
# Amateur, professional and proto- practices: a contribution to 'the proficiency debate'

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# Amateur, professional and proto- practices: a contribution to 'the proficiency debate'


## Abstract

With increasing disciplinary interest in amateur practice, and growing geographical use of artistic practice as a research method, ideas of proficiency are increasingly coming under scrutiny. In this paper, I explore and unsettle different classifications of proficiency in relation to empirical data from practice-based research with art practitioners. I focus on the role and nature of experimentation within artistic practices across different levels of proficiency, and suggest that this leads to increasingly individualized practices over time, which can be characterized by features from outside the conventions of a field (proto- practices) irrespective of formal attributions of proficiency. I suggest an alternative understanding of proficiency which characterizes the practice rather than the practitioner in terms of experimental style rather than skill, which has theoretical and methodological implications for geographical research into both amateur and artistic practices.



## Keywords

artistic practice, proficiency, amateur, professional, proto- practice, experimentation

## Introduction

Geographical attention is increasingly turning to matters of proficiency, which—often informed by the work of Tim Ingold—is conventionally conceptualized in relation to the embodied skill of a practitioner (for example see Ingold, 1994, 2011, Ingold and Hallam, 2007). In this paper I advocate an alternative perspective on proficiency in relation to practices rather than practitioners, which I argue can accommodate more readily the internally diverse nature of practices discovered in practice-based research with artists than conventional skill-based ideas of proficiency.

One particular area of activity exemplifying this concern for proficiency is the growing interest in amateurism, which is refining understandings of how amateur and professional practices relate (Brown, 2007, Craggs et al., 2013, Heley and Jones, 2013, Stebbins, 1992), and developing new terminology to accommodate emerging practices, such as online mapping conducted by non-professionals (Budhathoki et al., 2008, Coleman et al., 2009, Goodchild, 2009, McConchie, 2015). Meanwhile, geographies of artistic practice are increasingly turning their attention towards the enactment of artistic practices as a form of geographical knowledge-making, and are increasingly characterized by geographers employing image-making as a research method, either engaging in their own artistic practice or collaborating with professional artists (Banfield, 2015, Cresswell, 2012, Foster and Lorimer, 2007, Hawkins, 2011, 2013, 2015, Madge, 2014, Marston and de Leeuw, 2013, Morris and Cant, 2006, Tolia-Kelly,

2007). This has stimulated commentary on the artistic proficiency required on the part of geographers incorporating image-making into their research method, and raises questions as to the applicability of proficiency to practices rather than solely practitioners. Several calls have been issued for geographers to develop artistic skills through sustained practice and formal tuition (Cresswell, 2012, Lafrenière and Cox, 2013, Marston and de Leeuw, 2013, Madge, 2014), while others call for greater attention to what is gained in the learning as well as the doing (Hawkins, 2015), and even suggesting research potential from deliberately unsettling otherwise proficient practices (Banfield, 2015).

Research into amateur practice reveals diverse understandings of amateurism, with characteristics that include working to a lower standard than professionals (Goodchild, 2009, Nicholson, 2004, Stebbins, 1992), being less committed than professionals (Brown, 2007, Stebbins, 1992), not participating in the activity as a main source of income (Stebbins, 1992), or lacking formal training in the activity (McConchie, 2015). The prevailing conceptualisation remains that of a continuum from novice through amateur to professional and expert practitioner, where the expert remains the gold standard in terms of skill and proficiency is bound to an embodied human practitioner.

Increasingly, authors are seeking to collapse this amateur-professional dualism by establishing new blended categories, such as the hacker (Coleman et al., 2009, Craggs et al., 2013, Greenberg, 2005, Heley and Jones, 2013, McConchie, 2015, Stebbins,

1992). For example, research suggesting that the roles of amateur and expert are becoming blurred in online mapping defines these roles in relation to a typology of proficiency in which: 1) neophytes have no formal background in the subject or activity; 2) interested amateurs have discovered the subject and are gaining experience through experimentation; 3) expert amateurs know a great deal about the subject but do not rely on it for their living; 4) expert professionals do rely on their knowledge of the subject for their living; and 5) expert authorities are recognised as leaders in the field (Coleman et al., 2009).

