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Journalism as research: Developing radio documentary theory from practice

Mia Lindgren
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

.................................
Mia Lindgren
Abstract

Journalism academics around the world face the challenge of having their journalism practice recognised as academic research. This dissertation presents a model of how journalism practitioner-academics can present their in-depth journalistic practice in ways that make clear its standing as legitimate academic research.

Informed by Candy’s (2006) framework for practice-led and practice-based research, the thesis defines two research methodologies: research on practice and research through practice. Using the radio documentary as the focus, research on practice is represented by fieldwork studies involving international radio documentary producers to provide new insights into the creative process. To demonstrate research through practice the researcher applies the theory generated in the first part of the study to reflect on her own practice as she produces a one-hour radio documentary, Dead Dust commissioned by Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Radio National. Each part of this study would independently contribute new insights and knowledge into the under-researched area of radio studies in general and radio documentary practice specifically. However, taken together, the two parts present a compelling argument for why the practice of radio documentary production can be seen as a legitimate research process with legitimate research outcomes.
# Table of Contents

Abstract

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 3

Table of contents ....................................................................................................................................... 4

General acknowledgement ..................................................................................................................... 9

INTRODUCTION ...................................................................................................................................... 11

Aim of thesis ........................................................................................................................................... 13

Research questions ............................................................................................................................... 14

Methodology ........................................................................................................................................... 15

Definition of practice-related research ................................................................................................. 17

Practice-led research ............................................................................................................................. 19

Practice-based research ......................................................................................................................... 20

Thesis structure ...................................................................................................................................... 21

How to read this thesis .......................................................................................................................... 22

What the thesis is not about .................................................................................................................. 23

PART I: PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH – RESEARCH ON PRACTICE ......................................................... 24

Chapter 1 – Fieldwork methodology .................................................................................................. 25

Qualitative research methods ............................................................................................................... 25

The research paradigm ......................................................................................................................... 26

The research strategy ............................................................................................................................ 26

Method of data collection ..................................................................................................................... 28

Interviews with radio producers ........................................................................................................... 29

Selecting interviewees ............................................................................................................................ 30

Semi-structured interviews ................................................................................................................... 32

Data analysis .......................................................................................................................................... 33

Ethical considerations ........................................................................................................................... 33

Identification of interviewees ............................................................................................................... 34

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 35
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 – Radio Documentary Theory</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_radio documentary production values</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio features and documentaries</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of radio documentary</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio – the perfect medium for documentary</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio pictures</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology of radio documentary production</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Story Idea</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Background research and planning</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motif</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio documentary ingredients</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenes</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrator</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of interviews</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating rapport</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Painting pictures</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporter involvement</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough editing</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturgy</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripting</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final editing - mixing the documentary</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART II: PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH – RESEARCH THROUGH PRACTICE .......................... 87

Chapter 3 – Deadly Dust: the methodology ................................................................. 88

Journalism as research ................................................................................................. 88
Deadly Dust as research ................................................................................................. 91
Reflective practitioner .................................................................................................... 95
Keeping a journal .......................................................................................................... 97
The role of autoethnography ....................................................................................... 98
Narrative studies ........................................................................................................... 100
Background to the Asbestos Stories Project ................................................................. 102
Factual research on asbestos ....................................................................................... 104
Recruiting interviewees ............................................................................................... 105
Ethical considerations .................................................................................................. 107
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 108

Chapter 4 – Listening to Trauma ................................................................................ 109

Journalism and trauma ............................................................................................... 112
Listening to traumatic stories ..................................................................................... 114
Extended personal narrative ......................................................................................... 117
The power of narrative ................................................................................................. 119
Benefits of telling a story – for the interviewee ......................................................... 120
Benefits of telling a story – for the journalist ............................................................. 123
Making a difference ..................................................................................................... 124
Debriefing after interview ......................................................................................... 125
Benefits of telling a story – for society ...................................................................... 126
Ethical challenges ....................................................................................................... 126
Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 127
Appendices..............................................................................................................................169

Appendix 1: Interview protocol ..............................................................................................170

Appendix 2: Radio documentary proposal (Aug 2007)..........................................................172

Appendix 3: Updated radio documentary proposal (Aug 2008 - after feedback) ..............176

Appendix 4: The story so far – story development during production (6 Oct 2008)........178

Appendix 5: Final Deadly Dust mixing script (12 Nov 2008) ..............................................182

Appendix 6: Deadly Dust transcript (from http://www.abc.net.au/rn/hindsight/stories/2008/2418680.htm) .............................................................197

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................212
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Most people have never been listened to. They live in a lonely silence – no one knowing what they feel, how they live, or what they have done...Because listening can bring about such powerful healing, it is one of the most beautiful gifts that people can give and receive (Faber, 1976, 3).
INTRODUCTION
In the words of Peter Lewis, ‘radio is everybody’s private possession, yet no one recognizes it in public’ (Lewis, 2000, 161). It is easy to access, the technology is cheap, and content is inexpensive to produce. Radio’s nature is as background medium. It is seen as a natural part of everyday existence where mostly the listener is thinking about something else.

