



NW Network Group

Universities of Central Lancashire, Chester, Liverpool John Moores, 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

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Perceptions of Research and what it means to the interviewee

“Because as first and foremost as an artist, the term *research* is immediately dubious to me so I have to admit I don’t think in terms of *research* in a very direct way, I think in terms of my *work*. Exactly how then that is processed in terms of an academy or art school or a university and what is deemed research is not, in a funny way, up to me. I’m not research led in that sense.”

Dean found it very difficult to define ‘research’ although he made a clear distinction between ‘research’ and his own work while making a connection between ‘work’ and RAE returnable research which was decided by senior management.

“What research means to me is something I kind of abdicate responsibility from because somebody else decides. And in an interesting way, we had a staff training, a whole day last year I think it was, where we had various people discussing what research was – and we had actually one this year as well – and the strange sensation I got from it was, even if I had very strong idea about what research was, it wasn’t ultimately me that decided anyway, it was decided by a kind of far higher up kind of management like a professorial level. So, and I actually feel kind of okay with that.”

The University of Manchester use a new computer system to make the next RAE submission easier and Dean explained that this was helpful for staff to manage what they were doing and to make it visible. This system was managed by the Manchester Institute of Teaching and Research which every member of staff is part of – the head of which Dean trusts to define what is and what is not ‘research’.

“I suppose at the same time, research seems to be about finding *answers* to things and fundamentally art’s about asking questions so that’s automatically somewhere where there’s a kind of glitch but I guess also I’m not interested in academia in that sort of sense. I’m interested in the artist as a teacher but not the sort of fabric of the system so I have a less of an interest in finding out exactly what research is because it seems to fit like a model.”

“I’m quite happy to use the term ‘research’ in relation to students and to teaching because they’re in an academy.”

Dean noted that research in terms of students and teaching was vitally important for artists, especially so that students understand that Dean does things outside his teaching.

“I think most importantly actually they realise that I’m an artist and then perhaps the research *perhaps*, maybe, is a way of understanding the

art school as a system for questioning things. Then maybe *that* becomes a useful model to think about research. But it's important certainly that students, so although I do abdicate some responsibility and it's really left up to other people to decided *officially* – and I'm talking in terms of the RAE I suppose – but also it's important that the students understand that what I do as *work* but also as a teacher in an art school is research, I suppose, but it's not important that they understand the term 'research' but that I do it."

Perceptions of institutional support for research

As already noted, MMU use a sophisticated computer system to log staff's research output which is managed by the university senior management. Dean noted that it was enormously helpful.

"It's useful for me because not being the kind of, or being a technophobe rather, it's a way of me managing kind of data in sense of what things I've been doing and making them visible because also any kind of data that is put onto this system automatically is linked to a staff website."

Manchester Institute for Research in Art and Design (MIRIAD) manages the research. Each individual department – for example Fine Art or Textiles, have core staff to decide research funding up to a particular amount although Dean stressed that this was sometimes determined on the level of research productivity by the member of staff applying for funding or on how RAE returnable their research was.

There was an expectation to produce research and, more than this, Dean felt it was important that artists teach however, the economics of the situation suggest that university art schools should be teaching-led and MMU was going down a research orientated route.

"The question in a funny way is about whether – and specifically for me – whether Fine Art departments or Art and Design perhaps *should* be research led or whether they should be teaching led. I think they should always be, as often as possible for me, especially for Fine Art students – I wouldn't speak about any other areas because it's not my expertise or whatever – but I think they should always inherently be run by artists fundamentally. It was always important to *me* that I knew that this person who was sat the other side of the desk or in another part of the studio had a life outside of this and they were kind of actively contributing to something. But the more I think about it the most I think that particularly in the present situation that we should really be teaching led and not so much research led. But that's partly to do with the kind of economics of what's happened, in this *particular* university which economically we're losing space which I'm guessing is kind of *partly* because we're kind of... we're going down the research road. Now I guess if they go towards the teaching road, make better teaching

and learning environment then I'm guessing we wouldn't be in this kind of predicament now."

"I will always kind of be first and foremost an artist. It's difficult to say, I can't sort of separate the teaching and the work. It's the same sort of activity. Being an artist is very much about being a teacher too, I think. So for me it's... the expectation, yeah of course it's there and it should be but for me it kind of goes without saying."

Dean does not collaborate explicitly with any colleagues but he has worked with other artists from art school all over the world last year on the 'Lost In Translation' project in Istanbul (2005) and is planning to take students to Helsinki to do collaborative work there. He found this very valuable.

Dean reiterated the separation between 'research' and 'art' by noting that:

"The interesting thing about the idea of research in terms of artists, what may be good research may not be particularly interesting art fundamentally. It seems like a contradiction in terms. I guess it's how we talk about it, I suppose."

Perceptions of relations between Learning and Teaching

Most teaching is in seminar groups or one-to-one tutorials and almost completely concentrated on the student's work:

"I guess in both those situations, I try and teach towards something that we share. Whether that's an experience I've had and they haven't but they *might* have then that can be a useful, that's I guess an example where my research if we're to call it that, is visible."

