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.

Dr Dawn Mannay is producing excellent research using ground-breaking creative methodologies. As discussed in this interview, she is building a reputation for exceptional work in the community and with creatives of various kinds. As she explains, this creative work has also informed her research-led teaching.

Can you start just be telling us who you are, what you do and just a bit of background?

My name's Dawn Mannay. I work in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. I am a Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences, with a specialism in Psychology. I'm in my fourth year of teaching here in this post. Before that, I taught at Newport University and The Open University, and I've done a lot of work with adult education and courses like that.

I came into university as a mature student, so I didn't come and do my first degree until I was in my thirties, and because I've got a non-traditional background I've always had an interest in marginalised communities and people from non-traditional backgrounds.

Can you tell us about your recent book, and what it's about?

My new book is published with Routledge; it's a book about visual methods, and it's called *Visual Narrative and Creative Research Methods: Application, Reflection and Ethics*. So it focuses on visual methods in two ways, really. I use a lot of visual methods with participants, rather than just doing a sort of standard interview… When you do a standard interview, people sometimes feel like they've got to give an instant, rational response. They don't always think things through, and there are often a lot of power hierarchies.

When you use visual methods, it often gives people time to think things through, so people might create a collage of their life, or a map, or use photo-elicitation. So it lets the participants lead the interviews. It gives you different insights into people's lives. It brings up questions that you wouldn't have asked, because you'll only think them up from your perspective where, when they're making something, it comes much more from their perspective.

The book talks a lot about how visual methods are good for tools of data production, so producing data. The other thing I really like about the visual is, it's a really good tool to disseminate findings. I think the real problem in academic work is that you do this academic work, you write a 200-page report or you write a journal article, and only a very small number of people are going to read that work. If you want to make real, social change with your work, you've got to engage with a diverse audience. So you might have to engage with young people, social workers, teachers, practitioners on the ground, general publics. They're not going to read your big, long, boring report or journal article. They want something quicker, snappier, something they can engage with. So the visual has been really useful.

On a recent project, with children who are in care or have left the care system, we made a number of [posters and postcards](), and we made [four films]() recapping the main findings from the research. We made [music audios and music videos](), and I think overall it's the impact of these things that have really changed practice. So they've made people stop and listen, and reflect, think about what they're doing, make concrete changes. They've engaged people in different ways, ways in which you wouldn't be able to engage people in with a simple report. I think the power of visual images, of film, of music, is one different way for academics to get their message out, otherwise there's no point in research. There's no point in research if you've got no audience, and I don't think you can necessarily get a wide audience if you're just writing reports and articles.

You've used creative research methods to work with marginalised people and communities. What have been the success stories there, and what kinds of creative people or companies have you worked with?

I have worked with children in care and care-leavers who've left that system. Their voices are often marginalised. There's often a lot of research on them, but not with them. We used participatory visual activities like sandboxing and drawing, so they could lead the research more and give us their own opinions.

I've mainly worked with a local company in Cardiff called 'Ministry of Life'. They hold workshops with young people to help them become more creative. They do a lot of rap music, songs, music production. So they've been doing this for a while. They're based in Adamsdown, but they work in other areas in Cardiff.

When we did the research, I'd worked with them before on another project, so we got in contact with them to do this work. The first project I worked on them with was a project about Wales and Welshness. I've got an edited collection with the University of Wales press called *Our Changing Land: Revisiting Gender, Class and Identity in Contemporary Wales*, and it revisits older work about what it's like to be Welsh, what it's like to have a Welsh identity, in terms of gender, class and identity. I wrote the book with 12 other academics. They all wrote a chapter, we all reflected on things like poverty,

gender, the arts in Wales, lots of different topics, but what was really missing then was the voice of young people.

So I went out. I worked with Ministry of Life. They did workshops with young people about what we'd written in the book, and whether that resonated with their idea of Wales, and sometimes it did and sometimes it didn't. And we worked with Ian Homer, the photographer, who is also based in Wales, and he worked with the young people to create a photograph for every chapter that either supported the theme we'd written about, or said something different that we hadn't said.

They produced a series of black and white images. The chapter that I actually wrote in the edited collection was about who should do the dishes, and it was looking at a study that was done 20 years ago with grandmothers, mothers and daughters, and there was an argument that even though women were working, men weren't doing the dishes a lot. In my study, I found the same sort of thing, and I was saying that women feel like they've got to work full-time and be a good mum, and do the dishes, and they're stuck in this ideology of the Welsh Mam. When the young people looked at it, a lot of the young men said they did do the dishes, and my chapter's wrong, so they did a picture of a man washing the dishes. But what they did, they had a man washing the dishes and a little baby sat in the high-chair, a girl, watching, and they were saying if young men like us are doing the dishes, and young babies are watching, you'll get that change. So they answered back to my chapter.

