The Liminal Zone: A Metaphor for the Interface between Teaching and Creative Practice

a. Introduction to the topic

For creative arts academics, there is considerable interplay between teaching and creative activity, with each influencing the other. These effects can sometimes be negative, *e.g.* when teaching uses so much creative energy that creative practice is side-lined or even impossible, yet they can also be positive, *e.g.* when students are inspired by their teacher's creative work. This research will explore the balance between such positive and negative effects among teaching staff Scottish Universities and how positive interactions between teaching and creative practice can be nurtured, in order to make recommendations for spreading good practice. The researcher teaches creative writing and literature to students at levels 5-11, drawing on creative practice as a poet and novelist.

Inquiry at the interface between Art, Research and Teaching, seeking to integrate and develop synergies between these roles, is known as A/R/Tography (Gouzouasis *et al.* 2008). The wider Arts-Based Research movement (of which A/R/Tography is a part) has demonstrated the power of creative and artistic practice as research inquiry(Leavy 2015), including creative writing (Harper 2008) and 'poemish' writing (Lahman, Richard & Teman 2019), and the benefits to students when teachers bring their creative practice into their teaching role (Vanada 2017). It has also shown that '[c]rossing boundaries, boundary encounters and boundary partnerships are necessary for the integration of a landscape of practice'(Wenger-Trayner *et al.* 2015). As exemplars of boundary crossers, 'hybrid' academic-artist practitioners have been studied, exploring how they manage the 'uneasy' boundary crossing between academia and art through 'identity work' (Lam 2019). The concepts of hybridity, boundary crossing and identity work will help to elucidate the teaching/creative practice boundary in universities.

Previous research suggests that insights about institutional support for teaching and creative practice are likely to be generated by exploring the liminal tidal zone metaphor. Use of metaphor is a key method in poetic inquiry as it provides a powerful way to articulate emotion and generate new insights(Gitlin & Peck 2008), (Barrett 2011),(Vincent 2018), (Fernández-Giménez, Jennings & Wilmer 2019). Beyond its use as a literary device, metaphor has been promulgated for other disciplines, including educational discourse (Cameron 2003). Wenger proposes collective exploration of metaphor as a method for facilitating social learning in the central of three stages: engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger 1998). Leggo encourages researchers 'to linger in the spaces of binary oppositions in order to build bridges like metaphors from one vertex to another'(Leggo 2008). The liminal metaphor in particular has been shown to be important in identity studies (Beech 2011). In a teaching context, Todd claims that 'exploring the existential dimensions of pedagogical relationships … requires a language of in-betweenness, or liminality'(Todd 2014). A tidal zone metaphor exploration seems therefore particularly relevant for building meaningful knowledge exchange between hybrid artist/teachers. It has particular resonance in our northern geography.

b. Background and Rationale

With the increasing success of creative practice University degree courses there is a growing need for staff who can sustain both teaching and creative practice, but there has been little research into the experience of these 'hybrid' staff, the methods they use to maintain balance between the two areas of their role and the support University management can provide to them. The risks of creative burn out of staff are high, as this causes loss of experience and expertise from Universities, so this is a significant issue. A sustainable situation is needed where creative practice and teaching nurture each other and boundary crossing is facilitated.

The research will take the tidal zone as a central metaphor, following the 'Shoormal' creative arts conference in Shetland (Shetland Arts 2019) which used this archetypal liminal zone to represent a fruitful ebbing and flowing dialogue between artists, teachers and researchers. This metaphor is thus already active as what Wenger-Trayner *et al* call a 'boundary object' in the landscape of practice (2015:82). This research will explore first person experience by a creative writer and second person experience of the wider landscape of

practice among creative arts university staff, to generate a third person analysis that is relevant at the institutional level both at UHI and beyond(Coghlan & Brannick 2014:7).

c. Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this project is to explore how creative arts teachers can achieve a synergy between their teaching and creative practice and how employers can empower them to do so.

Specific objectives are:

- To explore boundary crossing between creative and teaching practice by Scottish university arts staff.
- To develop the A/R/Tography community of practice at UHI and share learning and best practice between this specific community and other creative arts teachers in Scottish universities.
- To create a collective artistic response to the liminal zone as a metaphor for the boundary between creative practice and teaching.
- To improve understanding of and support for creative arts academics in Scottish universities.

d. Research questions to be addressed

The primary research question is: How can universities support synergies between teaching and creative practice of arts staff?

