

University of Dundee

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Meta Praxis

Craft Practice: A Way of Being

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Play

Irene Orr
META PRAXIS

Threads

Threads, worn,
Shadows of patterns drawn
On walls through cotton gauze
Oscillating with breeze and
Sun dust
I remember a hue of pale blue, a spike of red
I remember the colour of dark

I remember rivers and sunburn
Frogspawn through weeds
Nettle stings and being lost
Running
Falling
Rhubarb sticks in cones of sugar
Long days with nothing to do
Eyes of needles
Silk threads of dreaming
Feathers unformed and damp
Nurturing fallen baby birds
Beaks as translucent as finger nails
Icicles to lick
Skating on lakes where the reeds
Peered though you
Tasting snowflakes
Landing on your
Tongue.

Oil track marks on legs indistinguishable from
Bruises
Tears on my skin from thickets
Of thorns.

Play

Playfulness is an intrinsic part of the creative process for me. To play is an expression of my individual self, the joy of freedom, expression of changing gesture, motion, physical locations, interactive with no set goals other than what I make up. Play can be the instrument to release ideas to me; it is in the moment, has no preconceptions, and is a release of tensions of what has come before. Play can affect me, enliven me, form me, and invigorates my imagination, allowing me to see and understand my boundaries without conflict.

Continuing to play beyond childhood becomes increasingly complicated as the responsibilities of adulthood inhibits our joyful connection to this process. Actively courting play and sampling possible avenues of inquiry away from deadlines, and goal-oriented work, engages me in my investigative, curious mind where inevitable change and the unknown is my companion, a source of intrigue, motivation, but it is familiar, therefore dispelling fear. It is, I believe a biological driving force integral to creativity and intelligence.

Dr. Stuart Brown (Founder of the National Institute of Play) wrote in his book *“Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul”*:

“I have gathered and analysed thousands of case studies that I call ‘Play histories’. I have found that remembering what play is all about and making it part of our daily lives is probably the most important factor in being a fulfilled human being. The ability to play is critical not only to be happy, but also to sustaining social relationships and being a creative innovative person.”¹

Most of us have times when life is a trudge; it is inevitable as we make provision for ourselves and our families. Within a vast myriad of stimulations, laws and economic necessity's, we can become serious and fearful of the future. Maintaining an ability to naturally engage in the fluidity and excitement of the unknown through play reinforces a note of lightness of being, a sense of relief from the world of achievement, competitiveness and striving to attain.

Through play, opportunity opens up to encounter and engages with the unexpected. History is littered with phenomenal discoveries as accidents or, as many scientists and artists will remark ‘now that is unusual’, leading to a new approach, a new investigation, a link unexplored before. Play is a connector to uncharted waters and elicits opportunity to discovery of our innermost experiences.

¹ Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 6

My conscious mind leads me to the 'comfort zone', that which I am familiar with, my irrational mind is more likely to be fresh, ignited, break new ground; and, therefore, the adventure starts, and with practice, becomes the comfort zone, the familiar.

Today, I have in front of me a series of pieces of wire, metal castings, sheet silver and a blank piece of paper. I have no idea what to make. Clearly, some pieces are not related; weight, colour, scale and opaqueness all differ. I place them down on a white background and look; stare, as in the Goethean method of drawing. I see what I am drawn to; taking tweezers, I automatically space and place these items aesthetically with no particular formula. Already, I think of an archaeologist or botanist laying out species or specimens to be investigated with intent. I love the fragility of the edges of the castings, mainly because they are evocative of a sense of being worn, a little crumpled, maybe on the cusp of decay, in transition. Making sense out of disorder, from a mess like a tangle of thoughts, giving the materials space, like thoughts, to bring a sense of order out of chaos. In a vastly stimulated world, I create my own order with habits and familiar activity. To purposely allow an order of perception, to let its guard down, can reap astonishing results and let me see how enshrined I am in preferred methods. Creativity needs release from habit to breathe, an expansion of space for potential to roam in. Recognising my ability to stay in my habitual thoughts is revealing. My mess is in the thought process; and, although I can relate to bursting through to the newness of an idea, I always seem to tidy up the process in visuals. So, I can see. Play is in the ideas in my head. By the time it is sampled, it already has an aesthetic around it, an order born of the possibility of it becoming something more than a sample.

