

Creative and educational spaces: The musician in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Conservatoires and universities are both creative and educational spaces. As major employers of musicians, negotiating the nexus of teaching-research-creative practice within higher education is a critical concern for music faculty and students. This paper takes as its subject the newly introduced Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), drawing on the experience of other research frameworks to identify some of the pertinent issues facing musicians in academia. The paper suggests that whilst creative practice is increasingly recognized as research, it is rarely judged as being research in its own right or as having equal status to traditional scientific research. Findings strengthen the argument that conceptualizing and communicating the research inherent within creative practice can give musicians both artistic and intellectual agency over the commentary that surrounds their work. However, successfully negotiating the translation of creative work into a language understood by the academy requires skills that are often far removed from creative practice. Added to increasing pressure to produce traditional written research within a narrow band of highly ranked journals, the findings suggest the need to develop a range of academic writing skills and conceptual approaches early in the training of graduate students and for new faculty. For musicians to find a balance between the creative and educational spaces of higher education, the paper presents a case for individualized support accompanied by a systemic shift that acknowledges the value, new forms of knowledge and innovative approaches within creative practice and research. The articulation of creative processes to a broad audience may prove to be a major step towards gaining this acknowledgement.

KEYWORDS

Musician, academic, higher education, creative research

INTRODUCTION

Despite acknowledgment of creativity and innovation as the backbone of Western experience-based economies, the presence of the arts within universities remains problematic. Musician academics work within a government-directed research environment that fails to fully realize the value of creative research, yet which accepts the funded outcomes of graduate practice-based students and expects many academics to maintain a high-level arts practice. Whilst research frameworks differ according to location, traditionally notated “scientific”

research has long been accepted as the rigorous norm, and most frameworks seek to “regularize creative practice – dissect, section and give acceptable academic shape to it” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 5). It is certain that research will remain core business within the increasingly corporatized world of the university, and it will continue to have considerable bearing upon career success and progression. Musicians working within academia, often finding themselves “driven by the external art world and educational agendas that rarely reflect their own artistic motives and practice” (Carroll, 2006, n. p), negotiate the creative and educational spaces within academia in search of balance and a common language.

Although there is insufficient room here for analysis of research frameworks internationally, the UK experience provides useful background. In the UK, creative research was ineligible for funding until implementation of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1992 (Frayling, 1993). Whilst the inclusion of creative research was applauded, it was not without problems: “opening research to the inclusion of [creative] practice, the need arose to legitimize the use of practice within research and with regard to its contribution to knowledge, because the requirements for research remained the same, and any submission was and still is judged against the conventional criteria for rigor and validity of research” (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007, p. 5).

There is a fundamental need to question the logic of justifying creative practice as equivalent to traditional scientific research rather than as research in its own right. Arguing that creative practice was research “long before many other academic disciplines existed” (2002, p. 1), Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) emphasized the difficulties for creative practice in “articulating what it does and ... mapping such creative research by practice onto currently accepted assessment criteria” (p. 1). On this point, the ECA and Niedderer and Roworth-Stokes (2007) agree that the written articulation of creative work as research, particularly when applied retrospectively, poses particular conceptual and philosophical challenges. In 2013 the UK will replace the RAE with the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which will focus on research output, research impact/significance, and research environment: quality, dissemination and application (HEFCE, 2009). At the time of writing, the implications for creative research are not known.

Until the 1990s, Australia funded twenty categories of

research output including creative research. There followed a decade in which only authored books, peer reviewed journal articles, refereed conference papers and book chapters were recognized as research; however, 2010 saw full implementation of a new framework, Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA). ERA formally recognizes the research inherent in four categories of creative work:

- Original (creative) works in the public domain;
- Live performance works in the public domain;
- Recorded (performance) public works; and
- Curated or produced substantial public exhibitions, events or renderings.

Each creative work submitted for assessment has to be accompanied by a written narrative that articulates the research background, contribution of new knowledge, and research significance (Gye, 2009). Whilst this recognition of creative work is welcome, the degree to which it ameliorates long-standing attitudes to arts practice as research remains to be seen.

METHOD

This paper reports findings from a research project into creative research and the academy. Sixteen full-time arts academics in five Australian States were sent a written invitation to participate. Purposeful sampling was employed to attract participants who maintained a creative practice or managed teams of artist academics. The thirteen respondents are each identified by creative discipline and respondent number (r): popular music (r1 and r2); new music (r3); classical music, including three academics working mostly within music education (r4 to r10); world music (r11); ethnomusicology (r12); and visual art (painting) (r13). The visual artist managed a School of Arts that included music. Eleven respondents held administrative positions such that they were able to represent a broad range of experiences.