Subsidiary questions are:

- What is the extent and nature of boundary crossing between creative and teaching practice by university arts staff?
- What insights can be generated from the inter-tidal zone as metaphor for the experience of the creative/teaching interface?

e. Methodology and justification of methods

This will be a mixed methods action research project, involving a 'sequential mixed design'(Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011:25) of four action research cycles: an initial quantitative inquiry, followed by a participatory qualitative (appreciative and arts-based) inquiry, then triangulation or 'integration' of data (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004:22) and then discussion of the results. The quantitative component of this research will provide 'hard' comparative data that may be more persuasive for some audiences and provide a nationwide contextual backdrop for the qualitative results. A survey will also provide a 'sampling frame' to identify staff outwith the current community of practice of the primary investigator who have insights and experience to share about the art/teaching interface(Brannen 2005:178).

In order to elicit insights in a qualitative way, appreciative inquiry interviews will be used because rather than framing the art/teaching interface as a problem to be solved, appreciative inquiry allows a focus on the sharing of best practice (Coghlan & Brannick 2014; Ye He & Oxendine 2019). An arts-based inquiry method will develop and deepen the participation of practitioners in exploring the central metaphor and taking co-ownership of the project. A similar combination of methods was used successfully to explore studio practice among teachers in Australia (Peterson *et al.* 2015). The action research paradigm is appropriate as it explicitly aims to empower participants through processes of change that they control (Boog 2003), described for this reason as a 'noble cause'(Winter, Richard & Badley 2007). It recognises that change within 'the swampy lowlands' of an organisation is inherently political and requires buy-in from and persuasion of many people with differing perspectives, values and priorities (Coghlan & Brannick 2014:4).

The first cycle of the research will be a quantitative inquiry cycle to establish the extent to which Scottish university creative arts staff experience interaction between their creative and teaching work. This will be by means of an online survey. Questions will seek to determine:

- the proportion of teaching staff who carry out creative practice at work and/or in their own time;

- how many experience a positive effect of teaching on their creative practice, and vice versa;
- experience of the temporal balance between teaching and creative practice;
- measures staff find helpful in achieving positive interaction between the aspects of their work;
- metaphors and methods for conceptualising links between creative and teaching practice.

The survey evidence will be analysed to provide a comparative overview of staff experience of the creative and teaching practice interface. It will also be used to identify up to 12 participants for the subsequent qualitative inquiry. Selection of participants will attempt to achieve a mix of artform and location.

The second action cycle will use appreciative inquiry interviews in coastal locations to explore the experience of creative arts teachers and the tidal zone metaphor. Results of these interviews will be fed back to all participants who will be invited to take ownership of the ongoing research process as full and equal partners, forming a creative community of A/R/Tography practice. Reflection will involve a poetic inquiry at Inverewe Gardens, Wester Ross, where the principal investigator is poet in residence. The other participants will be invited to reflect creatively on this metaphor in their own artform.

In the third cycle, results of the quantitative and qualitative phases will be triangulated collectively at a reflective retreat for the community of practice, using concepts developed in the qualitative phase to explain and understand the quantitative results or indicate dissonances that may indicate interesting complexities in the relationship between teaching and creative practice (Brannen 2005:180). This will also involve curation of an exhibition of the artworks, drawing out these concepts.

The final action research cycle will involve discussion in an interactive workshop at Shoormal and disseminating results to all survey responders, to senior management at UHI and other participants' universities, and to Universities Scotland, sharing insights, seeking feedback and nurturing best practice.

f. Feasibility, significance and potential for innovation

The principal investigator is a successful writer with a wide network of contacts in Scottish arts and experience of co-ordinating a large international network of creative practitioners, activists and researchers. The project will be led from within Inverness College UHI, where there is a supportive environment for creative arts, from school level up to the Principle, as well as a burgeoning community of A/R/Tography practice. This will ensure feasibility of the project.

The significance of the project is that it responds to a national expansion of the need for arts teaching in Scottish Universities. We are seeing rapid growth of the arts sector in Scotland, with the Highlands and Islands playing a significant part in this, and the Scottish Government's Culture Strategy is to support continued development of the creative arts, with Universities playing a key role. This will require a balance to be maintained to ensure that arts teaching and arts practice can flourish alongside each other. The use of art in University institutional discourse of this sort is highly innovative and it is hoped that the artworks developed in the project will trigger genuinely novel conversations about the edge zones we inhabit.

g. Relevance for the Scottish universities and academic community

There is a significant need for sustainable growth in arts teaching in Scottish Universities. According to recent UK government data (DCMS 2018), the Creative Industries has seen a 30% increase in jobs since 2011 and in Scotland it employs more than 140,000 people. Scottish Universities must respond to this growth through teaching to prepare students for employment in the sector, without jeopardising the wellbeing of their staff and enabling them to be active creative practitioners in their own right.

