

Series 3 Episode 4

[00:00:00] Hello and thank you so much for joining me. This is the fourth episode of series three of *In Ten Years Time: How to live a creative life*. I'm so grateful you are here. I'm Tricia Duffy. I'm a songwriter, a media consultant, a singer, a writer, and a podcaster. And I'm here with an aim to inspire you to live a creative life. To find a balance of creativity that works for you and to encourage you to make your creative dream a reality. With a combination of small daily steps and the heady power of ten to help us, we will live a more satisfying life. If you'd like to engage with this conversation, please follow me now @intenyearstimeofficial on Instagram or Facebook. I respond to all direct messages, and if there's a topic or question you would like me to research and discuss, I'd love to hear your suggestions. I've spent the last few years [00:01:00] trialling ways to live a more creative life, and I'm distilling all I've learnt in thousands of hours of research into this podcast series so that you can embark on a similar journey.

In this series, we're exploring a theme of amplifying creativity. And a few people have asked me to talk about larger, more in depth creative projects. How we might approach research, and if research frameworks can help us with our creative endeavours. I am grateful for the suggestion and I'm looking forward to getting into this with you.

If you've been listening to this podcast, I'm sure you will have gathered that I do a lot of research. I spend hours seeking out articles, scratching through medical journals, reading or listening to books, listening to other podcasts, and thinking of ways that I can apply what I've learned to the task at hand, which is how to live a creative life myself and inspire you to live with a purpose and meaning that comes from creativity too.

In my consulting business, in my day job, [00:02:00] I also have a research process, although in the corporate world we might call it evidence gathering or even the scientific method. When we research as creatives, we are often doing it not just in this conventional scientific way, looking for qualitative and quantitative data, but also via our practice or our craft.

In academic circles, this is known as practice research or 'practice as research'. When I studied my master's in songwriting, I explored various

research frameworks, including something called heuristic research, which in simple terms is a methodology that allows us to figure things out for ourselves. And autoethnographic research, which is the study of culture, community, or social phenomenon from the perspective of ourselves.

In other words, it's okay to use our own experience and perspectives to influence our findings. Both of these methodologies fall under the umbrella of practice research because I used my [00:03:00] practice - in my case writing songs - to learn about my area of inquiry and myself.

There are other research methodologies you may have heard of too, such as narrative inquiry, which focuses on storytelling in artistic practice. Phenomenological research, which looks at the essence of first person experiences and how those experiences influence the individual artistic expression.

Okay, so why did I use these two different forms of research to write songs? Well, the simple answer is that I had to! Because I was doing a master's and one of the requirements was to use an academic framework for my research. But through this process, I discovered, to my surprise, that using those frameworks wasn't just useful for academic work, but actually the frameworks can be applied to my creative projects going forward to great benefit.

I'm keen this is not an overly academic podcast, although obviously I do regularly quote academic research, but I want to draw on the knowledge I gained through my time at [00:04:00] university to discuss how to set up a bigger project or take on creative research.

Although as a side note, if you are even remotely considering doing a master's in anything you are passionate about, I implore you to do it, to find the funds, the time, the dedication...without hesitation. I am positive that if you choose a topic you are fascinated by, it will change your life for the better in so many incredible ways. If you're anything like me, enrolling to do a master's feels like a huge step. It can feel terrifying, exciting, intimidating.

This is completely normal. I seriously started to question my sanity when I first enrolled to do my master's, but now I can see that the fear and the doubt were all signs that I was onto the right thing. It extended me and

challenged me in ways I could never have anticipated. And I'm absolutely convinced that this podcast wouldn't exist if I hadn't have done it. Who knows what you could come up with if you embark on some further education. [00:05:00]

Right, back to the point in hand. Robin Nelson, author of 'Practice Research in the Arts and Beyond', is one of the most highly regarded experts on the topic of practice research. Essentially, he makes the point that artists or creatives are in a form of research each time we engage with our practice or craft.

However, he points out that there's a possibility that without a framework for that research, the insights from their practice will be impossible to grasp for themselves or to share with others. This really articulates for me why having an eye on research is useful for us as creatives. It helps us to gain insight into why we made the choices we did.