Respondents were sent background information on the ERA and the study, together with a survey comprising six questions:

1. In 2008, Julia Gillard [Australian Minister for Education] said: “For the first time in many years, Australian Universities will have a Federal Government that trusts and respects them. A government which understands the formation of knowledge and skills through teaching and research is the indispensable—absolutely indispensable—precondition for the creation of a stronger economy and a more confident and equitable society”. How do you respond to Julia Gillard’s remark?
2. What changes (if any) have there been to the ways in which you and/or your faculty are thinking about creative practice?
- 2.1 Have the processes of collecting information about creative practice changed?

- 2.2 Is there a new or increased interest in creative practice from the institution?
- 2.3 Are artist academics likely to engage more with the research framework now that creative practice is recognized and rewarded?
3. Is ERA impacting your creative practice? If so, please explain how.
4. How prepared are you to meet the requirements of ERA?
5. How prepared is your institution?
6. If you write for academic journals, what are your views on the current journal rankings? Will the rankings influence your choice of journal?

In two cases, responses were followed up with a telephone interview in which responses were clarified and new themes further explored. Interview transcripts and survey responses were coded by the researcher and by an independent observer. The following section presents and discusses the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questions opened with the statement made by the Minister for Education. In general the reaction was positive: “I accept the sentiment that the Government values education and look forward to seeing how that might apply to higher education” (r13). This was shadowed by uncertainty: “as yet there is little evidence of tangible support” (r1). Described by one respondent as “political speak” (r10), the timing of the proposed initiatives also prompted comment: “most of it is to come closer to the next election. It is easy to be skeptical about this approach” (r2).

The second question focused on changes to the ways in which music academics and faculties were thinking about creative practice and research in light of the ERA. As the visual artist explained, “the inclusion of the creative arts in the data collection of research outputs is critical for the arts sector of higher education to feel fully franchised and not always having to argue the case” (r13). However, she went on to warn:

This ERA trial will test the ARC [Australian Research Council] and the Government’s commitment to the inclusion of creative arts in the higher education system, and it will test the creative arts academics in their capacity to step up and make a sound and rigorous system for evaluating quality. Having said that, this mania for auditing is putting huge imposts on universities and individual researchers, and if the Government really trusted us they would not put us through so much of this micromanagement.

The process of making creative work eligible for funding under ERA is far from simple. Academics, faced with collecting evidence relating to each creative work, have the additional challenge of collecting this evidence retrospectively because “the rules changed after the period

that is being assessed” (r11). As mentioned earlier, the difficulty of retrospectively rationalizing the research within creative work was also experienced in the early days of the RAE: “the post rationalization of work submitted and evaluated through the peer review process confused the previously held status quo of research operating within strict scholarly conventions” (Niedderer & Roworth-Stokes, 2007, p. 5). Respondents voiced doubt about how ERA would evaluate creative practice and articulated a sense of foreboding: “awaiting the evaluators who come around and make decisions about its worth” (r10). The consensus was that “without knowing what kind of recognition will be given to creative practice outputs it is difficult to get over-excited” (r2), and respondents were suspicious about whether the inclusion of creative work would change the status-quo: “there is a degree of negativity about whether it will ever come to anything concrete in the way of funding for creative work within universities” (r2).

Two distinct pictures emerged in terms of the immediate impact of evaluating creative research. The first included institutions that had not previously recognized creative research, and where musicians had “been completely demoralized by the many years of non-recognition of creative outputs” (r2). This had often resulted in a creative practice separate from academic life, or the abandonment of creative practice in favor of traditionally notated research: “I have neglected my arts practice in favor of written research because I never thought anything would change” (r2). Many of these institutions had “no systematic approach” (r13) to the collection of evidence required for ERA. Some respondents revealed that creative practice had yet to be accepted or understood within their own institutions, adding an internal battle to the national one.

In contrast, institutions that had recognized creative research despite its exclusion from the national research agenda appeared to be ideally positioned to engage with ERA. Internal recognition had long enabled academics to integrate their creative practice into their academic profiles, prioritizing it as one might any other form of research (albeit within the usual constraints of an academic workload). In addition, much of the evidence required for ERA had already been collected as part of the internal recognition process. One musician noted that since his university had formally recognized creative practice as research, “the engagement of staff members with research has increased significantly” (r11).

Aside from the fact that writing about one’s creative practice can contribute positively to that practice, “not all creative artists want to view their practice as research”. There are obvious artistic as well as practical reasons behind this: for example, a reluctance to over-analyze the creative process, or protection of the specificity of the artist experience. Whilst participation in university based research schemes had been mostly voluntary, respondents noted that the introduction of ERA had brought about “an

increase in interest in the university and a growing discussion in the music department” (r10). Voluntary participation had become a thing of the past: “now the faculty is scrambling to make all lecturers engage with this process” (r5). It will be interesting to observe what constraints are experienced now that creative research has the attention of the wider academy. As one respondent wrote: “For me, it has just meant more documentation and explanation” (r3).

