

**Project Title: Littoral Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Project.**

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### **Introduction & Project Aims**

The purpose of the Higher Education Funding Council Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund was specifically to foster research informed teaching practice within the academy, whereby students at any level in a Higher Education Institution would benefit from engaging directly with research theory, methodology, evidence and ideas. The Littoral Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund Project (Littoral TQEF) was established in 2007 to take forward cross disciplinary work in Arts and other subjects (dealing specifically with the marine and terrestrial edge and more broadly the link between theory and praxis in Arts). This work built directly on 'Littoral' – a practice based research area within the umbrella of the Land/Water and the Visual Arts Research Group<sup>1</sup>. The project was seen as an opportunity to obtain seed corn funding for medium term development of a Littoral Archive (under production as a compact disc, forming the outputs of the project) and, longer term, providing the opportunity to put together a travelling exhibition.

The aim of the project was therefore to capture quality teaching materials by supporting a wide range of events and activities connected with developing opportunities for dialogue between researchers and postgraduates in the University community, and specifically to develop these for subsequent dissemination. This was intended to support teaching of MRes students in the Land/Water and Visual Arts Research Group, who are often using practice based research techniques and also to provide materials which would be applicable to MA and potentially final year undergraduates. The following events form the basis of the Littoral Archive.

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<sup>1</sup> Littoral started as a 'Site, Space, Location, Place' event involving the hiring of a base at Exmouth Docks for three months in 1998. The concept was open – anyone in the Faculty was able to use the space in any way they wanted – with Littoral simply providing the focus for co-ordination, funding and collaboration in terms of experimental space. This proved fruitful in terms of allowing new forms to emerge, for example Chris Cook's Sand Drawings. The 'Exmouth documenta' formed an archive of the work - people talking about their own practice, and led to a subsequent touring that went to other maritime spaces – Germany, Isle of Wight - forming a growing dialogue between academia and practice and a resulting network of participation over a number of years. This included a PhD studentship and subsequent reincarnation as the Land/Water Research Group in the Faculty of Arts.

1. **Littoral Dialogues I**, was held in May 2007 and provided an opportunity to review existing arts research practices in known areas of collaborative work<sup>2</sup>. Six projects were presented and discussed at the day's seminar. This event was open to invited researchers with a known interest in 'Littoral', but in practice attracted an arts audience, with the exception of three presenters from other disciplines. This resulted in a discussion about the work produced, rather than a discussion about cross disciplinary work, with the underlying questioning of what collaboration was doing to the quality of the art. This position was contrasted in two of the seminar paper's concerned with collaborative teaching projects which spanned the arts and another discipline. A paper by James Gray McDonald examined depth learning that took place in an intensive, immersive field study which allowed students to 'drag the scientific and analytical self out of the comfort zone' and reflectively examine a real world case study. A paper by Hywel Evans and Chris Hall similarly discussed the value of collaborative science- arts engagement, and demonstrated how a successful multi-disciplinary partnership relies on informal as well as formal processes, in particular on shared values and enjoyment, 'knitting ideas' together through on-going discussion and development.
2. **LTHE551 Teaching Research**, an optional module on the Higher Education Academy approved Learning and Teaching in Higher Education run by EDALT at the University of Plymouth, was attended by Sue Blackburn in the summer term of 2008. This module set in context the research and teaching debate in the academy as a whole and allowed some of the interdisciplinary methodology to find expression in the form of an essay<sup>3</sup>.
3. **'Reflections on Green Infrastructure in Plymouth, UK: Green Lungs & Countryside Access, Approaches to Nature and Place'**, Rural Futures Conference, April 2008, involved a joint 'work in progress' exhibition and conference paper on Littoral TQEF<sup>4</sup>, based on an exploration of the Plymouth Urban Fringe and its relationship to the Tamar Estuary. This connected praxis between the principals (Liz Nicol and Sue Blackburn) in Littoral TQEF and helped to uncover the awkward nature of collaboration. The focus of the exercise was an immersive experience (a walk) followed by reflection, and photographic and written work. The resulting exhibition led to some fruitful

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<sup>2</sup> Blackburn S 2007 Littoral Dialogues I, 30 May 2007, University of Plymouth.

