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# Practice-based art projects: reviewing the methods and methodologies of graduate scholars

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## Abstract

*This review explores the methods of inquiry and methodologies adapted in practice-based art projects that were documented in dissertations by graduate scholars at the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University. The paper compiles, describes and comparatively analyses the methods and methodologies in eleven out of nineteen randomly selected dissertations completed between year 2000 and year 2020. The paper uses appropriate variables in matrices that traces themes and gaps in the practices and processes of practice- based research by the scholars.*

**Key words:** *methods, methodologies, practice-based art projects*

## Introduction

Research is a process of accessible disciplined inquiry. One of the most important questions that shapes its process is the 'how?' of it. Gray *et al* (2004:17) affirm that, 'knowing *how* to do research, knowing about methodology – is perhaps the most important part of the research process.' The 'how' also refers to the necessity and importance of developing specific methods and appropriate

methodologies for gathering and generating information relevant to the research questions, and evaluating, analyzing and interpreting the research evidence. It is worthwhile to note that the'how' in research tends to be dynamic: it keeps changing to affect the new knowledge being generated. New methods and methodologies are therefore always being advanced to propagate new knowledge.

The terms 'method' and 'methodology' are often usedinterchangeably in research though they have a distinct difference.Methods are the strategies, tools, and techniques employed by the researcher to collect, exploring, gathering and analyzing information needed to create theories in research. Examples of methods of research are observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, video, audio, case study, visual diary, models, interviews, surveys, and so on.

Methodology on the other hand is the 'science' behind the methods used to gain knowledge. Methodology is therefore the study of the methods used and the reasoning behind 'why' those particular methods were used in research. Methodology of research allows the researcher to evaluate and validate the rigor of the study and methods used to obtain the new knowledge being generated. Gray*et al* (2004) indicate that in research, methodology aims at 'the understanding of the process of inquiry, but not the products of that inquiry.'

To make an informed decision about how to proceed in research, researchers are expected to investigate and compare different methods and methodologies at their disposal before applying those best suited to generate new knowledge. This suggests that the methods there are and the methodologies of their use can, through explicit structured thinking, questioning and evaluation, be creative

and transformative (Jayaratna, 1994). This kind of method and methodological innovation has been demonstrated in researchin the discipline of Fine Art and Design.

The discipline of Fine Art and Design has many specializations for example, Art History, Graphic Design, Weaving, Animation, Fabric Design, Multi-media crafts, Sculpture, Ceramics, Painting and Printmaking. The study is carried out both theoretically and practically. Practice-based research is the foundation of research inthe practice of Fine Art and Design. It is research that begins with the envisioning a research approach, engaging in inquiry, selecting sources of information and ideas, and then offering new understanding or new knowledge documented visually (Finley,2003) Practice-based researches tend to be original investigations undertaken with hands-on art practice as their central focus with a view to gaining new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice.

Scholars have documented a number of practice- based methods and methodological approaches that researchers in Fine Art and Design have found productive and have adapted for their own particular research requirements. The methods are a variety that are applied individually or in combination. These include and are not limited to: observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, video, audio, case study, visual diary, models, interviews and surveys. The methodologies in Fine Art and Design are normally in the area of Naturalistic inquiry, Action research, Soft Systems Methodologies (SSM) and Inquiry by design. These can again be applied individually or in combination. Naturalistic inquiry involves research happens in real situations rather than in laboratory controlled conditions. Action

research, on its part, involves applying methods that intervene, diagnose and solve problems in a specific real-world context. Soft' systems methodologies (SSM) are derived from the domain of 'hard' information systems and are usually computer-based while Inquiryby design is that investigation that is deliberately constructed to affect change or improvement.

This paper reviews the methods of inquiry and methodologies of practice-based art projects documented in dissertations bygraduate scholars at the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University. This paper undertook a comparative analysis of eleven out of nineteen randomly selected Practice-based – researches completed between year 2000 and year 2020 at the Department.

The rationale for undertaking the review was to locate the dissertation collection in the broader area of practice based art projects then review them to answer the following questions : What do the practice-based methods and methodologies consist of? What is the range of the methods and methodologies applied to the collection? What is the relationship between these methods and methodologies over the years? To answer the questions this paper uses appropriate variables inmatrices that trace themes and gaps in the practices and processes of practice- based research by the scholars.

