

The Creative Researcher: Mapping research culture through collage inquiry

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Funding: See Acknowledgements.

Peer review: This article has been subject to a double-anonymised peer review process.



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Abstract

Research culture is often framed as an external and abstract construct, shaped by institutional environments. This article takes a different perspective, arguing that research culture is actively constituted within research practices. Drawing on findings from The Public Laundry Project, a study funded through the Enhancing Research Culture Fund (ERCF) at the University of Warwick (2023–24), this article examines how researchers experience and navigate the cultural dimensions of their work. Using collage inquiry, a creative research method employed in professional development workshops, the study explores how researchers articulate and reflect on their research problems and the broader conditions that shape them. This article aims to contribute to research culture scholarship in two ways. First, it reframes research culture as enmeshed with research practices and researcher identity. This challenges dominant conceptualisations of research culture as primarily institutional or extra-individual. I argue that sustainable shifts in research culture cannot be achieved solely through institutional regulation or external frameworks. Rather, they require an attentiveness to the ways in which culture is lived, enacted, and negotiated within the everyday practices and identities of researchers themselves. Second, the article advances methodological innovation by demonstrating how collage inquiry functions both as an outward-facing research method for examining research culture and as an inward-facing tool for fostering critical reflection. By documenting the workshop process, this article highlights the potential of arts-based methods to surface the lived experiences of researchers, support interdisciplinary dialogue, and cultivate research environments that embrace uncertainty as a generative force in knowledge production. In doing so, it offers new perspectives on how research culture might be actively shaped through creative, reflexive, and deliberative approaches.

Keywords: collage inquiry; researcher development; research culture

Introduction

Research culture has been described as a ‘fuzzy’ (Causadias *et al.*, 2021: 86) and ‘hazy’ (Casci and Adams, 2020: 1) concept associated with extra-individual forces (Lena *et al.*, 2019: 21). This orientation is understandable, in the context of on-going discussions around how institutional environments and cultures may be assessed in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (UKRI *et al.*, 2025).

In this article, I propose that scholarly attention should turn towards culture as an active, constitutive element of research practices, and researcher identity, rather than as a context for research practices. I will document the outcomes of a research study, funded through the Enhancing Research Culture Fund (ERCF) at the University of Warwick in 2023-24, entitled: *Research practices as sites of research culture(s): The barriers to, and enablers of, research identified through creative workshops*. The study was inspired by my experience of designing and facilitating professional development workshops for researchers, called: *Creative Methods for Research Thinking and Writing* (CM). The aim of the workshops was to provide opportunities for researchers to interrogate research problems, using collage-making.

The first CM workshops took place in 2022. Researchers’ engagement with making in these workshops prompted wide-ranging discussions about some of the challenges they were experiencing with research problem formulation. However, discussions also focused on what I term *problems with research*. This is a deliberately expansive phrase used to describe not only the cultural and contextual factors that shape researcher identities, but that could also be understood to arise from what is defined as ‘research culture’, to include the deeply personal doubts, values, and beliefs about capability and being that researchers bring to, and develop through, their work. Researchers talked about workload pressures, identity conflicts, imposter phenomenon, career uncertainty and their affective responses to the research process. They also discussed their positionality in the research. Researcher ‘personal reflexivity’ is a familiar stance for those undertaking qualitative research (Lichtman, 2014: 33), but uncommon in the ‘hard sciences’ (Jafar, 2018: 323). Researchers expressed degrees of ‘epistemic breakdowns’ (I have chosen the term *epistemic uncertainty*), where their previously held understandings of the nature of a problem are unsettled and unresolved (Mengis *et al.*, 2018: 48).

As the designer and facilitator of these workshops, I noticed these recurring themes. This ‘noticing’ (König *et al.*, 2022) drew my attention to the lived experiences of researchers, and how these experiences aligned with institutional conversations about research culture. This

prompted the proposal for this study. I refer to the study using a shorthand title: *The Public Laundry Project*, because the creative work produced by participants was printed onto items of clothing and exhibited on a laundry line at the International Research Culture Conference (**National Centre for Research Culture (NCRC) and The University of Warwick, 2024**). The shorthand title draws on the English idiom that warns against ‘washing one’s dirty linen in public’, which implies a reluctance to share private matters openly. Yet the project deliberately resists that caution. The exhibition aimed to bring the messy, hidden dimensions of research practice into public view to both expose and cleanse, to make space, and begin anew. In this sense, the metaphor gestures towards a kind of restorative airing: a process of naming, reflecting, and starting again with clarity and care.