I remember as a child being asked to write about my favourite season. I wrote on autumn, memories of piling heaps of dry crisp leaves so high we could hide under them, hide unexpected items and ask unsuspecting participants to leap into the unknown. I relished the colours, the sharp contours of shadows, and the closing in of the light. The musky smells, the certain knowledge that change was upon us and winter would come.

I look at my samples, playful exploration through material and ideas, and place beside the feathered edges a sleek highly polished wire, the contrast amplified both extremes, and an idea forms.

Play in making always seemed to produce alchemical results, lurking in shadows, thoughts leaping from subconscious folds, crevices, a memory and a trigger, where before me the unthought-of reveals itself, illusion has appeared. The deckle edge of newly rolled metal, the entangled wires and thought leading out into clarity, imagination set free from boundaries to

be set again in a new configuration, fresh, changed, deliberate from the consequence of play.

I am reminded of an occasion where the ingredients of play and making produced an astonishing outcome. Imagine a room - grey, coughing, choking smoke and raucous gritty laughter. The Fisherman's Rest, a community centre, attached to a well-intentioned but demoralised village in an area whose heartbeat had slowed due to the demise of the mining and fishing industries, both livelihoods core to the community and culture and provision to much more than just work. Now an area of deep depravation, this community centre, striving to give space and hope, is a meeting place other than the local pub.

Inside the noise filled room, a group of women congregated regularly. Between these six women were spectacularly twenty children and expanding. Here, in this space, the children were looked after, giving the mothers time to talk, swear, eat biscuits and disclose secrets, moments of hilarity and attachment in an otherwise fairly bleak landscape.

Somehow, the idea arose that an Art Club might be well received, and I was dispatched to see how I could be involved. Inevitably, the reception was cold; the concept that making art had any interest or indeed relevance was heartily voiced, sparing no sensibilities. The interest was zero; curiosity and a desire to shock and engage a new art worker was fair game and serious entertainment.

Slowly, but surely, as my alien status became communal laughter, I learned to drink strong tea, and listen. We did eventually put pencils, paper and thoughts on the table. What evolved and was central to all conversation were the children. Maybe, if we came up with an idea to make something for the children, it may be worth exploring.

One of the mum's, naturally the loudest and, therefore, the leader, had five children, no partner and scant support in evidence, neither physically nor practically. The children were doted upon with energy and humour and were well loved and cared for. Mum was a large personality, with cropped practical hair and a vocabulary born to shock and educate. Every woken moment was dedicated to the wellbeing of her children. A volcano of ideas erupted: nursery rhymes diverted into local myths and encounters, characters of superhuman qualities entered these stories with ease, and a framework was urgently required to harness these sessions. A play of course, but no one wanted exposure. What if we made the characters out of wood, metal, papier mâché, string, cloth, wire, and painted a screen to mask the real animators? Effectively, what if we wrote, directed, made and staged a puppet show and invited all the children to watch.

Hours and hours of intensive detailed, structured and creative times followed. What colours would the children react to; what would make them laugh; how long should the nose be on the main character? Bright and cheerful dialogue sat comfortably alongside sewing, hammering, gluing, painting, writing and singing. Structures grew tall, toppled, were rethought; and, slowly, stunningly, a hilarious story, imbued through narrative and materials, was there to be told. Monsters and ghosts, magicians and miracles, the stuff of myths and legends interspersed with local colloquium and nuance.

The local school had heard of our endeavours and had invited us to the Assembly Hall to tell our story to the whole school. Nerves were strung out, make up was on, we were all set up and ready to go at 8.30 one morning.

