Finding a Voice - Having a Vision – Making a Space: metaphor and reality in artistic research

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Biography:

Frank Millward explores the intersection between fine art, music and theatre making, and how technology is making the arts fertile ground for artistic research. An accomplished composer, multimedia artist, teacher and academic, Millward makes visual art and connects it with sound. His research focuses on the way technology has transformed possibilities for interactive performance, and how an interdisciplinary approach can lead to the creation of new knowledge.

Abstract:

This paper considers how metaphors, such as those used in the title of this work, are shaping university approaches to artistic research in a deregulated educational environment. This idea is explored through lexicons developed around 'finding' and developing an 'original voice' when adding to new knowledge in undertaking a research higher degree. Terms such 'creativity' and 'innovation' are being made interchangeable as research outcomes are assessed in terms of their economic value. The discussion looks at business models used in the development of commercial concepts and products and how these are being translated to apply to artistic research. A start-up practice commonly used is to 'get the product / concept out there' even if 'under done' in order to see who is interested or if the product / concept can be developed in user experience feedback scenarios. This resonates with the idea of 'perpetual beta', extending and interacting in collaborative engagement with various communities. The testing and feedback process, which includes 'like / not like' with comment trail, are now part of a developing research with social media consultation process. How are such models impacting on artistic practice-based research? Where is the position of the 'original voice' within such narratives and how are the outcomes of artistic research to be judged when work is developed within such frameworks? What are the wider political implications for the position of creative arts research, the claim to new knowledge and the fundamental relationship that artistic practices have with specialist and non-specialist communities and the idea of 'perpetual beta'?

Keywords: creative practice; artistic research; innovation; having a vision; metaphor; 'perpetual beta

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Finding a Voice

'Finding a voice' is a concept often used to describe the maturation of an individual's creative identity, similarly to 'the emerging voice', of the writer, the composer, the artist or performer where a body of creative work, presents as a quality of identity and individuality. The 'finding' being a process that sits parallel to identifying qualities of originality, inventing, searching and re-searching, which translates into making a contribution to new knowledge.

At the center of this metaphor is an association with the idea of the voice having uniqueness, originality, and adding to new knowledge specifically relevant as 'finding an *original* voice'. This resonates with how qualities of originality and the contribution to knowledge are defined in terms of doctoral practice-based research.

> In a doctoral thesis, claims of originality and contribution to knowledge may be demonstrated through creative outcomes … Whilst the significance and context of the claims are described in words, a full understanding can only be obtained with direct reference to the outcomes. (Candy, 2006)

With the technological disruption of higher education value chains, the commercialization of university degrees (UK 2012/2013) and the rise of the private provider in the tertiary education sector, the traditional university student experience and the pedagogies that shape student learning have been subjected to many pressures for change. New technologies now provide students with various forms of mobility including blended and online learning. As well, many now look more thoroughly at the 'return on investment' when considering career options in a deregulated educational landscape. Will a degree program at a university return a starting salary on graduation commensurate with the investment made in fees charged for completing the degree?

Technologies are being used to develop student experience options as higher education works to find business models and pedagogies to update face to face and lecture with tutorial based delivery forms. Considerations of how research training is conducted and the processes and pedagogies that facilitate student learning in collaborative environments are evolving.

Collaborative models for the generation of ideas as developed by corporations such as IBM, Apple and Microsoft, are being explored in learning and research environments. iLabs, Incubators, Sandpits, interactive environments and the like, are now used as pedagogical components for

students undertaking awards in many discipline areas including art, design and the performing arts. Student researchers are being prompted and encouraged to produce creative outcomes that align with industry in more economically meaningfully ways. While this is not a new state of affairs, the disruption to 'long learning' cycles and the 'emerging voice' are being remodeled to support outcomes that respond to market needs and wants, within quick flexible turnaround times.

Artistic research in the academy is now taking place in changing environments. Creative outcomes and their value are being assessed in and beyond the academy. Ideologies associated with Creative Arts education such as aesthetic considerations in the production, dissemination and development of content is being reconfigured. These new environs include extended digital networks involving communities in the public arena and those engaged with social, professional and special interest networks. The value, aesthetic and viability of research being tested to include, 'like', 'not like' or interactive 'comment' trails of evaluation.

