

# The Liminal Zone

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## 1. The beach (introduction)

The Liminal Zone project was a year-long mixed-methods research study funded by the Carnegie Trust for Scottish Universities. The project explored the seashore as a metaphor for the boundary between teaching and creative practice in order to investigate how creative arts teachers achieve synergies between their teaching and creative practice and how employers can support and empower them to do so. The study, carried out in 2021, aimed to understand how creative arts staff in universities and colleges balance their teaching responsibilities with their creative practice, and how teaching and art can be supported in order to nurture and complement one another.

### Research questions

The primary research question was: How can universities support synergies between teaching and creative practice of arts staff? Subsidiary questions were: What is the extent and nature of boundary crossing between creative and teaching practice by arts staff? and What insights can be generated from the inter-tidal zone as metaphor for the experience of the creative/teaching interface?

## 2. The seabed (theory)

The theoretical underpinning of this project begins with Wenger's work on boundary crossing in landscapes of practice. We have also drawn on methods and ideas from Arts-Based Research, in particular A/R/Tography and Tidalectics. Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of metaphor as a fundamental cognitive tool for the creation of reality is also key. A fully-referenced working paper which sets out this theoretical framework and gives much more information about the methodology and findings is available from the authors.

## 3. Tides (methodology)

This was a mixed methods action research project, involving four action research cycles: (1) an initial quantitative inquiry, followed by (2) a participatory qualitative (appreciative and arts-based) inquiry, then (3) triangulation and integration of data through creative, collaborative work, and finally (4) discussion and promotion of the results. The four-cycle action research methodology was highly effective, progressing from quantitative (survey), through qualitative (dialogue), onto creative (art) and finally institutional (impact) research.

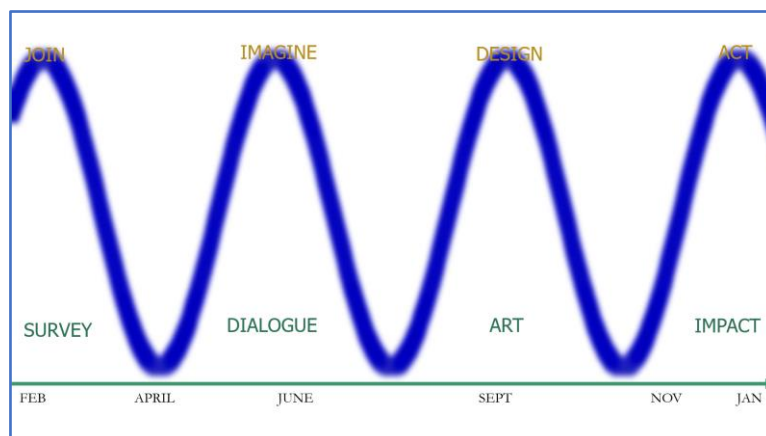


Figure 1: Action research methodology, conceived as a tidal cycle

Each cycle was conceived of tidally – and this is just one way in which the tidal metaphor has permeated the project. The planning phase of each cycle was conceived of as the tide rising. Action is high tide: for the survey that was the action of getting people to join in the project; for the interviews it was encouraging our participants to really imagine their hybrid identity in terms of the seashore metaphor; for the creative phase it was designing and co-designing our artistic responses to the metaphor; and for the impact phase it was acting together to raise awareness of our findings. These action phases have been the times when the project has involved most energy and visibility. Following them there have been quieter times, conceived of as the ebbing and low tides, for monitoring and reflecting before embarking on the next action research cycle.

#### 4. Seaware (outcomes and findings)

##### Exhibition and policy as boundary object

The process of nurturing the Liminal Zone community of practice has been successful, with eight artists in addition to the authors as committed members of the group. Our co-creation has produced an exhibition and a policy. We anticipated and hoped for the first but the second was a surprise. The exhibition has been greatly enhanced through the fact that the group has real ownership of it as exemplified by the fact that two colleagues are hosting it in their own institutions, and this means that it can take a form and gain an audience far greater than it would have been had the authors retained control over it. The exhibition consists of painting, sculpture, collage, photography, video, sound, concrete and experimental poetry and music and includes our policy hand-written on an unfurled scroll and ‘spoof’ versions of the policy masquerading as artwork. This exhibition therefore explores, through many different media, how our community feels about our hybrid identities, using the seashore metaphor to show and challenge that reality. In presenting our excitement and frustrations so vividly, the exhibition serves as a powerful ‘boundary object’ pointing out the importance of careful nurturing of the interface between teaching and art in our academic institutional landscape of practice.

