

The emergence of new subjectivities in Knowledge Exchange practices

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This paper suggests that reconfigured subjectivities are emerging from the process of managing Knowledge Exchange (KE). The paper considers my experience as a Knowledge Exchange Fellow for REACT, one of the Arts and Humanities Research Council's four KE Hubs for the Creative Economy. REACT brokers knowledge exchange between arts and humanities academics and businesses in the creative sector. I argue that we can understand the shifting political discourses of creativity, knowledge and labour by considering the kinds of subjectivity required to work in knowledge exchange.

Keywords (3 max): creative subjectivities, knowledge exchange, governmentality

Introduction

This paper is about creative labour in managing knowledge exchange (KE) between arts and humanities research in academia, and the creative economy. It proceeds in three parts. The first outlines the field of arts and humanities KE. The second considers a political intervention made in this field, namely the REACT Hub in Bristol. Finally, it considers how this intervention can be used to show how new subject positions and subjectivities are emerging in this field.

Knowledge Exchange in the arts and humanities

Knowledge Exchange between arts and humanities disciplines and creative work does not neatly map onto these models of knowledge exchange associated with STEM subjects. This is arguably because often the knowledge that emerges from this field of research is constituted as tacit, subjective or cultural and lends itself to scholarly outputs such as journals, books, teaching or working with cultural institutions in more straightforward capacities. So, although culturally invaluable, it is not always clear how these skills can be exploited in the economy in the same way in which scientific discoveries are.

Making interventions in this space is a strategic interest to a number of cultural bodies including Creative England (Channer et al., 2013), the Technology Strategy Board (TSB, 2009), Arts Council England and NESTA (as exemplified by their Digital R&D Fund for the Arts) and the HEI sector itself (PACEC, 2012). The broad discourse of KE in this field asserts that skills and knowledge reside in culturally focused research that can be leveraged to promote innovation in the creative sector.

The cultural field of Arts and Humanities research has been constructed in knowledge exchange policies and elsewhere (Crossick, 2006) as having fundamental, if unclear relationships with contemporary economic and social activities. The Centre for Business Research (CBR) in their report for the AHRC, 'Hidden Connections' (Hughes et al., 2011) attempts to quantify and qualify the types of work undertaken by arts and humanities academics in knowledge exchange (Hughes et al., 2011). The presence of impact as a political concept is visible in contemporary HEIs is one aspect of how and why KE is expected to be performed. The evaluative systems put in place to monitor performance within the HE sector, which includes measuring public impact as well as academic output, have been the source of much debate in the HEI sector (Välilmaa and Hoffman, 2008, Kenway et al., 2004).

The reconfiguration, or evolution, of impact discourse to produce value via KE underpins REACT. The Hughes et al. (2011) paper recognises that there are a range of motivations for knowledge exchange in the arts and humanities that extend beyond only financial gain. These include effecting social change, improving education and cultural understanding. The report also recognises that a range of businesses – not just those working on technological products – benefit from academic knowledge. The paper is, however, unclear on how best to support these processes.

This difficulty is due in no small part to the incoherent field of the creative economy. The Department for Media Culture and Sport (DCMS) and Department for Business and Innovation Skills (BIS) conceive of creativity as being implicated in competitive economic value and informs much of the UK's creative economy policy (DCMS, 2008, DCMS, 2007, Oakley, 2004). This language can be seen in other documentation that promotes the value of the creative economy to UK development (CIHE, 2010, Channer et al., 2013). Other cultural bodies perform this definition differently. The Arts Council link creative activity to social wellbeing and inclusion (Matarraso, 1997, ACE, 2005, ACE, 2006). This type of thinking was visible in creative policies in the late 1990s, but is less apparent in contemporary policies as Lee et al. (2011) show.

This leaves a complicated cultural, social, economic and political terrain in which KE is expected to operate.

Discourses, subjects and practices: the REACT example

REACT was one of four KE Hubs established by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to explore new models of KE in this field. Its operation raises many questions, and as the researcher attached to the REACT Hub, I'm implicated in documenting and exploring its impact in addressing the challenges of KE: how can KE work in this field? What skills are needed to broker such relationships? What are the implications for supporting this kind of labour?

REACT was established in 2012. It is led by the University of the West of England and Bristol digital creativity centre Watershed, in collaboration with the Universities of Bath, Bristol Cardiff and Exeter. REACT is based at the Pervasive Media Studio at Watershed Media Centre in Bristol. Watershed has run the Pervasive Media Studio since 2009 in collaboration with the Universities of the West of England and Bristol. Here academics working in technology, media and practice led research are co-located with creative businesses and artists.

REACT funds collaborative R&D projects that bring together creative companies and academics working in the arts and humanities. REACT's core delivery model to support these collaborations is iShed's Sandbox. Sandbox was developed in 2008 by iShed, part of Watershed. The inaugural Media Sandbox supported six companies from across the South West to develop early stage digital media ideas. Now in its fourth year, 19 companies have participated in Media and Theatre Sandboxes, creating games, apps, installations and software. REACT sub-contracts iShed to use the sandbox approach in its Knowledge Exchange projects. REACT Sandboxes differ from those run by iShed in the past because they comprise creative companies and academics.

