Challenging expectations and acting differently: practice research within/outwith university research culture

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Research Domains

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Abstract

As expectations of researchers and research environments around demonstrating impact beyond the university continue to increase, this paper considers what insights might be gained from thinking across disciplines and reflecting on the differences and potentiality of research practices in the creative arts. The problematic relationship between practice research and university research ecosystems continues despite decades of history of creative methods and artistic practice as research. Yet, by necessity many practice research activities, particularly visual arts and curatorial research practices, are both within and beyond the academy. This *being beyond* of the research is not merely dissemination outside the academy, nor necessarily impact as a result of the research. In exploring the positioning of practice research, and the practitioner-researcher, as inhabiting and traversing knowledge generation both within and outwith the university, I argue that we might bring another fruitful perspective to contemporary challenges facing academic research culture.

Full paper

The expectations of researchers and research environments to demonstrate impact beyond the university continue to increase. Research culture in the neoliberal university is increasingly problematised and contested from multiple perspectives (e.g. Elizabeth & Grant 2013, O'Regan & Gray 2018, Mulligan & Danaher 2021) with contemporary challenges for researchers including academic precarity, the persistence of 'publish or perish' competitiveness and increasing expectations through growing emphasis on impact literacy, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. Drawing on examples from the United Kingdom, this paper will consider what insights might be gained from thinking across disciplines (Trowler 2013) and reflecting on the differences, similarities, and potentialities of university research cultures and practices in the creative arts (Raunig et al 2013).

The relationship between practice research and university research ecosystems remains problematic (Wilson 2017, Pfoser & de Jong 2020, Cotter & Hamdan 2024). This is despite there now being decades of history of creative and artistic practice as research in creative disciplines and continued growth in creative methods in research across social science and humanities disciplines. This paper acknowledges how prevailing conceptualisations and enactments of 'good' research, research culture and of impact and engagement can jar with the praxis required to support practice research. For example, few artist researchers are provided with studio space, materials, or production costs to enable their research in

the same way that research scientists are provided with laboratories and equipment. By necessity many practice research activities, particularly those in the visual arts and curatorial research practices, are beyond the academy through their production and their public engagement – whether as exhibition, event or performance. This *being beyond* of the research is not merely dissemination outside the academy, nor is it necessarily impact as a result of the research. I draw examples from the outputs and impact case studies submitted to the UK's Research Excellence Framework exercise of 2021 (REF 2021), as both a large public data set and a repository documenting research activity deemed by submitting higher education institutions as demonstrating quality and significance. Here evidence of the more porous, fluid, multiple and entangled positions occupied by practice research can be found. Often collaborative, such creative research praxis inhabits and creates spaces within creative communities and within publics whereby the research locus, methods, and modes of knowledge generation and articulation are all beyond the confines of the university, yet in constant dialogue with their disciplines within the institution.

This is not to position such practice research as oppositional to academic research, nor is it to suggest that the cultures and institutional praxis of the arts and arts organisations are unproblematic. In exploring the positioning of practice research in the arts, and the practitioner-researcher, as inhabiting and traversing knowledge generation both within and outwith the university, I argue that we might bring other perspectives to the conceptualization of research practices and cultures. My paper provides a provocation to education researchers to consider how might learning from artist-researchers enable us all to act differently and create opportunities for agency for ourselves and communities within and outwith universities to address the challenges facing researchers and research culture.

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