

Practice diary for animation: a reflective tool for the practitioner, researcher, and educator

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Abstract

This article examines the experience and outcomes of conducted research project that employs autoethnographic action research methodology and uses a practice diary as a key method to gather data. Practice diary, as a critical reflection tool, although becoming a widely accepted and used method in various research fields such as humanities, creative arts, education, clinical trials, and healthcare, have yet to find footing in animation studies. Findings suggest that a practice diary helps to conduct more profound, more thoughtful engagement in the research process and, as a result, helps to transform tacit knowledge into explicit form. The article concludes with recommendations on employing a reflective practice diary when conducting an action research project.

Keywords
Practice diary, reflective journal, animation, reflective method, action research.

1. Introduction

A reflective diary or journal[2] is a flexible method that can be used with qualitative methodologies such as (auto)ethnography, phenomenology, hermeneutics, semiotics, and narrative inquiry and as a research tool to gather quantitative data. Furthermore, Blaikie [1], in his text on research design, identified that in social sciences research alone, there are 12 different designs: experimental, survey, fieldwork/ethnography, comparative/historical, case study, content analysis, observation, simulating and gaming, evaluation research, social impact research and action research. In other words, a diary can easily be moulded to suit different research designs. However, in this paper, I will focus only on the reflective diary method when applied along with the action research methodology.

The action research study is a very organically suited research approach for animation practitioners, researchers, and educators, as its goal is to solve problems and make changes, as opposed to traditional research approaches concerned with creating theories and testing hypotheses [2]. Thus, as Schmuck [3] observes, "Reflection and action research are two sides of the coin of planned change". Yet, the reflective diary is an extremely under-used method among animators. Hence, this article aims to raise awareness of this method by examining the experience and outcome

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2 Although, as Bassot [4] argues journal and *diary* can mean slightly different things, in this article they are used interchangeably.

of the conducted research, sharing insights into this research approach, and outlining its potential use in animation.

In this methodological article, I will begin with a general overview of the reflective diary as a qualitative research method. Secondly, the article will demonstrate its application in animation studies through an example of one concrete animation research project (that employs autoethnographic action research methodology). Thirdly, I will examine the experience of the research project and outcomes regarding my animation research, practice, and pedagogic processes. Finally, I discuss the relevance of this method for the animation field and propose practical recommendations on how best to adapt it for animation researchers, practitioners, and educators.

2. Literature review

At its core, a diary is a document created by an individual seeking to maintain a regular, contemporaneous, and personal record [5]. However, Klimova [6] expands the definition of a diary by adding that people can write their thoughts, ideas, feelings, or experiences (interactions) in this document. Thus, based on individual needs, a diary can be shaped and formed into various formats that vary in detail, level of personal commentary and reflection, regularity or even medium used to record entries to suit the researcher's, practitioner's, or educator's needs. Also, a diarist may explicitly write for a specific audience – for personal use, specifically for the scholar, or to be consumed by the public.

Alaszewski [5] argues that the diary method can help overcome the disadvantages of conventional methods (such as interviews) by providing more accurate and thorough data, as the diarist writes his entries shortly after the event or experience transpires. In other words, this method "is designed to minimise recall and memory errors and cognitive strain" [7]. Another important strength of this method is that diarists not only increase their observational skills [8] but also perceive events in a less personal, more objective way [9]. Furthermore, journaling can assist diarists by providing an avenue for addressing the theory/practice gap [10], [11]. Thus, dairy is a vibrant and effective method in its capacity to capture phenomena of interest when it requires regular study in context, depth and over time [12].