## Methodology

This study compiled graduate scholar's dissertation done in the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University from year 2000 and year 2020 and randomly selected eleven out of nineteen dissertations that were examples of practice-based art projects.

The dissertations were in the different disciplines of Fine Art and Design. A representative number of dissertations was selected to minimize bias and ensure transparency.

A comparative analysis of the selected dissertations was done to identify, describe and document the methods and methodologies the graduate students used in their practice- based research. The information was recorded as an annotated list that included the following additional information: author and year, study area and research title proposition, specific methods and methodological approaches used in the research and research outcomes. The scholars were then coded and comparisons of the methods and methodologies of practice- based research used by the scholars done using two matrices. Themes were drawn and traced from thecomparisons and these provided a description of the gaps in the practices and processes of practice- based research by the scholarsover the years.

## Results

Table 1 is a presentation of data obtained after reviewing a random selection of practice-based art dissertations by graduate scholars in the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University.

**Table 1: Data after reviewing practice-based art dissertations by graduate scholars**

| | Author and Year | Study area/ Research proposition | Methods/ Tools used | Methodology | Format of Dissertation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Everlyne Nguku 2000 | Weaving/ Application of weaving in art | observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br>• Exhibition of woven fabrics |
| 2 | Jennipher Kungu 2001 | Fabric Design/ Subject matter in Fabric Decoration | observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br>• Exhibition of woven fabrics |
| 3 | Penelope Tusaasiirwe 2009 | Weaving/ Subject matter in Weaving | in-depth interviews, observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br>• Exhibition of woven fabrics |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | Jacquiline Okeyo 2014 | Fabric Design/ Subject matter in Fashion Design | in-depth interviews observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br><br>• Exhibition of woven fabrics |
| 5 | Lilian Barongo 2016 | Ceramics/ Glaze formulation using geological materials | observation, drawing, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br><br>• Exhibition of fired ceramics |
| 6 | Teresa Mbutu 2016 | Weaving/Utilization of Plant colorants in Art | Indepth interviews, observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br><br>• Exhibition of woven tapestries |
| 7 | Ignatius Ireri, 2016 | Painting/ Portraiture using improvised materials | observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research<br>• Naturalistic inquiry<br>• Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report<br><br>• Exhibition of portraits |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | Muktar Ahmed, 2016 | Painting/ Painting using improvised materials | observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research <br> • Naturalistic inquiry <br> • Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report <br><br> • Exhibition of paintings |
| 9 | Mary Gitura, 2016 | Painting/ Subject matter in painting | observation, drawing, concept mapping, photography, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research <br> • Naturalistic inquiry <br> Inquiry by design | • Illustrated project report <br><br> • Exhibition of paintings |
| 10 | Arthur Apwoka, 2017 | Graphics/ Redesigning graphic materials | in-depth interviews, focus groups, | • Experimental Action research | • Illustrated project report |
| | | for a target population | observation, drawing, concept mapping, case study, visual diary, models, Photography Video Surveys | • Inquiry by design <br> • Soft systems methodologies | • Exhibition of redesigned materials |
| 11 | Derrick Muneza, 2018 | Graphic design/ Rebranding packages for a target population | in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, drawing, concept mapping, case study, visual diary, models, surveys | • Experimental Action research <br> • Inquiry by design <br> • Soft systems methodologies | • Illustrated project report <br><br> • Exhibition of redesigned packages |

**The scholars were then coded and relationships of the methods and**

**methodologies of practice- based research used by the scholars analyzed and presented in two matrices in Tables 2 and 3.**

*Table 2: Comparison between scholar and method used in research*

| Method | Scholar code | | | | | | | | | | | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | S2000-1 | S2001-1 | S2009-1 | S2014-1 | S2016-1 | S2016-2 | S2016-3 | S2016-4 | S2016-5 | S2017-1 | S2018-1 | |
| | Weaving | Fabric Design | Weaving | Fabric Design | Cearmics | Weaving | Painting | Painting | Painting | Graphics Design | Graphics Design | |
| In-depth interviews | x | X | √ | √ | x | √ | x | x | x | √ | √ | 46 |
| Focus groups | x | X | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | √ | √ | 18 |
| Participant Observation | x | X | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | 100 |
| Observation | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Drawing | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Concept mapping | √ | √ | √ | √ | x | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 90 |
| Photography | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | x | 90 |
| Video | x | X | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | √ | x | 10 |
| Audio | x | X | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | 0 |
| Case Study | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Visual Diary | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Models | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Surveys | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | x | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 90 |

**Table 2 shows the methods used by each scholar in their practice-**

based art project. The table indicates that a significant number of scholars employed more than one method/ strategy or technique when collecting, exploring, gathering and analyzing data. Specifically, all scholars utilized observation, drawing, case study, visual diary and models. A majority went on to use concept mapping, photography and surveys. However, none of the scholarsutilized audio and participant observation in collecting data for their research and very few used video and focus groupdiscussions.