*The downside to the widespread availability of radio is that it tends to be taken for granted. Because it is a medium that can be used while doing other things - whether driving the car or reading a book - it is widely regarded as a secondary medium which implies it is somehow less important than other media or lacking in some way.*

*(Fleming, 2002, 1)*

Radio is no less invisible in academe and as a research field it has been slow to establish itself. Whereas much has been written about film theory, radio theory is often seen as embedded in the production process and therefore not acknowledged. Radio studies academic Eryl Price-Davies and colleagues argue that radio needs to ‘rid itself of the tyranny of the visual’ (Price-Davies et al., 2004, 108) to achieve the same standing as visual media in academe. The ‘invisibility’ of radio and the label of radio as a secondary medium has serious consequences for radio as a research field. It means the impact of radio on our daily lives is under-researched and therefore under-valued as a result (see for example Aroney 2005 and 2009; Hendy 2000 and 2003; Lewis 2000 and Madsen 2005). It is thereby ‘easy to underestimate or in fact ignore altogether the multi-faceted theory that informs this type of communication’ (Lindgren and Phillips, 2005, 593). Or in the words of Tacchi: ‘Radio has become naturalized – so much that it is difficult to establish its significance’ (Tacchi, 2000, 290).

Australian radio producer Tony Barrell has, in an interview with radio producer/academic Eurydice Aroney, commented that radio’s ephemeral nature is its greatest drawback:
You can’t hold up a radio program and look at a bit of it. You can’t freeze a bit of a radio program, and just listen to a bit of it. You can’t stop it in time…People write whole essays, books, articles about three stills from Casablanca and everyone knows what they’re talking about but if you try to do the equivalent in radio you couldn’t do it (Barrell in Aroney, 2009).

Arguably podcasting has allowed radio to be ‘captured’ and timeshifted where listeners now can stop and start programs at times that suit them. But Barrell’s comment about radio’s ephemeral nature is relevant as the non-visual aspect of radio makes written analysis challenging with no stills to be examined or sequences of shots to be analysed. Inserting audio into an essay, book or article is not a realistic approach for most scholars and there are limited opportunities to have works including audio published in mainstream academic journals.

The production of radio is often seen as a practical skill based on experience rather than a process informed by academic methods and rigour. This can be true for short-format productions like news and current affairs stories where tight deadlines effectively militate against in-depth research and reflective practices. However, the production of longer-format stories like 30 or 60-minute documentaries requires that producers follow protocols and apply skills and methodologies very similar to those used by academic researchers.

Journalism, as the parent discipline, has struggled with a similar identity crisis as radio within academe. In 1995 John Hartley wrote a scathing attack on journalism saying ‘there is no essence to journalism’ (quoted in Lamble 2004, 90) and claiming that ‘[j]ournalism is a terra nullius of epistemology’ (ibid, 90). This has contributed to the view that journalism is something of a ‘bastard orphan discipline’ (Lamble, 2004, 85).

Although the relevance of journalism studies is still questioned in some parts of the world, as a research field it is growing steadily and thereby also gaining acceptance
One way to rectify the view of journalism as lacking in academic rigour and discipline is to make its methodology and methods visible; to define and document the processes embedded in journalism practice (see for example Bacon, 2006; Duffield, 2009; Lamble, 2004; Meditsch, 2005; and Silverstone, 1985). Similarly Price-Davies et al. suggest the way forward for radio is to ‘develop a shared resource drawing on as many first-hand accounts as possible, so that the radio studies community can learn from each other’ (Price-Davies et al., 2004, 109).

**Aim of thesis**
This PhD study aims to make a contribution to Price-Davies’ ‘shared resource’. There are few writings about radio documentary theory and practice in academic and industry publications alike. The sparse literature that does exist tends to focus on practical tips on collecting the material (research, interviewing and writing skills) and mixing it into a program. Recently one book has been published featuring radio documentary producers reflecting on their craft (Biewen and Dilworth, 2010). Two previous books about radio features and documentaries were in Swedish (Björkman, 2009) and Norwegian (Hedemann, 2006) respectively and there are only a few journal articles dealing specifically with radio documentary and feature analysis.

