

Creative Research at Cardiff University

During the filming of the 'Creative Research at Cardiff University' [video](#), we spoke to three academics in the [Creative Cardiff Research Network](#) about their work. We've identified three particular and related strands of 'creative research' at Cardiff: research that involves working with creatives or creative organisations; research that involves creative outputs or methodologies; and research that investigates the creative economy. Sam's work touches on all three of these strands, as she discusses in her interview.



My name's Sam Warren, and I'm a Professor in Management, Employment and Organisation at Cardiff Business School. I started my working life as a filing clerk, leaving school at 16 with basic qualifications. I decided in my mid-20s, after I'd had two children, that I wanted to go to university, which I did at the University of Portsmouth. And then I just decided I loved it so much I stayed, became an academic, and here I am 20 years later!

What led to your academic interest in the life and work of underground techno DJs?

First of all, it's a world I've loved being in as a clubber for a long, long time and I've often been down the front, dancing away, but being an academic, you're never really off duty. So I'm watching the DJs and thinking, "these people are at work... while we're having fun, and yet they've *got* to have fun as part of their work, so how does that feel? Does it feel like work? What's the interface between work and non-work, between play and leisure when you're a DJ, especially in the underground scene where there's very little money to be made?"

So that's where it came from, from a personal interest in being in a particular community, and obviously I got access to lots of funky underground techno DJs to interview. But broader than that, there's a need to research creative occupations that are not your bog-standard broadcast, software engineers, web designer types. They're the people that get the headline press. I'm very much interested in grass-roots, sort of hobbies that people want to turn into their careers, and how does that work? And I've been interviewing underground techno DJs. I should say I use the term 'techno' advisedly, because they're in lots of other genres, and that's an issue in itself. How do you position yourself within this market? Do they think of it as a market? What makes them underground? What makes it commercial? Would they still be underground if they made a track that sold a whole load of copies? As they really don't make any money out of hours and hours spent writing music – DJ's don't just play

records any more, they have to produce them as well if they want to be taken seriously, and that's a whole different ball game.

So I'm just fascinated with all the issues involved, given that the creative economy is such a huge political and social buzzword. You know, "Everybody's a creative", and it's spilling into all sorts of occupations as well, not just creative occupations that we would normally think of as creative, but everybody seems to have to innovate as part of their job, whether you're a receptionist on a hotel desk, or a graphic artist for a software house.

What have you discovered during this work?

Some of the most striking findings are around identity and genre. Different music genres have different communities around them, but the nature of underground techno DJing is, it's *electronic* music and so technology has made an enormous difference to who can mix, who can DJ, but also who can produce music. The perception is that all you really need is a copy of some basic software, and you can produce a techno track. You can even download an app for your phone, tap a few buttons and turn out what sounds like a broadly passable main-room commercial track!

So how people are renegotiating this is very interesting. What they're doing is adopting identities that are sort of a splintering of genres, to find a niche – or identifying their music as 'beyond genre'. And positioning too – do they identify themselves as DJs first, producers second or the other way around? there's a whole load of professional esteem issues there. The other things that have been very interesting are how social media is involved, how much music is given away for free, how the sharing economy affects the money you can earn. Broadly speaking it'll take you weeks to make a track, you release it, it goes on Beatport via a record label and basically you never see any money. You've got to sell hundreds and hundreds of copies to see even a small return. So what's interesting is folks are giving their music away for free instead – they'd rather it was played, and made people happy – and of course that the music attracts promoters to book them for gigs – but of the DJs I've been talking to, all have to supplement their income somehow.

So distribution channels have made a huge difference. If you're pressing vinyl, a few years ago that was a big investment, so the fact its all computerized now has changed the style of the music as well – there's not the same pressure to make sure your track is a success when you're not spending thousands on getting a physical product pressed and distributed. So yeah, there's an awful lot of interesting stuff about technology, about identity, and about the shape of the industry and how that impacts on the everyday lives of people who try to make a living DJing and producing electronic music.

What does creativity mean for you in terms of university research and activity?

