

## **University of Hertfordshire**

### **Michael Biggs and Daniela Büchler**

#### **Postscript**

Biographical notes:

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From the outset we would like to thank the editors for the opportunity to participate in this special issue of *TEXT*. It was interesting to see our work cited in the call for papers because we realized this was going to give us a view of how our work is received in our community. But at the same time as being stimulated by the prospect, we could also see that the particular passage cited in the call could sound somewhat pessimistic. The call quoted our claim that ‘although these actions conform to the conventions of academic research, they do not result in a significant research activity’. We were slightly shocked by how negative that sounded, read cold like that, and realized that it may be interpreted as disdaining the artistic research that is produced worldwide. That is absolutely not our feeling! We would therefore like to start off on a penitential note and elaborate on what we mean by ‘not result in a significant research activity’. We do not intend to imply that the artistic research that is produced by the community is *insignificant* but rather that, although being undeniably research owing to it ‘conforming to the conventions of academic research’, the outcomes are not *impactful* for artists. The reason we claim that the academic research that is produced by the artist community is not impactful is because it does not conform to their community values, and therefore risks not producing anything that is relevant or important to them.

This clarification of a potential misunderstanding of our concept of ‘lack of significance’ also reveals another aspect, which is a consequence of problem analysis. If the ‘problem’ to be addressed by PLR is understood as a matter of institutional management, then a response that elaborates on the role of practice in academic research is not significant. We are currently working on a book in which we conceptualize this perspective on what is the issue that PLR addresses, as a ‘position’ on arts research in the academic context. This ‘positional approach’ arose when, in the process of preparing for the book, we revisited our own work that we had produced over the last 10 years and reflected on what appeared to be some, shall we call them, shifts in philosophy (discrepancies? inconsistencies? contradictions?) along the way. Although we could politely describe these as ‘changes of heart’, ‘corrections’, ‘disclaimers’, ‘bouts of schizophrenia’, we recognized that each piece actually presented an inner consistency which suggested that while different to one another, each work was making a coherent case but for radically different claims. We decided that what we had in fact done over the years was respond to issues about research in the arts by resorting to a series of different agents, resources and systems that would define the position within which that issue was meaningful and would produce a significant response. Thus, we concluded, we had over the years adopted a series of different positions within which each had its persistent concerns, requiring different methods and resources leading to different outcomes and understandings.

Positional diversity is to be found throughout the contemporary debate and discussions on research in the arts worldwide. The articles in this special *Beyond practice-led research* issue display a similar positional diversity – both in terms of themes and interpretations – that we originally identified in our own work and which led us to devise a critical framework for understanding to which position each work provided a response. The framework consists of four specific positions: a politico-economic position, a logico-deductive position, an empirico-pragmatic position and a

socio-cultural position. In the remainder of this article we will introduce each of the four positions and reflect on the articles in the present journal issue in terms of these.

Our interest in identifying the position within which a discussion is meaningful and significant lies in understanding to what the response is providing an answer and what it is not attempting to resolve. In this sense, we use the concept of ‘position’ to describe an explanatory framework for the production of research in the arts and as a means of demonstrating the relationships between beliefs and coherent research actions, in order to reveal the relevant issues and debates as seen from within each. Values and beliefs belong to an individual’s psychology and are not easily changed; however, they also inform a sociological system in which groups of individuals act in relation to one another within a community. This accounts for the significance of responses to certain issues for certain groups, i.e. within certain positions. Each position emerges according to a community’s claims about, and production of, research in the arts. Using this positional analytical approach, we are able to address the meaningfulness and significance of questions and issues that have been variously dealt with over the last 25 years, as Magee rightly points out in his Introduction.

So there is a vast production of research and discussion on the foundations and practicalities of research in the arts, including practice-led research. However, McNamara complains of the lack of consensus and consequently the apparent inability of the community to close down these issues. This difference in perception of the situation, i.e. as there being a vast body of work on the subject and there being no conclusive material with which to work, we attribute to the fact that each issue and concern is argued from within a specific position, necessarily foregrounding certain agents and aspects, and pushing others into the background. It may therefore seem, for example, that when considering the role of institutional regulations for practice-led research production, the epistemological basis of research in the arts is overlooked. This is however not the case because, since neither a position-independent theory nor a theory-of-all-things-practice-led is possible, what happens is that conclusions arising in one position do not put to bed the concerns in another.

Our positional analytical approach allows us to understand the diversity of approaches to what could constitute research in the arts and where the contribution of this kind of research might lie. It enables us to present the contemporary situation of the arts in the university sector, and to understand the history of structured arts education and the milestones in formalizing what was formerly a studio-based training. In our approach, one position is not superior to another nor do they necessarily emerge sequentially with one replacing another. In the contemporary debate one can identify responses coming from all four of these positions, which are significant to different groups within the field of contemporary art research. Similar to Brook’s four critiques, the four positions we propose are mutually exclusive – this further accounts for the impossibility of a single response and therefore the impression of inconclusiveness of the debates. Although all the concepts in all the positions are visible and have meaning, within one position certain meaningful concepts stand out as significant whereas others, because they are not foregrounded as mentioned above, lack significance. Consequently, if one is focusing on a given framing of the issue, thereby being within what we call a position, so the understandings and factors that are

important and impactful in another position are not in focus. However, a position does not argue for issues (as would a critique) but describes them, identifying what is foregrounded in the response. As a result, our approach possesses an ethnographic design.