In turn, it helps us to grow as artists, as creatives and as human beings. The benefits may be further reaching too, by even having a loose framework we can better articulate to others what we did when we finished our work and come to share it. It might even have a broader benefit for the academy or for a [00:06:00] community that could be lost if there's no mechanism to capture what we did along the way. So, how do we do it? How do we steal from academia and use a framework or research method to help us create a bigger project?

Now, I've allowed my mind to wander and all I can think about is that meme that says the six stages of any creative project are: This is great. This is tricky. This is shit. I am shit. Actually, this might be okay. This is awesome!

Okay, this isn't how it really works, but I know we can all relate. What this meme really draws attention to is that projects evolve. As well as our feelings about projects, it isn't always comfortable and yet when it's finished we look back and know with absolute certainty that what we have accomplished would not have been possible without going through each of those phases.

I'm going to break this down into phases used in research for you now so that I can offer a guide for your project. But please note that sometimes these [00:07:00] phases are cyclical in nature and you may need to return

to a previous step multiple times throughout the project life cycle. Before we get into looking into the different stages of a specific project, I'm going to suggest that the first thing you could do is incorporate a form of inquiry as a daily practice. If you're someone who likes to meditate or journal, which I highly recommend if you are living a creative life or dealing with any life changes, this may be something you're doing already.

When you journal, rather than just describing what you did, dig a bit deeper. I find that sometimes in my morning pages, I might end up jotting down my to do list, and this is useful practice because it clears my mind so that there's room for other things during the day.

However, if I journal on what's happened during my songwriting session the previous day, I can start to ask myself questions about the what and the why surrounding my choices. I can observe myself almost as an outsider looking at what happened [00:08:00] during the session. If I felt drawn to write about a particular topic, I can explore what that topic means to me and start to figure out if the significance of this topic goes a little deeper. Does it reveal something about me? My interests or my relationship with the world around me.

I might start to draw connections between that theme and something else I wrote previously, which could be the start of a bigger project. I think this is good for all of us. And even if you aren't yet minded to create a bigger project, the insights that the 'whys' give you will help you grow as a creative a little every day.

But if you're sure you want to do a project, something with multiple elements, or you'd like to create a body of work for an exhibition, or as in my case, a song cycle, EP, or album of songs, there are some things we can learn from academia to help us.

The first stage of any project is exploration or initial inquiry. To bring this to life a bit more, I'll tell you about a project I did that I've [00:09:00] mentioned already in passing in previous episodes.

In November 2023, I was looking for a project to do as part of my master's degree and I approached an artist friend who had a studio on Johnson's Island to see if I could visit and write songs about the artist who worked there. Johnson's Island is a tiny landmass in the mouth of the Grand Union

Canal in Brentford and it's home to about 15 or 20 artists who have dedicated studios or spaces. I was intrigued by this community of artists and this intrigue sparked an initial exploration. I didn't know then what the project was, how it would evolve, just that artists are generally interesting people, it was a unique environment and that it was in an area that was undergoing huge regeneration.

So, I thought, there must be something in it. Perhaps I will find out how the local community feels about the building works and the changes in their area. Perhaps I would write story songs about the [00:10:00] artists themselves. These 'what ifs' were open and felt like broad speculation at this point in my thinking.

I was simply trying an idea on for size. For some, ideas like this are born every single day. We wake up with them in our minds thanks to the power of our subconscious. But what might seem powerful and compelling in our half sleep state suddenly becomes frivolous or too hard and impractical in the cold light of day. The idea is born, but it immediately dies.

Thinking back to that time, it would have been so easy not to pick up the phone to my artist friend, Angela Chan, to make that inquiry. To allow the fear of rejection to stop me. Let me reassure you, it is normal to lose confidence, to feel shy making an approach to people involved. And in my case to the artist studio.

I talked at length about reframing rejection in episode two of this series. So go back and listen to that. If you need to. For now, let me just [00:11:00] reiterate that you will be surprised how delighted people are when you reach out to them about your idea. And if they say no, reframe that rejection and use it as a stimulus to pivot into something new.

In this instance, Angela didn't say no. In fact, she went even further. My idea was to do a couple of short visits and she said 'oh I think we can do a bit better than that!' and went on to explain that she was going to be away from her studio for a week in November and that I could use her space for several consecutive days.

