
PLACE WORK KNOWLEDGE

Investigating London's creative economy: A word on research methods

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Investigating London's creative economy: A word on research methods

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Abstract:

This paper is about the research methods used by Creativeworks London's Place Work Knowledge (PWK) research strand in developing a number of case studies investigating the creative economy in parts of London. The PWK research strand focuses on some of the processes that drive and sustain London's creative and cultural economy with a focus on the places, spaces and practice of this activity. It adopted an ethnographic approach in order to develop a deeper understanding of what is seen as a number of creative 'Communities of Practice' in various parts of primarily east London. This paper is a reflection of the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods used.

1.0 Introduction:

This paper is about research methods. Specifically, it looks at the methods used to investigate characteristics of London's creative economy - focusing primarily on the activities of creative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)¹. The research was conducted as part of Creativeworks London's (CWL) Place Work Knowledge (PWK) research strand's activities². The PWK research strand focuses on some of the processes that drive and sustain London's creative and cultural economy - in particular on the places, spaces and practice of this activity.

Through the use of qualitative methods the PWK strand has built a robust picture of creative activity in parts of primarily east London. This was done by focusing specifically on creative SMEs (Pratt and Virani, 2015; Virani and Banks, 2014), knowledge exchange (Pratt, 2014; Virani, 2014; Virani and Pratt, 2016) and creative workspaces identified as 'creative hubs' (Virani and Malem, 2015). It has adopted an approach that uses the theoretical construct of 'Communities of Practice' (CoP)³ to frame the creative ecology in this part of London⁴. The PWK strand's approach reflects the diversity and changing nature of east London's creative and cultural economy, including the pivotal role of

¹ See Pratt and Virani (2015) for a detailed look at 'Creative SMEs'.

² Creativeworks London (CWL) is a four year (2012 – 2016) AHRC-funded knowledge exchange project based at Queen Mary University of London. Its primary aim is to facilitate collaborations between researchers, creative entrepreneurs and businesses as well as to explore the issues that impact on London's creative economy. This was done through the establishment of three research strands: the Place Work Knowledge (PWK) strand; Capturing London's Audiences (CLA) research strand and London's Digital Economy (DE) research strand. For more information go to: www.creativeworkslondon.org.uk/

³ Communities of Practice (CoP) theory is mainly a social theory of learning (Wenger, 1998); many of us belong to a CoP in some shape or form. Being in a band, being a strategist for a telecommunications company or being a fireman encompass being in a CoP (Ibid) because they all include some element of learning and practice in order to be part of the community. For more on CoPs see: Lave and Wenger (1991); Amin and Roberts (2008).

⁴ This will be discussed in more detail in later papers.

educational institutions, public and curatorial institutions and extra-institutional clusters of creative activity. Central to capturing this diversity and building this picture was the PWK's methodological approach - which is the topic of this paper.

The primary aim here is to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used to conduct research into the creative sector in east London, understood as creative CoPs. By doing so it is hoped that this working paper can act as a useful resource to any future study of creative SMEs that are embedded in place and micro-localities.

Importantly, this paper will not discuss the research findings in any real depth, which are the topics of supplementary research papers and outputs⁵.

This paper will:

- Provide an overview of the research conducted.
- Look at the ethics approval process.
- Provide justification for using ethnographic methods in this case.
- Justify the use of the case study method.
- Explain the use of interviews and observation.
- Explain the use of 'snowball sampling' and what data collection entailed.
- Conclude with a reflection on the research design.

2.0 Overview of the research:

The research is three pronged: it firstly, investigates the process of knowledge exchange between universities and creative SMEs through understanding how they collaborate. Secondly, it looks at important place-based centres of creative and cultural activity, specifically 'creative hubs'. Thirdly, leading from the work on creative hubs, it investigates the role of creative and cultural workspace as a tool (or not) for renewal and urban redevelopment.

The research has started to provide an understanding of the dynamism of London's creative sector, but more importantly it focuses on what is viewed as the practice of the creative and cultural sector:

- how it is nurtured (through spaces like hubs)
- what challenges it faces (such as rising rents)
- the importance of access to knowledge pools (such as universities)
- the nuances of cultural and creative work (especially within new types of workspace)
- the importance of policy
- the importance of building and curating real networks (both informally and formally).

