

Collaborative creative work investigating the roles of traditional and contemporary technologies for the creation of media projects in practical research and their application to and dissemination in teaching

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Background

The rationale underpinning this collaborative research was a wish to improve insights into how technology impacts on creative production in practical research and then apply the findings to enhancing teaching. The project co-ordinators wished to eliminate false barriers separating teacher and student, and creative practice and research, as there are aspects of each of these elements in all these processes – a co-creative and fluid learning process could then emerge. As practising artists they were interested in aligning traditional art practice with computer technology, to increase confidence and understanding of how those technologies impact upon creative making and teaching creativity. The project also set out to deploy digital media for promoting research to students. Inquiry, innovation, discourse, experimentation, specialisation, creativity, and the development of new knowledge, in the form of practice related research, have underpinned the RIT project.

A particular focus for Tim Long is his research into the grotesque image and imagination. The way computer technology is now employed is ubiquitous in developed countries, but the hybridisation of human and machine has important and as yet unknown implications for human action. By assuming that the hybrid of human and machine, the cyborg, is an alarming and problematic thing, he seeks to examine the human/computer relationships with drawing machines and other physical computing devices.

Approach/methodology

The project co-ordinators teach practical production in the Department of Media and have a background in Fine Art practice that is applied to practical production and related theory. Through questioning the properties of their backgrounds and resulting teaching approaches, they reasoned that increased contact with their idiosyncratic creative approaches would facilitate engaging students with their own creative practices. This process required the identification of qualitative values derived from the individual, combined with an increased knowledge of the research techniques of others. These techniques in the project combined creative experiments with varied emergent outcomes, with emphasis upon questioning how and why digital media influences and changes those practices.

It was agreed that certain key issues were central to the research:

- An emphasis on interrogating the exchange between traditional practices and rapidly shifting digital technologies.
- An emphasis on the current creative practices of the participants, who would seek to monitor and critically engage with the 'creative potential' represented by these practices.

- An emphasis on the 'open-endedness' of creative practices of teaching staff and students.
- A belief that the creative practices of staff and students represent a vital educational resource that can be overlooked.
- An emphasis on RIT as not 'one way' or 'linear' but a relay of constant learning and exchange.

There was no formal quantitative data collection, as this was considered antithetical to the methodology and intent of the project. Students were involved formally during lectures, presentations and seminars, and informally during visits to galleries and in discussion with tutors outside lectures. Asking students to complete questionnaires and fill in more forms did not seem to accord with the ethos adopted for examining and promoting independent thinking and its relation to creativity.

We employed traditional and new technologies for disseminating research, which informed students not only of the content of research, but attempted to open up some of the problems and issues raised by the research. The variety of methods for sharing and creating content is especially important in the digital age, so debate around the appropriate use of media distribution methods and their histories informs our teaching. Part of the funding was used for two computer display kiosks, which allows for promotion of research via a computer screen so people can see the work and appreciate how online resources can become part of learning. This then influences the students' practice and insight into the variety of ways computers can facilitate research.

Outcomes

Research has been disseminated through:

- the *Ghosts and Grotesques* exhibition at Sidney Cooper Gallery, accompanied by an exhibition catalogue
- community contexts (Margate Limbo Arts)
- environmental interventions with the construction of booths at the Broadstairs and Canterbury campuses, displaying students' and staff work together on specialised kiosks
- *Nothing Happens* conference funded by the RIT initiative and involving practice related papers, February 2009
- Eddie McMillan's *Con-trails* exhibition at the Canterbury campus, following an exhibition of work funded through the RIT initiative
- a research blog outlining the project's progress.

The impact of practice-related research into teaching has been cascaded into module and programme design in: Film, Radio and Television Studies, Digital Culture, Arts and Media, Digital Media, Photography and MA Fine Art.

Students are involved in sharing the experience of research by applying methods and models demonstrated by the RIT initiative. Knowledge of types and forms of research assists students' ownership of the research process, appropriate to their level of learning. For example, two student-run competitions, sponsored by the RIT funds, require students to create and upload videos to YouTube for judging by students and staff. This process replicates the structure of taught modules, and permits students to experience the process of creating a theme-based creative outcome from inception to assessment.