All she needed to do was let the other artists know that there was going to be a 'songwriter in residence' at the time and then I could just come and go as I please and write. All good, right? Well, no, not really. At this stage of

the project, I was suffering from extreme imposter syndrome. I started to look up how residencies work, drawing from artists-in-residence schemes, and I felt like a fraud.

Who on earth did I think I was describing myself as, ‘songwriter in [00:12:00] residence’? Looking back on it now, using those words feels very comfortable. It's useful language to describe what I did. At the time, I was practically dying inside. Go back and listen to my episode on imposter syndrome from the last series if you're feeling any of this. I can't make it go away, but I can arm you with language to quieten the inner critic.

Leaving the self doubt aside, in research terms, I now had something definitive to work with, and I set about busying myself with making a more detailed plan, documenting what equipment I would need for the week, working out a rough schedule, reaching out to nearby businesses in the area to see if I could meet with them.

All was going fine. As I started to make the detailed plans, I found I was looking forward to it. I had moved from initial inquiry to planning. And this is the second stage of the project. Now you might be thinking, ‘this sounds easy’. All she needs to do is execute it. Well, creative projects are never that simple. So let me tell [00:13:00] you what happened next. Those of you who live in the UK might remember that in October 2023, two huge storms battered the country, causing significant damage, particularly from floods. Johnson's Island, as I've already mentioned, is a tiny landmass in the mouth of the River Brent at the start of the Grand Union Canal.

When the first storm hit, the island flooded. The artist studio I was going to be using for my residency was inches deep in water. Fortunately, none of the artists’ work was damaged. They had enough time to respond to the threat. But the studios were temporarily unusable. I got a call from Angela to let me know what had happened. She was just giving me the heads up. Her thinking was that it would all be dried out before I came. Then, another storm hit. This one was even more significant. Combined with a high tide from the River Thames and a full moon, which always amplifies the tide's impacts in West London. And of course, the studios [00:14:00] flooded again despite having defences in place.

I got a call from Angela on the Sunday before I was due to arrive the following Wednesday. She was at the studio mopping and attempting to

dry out the space. The whole project was looking 50:50 at best. I sat on the sofa with my guitar feeling slightly sick. Of course, I was worried for the artists and their challenges, but I also had to think about my project! It had been so kind of Angela to offer me her space. I'd carved out the time for the project, but I also needed to do it for my master's.

A great benefit of the accountability provided by academic study is that I couldn't just shrug my shoulders and cancel the project, or do it a few months down the line when the weather was better. Which would have been seriously tempting.

Do you ever have that sensation when there's a hiccup in your plans? 'Oh, well, it wasn't meant to be.' Well, I didn't have that option. I thought to myself, that river is beautiful, but damn, it has two sides. And that made me smile. [00:15:00] The river has two sides, literally and figuratively. I picked up my pencil and I started to write a song. The song is called 'The River' and it's one I'm incredibly proud of.

The lyrics start:

*Sometimes there's barely a ripple on the surface of the river as she flows.
Perfect skin. Gently scarred by feather branches of the willows.*

I loved the imagery. And in the second verse, I say:

*Some days rage spills over, bursting the boundaries of the shore. Mournful
reflection shattered by shrapnel in the storm.*

And the chorus declares: *I've seen two sides of the river.*

It hasn't been released yet, but it will be out sometime in 2025. The creative process had begun from my living room. I was using songwriting to deal with my feelings about this situation, and I had created something pretty good. I had a song in the bank for my project. Great! Although now I was a bit confused. [00:16:00] I didn't set out to do a project about the river. I wanted to do something autoethnographic, which was going to highlight the culture and the community in Brentford. Mmm, this is all starting to feel pretty uncomfortable.

At this point, I really leaned into some research techniques in heuristic research. This might be considered a form of incubation or illumination, but I actually went to autoethnographic techniques next, and in particular, some ideas described by Heewon Chang, author of 'Autoethnography as Method'. Again, this is an academic book, but I love it, because it's so much more practical than some research books with their big words and long sentences.

