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Data in Arts Research: A Conceptual View

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Abstract:

A distinguishing feature of arts scholarship is the dynamic human element. Arts researchers observe and interact in the natural world of the arts and record their impressions and experiences as data. As part of this process of intense story-telling around the data, arts scholars use a broad scheme of social inquiry to develop a sophisticated understanding of the existing information. This paper deals with the importance of the arts in research; and some of the issues associated with the arts and research. The arts help researchers in developing frameworks for collecting, documenting, analyzing and interpreting their impressions. So, the article stresses on the need for clarity on issues of methodology and methods that are used as the essential framework for investigation when conducting arts research. It is interesting to note that although data is fundamental to all scholarly pursuits, we often associate data with all disciplines for research but the arts. In reality, however, both the amount and range of data in the field of the arts are compelling experts to come up with new ways of managing them. This article examines some of the issues associated with arts research; and the ways in which data would be documented, protected, and made available for further use.

Keywords: Arts data, arts research, arts scholarship, arts management

“If human beings are to survive, we need all the symbolic forms at our command because they permit us not only to preserve and pass along our accumulated wisdom but also to give voice to the invention of new visions. We need all these ways of viewing the world because no one way can say it all.”

—Charles Fowler

1. Introduction

It is a generally accepted view that human beings are broadly artistic in everyday life. Despite the fact that many realize the value of the arts – creative writing, painting, sculpture, photography, music, dance, and theatre and so on – in society, few agree it is necessary to include them in the core school curriculum. Perhaps, for this reason, the arts have long been situated meagerly against the more engaging subjects of basic education in school. The less-than-desired consequence is that many students are denied access to a colossal capital of artistic knowledge and their formative years are less enlivened.

The question that naturally surfaces, then, is, “Are the arts merely ornamental aspects of human production and experience or do they have a more significant role to play in enlarging human understanding?” [1]. Boyer [2] was convinced decades ago that the arts are an essential part of the human experience, and not a frill; and recommended that “all students study the arts to discover how human beings use non-verbal symbols and communicate not only with words, but through music, dance and visual arts.”

This view finds support in the assertion of Fowler [3]: “The arts are self-enablers that involve students in exploring the life around them, past and present, and in constructing and inventing the future. Through the arts, students learn to see themselves as functioning members of the human race, persons who share a bond across different cultures with people who also express themselves and communicate through their indigenous artistic expressions.” If this weren’t true, perhaps, not many researchers would have engaged with the arts to realize the purpose of their study beyond the mere utilitarian.

However, the state of the arts in education is not totally devoid of pleasing circumstances. For almost more than half a century, many art enthusiasts, educators and institutions have been striving for “illuminating the value of the arts to a civilized society and their value to the educational development of children.” They are not only working towards including the arts in the basic school program, but effectively putting up an art curriculum as well. The vision is to put together the curriculum, drawing upon disciplines that contribute to understanding art: art production, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics [4].

Fowler [5] argues, “If our concept of literacy is defined too narrowly as referring to just the symbol systems of language, mathematics, and science, children will not be equipped with the breadth of symbolic tools they need to fully represent, express, and communicate the full spectrum of human life.”

2. Leading from the Beyond

Often, scholars are not previously initiated into the arts; yet they create a connection between the specialized area of research and the self. In this age of information and ever-increasing interest in “back to basics,” students and scholars invariably run into the arts while tracing the antiquity and evolution of concepts relevant to their respective subject domains. The arts help create opportunities for students to enhance their ability to articulate academic research within creative contexts. Thus, the quest to reach the deepest limits of knowledge culminates in an awareness and appreciation for the arts.

Furthermore, those dimensions usually identified with the arts, such as creativity, innovation, varied and deep thinking ability, articulation and critical study, are also considered essential for scholarship in disciplines other than the arts. A study on whether cognitive skills developed through the arts have an effect on learning and thinking in general suggests that “the arts offer possibilities for engagements with materials, body, and sound, and encourage sensory-affective responsiveness in creating and appraising for which there are no clear-cut parallels in other disciplines” [6]. Therefore, the idea that one can’t be educated well enough without the arts finds its perfect expression in the scholars’ pursuance of the arts for insightful learning.