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn S 2008 Reflecting on Research and Teaching in an Interdisciplinary Context. Essay for LTHE551, University of Plymouth.

<sup>4</sup> Blackburn S & Nicol L 2008 Reflections on Green Infrastructure in Plymouth, UK: green lungs & countryside access, approaches to nature and place. Rural Futures Conference 2008 Dreams, Dilemmas, Dangers. University of Plymouth.

discussion with other members of the Land /Water and Visual Arts Group about the nature of the work, demonstrating how practice based research for a number of the artists in that group focuses on the visual work itself rather than focusing exclusively on underlying theoretical frameworks and methodologies. The work can therefore be seen as a statement by the artist in response to their existing body of practice.

4. **‘Reflecting on Cross Disciplinary Collaborations: the planner’s world and the artist – work in progress’**<sup>5</sup>, a presentation by Sue Blackburn and Liz Nicol was given at Methods@ Plymouth 2008. This work was also based on the immersive experience of the walk in the Tamar estuary and addressed the process of collaboration, and was intended to show social science colleagues the approach used in arts practice. It prompted further discussion with social science colleagues associated with an interdisciplinary bid to the collective research councils ‘New Dynamics of Aging’ programme, and has now gone forward as a Leverhulme bid. The pattern of developing informal dialogue associated with the Littoral TQEF has been an important approach in terms of building understanding between fundamentally different types of research praxis.

5. **‘Littoral Dialogues II, Research through Practice - Exploring Consciousness’** built on the research as practice element within the Faculty of Arts, and was centred on ‘Scribing the Soul’, a touring exhibition of the work of Susan Aldworth, shown at Peninsula Arts, University of Plymouth 7-18 July 08<sup>6</sup>. This body of work was based on active examination of the nature of consciousness, collaborating with a variety of doctors, neuroscientists, neuropsychologists and artists, to experience first-hand, some thirty brain scans.

Littoral Dialogues II was an all day symposium featuring a variety of cross disciplinary research from science, technology and arts, explicitly focusing on aspects of consciousness and the body/mind<sup>7</sup>. For example this included talks by Paul Broks, a Neuropsychologist based at Plymouth University, and extracts of a documentary film he produced with filmmaker Ian Knox – *Martino*

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<sup>5</sup> Blackburn S & Nicol L 2008 Reflecting on Cross Disciplinary Collaborations: the planner’s world and the artist – work in progress<sup>5</sup>. Methods@ Plymouth 2008, 15-16 May 2008, School of Law & Social Science, University of Plymouth.

<sup>6</sup> Aldworth S 2008 Scribing the Soul. Exhibition Catalogue. The Creative Group.

<sup>7</sup> Chapman S 2008 Report on the symposium: Research Through Practice: Exploring Consciousness, Peninsula Arts, University of Plymouth, 19<sup>th</sup> June 2008.

*Unstrung* – which depicts the story of brain damaged jazz guitar virtuoso, Pat Martino (Sixteen Films, 2008). It also included a presentation of the *Fragmented Orchestra*, a sonic arts work by John Matthias, Jane Grant and Nick Ryan, in partnership with The Local. The work replicates the pattern of neurones firing in the brain in order to bring together for a unique performance a variety of sound bites from 24 locations across the UK. A 5 minute documentary taster of the event was made for the VC's Teaching and Learning Conference 2008 (<http://video.plymouth.ac.uk/tvb/24-06-08TasteofLittoral.wmv>).

Littoral Dialogues II was followed by a focus group for eight postgraduate students invited to the event, where the nature of interdisciplinary collaboration was discussed. This resulted in both individual and group feedback, from taught and research based Masters or PhD students. A feature of the feedback was the clear distinction in the level of understanding about the nature of research by these two groups, and the higher level of awareness of interdisciplinary study evident from the students involved in research from the technology area.