The kids tramped in, curtains opened; and, throughout the next half an hour, everyone in that room was enraptured, laughing, pointing, squealing, breaths held. Throughout, one voice penetrated everything, a small child cried out constantly, a jumble of incoherent words and sounds not unlike a trapped animal.

Applause, bows, the child whose response was so vivid ran to the front, followed closely by the head teacher. Later, when the eruption we had caused settled down, the head teacher approached me in clearly an emotional state. With tears in her eyes, she explained that the child who emitted the loud noises had been in school for two years and had never, ever uttered a sound despite all the help and assistance available; both psychologically and medically, until that moment. Something triggered a vital part of that child and transformed silence into communication that day.

Making and playing can be a powerful combination, igniting transformative processes, without always knowing how.

“Play is how we are made, how we develop and adjust to change. It can foster innovation and lead to multibillion-dollar fortunes. But in the end the most significant aspect of play is that it allows us to express our joy and connect most deeply with the best of ourselves, and in others. If your life has become barren, play can bring it to life again. Yes, as Freud said, life is about love and work. Yet play transcends these, infuses them with liveliness and stills time’s arrow. Play is the purest expression of love.”²

As adults, we often forget to play, as the momentousness of life manifests itself. We strive, we work, we exercise, but often forget to play, that wonderful evocation of expressive space that any thought and action can move into according to the

² Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 218

players. When we forget overly complex rules, abandon an end goal, we are released into a pleasure, providing the game is equally played. During a period of teaching, I would purposely devise a project that created a space through speed, three pieces in three hours. Technical and design weights were left behind; and, often with a skilful interaction of the nonprecious, accidentally or without motivation, something happened. Over thinking, being contained by too many rules and regulations, being disassociated with a wild space, both in our minds and physicality, is like being boxed in; there is no space to grow, imagine, dream, make a story.

The introduction, *“The Necessary Poetry of Things”*, by Neil MacGregor former Director of the British Museum, captured the poetry of things by telling the story of History in 100 objects, beautifully and succinctly by choosing objects that significantly told a story beyond the object itself and specifically story when text was not part of the culture or indeed available.

“If you want to tell the story of the whole world, a history that does not unduly privilege one part of humanity, you cannot do it through texts alone, because only some of the world has ever had texts, while most of the world, for most of the time, has not. Writing is one of humanities later achievements, and until recently even many literate societies recorded their concerns and aspirations not only in writing but in things.”³

Through ceramics, fabric, coins, statues and reliefs, he relives and tells stories through intricate detail from impression, skill and shape, weaving vast pieces of information together to form pictures and facts whereby we are able to see the connections of vast swathes of land, peoples, customs and the relations therein. Stories of objects I believe are the links to our human traits, as all story is intrinsic to an emotional, physical, territorial self. It illuminates aliveness through fear, love, trade, abandonment, hierarchy, ethics, politics, power, religion and myth. Story can say the unsayable; it exposes in its magic the moment when something reveals itself as something else; we are making the invisible, visible. Through story, I can explore, learn and experience:

“Because the realm of the storyteller is in the imagination, they can bring play to almost any activity.”⁴

Play, and the narrative that emerges, is a basic connector to the integral imaginative, to the creative human being; it allows me to see, feel and grow. Play should be a safe place to explore. We all make mistakes. We can choose wrong materials, shapes, burn things; but that is where we can learn. Because I am ‘just’ playing, I can protect myself from being purposeful, having to

³ MacGregor, 2010, p. xvi

⁴ Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 70

achieve; mostly being creative, play can be uncritical. I can suspend judgement as play is just that, opening up to possibility, detecting boundaries, testing potential. As it is with play, I can take things over the edge, to see what happens, and withdraw to the boundary that fits. Play opens up to wonder and retrains my mind to the incredibility of what might happen. It is about personal choice and freedom, the place of arbitration where I can fine tune perceptiveness. Getting lost in play acts as a conduit to change and becoming as observed by Stuart Brown.