What questions arise where research is conducted using such extended interactive feedback models in devising, developing and exhibiting practice-based research outcomes? Where does this sit in relation to 'originality' and the training of the researcher in supporting the process of 'finding an original voice'?

Innovation and Risk

The relationship between innovation and creativity is managed in the market place by vetting competing ideas, some go forward to be produced as prototypes then tested by consumers through user experience feedback.

> Creativity is rarely from the isolated individual but rather it is the product of three shaping forces. These forces are a set of social institutions or the *field*, a cultural *domain* that is determined by generations and the *individual* that may change the field in which he or she is creative. (Charyton, 2015)

This structuralized approach has been used as a business model where *field, domain* and *individual* converge as collaborative process in the farming and framing of ideas. Creativity collapses into innovation as the individual becomes part of a larger field within a defined domain. This design takes the most economically viable idea to market 'before it has been fully proven technically in all respects' (Levitt, 1986). This practice is sometimes known as 'perpetual beta', to 'Engage your users as real-time testers, and instrument the service so that you know how people use the new features' (O'Reilly, 2005).

The structural design of such 'innovation cultures' is to 'manage and minimize risk', to produce best return on investment (Rayner, 2016). In terms of user-led feedback, this could be considered as outsourcing the reflexive component of the research process and extending interaction to collaborative engagement with audiences and communities. In networked terms this may include many types of quantitative and qualitative factors from student clusters engaged in research training within the academy and include the 'like', 'not like' scenario involving industries and other networked cohorts.

The significance of 'manage and minimize risk' is important here. Where the experimental nature of artistic research is central, this approach will compromise the outcome, particularly relevant in instances where provocation or political comment is embedded into the outcome.

Within the artistic research culture the idea of creativity and innovation extends beyond the boundaries of user experience and incremental product development and improvement. Artistic research includes ways of thinking, of understanding, of insights that shed light onto philosophical positions to do with the production of new knowledge. It may involve structuring and designing skills that may or may not be considered to be useful in the market place or to the 'art' consumer. Many notable artistic works are premised on provocations that critique the market.

> In the modern era what constitutes an innovation has also become clouded by the myths around the 'race to individual discovery' in science, or the retelling of highly unusual 'digital business breakthrough' stories. Yet in academic research almost all work is actually collective and incremental. (Dunleavy, 2015)

The important issue here is about the assignment of value to the creative output. Impact measurement is now being used to make such evaluations. Within the current environment of technological disruption, value is more easily calculated within the short-term economic benefit cycle. The long learning cycles and the impact of the 'emerging voice' is not as easily calculable because artistic research is not always appreciated until time has been given to appreciate the complex cultural and economic nature of its impact.

When feedback from audience networks outside the academy influences the development of ideas and artistic research-in-progress, the student researcher involved in 'finding a voice' is challenged to explain and validate the direction of the work being undertaken. Such dialogues set up complex and at times chaotic voice 'finding' narratives. At best, the uncovering of new ideas and knowledge, at worst it produces research outcomes that are tempered by populist acclamation or adopts an approach to manage and minimize risk.

Creativity

At the heart of *Creative Nation* (APO, 1994) *and* the *National Science and Innovation Agenda* policy positions is a discourse around the idea of creativity, skills development, economic and cultural growth and wellbeing. *Creative Nation* and the *National Innovation and Science Agenda* focus in part, on science, culture and innovation coupled with improving connectivity between university research and industry, to produce research outcomes that service the needs of industry and the economy and look ahead to solving the big problems that face the world.

> Numerous researchers and scholars also conclude that fostering creativity and innovation is the responsibility of organizational leadership, and a mark of successful leadership. From this standpoint, creativity lies in the intersection between group / organizational dynamics and individual behavior, not least leadership behavior. (Karaman, Kök et al., 2008)

Underpinning this line of corporate thinking is the assumption that creativity applied as innovation will drive economic prosperity. Leadership will be given in the form of an 'organizational dynamic' that enunciates a set of strategies and plans, that when applied to the production and realization of ideas, produces outcomes in the form of processes, goods and services to create economic prosperity.

