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A Short Report from the Core of Practice-Based Research

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Article abstract

This article is a short reflection on practice-based research from the core of practice, which includes a list of recent research hubs in Canada.

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A Short Report from the Core of Practice-Based Research

Teresa Connors

My experience obtaining my PhD with a creative component at the University of Waikato (2013–2017), one of the leading Mātauranga Māori centres in the Aotearoa (New Zealand), has dramatically shaped my perspective on practice-based research. The university consciously supports the creative and imaginative potential of education, embedding Mātauranga Māori across the curriculum.

Along with my postgraduate studies, I taught in the creative technology and practice stream for three years. My teaching experience was embedded in a practice-based learning environment that incorporates and recognizes knowledge and values foundational in Māori and Pacific cultures, where students have a strong sense of place, tūrangawaewae, and mana.

When I returned to Canada in 2017 for a postdoctoral research fellowship at Memorial University of Newfoundland, I was intensely aware of the differences in Canadian relationships with the Indigenous peoples of this country compared to the Māori and Pakeha (white people) relations in Aotearoa, New Zealand. I also became more aware of the difference in Canadian university approaches to practice-based research compared to Aotearoa, New Zealand. I believe that practice-based research (research-creation in Canada) has the capacity to support situated practices of diversity, forwarding postdualistic forms of research (Janssens and Steyaert 2019, 518). Having taught and studied in New Zealand, where the relations between Māori and Pakeha have evolved differently than the narrative of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, I have felt the deep worth of cultivating a more pluralistic society.

These experiences have greatly influenced my teaching approach and understanding of the pathways for different thinker-maker-doers. As a nonlinear and reflective thinker, I am sensitive to the challenges in academia and to those with alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Since joining Concordia University in Montreal as a part-time lecturer in the Department of Communications and the Department of Music in 2020, I have engaged in many conversations to rethink and recontextualize how practice-based research methodology can help (1) broaden research practices that are agile enough to include diverse thinking-in-the-making processes; (2) broaden the capacity for decolonizing pedagogical practices; and (3) expand diversity and engage different socio-economic, ethnic, and gender groups to create a broader pool of thought processes and worldviews.

The following list of four newer research hubs in Canada stands out to me for asking tough questions in the best way possible while actively challenging long-standing belief systems that exclude members of society and others (nonhumans).

Teresa Connors is active as a composer, sonic artist, creative coder, and vocal performer. Her works have received awards and support, including from the International Classical Music Awards, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council. Her research has been presented at international conferences, film festivals, and galleries, and published in leading journals. She lectures in the Departments of Music and Communication Studies at Concordia University.

The List:

1. Located at Memorial University of Newfoundland, CLEAR, the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research, “is a feminist, anti-colonial laboratory, which means our methods foreground values of humility, equity, and good land relations” (CLEAR, n.d.a). Founder and director of CLEAR, Max Liboiron writes: “Methodology is a way of being in the world. An ethic, if you like that word better. There are colonial ways to be in the world, whether intentionally or otherwise, and there are less colonial and anti-colonial ways to be in the world” (Liboiron 2021, 36). The CLEAR Lab Book has been an influence for practice-based research projects around the globe that work toward creating anti-colonial teaching spaces, methods, and pedagogies (CLEAR, n.d.b).
2. Access in the Making (AIM) Lab. AIM is founded by Arseli Dokumaci, assistant professor of communication studies at Concordia University and Canada Research Chair in Critical Disability Studies and Media Technologies. AIM’s manifesto states that it is a “lab committed to disability justice and feminist citational practices, we are especially concerned that the intellectual labour of marginalized folks (including BIPOC, disabled artists, activists, scholars) and those occupying precarious positions in academia (graduate students, adjuncts, emerging scholars) are not properly (sometimes never) recognized” (AIM Lab 2022). AIM’s most recent practice-based projects include Body Bags; The Paradise Project; and Life of Fire: An Ethnography of Smoke, Flame, Ash, and Earth (AIM Lab, n.d.).
3. The Feminist Media Studio, located at Concordia University Loyola Campus, is a practice-based lab that “supports and critically engages the complexity of mediations of gendered and queer social life in the context of the unfinished histories of European and American empire, enslavement, and colonization. It supports collective and collaborative study, as well as activist, curatorial, and artistic engagements which draw from the political potency and aesthetic experimentation of feminist media practice. Such creative and critical aesthetic engagements are firmly located in the intersectional feminist politics of the contemporary moment, an age marked by the proliferation of new media that have radically reconstituted not only the character of visual culture but also its channels of transmission and circulation” (Feminist Media Studio, n.d.).
4. The Indigenous Decolonization Hub (Centre for Teaching and Learning, n.d.) and the Píkiskwétân “let’s talk” series (Indigenous Directions, n.d.) at Concordia University. These series of talks enable faculty members to reflect and move forward on “how [to] decolonize curriculum and pedagogical practices in meaningful and respectful ways” (Centre for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). A recent discussion opened the conversation on how practice-based research, as currently configured in Canada, does not afford space for postgraduate research that includes Indigenous community ways. To this effect, the Indigenous Futures Research Centre at Concordia University “is an environment where Indigenous methods for knowledge recovery, discovery, and transmission are respected, and where faculty can learn different Indigenous research frameworks from one another while educating students in those methods” (Indigenous Futures Research Centre, n.d.).

Being involved with these hubs as an active member, or taking workshops, or implementing into my course syllabus aspects of a manifesto, mission statements, or guideline protocols has improved my

capacity as a research-creation lecturer and practitioner to engage with the challenges we face in our time.

For me, then, it is only through creative research that I have the ability to be *in* the world on a level that feels connected and truthful to the things I care about—a sentiment shared by other creative practitioners (Pite 2017). Operating in such entangled configurations from the core of practice-based research, “the nature/culture dualism implodes and we’re all repositioned as participants in lively ecologies of meaning and value, entangled within rich patterns of cultural and historical diversity that shape who we are and the ways in which we are able to ‘become with’ others” (Van Dooren 2014, 8).

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