

Research methodology: background and reflection

Please see the final section of this website, Inconclusions, for further thoughts about the research methodology.

Background: practice as research

Challenging Place uses practice as research (PaR) methodology, thus privileging performance-related practices as the key mode of enquiry. To understand how young people might 'perform' their everyday places, whether performance might shift their perspective on their everyday places or places of fear and how they consider those places as a result of performance-related practices - the research must be practical at its core. This is a form of research where performance-related activities are the 'experimental' process: ' "[P]ractice as research" (PaR) indicates the uses of practical creative processes as research methods (and methodologies) in their own right, usually but not exclusively in, or in association with, universities and other HE institutions' (Kershaw et al, 2011: 64).

Mackey is not new to using PaR methods (see, for example, <http://www.performingplace.org>) and has been undertaking research through practice since the mid-1990s. She has contributed to debates in the field and, in turn, has been influenced by ongoing enquiries into PaR particularly in the 2000s, when searching questions were asked encouraging its rigour as a research process e.g:

- 'How does 'practice as research' problematise notions of 'professional' and 'academic' practices?'
- What might be the various epistemologies of and knowledges generated by practice as research?
- What kinds of resourcing/plant/infrastructures are needed for practice as research?
- What makes an instance of practice 'count' as research? Does practice as research involve different methods as a result of its framing as research as distinct from 'pure' practice?
- How might the multiple locations of practice-as-research knowledges be conceptualised and assessed/evaluated/judged? And who decides?
- Must practice as research include some form of disseminable 'reflection' or is the practice in performance/screening contexts sufficient to stand as research outputs? What might be the role of documentation across media?

(<http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/sept2003.htm>; accessed 2.5.05)

She has also developed her own form of documentation which she calls 'complementary annotation'. This comprises the gathering of a range of material that refracts the practical research in order to provoke responses in the researcher (see below).

Theoretical ideas are immanent in PaR. Understandings of place and its performance, for example, (see following website section) fortify the practical research of Challenging Place. The denomination of 'practice as research'

emphasises practice as the core means by which knowledge is discovered. But for that emphasis, 'praxis' would offer another way of considering such work with praxis interpreted as an integration of theory, practice, reflection and action. As a term, however, perhaps praxis doesn't forefront practice in the same way that PaR does. So, this section concentrates on PaR as the primary mode of enquiry with theoretical thinking inherent in this process.

Background: challenging place research methodology

Guided by the research team, PI Sally Mackey and Co-Is Margaret Ames and Mike Pearson, each partner organisation in the overall Challenging Place research enquiry has developed and used performance of place practices in projects with community groups. These are evaluated and analysed using ethnographic methods. Refined models of performing place practices are to be disseminated and further implications of the research will be theorised in journal articles or book chapters.

Development of practical research

The practical research methods used are evidenced throughout this website.

Led by Mackey, an initial two-day introduction and exploration of performance place practices and theory took place in July 2011 with the research team and project partners (including Chris Elwell, chief executive of Half Moon). The practices to be tested were drawn from several sources e.g. Wrights and Sites 'mis-guide' activities and other relevant walking practices; adaptations of Peter Reder's 'City of Dreams' projects; superimpositions of mapping places such as Misha Myers' 'Homing Place' stemming from earlier Situationist models; sonic compositions such as the work of Graeme Miller and CI Mike Pearson (e.g. <http://www.carrlands.org.uk>).

Specific practices were introduced and demonstrated at these induction workshops with the project partners, drawn from examples such as these identified and PI Mackey's three-year 'laboratory' research project *Performing Place*. Ideas and exercises offered at the workshop from Mackey's work included:

- repeated performances such that one site is perceived as continuously under erasure (Derrida's *sous rature*) and therefore always temporary;
- re-experiencing the site through many forms of improvisation (e.g. *bouffons* work, incongruous object manipulation, personal response performative demonstrations) in order to re-view and reinterpret quotidian dwelling spaces;
- contriving dense inhabitation of an everyday site used for multiple purposes (performatively) and thus experienced variously and richly (e.g. a work place as well as a place of dwelling; inhabiting a place 'ecumenically' by utilising it for many different purposes)

To successfully build on the original two-day workshop, it became clear to Mackey that for the project at Half Moon a further 2 days would be needed to work closely with the particular artists on the project, not present at the original two days in July 2011. Led by Mackey, similar material was introduced at this workshop in April, 2012. In the final half-day session and led by Half Moon's project coordinator Vishni

Velada Billson, we began to select appropriate practices for the projects. The initial practices selected were:

- deemed appropriate for the nature of the project e.g. expected to facilitate a re-viewing of location for the participants;
- accessible to the participants (taking into account language, ability, intention, cultural sensitivity);
- able to be run by experienced practitioners led by Mackey's research questions.

In addition to being selectively represented on these webpages through video clips, the precise practical methods used will be alternatively collated for the final post-project webpages where facilitation materials will be annotated and made available to a number of different community arts organisations. The post-project webpages will hold material from all three projects, not just Half Moon.

Led by Mackey, the Half Moon research team (research assistant Jo Scott, MA placement students from Central, Anna Bosworth and Jo Yeoman, and the practitioner team led by Velada Billson) organised 'complementary annotation', a system of data gathering for analysis suggested by Mackey (2007) to: ensure a comprehensive documentation and archiving of the process; help refine the practices retrospectively; provide matter for measuring the impact of the work; offer material for journal articles and book.

