

The *Theatre* of University Research?

Frank Clarke, Russell Craig and Joel Amernic

Few academics would dispute that *theatre* is part of day-to-day life in universities. Certainly there is a significant theatrical component to teaching. Much of the process of university-based research is *theatre* too — it is performed with a facade of sophistication, in ritualised fashion, to a prescribed script, before a make-believe backdrop.

In this article we explore some implications of the ‘university-research-is-theatre’ metaphor, emphasising the more egregious entailments in order to stimulate a conversation. We seek to stimulate reflection on the *nature* of university research and whether the DETYA (1999) Green Paper will effect fundamental change in an enduring characteristic of research-related activity — its theatricality.

Virtually nothing stirs the emotions of academics as much as reference to *research*. At the mere mention of *research* even experienced scholars sometimes go limp, assume a grave countenance and affect a sanctimonious expression. *Theatre* at its best? Merely thinking vaguely about *research* seems almost a religious experience for some academics. Several theatrical excesses characterise much research-related activity. They invite conjecture that dubious motives influence research efforts and what is alleged to be worthwhile research.

Research Theatre and Teaching

We submit that being a performer in the university research *theatre* often attracts more acclaim than actually completing a production. Cameo, rather than completion, is paramount. The process of *doing* research assumes greater importance than achieving research outcomes likely to extend horizons of knowledge in substantive ways. Colleagues sometimes excuse themselves from extra curricular activities with the alibi ‘I’m too busy, I’m *doing* my research’. This is offered as some almost Divine absolution for not doing the things the community expects of academics — creating and disseminating knowledge, being good in teaching, and being active in administration and community outreach.

Some, perhaps much, of the behaviour of research ‘actors’ is a result of the ‘publish or perish’ drama which encourages publication of even the shallowest of research. The *fact* of publication, not the content or impact, too often becomes an academic’s Logie Award. Some contemporary research might be best assessed, somewhat uncharitably, as dross inspired solely by desire to advance careers. This is hardly surprising. Reviewers of the academic stage show (promotions and

Frank Clarke, Russell Craig and Joel Amernic are Professors of Accounting at The University of Newcastle, The Australian National University and The University of Toronto respectively.

appointments committees, and external research assessment panels) persist in emphasising the *quantity* of publication. The legacy is that all too often, scholarly articles are written and cited, but are not read closely or widely. The stage show goes on, but few are in the audience?

Research theatre is also manifest in the classic incantation, 'I'm a researcher, not a teacher'. This is intoned often in the hope it will be self-fulfilling. It is as if being a good teacher is at odds with being a good researcher. For many, teaching is a necessary evil to be performed with a mask. We are invited to believe, falsely, that teaching and research serve opposing social ends, call upon unrelated skills, entail opposing foci, engender contradictory attitudes, or pursue incompatible objectives. We submit, as do many of our colleagues in academe, that nothing could be further from the truth. The rich tapestry of the university is interwoven with teaching *and* research — often with both intertwined intimately.

We should not quarantine teaching material and curriculum design from contemporary research findings. If we do, we will lose much of the vitality of university teaching which is achieved through a sort of trickle-down effect from research activity. Indeed, much *thinking* and *preparing* engaged in by academics involves simultaneous consideration of the teaching and researching of the subject under contemplation.

Research Theatre and Intolerance

There is *research theatre* inherent in the hubristic intolerance of those in academe who regard only particular forms of enquiry as *research*. They argue that *research* is constituted only by those modes that are (supposedly) *scientific*, as they might view the term. All other modes are deemed *not research* and as *unscientific*. Ideals of open-mindedness, tolerance of the ideas and methods of others, and of personal and academic humility, get short shrift.

In theatre, characters who display hubris delight the audience when they fall from grace. Like Narcissus, the tunnelled-vision of research activity by those thus afflicted might merely reflect a deceptive self-image. In the research theatre, self-adulation for pursuing one research mode and ridiculing other modes is a common characteristic. Research requiring an open mind cannot be well-served.

Research and *Legitimate Theatre* of Research Community

Entry to what is euphemistically called the *research community* is difficult to obtain within an environment tainted by such hubris. Membership is guarded jealously by the 'grandfathers' (its inventors and foundation members) and its 'gatekeepers' (sympathetic journal editors, referees and selection committees), who often form a powerful elite of theatrical directors and producers. The ladder to the *research community* has frequently been pulled-up by some already within the hallowed lofts. Entry can be helped by supplication at ordained initiation ceremonies — an auditioning for a role. At a doctoral consortium budding new

actors are disciplined to accept the scholarly wisdom of the directors and producers in attendance.