“Play can become a doorway to a new self, one much more in tune with the world. Because play is all about trying on new behaviours and thoughts it frees us from established patterns. For children, who are always in the process of changing and becoming, transformative play is a constant part of their world, and often goes unnoticed.”⁵

‘Making’ provides ample opportunity for narrative and play. Inspiration often comes through a narrative of personal experience, local myths and history. Whether it is within the creation, the function or the reciprocity, it will at some point touch on a human emotion. Whether our story is included, or we tell a fable, or, as I have found within my own practice, the signals or symbols, decisions on imagery can affect others in ways we had not intended. Such are the hidden messages within our work.

“Put into practice a myth could tell us something true about our humanity. It showed us how to live more richly and intensively, how to cope with our morality. From a very early date people re-enacted their myths in stylised ceremony’s that worked aesthetically upon participants, and like any work of art introduced them to a deeper dimension of existence.”⁶

“A Myth would not be effective if people simply ‘believed’ in it. It was essentially a programme of action. It could put you in the correct spiritual or psychological posture, but it was up to you to take the next step and make the ‘truth’ of the myth a reality in your own life.”⁷

Making is a powerful media; and, as I see the widening of an image-based world, I see and relate to story told through objects as part of our lived experience and a route into it. Risk in play is an integral part of exploration through and a taste of the unknown.

“There is a great deal of evidence that the road to mastery of any subject is guided by play. Learning by rote can take one

⁵ Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 70

⁶ Armstrong, 2009, pp. 3-4

⁷ Ibid., p. 3

only so far. To become a master, the pupil has to go beyond what is known, has to learn what has not been shown.”⁸

Richard Sennet is a Sociologist, commentator on Culture and Cities, and author of “*The Craftsman*”, in which he names craft as a basic human impulse. He also makes the connection to the importance of play:

“Making matters complex in one’s work derives from these capacities [play]. The scalpel, a simple tool, was put to highly complex purposes in seventeenth century scientific work, as was from the fifteenth century the flat sided screwdriver; both began as basic tools. They can perform complex work only because we have, as adults, learned to play with their possibilities rather than treat each tool as fit for purpose. Boredom is as an important stimulus to craftsmanship as it is to play; becoming bored, the craftsman looks for what else he can do with the tools at hand.”⁹

He continues, using the word enlightening, lightening the tensions of conventions of attainment and achievement; we are drawn to playfulness, even if that is transformed into purpose, given boundaries and skills, if born in imagination, or the space for foraging in our human behaviours. It is a touchstone of nurturing enhancement and connections.

“This brief outline of how the craft of play connects to work should be to us literally Enlightening. Craftsmanship draws on what children learn in play’s dialogue with physical materials, the discipline of following rules, the advance of complexity in making rules. Play is so universal, so full of adult implication- yet modern prejudice clings to the conviction that only a few have the ability to do really good work.”¹⁰

Within play, we allow ‘things to happen’. Our own business relies upon an ancient technique of enamelling, partly because it is a difficult technique to get right (and therefore difficult to plagiarise). Because it has many hazards, such as burning, discolouration, disforming, most companies steer away from it. However, once, while we were practicing, trying to produce more consistent results, already in a technically discouraged situation, a few pieces were unintentionally exposed to heat in the wrong order and the wrong temperature. Playfully we explored further this serendipitous outcome some more. Amazingly and unexpectedly, it revealed a transformation of the material by which we could predict the outcome with more accuracy. It remains a vital part of our identifiable technique and is not available in any manual.

⁸ Brown & Vaughan, 2010, p. 141

⁹ Sennett, 2009, p. 273

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 273

I constantly ran projects with students to incorporate play. As adults in learning (and therefore increasingly attainment-orientated) environments, the focus is on task and achievement. In this culture it is difficult to relax and enter a field of play. Equally, with children, as our schools educate through increasing work sheets and tests multiple questions, little room is available for imagination, accident and process. Sometimes, it is possible to access our playful mind by 'ringfencing' our conscious, achieving mind. If we include speed (i.e., ringfence over thinking) and various avenues of exploration (ringfence over obsessive choice), maybe by unusual materials, ill-fitting thoughts, the opportunity to think inversely, perhaps by accessing a childhood memory, story or a poem, it releases in one's mind a new way of thinking. I believe we all have this capacity. Conceivably as a culture or our society need to relate its importance in original growth. Being original within a making arena is incredibly complex. Creating or expanding into a space where things happen is a vital component. Learning huge amounts of facts and putting them to use is a way of attaining knowledge. However, to process something that leads to newness, or originality is achieved perhaps by taking routes long trodden before, but somehow pushing a little more, playing a little more, accessing a story so personal or unique it triggers within an exploration of creation.