They also made music videos for each theme in the book. The first theme was identity, but because we were revisiting, we didn't look at ethnicity, which is a really important issue in Wales. In Wales, we often try and kid ourselves that we're a really welcoming nation and we don't have problems with racism, and we're very inclusive, but in reality that's not always the case. So with two young boys from Eritrea and a young boy from London, they talked about feeling Welsh and going to Cardiff City games, wanting to support Cardiff, but then people saying that they're not Welsh because they're black, and they made a song talking about what it's like, about having a [Hybrid Identity](). That's what they called the song, so what's it like to be black in Wales. Ministry of Life worked with the singers, the boys wrote their own lyrics, and they did their own performance and music.

The second theme of the book was education, and we looked at labour markets. So education, employment, labour markets, zero-hours contracts, people returning to higher education. When the young people looked at that, they thought what was missing was the actual school experience, particularly bullying. So there was a young person called Tasha Harvey, and she wrote a really nice song called [Beautiful]() about body image in school, and getting bullied, and quite a tragic story about how this young girl dies. So she wanted that to be included in the theme.

And then in the third theme, we had an artist, a young artist called Sapien, and again he did a rap song, Politricks, and he talked about the idea that no wonder young people don't always vote, and they believe more in conspiracy theories. They wouldn't know their AM if they saw them. It's not that they're not engaged. It's just that they're not engaged in the right way. They're looking for action and change, but they don't necessarily feel that it can come from the governance system we've got now.

There were three songs all together that were produced for each theme, and all the lyrics from the songs ended up in the book, and all the music and the music videos are available on YouTube, which I thought was important because, again, it's about how can the visual get messages out to other people who wouldn't be the readers of your book? And I think the young people had really, really important messages that weren't always covered in the book, and had new things to say. If we're thinking about Wales and Welsh life, and what it means to be Welsh in terms of class, identity and gender, we need to have young voices involved, and creative ways of disseminating those ideas.

Then we did the project with care experienced children – that was through the research centre CASCADE, and it was commissioned by the Welsh Government. Again, we wanted to get the voices of children in care out to a wider audience, but in that project it was difficult because you can't film them, because of confidentiality. We couldn't have their faces; we couldn't have their voices. We worked with a film producer from London who came down to do the film with Ian Peacock. So he did all the filming and all the editing, and we made some really nice films. And because they used visual production when we did the interviews, we had a lot of visual figures and drawings that they'd made that we could include, and then have voiceovers. We also did a lot of activities like wall-climbing, and we had these activity days for the young people. So we could also think about the sort of struggles of climbing the wall, but also the struggles of life.

We had all this footage from the day's activities, and then we had voiceovers. And again, the film's very powerful, but you've also got a tension when you work with people who work creatively, and you have your academic or social science agenda: I remember when we did the voiceovers, the film producers wanted all the children that could speak in Received Pronunciation, in relation to sound quality. But we were like no, we don't want all the children who have got these really sort of 'clean' sort of voices, and Received Pronunciation. We want a bit of a mix of local accents to represent the children and young people in the project we've got.

We worked with Ministry of Life again on that, and did three music videos, and we also had live performance at one of the events. In terms of practitioner engagement and getting people to rethink their everyday practice, lots of people – after seeing the live performance of the song – wrote to us or gave feedback, saying after hearing that song or watching that film it's really made

them think about the experience of children in care, and how some practices that we think are enabling are really quite damaging.

So it's never really the report. You don't get so many people saying, after we read your 200-page report, we thought we would do this or that. It's after we've seen the film, after we've seen the song. That was really, really successful, and we got changes and we got people to take notice, and we got engagement from young people, from teachers, from social workers, from the general public, from youth workers, so it's a much more engaging format.

Again, you get some tensions. We had three graphic arts posters done, and on one of the graphic arts posters there were images to represent social workers, and some of the young people had said a lot of critical things about social workers. But at the end of the day, social workers are also under pressure, and we wanted to get them onside to work with us. So we had to change the poster slightly. In the initial poster, they were visually represented in line with some of the more critical comments from young people, and it was like… that's not the right message! There are tensions between people's artistic interpretation and what you need to do with project findings; but these can be negotiated to create really powerful materials.