##### Key quantitative data

The quantitative survey provided us with some significant data points which the subsequent phases of the project have explored. We had 60 responses to the survey, mostly from Scotland, from artists involved in higher or tertiary education. The data provides a stark picture of the marginalization of staff’s creative practice by educational institutions despite its deep importance to their teaching work.

- 65% are on part-time contracts, though 57% actually do their job full time
- 91% feel creative practice has a positive impact on teaching
- 79% feel teaching has a positive impact on creative practice
- 57% spend  $\leq$ 1day /week on their creative practice, 96% want more time
- Only 31% feel supported by their employers in their creative practice

##### The Liminal Zone Metaphor

The use of the metaphor has shown itself to be a powerful methodological tool to encourage expression and to explore nuances and feelings of our participants. Offering our survey participants the suggestion to think in terms of the seashore metaphor triggered some strong emotional responses, with descriptions such as ‘eroding my shore’, ‘crashing waves’, ‘a storm’, ‘drowning’, ‘clawing’, ‘engulfing’, ‘overwhelmed’, or ‘grounded’, ‘washed up’, ‘at peace’, ‘safe haven’ (see Figure 2). The wide variety of ways that they used their imaginations to interpret the metaphor results in a rich picture of how these two aspects of people’s lived experiences synergise and overlap.

##### Boundary crossing

The study highlights the extent and nature of the boundary crossing between creative and teaching practice by university arts staff. It makes clear the overwhelmingly positive impact of creative practice on teaching and the benefit that our institutions and students are therefore gaining from this work, which is largely going on unpaid in teachers’ own time. In addition our responders have helped to generate a useful body of understanding and practical advice about how to switch between their teaching and artist roles.

##### Time

Importantly, our research suggests that many creative teachers are in a crisis of imbalance between their work and creative life and there is a need for change in order to help staff to integrate their practices and transition between them. The findings demonstrated that 96% of respondents want to spend more time on their creative practice with 57% spending a day or less per week on it and only 7% achieving better than



The cumulative effects on teachers' wellbeing of having less time for creative practice and how it has affected the quality of teaching merits further investigation, as does the impact of staff creative practice on students and whether the boundary between teaching and art is similar to that between teaching and disciplinary practice in other fields. It would be fascinating to explore the liminal zone metaphor with practicing scientists, for example. The seashore as a boundary metaphor can also be used to explore other interfaces in our lives: between work and play, art and science, nature and culture, past and future, life and death.

The interface between art and teaching is porous, soft and shifting, just like the tidal zone. In this study the liminal zone has been revealed as an important creative area where education and artistic wisdom may reside and mix and influence each other. It is a shared space, a place of reciprocity and gratitude, a place for play, a place to be carefully stewarded.

### Box 1: University/College Policy on Creative Arts

Recognising that many creative arts staff are hired and valued because of both their teaching skills and their creative practice, [this organisation] aims to nurture staff's creative practice so that it can continue to add benefit to the student experience, contribute to research outputs, maintain relevance to sectorial developments and aid in well-being.

This is underpinned by the following value statements:

1. We value the multiple benefits that creative practice brings to teaching, as research, on institutional reputation and on staff well-being.
2. Our managers recognise that their creative arts staff are creative practitioners and support that creative practice.
3. Creative arts methods need not only be limited to arts subjects and the use of creative arts methodologies and practices in sciences, social sciences, medicine and other disciplines is encouraged along with interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary collaborations.
4. We recognise creative practice as research, contributing to knowledge and a positive research environment and producing outputs, impact and public engagement that can be entered into the Research Excellence Framework.
5. We encourage creative staff to link their creative practice with their teaching.

For this to be effective, [this organisation] will provide mechanisms to support a good balance between teaching, administration and creative practice by adopting the following measures:

1. Creative staff contract time should be 0.4 full time equivalent (FTE) for teaching, 0.4 FTE for creative practice research and 0.2 FTE for administration (and pro-rata for part time staff). At least one day per week (0.2 FTE) for creative practice is essential.
2. Time off in lieu (TOIL) is guaranteed for when teaching duties go beyond contracted hours.
3. Sabbaticals are available to provide concerted time to spend on creative activity. Good practice is one sabbatical every six semesters.
4. Arrangements can be made for 'soft time', 'porous or fluid time' where creative activity can flow into teaching practice and collaborations can emerge. Use of unconventional spaces, including outdoors, are encouraged, and activities involving motion or exercise, such as walking, cycling or swimming meetings.
5. We will support staff by making financial and in-kind resources available for creative work, including studio space, exhibitions, publications, online showcases *etc.*
6. We will enhance student experience through active engagement with the creative practice of arts staff.