The aim of the study is to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of theory and practice of radio documentary production. It also explores how to express the embedded production protocols for a long-format documentary in terms of research methodologies. The illustrations here of the way practice can be expressed in research terms provide justification for the inclusion of a journalistic piece such as a documentary as a legitimate academic research output.
Research questions

The study addresses two broad research questions:

1. How can radio documentary practice be defined in terms of research and which research paradigms are suitable for this purpose?

2. How does the concept of ‘journalism as research’ assist in analysing and understanding the processes and protocols involved in producing long-form radio documentaries?

The research seeks to discover where the study field of radio documentary theory and practice fits into an academic context. It questions how journalistic practice can be included – and valued – as research outcome. It is timely for this topic to be explored as journalism academics in Australia and internationally are continuing to push for non-traditional outcomes, such as journalism publications, to be fully acknowledged as academic research.

As radio is a medium made up of seamless sounds listeners often comment that they think that everything they hear on radio is live. In a documentary this would only be possible if all the interviewees were lined up to be interviewed giving short and perfect answers with music or other sounds appropriately cued and interspersed between the different audio grabs. The better a radio production is, the more invisible the production process becomes. The radio documentary appears to be a recording of reality rather than an artefact created by a radio producer employing journalistic techniques to select and

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1 In a 2009 trial the Australian government, through the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative, mapped how the research quality of creative outputs can be assessed within Australia’s higher education institutions using a combination of indicators and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts. A similar system called the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is used in the UK.
order components to create a storyline. Listeners therefore do not understand or appreciate the preparation and production process involved in creating a radio story; in fact the craft of documentary-making relies on the invisibility of technique. Similarly the few publications available about the production of long-format radio seldom identify the methodology involved nor discuss production issues beyond tips on researching, preparation, interviewing, editing, scripting and mixing.

Documenting this methodology can expand our understanding of radio documentary production for both listeners and practitioners. At every point in the production process there are decisions to be made and issues for the producer to consider. For example the production of a documentary about the personal impact of asbestos exposure raised the following issues: What is the role of the journalist when dealing with trauma interviews? What role does music play in enhancing the emotional impact of the story on the listener? What strategies can be used to balance the need for strong emotional impact without making the content so unbearable that the listeners turn the radio off? The listeners are never made aware of these issues as items of reflection as they listen, and unfortunately many practitioners are too busy themselves meeting their deadlines to have time to reflect on the production values and challenges involved in their daily work.

Methodology
The researcher was motivated by a desire to reflect upon, understand and capture her own production practice. She had spent years in the industry producing a range of different genres of radio stories without much chance to think about methodologies and theoretical aspects of those productions. Later, when the researcher started teaching radio production at university, it became clear to her that this lack of reflection by practitioners
was further exacerbated by a lack of writings about long-format radio production. As a result, this study was set up to offer an opportunity for the researcher to reflect on the production process of making a radio documentary. A mixed-method approach seemed most appropriate when exploring and analysing the production of radio documentary in an attempt to draw theory from practice and to position that theory within an academic framework. In this case the researcher took on the role of a bricoleur, performing a diverse range of research tasks from interviewing to self-reflection (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, 9).

The study developed into a three-step investigation which at every point looked at the theory and practice of radio documentary production. This became an analytical model for understanding the richness of journalistic practice. The model is both transparent and replicable, as required in academic research.

- The first step was producing the radio documentary *Deadly Dust* on commission for ABC Radio National while keeping a production diary to capture the process as it happened.

- In the second step of the study the researcher embarked on fieldwork studies where primary data about the theory and practice of documentary production was gathered through interviews with renowned practitioners reflecting on their work. The interviews contributed new knowledge to the under-researched field of radio documentary practice.

- In the third and final step of the study, the researcher revisited the production of the radio documentary, and the theory extracted from the fieldwork was applied to her own production of *Deadly Dust* thereby offering a much-needed analytical framework to use for reflection on the practice of journalism.
The three-step research methodology was then translated and presented as a two-part thesis. The radio documentary production theory extracted through fieldwork interviews became the centrepiece of part I. In part II that theory was applied to the production of *Deadly Dust* with the focus on reflections on that practice (the structure of the thesis is described in more in details below). The result is a study on journalism practice which combines an analytical dissertation with a radio production thereby becoming an exemplar for practice-related research, which can be useful for other practitioner-academics as a framework for their research.