Receipt of a competitive research grant may push the entry door ajar, perhaps quite properly. But research *output* rather than research *input* should accord greater rights to membership. Winning a research grant seems to carry almost as much weight as does achieving something with it. Applicants for academic appointments make a big play of grants they have received. Universities that do well in terms of sums of money awarded in the annual large research grant round by the Australian Research Council thunder their success in a blaze of public self-adulation. Celebration takes place in anticipation of favourable reviews and before performances are completed. Rarely do universities and applicants explain why so little substantive research emerges from some grants. Some research that does emerge is often at a high cost.

Broadway Versus Off-Broadway

But the term ‘the research community’ itself is misleading. It implies a monolithic, unitary intellectual village or theatrical movement of like-minded persons living within a common world-view. It ignores the ongoing wars between disparate and largely incompatible research sub-communities.

One consequence of such incompatibility is a proliferation of new niche journals. Many emerge as a reaction to ‘research capture’ by those who denigrate all but their own view of research. Theatrically, this is akin to only one type of play, or interpretation, being ‘legitimate’ in the eyes of those within the ramparts of such a community. The excluded ‘put on their own play’ or launch their own journal to disseminate their ideas, have peers test them, and enter in debate. To have the mainstream of Broadway continually challenged by the non-mainstream ideas of off-Broadway seems to have creative potential — perhaps fresh theatrical innovations might result. However, this synergy may have little hope of ultimately affecting mainstream performance if a discipline’s academics currently running the major house of theatrical production adopt an exclusive and siege mentality. In such a climate, off-Broadway may always remain at the margins, until a major crisis erupts.

The Language of Research Theatre

A special cabbalistic language has developed within the research community, *research-speak*. It has a private and specialised vocabulary. By its use the ‘true’ researchers are taken to reveal themselves as worthy of entry to the research community, somewhat like the members of a secret society. Those who ignore it are exposed as uninitiated and unworthy of membership. Adoption of *research-speak* has nothing to do with the likelihood that research results will advance a discipline in any perceptible way. Nor has it anything to do with the originality, depth and breadth of research enquiry. Much of it is a form of gibberish.

But *research-speak* is an important part of *research theatre*. Budding researchers seeking a role would be wise to indulge in its compulsory clichés and to abuse such words as ‘paradigm’ and ‘methodology’. They will be encouraged to indulge in ghastly euphemisms and jargon — a ‘questionnaire’ is now a ‘survey instrument’. They are impelled to *operationalise* nouns as verbs and to display their stage manners and acting prowess by *workshopping* their research.

The Theatre of Research

All this may seem curious to lay observers. There are few grounds for researchers of any genre or employing any particular method to adopt sanctimonious poses or to bask in hubris. Some theatre is allegedly solely to entertain — often the actors as much as the audience. Some is motivated by desire to enlighten, inform, prod thought, appeal to base instincts and spur action. Unquestionably, many of the principal actors in the research theatre have the same motives.

Much contemporary research activity seems to be scripted in order merely to ‘survive’ before critical audiences in a harsh academic jungle. It is debatable whether the DETYA Green Paper has helped to take us beyond these existing scripts, motivations and theatricality to better things.

The Green Paper itself might be viewed as part of the research theatre. Minister Kemp, for example, might be characterised as an impresario, giving notice that review plaudits will be awarded for improved higher degree completion performance and for pursuing research with allegedly immediate economic utility. His priorities might be regarded by some as akin to putting the commercial appeal of a production before its aesthetic merit — to maximise box office takings. For soap opera, not opera?

Reference

Clarke, F., R. Craig and J. Amernic (1999), ‘Theatre and Intolerance in Financial Accounting Research’, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 10:65-88.

Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) (1999), *New Knowledge, New Opportunities: Discussion Paper on Higher Education Research and Training*, Canberra, June, available at: <http://www.detya.gov.au/highered/otherpub/greenpaper>.

This essay draws upon and extends parts of Clarke, Craig and Amernic (1999). The authors freely admit that they have more than likely indulged in theatricality and the other inapt behaviours mentioned here.