Imagination, teased apart, includes play and story. If we become overly disassociated with this part of us, and work becomes rote, or repetitive without the ability to change the rules, we can squash the human spirit in us, to become demoralised and unfulfilled. Throughout my time teaching undergraduates, where inventiveness coupled with skill, explored through technology and material, with play and story as essential ingredients, consistently produced exciting, innovative, different, poetic and fertile solutions. We just need to look at the vibrant craft renewal throughout our industry now, of the handmade, of smart materials, of fusion of technology to inventiveness. I believe we are recognising the seductive powers of craft without perhaps realising why. Students would tap into their personal adventures to these enquiries, inevitably bringing identity and their own agency through conscious and unconscious inquiry. I believe it is in our capacity to constantly manoeuvre into inventiveness given the space, time and respect to do just that. Business is essentially trading; we all need to do that for sustaining basic provisions. To free ourselves into a playful, imaginative, meaningful life, we need to believe and maintain experimentation beyond results, economics and achievement, to regain freedom of choice, access to change the rule book, for a flourishing mind.

Governments need tax receipts, trading goods and ideas, as a model to make profit; and this, of course, is part of our exchange for living in prosperity. Schools and Universities provide platforms, routes and opportunities for learning and

education towards a diverse integrated civilisation. We surely need to maintain awareness that a purely economic outlook within education disassociates us from one of the most important aspects of being human. A business model of purely providing a strong economic forecast that cuts out inventiveness, crushes our capacity to grow, mistakenly takes learning into an environment of stulted connectivity. Today there is increasing anxiety, distraction, addiction, mental health and, therefore, within education perhaps, a new look at nonachievement, play, physical activity and mess, can enlighten us towards a different potential, one of balance. Access to the 'Meta Praxis' (the connectors to the human spirit) is wholly available through our fingertips and our minds, as we make story and play central to our essential being.

Further work is needed to package the teaching of Meta-Praxis. I have taught contemplative drawing and creative practice in workshops. This research articulates and exposes the importance of a making practice which could be brought into a workable learning pathway. I would look towards an interdisciplinary approach of learning through practice, which includes material understanding, the influence of story, awareness of meta praxis through training, exercise and workshops. I would look at the teaching practices of The Centre for Healthy Minds where contemporary contemplation is taught and to integrate these methods with creative practice to explore new avenues of a learning pathway. It is my aim to extend this research into 'encounter', as a way of learning through practice as a compelling medium. Contemplation, mind training, reflection, awareness and creativity combine to become a potent learning method. This is the next extension of this work.