Well firstly all research and teaching is inherently creative, because you're generating and communicating new knowledge! But I also think that to a certain extent creativity is an overused word which people hope will be a shortcut to economic glory, or fame and fortune! But the principles that underpin it are actually really important. As a species we have to adapt and change constantly, always learning new things – and that's the essence of creativity really. So we need to equip our students with the means to do that, to think about things differently, to frame problems differently, to *play*. When you play, you don't really care about the outcome. You just get stuck in, and you're not saddled by the fear of failure. You're just doing it for the sake of it, and for me creativity allows a space in which we can all do that. But it does mean that you have to be much more tolerant of not necessarily getting a concrete outcome every time, and it means that you do have to actually be not afraid to fail, whatever failure means in a playing environment.

So creativity for me means deliberately doing things differently, turning things on their head, saying “what if?” So I don't think it's necessarily confined only to creative research agendas or creative departments.

In the past, you've researched the office space of a web design team in relation to creativity, and specifically the aestheticisation of the physical environment in which they work, and the designers' perceptions of their creativity as they work within it. What drew you to focus on this, and what did you find?

I was interested in researching fun at work. This was in the late 1990s when this was a big management fad, fashion, buzzword. You know, getting your employees to have fun. And it was so counterintuitive to everything we've learned about serious business, you know? Having fun at work signals mucking around, surely? And here was management using fun as a tool. So the research that I did was at a large, global IT firm who were attempting to make their work environment more fun. They were trying to construct a fun culture, and one of the ways they were doing that was through their office space. So they had designed a space to be fun and funky. It was full of toys, cool lighting. I mean, looking back on it now, it doesn't look all that, really, but it certainly was in 2001, when I was there gathering the data. And my research questions were, if you have to have fun at work, what happens when you go home? Can you have so much fun at work that actually you don't want to have any fun when you go home? And theoretically, there was a lot of research being done on emotional labour at the time, which had similar sort of arguments. Having to be so happy and smiley, and kind and loving and caring in your service work, so hotel receptionists, flight attendants, retail staff and so on, that these

people were reporting going home from work and being emotionally burnt out – dead inside – from having to be so lovely all day at work. They couldn't be bothered when they got home.

So I was interested in whether this applied to fun as well, and unsurprisingly I found that sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't. But it was quite interesting how the people I spoke to at this case study didn't really buy into it. They knew that it was something that management were using as a marketing tool to show how creative the department was. They quite liked it, but at the same time they were sort of cynical, and a bit resentful, of being infantilised: that was the impression that they had. But at the same time they felt special. So it was quite a complex dataset, but contrary to the quite critical voices at the time, who were saying “oh, this is dreadful, this is an appropriation of the soul of employees, and it's going to damage people's sense of aesthetics and their ability to have fun outside work...”, people were very well aware that they were going to work, and they were performing a role.

But some practical things that came out of it were that people had to work from home, because the office was too crazy. There were people firing Nerf guns and riding scooters about, and people wanted to get on with their work. So they stayed home, worked from home, which was counter to the ideals of the fun initiative, and secondly, having such a fantastically fun workplace made people stay there longer. So they did incredibly long hours, and because the work was fun they stayed longer, and that's not healthy for lots of reasons.

So, research is not only produced by academics on their own, but also in research groups and in collaboration with others. Do you belong to a research group?

All research is collaborative. We often work together with all sorts of different stakeholders, both academic and non-academic, and a good part about having a research group is that you have an identity. That you can have a point of contact, usually online, that people can say “that's what we do, and that's what we're about”. And I think in this day and age where everything is branded, (including people!), that's really important. And it says what Cardiff does as an institution as well.

I'm really excited to be involved with the [Creative Labour and Cultural Production Group](#) with colleagues from the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. I'm located in the Business School, so we're bringing together cultural studies, media studies and research on work occupations, careers, employment, those kinds of expertise. And the reason we're doing that is, broadly speaking, the creative industries are either researched for their creative content, for example what does it mean to be creative? How does creativity come about? What are the best conditions to foster it? That kind of thing. Or, it's the industry that gets

researched. So policy, structure, the macro level things. There's very little about the actual work. The production, the labour, the everyday, getting up, out of bed, going to work and coming home. How does that feel? What does that look like, to have to be creative every day? What does it mean to be somebody who is seen as creative or not creative? So the people who make the props? The people who sweep the floors? The people who lump the boxes about? The electricians, the lighting, the camera...even the camera people are often not seen as creative. I'm talking particularly about broadcast here, but in the clubbing world, promoters – are they creative...in the creative industry? We're just really interested in the network of relationships and careers, and working lives, that actually produce the creative economy, and that's something that's quite neglected in academic research.

So, what are the strengths of being in an interdisciplinary research group?