Research questions

The *Public Laundry Project* poses three research questions:

1. What are the barriers to and enablers of researchers and their research?
2. How does culture act in and on researchers and their research?
3. What (if any) is the value of collage inquiry for research thinking about research problems (or problems with research)?

However, I shall show through the findings of the project that my research problem formulation was somewhat reductive, but I will return to this question in the conclusion.

Contribution to research culture scholarship

This article contributes to research culture scholarship in two ways.

I argue that research culture is enmeshed with research practices and researcher identity, and this position contrasts with literature about research culture that is primarily concerned with extra-individual dimensions of culture. As such, I propose that research practice can be described as ‘a site of social practice’ where ‘...the character and transformation of social life are intrinsically and decisively rooted in the site where it takes place’ (**Schatzki, 2002: xi**). Understanding research culture through this lens provides new perspectives on the relationships between everyday research practices, researcher identity, and research culture.

The second contribution that this article will make is methodological. I will argue that collage inquiry has a dual role as an ‘outward-facing’ research method to generate data on research culture, and second as an ‘inward-facing’ tool (**Ayrton, 2020: 1230**) that enables researchers to

critically examine their research practices, functioning as a form of ‘ambulatory art practice’ (Cutcher and Irwin, 2017: 117), fostering slow scholarship (Karkov, 2019: 3). While collage inquiry is an established research method, its use in professional development activities is largely absent from the literature. By documenting the CM workshop process, this article contributes to scholarship about researcher development that has emerged over the previous ten years (e.g., see Evans, 2015; Rospigliosi & Bournier, 2019; Bromley & Warnock, 2021).

Because of the dual contributions that the article aims to make, it is anticipated that it will be of interest to two audiences: research enablers and methodologists. Research enablers may be interested in how collage has been used as a reflective tool in professional development. Methodologists may be interested in the specific procedure, and reflective framework for doing collage inquiry.

In the next section, the literature review begins with an evaluation of definitions of research culture. Then, the review will examine collage as an art practice, identifying the specific properties of collage. Finally, I will examine collage as research method in the form of collage inquiry.

Literature Review

Research culture

Policy definitions of research culture are broad, abstract, and somewhat disconnected from researchers' lived experiences. There appear to be four key conceptualisations of research culture in the literature:

1. Institutional environments and cultures.
2. Research integrity, transparency and open access publishing
3. Disciplinary cultures in the context of interdisciplinary teamwork
4. National cultures in the context of international research teams.

The first conceptualisation is concerned with institutional environments and cultures. The Research Excellence Framework 2029 will assess institutional dimensions of ‘people, culture, and environment’ (UKRI et al., 2025) aligning with The Royal Society’s oft-quoted definition of research culture (The Royal Society, 2017). Some of the primary drivers in these efforts to improve research culture are to counteract ‘toxic’ workplace environments and job insecurity (Wellcome Trust, 2020), with the aim of improving research careers, workplace experience, and inclusivity (Russell Group, 2021). However, identifying criteria to fairly assess these aspects remains a challenge, as acknowledged by UKRI and

Research England (**UKRI & Research England, 2023**), but proposals signal a move 'away from assessing individuals and towards assessing institutions, disciplinary groupings and teams' (**UKRI et al., 2025**).

The second, and related conceptualisation is concerned with the cultural impacts of research integrity and open access publishing and open data. The UKRI explicitly associates research culture with ethical conduct, stressing open research as vital to a 'healthy academic environment' (**UKRI & Research England, 2023**). The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) agreement critiques the 'publish or perish' culture, linking it to poor research practices and barriers to knowledge accessibility, and advocates for 'positive research cultures' that prioritise collaboration and social engagement (**CoARA: Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment, 2022**).

The third definition is concerned with epistemic cultures. This considers how cultural norms in different disciplines shape knowledge production (**Cetina, 2022: 11**). Researchers are socialised into epistemic communities, that privilege ways of knowing and conducting research. However, this can hinder successful collaboration in interdisciplinary research teams (**Tobi & Kampen, 2018: 1210**).

The fourth related definition concerns international research cultures. While international mobility benefits the career progression of researchers (**Wagner et al., 2015**), it may also present cultural challenges between in research teams (**Bagshaw et al., 2007**). This perspective sees culture as embedded in interpersonal dynamics within international teams.

Because definitions of research culture are broad, the approach to theory development in this study is inductive. An interpretive stance means that any or all these dimensions of culture could emerge through the analysis of data generated through the CM workshops.

In the next part of this review, I will review the literature about collage as art form, before summarising the key debates about the use of collage as research method, in the form of collage inquiry.