There are certain tensions within this framework that vacillate between extremes on a spectrum. At one end is the idea of 'genesis' or 'creation', at the other end, is the idea that creativity is a structural process in a continually evolving state.

> Creativity and innovation often generate creative conflict. There are two ways to solve creative conflict. One is to forsake vision and forgo creativity or innovation, a certain recipe for demoralization and failure. The second method is to harmonize present organizational reality with vision, through efforts to focus on difficulties to be overcome rather than problems per se. (Karaman, Kök et al., 2008)

And herein lies the challenge for the artistic researcher (and supervisor or mentor) in 'finding an *original* voice'. The previous thoughts may suggest a reconciliation of the 'voice' metaphor with the idea of harmonizing 'present organizational reality with vision', to draw the collective attention to 'difficulties to be overcome rather than problems per se'. The idea of 'vision' sits as a contemporary metaphor that chimes with the idea of corporate leadership, where 'fostering creativity and innovation is the responsibility of organizational leadership'.

This construct involves having and realizing a 'vision' by nominating a set of goals and values that unite the creative efforts of the work force toward the collective realization of outcomes that

produce economic growth and development. 'Vision requires that strategic planning be in conformity with actual and emergent organizational goals' (Karaman, Kök et al., 2008). Within the corporation the 'voice' is seen as collective. The metaphor 'singing from the same hymn sheet' resonates loudly here.

> Therefore if one wants to emphasize voice or to use the example of voice to represent discourse, one must swim against the tide of the dominant visual metaphor and emphasize a sound metaphor. (Elbow and Burk, 1994)

In the world of artistic research there are many collective visionary based scenarios that explore ideologies or forms of representation for the making of meaning; Dada; Bauhaus; Fluxus to name but a few. These forums investigate creative ideas and their expression within philosophical, ideological and theoretical contexts and were, in their initial iterations, disruptive. They provoked and produced new modes of expression, conceptual thinking and community engagement. This was achieved within a collective context but not at the expense of homogenizing the individual's contribution, but conversely by giving opportunity to the individual in 'finding an *original* voice'.

Having a Vision

The use of the term 'having a vision' has a long history. The metaphor brings with it gravitas and a sanctification that is buried in the Christian psyche through narratives such as that of Moses who leads his people out of Egypt to the promise land. (Keren, 1988)

The corporate application of the 'vision' metaphor associates an organizational model with the realization of successful economic outcomes. With the commercialization of the University sector and the changes brought about in funding processes, Universities and educational institutions have been adopting corporate business models that equate strategic and corporate planning with 'having a vision', aligning mission with strategic planning.

> Universities are tasked to educate and undertake research for the public good. Industry seeks to use R&D to generate commercially valuable products and services through invention and commercialization. The two do not always find engagement easy.
> (Mazzarol, 2014)

Institutions of higher learning are facing the dilemma between servicing the 'public good' and sustaining their own commercial viability. Students are engaging with creative practice-based research where there are blurred lines between producing a creative output and working to produce economic value within an 'industry' context?

Rampersad's Flinders University research titled *Perceptions of Creativity in University-Industry Partnerships* brought forward some interesting views from students participating in work integrated learning projects. While this research was limited in its scope it does provide some interesting feedback about students of STEM disciplines involved in creative, collaborative interdisciplinary projects. The research was carried out with students across the following disciplines: IT/Innovation, Software Engineering, Marine Biology, Computer Science, Electronic Engineering and Biotechnology. Student views reflected the following insights:

> There appears to be a convergence of the concepts of creativity and innovation … second generation perspectives of creativity are shared by both employers and students … students commonly held that creativity represents a set of skills and capacities that can be learned, taught, and assessed that it is generalizable across disciplines, and that is a collaborative, context-specific process. (Rampersad, 2014)

This study is an example of how the 'convergence of the concepts of creativity and innovation' is being perceived by 'second generation perspectives of creativity'. Creativity with innovation may be considered to be 'a set of skills and capacities that can be learned', indeed it can and in these circumstances is effective for addressing industry and economic needs.