I've always worked at the margins of different disciplines. My PhD was on fun and aesthetics, so I spent a lot of time reading about art history and psychological theories of humour, as well as cultural studies. I knew I was becoming interdisciplinary when I had to go to different floors in the library to get my reading material! It's quite simply, people from other disciplines have a different training, a different outlook on the topic and on life in general, and they bring completely different perspectives on the topic, things you could never have thought of yourself, because that's not your schooling and your training.

So really, it's absolutely essential, I think, and it's the way I've always worked. So it's one of the things that I sometimes find a bit surprising, when people say oh yes, you're working over and between disciplines, and that's been what makes my work so exciting to me, I think.

How are things progressing in the Creative Labour and Cultural Production Research Group?

We're in the very early stages of establishing the CLCP Research Group – Creative Labour and Cultural Production – but we've already secured some funding from the Business School, working with Creative Cardiff, to investigate what we are initially calling below-the-line workers, which is an accounting term in the creative industries that refers to the crew. So in film, theatre and television, that's everyone who's not on-screen or producing or directing. So we're going to be interviewing freelancers, people in the industry, stakeholders, to find out what the labour issues are in sustaining a crew labour force, because that's what's regional and local to film, theatre and television. So this is the local skills-base that, particularly in the Cardiff area, we need to keep healthy, and that's

hopefully going to lead to bigger research projects investigating things in more depth, and expanding out to other regions and nations.

While we're talking about Creative Cardiff, why do you think it's important for Cardiff to have something like Creative Cardiff?

Cardiff is a vibrant, creative city. I've lived here just over a year, and it's struck me how there's all sorts of things going on all the time, and often these things are produced by lone artists or freelancers who don't have a network or the security of colleagues, or even somewhere to go to work every day. So having a network for support, for opportunities, contacts, I mean, the whole industry is based on who you know and how you interact with them. So having a hub and a whole load of events and opportunities to A) showcase local talent, and B) bring people together and connect them, I think, is absolutely essential. I've been to several of the Creative Cardiff events and they're fantastic. There's some really, really interesting stuff going on.

As well as researching the creative labour of others, you also employ creative or visual research methods. Could you share some examples of that work, and why it's been so effective?

When you're looking at creative issues in labour, or even any labour issues, there's often a need to think differently about the problem. If you asked people simple questions you tend to get simple answers, and we do tend to be stuck in a sort of mind-set, particularly in business management work. We tend to think economics. We tend to think about labour issues, but not about the person or the aesthetic sensibilities or the emotions of the worker.

So way back now, in 1999/2000, I took a camera into a workplace and I gave the cameras to the people there, and I said "show me how it feels to work here". So off they went with the digital camera, and they came back with a set of photographs that we sat down and discussed. And it very quickly became apparent that using photography as a research method opens up different spaces for discussion. You very quickly talk about personal things. You hear what it *feels* like to do the job first, and what the rational elements are second, and often those things contradict.

So, using visual research methods is something I've continued to do because it basically frames problems differently. It's interesting, it's fun, people like to do it and it gives you a richer dataset, I think. And particularly in this day and age, where we're very image aware – some may say image obsessed through Instagram, selfies etc., there's a whole digital explosion in how identity is constructed. OK that's outside work, but also its inside work. How people are promoting brands, how brands are co-created by customers as well as producers through Instagram

sharing and all sorts of things. So images and visual research is a huge part of what I do, and that's kind of what I'm known for. I'm a founding member of the International Network for Visual Studies in Organizations, for example.

Do you think that interest in creative research methods is growing at Cardiff University, and if so, why?

The breadth of creative research and research methods across Cardiff is one of the reasons I came to work here. The opportunities to interact with people who've been pioneers of the field, really, particularly in Sociology and Social Policy is something that I've found very exciting. And I think although there's always been little pockets of research on creativity, until the Creative Cardiff network got involved, we didn't really know each other existed across different faculties, and this is a common problem with universities. We're in schools, or faculties, or colleges, however you want to describe them, and that's where we stay. So unless somebody brings us together, and we can meet, and have joint projects, (or just hang out!) those things don't happen.

So I'm not sure that there's any more than there used to be. It's just that we're much more joined up, and it's a nice feeling. Because sometimes when you do, frankly, quite crazy and bonkers research, people don't really want to know. So you can feel quite isolated, and always justifying yourself, and it's nice to be part of a support group, if nothing else.