But, like any method, it has not only strengths but also weaknesses. First, the quality of the diary's content is directly linked with the diarist's ability to observe, identify patterns and, not least, express them in a constructive, critical, and straightforward manner. As well, journaling requires a considerable amount of dedication [13]. Furthermore, although the diary is usually identified with intimate privacy, in the context of research, it becomes not only a publicly available document but also one where every thought and feeling of the diarist is examined and analysed in detail. That may invoke a strong feeling for the diarist to self-censor and to remove or amend any aspects that may shed light in unfaltering light. Another serious drawback of the method is that people consider completing their professional diaries an effort (and, thus, a task they are unwilling to perform) [14]. And finally, then there are also ethical consid-

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erations – how to portray events in an autobiographical study that involves other people without providing them with the opportunity to defend or explain their stand [15], [16], [17], [12].

However, the most significant challenges this method still faces are continuous questions and doubts about the findings' scientific validity [12], [5]. In other words, from the position of the positivist and empiricist, it is improper for the researcher to take the observer's position and observe [12], [16]. And this sentiment has strong roots even among researchers working in social and artistic fields. In addition, in some cultures, the diary is perceived as a highly private activity attributed to specific social roles. For example, in Western cultures keeping a diary can be viewed as somewhat of feminine and juvenile activity [12].

However, researchers extensively used quantitative diaries in medicine and healthcare to record symptoms, prescribe treatments, and identify the realities of treatment in an individual patient's life [19], [20]. Education is another research field where a diary is used extensively and successfully. Studies revealed that by using diaries, students could facilitate the language learning process [21], [6], increase students' understanding and enhance their learning process [22].

The situation in the animation field, however, is quite different. Not only the method of reflective journaling is absent in all key animation literature, but even the thought process of a practitioner is not addressed clearly for the readers [23]. Furthermore, the review of UK doctoral theses in the animation field and the employ of creative practice as research methodology revealed that, although few researchers mentioned in passing that they are taking notes, not even one formally included a diary in their methodology. Interestingly, the most revealing doctoral thesis was written by [23] Lo-Garry, who interviewed animation industry practitioners and identified that the industry does not motivate animators to document their insights about conducted practices and experimentation. Furthermore, the animators feel that documenting their techniques and animation studies would interfere with their primary work – animation content production. Witch is counter-intuitive because for the creative practitioner (e.g., animator) to excel in his field (and, thus, move upwards in one's career), he must acquire them through observation, practice, and evaluation (result interpretation) [24].

And lastly, I would like to review recommendations presented in the literature on using various techniques and tools to acquire knowledge through practice. First, diarists should always have a clear understanding of (i) what is the goal of the practice diary and (ii) what aspects of practice should be recorded in the document before even starting the diary [12]. It is important to note that when one employs action research methodology, it is usually to acquire data on how to solve a particular problem or improve the quality of processes and results. In other words, the reflective practice diary approach is used when one's goal is to seek creative ways to improve one's practice and general understanding.

Once the diary's goal is established, the following steps are to identify what kind of format the diary will be in – what medium will be used, how often and detailed entries will be, what is the timeframe that entries will be

recorded, and what aspects of the practice will be reflected. For the format of the entries themselves is helpful to use Gibbs' [25] model that proposes a cycle of six key stages: ((1) describing what happened, (2) an examination of feelings and thoughts related to this, (3) evaluation of the positive and negative aspects, (4) subsequent analysis where sense is made, (5) conclusions drawn regarding what else can be done, and (6) action planning – involving actions that may be applied with future re-occurrence.

For a reflective diary to work, constant inner dialogue must challenge the practitioner's beliefs, underlying assumptions, biases, doubts, and uncertainties [21]. Only then can reflective practitioners become decision-makers who develop thoughtful plans to bring new understanding into action [26]. Finally, there is an aspect of ethics. A reflective diary should not aim to present reflected events or interactions with other people as objective data. Also, a diary should always aim to preserve other people's identities anonymously.

3. The practice diary in use

The author of this article employed the diary method to collect rich data for a qualitative long-term research project that uses autoethnographic action research methodology. The research project aims to explore and gather insights about the phenomenon of erotica (and, to an extent – pornography) in 2D animation with a heavy focus on aesthetics. The reason for choosing the qualitative autoethnographic approach for practice-led research was that early in the research, it was identified that self-censorship plays a vital role in the animation industry. Thus the quantitative approach to understanding the element of aesthetics in animated erotica was not suitable.