This work called for a broad spectrum approach that could focus on micro processes while at the same time capturing what this means on a macro and policy level. In order to do this the project included a suite of case studies which sought to address the challenge of contributing to insights into what makes London a world leader regarding its many creative sectors and sub-sectors. A central concern was around the contextual significance of place, work organisation and knowledge and how

⁵ See: Virani and Banks (2014), Virani and Malem (2015), Virani and Pratt (2016).

subsequent and iterative interactions and innovations sustain the creative economy. In light of this a number of specific lines of enquiry were developed in order to find out from participants what they regard as relevant and critical knowledge as well as how this knowledge is codified (if at all) and circulated (if at all) and within/and by which means. The reason behind this was to understand the ingredients that might make up collaborative creative work.

The research progressed via a number of case studies that all shared the characteristic of being rooted in a particular place and institution with a network of firms, workers, students, policymakers and other actors. We sought to both describe and define the networks/communities - as well as to investigate how they are mobilised by participants. Initially we had a number of case studies planned, however as time went on, these locations changed for reasons that will be discussed later (see Table 2).

3.0 Ethics approval

The project received ethics approval on November 13th 2012 and the fieldwork began in earnest in January 2013. Seeking ethics approval from Queen Mary University of London was critical, and only then could the research commence. Ethics approval was granted for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the initial research was necessarily exploratory and user driven, therefore a number of routes to access had to be established. Existing partners already brokered by the project were asked to assist in providing gateways to relevant firms, individuals and networks - if possible. In order to capitalise on this, at gatekeeper, network and individual stages, informed consent was sought with a standard letter which did four things: (1) outlined the project, (2) stated the fact that information would be anonymised in any subsequent report(s), (3) allowed for project withdrawal at any time and (4) provided access to any online versions of the final reports. Importantly, sometimes signed consent was not feasible – such as during ad hoc and sporadic interviews. In these instances consent was sought by asking the interviewees to consent after telling them of the four points above – especially making sure that they knew they would be anonymised for the purposes of this research. This consent was recorded during the interview process.

Secondly, the research questions were open-ended and exploratory but did not warrant any ethical concerns according to the ethics committee because they revolved around attempting to understand practice and how this relates to place. The research questions were:

- What do participants/actors regard as relevant and critical knowledge in their creative practice?
- How is this knowledge codified and protected (or not)?
- How is it circulated and managed?
- By which means is it codified/circulated?
- Describe the relevant networks/communities.
- Explore how networks are mobilised by participants.
- What is the nature of their creative practice, and how has it changed?
- Barriers to execution of creative practice.
- Nature of creative practice organisation and its governance?

- What is the importance of locale and clustering regarding a creative sector?

Thirdly, the project used a variety of already established data-collection techniques including interviews and observation. None of the questions that were asked, or the topics discussed, were of a psychologically sensitive or traumatic nature; we were aware of our duty of care towards participants.

Fourthly, data collected was archived on a single hard drive and password protected under the primary responsibility of the primary researcher, but with access granted to the Principal Investigator and Co-Investigators on this project. It is the intention to destroy the original archive after final exploitation of the corpus for the project and to offer the archive to the appropriate data archive after the end of the project.

4.0 Ethnography:

The rationale for using ethnography here can be stated simply. Its objective is to display the social organisation of activities, as they are revealed, through involvement in the natural setting of the activity (David, 2008). As the objective was to examine how it is that creative SMEs sustain themselves in London, their social organisation - including their practice - was important to understand. This has been expressed in a number of ways including seeing 'community' from the social actor's point of view.

Ethnographic fieldwork is a powerful way to open up and extend the understanding of how human beings live in the world (David and Sutton, 2004). It is important to recognise it as a relational approach to social life, where the researcher is fully connected. Unlike some methods, ethnography is not a technique that can be first mastered and then applied; this is due to the fact that every ethnographic study is unique because what the researcher is seeking is rich and texturised information describing a specific type of human praxis (Ibid). In this sense ethnography is not something that somebody else can easily do for you, and the empirical, the analytical and the theoretical are intertwined from the start (Ibid). This means that the activities that are occurring and being researched by the ethnographer are being given a platform for display through the ethnographer's eyes and his/her understanding. This undoubtedly has positive and negative effects. The key theoretical aims of ethnographic work are threefold. First, to clarify any relational dynamics of a group in order to describe and interpret cultural behaviour; second, to investigate the spaces of cultural interaction; third, to define a different world view (or world views) as defined by the group (David, 2008). With regards to the research here this meant: examining the practice of collaborative creative work by London's creative SMEs, examining the places where this practice happens, and to define the pertinent and relevant stocks of knowledge (including their world view) that allow these enterprise communities to grow and in some cases thrive.