While such work sustains the conventional association of proficiency with the practitioner, two features of this typology are interesting in the current context. First, it accommodates practitioners situated outside the field of practice: neophytes. Secondly, it attributes experimental practices only to the interested amateur, suggesting that this experimentation falls away as a practitioner progresses through the typology. In this paper, I suggest a way in which we might think differently about proficiency, in relation to the practice rather than the practitioner, moving away from the wholesale application of a single classification to the entirety of a practitioner's activity, to conceptualizations of proficiency that can accommodate internally diverse practices, characterized by differentiated proficiencies.

In doing so, I rework both of the interesting features of the typology outlined above. Rather than emphasising newness with the term neophyte, I employ the term proto-

practices to emphasise the focus on the practice rather than the practitioner, and to position these practices before their formal development through engagement with a field of practice. Originating from outside that field, proto- practices are not necessarily new and the practitioner does not necessarily lack formal background. In addition, I suggest that experimentation is not confined to the early stages of a developing practice, but features across conventional proficiency classifications, and that this continued experimental practice can support the persistence of proto- practices even within expert practices. Consequently, a practice can feature elements acquired both within and outside the field simultaneously.

Although I have situated this paper in relation to amateur practice, the research that I discuss did not attend explicitly to amateur practice, but to artistic practice more generally as a form of geographical knowledge-making. The accounts employed here are those of the ten individuals who completed the research, most of whom were professional artists although two were hobbyists. The two hobbyists (Yoko, 61, and Marnie, 50) took part as a group, along with Philippa (66). Yoko works with watercolour, pencil, charcoal and pen; Marnie uses soft pastels; and Philippa primarily works with watercolour. Susan (57), Clare (58) and Kassandra (64) also took part as a group. All three work in mixed media, including printmaking and painting. The other four participants took part individually. Jane (71) uses a variety of media including watercolours and Chinese brush and ink. Laura (36) works primarily in oil paints, and

Katherine (59) works primarily in watercolours. Polly (62) works with textiles and embroidery. The research involved retrospective interview accounts of participants' practices, real-time commentary during practice, and stimulated recall while viewing visual recordings of those practices. Despite the lack of explicit focus on amateur practices, the outcomes and implications of this research are significant for geographical interest both in amateur practices and in artistic practices, as well as for geographical interest in proficiency more generally.

The paper is presented in two main sections. Section one opens with an extract from a discussion between three participants, through which I identify three key themes that run through the paper, and which pave the way for consideration of the varied forms of experimentation evident in participants' artistic practices, and their relation to proto-practices. In the second section, I explore and unsettle existing typologies of proficiency on the basis of these features of participants' artistic practices, and suggest an understanding of proficiency based upon the experimental style of the practice rather than the skill of the practitioner. This allows for proficiency to be multiply situated in relation to the field of practice, potentially being both amateur and expert simultaneously, and to accommodate the persistence of features of proto- practices even in 'expert' practices. I conclude by outlining some implications of this for geographical engagements with both amateur and artistic practices.

**Experimentation and the persistence of proto- practices**

Y. [Norman] is always telling us the water should be drinkable for your brush to wash

P. and do you think it should?

Y. oh I don't know, it's up to you. Like I did once by mistake dip [my] paint brush into coffee and got this rather nice colour, sort of sepia. So that is his method compared to maybe someone else has got different ideas

P. I think you have to find your own way

M.I think it's probably a good way to start maybe, because I think if you start with too many, I think I would get, mine would be so muddy my watercolour if I didn't really keep it clean, but I think as you get better you can probably not worry about it so much

P. but I think if you want fresh colours transparent colours I think you do have to do that possibly, yeah

Y. because I remember before I went to Norman's class sometimes I get really annoyed, is not getting the clear colours. I didn't realize it was the problem from the water

Yoko, Philippa and Marnie all attend the same painting class with their tutor, Norman, but they differ significantly in terms of their level, nature and length of practice. Philippa is formally trained and practices professionally. Both Yoko and Marnie describe themselves as hobbyists, but whereas Yoko has over twenty years of art tuition, Marnie has only been practising for a few years. They all identify circumstances in which formal instruction is beneficial, for example Marnie jokes that as she is currently struggling to identify when to stop working on a picture Norman tells her when her work is finished. They also try to follow Norman's guidance, although Philippa's comment that "I can't do Norman's painting either" indicates that this is not always successful. However, in the extract above, they also all indicate circumstances in which it is appropriate to disregard formal guidance and do things differently. While Marnie considers that guidance becomes less important with skill, for Philippa there are no formal rules but some are helpful, and for Yoko, following instructions is a matter of personal choice. This disengagement from Norman's guidance suggests considerable scope within their artistic practices to do things their own way, irrespective of any differences in proficiency.