3. Arts and Research

Most researchers acknowledge that the arts stimulate an enhanced sense of judging human experiences and the capacity to cope with nuances and ambiguities in the research process. The arts build the context, approach and methodology to generate meaningful inferences from the available information on the basis of creative and critical thinking. Yet, for some, the term ‘research’ appears far removed from people involved in the arts. “The word has traditionally been associated with: obscured corners of specialized libraries, where solitary scholars live; white-coated people in laboratories doing esoteric things with test-tubes; universities, rather than colleges; arms length, rather than engagement; arty facts, rather than arte-facts; words, not deeds” [7].

Borgdorff [8] clarifies, “Many contenders on one side are inclined to entrench themselves in established institutional positions, portraying themselves as defenders of quality standards on which they seem to have a patent. Some on the other side put up resistance against any form of ‘academisation’ (as it is sometimes scornfully called) – afraid of losing their own distinctiveness, wary of the perceived ‘stuffiness’ confines of academia.” Positioning the arts in the academic environment, Savin-Baden & Wimpensky [9] state rather lucidly, “Whilst the traditions of the arts as teaching and investigative tools stretch back throughout history, the use of the creative arts as formal methodological approaches to academic research is relatively new.”

It is true that questions on the relationship between research and the arts do frequently emerge among the students/scholars/researcher communities. Prominent among the queries on the subject of arts research are: Do the arts qualify for association with the phenomenon of research? Does this kind of research merit recognition as academic research? Does arts research distinguish itself from research in other disciplines in terms of the working methods? It may be of value to accept that these questions perhaps arise from: (a) a lack of awareness of the historical contribution of the arts to research, and (b) the absence of any method to value the ideas, analyses and interpretations that the arts offer to research. Therefore, the reasons for the long-standing debate on arts and research do not in any way diminish the value per se of the arts in research or vice-versa.

4. Worlds within Worlds

In the context of the arts, it is difficult to locate and gather quantifiable answers for most research questions. The most that can be done in such cases is to “provide a credible argument based on good quality evidence” [10].

Since the arts provide opportunities for self-expression, particularly in environments that encourage action and interaction, scholars usually deal with primary data and their sources. Arts researchers, generally, engage in direct communication with a sample of people to assess some related views and ideas. The impressions created through sharing of ideas and thoughts between the researcher and the purposive sample, are recorded as data; and a knowledge base is developed. Researchers depend on their observations and reflections, which in themselves may not provide answers to the research problem. It becomes their task to make sense of the collected information by studying, analyzing and interpreting the impressions. In the configuration of arts research, specifically, the assembled data is analyzed, interpreted and tested for validity at multiple levels.

“The paths taken by arts-related researchers are largely idiosyncratic but often hinge on serendipity, exposure to other like-inspired scholars, grounding, or experience in the arts so that the art or arts become as a catalyst and vehicle for the work,” assert Knowles and Promislow [11]. Owing to the numerous interrelationships among the enormous amount of data, arts scholars are confronted with the massive task of not only recording vast and wide-ranging impressions, but creating new reflections and perspectives on the strength of existing knowledge and amassed information. Hence, summarizing the shared understanding of the subject and reflecting on the accumulated data to interpret them effectively, form the crux of arts scholarship.

5. Old Methods, New Rules: Not Quite Foolproof

Given that arts researchers deal a lot with sounds and images (they use a lot of sound and video recordings), which comprise mostly collections of unstructured data, there emerges the problem of how to analyze and present the data once it has been collected. “The problem arises among those who mistake an intellectual probe with a statement of fact” [12]. The size of data material of this sort is overwhelming, too. Consequently, the process of analysis and interpretation of data becomes somewhat complex.

In this backdrop, it is necessary to deliberate over some methodological considerations and challenges with regard to data-driven arts research. The big question is: What research methodologies, methods and approaches are appropriate to research in the arts? The answer to this question is accommodated in the simpler ones such as: What issues are we looking to address? How should we collect data and

use them in context? How can we manage data? How can we preserve and protect data? How can we derive value from them? What purpose does the research serve?

For some researchers, traditional research methods “may fix and limit meaning in a reductive way, while creative methods can more accurately reflect the multiplicity of meanings” [13]. It may be noted that the combination of the arts and research can sometimes result in distinctive methodological approaches. Kara affirms that there are many instances of arts scholars adopting a creative approach to the traditional research methods, with even some from the STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines finding inspiration from creative practices. Further, Ellingson [14] explains that while some creative research methods may be quite appealing, it is essential to choose methods (of data collection, analysis and representation) for their ability “to most fully address” the research questions within the methodical context.