Overall, in all my work now, I hardly ever do work which is just interviews. When I'm producing data with people and I want to know their stories, I'd much rather have a visual option for them to draw or take photographs, or make something.

In terms of dissemination as well, I think on future projects I don't really want to have projects that just turn into a report or a journal article, because there's just not the impact that you can get from using creative methods and working with people in the creative industry.

What is powerful about creative research methods? Do you think that interest in creative research methods is growing in Cardiff University? And why do you think that, if so?

Creative methods are powerful in two ways. They're powerful when you're trying to produce data with people, when you're trying to learn about their stories and their lives. They don't have the pressure of interviews. Particularly if you're working with children or marginalised groups, you're not reliant on language, on pure language. You're reliant on other things. They can give you insights into places that you couldn't go, so I've done a lot of research around the everyday life of people in their homes, but you couldn't do an ethnographic research piece and say I'm going to sit on your settee now. I'll be here for two years watching your everyday life. But if people have got cameras, they can show you those spaces and use things in interesting ways to give you insights into their worlds.

Then, secondly, in terms of dissemination, there are all those opportunities to make films, to make songs, to make posters, to have an array of things to get people's interest, to get things that connect with people on an emotional level that can make that impact. So in terms of changing things and getting your research out, visual methods, creative methods, music, all of those can do things that you can't simply do with the word alone, particularly the academic word, which is particularly inaccessible to a lot of readers. It's inaccessible to us. I often read things and think oh, why didn't you just say what it was, rather than using 100 words? So when you've got music and art, you can get past that and get your messages out.

I think now is the time, really, for creatives and academics to work together. I think now, we've got more opportunities than ever, because of the case for impact. So now there's pressure on universities to say not just 'I did this research and I published 10 journal articles'. What did you change? What was the impact of that? How many people know about it? What do they know? What are they going to do to change? Now there's the pressure for impact, which gives people huge opportunities, really. So when we made the music videos and the songs and the posters with the young people from the project with care experienced children and young people, it was through an engagement seed corn fund; before, maybe 10 years ago, if someone went to their funding board and said, 'Oh, I've got a great idea. I've done this research – you're going to love it. I'm going to make rap songs and some music videos', they would have been like, 'No, I think you will not have any of our university money for this'. But now there's such a pressure that you've got to get the message out, and people listen and receive and act on messages in lots of different ways, so now we've got some freedom to work with people outside of academia who know how to get messages over to diverse audiences.

Creative research methods, teaching, visual methods of knowledge transfer rather than just text-based systems: have you employed or shared these creative research methods in your teaching too?

Yes, I have. In my teaching I use visual images a lot. They get people's attention. I also try and teach things to make students more socially aware, so often we'll get students and they don't know about the troubles in Northern Ireland, or sometimes Apartheid, and they're just like ooh, we don't know what that is. That's really a problem, because I think if students don't know about these socio-political histories, we keep on making the same mistakes.

We do lots of interesting things with images. I also do a lot around terrorism and activism, so who is a terrorist and who decides? And who is an activist? So if you think about Apartheid, they were seen as terrorists. Now they're seen as activists, and people who changed things. We try and see things from different perspectives, and I try and get them to engage with the media. I say to them, you know, watch a story on Sky News, watch it on the BBC News, watch it on Al Jazeera, and watch it on RT [formerly Russia Today]. What are the different

messages? What are the different things that are filmed? Why do you think the way you think you do about particular people?

We do a lot on poverty, and often university students are very careful to be politically correct, but we do one on images and some of the students in the seminar say 'what did you think when you saw the image?' And the students will be very polite, but one student will always say what they really thought. And there's one who says 'oh, I thought they'd look like little chavs', and the other students were like 'Huh!'. But then you ask, why do you think that? How is it mediated? What does Benefits Street do? What do all those things do?

I also teach them the power, and also the danger, of visual images. Who do young people want to look like, and does anyone really look like that? What about photo-shopping? Is that a real person? So I use the visual a lot.

I use it in assessment as well, so I didn't want to do modules that are full of visual images, and then say right, go and write me a 3,000 word essay. So what I get them to do in their essays is, they all choose an original image that they found somewhere, and use different theories to read it, and think about how you read it from the constraints of your own culture and politics.