Three key features of artistic practice, which I bring together in this paper, emerge from the above extract: 1) Philippa's notion of finding one's own way, which I conceptualise as an experimental aspect of these artistic practices; 2) Marnie's suggestion of a trajectory of skill development, which I explore in relation to understandings of proficiency; and 3) Yoko's accidental discovery and adoption of a sepia effect, an example of a proto- practice (originating from beyond the field of practice), which, like experimentation, I suggest persists across the proficiency spectrum, thereby unsettling conventional typologies proficiency as skill development.

Philippa's belief that each individual has to find their own way in developing their practice suggests an exploratory or experimental engagement with the materials of her practice rather than relying solely on the formal teaching or training at the heart of conventional understandings of proficiency. Rather than seeking to over-theorise notions of experimentation, I use the term here because several participants described their own practices as experimental, and because experimentation has been recognized as an inherent part of the art-making process, defined as discovering the outcome of manipulating materials and methods and as a means of gaining new ways of thinking and perceiving (Mace and Ward, 2002). This is exemplified in these artists' practices by the imposition or alteration of experimental constraints, for example by working on a smaller scale than usual (Polly) or limiting their expressiveness (Kassandra).

Notably, in contrast to the typology of proficiency outlined earlier in relation to online mapping (Coleman et al., 2009), experimentation was not confined to amateurs, and the purpose and manner of this experimentation varied, from exploring new domains and trialling equipment to curiosity as to what will happen (Buchwald, 1995, Galison, 1995, Hacking, 1983). Katherine outlines her eagerness to "see what I can do" with her first sketches on an iPad, and Polly talks about "constantly striving to find new ways of expressing myself", while Jane comments that "if you do things another way you actually get a better effect". Such comments suggest that these artists associate their experimentation with skill development, which—although consistent with conventional conceptualizations of proficiency—unsettles assumptions that experimentation is confined to the early stages of that development as experimentation is sustained, not left aside, as their practice develops.

Other participants targeted their experimentation towards particular materials, making familiar materials unfamiliar in order to discover new ways of working with them (Buchli and Lucas, 2001). Laura speaks about "experimenting more with my starting layer, my primed surface", and Polly discusses her exploration of different surfaces and textures, while Philippa describes how she let one layer of paint dry "so I could paint on top and explore the transparent qualities of the paint". Here, practice constraints are not so much imposed as allowed to emerge through an open-ended

engagement with their materials, determined more by the contingencies of the practice than by the intended outcomes or embodied capabilities of the practitioner.

Sometimes experimentation aims to achieve specific effects. Clare says that she seeks to transfer effects between mediums and is "struggling to find out if there's a way from one to the other", and Laura describes her effort "to investigate creating an intensity of colour on a small scale as opposed to painting large". Equally, though, much experimenting is undertaken without such goals in mind, but rather in the spirit of curiosity as to "what if?" questions. Marnie says that she "wanted to see what would happen if the paint ran", and Philippa says that she was "trying to see what happens if you use [acrylics] like watercolours". Other experimental efforts have developed from accidental beginnings, similar to Yoko's coffee-derived sepia effect. Delighted at the unexpected outcome of the uncontrolled mixing of very liquid paints, Philippa now experimentally sets in motion conditions under which desired accidental effects may re-occur, and working wet has become a hallmark of her work. In these situations, the constraints employed are often not purposively pre-selected but emerge or occur by accident, increasingly informing experimental practices.