There was a trend towards lectures as they gave the opportunity to reach greater numbers of students and students are now demanding market useful skills. Dean felt that with the changing economic climate he might be pushed towards giving more lectures but that one-to-one tutorials was his preferred method of teaching. Dean's teaching is geared towards 'development in an art school' as a place of experiment and development without social or economic constraints.

"The art school ideally is the place where one can test things away from any kind of social or economic structure... It's the place ideally – and I don't know if this place operates in this way or any art school operates in this way – it's the site where society in general limits its conception of what art can be. Ideally that's what it should be and ideally that's what I teach towards."

Students, Dean noted with regret, are now – and for economic reasons – demanding marketable skills and want to see how what they learn in an art school environment will map onto a career once they have left.

In Dean's opinion, the loss of teaching space to research indicates a trend of research effecting teaching and a fundamental misunderstanding of what an art school is.

"It's clear to me anyway, that we're losing space because research led culture, particularly in a university. But it also comes from not really understanding about what artists *do* really... And this idea of forcing the students outside when really we should be forcing them in [*Dean referred to a project which had the students going outside the art school to exhibit work*], to create. You know, they should be using the space to, I don't know, have a party or something or you know, whatever or anything that creates their... because their culture is not what's outside, it's already what's in here, it's how they kind of do whatever in here and I just think it's kind of misplaced to constantly force them out."

Dean did concede that change happens and that it was important for an art school to be adaptable. He went on to consider the issue of space alongside his own research:

"As an artist I don't particularly like the idea of going to a special place to make the work, it seems odd, to me. I don't like the pressure of have to think 'I am now going to start making the work'. Although that's what we tell the students they must have, it's important that they kind of experience that and then maybe they discard it later. But, you know, if I don't need it then maybe they don't too, maybe there's other ways we can kind of deal with it. I'm not so sure, I don't know. I'd still like us to have big empty rooms with people in or where people can use them."

Support for integrating research with Learning and Teaching

Dean indicated that he felt there was little help to integrate research into teaching and that events such as staff training days were unhelpful because they were more geared towards academics with written output.

"We have like a staff training day which have been kind of geared towards research but for me it's, because I have a fundamental distrust of research then it's pretty useless in a funny kind of way. I'm more interested in how an artist negotiates this sort of territory rather than how an academic negotiates that sort of territory."

Dean referred back to the 'Lost In Translation' project in Istanbul and the forthcoming Helsinki trip as being part of the support for his research. He added that there was little direct formal or informal support in research at a management level.

There was little direct peer support and there was a lack of a 'research culture' whether that means discussion and interesting work rather than 'good' research.

"I'm only interested in it if it's interesting work, fundamentally. I don't really care if it's 'good' research or not."

Dean had originally come to MMU as an artist and had only been an educator for a relatively short time (2003). Dean found the interview useful for working through his ideas about the relationship between research and teaching although he expressed a concern about becoming 'an academic' while also being interested in the idea of artist-as-teacher and is looking for academic leadership in these areas.

"Maybe part of *my* role is to discuss these things with everybody; with the students, with you [*referring to the interviewer/SNAS project members*], and with whoever, that's kind of part of... when I signed the contract it's equally about teaching, assessing and also about research – I've kind of already been picked for the game... So although all my 'oh I don't believe in research' I think at the same time I *have* to be involved because that's the system that this building uses and it's up to me to play with that."

Reflections on the impact of research and dissemination

Dean referred back to the idea of art school as experimental laboratory, suggesting that art students develop and understand what artists do best in this kind of environment:

"Seems to make sense because it's something that accommodates both the idea of questions *and* answers but preferably not answers, actually just more questions. And also has a very direct impact on how students learn *what* artists do and that has nothing to do with what kind of happens outside of here."

Dean felt that the interview itself was highly useful because it helped Dean work through and articulate these issues. Teaching and work are geared towards each other and directly affect each other. Students are a cross between artists and learners – if they only consider themselves artists, they tend to forget about the studying side of being students. Dean stressed how important he felt it was for students to be this combination of 'student' and 'artist'.

Dean noted that he teaches 'towards' something based on actual experience and to see 'the light go on in someone's head' and stressed that he was not interested in teaching a set of dogmas but interested rather in students' personal development and instructing a craft – not teaching a 'how' but a 'why'.

Dean was pleased with the research he has undertaken and would not have included it in the university's computer system otherwise although he noted that creativity sprang from dissatisfaction which what had preceded it.

Plans for continuing research

“I think I have a responsibility as long as I'm employed in a university to contribute to a research culture and to be... to try and make sense of everything. Because I still think, you know, that universities and art schools should fundamentally be places of battle really.”

Dean's artistic work or research is integral to his working life and he feels he has a responsibility to the university to continue with it although he explicitly disagrees with the idea that research 'implies an end'.

Summary of Key Issues

- Dean noted very specific differences between how he conceptualised 'research' when compared to his 'work'. Research was explicitly linked to the RAE and to his role as a university lecturer.
- Dean stressed that being an active artist was vitally important when teaching art students.
- Dean felt that the move towards more research dominated institutions and the current market demands by students could cause problems for art schools in the future.