

'It takes two to Tango'
Artistic research and impact assessment under the new
Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK

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Introduction

Being implemented for 2014, the Research Excellence Framework, will replace previous Research Assessment Exercises in the UK. The evaluation of impact of research as an measurement of effects and benefits generated by new knowledge on non-academic users will form a novel evaluation category for the profiling the performance of research units. In its close link to recognised excellence of research it replaces indicators of ‘peer esteem’ related to the research active staff submitted by Higher Education Institutions to the RAE2008. In future, subject-specific units of assessment will be required to generate impact statements supported by a number of selected case studies. Significant work on impact for the Arts and Humanities has already been undertaken by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) by following up the wider effects of some of its funded flagship research projects. The development of the REF and more over the recent public release of the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance (2010) with its proposal to cease government funding of HE teaching for subjects in the Arts and Humanities (amongst others) and advocate a general increase in the cap on student fees to £9,000 have a reinvigorating effect on critical debates on the value of art/istic research to society. The increased government emphasis on accountability and transparency as well as the necessitated institutional search for a diversity of investment and funding opportunities for the creative and performing arts that stands to follow recent developments have to include considerations of robust evidencing and persuasive communication of the benefits and effects of art/istic research. ‘A Pedagogy of Curiosity’ as case study serves to address the tensions between the process-based, often experimental and speculative nature of artistic research and the output driven and prevailing short-termist and instrumental(ist) focus by policy makers, funding bodies and dominant commissioning models. The following discussion aims to draw attention to requirements and opportunities for a further conceptualisation of impact. From the current lack of thinking imaginatively about ways to evidence the qualitative benefits of art/istic research and to deal with the measuring of complex and dynamic categories such as ‘qualities of life’ and their underlying value hierarchies the discussion seeks to point to areas for further and perhaps alternative development.

A Pedagogy of Curiosity

‘A Pedagogy of Curiosity’ constitutes an emerging amalgamated body of cross-disciplinary research initiatives on the role of sensory and embodied perception that stimulate creativity in and beyond every day practice and promote imagination as a life-long learning tool. It builds on and informs a growing understanding that the challenges societies and communities face

in a globalised world are too complex to be solved from singular subject perspectives. Thinking about contemporary leadership, organisational and human development, and requirements of the 21 century knowledge-based economy has given increased recognition to the value of creativity and the artistic mind. With a shift from discovery to innovation, qualities such as intuition, imagination, serendipity, lateral and divergent thinking and a continuing process of inquiry and reflection gain in importance, qualities that lie at the heart of artists' practices and the leadership they exert. In this spirit, A Pedagogy of Curiosity brings together leading artists, scientists and researchers, who use the senses as their medium, with environmentalists and educators, who are experimenting with sensory approaches to learning and teaching across disciplines, institutions and policy domains. Through a range of issue-driven and site-specific exchanges and collaborations with policy makers, and a wider public of all ages, diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, the project aims to sensitise society and to promote resilient yet enhanced qualities of life.

A Pedagogy of Curiosity was initiated by Susan Benn, the Founding Director of the Performing Arts Labs Ltd. (PAL). Since 2008 it has been developing as a collaborative venture with the author of this paper. The project has evolved and builds on the expertise of PAL, which occupies a unique place in the development of exceptional cross-disciplinary practice in the UK and increasingly abroad, in Asia and Europe, foregrounding the formative role of creativity and artists' practices. Since its inception in the UK in 1989, it has developed and delivered over 140 Lab programmes – both residential and non-residential – across the breadth of the creative and cultural industries and at the intersection with the sciences, education and cultural and educational policy making. PAL's activities have been directed at identifying and bringing together exceptional talent to promote new insights and understanding across different areas of knowledge production and skills provision. The mix of people and an open process of engagement on a level playing field enable participants to take full responsibility for dialogic exchange, and generous inquiry and experimentation. These conditions - tangible and intangible - are essential ingredients in all PAL Labs. And whilst Lab programmes are results-focused, they are not predetermined but evolve through the process of inquisitive and intense exchange, creative interaction, peer learning and peer-to-peer coaching. They offer sufficient time for genuine acknowledgment of individual strengths and weaknesses, underpinned by serious structured professional support from leading creative practitioners, given before, during and after each LAB. A Pedagogy of Curiosity aims to apply, refine and expand these methods, techniques and instruments for artist-led collaborations for instance in order to galvanizing energies for the realisation of an experimental and participatory 'Street of the Senses' in London and other international cities.