Two important aspects of these participants' artistic practices are the diverse motivations and modes of experimentation, and their incorporation of non-traditional techniques, materials and styles from beyond their field. By deliberately or accidentally changing the arrangements for their practice (Foster and Lorimer, 2007, Hacking,

1983, Kullman, 2012, Last, 2012), elements of their practice that originated from beyond their field of practice (proto- practices) can be sustained as part of increasingly professional or expert practice. Consequently, an artist's practice becomes progressively individualized as they build incrementally on their experimental engagements with their materials, but how does this relate to conventional understandings of proficiency?

**Proficiency and proto- practices**

The increasing individualization of an artist's practice might reflect a standard developmental trajectory from habituation to experimentation, consistent with accounts of giftedness, whereby individuals develop abilities (as a novice) into competencies (as an amateur) through structured tuition, and then develop these further into expertise through self-reflective practice. Beyond expertise, the trajectory extends to elite talent or artistry, for which technical competency is not sufficient, as artistry requires style in order to constitute a unique contribution to the field (Ericsson and Charness, 1994, Kaufman and Kaufman, 2007, Pickard, 2012, Stephens and Delamont, 2009, Subotnik and Jarvin, 2005). This suggests that greater experimentation is expected of experts than novices, contrary to the earlier association of experimentation with interested amateurs (Coleman et al., 2009), and there is certain limited empirical support for such

a view, in that Yoko and Marnie (hobbyists) spoke less about deliberate experimentation than trained artists such as Laura and Jane. Indeed, Marnie's comment that guidance becomes less important as a practitioner develops indicates such a trajectory. However, as the trajectory originates with the novice, who has already identified themselves with a field of practice, it makes no allowance for the influence of factors from outside that field (proto- practices).

Taking an alternative perspective, Marnie and Yoko also both comment that they "haven't found the right technique" yet, suggesting an opposite trajectory from exploring alternatives to settling on the correct practice. Such an account can be found in typologies of proficiency that distinguish proto-, novice, amateur and expert practices. Based only on a practitioner's lived experience, proto- practice inherits no tradition and is not accepted as legitimate practice by institutions (Berger, 1980, Carroll, 1999). In the absence of formal training, less rule-governed practitioners are better able to conceive of new possibilities of practice, such as online neophytes (Boden, 2004, Coleman et al., 2009, Hawkins, 2010). Novice practitioners are relatively new to practice but operate within a field. Their performance is poorer than that of experienced practitioners and their task is to organize their own behaviour for competent performance as directed by their field (Hutchins, 1993), shedding their foregoing proto- practices. The amateur is relatively competent, a lay enthusiast or apprentice who systematically tests and develops their field-sanctioned capabilities and

sensitivities (Hennion, 2007, O'Connor, 2005). The expert exhibits superior performance, whether due to greater knowledge, greater sensitivity, more effective strategies, greater training or more experience (Ericsson and Faivre, 1988, Ingold, 2011, Kozbelt, 2009).

More consistent with typologies that associate experimentation with less proficient practices, such an account echoes a distinction drawn between commercial artists who work conventionally because their livelihoods depend on sales and hobbyists who work experimentally (Vigneron, 2013). However, this contradicts the relative scarcity of accounts of spontaneous but deliberate experimentation by Marnie and Yoko, and overlooks the open future that several participants perceive for their practice, including Clare, for whom “as an artist you can’t stop developing or changing”, and Philippa, who says “I think you just go on learning”.

Consequently, conventional assumptions of a unidirectional trajectory of skill development on the part of the practitioner, with either increasing or decreasing experimentation, are overly simplistic. Attending more closely to experimentation as a persistent but variable feature of practice that mediates between the practitioner and their field allows the development of a more varied conceptualization of proficiency related to practices rather than practitioners. To this end, we can characterize proto-, novice, amateur and expert practices as ignoring, conforming, exploring and transforming the field, suggesting particular synergies with different modes of

experimentation, such that it is the style of experimentation, not the skill of the artist, which determines the classification.

Proto- practices effectively ignore field conventions, exemplified by accidental discoveries and "what if?" experimentation that disregards any field-relevant standards of appropriateness. Novice practices must conform to the determinisms of their field to be accepted, with experimentation aimed at testing and manipulating materials to generate a competent performance as determined by their field, as in Philippa, Yoko and Marnie's exploration of taught practices. Amateur practice questions or explores the determinisms of the field (Hennion, 2007), discovering and developing individual capabilities as experimental practice increasingly stretches beyond the prescriptions of the field, as in Polly's experimentation with different ways of expressing herself. Finally, expert practices can transform the field through the generation of novel experimental effects, as in Laura's efforts with her primed surface.