6. **ICIA TALK: Anne Tallentire & Mike Crang in Conversation**, 9 Oct 08. The programme of study associated with the interdisciplinary MRes Landscape award was launched in Oct 08 with its first student. Certain modules are shared with other students in the Faculty of Arts and this allows a cross disciplinary focus to be encouraged, whilst recognising that several of these MRes sister programmes are discipline specific. A visit was made to the Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts at the University of Bath, as part of MARE517 Contemporary Landscape Research, to see Anne Tallentire's photographic exhibition about place making in a migrant workers camp, and to hear a joint presentation by the artist and cultural geographer Prof Mike Crang. The latter commented on the selection of content of the images, and served to highlight the artist's role as the technical practitioner selecting and making the image. It raised the question of the purpose of disciplinary boundaries, and the apparent usefulness of interdisciplinary tendencies.
7. **Jem Southam, 'Clouds Descending', Lowrie Gallery, Manchester**, involved a series of large format photographic works made on the Cumbrian Coast between Maryport and Barrow - in - Furness, made in collaboration with other artists and a curator. Sue Blackburn made a visit to the exhibition and subsequently took a rail trip along the coast to better understand this ravaged landscape, based on mineral extraction, and steel smelting, now abandoned.

The critical difference between this exhibition by Southam and his preferred pattern of working relates to the amount of time he was able to spend in the field. This was reduced by virtue of distance and in order to compensate he entered into a new way of working, bringing a range of other people to share his time on site, making their own work. This involved Harriet Talo's land poetry; David Chandler's experience as an art critic and curator; and Matthew Southam's experience as an ornithologist. The approach was immersive rather than conceptual, involving extended periods of being together, walking coastal stretches selected in advance by Southam. A subsequent audio interview with Southam and Chandler in conversation, with the principals and with two MRes students reflects on what was gained or understood by the experience<sup>8</sup>. A further layer of reflection comes from two postgraduate research visits to 'Clouds Descending' and associated reports<sup>9</sup>

- 8. Land/ Water Research Group – collaboration.** The Land/Water and the Visual Arts Research Group draws on staff members from the School of Arts and Media and the School of Architecture & Design in the Faculty of Arts, and is well supported by postgraduate research students. The subject of research collaboration was discussed at a meeting in February 2009 by Liz Nicol and Stephen Vaughan. This can be seen as reflecting on the changing intergenerational views about interdisciplinary work – Vaughan representing the up and coming generation for whom doing global issue based work (climate change) with people from a range of disciplines is important (if only as a way of getting to remote places), compared to Nicol and Southam's focus on locality and intuitive awareness to capture images.
  
- 9. 'Framing Time and Place: Repeats and Returns in Photography'.** Littoral TQEF supported this major international conference at the University of Plymouth (15-17<sup>th</sup> April 2009) by meeting keynote speaker's travel expenses and ensuring that the full event was video recorded for subsequent dissemination as part of the Littoral Archive. The notion of rephotography in this context differs from conventional monitoring of land cover change by use of repeat aerial shots (including satellite imagery) by focusing in particular on returning to ground truth and orientating a repeat photograph of a particular view. This can be used to accurately measure changes in land cover – for example, change in gully erosion, built up area, etc, but most importantly, it can also allow aesthetic aspects to be explored and predicted or scenarioed – eg. day and night, past/present/future. The range of research models evidenced at the conference crossed the spectrum from Arts to Science, offering quantitative, qualitative and phenomenological elements. Most of the papers offered a perspective from established researchers, although some were from PhD candidates close to final submission. This allowed both cross-disciplinary and discipline specific work to be fruitfully held in tension during discussion.

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<sup>8</sup> The interview was recorded as an audio file and will be made available on compact disc as part of the Littoral Archive.

