Tate’s Turnaround: Practice becomes Research

What are the benefits and challenges of situating the work of a learning team in an art museum as a form of practice-based research

Dr Emily Pringle
Head of Research Tate
Background

Head of Learning Practice and Research at Tate 2010 - 2019
AHRC Leadership Fellowship, Sept 2017 – August 2018

Research Question:

How can practitioner-led co-produced research practices be embedded within the art museum?

Appointed Head of Research at Tate in February 2019
Methodology

• Practice as research – emergent, exploratory, interdisciplinary, personally situated
• Case studies – Harvard Art Museums (USA), Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA) (Ireland), Knowle West Media Centre (KWMC) (UK), Tate Learning (UK), Trapholt (Denmark)
• Interviewed 30 museum/ arts professionals
• Facilitated 2 seminars at Tate Britain to test findings
• Blog – PRAM (https://www.practitionerresearchintheartmuseum.com)
Starting with questions

• What does the term ‘research’ mean to you?
• Do you consider yourself a researcher?
Four discourses of the Art Museum

Discourse of artists and the collection

Discourse of academia

Discourse of democratic participation

Discourse of financial sustainability
The implications for research – interview feedback

• **Confusion** - people did not have a common understanding of research

• **Differentiation** – people identified a hierarchy of research within the museum

• **Exclusion** – people did not think they could do research and/or that their research was not valued by the museum
How can we rethink research in the art museum?

• Address the inbuilt hierarchies around what is seen as ‘valuable knowledge’ and broaden our conception of research
• Reframe our understanding of the museum professional as a practitioner researcher
• Broaden our understanding of who can do research (including our audiences) and recognise the varied expertise that is needed within the twenty-first century art museum
• Put in place systems and structures that support ongoing practitioner-led co-research.
Three characteristics of research

• The importance of questions
• The process of enquiry
• The generation of new knowledge that goes out into the world
Practice-based/practice-led/practice as research.....

• Practice = ‘what we do’ (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009)
• Theory = set apart from practice as set of abstract ideas about something
• Praxis = knowledge and theory are not separate, but embodied in practice, operating in a dynamic relationship with it

• Practice as Research = ‘Programmes of careful enquiry and reflection prompted by questions related to practice that generate new knowledge through and about practice. (Pringle, 2019: 72)
The Scholar Practitioner

An ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experimental knowledge and motivated by personal values, political commitments and ethical conduct.

Charles McClintock, 2005
The Qualities of the Practitioner Researcher

• Motivated by curiosity and ongoing questioning
• Committed to developing their knowledge of practice and understanding of theory
• Engages in reflection and the assessment of changes brought about by their work
• Collaborates and actively exchanges knowledge with practitioners and others – artists, academics, community members, museum visitors
• Communicates their knowledge and make their expertise visible to others in ways that are useful
• Works with integrity, generosity and care
Tate Learning

- Values-led approach (2011)
- Practice as Research (2016)
Developing shared values – more questions

• What are the core values of the department?
• How are these values are embedded in all we do – and what we expect to see?
• What documentation and evaluation do we need to capture and account for the experience of participating in our programmes and activities?
• How do we draw together and analyse findings to develop broader understandings?
• How do we feed those findings back into practice and communicate them internally and externally?

Tate Learning values = generosity, trust, openness and risk
The Practice as Research programme - four interconnected elements

• Research through practice across Learning
• Specific research projects emerging from the research through practice activity
• Research projects in collaboration with colleagues internally
• Research projects in collaboration with external researchers – academics, teachers, community members, young people
Research through Practice

• Move from ‘delivery’ to ‘enquiry’
• Activities framed around particular, but open questions
• Programme = an investigation of the question undertaken with participants
• Activities can follow familiar formats
• The expectation is that staff question, reflect and remake programmes as they progress
Research through Practice - challenges

• Making time for questioning, reflection, analysis and writing
• Broadening our understanding of what is a research ‘output’ – going beyond the written word
• Entrenched research hierarchies
• Staff changes – new people joining the department who are new to this way of working
Research through Practice - benefits

• Instils rigour and quality into all areas of practice
• Makes visible processes and practice
• Interrogates & makes explicit the skills and knowledge in the museum
• Encourages critical and reflective practice
• Supports the development of cross-disciplinary practice