*Table 3: Comparison between scholar and methodology used inresearch*

| Methodology | Scholar code | | | | | | | | | | | % |
| | S2000-1 Weaving | S2001-1 Fabric Design | S2009-1 Weaving | S2014-1 Fabric Design | S2016-1 Cearmics | S2016-2 Weaving | S2016-3 Painting | S2016-4 Painting | S2016-5 Painting | S2017-1 Graphic Design | S2018-1 Graphic Design | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Naturalistic inquiry | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | x | x | 81 |
| Action research | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |
| Soft systems methodology | x | X | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | √ | √ | 18 |
| Inquiry- by-design | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | √ | 100 |

Table 2 indicates the relationships of the methodologies used by the scholars. There was a significant application of Action research, Inquiry- by-design and Naturalistic Design but a non-significant 18%

applying soft systems methodologies on the methods for collecting data.

## Discussion

From the foregoing, it is evident that the graduate scholars at the Department of Fine Art and Design, Kenyatta University utilize a myriad of research methods when carrying out their practice-basedart projects. As expected of them, observation, drawing, visual diary and models were used by all scholars. This is because, havingan artistic background and being proficient in drawing, sketching and modelling, naturally predisposed the scholars to use the stated methods. Furthermore, the stated methods are best suited for the Fine Art and Design curriculum that has the application of the process of creative design- from ideation, doodling, modelling to comprehensives - as its mainstay, a reason that could have prompted the scholars to all use the methods of research.

In converse, audio methods of research were not used at all by the scholars. Another method not used by the scholars was focus group discussions. Audio recordings happen to be a primary strategy in collecting data when using focus group discussions. This could explain the congruence.

An insignificant use of video (10%) was reflected in Graphic Design. Video is a digital technologies that is not adept to 'naturalistic' and 'artistic/ designerly' forms of inquiry.  An average use of in-depth interviews (46%) was also reported. Video happensto be a strategy of use in in-depth interviews and its predispositionto digital technology may explain its average use by the scholars.

Furthermore, unlike in other specializations, there is clear evidenceof lack of 'naturalistic' inquiry in Graphic Design. Could this be because

of the inclination to digital technology in this specialization? Could it be that subject matter of Graphic Design lends itself more to 'positivist' methodologies than more 'naturalistic' and 'artistic/ designerly' forms of inquiry that is in other specializations? All this said, there is the need for the other specializations to adapt to digital technology as a method or methodology to take advantage of its versatility and the the solutions it offers.

The review of the practice-based art dissertations was done in chronological order of completion. It is worthwhile to note that there is some use of video as a method of research in Graphic Design in 2017. The use of video as a method of research in Graphic Design happened at the same time the use of Soft Systems Methodologies (SSM's) as a methodology in Graphic Design research (2017 and 2018) was noted. The analogy in Graphic Design could then be explained.

Action research through experimentation (100%) and Inquiry–by-design (100%) are predominant methodologies used by all the scholars. The format of the dissertation- illustrated projects and exhibition – was also reported by all the scholars. This trend in reporting can be attributed to the scholars having to fulfill the requirements of the Fine Art and Design curriculum's that is for inquiry through experimentation.

In conclusion, the trend in the results illustrate a growing confidence in the methods and methodologies artists and designers use in research: there is evidence of innovation in the combination of methods and methodologies used in practice-based art projects in research in Fine Art and Design. This rigor in research is bound to increase the generation of new knowledge by scholars in Fine Art and

Design. There is, however, need for the majority of specializations in Fine Art and Design to embrace digitally-based methods (like videos and audio)  and methodologies that utilize the digital methods (like focus group discussions) for value addition. This would happen if the scholars impute subject matter that is digitally suitable from the onset of the research. Probably, an insistence of the use of technology in the methods and methodology of doing research in the Fine Art and Design curriculum at graduate level, would of necessity have the scholarsutilize digitally-based methods and methodologies.

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