**Definition of practice-related research**

With the growth of the creative industries and their evolution as an area of pedagogy and research within academe, it has become clear that the traditional definitions of research do not always suit these newer practice-based disciplines. Creative PhD theses are becoming more acceptable at universities, most often in the creative arts area where a creative artefact such as a book or a film script is submitted with an accompanying exegesis contextualising the artefact within a theoretical framework. More recently this model has been introduced as an option for students wanting to complete a research higher degree in journalism\(^2\). There will no doubt be discussions about what constitutes journalistic ‘artefacts’ and also whether journalism should be defined as creative work.

Notwithstanding that, the model has great potential for journalism practitioners wanting to deepen their understanding of theory and practice within their genre. The opportunity to reflect on practice, with practice informing the research process, would be welcomed by many. Arnold describes it as a model where ‘your own creative insights, practices,

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\(^2\) A range of Australian universities offer PhDs in practice-based research. At Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, where this research was done, the definition is extended to include a ‘creative or production-based thesis’ (Murdoch University, 2009)
problems and delights are the core data’ (2008, 39). And it opens the way for multi-layered research which, according to Arnold, includes:

- ‘the practitioner’s work
- the practitioner’s insights into that work
- the relevant works of other practitioners and their insights into that practice
- apposite academic writings and theories that enliven and enrich the practice’

(ibid, 58)

To broaden the perspective of what constitutes research in this area the UK-based Arts and Humanities Research Council’s definition offers a useful framework. Its definition of research is based on process rather than outcomes and requires that creative work have some form of documentation of the process which demonstrates critical reflection:

- ‘it must define a series of research questions, issues or problems that will be addressed in the course of the research. It must also define its aims and objectives in terms of seeking to enhance knowledge and understanding relating to the questions, issues or problems to be addressed.
- it must specify a research context for the questions, issues or problems to be addressed. It must specify why it is important that these particular questions, issues or problems should be addressed; what other research is being or has been conducted in this area; and what particular contribution the particular project will make to the advancement of creativity, insights, knowledge and understanding in the area.
it must specify the research methods for addressing these research questions, issues or problems. It must state how, in the course of the research project, it will seek to answer the questions, address the issues or solve the problems. It should also explain the rationale for the chosen research methods and why they provide the most appropriate means by which to answer the research questions, issues or problems.’ (Arts & Humanities Research Council, 2009)

Candy argues that through practice-related research ‘new knowledge is reached through a research process and is made explicit and transferable’ (2006, 2). As well as sharing the outcomes with a wider community, another distinction is that the research follows a structured process as outlined in a university’s examination regulations (ibid, 2).

Candy subdivides practice-related research into two sub-types: practice-led and practice-based research (2006, 1). This allows her to make a clear distinction between research on creative practice and research through creative practice. This was therefore a useful model for the present study which has a natural divide between research about radio documentary practice and research through the practice of doing a radio documentary. The two separate parts also require and demonstrate different kinds of academic writing. The first part dealing with practice-led research is written in a traditional academic style, whereas the second part dealing with practice-based research is a self-reflective text in which the researcher herself is a presence.

Let us look at how the two fields of research on practice (practice-led research) and research through practice (practice-based research) relate to this thesis.

**Practice-led research**

Part I of the written dissertation focuses on the theory of documentary production. It describes the methodology that was developed for the practice-led component of the
research which involved fieldwork interviews with international award-winning radio
documentary makers to gather their unique insights into their craft. Chapter 1 provides an
overview of qualitative research approaches and describes the qualitative methods used in
collecting, analysing and writing up the fieldwork data. The interviews in chapter 2
constitute primary data which in Candy’s terms enhances knowledge about or within
practice (2006, 1) adding a new dimension to the limited existing literature in the field. The
radio theory extracted in this part of the study becomes the framework for analysis where
the researcher reflects on her own practice in the second part of the study.

**Practice-based research**

In part II of the thesis the focus shifts to practice-based research where a radio
documentary produced by the researcher becomes the locus for reflection on the complex
multifaceted process of journalistic creativity. Here the theory extracted in part I of the
study is applied as a framework allowing the researcher to organise her insights into her
own practice. The inclusion of a creative component is essential for this study as it
highlights the production issues theorised about in the first section. It makes research
through creative practice accessible for both the researcher herself and, from a
pedagogical perspective, for other teachers, students and interested practitioners. The
documentary contributes in its own right to knowledge by its original content, structure,
form and impact on listeners. The accompanying written analysis contextualises and
explores the significance of that contribution to knowledge (Arts & Humanities Research
Council, 2009), however ‘a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to
the [creative] outcomes’ (Candy, 2006, 1).

