

NW Network Group

Universities of Central Lancashire, Chester, Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan
and Cumbria Institute of the Arts,

Case Studies in support of the Support for New Academic Staff (SNAS) Strand 3 project

Linking Disciplinary Research to Teaching

Interviewee

Peter Lewis
Senior Lecturer Fine Art / Head of Ceramics
University of Bolton

pgl1@bolton.ac.uk

01204 903382

Interviewer

Rachel Studd
Senior Lecturer in Design
University of Manchester

rachel.studd@manchester.ac.uk

0161 3064136

Perceptions of Research and what it means to the Interviewee

Peter Lewis is a Senior Lecturer in Fine Arts, specialising in ceramics on the BA (hons) programme and also lectures on the MA Public Arts Programme. Peter is an active practitioner in the ceramics area. He best describes himself as a 'Practitioner/Educator'. Research means to Peter:

'working in a way which is perhaps unconventional, and in terms of how you place yourself within specific known boundaries that we term art, fine art and design.'

He goes on further to say that:

'ceramics is a subject that has a tradition and history within industry-mainly design led; you'll find that you get a lot of courses that are purely ceramic design in higher education. However over recent years sculptural ceramics has found a niche, indeed, ceramic programmes are much broader in outlook. My work crosses boundaries in terms of research, I feel that's very important. It's about hopefully not being pigeon holed, it is also about fulfilling meaningful goals in terms artistic endeavour and expression'

At the University research has been up for debate many times. In the past there has been a Professor appointed specifically for research. His remit was to encourage an active research community, to establish and with that define what research and scholarly activity meant to academics within the Art and Design group. The Professor's definition was 'that you were breaking new ground, it was new knowledge and it was something that had not previously existed.'

'In terms of that I think I fulfil most requirements that people would regard as research. I feel uniquely placed to be able to break new ground within the context of my own work. The subject matter that I deal with is from personal experience of living in the Middle East.'

Peter's passed experiences underpin the uniqueness of his work and inspiration from the time he spent living and working as a British citizen in Jordan.

'I think it fits in with the research culture, publishing documents or academic writing however is a more conventional form of research. Practice as research may not have been perceived as having the same integrity- but I think that has changed considerably now. In terms of written work, I don't write specifically, although in the past I have written journal articles.'

Some research projects that Peter has received funding for, was from the Welsh Arts Council. This was to visit, and interview, two ceramicists in Jordan. He carried out a comparative study of their practices and more over about their approaches to ceramics. From this work an article was written and published in Ceramic Review, an International Journal.

'I guess that in terms of research I think it is a valid contribution. One of the objectives of the University is to record research outcomes and this

means you have to be able to manage your time effectively. Sometimes it's difficult due to critical periods of the academic year that are more demanding, so planning ahead is vital. I think the research part is refreshing and has a valuable input into the taught programmes it makes them much more exciting.'

Perceptions of Institutional support for Research

At the University academics are allocated one day a week to carry out their research / practice. Although this is the allocation it is not often what happens.

'as mentioned you have to plan ahead, it can be difficult with a variety of events happening within the year, QAA, the student degree show, Internal subject reviews, HERA document, preparation of other paperwork etc., it all takes time, along with final year supervision and normal duties. One day a week isn't always suitable for everybody's type of project work.'

Peter works on various scales but when it is something on a large scale it requires a joined up period of time to carry out the work. If only one day a week was used it would take Peter seven weeks to carry out the piece of work, rather than the seven days needed and with ceramics that is just not viable. So accumulating the days into a concentrated period (for larger projects), is often needed so that is during the Christmas, Easter and Summer periods.

Within the University research is managed in an unstructured manner. In the past the University did have a Research Newsletter circulated, documenting some of the activities going on amongst staff but this no longer seems to happen.

'research active staff take on this role usually because they feel it is valuable; it is in addition to all other duties not instead of them.'

The expectation from the University is still there and still deemed important. At the time of the last RAE exercise at the University, the Research Professor coordinated research and it was felt, at the time, to be fairly organised. Now that this Professor has left, Peter has not heard of any organised activities within the Art and Design area. The University occasionally hold research forum events. Last year academic year there was an event to discuss research across the whole University and to encourage more people to engage in research and become research active along with suggesting people acquired PhD's

'I haven't heard of anything significant happening internally for art subjects.'

Outside of the University however there is more activity and support. There is the North West Art and Design Research Group that Peter is a member, unfortunately these meetings often fall on teaching days. They are an active group who organise conferences and forums for discussion about research.