The concept of CoP best describes the theoretical elements of the research across all case studies. This is because the case studies were usually places of work (in one form or another) as well as places of (usually) informal and (sometimes) formal learning. The micro-processes that encompass creative work for micro-enterprises, although quite substantially different with respect to sub sectors, were remarkably similar across the case studies. These included many similar characteristics such as notions of: learning, trust, failure, precariousness, mobility and a host of other features and

other processes. Therefore it was important to use a research methodology that allowed for the capturing of these dynamic processes; ethnographic methods allow for this.

A justification for the use of ethnographic methods, and this is a justification after the fact, is because of their effectiveness in studying CoPs. According to Lorenz and Barlatier (2007 pp. 9) the seminal research on Communities of Practice privileged the use of ethnographic methods due to their strengths (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Orr, 1996). These strengths include ethnography's effectiveness in capturing 'the locally situated nature of learning including the way social arrangements and artefacts serve to mediate processes of knowledge exchange and co-operation in the performance of distributed tasks' (Lorenz and Barlatier, 2007 pp. 9). Since CoPs are close-knit communities where 'people can learn together through both formal and informal participation in a range of shared practices' (Pinch et al, 2011 pp. 379) which was the case here, it strengthens the justification of using this as a research approach. For example, Orr's (1996) study of field technicians who were responsible for mending photocopiers found that the 'circulation of stories among technicians is a principal means through which they stay abreast of the knowledge about the subtleties of their machines' (Orr, 1996 in Lorenz and Barlatier, 2007 pp. 9). Therefore, 'the process of recounting stories can serve to mobilise the collective knowledge of the community and provide essential insights for problem-solving activities' (Ibid). Orr discovered this through field visits, attending meetings and eating lunch with the technicians. This allowed for an insider's understanding of work within this community (Ibid). Other methods may not have been able to yield the same results.

Additionally, another study that elevates the use of ethnography to study CoPs is Wenger's (1998) work on claim processors working at a health insurance company – this was a classic study that led to an explosion of CoP related research in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Lorenz and Barlatier (pp. 9) posit that it is difficult to see how Wenger could have provided useful characterisations of the nature of the daily work of the claim processors if he had not used ethnographic methods. Wenger compiled a list of key characteristics (which still characterise the milestone of CoP research today) for identifying Communities of Practice in his influential study of the claim processing employees (see Table 1).

Table 1: Key characteristics of a Community of Practice

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sustained mutual relationships - harmonious or conflictual. - Shared ways of engaging in doing things together. - The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation. - Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process. - Very quick set-up of a problem to be discussed. - Substantial overlap in participants' descriptions of who belongs. - Knowing what others know, what they can do and how they can contribute to an enterprise. - Mutually defining identities. - The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products. - Specific tools, representations, and other artefacts. - Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter. - Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones. - Certain styles recognised as displaying membership. - A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world. |
|--|

Source: Compiled from Wenger (1998, pp. 125–126) in Amin and Roberts, (2008 pp. 354).

According to Lorenz and Barlatier (2007 pp. 9) 'ethnographic methods are more suited than others to capturing the locally contextualised nature of practice' although they do acknowledge that limitations exist. First, there is the problem of generalising from the results of specific case studies (Ibid). Second, ethnographic methods can be less cost efficient for capturing certain relevant dimensions of CoP. Third, it may be difficult to characterise the wider institutional context in which localised practice is situated, for instance the workings of Communities of Practice theory in multinational corporations. Fourth, virtual communities that depend on distanced communication may prove difficult to engage with when using methods that look for sociological structures based on co-location and face-to-face interaction. Fifth, direct observation and involvement in the activities of CoP may be impractical as a method for capturing longer-term dynamics (Ibid).

