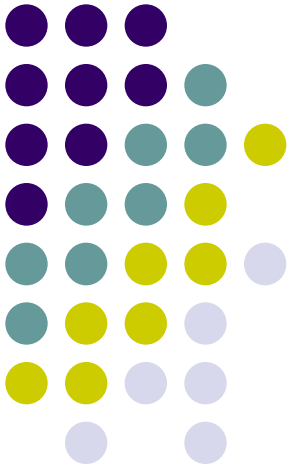
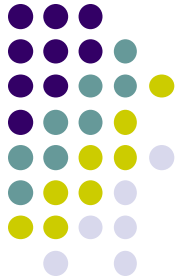
Dr Dave O'Brien, Chancellor's Fellow, Cultural and Creative Industries

The Early Career Researcher's experience of the AHRC's Connected Communities Programme



AHRC related projects

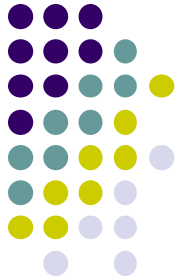


- 2018 ESRC Parliamentary Academic Fellow *Social impact of participation in culture and sport inquiry* Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee
- 2017-2018 AHRC Creative Economy FoF (PI) *Who is missing from the picture: Inequality in the creative economy and what we can do about it.*
- 2014 AHRC Connected Communities FoF (PI) 'Connecting Epistemologies in early career research'
- 2014 AHRC Cultural Value Project (PI) *Cultural Value and Inequality: A critical review of the literature*
- 2013-2016 AHRC Connected Communities Scheme (Co-I) *Dementia and Imagination*
- 2012-2015 AHRC Connected Communities scheme (Co-I) *Cultural Intermediation in the creative economy*
- 2010 AHRC/ESRC Placement Fellowship *'Measuring Cultural Value' placement at the UK government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport*

Critique…

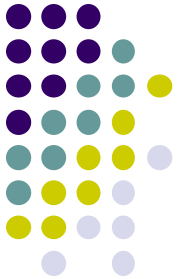
- Class relations
  - ‘social class inequalities in British higher education have been both maximally and effectively maintained.’ (Boliver (2011: 240), Loveday (2015), cf McGettigan 2013 on funding)
- Institutional sexism
  - *‘The gender pay gap across higher education (HE) equates to a shortfall of £6,103 per year for each female academic. In total, this difference in average pay is a gender pay gap of £528 million per year. The total salary spend on female academics is £1.3 billion less than it is for male academics’*
  - *The gap is larger at the so-called ‘elite’ Russell Group institutions (16.3%)’* (UCU 2016)
- Marginalisation, underrepresentation and ethnicity
  - *‘despite recent policy changes in the UK such as the Equality Act 2010..the overwhelming majority of these respondents still regularly experienced marginalisation and exclusion in relation to racism and described their experiences in academia as one that positioned them as ‘outsiders’ and ‘others’.’* (Bhopal 2014)

Some context- Enright and Facer (2017)



- Interdisciplinarity
  - Academic disciplinary structures are reconfigured by both funding and demands to respond to the social world; But disciplines still organise the university
- Co-Production
  - Involvement of external experts, publics and communities in research
- Early Career Precarity

What is *Connecting Epistemologies*?



- Part of ECR work in *Connected Communities*
- Exploring themes of methods, epistemologies and everyday lives of ECRs
- Run by 5 ECRs
- Workshop May 2014
- 11 participants contributing over summer 2014
- Final report

CHIPS

A word on the data....