'...specifically at the moment with the deadline of the RAE, there are lots of events being planned.'

Perceptions of relations between Learning and Teaching

Peter strongly believes that the relationship between learning and teaching with research cannot be separated. Art and design is an informed, linked process and research articulates that process. Using a variety of methods research is integrated into the learning and teaching practices. Getting visiting artist/practitioners to come in a talk about their own research methods and the development of their work is just one example.

'I link it in specifically by way of visiting speakers for example, practitioners I have met who I feel could bring new insight to the student experience. Students often benefit from seeing how others problem solve and evaluate their own ideas. Visiting speakers are selected so they can make a real contribution to the programme.'

Other ways of using research within the teaching and learning environment is with the methods that Peter uses when developing his own outputs. The three areas of importance to him are combining aesthetic, narrative, and issue based work.

'I get the students to explore similar themes of study, but don't lecture them about my work per se. With all project work that the students are engaged on I refer to relevant exhibitions or artists that they may research. Being research active enables me to be networking, meeting people who are contemporary and passing information on to the students via their study modules. I also think some students would expect staff to be engaged in their own areas or disciplines as a matter of course'

The position in which ceramics finds itself in, in the art-world if you like, is it being a functional, utilitarian object with a tradition and history of ceramics, and yet its being used as a vehicle in fine art, and that art/craft relationship.

Peter has various examples of projects that he has been involved in that link research with teaching and learning. One project that was funded by the Arts Council England developed from a simple research project, working with School children on an art project through to helping develop a postgraduate MA programme in Public Art.

'...the public art project allowed me to experience how grant awarding bodies operate (such as the Arts Council England), how health and safety (concerning sited artworks), plus Insurance of artworks is important. This has helped me in implementing and developing the MA programme and as part of the team – the overall structural side of the programme as it went through validations.'

Support for integrating Research with Learning and Teaching

Within the University there is no known support for the integration of teaching and learning to research. This is just seen as something that staff should do or not do, and work this out for themselves. There is informal peer support, but is unstructured and more about making your own contacts and there is nothing beyond that.

Outside of the university however there is a much greater network of peer support and organisation that are proactive in supporting such initiatives. The National Association of Ceramics in Higher Education is one such organisation. It is made up of all staff within Ceramics in the Higher Education sector.

'I am a member, I attend as many meetings as possible but again teaching and distance can be an issue- several meetings are held in London. They also organise exhibitions most recently- The Ceramic Contemporaries 4.'

For people within art and design the integration of research into teaching is something that happens informally. It is good to know other people in other universities and collaborations are really important, unfortunately often these opportunities just pass by with the teaching and administrative commitments that are required from the University life.

Reflections on the impact of research and dissemination

Reflection on research and its impact is something that does not often happen. Peter finds that more recently he has begun to return to projects, but the pressure of time often only allows for the work to actually be done rather than the time it takes to reflect.

'I've got to the stage where I am ready to embark on targeting galleries for solo shows – I've built up practical work that has a greater resolved feel to it; I'm more comfortable with it.'

Project evaluations, which are often the requirements for funded projects, contain an element of reflection. The Arts Council England project that Peter was involved with specifically required self evaluation of how the project had gone in terms of what had been learnt, what problems were overcome and a reflection of the whole process.

'This was helpful, although it meant additional paperwork though, I recognise it is important to reflect on completed projects. I find it helps to crystallise ones thoughts and perhaps informs the process for next time'

Some of the journal papers that Peter writes, about his practice or studies he has carried out discuss how well the outcome fitted with his initial concepts, but overall reflection requires additional time, and that is available.

Plans for continuing Research

Peter is very determined to continue and become more focused in his practice and research. Future projects are being developed with more trips to

Palestine and solo exhibitions planned for over the next two years. New research ideas, which have been influenced by the MA in Public Art, have inspired Peter to put funding proposals to the Arts Council, but also to get his art out into the public domain.

'Public art is exciting because it means being able to engage with the public outside of the traditional gallery setting. It can be less formal with different considerations. I would like to work in this area more in the future'

Peter's ceramics is his practice, his research and his teaching combined.

'I am going to continue research, possibly branch out more from ceramics at times, this could be digitally or using other materials in a sculptural way. You need time to think and reflect on your practice-how it could develop in the future. I rarely find time to do this in the University, but snatch quiet moments to consider present work or other directions.....'

Summary of Key Points

- Practitioner/Educator
- Research is always up for debate
- Balancing Practice with the university teaching and administrative requirements
- Art and Design is an informed, linked process and research articulates that process
- Need thinking time as well as practical time