If you ever see a secondhand copy for sale, I urge you to pick it up. Details in the show notes, as always. Chang suggests that to understand our area of research or the focus of our project, we need to understand it in the context of ourselves. And she suggests ways in which we can do that. Her ideas include identity mapping [00:17:00] to help us understand factors about ourselves that may be influencing our opinions about the environment. For example, how we identify in our career, our ethnicity, our faith, our gender, not taking any of these things for granted, but jotting them down and critically analysing how they may play into the circumstances or the project. She suggests analysing our routines by writing down the things we do each day to see if that offers any unexpected insights. But most critically for me, she also suggests that we write a chronological timeline where we identify events in our lives that are relevant to the topic in question. And that's what I did next.

I took a large sheet of graph paper and wrote zero at one end and my age, 52 at the time, on the other. And I started to just jot down anything I could remember related to rivers, water, the sea, community change, building works and art, because those were all the themes emerging. [00:18:00] What came out of this exercise was extraordinary for me. I realised I had a much more complicated relationship with water than I realised.

The headlines were that I've lived my whole life in places with proximity to bodies of working water. I was born in Oxford near the Thames, moved to Cambridge, which is on the Cam. I went back to Oxford and then to a place called Fareham near Portsmouth, which is on a busy tidal estuary. I also worked on cruise ships for more than four years.

Not only that, but I also noted that I'd fallen into a pool when I was two, which I have no living memory of. But as a child and a teenager, I lived in an area where swimming, water sports, such as canoeing, were really normal. And I refused to swim. I didn't learn to swim until I was a teenager. So I

really was quite literally a fish out of water in that environment and culture. I do swim now, not well, and I really don't like putting my face in the water, but I have overcome.

I digress. The point is that this [00:19:00] exercise led me to understand the relationship between seemingly unrelated events and factors in my life. The project was evolving. I had a song about the river as well as a growing understanding that my own relationship with water was more complicated than I realised.

What may come out for you will be entirely different, of course, but I am sure that whether you are a jewellery maker inspired to work with shapes from nature, a painter inspired by a colour palette or form, a potter drawn to a particular texture, or a songwriter writing about a theme, there will be more that you can derive from your craft. If you take a moment to lean into research like this. Ask yourself, why have you chosen this project? What interested you about it?

I know you're all dying to know what happened next on the flooded Johnson's Island. Well, I got a call from Angela telling me that the studio was drying out nicely and it should be in a state for me to use the following week. The project was [00:20:00] back on. On the first day, it was bright and sunny. I turned up excited to meet all the artists on the island with my guitar, a notebook specially selected for the project, and my computer. And...? There was no one there. I sat down and stared out of the window onto the canal, which was illuminated by the sunshine on this cold, clear, autumnal day. And I wondered what I should do. I had nothing else to do but write. So, I wrote. Freehand and song lyrics and ideas about my relationship with water. I watched a documentary about rivers and how they reject being dammed and caged. I read books from authors who have walked the Thames estuary. And at the end of the week, I had five songs.

Maybe I'll do an episode at some point about the power of creative retreats. I should say that the artist did turn up eventually. Although the main theme of the song cycle is water and rivers, there is a song aptly titled 'Johnson's Island', which [00:21:00] talks in detail about the artists themselves. Although I actually wrote that one after the residency. The project isn't over when the residency ends, the lyrics start:

Canal flows past an island, sometimes up and over the sides, towards a man who makes art from paper, dressed in purple, with a golden scarf and a booming laugh.

It's a lot of people's favourite song when I play it live, not least the artists who feature in it, they get a kick out of it. So let's just recap the stages because although I'm sure you're finding my story fascinating, it really serves as an illustration in this context.

The project started with an initial inquiry, an idea, a thought, a 'what if?' moment. Then I made a plan. Now, as I've told you, that plan ended up evolving significantly, but I still believe that having a plan was useful. It is easier to pivot from a plan than from a blank sheet. Then I went into an incubation or an illumination phase, which really allowed me to draw out more details about why I was [00:22:00] interested in this topic and led me to understand it was the river and the water that was enticing me alongside the community. And then I executed the project by doing the residency and writing the song cycle.