'Complementary annotation' included live documentation of the project (e.g. extensive filming, photographs, scraps of writing, noting and retaining objects used and artefacts created) as well as appropriate ethnographic research methods such as those utilised in GIM (Global Impact Monitoring) to measure impact (Baños Smith, 2006):

- semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, observation, footage analysis;
- change stories if available (participants identifying notable moments of change – or shifts in perception - for themselves);
- 'return' discussion seminar including the playing of the filmed show three months later. (Previous research suggests shifts in cognising place have additional validity when noted after a gap.)

Specifically, the practice-based methods led by Mackey included:

- Two days of introduction to the ideas of the project and practicing ideas with Mackey and the artists and interns, April, 2012.
- 10 x 2 hours practical drama workshop series with the young people using a variety of exercises, summer 2012.
- Interviewing (e.g. the youth participants; artists)
- Facebook site responses
- Twitter responses (e.g. on the night of the performance)
- Photographs
- Videos of: practical sessions, interviews, the performances (post- and pre-also), material for inclusion in the workshops or performance
- Audio recordings (of, for example, audience members discussing 'place')

- Recorded Skype conversations between Velada-Billson and Mackey, specifically debating the weekly events during the 10-week practical workshop series.
- Object collections
- Written/drawn scraps
- Post-session discussions
- Questionnaires (to audience and artists)

Initial reflection on the research process

One of the objectives of Challenging Place was *not* to use it as a source for analysing practice as research as a methodology, where ‘the documentation of practice ... at worst displaces the thing itself’ (Nelson, 2013: 5). Reflection upon the research process for the whole AHRC research project may well be articulated more formally once all three projects have been completed. What the research *finds out* is of primary importance in the entire Challenging Place research project – not to debate methodology itself. It is intended as ‘insightful practice’ (Nelson, 2013: 10).

Nonetheless, there are aspects of the research process worth addressing from the Half Moon project, which may well contribute to a fuller reflection on the research methodology after the completion of all the projects.

Useful aspects of the Half Moon research process can be summarised as follows:

- The importance of a strong team of practitioners willing to be guided by Mackey’s conceptual lead and able to offer their own ideas. Mackey’s research enquiry was enhanced through the numbers on the ‘team’ and the constructive working atmosphere. Example of such enhancement includes:
 - The numbers involved (8 at one session, for example) gave weight to the project for the young people. It felt ‘important’ because of the number of adults putting in time.
 - New ideas were created, received and adopted encouraging a more interesting project. (e.g. Anna Bosworth’s work on digital media and its presence in the studio space and outside had led us to question ‘virtual’ places, for example.)
 - Artists gave additional time, willingly.
 - Because of the numbers of artists, more activity was undertaken because the group could be split into smaller working groups with different artists.
- Having a previous positive relationship with some members of the team allowed for an enhanced PaR process. Half Moon’s artistic director, Chris Elwell, had worked at Central with Mackey and understood her work. Velada-Billson had been at Central 20 years previously and had worked well with Mackey as a student. This particular research relationship became important

in the weekly Skype meetings. We were thinking and operating from a position of mutual respect and also some shared history of knowledges.

- The weekly Skype conversations between Velada-Billson and Mackey arose because of a concern Mackey had about 'entering into' the research process fully enough, although present at each workshop session. With wanting the community organisations to facilitate the projects – as an important part of the research enquiry – it was possible for Mackey to be distant from the Half Moon project after the two-day intensives. Skyping and recording these conversations were an unforeseen method within the PaR and became critical. It was an opportunity for Mackey to share ideas with Velada-Billson and, as appropriate, guide and steer the thinking behind the choices of activities. This became an essential part of the process and is raised several times in material on this website. The complexity of working *through* community partners was eased by this weekly Skype meeting.
- The use of digital media within - and beyond - the sessions enhanced the possibilities of the research. We were able to access young people's thoughts and ideas beyond the workshop space of Half Moon.

There were several challenges, many of which will impact upon the wider research project reflection.

- There was a sense of a shortage of time with only ten sessions, and the last few used as 'rehearsals' leading up to performance. (As mentioned above, having the opportunity to run several sessions at the same time within or outside the building helped here.) This was frustrating in many ways as we all felt more experimentation would have reaped further insights into performing practices and place.
- How to articulate the research and its 'findings' within this website? There were a number of questions to be considered in creating this website as a research outcome. Sifting and selecting threads of research for articulation on the website has led to questioning intersubjectivity, for example: whose voices should contribute and how is this 'evidence' representative? Researcher subjectivity needed to be acknowledged in the mediation of the research, as it is on the home page of this site. One of the reasons for this website as an articulation of the research is to facilitate the voices of participants directly, whilst recognising editing acts as a form of researcher-choice.
- For the project to remain within the territories set out in the original proposal, certain forms of performance practice were at the heart of the enquiry. Such



practices were utilised during the project yet the team were aware that some of the youngsters struggled with these initially. They weren't 'proper' drama, in the youngsters' eyes perhaps, as the work didn't follow conventional devising patterns leading to a faux-realistic theatrical conclusion. This tension was never fully resolved although several of the participants expressed a real enjoyment in the more abstract form.

- Identified above, a particular challenge was leading a practical research project with so many layers of participants. It is this that underscores the later section 'Planning the Activities'.