Twelve months in, and the REACT collaboration is forming its own institutional culture and how that process unfolds will impact how the Hub is run. In particular, the collaboration is aiming to minimise bureaucracy, valuing intuition and hunches, being accountable and open to change, and being able to adapt quickly to challenges and opportunities. An openness and performativity is required. A curiosity. These are not just desirable outcomes, but essential components of how innovation can be supported according to the distinctive ways of talking about creative work developed by Watershed and iShed. This is evidenced in research that cites the value generated by the networked activities of Watershed (Leicester and Sharpe, 2010) and the Pervasive Media Studio (Bachmann et al., 2012), and the Media

and Theatre Sandboxes pioneered by iShed, and upon whose template REACT Sandboxes are being developed (Warburton, 2011, 2010)

These working discourses are calls to action that demand a specific form of agile working subjectivity. The REACT collaboration is underpinned by the same ethos of openness, generosity and experimentation. This informs decision-making processes, management structures, approaches to research, evaluative systems and how funded collaborations are asked to work. They represent a governmentality of creative labour that both borrows from, and resists, broader discourses about contemporary labour (Bill, 2008, Fougere and Solitander, 2010).

It operates in a hybrid space, comprised of both HEI and cultural/creative discourse. This hybridity is not only an outcome of REACT but also constitutive of it. The prior relationship between UWE and specifically the Digital Cultures Research Centre (DCRC) and iShed as instrumental in not only leading the original bid to the AHRC, but in constituting the core working ethos of the collaboration. Newly reconfigured working subjectivities are one outcome of this hybrid space.

New subjects, new skills?

Mapping the complex assemblages that are forming around the REACT Hub presents a particular challenge. As Knowledge Exchange Fellow for the REACT Hub in Bristol, I am tasked with capturing stories, gathering data, documenting outcomes and impacts of the work we do and the projects we fund. I work with the team to share some of these outcomes, to report to funders and to advocate for best-practice in knowledge exchange. In many ways, I act as an advocate. As an academic I am also exploring ways to critically engage with how ideas like 'creativity' are constituted and performed in everyday life, trying to explore how creative economies are constituted. A tension within this experience is learning to contribute and value those skills I have acquired as a trained academic, but marry them with new approaches to seeing the world and understanding creative labour I am learning via working in Watershed.

One embodiment of this latter set of skills is the working subject is the arts producer. The producer is a central working subject position within iShed, and REACT's, discourse. The creative producer role represent a distinctive set of talents needed in the field of creative innovation, and KE as identified by recent research on Watershed (Leicester and Sharpe, 2010) and in the arts more broadly (Tyndall, 2007). They operate in multiple ways, acting as boundary spanners between sectors, project managers and advisors to support funded projects, relationship brokers within the REACT network and creative practitioners in their own right. These roles address many of the needs for 'brokers' in KE projects identified by a number of KE reports (CIHE, 2010, CIHE, 2012) while at the same time providing a new set of skills specific to the creative and arts sector. They are also often seen as creative practitioners in their own life, contributing ideas and direction to the management of arts projects as well as managing and producing their own artistic or creative endeavours. A strong conviction in their know-how and know-whom positions them within not only Arts Worlds, but also technology worlds, networks of businesses and funders and brokers to locate expertise where needed. They translate across institutional spaces and find ways to promote and support creative labour in the KE projects we fund.

Where these ways of working, steeped in affect and immaterial value as they are, contrast with academic or those of us who have been trained in more conventional research disciplines. These same ways of working, underpinned by the specific and constitutive governmentality of creative labour produced in the Pervasive Media Studio, mean that REACT is also adopting these approaches – to navigate HEI systems, liaise with academics and organisations, to support creative and knowledge exchange. In essence, REACT itself is a KE partnership as much as it is a broker of KE relationships.

But of course, this kind of fast working subjects not a panacea, divorced from the various challenges associated with precarious labour or self-exploitation redolent in the creative industries. Nor are they disengaged from debates about the entrepreneurialisation of the self, the command and performance of portfolio careers and individualising, abstracted expertise associated with neo-liberal subjectivities (McRobbie, 2002, Gill and Pratt, 2008). We are all embedded in this process of becoming something not wholly of one political discourse but many: creative, entrepreneurial, innovative, resilient.

Conclusions

This paper opens up a new site of analysis in the KE discussion. By unpacking the ways in which KE research can occupy a space neither fully outside of, nor fully immersed in, the world of Higher Education or a cultural organisation, I argue that new subjectivities are being required to operate in this terrain. Both spatially and organisationally separated, I perform my duties within in a working environment that has been developed to promote informal information sharing, flexible working and play. Although this binary may seem somewhat artificial, it serves to raise an important question about what happens when conducting a knowledge exchange project.

The fact is, I am a subject of it, its impacts, its intentions and its affects: I am at once a subject of a normalising discourse around that the thing we call creativity, and attempting to take up the challenge of resisting a normalising tendency within advocacy to make straw people out of the institutions, people, and perspectives with which we come into contact.

The tension is how to apply this learning and yet maintain a critical eye on the very real politics of what we are being asked to do. The demand for new affective, emotional and knowledge skills comes from a governmentality operates in a space where economic, social and cultural value are woven into a contested and fractured space that is potentially problematic.

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