The question to be explored however is about how to resolve the tensions between the original individual idea and the production of ideas that align with corporate educational research strategies that seek to specifically service the needs and wants of industry. More investigations are needed to understand the nature and influence of environments where the production of creative outputs falls outside the realm of brief driven projects that service particular industry needs or problems to be solved.

Making a Space

Sustaining creative environments where longer learning cycles such as 'finding a voice' are maintained is becoming compromised in a university sector starting to be more driven by market values and return on investment than 'servicing the public good'. Again, the central issue here is about value and its perception. In the book 'Hypercapitalism: language, new media and social perceptions of value' Graham argues that 'we need to understand how conceptions of value have changed, and how these changes are related to new mediation processes'. He goes on to argue that

> The widely heralded emergence of a knowledge economy indicates that more intimate aspects of human activity have become exposed to commodification on a massive scale, specifically, activities associated with thought, language, and social relatedness.

> Correspondingly, more abstract forms of value have developed as the products of thinking and meaning have become dominant sources of commodities. (Graham, 2006)

How should the Academy assign value to artistic research? Where is there an identifiable value for 'finding a voice' once noted as distinctive, but now itself become subject to the judgmental scrutiny of competing voices and the drive for the short return cycle of ideas trialed through user experience feedback.

> The cultural policies founded substantially on fiscal objectives are problematic because the conditions for culturally sustainable development must also encompass community demands for nonmaterial wellbeing, intergenerational equity and the interdependence of economic and cultural values. (Marinova and Borza, 2013)

Within this unsettled transitional phase there is a need to 'make a space' where value is identified in the creative outcomes of artistic research. The value of artistic research is made apparent when it has 'impact' and when the interdependence of economic and cultural value is understood as value adding. 'Impact' now being the metric used for evaluating research outcomes and for providing a basis upon which to ascribe economic, social and cultural value.

Research is needed into the ways in which effective translation can be facilitated between these various value systems. Commentary is required to demonstrate how artistic research has value and how that value has profound impact on our educational, social and cultural wellbeing. We must more effectively explore the issue of how to apply and engage with technologies that make for fluencies within the digital, its languages, interfaces and interactive processes in the making of meaning.

There is good reason for artistic research itself to 'have a voice' by:
– facilitating contexts where meaningfulness is translated and brought together across voices, visions and spaces;
– transitioning the skills of traditional artistic research practices into the networked world in ways that meaningfully present value and engagement with audiences in a post studio, post gallery, virtual converged with real future world;
– understanding the importance of everything is everywhere as exhibiting space, as this opens up the ways for valuing creative practices through the interdependent of communities, cultures and economies.

What is of central importance is that ideas are allowed to germinate and grow without the overriding obligation of being linked or in the service of commercial outcomes in balancing

economic wellbeing with creative and aesthetic successfulness. It is crucial that we invent and provide spaces where ideas can be 'shared, mutilated, reconstructed, applied and reapplied' (Buckley, 2103). Spaces where collaborative models manage organizations and individuals within a diverse range of expressive media, and where collaboration is to the mutual benefit of individuals and collectives alike.

These include conceptual spaces where art, science, culture and economy together address the complex nature of creativity by operating simultaneously with, within and without commercial prerogatives. This is an important part of understanding the interdependent value relationships that underpin creative endeavor in a profit and not-for-profit world. Technology should be designed, adapted and exploited to broker understandings about our creative, physical and intellectual wellbeing across a range of value relationship that artistic research and practices bring into being in the facilitation of healthy communities, cultures and economies.

The world will always be analogue and languages that are used to describe it will always need to be translated between modes of operation, brought about by technologies that instigate changes in value systems. Now is the time for the rendering of refinements in translation and gives appreciation to what is known to be of value for cultural, social and economic wellbeing.

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