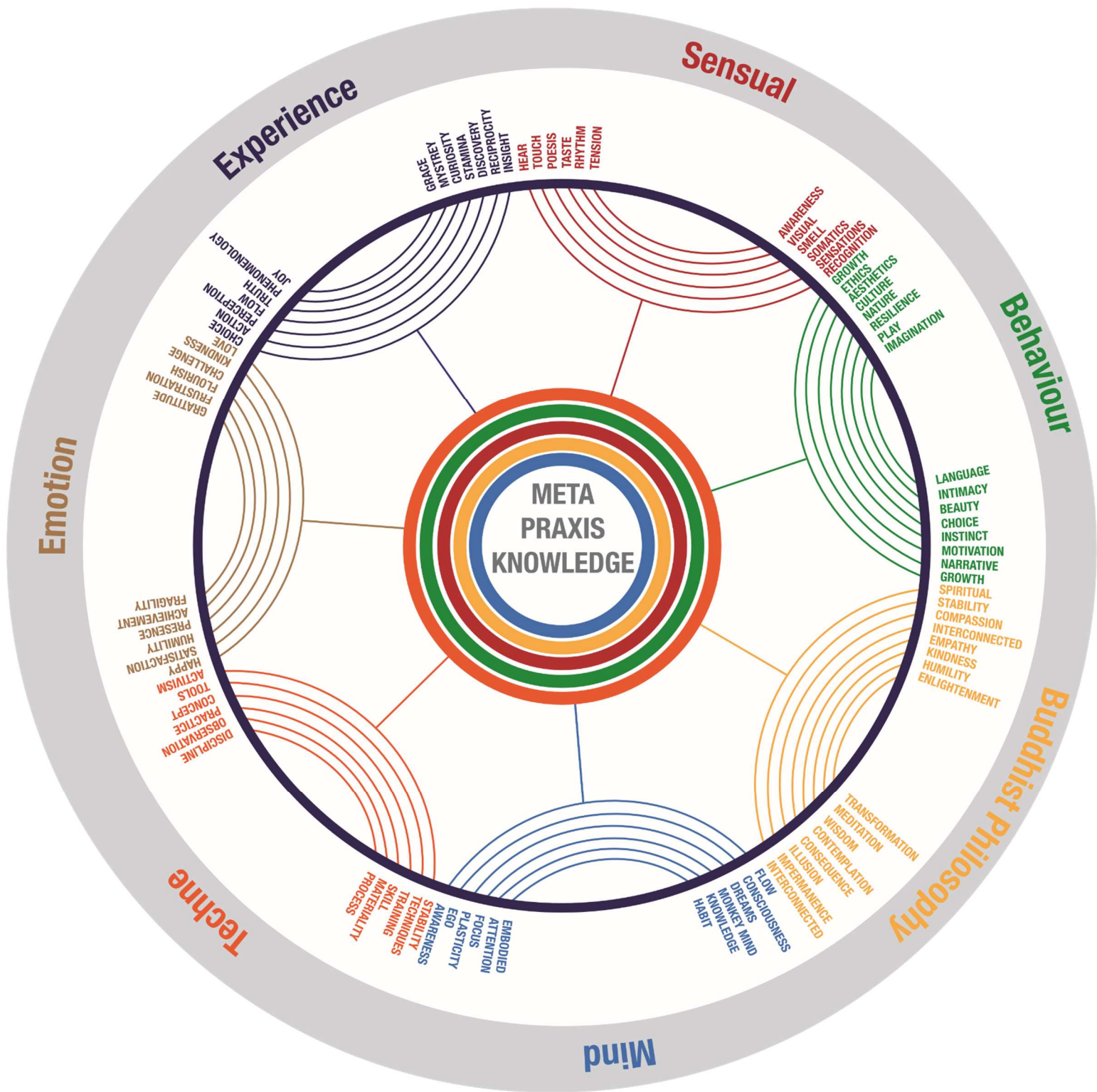
Meta Praxis

'Meta Praxis' is the potential for human flourishing through an awareness of practice and the value of making craft as an explicit knowledge pathway. Within and beyond the practice, this pathway has the potential to put us in touch with the essential vitality of life and its human value.

The exposition and articulation of 'Meta Praxis' and its potential is the original contribution to knowledge. This research leads us through interdisciplinary schools of thought (craft practice, Buddhism, anthropology, and neuroscience) to make connections and to set out why and how making craft is an explicit knowledge pathway and what is its importance for human thriving.

Chart

The chart represents possible reflections, encounters and human traits explored within the 'reflections'; each has multiple, personal and potential pathways represented in the chart. As the reader engages with the writing in each text, it is possible to explore these routes of knowledge and relate them specifically to the idea of 'Meta Praxis'. The texts are the reflections of practice, with relevant encounters affirmed through an interdisciplinary approach.



**META PRAXIS
CRAFT PRACTICE: A WAY OF BEING**