Artistic Research

Research in the space of the arts constitutes a 'contact zone' in which different perspectives, concerns, approaches and methods can meet. The space in which open-ended, potentially

multi-directional and osmotic conversations and creative exchange can unfold needs to be permeable and flexible enough to accommodate the affordances of 'problem' identification and solving through creative and artistic means, which are never smooth and homogenous processes but fluid, 'wet' and folded, if not at times messy, fuzzy and tumultuous. (Gray; Delday, 2010)

The space of art/istic research is a principally dialogic space. This is underpinned by recent sea changes in the arts, alongside altered cultural concerns. Those shifts can be described in terms of a lessening interest in the re/presentation and experience of life worlds to give way to a greater preoccupation with the 'Other', with individuals and communities and the formation and dynamics of social relationships and inter/actions. Following on from postmodernism's keen drive towards self-reflexivity, which became particularly pertinent during the late 1980s and early 1990s, art practice has embraced cross-disciplinarity and acted as a kind of catalyst in bringing together other domains and forms of knowledge production, organisational systems and their standards and codes of communication. Operating as an experimental, observational resonance zone it explores, tests, challenges and intervenes with its own ways and means in models, procedures and protocols that stem from the sciences, medicine, sociology, politics, administrative systems, business, etc. Institutional art currently promotes its capacity as a space for comparative analysis, exchange and the experimentation with collaborative and participatory forms of engagement and public pedagogies. The advances in mobile communication and information technologies have opened up new possibilities and aided new forms of self/organisation and self/governance (Mey, 2010).

It might be worth in this context to place a reminder of the operations, expectations and criteria that are connected with notions of art/istic research. Increasingly, an understanding is being fostered that art/istic research is concerned with modes of explorations that are not only located and more or less embedded in the domain of art production, but through the means of art/istic inquiry and with processes of making and material thinking at its core. (Carter, 2004) To be recognised as 'proper' research it has to be seen to meet (but should also complicate and challenge) current notions of iterability (marked by the dominance of textual modes as means of authoritative communication and institutional 'standards' of scholarship). Such endeavour has to evidence convincingly that it not only transcends individual creative practice and concerns but that it has made an original and significant contribution to knowledge, which is effectively shared within and – under the notion of impact – outside of the academy and has potential applications and benefits for the wider society. Academic rigour and robustness as well as an articulate(d) reflection and reflexivity alongside current relevance criteria in/form present institutional expectations and frameworks of art/istic research.

Impact

In the draft REF framework, the definition of impact includes 'benefits to the economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health, the environment, international development and quality of life' (REF, 2010). Its principal assessment would be specific to discipline units, but with scope for interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration. It is set out historically, i.e. only those benefits that have already been produced by excellent research would be considered, not speculations on future effects. The category descriptors connect impact to the criteria of 'reach' and 'significance' and problematic qualifications such as 'ground-breaking' and 'transformative'. During the second consultation on the REF in 2009, many respondents highlighted the complexity of impact assessment by foregrounding issues such as impact definition in relation to discipline fields, the time frame for impact measuring, 'attribution and verifiability or reliability of evidence' (REF,20010). It has been acknowledged that further work is required to conceptualise impact and develop robust and credible methods for its assessment, particularly for areas such as the Arts and Humanities where research is seen to produce more diffuse, less tangible and therefore more subjective effects on culture and / or qualities of life'. The initiated pilot exercises as work in progress during 2010 alongside the many and diverse responses to the second REF consultation are considered as viable means to address these in time for the implementation of the exercise in 2014.

Consequences

For A Pedagogy of Curiosity, impact assessment results in a pronounced consideration of (a) existing evaluation criteria at the start of any of its projects with (b) the aim to identify and / or generate appropriate methods and tools that support the documentation, measuring and evidencing of (potential) benefits; and (c) to keep in mind how collaborative efforts may fit into current research quality assessment frameworks. There are a couple of pressing issues emerging: at current the mechanisms and instruments particularly for a qualitative assessment of complex categories such as qualities of life or an increased sensitising of society are not well advanced. Existing funding and commissioning schemes do not readily offer opportunities to inscribe experimental, potentially extensive and demanding evaluation process into the resources bid, but orient towards final outcome based reporting. Against this dominant paradigm, early considerations of impact necessitate a respective engagement with collaborators and participants to prepare and involve them actively and effectively in evaluation activities during and after the research project. It asks for imaginative, ingenious and multi-modal ways to capture effects in a variety of form/ats. From the observations of the demands of process-driven documentation and evidencing of impact, impulses need to be directed at policy level to shape the development of respective accommodating funding and commissioning models. The current situation offers specifically art/istic research a large field of opportunities of future engagement and all to play for.

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