We will start by describing a politico-economic position. In this position the questions that emerge as being relevant ask about the role of national norms, institutional hegemony and economic incentives towards research. The focus is on the institutional context of the entry of the arts into the university sector. Relevant terminology to describe this position includes: regulations, rules, norms, requirements, performance, assessment, accreditation, awarding bodies, management. The analysis of the situation from within this position takes a political stance and considers the academicization of vocational areas. A defining characteristic of this position is the understanding that research is produced ultimately in response to educational policy, regardless of subject/disciplinary differences. Both introductions, by Magee and Brook respectively, make mention of *realpolitik*, which in conjunction with theoretical understandings of how institutionalized systems work, circumscribe the politico-economic position very effectively. Webb's description of Bourdieu's theory also falls within the remit of this position because central to his sociological system is the agency of external political constraints on the internal dynamics of the field, both of education and of the arts. In this position, the discussion of what would constitute research in the arts falls away in favour of organizational management and discussions of how conditions are created for an activity (in this case the arts in academia) to make an economic contribution. Strange's Marxist critique, and the giving of agency to the organization as an organism, is also an indicator of a politico-economic position.

Alternatively, within a logico-deductive position, research in the arts is regarded as a set of actions that contribute to well-established or dominant academic paradigms, stereotypically the scientific model of research. In this position, it becomes relevant to discuss the foundations of the traditional structure of academic research and what art can contribute to it without altering it. Relevant terminology to describe this position includes: fundamental, essential, hegemonic, necessary, sufficient, constituting, criteria, *Wissenschaften*. The analysis of the situation from within this position takes an ontological stance in order to identify the defining characteristics of academic research in any discipline, including both science and art equally. A defining characteristic of this position is the understanding that the same rules apply for all university subjects and research in the arts does not present a special case. We feel that McNamara's rules reveal an acceptance of the central role of traditional academic research in helping to incorporate the arts in the context of higher education research. Holmes, lamenting the difficulty that personal experience brings to academic research, also indicates an understanding that there is a dominant structure of what is research and that that model requires control or compensation for concepts that do not fit. The concepts of 'experience' and the 'I' of subjectivity are examples of such problems.

In an empirico-pragmatic position one identifies the practical attempts at producing research in the arts. Notions of 'alternative' and 'hybrid' paradigms, as opposed to

‘dominant’ paradigms, become more relevant to the debates in this position. The focus is on the actual production of research by the artist community that entered the contemporary university context in recent decades, thereby altering the dominant hegemony. Relevant terminology to describe this position includes: compensatory, efficient, appropriate, strategy, negotiation. The analysis of the situation from within this position takes an epistemological stance in order to identify the fundamental core of arts research, by observing the practical results of artists producing research outputs in an academic context. A defining characteristic of this position is the understanding that there is a need for subject-specific conditions for the production of arts research. When Holmes proposes a strategy for validating experience and making it work, the author is contributing to this position by enabling PLR to be recognized as academic research in its own right, without having to resort to a mere contribution to the dominant system that is upheld in the logico-deductive position, for example. In Messer, the suggestion is made that PLR is interdisciplinary and the author does a good job of identifying various solutions for the production of PLR in the academic context. That part of Messer’s article seems to us an empirico-pragmatic position because it responds to the actual lived situation of the arts in academia. The empirico-pragmatic position frequently employs collaborations and contributions across disciplinary boundaries and constructs ways of producing research that respond to a new interpretation of what traditional research is trying to achieve. It brings to these collaborations new skills, techniques and concepts that are made available to interdisciplinary research through the incorporation of the arts.

In a socio-cultural position, the focus is on the individuals and the communities that they form around common values and beliefs. Relevant terminology to describe this position includes: convention, satisfaction, new, authentic, emergence. The analysis of the situation from within this position takes a cultural stance in order to describe the meaningful relationship that exists between values and actions, and that defines a community. A defining characteristic of this position is the understanding that a research model/paradigm is not to be created for the arts but emerges authentically from the artist-researcher community, as a consequence of the entry of the arts into the university context. In contrast with the empirico-pragmatic position, in a socio-cultural position practice-led research methods do not have to be argued for – because they exist and are accepted by the community, they therefore are accepted as valid. Employing these methods leads to outcomes that are significant for the community and result in satisfying responses to questions. According to this position, PLR is done and not defended, therefore De Kline’s use of creative writing as a critique, in which the form of the delivery is the criticism, supplies us with a good example. As an ethnographer, all that De Kline describes about the lived experience of fieldwork becomes not only observation but also critique. De Kline engages with the subjectivity that one can find in any area as we also see in Holmes’ use of the notion of ‘desire’. However, as Hecq exemplifies, this socio-cultural position is not just about doing rather than explaining, ‘creating data rather than recording data’; but rather, it is a critical position which focuses on analyzing the lived experience from within, focuses on an analysis that is immersed in the doing. Once again, distinct from the empirico-pragmatic position (in which recognized research models and methods are adapted pragmatically in order to incorporate or better serve art), in this socio-

cultural position, the research methods are essentially those art practice-led ones that enable criticism.

We have used the positions to describe what is relevant to be asked *about* research in the arts, but what does the existence of diverse positions mean for arts research *itself*? We suggested that, with regard to the debates about research in the arts, the meaningfulness, that is to say the fact that researchers can understand but do not value the actions of the other, can result in debates about research that are inconclusive. Regarding arts research, whilst actors in one network can see the meaning of what other actors in other networks are doing, the results of the latter are insignificant to the former. We have claimed that what appears to be happening at any one time in research can be observed from any one of our four positions. From within a given position, certain factors are seen as having agency in the process of research and the physical and intellectual environment in which it is conducted. From within another position, the apparent agents are different, resulting in different views of what resources are available, what constitutes relevant research questions, and what is needed to generate significant responses or solutions to these questions. The combination of these two factors accounts both for the diversity in the production of research in the arts as well as for the apparent lack of consensus.