The artistic practices described here indicate that experimentation is sustained across classifications of proficiency, as is the potential influence of proto- practices, and that experimentation can perpetuate the proto- as a characteristic feature of an artist's practice. In pursuing novice status, experimentation is oriented towards refining foregoing proto- practice in socially sanctioned ways, but a novice might retain elements of their proto- practice that do not adversely affect overall assessments of competency, emphasizing the plurality of proficiency characteristics of a practice that

is overlooked if we associate proficiency only with an embodied human practitioner and ascribe to it a unidirectional developmental trajectory. Equally, an amateur questioning the determinisms of their field might experiment with proto- practices in comparison to their traditional medium (Hennion, 2007, Mace, 1997), as in Philippa's use of acrylics as if they were watercolours. The perpetuation of proto- practices might become a hallmark of an elite's practice as part of their recognizable style, similar to Philippa's wet style of working. The proto-, then, is not necessarily antithetical to the expert/elite, but proto- and novice practices can co-exist with the expert and elite, and a feature establishing a practice as elite may itself be of proto- origin.

This is not to make grand claims about proto- practices necessarily being defining features of a proficient or expert practice, but rather it is to use proto- practices as a means to draw out a broader point about the multiple proficiency classifications that might apply to a practice simultaneously, encouraging an appreciation of proficiency in relation to practices rather than practitioners, and an appreciation of practices in terms of differentiated proficiencies.

Importantly, it is the practice rather than the practitioner that is classified, and the practice is multiply classified. An individual can evidence proto- practice in one aspect of their work while also conforming to, exploring or transforming field norms as novice, amateur or expert/elite in other aspects. Rather than wholesale change from one proficiency classification to another, different aspects of a practice are classified

differently at different times, as with Philippa, Yoko and Marnie's discussion of Norman's advice on water quality. Anchoring our classification of artistic proficiency in experimental style rather than skill can accommodate complex and dynamic practices, such as those described in this paper, in a way that conventional understandings of proficiency do not.

## Conclusion

Amateur practice is conventionally understood as involving a lengthy period of formal apprenticeship, emphasizing conformity to field norms and progressive development of skill on the part of the practitioner. Construing proficiency in terms of styles of experimentation allows for the influence of non-sanctioned modes of production as an affirmative and productive influence on practices, without jeopardizing the notion of amateur efforts to refine their practice. While attempts at refinement are not unique to amateur practice, the particular nature of their experimentation in those attempts (exploratory) does seem to be characteristic of amateur practice, as is the case for the specific experimental style associated with each classification of proficiency. Such an understanding also allows for an individual's practice to be multiply categorised and multiply situated in relation to the field, while the extension of experimentation across

classifications of proficiency accommodates practices in which a proto- typical element can also constitute its transformative aspect.

This informs both growing disciplinary interest in amateur practices, and the relation between the disciplines of geography and art in light of geographers increasingly undertaking artistic practice in their research and current debates in the sub-discipline regarding proficiency requirements. The field of arts-based research has been described as needing theoretical and methodological development (Lafrenière and Cox, 2013), and one aspect that invites re-theorizing is the very notion of proficiency and its limited conceptualization as relating solely to embodied human practitioners. If our understanding of what constitutes proficiency shifts as we make more space for the proto-, then methodological consequences must surely follow. Methodologically, reframing proficiency in terms of experimental style draws attention to practices deemed less proficient, those developed through informal means (Hennion, 2001, 2007), and those that contravene field norms.

It is also worth considering proto- practices specifically within the context of the promising intersections and exchanges, tensions and productive forces currently playing out between geography and art (Hawkins, 2013, Marston and de Leeuw, 2013). Here, geography can be seen as a source of proto- practices for art, and vice versa, suggesting exciting new avenues for inter-disciplinary entanglements, both within and beyond the geography-art interchange. While such a conceptualization of geography-

art interactions might raise the stakes further in the emerging 'proficiency debate', such engagements and debates would, I suggest, be productive rather than problematic.

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