The decision to use the diary was made upon completion of the literature reviews. It was identified that by taking an action research approach, the reflective method could help identify the strength of the self-censorship effect when producing erotic animation content. A rationale for using a diary to collect data (rather than other methods such as focus groups, interviews or observation) is that the topic of animated erotica (and pornography) could be uncomfortable for the participants. Also, with the interviews, participants may be unable to recall events or feelings. As the literature suggests, many animation practitioners could have created mental justifications for why they don't need erotic elements to tell their stories. In other words, because of the nature of self-censorship, animators could not perceive the avoidance of erotic themes in their work as something negative or limiting.

It is important to note that I will not present conducted research findings in this article. I will only use the research project as a case study to present insights into the practice diary method and its possible applications to animation practitioners, researchers, and educators. By the point of composing this article, I had used the practice diary for 18 months and produced 90 pages (over 38 thousand words) of content. It is important to note that the research project is still ongoing. And although this is a research project that aims to answer specific research goals, over the 18 months, I started to notice positive outcomes regarding my pedagogical work with animation students and my personal animation practice.

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The chosen format of the diary was a digital document in which I would reflect in and on action (during the creative task and after it is finished). At the beginning of the document, I wrote (a) the rules of engagement and (b) the goals of this practice journal. The first page provided six rules for conducting the reflective journaling process. Here are a few examples from the rules set:

1. Write openly and do not hide any thoughts, doubts, or mistakes. The success of this journal depends only on my openness to myself.
2. Describe all events within 24 hours or note that they are written later. However, always aim to write as soon as possible.
3. No content editing after writing. The only exception is grammar error correction and only with priority so that written thought would not change in any way.

The second page describes the research goals I try to achieve with the practice diary. However, as my research project employs action research methodology, the research goal (research questions) changes in reflection on gathered data. In other words, my research goal has shifted a few times based on gathered insights about the phenomenon.

Every single entry in the diary has five data points: (i) date, (ii) task name, (iii) comments before starting, (iv) comments during the task, and (v) comments after finishing. However, because some entries are not about the practice work itself but about the practice reflection process (e.g., meetings, feedback or presentations), these entries, naturally, would not provide comments on the action. It is important to note that "comments before starting" establish my goals with the specific practice task, the challenges, and how I will approach them. Thus, the final segment of the entry is always a critical reflection of how I succeeded in achieving my goals and what worked and what did not. And, if it applies to the task – what would be my approach to a similar task in the future? Finally, during the task, I would document my thought process, creative approach, mind-task results etc. This section is usually the largest text-wise as it functions as the raw data that will help me later to analyse overall creative and thought processes and determine how to improve them.

It is important to note that developing the necessary skills to identify what is worth recording took time. In addition, learning how to present any practical failure without shame or excuse also took time. Thus, with time and continued reflection practice, diary entries became more constructive, objective, and valuable.

4. Results and Discussion

Three qualitative groups of outcomes and insights emerged from the collected data. These groups were: (i) the reflective diary method met all expectations to explore the phenomenon of self-censorship and the exploration of erotic aesthetics in animation media; (ii) the diary provided tools to better identify the correlation between creative decisions and in turn, transform knowledge that would be otherwise implicit into explicit;

and, finally, (iii) reflection on animation practice helped to breach theory and practice gap and look for better practice solutions.

Further in this chapter, I will present the outcomes and insights for each identified group.

4.1. Practice Diary for animation researchers

It is important to honestly admit that I, from the very beginning, did not trust this data-gathering method. It felt that gathered data would be too subjective and unsuitable for constructing any argument acceptable in the academic field. In other words, I was biased towards this method before even learning anything about it. Another vital element was that I felt that a diary is an extraordinarily juvenile and feminine activity. And to be more precise, that diary is suitable for little girls reflecting on their feelings, and not for serious academic study. And although this perception was quickly shattered with a simple literature review, it did stick into my memory of how cultural programming can affect the rationale of choosing research design.