Many University creative arts teachers feel themselves to be inhabiting a liminal zone, as partial outsiders to academia, and this hybridity can limit their ability to nurture the next generation of creative talent. It is necessary to challenge what Lam (2019:17) calls the 'higher status' afforded to science and social science research in Universities compared to creative practice, addressing it through both individual identity work and institutional support. There are many issues, from contractual to well-being focused, from literary to curatorial, from pedagogical to managerial, which are likely to be raised by this project with relevance to the academic community across Scotland and beyond.

References

Barrett, T. (2011) 'Breakthroughs in action research through poetry.'. *Educational Action Research* **19** (1), 5-21

Beech, N. (2011) 'Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction.'. *Human Relations* **64** (2), 285-302

Boog, B.W.M. (2003) 'The emancipatory character of action research, its history and the present state of the art.'. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* **13** (6), 426-438

Brannen, J. (2005) 'Mixing Methods: The Entry of Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches into the Research Process.'. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* **8** (3), 173-184

Cameron, L. (2003) *Metaphor in educational discourse.* London: A&C Black

Coghlan, D. & Brannick, T. (2014) *Doing action research in your own organization* 4th edn. London: Sage

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. (2011) *Research methods in education* 7th edn. Abingdon: Routledge

DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) (2018) *DCMS Sectors Economic Estimates.* [online]. Available from <shorturl.at/qwBEN> [4 March 2020]

Fernández-Giménez, M.E., Jennings, L.B. & Wilmer, H. (2019) 'Poetic Inquiry as a Research and Engagement Method in Natural Resource Science'. *Society and Natural Resources* **32** (10), 1080

Gitlin, A. & Peck, M. (2008) 'Educational poetics: an aesthetic approach to action research.'. *Educational Action Research* **16** (3), 309-319

Gouzouasis, P., Leggo, C., Irwin, R.L. and Springgay, S. (2008) *Being with A/r/tography.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Harper, G. (2008) 'Creative writing: words as practice-led research.'. *Journal of Visual Art Practice* **7** (2), 161-171

Johnson, R.B. & Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2004) 'Mixed Methods Research: A Research Paradigm Whose Time Has Come'. *Educational Researcher* **33** (7), 14

Lahman, M.K.E., Richard, V.M. & Teman, E.D. (2019) 'ish: How to Write Poemish (Research) Poetry.'. *Qualitative Inquiry* **25** (2), 215-227

Lam, A. (2019) 'Hybrids, identity and knowledge boundaries: Creative artists between academic and practitioner communities'. *Human Relations*

Leavy, P. (2015) *Method meets art: arts-based research practice.* New York, N.Y.; London: The Guilford Press

Leggo, C. (2008) 'Astonishing silence: Knowing in poetry'. In *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research*, ed. by Knowles, J.G. & Cole, A.L.,. Los Angeles, Calif.; London: Sage, 166-175

Peterson, J.F., Frankham, N., McWhinnie, L. & Forsyth, G. (2015) 'Leading creative practice pedagogy futures.'. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education* **14** (1), 71-86

Shetland Arts (2019) *Shoormal Conference* <https://www.shetlandarts.org/our-work/projects/shoormalconference> [21 November2019]

Todd, S. (2014) 'Between Body and Spirit: The Liminality of Pedagogical Relationships.'. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* **48** (2), 231-245

Vanada, D.I. (2017) 'Teaching for the Ambiguous, Creative, and Practical: Daring to be A/R/Tography'. *Art/Research International* **2** (1), 110-135

Vincent, A. (2018) 'Is There a Definition? Ruminating on Poetic Inquiry, Strawberries and the Continued Growth of the Field'. *Art/Research International* **3** (2), 48-76

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press

Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O'Creevy, M., Hutchinson, S., Kubiak, C. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) *Learning in landscapes of practice :boundaries, identity, and knowledgeability in practice-based learning*. New York; New York: Routledge; Routledge

Winter, R. & Badley, G. (2007) 'Action research and academic writing: a conversation.'. *Educational Action Research* **15** (2), 253-270

Ye He & Oxendine, S.D. (2019) 'Leading positive change in higher education through appreciative inquiry: a phenomenological exploration of the strategic planning process.'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management* **41** (2), 219-232