<sup>9</sup> Leonie Isherwood (studying MRes Photography) & Jason Hirons (studying MRes Landscape).

## **Observations and Findings on Interdisciplinarity through Littoral TQEF.**

Disciplines at the University of Plymouth are now fully co-located following from the 2002 restructuring. This gives fresh opportunities to examine the relationship between disciplinary and interdisciplinarity in a policy climate which turns attention to the knowledge economy and offers UoP a transition to becoming THE Enterprise University.

However, despite the popularity for interdisciplinarity in policy circles in the UK, encouraged by the Research Councils and the Higher Education Academy (Chettiparamb, 2007), it is not obvious that interdisciplinarity is easily embraced. Thew, in a recent study for the HEA Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Group, comments that 'most interdisciplinary programmes operate across institutional 'silos' (ie across different kinds of management and financial structures). For the most part HEI's are yet to recognise the infrastructural blocks faced by proponents of interdisciplinarity and have not found adequate ways of facilitating effective cross-institutional working, particularly at meso and micro levels' (Thew, 2007, p.1).

At the University of Plymouth there has been a recognition of the significance of interdisciplinary study, for example in relation to its adopted sustainability policy where there is explicit reference to the need to ensure that students sustainability understandings are developed and challenged from both within and beyond their chosen discipline (<http://csf.plymouth.ac.uk/files/UPSUSTPOLICY12.pdf> , accessed 15.6.08) This historical interest is not simply pedagogic, and dates from the 1970's period of review and questioning human impact on the environment. Unsurprisingly in UoP this agenda has been taken forward by key players with long standing environmental interests in the Centre for Sustainable Futures CETL in the form of founder fellows. This has resulted in the development of new curricular (for example a new modules 'Sustainability: Issues and Debates and Work-based Learning in Sustainable Environmental Management', for MRes/MSc in Sustainable Environmental Management). Nevertheless much of this has taken within schools or within faculties, rather than more broadly in a cross institutional manner. This is confirmed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Self Evaluation by the Centre for Sustainable Futures relating to Curriculum, Learning and Teaching, 'The Centre Fellowship scheme has overall proved productive in terms of curriculum development. In some cases it has proved less productive in terms of pedagogical innovation, in the orchestration and facilitation of CPD and in terms of effective formal and informal school and cross-University change agency and advocacy' and 'An Interdisciplinary Working Group CPD sub-group was formed in May 2006 but has met but once' <http://csf.plymouth.ac.uk/?q=node/451> , accessed, 15.6.08)

This suggests that there is still some work to be done to systematically unpick institutional tensions and barriers to interdisciplinary approaches.

Littoral TQEF was started because there was an on-going interest in working across marine science and arts, and the project provided the framework to foster development. However, in practice interdisciplinarity has not developed to new heights in the timeframe of the project, although the TQEF helped to map the terrain by supporting events and capturing discussions with many colleagues. The Littoral Archive will help to ensure that material from these discussions and presentations is more broadly accessible.

In-house, it would be easy to identify the on-going concern with the Research Assessment Exercise outcomes as underlying brake on interdisciplinarity during the TQEF project, alongside the on-going, slightly interruptive effects of institutional change. However, this is not to suggest that the reflective dialogues and conversations under the Littoral TQEF are inconclusive about the value of looking over the fence at a shared dilemma, or the value of appreciating the rich qualities of multiple views - indeed, the outputs of the project capture a variety of richly textured discussion.

There does not seem however, to be a universal interest in fully pulling together across the institution on interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary, or transdisciplinarity, in the rather neat and tidy constructions of environmental science. Rather it seems as if interdisciplinary observations occur just outside the conventions of scientific discourse, and are more meaningfully accessed in depth learning situations, where people are operating at the edge of their comfort zone, and are alert to group experiences. Operating in fact, in just the kind of situation described in Dialogues I, where a group of people spend a weekend together and walk a stretch of the coastal path.