However, once a literature review on the method was conducted, I, per recommendations, established goals for the diary and formatted how and what data I will document in my diary. Although the course of the research did shift a few times, the diary format changed very little and fully met all study needs by employing this method, as it was able to gather rich data and identify essential aspects of the phenomenon. For example:

1. What psychological and physiological sensations are evoked by the desire to produce erotic and pornographic animated content?
2. How long does it take to break away from the shame of producing erotic content?
3. How other animators react to the opportunity to produce erotic content.
4. The difference in an emotional state when conducting (what could be called) academic study and when I am producing an erotic shot.
5. Etc.

It is safe to argue that these insights would not be possible without the reflective practice diary method. And most define tell it is not something that could be gathered with a quantitative research approach. However, this type of research design requires dedication, discipline and embracing vulnerability for the method to gather data that can create new explicit knowledge.

4.2. Practice Diary for animation educators

Surprisingly, in this aspect, the used pf practice diary method produced the most significant and fastest qualitative difference in professional life. And it is important to note, not because of the increase in my technical animating skills but because of better critical understanding and increased communicative abilities. In other words, the practice diary helped me to identify bet-

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ter causality of taking creative decisions and helped me to articulate better

To illustrate this, I will use one of my very first animation practical exercises I recorded in my diary – the walking cycle. And although my goal in doing this exercise was not to learn how to animate a walking cycle but to research and gather data about my feelings toward animating nude characters, I was quickly surprised how taking notes helped me better understand why some of my decisions worked and some did not. But most importantly, how reflection on practice helped me better explain my decisions' causality. And these newfound skills were quickly tested in my classroom, where I could now communicate potential solutions to my students significantly more efficiently.

Thus, by reflecting on my animation practice in the diary, I could transform an implicit type of knowledge into an explicit type of information. Furthermore, because of the need to provide a clear explanation of causality in the diary, I improved my analytical and communication skills. Finally, and arguably the most surprising thing is that the positive effect of the diary appeared very quickly – just in a few weeks.

4.3. Practice Diary for animation practitioners

It is important to point out that for the practice diary method to work for animation practitioners, it has to be used as a rich data-gathering tool to conduct action research. In other words, it is all about the animator's goal to actively and purposefully search for a better way to conduct practice. The diary method simply allows us to take the most out of the process.

The most significant change in my animation practice due to the reflective journaling process was a change in my mindset – because of the diary, I stopped perceiving failure in my practice as an unwelcoming outcome. In other words, once I started to look at creative outcomes that did not meet my aesthetic or quality expectations as just another data set, it helped me establish causality and, in turn, improve my animating skills. Furthermore, I realise that before employing the reflective diary method, I would subconsciously lean towards my creative comfort zone because any unsatisfactory creative decisions would, in my opinion, mean loss of time, money and prestige. Thus, passively impearling my ability to level up, so to speak.

Another meaningful change in my mindset was that I started to construct not only goals for the creative task but also form hypotheses. In other words, I was not only identifying what I wanted to achieve but also constructing a premise that could be tested by the end of the creative task. And at the end of the creative task, I would conduct a small analysis to see how my hypothesis held up and, if it did not – how it should be amended for the next time. In addition, I was astonished at how the reflective process helped to breach the theory and practice gap. This happened because I would form my hypothesis based on some theory, and the results of the creative task would also help me to identify if I had misunderstood or not completely grasped the theoretical approach to animation practice.

