, I made a couple of short films, *Party Time!* and *King Cake*, to bring awareness to some situations where we are indifferent to some people's solitude and, sometimes, distress. The intent of these films was to create awareness, but also to develop some empathy and, hopefully, compassion, in the audience.

It is very difficult to know if I have managed to do what I intended. The impact would depend first on the number of people that my films reach. But even if I could somehow measure this number, how could I make sure that they experienced what I intended them to experience? The only approximation of this I can propose is when the film is shown to an audience, and I am there at the end of the film to answer some questions. I can infer, to some degree, from the questions, what people got from the film, what they possibly did not understand, and, also, how they might have been affected. I remember a friend of mine who told me that, since he had seen *King Cake*, he was looking at homeless people differently, with more compassion.

But this is a situation where measuring impact is quite challenging. Also, one could wonder if this kind of impact is enough. I would argue that, even if not very ambitious, there is nothing more important than to open the heart of someone else, even if so little.

In these cases, there is not really an entity responsible for evaluating the impact of the work. In more commercial projects, there is the number of tickets sold and the financial benefit of the film that can at least show if the film reached its intended audience. But the only way to know for sure if the audience was impacted the way it was intended would be to ask an audience to fill in a questionnaire, and to ask questions that address the intended impact.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have tried to propose a definition of impact in the framework of creation research, with its three proposed dimensions: emotional, influence, impression. Could impact be defined differently? Are there other dimensions of impact?

I have underlined the difficulty to quantify impact prior to the realization of a project, but also sometimes after its realization. I have offered as an alternative to impact measurement the suggestion to plan for it, and for its maximization. How can we plan for impact and for its maximisation?

I have finally given a few examples where I tried to define impact, how I planned for it, and how I reflected on the maximization of this impact.

Is it possible and important to think about the impact of a project before embarking on it? Does it maximize the chances of having a bigger impact when doing it?

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