Connecting Epistemologies

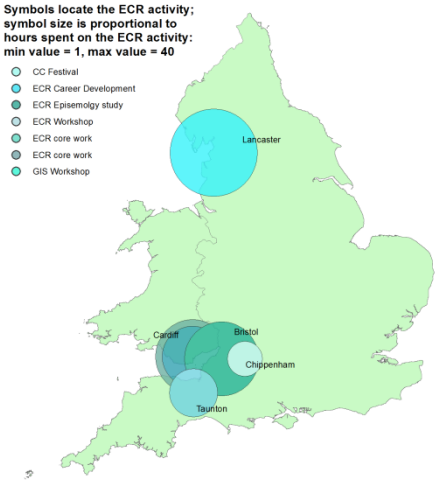
2nd contribution, 23rd August 2014

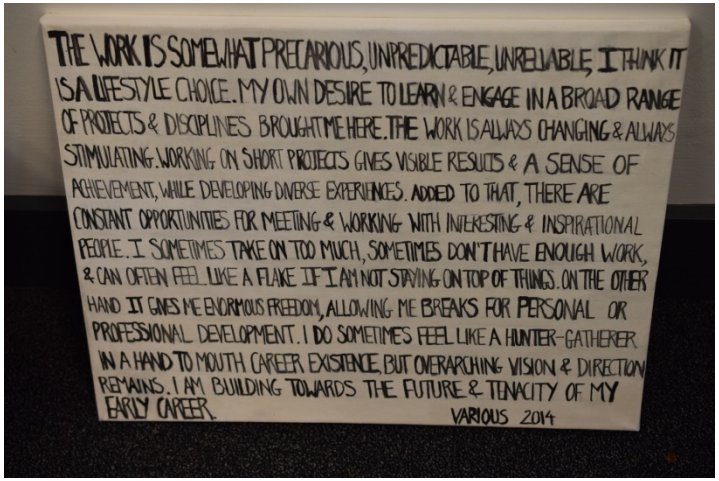
At the start of July 2014, the mid-point of the PhD, I tried to capture some of the value of what has been happening in terms of my practice as film programmer/event organiser and asked myself if it was turning out to be a creative and productive dialogue that informed the thesis (which investigates the interrelationships between communities of practice and epistemic communities) or a massive distraction from the epistemic work involved in completing the agreed PhD tasks (reviewing literature, making field-based observations and conducting interviews).

For the Connecting Epistemologies project I have re-written it, to anonymise my colleagues, and edited it so it's a bit less of a ramble.

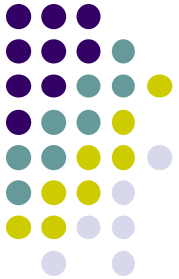
A lot about practice and research

The possibility of original creative work as an outcome of the PhD was mentioned in the original learning agreement, but what could that 'original creative work' bit realistically entail? I am neither an artist nor photographer or film maker, my former artistic practice was as designer and maker of wearable items (BA Fashion Design followed by street/clubwear label) - the skills involved were drawing and sewing - not hugely relevant to the subject area of this PhD, except in a few isolated and discipline-specific cases. What I have been doing more recently, however, is working as a 'cultural intermediary', researching, curating, designing and producing public events, with most of my experience in this area being in film exhibition and organising live performances.

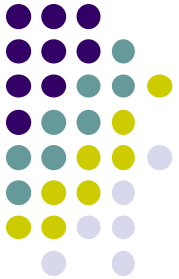




The precariousness of ECR life



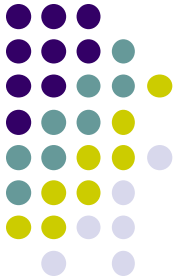
- The importance of their precarious positions as ECRs, reflecting research on ECRs
- But precariousness was experienced differently
  - Personal
  - Disciplinary
  - Institutional
- The balance between work and life....
- ...and the freedom that being an ECR brings



- *‘I work on trains quite a bit (which I think most people do) but it also keeps things interesting. I don’t get stuck in a rut and it’s hard to get bored, which I like. ‘*
- *‘I have a building I go to each day but no actual desk, or computer, or phone. There’s something a little unsettling about not having a proper workspace of your own.’*
- *‘survival in academia…requires making sacrifices to be able to make any meaningful progression’*

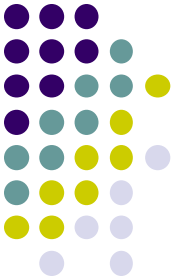
Academic identity

- A contradictory identity
- Freedom, but with pressures, particularly about job security
- Skills are crucial to success, rather than knowledge gained on the PhD
- Is a new type of academic emerging?