5.0 Case Studies:

In case study research the questions are targeted to a limited number of events or conditions and their inter-relationships (Yin, 1994). This is because it is important to keep one's research as focused as possible in order to make sure that it stays within the boundaries of what actually contextualises the case. This is done through an evaluation of the types of questions asked and of the research method the researcher wants to use to ask these questions (in this particular case open-ended interviews were used). To assist in targeting and formulating the questions, information was drawn from a review of the literature on: Communities of Practice, creative hubs, incubators, innovation, knowledge exchange and creative clusters. This established what research had previously been conducted on creative work in micro-localities and helped to refine questions about the research focus. This being said this particular research was also exploratory, which meant that the research questions had to be open-ended enough to capture more than what might have been anticipated through the literature review. Also, while the concept of CoP being applied to creative industries research is not new and is evidenced in other literatures, an in-depth study into these new types of CoPs (namely, creative hubs and other types of creative work spaces) is scarce⁶.

A limitation of using case studies is that it can be difficult to gain access, as well as maintain relevance, as a research project unfolds - especially if there is an exploratory element to the study. Case studies are contingent on access to key people; if this access is not negotiated *ex ante* then the case study is at risk of not being realised. Creativeworks London's project had an initial number of case studies planned (see column one in Table 2). However, as it continued, it was found that some planned case studies were beginning to become irrelevant to the developing focus of the research or access was difficult to gain. Moreover, some case studies were not defined enough and therefore it became difficult to envisage who the key people were in order to gain access.

The first two case studies were conducted without any substantial issues and in fact set the tone for the emergent research themes for the duration of the study. This was because the PWK research strand had initially negotiated access with both of them before the beginning of the project. The third, fourth, sixth, and seventh initial case studies were not realised, primarily because access was not negotiated and finalised beforehand. In one case the negotiation of access took over a year and

⁶ For some of the seminal work in this area see Cohendet and Simon (2007), Gertler (2008), McLeod et al (2011).

at the end of that year it was decided to abandon that particular case study because the end of the project loomed. Regarding the realised case studies the third, fourth and sixth case studies emerged due to them being connected to the first and second case studies. They were connected through networks of Communities of Practice and 'Communities of Interest'.

Thus an important component of conducting case study work - especially if the research plans to compare and consolidate a number of case studies - is to negotiate access before the research begins. This is especially salient if the research is going to be conducted using ethnographic approaches. This should also include a timetable of research that is strictly adhered to. Importantly, the changing nature of the case studies did not affect the ethics approval process as long as what was stated in the ethics approval letter was adhered to – especially with regards to granting anonymity.

Table 2: Contrasting initial case studies with those that were realised in order of activity

<i>Initial Case Studies</i>	<i>Realised Case Studies</i>
1.A fashion incubator located within a fashion college	1.A fashion incubator located within a fashion college
2.An undergraduate fashion programme	2.An undergraduate fashion programme
3.King's Cross	3.Hackney – Mare Street
4.Shoreditch	4.Shoreditch - Silicon Roundabout
5.Dalston	5.Poplar / regeneration project
6.Hackney Wick	6.Ilford / community art project
7.Holborn (Cancelled)	

6.0 Interviews and observation:

Extended in-depth interviews were the primary research tool used to gather data about the case studies. In total 103 interviews were conducted across six case studies commencing in mid-2013 and ending in early 2016. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to two hours. The interviews were conducted with consent and each of the 103 respondents has been anonymised for the purposes of this research. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed later for analysis. This was the primary fieldwork component of the research strand.

The purpose of using interviews was to build an in-depth profile of creative work in order to understand how these Communities of Practice actually worked. Moreover, as stated earlier, using ethnographic tools such as interviews work well when investigating Communities of Practice (Lorenz and Barlatier, 2007). These interviews were open-ended in nature with a few probing questions when there was a lull in the conversation. The interviews were purposely conversational for two reasons. Firstly, it was important to make an interview not feel like an interview - this usually results in respondents holding back. The second reason revolved around allowing respondents the freedom to talk about whatever they wished to talk about without placing topic boundaries, irrespective of the particular research. Disturbing the flow of an interaction and keeping to rigid boundaries might have inadvertently created an atmosphere of distrust, especially since the research was exploratory. Observational techniques were also used during case studies two, three and four. This including the

attendance of 'crits', mock fashion shows, as well as 'hanging out' in co-working spaces and studios during important events such as London Fashion Week in order to understand the real importance of hub managers and how these spaces are used. Identifying respondents to interview happened in two ways; either they were provided by the institutions/organisations that were being researched or they were identified through snowball sampling where sometimes ad hoc interviews occurred. Where access was negotiated early, the respondents were chosen by those individuals tasked to assist the PWK strand with the research. This was the case with regards to the first and second case studies. The first case study involved interviews with burgeoning fashion designers, incubator managers and established designers using the incubator's services. The second case study involved interviews with students and tutors of a respected educational institution. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth case studies were not part of the initial roster, as stated earlier, therefore interview respondents were chosen in a more ad hoc manner more in line with snowball sampling.