That is not the end though, of course it isn't, things are rarely that simple. I already mentioned I wrote another song after I left the island and beyond that I needed to take my demos and get them recorded, make decisions about the instrumentation and the arrangement, work with collaborators to bring them to life as records.

I had to practice acoustic versions of the songs to be able to play them live. I edited the songs to make sure they were as good as they could be. This phase is a phase of optimisation and adjustment.

For a painter, it might include the decisions about the framing or the sharing of the work on social media. For a jeweller, it might include the packaging and display products. For a photographer, it might include Photoshop editing and selection processes. Then finally, the last stage [00:23:00] is dissemination and monitoring. This is also a lengthy process.

For my river stories, I needed to commission someone to make album artwork, decide where I would play them live, book a tour, create an album, decide when to release it. This is all still work in progress for this particular project, but I expect you will be able to hear the song sometime in spring 2025.

Your artistry or creative passion may offer you obvious larger projects such as writing an album or EP or creating a collection of paintings for a themed exhibition, curating a selection of dance routines that tell a story, writing a book or taking a set of photographs that land a deeper message.

Or you may embark on something that has a less obvious thread. Perhaps containing something very subliminal, that only you know about. Whether that be a common colour, a type of fabric in textiles, or a line printing technique. However you approach your art, I would encourage you to [00:24:00] think about whether there is something interesting you could do as a wider project. I'm utterly convinced I would never have written my river stories if I hadn't picked up the phone to Angela that day. And they wouldn't have turned out as they did if I hadn't dug deep into my relationship with water throughout my entire life. It's possible that I may have taken longer to come to these conclusions if those storms hadn't happened too, so I guess every cloud really does have a silver lining.

You have no idea what you might be capable of until you try. These projects can feel like a lot. Take one step at a time and really dig deep into what's drawing you to the theme. When you look back at this in 10 years' time, you will know that it was all worth it.

It's time for the challenge, the question and recommendation. As you might have guessed, my challenge to you is to embark on something broader. A collection or a bigger project of some type. Break it down into phases, use your journal to develop critical thinking skills and start to form some [00:25:00] initial inquiries. A what if list. Then explore it further to see what's possible. Make a plan, execute your project, then optimise and develop it further, and finally disseminate. I can't wait to hear what you come up with. I'm struck that in the interview with Sarah Johnson last series, she used the words 'what if' a lot when telling her story. If you feel that the circumstances are less than perfect for a bigger project, I would recommend you listen to the episode with Sarah. She really illustrates what is possible when you're faced with limiting factors that are outside your control, whether that be something physical or simply a lack of time.

The question: I'm willing to bet that something is already occurring to you. A dormant idea has been awakened. If it has, ask yourself why you are interested in this. You could have chosen anything. What is drawing you to

this craft? This topic? [00:26:00] This form? This combination? Write it down.

The recommendation: I have been completely inspired by the book 'Bird by Bird' by Anne Lamott. It's a book about writing fiction. And as you know, I'm not a fiction writer myself, but this is a book that will inspire anyone who has creativity in their lives. It is written so beautifully and every single page lifts me up.

The title comes from a story that Lamott tells about her brother, who was writing an academic report about birds. Overwhelmed by the number of birds he needed to write about, their father, who was also a writer, advised him to tackle the task 'bird by bird, buddy. Bird by bird!' In the context of this discussion about bigger projects, this book is a gift.

Thank you so much for being here. If you're enjoying this series, please follow and rate the show wherever you get your podcasts. It helps an independent creative like me keep [00:27:00] on keeping on. And speaking of keeping on, I'm keen to ensure that this podcast stays ad free. I think it is better for you to listen to these episodes and get to your creativity without the pressure to listen to several minutes of ads. So, if you can afford it and you've had some value from the series so far, please consider making a small donation. Think of it as buying me a coffee. So that I can keep the content as concise as possible. You'll find a donation tab on my website where you can do that. Thank you so much for considering this kind and generous gesture.

Next time, I'm going to talk about creating with more than one skill, craft or material, and explore what can happen when we mix our media in creativity. Until then, please engage with the conversation on Instagram or Facebook @intenyearstimeofficial. Sign up to my newsletter on the website, and if you like the series, tell a friend. Until then, keep creating. Peace and love.