

18 Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities

with exploring critical questions in the material, in the same way as social science- and health-related research. It can be more overtly engaged with the researcher, perhaps, than some social science research, although a personal connection between an author, a performance artist, or an oral history context is not necessarily part of the research, and most arts and humanities work does not directly involve the researcher reporting in person, except critically and analytically. What is rarely asked for is a personal emotional response; instead, a critical and analytical response is expected. Arts and humanities researchers are perhaps more honest than others since they clearly acknowledge their own directness and involvement in the work. A literature researcher, for example, might be relating personal critical responses to a group of writers, a writer, a group of texts, or a phenomenon, theme, or issue in texts, to those of established critics, and weaving something new out of this mixture of the personal and the established. Or it can be much less personal. The research can be carried out in quite a theoretical manner, with the debates between schools of critical thought in terms of artistic product. This is much as a scientific or social science researcher measures different theories and theoretical or conceptual frameworks up against their objects of study to evaluate the appropriateness and validity of the interpretations these frameworks offer.

What are the objects of study? And how might the research be carried out? Much arts and humanities research relies upon the analysis of documents, both primary and secondary sources (primary sources are those produced at the time, and by the originator – while secondary are works about the time or the originator, about others). It is not merely personal response, and it is not merely documents that you read or see. Such a simplifying of the arts and humanities research processes could lead to a sense of amorphousness and a lack of direction. However, a possibility of charting, recording and narrating what is there rather than delving into the personal, concentrating instead on the ways in which the form can articulate any message, makes a major contribution. This latter definition of research in the arts begins to pinpoint the crucial elements. Arts research needs to ask questions of its subject matter like any other research area; just like the scientist, the artist cannot afford to be merely descriptive or narrative in his or her research recording mode. Arts and humanities research often integrates theory and practice, as do social science research areas, such as a performance artist researching their own or others' individual relationship to, and interpretation of, the world in the context of the

Some arts and humanities research uses social science strategies, particularly in subjects close to the social sciences, such as history, and cultural studies. However, much of the research in the arts and humanities uses quite different strategies, and when presented in a thesis, is of quite a different shape to that of a social science thesis. In terms of both research methods and overall final shape, some arts and humanities research can tend to seem amorphous, or even highly subjective, when it needs to be just as conceptually clearly organised and managed as any other research in any other field.

This chapter looks at:

- *Strategies of arts and humanities research*
- *Conceptual framework and research methods*
- *Self-reflection, linking theory and practice, relating the creative to the analytical*

To the uninitiated, and particularly to the highly structured social scientist, research in the arts and humanities often seems to be simply a matter of reading and responding, even responding from a subjective and personal case. This is because the object of study is itself likely to be seemingly imaginative, creative, not as tangible and situated or grounded in the real world as the objects of social science or health practice research are. What kind of change can analysis of literary texts possibly produce? How does this relate to the real world, if at all? Is it merely self-indulgence, or is there rigour involved in this kind of research also? Actually, much literary and arts research is concerned

underpinning theories. They would probably ask themselves to what extent, and in what ways at what times, do theories underpin their personal and professional practices? And how do these practices engage with, contribute to and further the development of theory? Literature theses have underpinning theories, just like any others, and many arts and humanities research areas are interdisciplinary by the time they get to Master's or doctoral research stage.

▶ **What are the major paradigms and perspectives driving the research?**

A particularly lucid explanation of different research paradigms is offered by Denzin and Lincoln (1998: 185–93), some of which appeared in Chapter 10 of this book where we looked at the *positivist and post-positivist* paradigms, for example. These focus on *internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity*, and cannot fully take account of the ways in which inquiry is interactive, sets of facts can be read in different ways, and are value-laden, not value-free. *Constructivism and critical theory* use a *relativist ontology, transactional epistemology, hermeneutic, and dialectical methodology*.