Since qualitative research allows for more impulsive and flexible explorations in the natural environments in which investigation is carried out, arts researchers generally adopt a method of inquiry aligned with the philosophical, rather than the technical, framework of the phenomenon/concept under study. Qualitative research methods make way for multiple realities to exist; and it is for the researcher to interpret the findings from different perspectives, and/or probe the same idea in different contexts.

This is not to say in any way that the idea of using qualitative research methods vis-a-vis quantitative research methods in the arts, is infallible. Nor, does this suggest that the richness of qualitative inquiry falls short of the robustness of quantitative inquiry in the arts. On the contrary, it is now intended to combine the two kinds of enquiry so that explicit knowledge of the arts merges with the implicit. It is pertinent to observe that “intangible subjects such as trust and intuition are being investigated through the creative use of quantitative methods in addition to qualitative methods [13]. But, whether it is necessarily as radical as it may seem, is a topic for contemplation.

Ascertaining appropriate methodologies for research in the arts would naturally entail a process involving interaction between researchers working across disciplines, to study research strategies from all disciplines and determine methodologies deemed suitable to arts research. For this, it is important to first establish sound methods of observation, inquiry and assessment that researchers could use to read, think, gather, analyze and present their findings.

6. Consciousness of Context

Irrespective of the research methodology used for arts exploration, scholars are almost always deluged with data. For any researcher, accumulating relevant data in big quantities may be both thrilling and terrifying at the same time. Thrilling, because one is in possession of huge data that may prove valuable in answering many questions; and terrifying, because it sets one thinking about how to keep the extraordinary quantity of data within containable and manageable limits.

However, the enormity of data is only part of a bigger issue. The issue lies in hoarding data, and not understanding data in its entirety. Arts researchers have to be judicious in maintaining data that is meaningful, and not just relevant to the subject. In order to cope with large volumes of useful data, they have to first create some revolutionary information processing-storing-sharing methods, all within the research context. Context for research may include context of place, context in time, theoretical context, regulatory context, legal context, political context, socio-economic context, cultural context, so on and so forth.

“If there is no clarity of mind, the data that is gathered together from the external world is not perceived in a co-ordinated manner, and the clouded mind receives a false vision.” — Swami Rama

7. Conclusion

Data, both in quantity and variety, has been big; and been with us for a very long time. After all, they are the basis of all academic research. The big question is: Where and how should we store and protect all data and their sources so that they remain secure, so that researchers can continue to work with the extant data? As of now, devising a comprehensive system for the management of large-scale arts data may not be possible. Nevertheless, one of the positive outcomes of the current data scenario is that we are now using technology to better understand the arts and their systems.

The importance of the arts lies in the function to create a surface from which different kinds of realities might be selected, leading to a deeper understanding of the subject. Therefore, a single-point access to data by various stakeholders in the arts could contribute to major breakthroughs in handling information. In that kind of reverberation, arts scholars are looking towards generating software platforms that would enable (a) bringing to one place every kind of data relevant to the arts domain, (b) making data available to multiple users in multiple geographies, and (c) making data documentation, data preservation, data protection, and access to data more trustworthy than before.

Today, data preservation has upgraded—from cassettes, floppy disks, CDs, DVDs, the local hard disk of the computer, and even in a cloud in the Internet—to the digital format, which is considered more reliable than the earlier ones. Not only has the technology for data preservation advanced, but with certain research infrastructure it is possible to ensure data is protected from unauthorized access.

The aim is to make sure that researchers use data is in accordance with the legal requirements such as copyright, data privacy laws, and conditions for use for archival rights. The enhanced technology also allows for verification of research results, which amounts to good academic practice. The concern, however, is that this approach (to protect data) may amount to distressing the open-data movement, which advocates broadening the scope of access to information so that the scope of studies is not limited in any way. But this concern

In addition to this, we will need to intensify the current discourse on arts research to look at their range, utility and relevance to users. The need for governance comes from the need to handle the complexity of arts data. Since data will also require stewardship at all levels of its management, developing new models of governance becomes imperative as well.

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