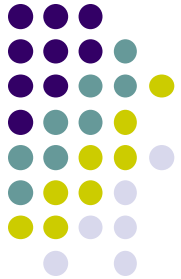
- *‘I’m proud to be a Dr but not sure if sitting in a university office writing every day is me’*
- *‘The long working hours but continued suggestion that we have so much autonomy and flexibility.’*
- *‘I will need evidence of publications to continue as funding for this post comes to an end in 2 years I will need something on my CV beyond a thesis to apply for other posts.’*
- *‘it's not to say I don't have a career plan…but what I'm seeing more and more is the type of person universities are looking for is someone quite interdisciplinary and creative and I think people with portfolio CVs is maybe more…but that could be misguided. I don't know. I'll find out.’*

The role of the *Connected Communities* programme

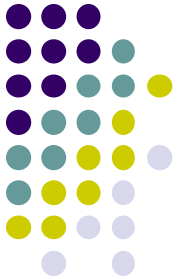


- A supportive space for the emergence of a new academic
- Forces arts and humanities to ask '*why this research is important to society?*'
- The new approach is not always supported outside of Connected Communities
- Do Connected Communities threaten academics' authority?
- Is Connected Communities too closed?

The ECRs' research methods

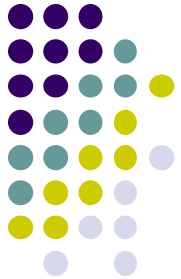


- Diversity, even across a small sample of 11 participants
- Methods connections to working practices e.g. Event organisation were essential for *Connected Communities* projects
- Disconnections from academic backgrounds and PhD training
- Challenging university and disciplinary structures is hard work!



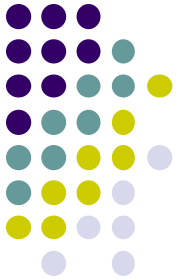
- *‘It is difficult to identify these events and the process of organising them, documenting them and building on the findings and discussion from them as a methodology. However, they do form a key part of the project and they produce insight which we will theorise, analyse, build on and write about.’*
- *‘I have also been very involved in the organisation of the final events, but mainly from a practice point of view in terms of how everything is presented. For me it is very important to have something to show at the end of a project that is concrete and exists in the real world rather than remaining an abstract notion or a list of recommendations (which so often is the case).’*
- *‘I moved from a desk based researcher more interested in theory to doing fieldwork, it was unexpected, I felt lost as a person’*
- *‘ The revelation for me has been that project management and research ‘proper’ are not necessarily two unrelated things.’*

4 identities from Connected Communities (Enright and Facer, forthcoming)



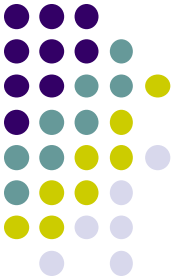
- The Disciplinarian
  - Traditional academic trajectory; collaborators as specialists, so long as the collaboration fitted with a 'disciplinary' career; facing the uncertain 'disciplinary' job market
- The Freelancer
  - Differing roles, contracts and projects frame through a narrative of personal development
- The Worker Bee
  - Hard workers and relationship builders; Committed to the communities and projects; facing difficult demands of mobility in job markets
- The Social Activist
  - Job as a way of making a social difference via the university, with the university as a resource to support this

Orientations and the university



- *'the emerging picture of an interdisciplinary, multi-skilled professional that draws on more than a doctoral or postdoctoral path, underpinned by experiences from beyond the academy. This professional is essential to the new world of the impact agenda and for a university's connection to communities. However it is clear that the usual form of academic training, the PhD, is not providing fully the necessary skills to fulfil this role. Both AHRC, and the research council infrastructure more broadly, need to give the reality of the new academic attention, given the complications of mapping emerging identities onto the constraints of disciplines and academic departments'* (Graham *et al* forthcoming)

Conclusion: University future(s)



- The academic as interdisciplinary, multi-skilled professional in the new era of 'impact'
- This has implications for the structure and nature of the university (Enright and Facer 2017, Graham *et al* forthcoming)
- These professionals need to be trained (cf UKRI system)
- The importance of disciplinary positions
- The ironic politics of *Connected Communities*