These interpretative perspectives enable an examination of relationships and values in context. While these are applied/social science- and cultural studies-oriented research paradigms and strategies, they can also be widely used by arts and humanities researchers who examine texts of whatever kind – literary, popular, film, media, documents, diaries, the personal record. They can also look at other sites for the dialogic and interactive – such as the individual in a performative space in a cultural context, the literary text in a cultural and critical context, or making a variety of cases about a cultural phenomenon. For example, Norman Mailer's semi-fictionalised autobiographical text, *Why are we in Vietnam?*, questions the political positioning and actions of others during the historical moment of the Vietnam War through a personal, critical and semi-fictional response. It sets up a dialogue which researchers can use to focus on how individuals construct meaning in a context. Many texts and performances themselves question such interactions, set up such dialectic, and encourage a post-modern approach. Others do not in themselves encourage such approaches but the researcher and critic can use all texts and performances as examples of contextualised products which say something about their times, origins and construction as part of a cultural dis-

ussion. Within this research paradigm some researchers' research is driven by investigation into interactions, and cultural and social reproduction of meaning in and through texts and their readership/audiences/performers/producers. Much feminist research, as well as ethnic research and cultural research, is informed by these paradigms.

▶ **An arts example: women's writing**

A student engaged in exploring the development of women's writing since the second wave of feminism, for example, would need to involve research methods more usually found in research focused on history and on culture and society, as well as literature, in their work. They would also have to engage with some key questions in their exploration rather than merely delineating an area. Their exploration is likely to be dialogic and interpretative, looking at how at different points in time, different constructions and representations have been produced and why, and why and how these might be critiques, and might change. Some underpinning questions might include, for example, asking: In what ways do women authors of the period engage with the developing issues of feminism? How do they challenge representations of women and their role? What kinds of writing strategies, themes, characterisation, style, and so on do they use to help them in this engagement? The development of these questions has already teased out a range of issues from the bald statement of the period and the area of study – and this suggests some underlying assumptions which will need establishing, checking out and exploring through the object of study, the texts themselves in context. Assumptions include the thought that women's writing in this period will involve itself with issues to do with the representation of women's roles, and so be aware of and to some extent enact or mediate feminist criticisms and feminist theory as it develops. Methods used would spring from these questions. Some would need to be largely documentary and to include analysis of the kind of themes and variation of the arguments in these themes in the texts, which deal with representations of women, and comments which critique the established versions of women. Some researchers have chosen to count the times that such themes emerge and so to indicate patterns and frequencies. This rather scientific approach is not so popular in the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. Equally unpopular is the merely personal response of enjoyment or empathy. There needs to be a middle way between

recognising and characterising themes, patterns and language and indicating how these serve as vehicles for argument, how language affects emotions and responses, as well as how the text is structured. The personal integrates with the analytical at every stage but both are clearly defined. And the dialogic is a key here – meanings, representations and interpretations are relative, are produced through interactions between people, events, and so on, and so on, and they change as they interact with each other. This is explored in such research even when it captures a very narrowly defined moment and set of texts or text, because it situates such moments and such expressions and texts within a constructed and interpreted frame. The researcher is always part of the research project, though not necessarily its focus.

It is important to take a critical and analytical approach to reading and artistic practices. A typical literature research project would set out to critique, explore, analyse and evaluate a body of work – that of one author or of several authors, of several texts on a specific theme or issue, texts in context in relation to the cultural context, texts in a theoretical framework, and so on. It would bring to bear specified theoretical and critical frameworks – such as historical/Marxist, psychological, linguistic, biographical, feminist, structuralist, deconstructionist, poststructuralist, postmodernist, and so on. It would need to define and defend the theoretical frameworks and the bodies of knowledge/approaches and to situate the investigation in the context of their work and other writing with similar and opposing frames and views, so that this new piece of research contributes to a *debate*. The variables as such are likely to be relationships between, for example, the author in historical context and their work – so, for example, how Thomas Hardy's novels engage with explorations of the changing experiences of families in the nineteenth century. This is a historical literary perspective. Another thesis might look at the works of African women writers' representation of women's lives in Africa and the UK. So they might compare, contrast and explore representations of women's lives in Africa and in Britain, establishing and relating with contexts both of everyday life, cultural practices, and literary or artistic expression practices, defining the particular version of these their chosen authors develop. This latter would involve cultural context, the texts, the writers, feminist criticism, awareness of debates about culture, gender and ethnicity, and also an exploration of the literary in that the work would involve the imagery, characters, themes, language and shape of the novels themselves. The 'what' of the text is added to

by 'in what way?' and 'how?', as well as 'in what theoretical and cultural context?' and 'Through what approaches?' The approaches question is one which substitutes for questions about qualitative and quantitative methods, although literary research can use the social science strategies when it is interdisciplinary in nature, and could, for example, in one version, look as much at audience response (using statistics as at the way in which texts and writers represented things and events and people) as at the texts themselves.