The third significant aspect of having a reflective practice diary is having a written document of all gathered insights. Memory is a funny thing

when it comes to creative practice – if one is not constantly practising, the skills can fade. However, looking over one's notes is an incredible help to at least recapture through the process. However, it is necessary to admit that the reflection process does take a sufficient amount of time. Thus, animation practitioners, by employing this method, must accept that he or they will produce less animated content. However, in the long run, a practice diary does provide a boost to skills and knowledge. Furthermore, it provides communicative skills that are necessary for any supervising position.

4.4. Discussion

Reflective journaling is not a magical pill that will instantly help animators to become better practitioners, researchers and/or educators. A few conditions need to be met if one hopes to achieve a positive effect using this method. But, on the other hand, it is hard to ignore how well-suited and natural this method is for the animation field. Furthermore, the method has quite a few positive byproducts that affect no matter for what purpose it is used– research, educational or practical skill improvement.

Of course, there are a lot of elements that precondition distrust for the method. First, there is a positivist stand that is suspicious of the subjective qualitative research approach in general [12], [16], [5]. And one does not get more subjective in research design than employing the autoethnographic methodology. However, there are research questions that not only is this method the best to gather data, but arguably the only way to acquire answers. Then, there is a misconception that a diary is a feminine and juvenile activity [12]. Finally, practising a diary is time-consuming, requiring critical thought, regularity, and embracing failure. Thus, especially for animation practitioners, it may seem like a very costly method, for benefits that will be evident only further down the road.

However, experience and outcomes from the presented reflective practice diary case showed that this method has great potential in animation. Of course, the substantial lack of animation literature on this topic also means a considerable knowledge gap regarding the procedures, formats, and general research design principles. Only with more animation study cases and, if you will, reflection on reflection will this method be able to form research design paradigms.

The presented study case suggests a diary format tailored explicitly for conducting research in the animation field. This diary format was successfully applied not only to achieve my research goals but also provided a noticeable positive impact towards my animation practice and pedagogical activities. However, it is necessary to point out that there were a lot of important elements at play for the method to provide valuable outcomes – from the ability to construct clear research goals to a willingness to follow its own rules. Even willingness to embrace failure can be vital to the method's success.

Another important aspect regarding the method that needs to be addressed is that the reflective practice diary method may not be for every animator. The conditions that need to be met for this method's benefit may not be acceptable (for whatever reason). Furthermore, this method can not work if it is forced on someone.

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I would also like to address one more possible application of a reflective practice diary within animation – students. Literature review revealed that this method has vast success in the context of education [21], [6], [23]. Thus, one can make an educated assumption that this approach could be a valuable educational tool in helping animation students grasp the intricacies of this art medium. Not to mention that journaling can assist students by providing an avenue for addressing the theory/practice gap [10][11]. However, for this method to have any positive effect on the educational process, first, the educators must not only believe in it but also have sufficient experience with it. In any case, this avenue requires empirical testing before forming any conclusions.

Finally, it is worth coming back to the current situation. There could be many possible explanations for why this method is underused in animation. Still, the fact is that the method is exceptionally well suited to study animation, be it for research purposes or to increase one's mastery over the medium. Thus, I would like to encourage other animation researchers, practitioners, and educators to employ this method to increase the understanding of the medium and be able to share that knowledge better.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has provided insight into using reflective practical diaries in qualitative autoethnographic action research as a data collection method. In addition, this article has provided an overview of how the reflective practice diary method can be a precious approach to conducting qualitative research in the animation field, a tool to improve practical skills effectively, and a device to help develop communicative and pedagogical skills to provide better guidance to animation students. Finally, this article aimed to showcase how the method can provide rich qualitative data to provide solutions for change and improvement.

However, this method must first beat quite a few misconceptions in the animation field in order to be accepted even as an option. Also, it is critical that this method would be tailored to specific research goals. And even then, this method will not be suitable for all animators, as it requires specific personal traits, willingness to accept vulnerability, not to mention dedication to long-term commitment. Finally, more discussion, exploration, experimentation, and research are needed to formulate research paradigms for the animation field. However, the reflective practice diary method exhibits promising applications in animation.

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