7.0 Snowball sampling and data collection:

Snowball sampling's strength lies in its ability to uncover hidden populations (Heckathorn, 1997). Snowball sampling may simply be defined as '[a] technique for finding research subjects. One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on' (Vogt, 1999). The snowball sampling technique has strengths and weaknesses. Its main strength is that it allows the researcher to create a list of potential research subjects where such a list may not have been available previously (Heckathorn, 1997). This became evident for the PWK strand's researcher as, during the interview process, increasingly more people were suggested as potential interviewees. One of the limitations of snowball sampling in this case was that some interviewees were less relevant to the research than initially thought - however they still provided the research with usable data despite not being completely pertinent to it. It was found that links existed between the first case study and the third one - through respondents and wider networks. This allowed the research to move quite nicely from one to another - although negotiating access was still time consuming. Many respondents from the first case study also had dealings with the third case study, which justified pursuing it as a case study.. Similarly the third case study had strong links to the fourth one, which also allowed the research to transition well. The fifth case study emerged from an existing link between the organisation and Queen Mary University of London. It was brought into the overarching study because it highlighted the importance of regeneration policy; however there also existed links between this and the third case study. The final case study emerged as a link through Queen Mary University of London's Enterprise Development team and it also deals with regeneration and cultural policy which was relevant to the study's emerging research findings.

Collection of data was conducted by analysing the in-depth interviews as well as taking stock of what was observed at some of the sites. The interviews yielded a great deal of information which meant highlighting relevant and pertinent information and themes was critical to the analysis. Analysis is ongoing, however it mainly entails the identification of themes in the interview transcripts. These themes are being collated in order to paint a texturised picture of the practice of creative work by creative SMEs as well as how policy affects them.

8.0 Conclusion:

The objective of the PWK research strand was to investigate the processes that drive and sustain London's creative and cultural economy with a focus- in particular on the places, spaces and the practice of this activity. It was discovered that London does extremely well due to the existence of creative Communities of Practice embedded in place and made up primarily of creative SMEs⁷. By using ethnographic methods the research was able to identify how co-dependency of knowledge and its 'exchange' in collaboration - as well as its sensitivity to context (particular creative practices, markets, and locations) - allows for the establishment of creative communities. This includes pertinent and relevant knowledge about issues such as property dynamics and housing policy as well as social organisation and the maintenance of workplace. The capturing of these types of nuanced and multidimensional characteristics of practice and work would not have been possible using other methods. The combination of ethnographic methodologies (in-depth, open-ended interviews and observation) allowed this. It was also open enough to tie in unanticipated case studies where initially planned case studies did not come to fruition. This was tremendously useful as it allowed the research to take shape in a way that was highly relevant and therefore not prescribed - this also had associated problems which are discussed later. Essentially the research allowed insight into 'live' knowledge exchange as it captured what was affecting enterprise-based creative communities in the here and now - it also gave a clear indication of the boundaries between communities and who they are. The research methodology adopted here was attuned to the challenges of the co-construction of meanings and values and sensitivity to networks, institutions and places - hallmarks of the issues that surround creative Communities of Practice and communities of interest. It is for these reasons and more that an ethnographic style of analysis has proven extremely effective.

This being said there were some challenges associated with the research design. This primarily involved the case study methodology. Although the method of using case studies is sound, a number of issues soon arose as a result of not having access negotiated beforehand. Gaining access to research subjects is by far one of the most challenging aspects of conducting ethnographic work, and not planning for this before undertaking a large case study-based project can sometimes be problematic. By not having access right at the beginning of the study the researcher must build trust from square one, before the case study can begin. This usually begins with the backing of an institution however, when researching tight-knit communities, this is sometimes not good enough. Thus it can take a long time, which can hinder the progress of the entire project. Regarding this particular research, the fact that access was negotiated for two out of the six case studies, also allowed for an exploratory approach to developing new case studies - which allowed the research to become tremendously relevant and timely. In this case it worked in the research project's favour.

⁷ This being said many of these places are under threat due to rising property prices and short-term leases. This is the topic of a forthcoming paper due for publication in 2017.

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