Staff benefited from the ability to take forward research projects rapidly because of the RIT funding. They gained confidence, evidenced by increased contribution to research participation at conferences in the UK and abroad.

Qualitative evidence, gathered during lectures, seminars, tutorials and forums, shows that students consider staff research a vital aspect of their process of learning. Students have stated that seeing staff research in creative fields stimulates their own thinking and ambition to achieve success. The enhancement to student learning is also measured by overall student satisfaction, evidenced by formative and summative feedback gathered during 2007 and 2008.

Enhancing RIT

In the Department of Media, emphasis is placed upon practice-related research that seeks to establish a methodology recognising the significance of emergent outcomes – in other words, creativity and problem solving are an integral part of the entire research process. The identification and deployment of this methodology constitutes an important outcome for the RIT work. Through the dissemination of research (as above), students have gained insight into the content of staff research, and the methods and practices they engage with in this process are influencing the quality of their learning and learning outcomes.

The RIT initiative has raised the profile of practice-based research in relation to the status and Research Excellence Framework (REF) potential of the Department, contributing to a dynamic shift in the profile of creative practice and its relevance to teaching and research.

Advice for others

Make a good plan, but be prepared to change and adapt it.

Break down barriers and structures in academia that separate research from teaching, and theory from practice.

Creativity requires intuition and the ability to work from a point of doubt and scepticism. Don't accept that anything is absolute, and challenge those who do.

Ask how play and research are related.

Reflections and any future plans

The project developed new paths and initiatives that changed from the original plan. We recognised that creative work proposes starting points, and creative practices require contingent elements to influence the completed outcome.

The project did work, especially in its capacity to increase awareness, for staff and students, of the importance of creative experimentation. The ways that new technologies impact on research and the dissemination of research was a key concern of the project. It is clear at the end of the project that some technologies require individual design and customisation – working with software out of the box, as it is designed to be used, does not always offer the creative practitioner the capacity to adapt and individualise creative strategies.

If we were to do it again we would concentrate on a series of events taking place after a period of study leave, as our teaching load prevented some initiatives from being developed as far as they might have been.

Bryan Hawkins' research

The production of creative work has been in relation to three identified broad themes, each having built from previous research. Landscape work (exhibited at the University of Kent), *Ghost Ships* (exhibited at CCCU and Margate) and *The Sleep of Albion* – work in progress. Current research is developing an engagement with archaeology, history and the shared characteristics of these forms within the visual arts and film-making. This work is leading to a trans-disciplinary work titled *Common Wealth and Landscape Project*, involving the Powell Research Group, Canterbury Archaeological Trust, Folkestone History Group, and Limbo Arts. Additionally research in relation to ideologies of creativity, personal creative process and creative strategies in traditional and new media technologies have emerged.

Papers - *Zombie Creativity* and *The Tyger Behind the Screen* have been presented at CCCU and are in development for publication.

Module design - Visual Research Digital Media, MA Fine Art

Curatorial and community based projects - Links with Limbo Arts and CCCU and new projects.

Tim Long's research

Tim has made progress with his part-time PhD studies at the Slade School of Art, UCL, London.

A multimedia exhibition entitled *Notations*, integrating drawing and sound production held in London during 2007 at UCL was attended by students from the Department of Media, subsidised from RIT funding.

- Tim's artistic practice employing physical computing has been used as a case study in a paper presented at The Association of American Geographers 2009 Annual Meeting in Las Vegas.
- Tim also presented his work at the *Digital Resources in the Arts and Humanities* conference in Cambridge during 2008.
- His work was selected for exhibition at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition 2008.

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Tim Long's drawing machine exhibited at the Notations event at the Slade School of Art, UCL, on 12 December 2008. This event was attended by students from Canterbury Christ Church University with support from RIT funding.



Tim Long (2009) Return, a mirror box assembly, d18 x h18 x w23cm

Images from the Ghosts and Grotesques exhibition catalogue