Task

Choose one or more of the humanities and/or arts titles which could underpin a dissertation or thesis:

- What mini-questions and subsidiary questions are involved in approaching this title?
- What theoretical frameworks, what theories could you use to help you to approach the asking of these questions?
- What material could you use to drive the asking of the questions? For example, what literary texts, what artistic products, what mixture of documents from different sources – historical, diary, and so on, could you use? Could you use media texts? Would you need to use social cultural and historical information, and where might you get this from?
- Which theories are you using to develop and underpin your own? What critical, contextual, interactive and personal elements are involved in your research and how do these all fit together in your work? How can you argue that the mixture of theories and other elements fit into a cohesive, directed, *whole* piece of research?
- Why do your questions matter, and are you sure/how could you argue that your explorations and theories underpinning and driving these can really help you answer your questions? What are the tasks involved here?
- Why does your research matter? Will it affect others? Cause change? Contribute to knowledge and argument? What will it do?

Examples of titles:

- *The treatment of relationships as an index of cultural change in the work of Elaine Feinstein.*
- *Kennedy's political strategies and the Cuban crisis: a turning point of American political response to Communism.*
- *Techniques of confessional poetry and the explorations of self and the body in the work of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell.*

- *Star Trek and beyond: how TV science fiction negotiates and represents versions of cultural imperialism.*
- *Thomas Hardy's dysfunctional families as an index of the historical change in the nineteenth century.* (Chosen example.)*

Questions:

- ▶ How can texts represent versions of historical change?
- ▶ What were the historical changes to the family and to people's lives as a whole – key points – during Hardy's period?
- ▶ What specific texts act as examples of representations of historical change in the family in the period?
- ▶ What kinds of families does Hardy deal with? What might they represent? Is there any argument developing over time in his work in relation to dealing with the changing family in history?

▶ The critical approaches

This work integrates the historical, the cultural and the political as well as the textual area or materials, and it also asks for a dialogue and interpretations – a dialogue between the historical change and the texts which represent it through the fictional families, and which charts events, images, and so on. How can you defend the work at the intersection of these different theoretical approaches? This would be a key question here.

Some critical approaches and theories we will need:

- Marxist historical criticism – this enables us to look at the relationship between textual examples, their production and the historical moments in a politically aware sense. Seeing the people's lives as produced by the political and historical moment, and seeing textual representations as ways of exploring, arguing and debating things about how people lived.
- Literary critical analysis of language, image, symbol, characterisation, the narrative, and so on.
- Some historical approaches to document analysis, acquisition of historical data through other means (Archives? Testimony?)
- Some feminist critical approaches – because this deals with families it will be saying something about women's roles and mothering, motherhood and the upbringing of children. This will be usefully interpreted through feminist critical approaches since that will allow for the recognition of stereotyping, impression, original-

ity, argument, interactions between representations of women and children and families and the questions of role and opportunities for women at this time – especially as represented by a male author.

▶ How would you write up your methods?

You would not detail what you did step by step as you would in social science methods. Having set out the theories which underpin your exploration you would then engage in exploring and pulling together the context and the material, and using the secondary critical theoretical material (the Marxist or feminist critics, for example) to bounce off/underpin/inform/guide your analyses of the texts. In a theoretical context, you would be establishing and developing your *own* readings, but using the critics to establish, back up or disagree with – so your own contribution is engaged in an informed dialogue with them. If there are critics with whom you disagree, have a dialogue with them. It is also important that you do not spend all your time arguing with them. You have your own case to establish and critics to use to back this up and inform it. You would use evidence from the texts and other appropriate documents themselves, quoting and analysing, synthesising from different parts of the texts and different critical or theoretical areas and comments. This is so that your synthesis and analysis are your own, your choice of quotation is your own and used at different times in different places in different ways to variously illustrate, exemplify and explore (through close critical analysis of the images and language, and so on) the arguments.

Different chapters could segment the material and the approaches to the questions differently, depending upon your choice. You could:

- Deal with an underlying set of questions as explored systematically through different texts and cover one per chapter, possibly in chronological order, possibly as they exemplify different angles or answers to the questions.
- Or scrutinise your area of questions further. Are there themes emerging? For example, in Hardy's work names, titles and events or elements set up an argument that because of the changing employment conditions and economic situation of the rural poor, families were less likely to be cohesive and able, caring and nur-

turing, and so there were many broken families, and feckless fathers who sacrificed or harmed or abandoned children.