Another critical issue for musicians is the ranking of academic journals, which is contentious across almost all disciplines and is increasingly common. With news of the European equivalent, the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH), the editors of 55 European journals published an editorial in which they described “putatively precise accountancy ... entirely defective in conception and execution” (Andersen, Ariew, Feingold, Bag, Barrow-Green et al., 2008, p. 1). “Great research”, they argued, “may be published anywhere and in any language. Truly ground-breaking work may be more likely to appear from marginal, dissident or unexpected sources” (p. 2). The editors predicted that ERIH will lead to “fewer journals, much less diversity and [will] impoverish our discipline” (p. 2). They asked the compilers of ERIH to remove their journals’ titles from the list, concluding: “we want no part of this dangerous and misguided exercise” (p. 2).

The Australian journal rankings have been similarly criticized on many fronts such as rankings supplanting peer evaluation of individual articles (personal communication, August 2009); the use of bibliometrics, which will undoubtedly place Humanities and Social Sciences research at a disadvantage (Donovan, 2005); inaccuracies and inconsistencies (Hainge, 2008); and opaque (at best) criteria for the rankings process itself (Genoni & Haddow, 2009). A particular concern for creative artists is the poor ranking afforded to many e-journals, open access journals, and journals incorporating creative work. Elizabeth McMahon, editor of the literary journal *Southerly*, bemoaned the low rankings of journals that feature creative work: “if we were to take these measures at the letter, we would be better off to get rid of all the creative material and just keep the peer-reviewed material” (Howard, 2008, p. 1).

Whilst the US does not currently rank journals, many journals ranked within other systems are published in the US or have US contributors and editorial board members: hence they are swept into the debate along with everyone else. As Craig Howes, co-editor of *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, wrote: “I can watch the lights go out. ... The rankings systems in these various countries never asked us whether we wanted to be ranked or not. ... They’re going to do it anyway” (in Howard, 2008, p. 5). Similarly concerned about the ranking of Humanities and Social Sciences journals, the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council warned in 2004 of the problems facing these disciplines if subjected to citation-based ranking (Genoni & Haddow, 2009).

The respondents expressed many of the same concerns, several of them identifying “reputable journals missing from the list entirely”. One respondent described the rankings as a “seriously vexed problem” (r13) and questioned “the enormous waste of effort that these processes have to exert”. Asked whether the rankings were already influencing respondents’ choice of journals, one respondent wrote: “I am largely defiant ... and publish where I think what I have to say will best reach its intended audiences” (r11). For the others, however, rankings were already influencing journal choice. Direct university pressure arose as a key factor: some universities would only acknowledge articles in journals ranked B or higher, and there were obvious implications for promotions. One respondent commented: “I have applied for study leave next year and have been advised that if I don’t say the work I produce will be submitted to A or A* journals then my chance of getting study leave will be greatly diminished” (r2).

With the almost certain demise of many unranked or lower-ranked journals, including many ‘regional’ journals, publishing will become much more difficult for musicians new to traditional research and for those publishing in new, interdisciplinary or emerging research areas. As many academics find their creative practice attracting attention for the first time, so too will come increasing pressure to produce academic papers. This is particularly problematic for artists whose creative practice is not based in the written word.

On a more positive note, participation in a research framework has the potential to give artist academics “more confidence to consider their work as a legitimate part of their academic jobs” (r13). It should promote “stronger links between practice and reflection” (r11) and encourage “more activities that combine research and music-making” (r11). The Australian framework comes also at a time of increasing concern that scientific research remains the norm despite recognition that “the kind of knowledge produced by scientific enquiry, although at times useful, is limited and does not provide an adequate model for all research, including much of what is happening in the sciences” (Rosenberg, 2008, p. 4). The fluidity of approaches engaged by creative researchers is potentially of great benefit to the academy, whether or not the outcomes are documented in traditional narrative form. Thus, there exists potential to “educate others in the academy about the innovative and expansive field of art” (r13).

Many musicians working in higher education are required to function effectively as creative artists, teachers, researchers and administrators. Finding a balance between these roles is no simple task. Whilst there is increasing recognition of creative practice as research, the creative work most often requires additional documentation that translates it into a language understood by the academy. The skills needed to undertake this translation are often far

removed from creative practice, and many academics require support to successfully negotiate the process.

Artist academics engaged in writing about their creative practice report the benefits of generating new perspectives that inform both their practice and their teaching (Bennett, Wright & Blom, 2009). Moreover, conceptualizing and communicating the research inherent within creative practice gives musicians both artistic and intellectual agency over the commentary that surrounds their work. As such, analytical and reflective thinking needs to be embedded into musician training, giving students a voice with which to articulate their emergence as artists. The communication of artistic processes and experiences will undoubtedly reveal innovative approaches and new forms of knowledge, which in turn will attract the attention of the wider academy. Perhaps these insights will gradually prompt an attitudinal shift towards acknowledging the arts as a valuable contributor to the academic discourse, emphasizing the crucial creative space within education.

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