Then I also get them to make something, which they're really resistant to, because they're sort of 'we're not making anything. It's not…you know, don't you know who we are? We're students, we want academic textbooks'. So I say now you're going to make something, and not only do they have to make it, they have to show other people. Because I think if you're doing visual research – or from when I do projects, if I'm asking someone to make a map of their lives, or to build something – you've really got to do it yourself, and you've got to show other people for people to look at something you've made.

The students make place and space maps of their everyday lives, and then they discuss them with others in the group and talk about the process. So even though they all hate me when I say we're going to do this, by the end of the module, when they've done it, they're always quite excited by it, and say why didn't we do more of this earlier? And in their dissertations, nearly all the students I supervise use some form of visual data production.

But with my PhDs, I'm also pushing now for them to consider what they're doing at the end: you've got this big, huge PhD thesis. How else are you going to get it out? Could you get it out visually, or with music? How is this going to make a difference?

Could you say a bit about being a member of the Creative Cardiff Research Network?

The Creative Cardiff Research Network I saw online, so I saw that something was going on. I had an email. I emailed Johann who works there. He got back

to me. Because when I saw the word creative, and Cardiff, I was, you know, obviously interested because of my work. I was like 'Oh, yes!', somebody else is doing something else apart from writing articles and being fixed in the written world. So I thought it was really interesting, and then I got to meet all the people who work in the team, and when I had a book launch for my *Visual Methods* book we came together and had some really interesting speakers.

I think the important thing about that network is that before people sort of think oh, no one else is doing anything creative. People are in different schools, but we don't know about each other. So even though we're all Cardiff University, it's quite fragmented in that way. So one of the real assets of having that network is knowing that there's somebody in the Business School, or the School of Music, or Sciences, that's also thinking how they can use creative or visual materials with their participants, but also as tools of dissemination. I think as things are taking off, it's really good to have a network, because you can have advice. Because I think that's what I really struggled with. So when I started using it as a research method it wasn't so bad. I could trial things out and see what worked for me, and make my children do things. I could just sort of test things out. When it's dissemination, there's money involved. You've got to make a product. You can't try things out. So when I first had to make films, and I was like oh my God, I don't what to do, and the guy was like oh, well it's normally so many seconds per word, or so…I didn't even know. I didn't even know the discourse of filmmaking, and it was a real challenge to say how do you get all these days of footage into five-minute films?

But I think if there had been the network, and someone else had made films before, I could have met them for coffee, they could have said yeah, when you do your films this, this, this and this. So we got some great films made, but we probably could have got some greater films made if I'd known more. The network can be really supportive in that way, and hopefully, you know, when I've done things and people are doing things for the first time in the network, I'll be able to say don't do it that way, that doesn't work, or this worked really well, or these are great people. So like, you know, Ministry of Life are great, I'd work with them again. I think you can share links, you can share experiences, you can share how you get funding, and how you word things to get funding so people can get the sense of importance and impact.

I think it was really needed, this network, and it's a growing network and it's one that will support lots of researchers across disciplines, and the local creative industries, to work together and produce better work that has a greater impact.

On that note, can you tell us a little bit about the event held with Creative Cardiff on 'Visual Research Methods – Working with Creatives'?

When I was meeting with the team in Creative Cardiff, we talked about my book, because it's Visual Narrative and Creative Research Methods, so it's sort

of in line with the theme of the network, and I'd been so busy because I'd been working on the other project with care experienced children that the book had gone. It had sort of come out, and nothing had happened. I'd just been too busy. And Johann said do you want to work together on a launch? Which was fantastic, because we worked together. I got funding from my school, Johann got funding from the network, and we were able then to do a really nice event in the evening and draw on the connections in the network, so then I met people from other schools.

There were people there who'd made a magazine of cartoons to get science ideas across, and people from the School of English, Communication and Philosophy. There were all these other people who were using visual, and it was a nice space for people to get together. The largest majority of people at the launch were people that I didn't know before, which was great. So rather than me sort of doing something through my own networks, I met a lot of new people at that launch, and we had people from across disciplines in the University, from other universities, from Welsh Government – a lot of interest from Welsh Government. So it's not only people in academia seeing changes. It's also people in Welsh Government who want to give more space for the voices of young people, think about different ways to ask questions, think about different ways to get policy out.

It was a really interesting event, and the places filled really quickly as well. And I think this, again, shows that there's a real need for something about creative methods, about the visual, about photo-elicitation, all these things. There's more and more interest but there's not necessarily enough events or vision. So I think the event selling out so fast, and the audience that it attracted, really cemented the idea that a lot more people are getting interested in working creatively.