



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

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Perceptions of research and what it means to the interviewee

Rory Turner is a photographer and programme leader for Fashion in the Department of Art and Design at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN).

“ The research interests I am engaged with at present stems from areas of investigation from when I was doing my MA in Fine Art. I was looking at notions of the tourist gaze.”

The MA was based on photographing old tourist edifices in the NW, particularly buildings with implicit links to the early period of Coco Chanel and Art Deco and how these were depicted through the tourist postcard. The notion of place, objects, memorabilia and the perceptions of these by the public was often moulded through the postcard. And it is the tradition of the tourist which underlies the development of the current research.

“I wanted to carry on my personal research because obviously my first interest is photography but I lecture in Fashion Promotion and photography is the key tool in how students actually realise and put forward their ideas.”

French commercial graphic advertising of the 1920's and 30's has inspired the next phase of research. Holidays in France had been an opportunity to view these images but on returning each time it became clear that these were deteriorating and disappearing.

“they were now fading and deteriorating but in that sort of light deterioration makes an object beautiful. The change over time unless people actually kept on repairing and repainting meant that these fantastic graphic images would disappear.”

The positioning of the advertising images on buildings fronting onto main roads made these the billboards of the time and the visual deterioration is

linked to the shift in focus of the companies who produced them and their perception of outdated imagery in the current market. Discussion with main advertisers had discovered that the images were no longer considered important.

“They didn’t see it as sort of a cultural heritage. The majority of them saw it as old fashioned and no longer relevant.”

This has resulted in compiling a record of these ‘ghost walls’, as a historical record, and to show the natural phenomena in images which have become beautiful objects through deterioration. The intention is to publish a book which will record this imagery and be a focus of publishable research recognised both within the University and externally.

Industrially sponsored research to investigate the use of PDA’s in Fashion is another arm of research which has had benefits for the department through sponsorship and collaborative working. This has proved particularly interesting as staff discovered that unless they led and drove the project very specifically through the subject areas there was no guarantee that the students used the technology creatively or a social tool.

Perceptions of individual support for research

Developing a research culture was kick started through a small research group formed in the Fashion area. This resulted in the production of a small journal called “Absorb” which outlined and presented the visualisation of the research interests of staff which ranged widely within the visual arts.

UCLAN require all staff to be research active. Key changes in the department include the appointment of a Professor of Contemporary Art whose brief include establishing a research culture and defining the research outputs of staff. Another focus for this role is to shift the balance of research into the design disciplines from its more historical focus in the arts.

More recently a research Professor for Fashion has been appointed with a specific role to look at funding opportunities to support personal research in a supportive research culture. Starting with research active staff, supporting them in applying for external funding to continue existing research or develop new research proposals. This has meant that the research activity of staff has become less of a group activity and moved towards individual projects. UCLAN require all staff to be research active and this is in part the rationale for the appointment and to create an impetus to drive research forward.

The link between teaching and research is not yet explicitly articulated in the department as the research professor's role is fairly recent and the prime aim is to get staff research active in their own area of interest which is very varied and split between academic and visual research.

Financial support through successful application to Hewlett Packard to investigate the use of PDA technology in Fashion has enabled a collaborative project with another department in the university. The different skills of these groups of students resulted in a successful project and professional outcomes which have been reported back to the sponsors with a view to informing the future market for the technology. The findings were also shared at a national conference. The longer term benefit has been the development of inter-departmental relationships.

Perceptions of relations between learning and teaching

Previously awarded UCLAN's Harris Award for Innovative curriculum development the link between the research and teaching was made explicit during the interview. Fashion students realise their ideas for fashion promotion through photography and are taught photography at UCLAN from the beginning of their course. The output from photos is prime evidence gathering for promotion.

“For example, I am a photographer and my research inspires me and leads into my teaching which is how it fits around the course.”

As a working photographer the development of personal practice over time has enabled him to show students how photography and fashion can be used in fashion promotion.

“ One of the things we look at is how photographers practice. We go back historically and how the work I do could quite easily be turned into fashion promotion, there is an image out there that can promote a variety of professional objects.”