- Hardy explores the ways in which the middle classes started to develop, with education and economic growth and he worries that this could be a problem. Some novels reflect on the many scenarios in families where education was sought, but leads to suffering and lack of economic growth, broken families and unhappiness.

Either the themes or the critical arguments could head the chapters – the choice is yours and depends on the overall direction of the research.

▶ **The form and shape of arts and humanities theses**

Students undertaking literary and arts research need to discover and defend their critical approaches and frameworks probably rather more than defending their research methods, unless these are unusual. The theoretical frameworks and literature review chapter will explore the critical and theoretical approaches used, while a methods chapter will possibly not be part of the thesis. It would also be unusual to describe the research activities and analysis. The findings of literary research theses are more likely to contain chapters on exploring themes, angles and arguments through contexts, and interweaving the debates by leading from one chapter to another and referring back and forth. They do not necessarily move in a chronological sequence through one piece of research followed by another followed by findings – the ‘findings’ or point of argument as such is led into at the beginning of the chapter, and the exploration flows on within the chapter. This is more of a journalistic than a scientific report writing method (see Chapter 23 on writing up). Chapters might follow developments within research, deal with periods of change, or deal with grouped themes in an author’s work.

Thesis – possible shape

Abstract

Laying out the questions which underpin the thesis, the conceptual framework which allows the questions to be asked and tracking

through the different kinds, stages or focal points of the different chapters which are asking and addressing the questions through the material.

Introduction (and sometimes a separate theory chapter)

This acts as a chapter to both situate the enquiry and its theoretical and conceptual location and framework. Unlike a social science thesis there is not usually a separate theoretical chapter – although there could be. It should be written in the third person, and in the past tense.

The Introduction concentrates on situating the arguments and questions in theories, context and background, the work of those interested in, and working in the context of the questions and ideas, even one’s own practices, and establishing a critical, theoretic frame and focus for the work. Here the researcher is explicit about the research paradigms and key theories, and the researchers whose views and approaches are being used and why. If it is an interdisciplinary research work, the integration of, relations between and use of different theoretical and conceptual approaches and contexts would be outlined, and an argument put forward for integrating them into or relating them to the inquiry.

Case study 1

For instance, in a performance arts PhD, MPhil or MA, which includes the self as an artist, a researcher might:

- Establish the theories of the key performance arts and arts critics and theorists, and stake a position in relation to them.
- Set up a position for integrating their own performance work in this critical and theoretical context, reading it through the theory, and reading the practice through the theory.
- Establish the critical distance and objectivity and the issue of subjectivity because of personal invention – using the self as the case study. This is really very similar to many other dissertations or theses which would here establish the position of the researcher involved in addressing these specific questions. A separate theory or methodology chapter would be unlikely, but possible.

Case study 2

A researcher writing on gay male writing since Stonewall charting the different themes which run through this writing, its relationship to the cultural and historical contexts of the times, and its historical development for a few key writers would need to:

- Define the underlying questions and make some assertions about the field of study.
- Clarify the theories and critical approaches being used in the context of 'queer theory' (which would need explaining). A cultural theory 'take' on this would need to be established, as well as a discourse analysis-based critical way through.
- Establish the reasons for the choice of themes and texts. This would form the focus of the beginning of each of the chapters. Establishing themes, clear approaches and text choices would provide a good lead-in paragraph or two to direct the reader in each chapter.

For both theses:

The ensuing chapters would focus upon the themes and the texts/artists performances/artworks/cultural products and interactions with self, in context (as appropriate to the dissertation or thesis) choices, developing the arguments through each chapter, linking the chapters. There could be a dialogue between the texts and the researcher, especially if they are using themselves as a case study. There could also be a dialogue between different interpretations offered by different critics or by the writers/artists and their works and the critics, so that meaning is made through a dialogue, a dialectical approach, and the argument is seen as an interpretation which is situated.

The conclusion would establish the significance overall for the arguments, explorations and discussions as developed through the dissertation or thesis, and could point towards cultural or social change. It could establish a new take on the theory/theories which have been underpinning the work, or it could bring opposing views together into a new synthesis through the interpretations of the texts/artefacts/actions, as appropriate.

