Creative Research and Creative Practice: Bridging Histories

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The possibility for supporting creative practice as a form of research has received extensive consideration both among creative academic practitioners and research policy-makers. This has been driven by a number of factors, among them an organisational need to account for professional creative practice among and expanding academic staff whose work contained an exploratory and innovative component; and growth in postgraduate programmes in the creative sector requiring equivalents to the knowledge-transfer models that have structured postgraduate study in other fields (UKCGE, 2002).

Recent research policy developments, particularly national assessment exercises in the UK and the British Commonwealth, suggested homologies between creative practice investigations and traditional research (if not always their equivalence) and facilitated the entry of creative practitioners into a formal Research Science and Technology (RS&T) support system. However, as a number of commentators have noted, this has often been characterised by a dynamic where creative practitioners are on the back foot, attempting to justify their practice as being as rigorous as "real research." After more than a decade of these discussions, we can now see that there is the potential for creative practice to contribute far more to our understanding of research and innovation than simply being admitted inside an existing discussion about knowledge production. In a way, creative practices highlight fundamental areas of tension in dominant ways of thinking about knowledge, and these represent an opportunity to rethink the systems by which research is undertaken and supported.

Creativity within a University knowledge system

While creative practices' understanding of creativity might be of a different order to most disciplines, it is also true that creative practice disciplines have not yet developed sufficient reflexive understanding of their position within the academy that would allow us to make stronger claims for a distinctive kind of knowing that could be the basis for support from research institutions. As Kevin Hamilton (2007) astutely observes, the difference between traditional disciplines (which aim to give a comprehensive introduction to a field at undergraduate level) and creative disciplines such as art and design are significant when we look at the way art and design is actually taught:

> Curricula and pedagogy for art and design at the undergraduate and graduate levels widely varies, undergoes little inter-institutional examination or critique, and is often still regarded with suspicion by even young professors who doubt that art can really ever be taught. 'Hidden curricula' dominate and there is no shared understanding of the discipline in the way that exists in most other departments.

This is unsurprising considering the dominant model for knowledge acquisition and expression in creative disciplines rewards an entirely different approach from the careful, detailed contribution to knowledge common to traditional academic disciplines. For artists, for example, the professional environment requires artists to have their work described in the context of their own development and investigations rather than that of prior work in the field. Of course, genres and traditions are constantly referenced, but most artists would actively resist seeing their work as a minor contribution to a large sphere of knowledge. As one of the participants in the Fine Arts AHRC workshop suggested bluntly, "the humility required to be a researcher [is] a particular challenge to artists who might need a different outlook to succeed in professional life."(Rust et al., 2007: 98)

Distinguishing professional and research practice

One response to this is to identify and isolate the parts of creative practice which fit most clearly with a research paradigm as we traditionally understand it, and distinguish it clearly from professional practice by inaugurating a specific set of processes which are called "practice-based research".

There is a difference between the *feasibility* of evaluating creative practice as a form of research and the *desirability* of it. In particular, we would have to question the value of practice-based research which explicitly contributes something to a body of academic practice if measured in an accounting-type way or through rational falsifiability; where is not widely seen as a valuable example of art, design, music, or media in the most significant authentication bodies in these disciplines (the museum, market, or festival rather than the academy). In other words, is it possible to avoid an evaluation process that suppresses creative practices as we understand them?

This raises the question as to the nature of the creativity we would want to assess. As Macleod and Holdridge (2006: 6) note, the findings presented through art "are always a posteriori and thus, ill suited to the institution's pursuit of truth and prescribed outcomes. Meanings are made after the event, through the act of viewing or contemplation and by the artist initially." Most artists would be suspicious of any new investigations which contribute to the field in advance of the work being created.

Further, it is difficult to promote creativity in institutional contexts because extrinsic motivation results in decreased creativity where strong intrinsic motivation is not present. A consistent body of research indicates that expected evaluation, surveillance, reward, competition for prizes, or restricted choice in how to do an activity all have a negative impact on creativity (Amabile, 1990). Anyone involved in research assessment exercises such as the RAE will experience the tremendous difficulty involved in getting practitioners to undertake the seemingly innocuous (from the institution/bureaucrat's point of view) process of documenting and submitting research portfolios. An audit model is opposed to the very nature of creative work.

This is not to suggest that research assessment systems are incompatible with creative practice, it is simply to acknowledge that, as von Tunzelmann and Kraemer Mbula (von Tunzelmann and Mbula, 2003: 2) observe, "most countries still regard their [research assessment] systems as somewhat experimental […] the nature of changes introduced is a likely reflection of dissatisfaction about previous systems (or indeed the previous absence of systems)." The systems are still far from settled, and while there is an ability for practitioners to intervene effectively, low institutional self-esteem is endemic in University art departments. As Timothy Emlyn-Jones (Emlyn-Jones, 2006: 237) notes:

> If, as a subject community, we are able to establish a shared understanding of how knowledge is generated through inquiry and communicated in or by works

of art or design, then we should have grounds for confidence in our developing research culture since it is in the forms of knowledge that our subject differs from other subjects. In fact we have a great deal of knowledge about the knowledge basis of art and design, but much of our knowing about knowledge is anecdotal and undertheorised. This makes many of us apologetic for not being able to define the knowledge simply; this lack of confidence is unnecessary in my view.

When creativity is being adopted so widely in other fields and disciplines (Clough, 2005), questions around of application of innovation through practice are paramount (Calestous and Lee, 2005), and the development of tacit knowledge is increasingly valued both in academia and in the commercial sector, this seems like an ideal time to articulate the value of the creative sector in terms that make sense to itself, first of all, and to build environments that truly reflect what we know about how creative practice operates. From there, we can begin to investigate how the insights from creative practice can begin to address the demand for more reflexive, creative and applied knowledge.

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