An example of a particularly successful teaching and learning approach with students is based on his approach to personal research where students recreate a definitive style of fashion photography based on the work of well known fashion photographers and take the idea through to exhibition outcome.

The interdepartmental project meant recognising that staff and students come with different skills but combining the two diverse subject areas and skill sets enabled the development of a successful project and a better understanding of methodologies linked to pedagogy in different subject areas. The outcomes of this research has had a direct input into the teaching on the course and future curriculum development. Research in the context of the actual teaching and learning experience was found to be very different to that of personal research. Students had to be driven in the early stages and staff and student perceptions of the subject areas had to be broken down in order to make the project work. As the project developed the inter-departmental relationships became mutually supportive and opportunities were taken to develop new skills alongside a humorous social interaction.

His personal research based on image gathering which feeds into his teaching and is managed within the frameworks for teaching and learning pedagogy in the department. Within the faculty there is a learning and teaching co-ordinator who leads initiatives in developing curriculum. New staff, who represent a broad age profile, are mentored by a senior member of

staff and have access to other departmental and institutional support so that there is clarity about their contribution into teaching. Peer observation of teaching, appraisal and shared course team meetings enable the sharing of good practice which crosses the boundaries of teaching, learning and research. The appraisal process helps to identify courses which staff would benefit from in relation to teaching and learning. New staff have to undertake the University's PG certificate and the university's Learning Development Unit (LDU) is pro-active in response to need as well as providing centrally run events.

Support for integrating research with learning and teaching

Support was defined as both internal and external. The link with the subject association for fashion and textiles is a forum for sharing research linked explicitly to learning and teaching in the subject .

Opportunities for discussion about research activity exist at a departmental level with the professor for contemporary art and at subject level with the professor in fashion. Funding for travel linked to research is available in the faculty and research grants can be applied for from the university but is not perceived as successful in the design disciplines.

“My experience in this sector is that fine artists are the ones that create cluster groups quickly because the tradition of what you do after you leave university was different than for designers. I think it is really important that the design disciplines actually start showing the balance of where the research is taking place. I think there is a little bit of, not resentment, but a need for the University to see design as a serious subject.”

One example of where perceptions had been changed was where a young researcher in textiles involved the science subject area in that research and the link proved a turning point for the scientists in viewing their own research alongside research in a visual area.

Support through time to undertake research is negotiated with the head of department and this is flexible but must be quantified and be of benefit to the department and the university. The level of research (e.g PhD) can be a factor in how much time is allowed. Successful applications for funding can be used to buy time out to undertake the research. The appointment of the new professor in fashion is viewed as key in supporting staff to access funding to enable the release of teaching to undertake research formally.

Reflection on the impact of research and dissemination

The passion, pleasure and importance of personal research recognition both within and without the university was defined as being of prime importance in pursuing research goals which are measurable. The lack of recognition for the seriousness of visual research is viewed as the main stumbling block in pursuing these aims.

“unless you are very committed you need that push to do your own research, it gets students going and they like to see their tutors’ work. It keeps them interested in that they are being taught by people that not only talk but also do as well.”

Personal research is key to teaching and the passion for this research and its dissemination underpinned the whole interview.

Plans for continuing research

A commitment and determination to continue with the French project and take it to publication, the success of which will determine future development.

Summary of key issues

- The link between personal research and study for higher qualifications
- The embedding of personal research into teaching and learning through pedagogic approaches used in the department
- Staff driving externally funded industry linked projects to ensure appropriateness of outcomes using new technology

- University developing a culture which requires staff to be research active
- shifting the balance of research from traditional Fine Art activity into Design disciplines
- Move from original group activity to individual research projects
- Collaborative research activity breaking down perceptions about other subject areas
- Key role of Learning Development Unit (LDU) in supporting staff
- Subject association links important as part of disseminating research
- Research time, funding for travel and conferences agreed with Head of Department and linked to quantified outcomes which benefit the department
- Appointments of Professor of Research in Fashion and Research Professor in contemporary Art are key to driving research agenda forward.