



Method is Impact is Outputs: Non-linear Approaches to Impact Generation to Practice Research

Who am I?

I appreciate that I am in the company of a diverse set of people, so think it best to start with a quick intro to my background and expertise. My name is Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg and I work at Goldsmiths, University of London: a University which, as some of you may know, is home to a variety of politically aware practice researchers, social scientists and computing and psychology experts. As an organisation, we are small, socially engaged, feisty, and specialist, to a degree, but keen to look outwards and to collaborate with the rest of the sector.

At Goldsmiths I am a Research Development and Policy manager as well as a visiting fellow in Psychology, at the Goldsmiths Music, Mind and Brain Centre. I am not a psychologist though, but an applied, medical ethnomusicologist: for simplicity's sake, an anthropologist of music who uses applied, culturally appropriate methods to promote wellbeing through the making of music. Colleagues of mine, particularly in the USA, work on projects related to HIV, Malaria and water sanitation. They collaborate with local stake holders in Africa and elsewhere to design musical and artistic messaging programmes which communicate health-related information, thereby increasing survival and recovery rates. Others work with Indigenous minority groups in Australia, New Zealand, Finland and Native America to design culturally appropriate mechanisms addressing societal disadvantage and intergenerational trauma. We are practice researchers.

I personally facilitated an Australian Indigenous choir, singing at prisons, Indigenous rehabilitation centres, for tourist audiences and for community events as well as regional artistic ventures, such as the Queensland Music Festival and appearing on radio and in the local news. I am a practice researcher.

What is practice research?

For the uninitiated, let me now say a few words about practice research. Practice research or practice based research, as some call it, is a broad church, and there is no one definition. Whenever is anything well-defined in the arts, humanities and social sciences? Our job is to challenge definitions, including our own. We exist in plurality. Conventional definitions would have it, that we are artists, musicians, poets, writers etc. who, through creating our art, generate Friscati's much beloved *new knowledge*.

We usually embed our practice in theory and philosophy. Practice research outputs look very much like documentaries, art house cinema, art exhibitions and musical compositions. Why? Because that is what they are, but in addition to being wonderful cultural artefacts, these outputs are also the answer to research questions that are relevant, important, topical.



In my own case, I asked: How does Christian choral singing impact on the construction of Australian Aboriginal identities? Through facilitating a choir in Outback Australia I found that if done in culturally appropriate ways, choral singing has a positive impact on identity constructs. It showed the wider world that ‘more than drunks come out of Hopevale’, which is the Indigenous community where I worked, in the Cape York area. If done badly, as by some of the well-meaning, but less well-informed missionaries, I discovered, through archival work, choral and hymn singing have a less positive effect. To answer my questions, I facilitated a choir, rehearsed with them, organised a tour, and sang. We performed. We practiced together, and I researched with the help of my singers. We then went off, generating positive impact, and I recorded this impact as part of my fieldwork studies and doctoral degree.

My method: choral facilitation, led to an outputs: performances, concerts and rehearsals. The impact: wellbeing for the singers and their relatives in rehab or prison and a heightened awareness of Australian Aboriginal diversity amongst tourist audiences in Outback Australia, combatting essentialist stereotypes: not all Aboriginal people play the didgeridoo, don’t you know? My impact did not occur *after* my research. It occurred *during* my research and in turn led to new questions arising. It led to a form of social enterprise and sponsorship via the Queensland Arts Council and so on. *The Impact was non-linear*. This non-linear creation of impact is not well-understood by the sector at large. Reporting of impact and the policies for it, still seem to suggest that it occurs only after the research has been completed. This is not so in practice research.

Challenges and Issues

It may well be though, that what I did and what others are doing as practice researchers in under threat, at least within the higher education sector. We, as a group face a number of challenges, and need to up our game. Practice research fared badly in the last REF. The general comments from panel chairs and user groups was that researchers did not sufficiently explain the underlying research questions and frameworks for non-specialists to understand how their work was contributing to the creation of new knowledge or to impact.

Practice research also has a philosophical battle raging within itself. It asks: should we always furnish our creative outputs with textual explanations or should we allow the art work to ‘speak for itself’? Does explaining the research underlying the art work diminish its impact or restrict the ways in which it might be interpreted and therefore its social value? Is the image uploaded on the repository the same artefact as the analogue version?

Some colleagues feel that the ways in which research funders seek to engage with their applicants does not work well for practice researchers. They feel that there is still an expectation that impact is linear. The language used in policies, application guidelines and funder strategies do not communicate to practice researchers, they feel, the inclusivity that is needed for them to apply. It is hard to capture the societal impact of their creative output



too. Audience surveys and perceptions are not always reliable, especially when undertaken immediately after the research has been completed. Surveys are too context and person specific, they feel.

As a result, many practice researchers do not apply for research funding, or if they do, the cost is prohibitive: making a film or significant art installation can be expensive and how does one write a practice research grant that does not sound like an application to fund creative practice?

Questions for practice researchers; research developers and research offices to dig in to, me thinks, and a challenge which must be taken seriously, and fast. Much practice research remains unfunded, except for quality related income and through student numbers. Smaller pots of money available and double jeopardy also often impact on funding success. If practice researchers continue to do less well in the REF, money may decrease further, leading to the unfortunate position whereby University's will have to make undesirable decisions about the viability of courses, jobs and perhaps even institutions. Without a more astute engagement with REF and research funders, personally, I feel the diversity of the UK's research portfolio might be under threat. The new White paper has it made it quite clear that 'The Government should not be in the business of rescuing failing institutions', so we must not expect any help there, unless of course we want to become one of these 'smaller. niche providers' they are on about. We shall see...

So, how to engage and be Impactful?

Could Practice Research be a Social Enterprise? I think so. My work was a social enterprise, where I provided a community with music facilitation support, which led to some income being received by the community for their performances at for example the Queensland Music Festival. The British Council's report on social enterprise acknowledges that we may have some way to go in understanding how a University's engagement with social enterprise might be understood, but I believe practice researchers are especially well-placed at exploring this avenue. Through our practice we engage with the public and many of us are also practitioners in our own rights, with a flourishing practice next to our academic job. Could we set up social enterprise through our institutions, using practice research creative outputs?

At the same time, we should also try using ethnography and auto-ethnography to document responses to and engagement with practice research outputs. Not just the post-theatre survey or interview but something more longitudinal and sustained. Should we look towards the anthropological and sociological disciplines for answers? If we do that, we have another instance of non-linear impact: its generating new research into the perception of impact. For those who are geeky like me: I recommend hermeneutics.



Lastly, and perhaps controversially: are separate funding streams for Impact and Knowledge Exchange in block grants really that helpful for practice researchers? We generate non-linear impact. Sometimes impact and research happen 'accidentally' almost as a result of the research enquiry of impact project. Having separate funding streams is not helpful. It sends the wrong message about the separation between theory and practice. It tells practice researchers that what they are doing is 'public engagement' and not research, whereas in many cases the two are one and the same. So, maybe, if a future employee of UKRI is here, we might see some funding mechanisms that use the right language and fund in ways which signal an inclusivity which will make even the most recalcitrant practice researchers want to write 10 pages and a variety of attachments to get some funding to help answer their research enquiries.

Thank you for listening.

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