Researching your own creative work/using the creative in your research work

Many students are involved in the kinds of critical approach we have discussed, at all levels. However, many engage in literary, artistic, musical or performance work directly, rather than through the lens of a critic as such. So their research is not merely in the arts and humanities but in relating their own performance and production, their own creative practices to these areas, seeing their creative work as a product of the theories and critical contexts and being fed by them. Technically, they are therefore exploring their own work as if it were a large-scale case study in the social science sense, analysed critically and contextualised. They could study their own experience, as well as the product itself. At undergraduate level, those who have already been involved in creative work – art, creative writing, video production, and so on, will be familiar with the issues of relating the actual texts, artworks or creative products and activities to an analytical framework. There are a set of theories which help engage the work with concepts and argument, and which enable a link between the theory and practice to be established.

Critical approaches and theoretical frameworks, as well as the basis of the dissertation or thesis, can be very much the same as those already discussed. Much creative work takes place in the intersection of critical perspectives, cultural contexts and the personal. Its main difference from more standard arts and humanities research is the inclusion of the creative work as part of the research object explored by the theories and critical perspectives, and the involvement (here appropriate) of the self as a research object, because the self is a vehicle for the creative work if it is a performance, or if the self is partly the topic of the research.

Some students choose to carry out this kind of research through the use of artwork itself. Where does the personal and developmental work go? Some work needs to capture the personal as part of the critical element of the thesis, focusing on the personal/critical/developmental choices and responses, the critical decisions made in the performance or artwork and integrating theses, and what the theoretical and critical perspectives and arguments in the context of which other work has developed. One student involved in a piece of performance art developed her performance work out of her own theories – about the relationships between the virtual (technology, media representations) and the visceral (the real person, the body in the space). This student then

acted out the performance, which she had videoed and included on CD-ROM, as well as videoing each element in the appropriate technological format. She then accompanied the work with a standard thesis, which explores decisions made about and the theoretical underpinnings to the performance and the ways in which it acts as a vehicle for explorations and discussions about the critical theories between them. She comments on the way it contributes to the thesis, using both personal comment, critical comment on personal performance work – which has been made objective because it has been shared with an audience – and the comments from the theorists, moving in a dialogue between them. Programme notes linking the performances themselves with the thesis are a great help here, as readers are not so used to making the links between performance in space, and its theoretical explanations.

Another student chose to explore her own relationship with her own history of artistic and personal response to her memory of life in South Africa as a woman in her family, now that she has moved to live in the UK. She is a visual artist working in installations, and she videoed and produced several linked pieces:

- A thesis which set out the drift and theoretical frameworks and explored and explained the video and all her critical points about self, memory, place and artistic response.
- A log or journal of her developing personal explorations and critical choices about the thesis – issues to do with the difficulty of capturing the feelings and experiences about decisions concerning visual representation. This includes actual videoing questions, problems such as fading, using sound on, over or off. It also involves looking at the visit back to South Africa, the shooting and the planning or accident involved in this. It notes what could or could not be caught on film and how.
- The video itself and accompanying notes, explaining and exploring its links with the arguments of the thesis and explaining also how its shape and form enable the arguments to be developed.

These examples of creative products, including videos, have involved the construction of sculptures, a dress, objects in installation, and creative pieces of writing. They need also some form of accompanying work for an exploration of the critical and theoretical engagement. This should lead to and enable the production of comment and analysis of

themes and issues of the work itself. A log and analytical, critical piece are the natural accompanying pieces of work.

A more standard thesis piece which uses the theoretical and critical to establish arguments and explorations and place this work within the context is additional. This serves to establish its contribution to critical debates in which it is placed.

Task

- Think of a text or texts, and/or a personal experience, which you would like to explore using artistic forms.
- Which forms will suit your exploration and research? Could it become a video? Are some forms art or media products? Creative writing? Technology? Sculpture?
- How can you use this creative piece to explore the arguments and issues rather than merely reflect or be a creative piece?
- What kinds of underpinning theories and critical approaches inform your work?
- What forms can you use to record the reflective critical, personal process? Why?
- How might you also produce an analytical and critical connecting commentary between the creative, personal, critical works and the thesis itself?

Conclusion

We have looked at:

- Arts and humanities research integrating the critical and the creative, interdisciplinary approaches
- Creative performance and critical work using the creative and the personal
- The specific form and shape appropriate for arts and humanities research and the thesis itself

Further reading

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1998). *The Landscape of Qualitative Research, Theories and Issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.