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3 Artefacts in practice-based research can range from paintings and buildings to software and poems. [http://www.creativityandcognition.com/content/category/10/56/131/](http://www.creativityandcognition.com/content/category/10/56/131/). Creativity and Cognition Studios (CCS) is an internationally recognised multi-disciplinary environment for the advancement and understanding of practice in digital media and the arts.
Chapter 3 presents the literature review and methodologies relevant to the production of *Deadly Dust*. Then chapter 4 isolates one issue in particular, the impact on the journalist of listening to traumatic stories, and here the author combines her own reflections with those from the radio producers interviewed in the fieldwork. Finally in chapter 5 the author uses the theoretical framework of radio documentary production developed from the expert interviews to analyse her own practice as she went about the process of producing the documentary. This self-reflective approach allows the reader to gain a unique insider view of the production process.

In summary the study utilises traditional qualitative research methods to collect and analyse data and to formulate a theory of production around radio documentary. It then provides an illustration of theory in practice through a self-reflective examination of the researcher’s own practice. For this reason the thesis also has a non-traditional format, consisting of both a written dissertation and a creative artefact.

**Thesis structure**
The thesis comprises a written component and an audio component in the form of a radio documentary. The radio documentary *Deadly Dust* is a stand-alone item that can be accessed and assessed on its own, in its own right. However, for the purpose of this study, the documentary becomes an integral part of the reflections on practice. Therefore, instead of dividing the work into one written part and one audio part the thesis is organised according to Candy’s definitions of practice-led and practice-based research (2006, 1), as outlined above.

The two parts of the study would individually create new insights into radio documentary theory and production. However with the written component deriving theory from practice and the production component illustrating theory in practice a research
project is created with both depth and breadth. Therefore the study demonstrates the benefits of this model for academics wanting to complement production outcomes with accompanying reflective and analytical writings, and vice versa (for more discussions on how documentary audio can complement traditional qualitative research studies, see Makagon and Neumann, 2009).

**How to read this thesis**

Being a ‘non-traditional’ academic publication, the reader requires some specific guidance in how to read and listen to the thesis. As the audio and written materials are interlinked and speak to each other, they will need to be engaged with in tandem. The thesis has thus been structured assuming the following reading and listening process:

1. Read chapters 1 and 2 which give the context for production-led research from which a theory for radio documentary production is derived.

2. Read chapter 3 which sets up the methodology for the production of *Deadly Dust*.

3. Listen to the whole radio documentary *Deadly Dust* (54-minutes) on the CD; the presenter’s introduction can be found in Appendix 6.

4. Read chapter 4, which examines in detail the particular journalistic challenge of dealing with traumatic material.

5. Chapter 5 provides a guided listening experience where the reader can follow the production process in more detail by reading the researcher’s reflective analysis.

6. The final conclusion draws out some of the lessons learned from the approach to practice-related research adopted in this project for the benefit of future journalism researchers.
What the thesis is not about
This thesis is not an in-depth analysis of where journalism is situated within academe.
Instead it offers a practical model of how one type of journalism can be incorporated and presented as part of a higher degree research study. It highlights the need for further exploration of journalism’s place in academe and encourages other practitioner-academics to experiment with similar models.

It is also not an analysis of radio production in general. Instead it looks specifically at radio documentary production. The following five chapters will explore and expand the theory and practice of radio documentary production.
PART I: PRACTICE-LED RESEARCH – RESEARCH ON PRACTICE

The introduction to the thesis has outlined the two parts of this study. This first part is based on Candy’s practice-led research framework where exploring the nature of practice has operational significance to that practice (Candy, 2006, 1). For doctoral theses such research is often presented in written form only, as stand-alone theory without any creative work being included (ibid, 1). In this thesis the theoretical reflection will later be demonstrated and reflected on through real-life practice.

The aim of Part 1 is twofold:

1. To develop new theory about the practice of radio documentary production

This is achieved through applying qualitative research methods in order to capture data about the process of radio documentary production. Existing academic and industry writings about the research field are here enhanced and deepened by the incorporation of in-depth reflections from internationally renowned radio documentary practitioners. This has pedagogical benefits for those learning about radio documentary as there are only limited writings available currently. The insights will also benefit practitioners in industry who might not have the time or the opportunity to reflect around their work practice.

2. To document the process of radio documentary practice.

The exercise of highlighting and documenting from real life the methodology of radio documentary production contributes to the increasing body of academic work dedicated to exploring journalism as research. It responds to Lamble’s call for journalists and journalism academics to document the methodology and methods of journalism (in this case long-format radio documentary) – ‘a methodology that although unrecognised and multi-faceted must logically exist’ (Lamble, 2004, 103).