Collage as an art form

Collage emerged as a fine art practice in the early 20th century, popularised by Cubist artists like Picasso and Braque, who introduced it to the avant-garde in 1912 (**Raaberg, 1998; Hajian, 2022; de Rijke, 2024**). Picasso saw collage as a 'release from representation', that subsequently shaped his relationship with painting (**Hamilton, 1955: 481**). While Cubism is most associated with modern collage, earlier layering

techniques existed in ancient and medieval traditions, including the Japanese and Chinese practice of chine collé (**Hajian, 2022: 96**).

Additionally, vernacular art forms pre-date the modernist turn to collage. For example, in the 18th century, Mary Delany created 'mosaiks'; an early form of botanical illustration that reimagined scientific illustration using collage materials (**Orr, 2019**), and in the 19th century examples include folk art, greeting cards, and Victorian photocollage (**Butler-Kisber, 2008; Siegel, 2009, 2020; Lutz, 2022; Gorman et al., 2023**).

By the 1930s, 'collage' was widely recognised as an artistic technique involving pasted paper (**Hugnet & Scolari, 1936: 5**). However, others have suggested that texture also plays an important role in collage. Unlike painting, which represents spatial relations, collage *creates* spatial relations through real textures (**Faulkner, 1938: 17**). Commenting on the work of Ernst and Dubuffet, who developed the technique of *frottage* from the French *frotter*, meaning 'to rub' **Lippard (1962: 241)**, describes how this method animates the surface by transferring the textures of underlying materials using various media. Mid-20th-century accounts describe collage as incorporating 'odds and ends' like rags, buttons, and photographs (**Saltzman, 1952**). Others distinguish 'art collage', comprised of object-based compositions, from pasted-paper forms (**Burke, 1959: 231**). In some cases, object collages are made permanent through other mediums, such as photography (**Holmes-Smith et al., 1956**).

Definitions then expanded to include photomontage, an assemblage of mass-media images, and photo collage, which integrates photographs with non-photographic elements (**Dahlgren, 2018: 27**). The concept of assemblage shares conceptual ground with bricolage, a term introduced by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss to describe the spontaneous creation of new forms using materials shaped by prior actions. Bricolage has been described as 'a nexus between collage, assemblage, and found objects' (**Kini-Singh, 2023: 49**).

Most recently, environmental concerns have shaped the emergence of 'eco-collage' which uses recycled materials to promote sustainability (**Baker, 2024: 132**). A distinction has also emerged between digital collage, described as an 'ephemeral' virtual composition (**Spielmann, 1999: 138**) and analogue collage, a term used to describe hand-cut work (**Davis, 2008: 247**). Some forms of short-form digital content, such as Instagram Reels, TikTok posts, and YouTube Shorts, also exhibit a collage-like quality in their layering of images, sounds, text, and effects. Their ephemeral and algorithm-driven nature, however, makes them harder to categorise within traditional analogue collage frameworks.

Culshaw (2019) employs techniques in collage inquiry where objects are placed rather than fixed or stuck down, raising the question of whether permanence matters in collage-making. Reflecting on my own collage-making, I observe that collages function as biographical artefacts that contain temporal simultaneity (**Author, 2022**). Their permanence brings past experiences into the present moment. As **Muzaini (2015)** observes, the process of human forgetting may be confounded by a material environment that prompts a re-emergence of memory. In the context of research thinking and memory, permanence matters. Therefore, I provide the following definition of collage that describes the practices adopted for the CM workshops:

Collage is an art form that makes use of a range of materials that may include printed materials, materials bought for the purpose of collage-making or scrap-booking, including textured materials, textual materials, objects and/or fabric. A collage is a new, permanent artefact (albeit an artefact that may also be subject to further cutting, sticking or rearrangement (d  collage). The collage is created through attaching or sticking down materials and objects in any dimensional arrangement chosen by its creator. The analogue permanence of the collage matters because it directs the viewer to an act of making that takes place in a particular space and within a particular time. The collage belongs to its creator(s), who decides what happens to the new artefact that has been created, e.g., whether the collage is retained, gifted, discarded, subject to further cutting or assembling, etc.

Although I have defined my engagement with collage, I also recognise that all forms of collage can be described as a ‘semantically-linked family’ (**Kjellman-Chapin, 2006: 86**). In the next section, I identify key properties of the collage ‘family’ and explain why this art form lends itself to generating research data about researchers’ lived experiences.

Collage properties

As an art form, collage possesses three core properties that make it particularly rich for the research study. It foregrounds failure; it defamiliarises the familiar through processes of deconstruction and reconstruction; and embraces complexity, employing metaphor and metonymy, enabling multiple concepts to coexist within a single image.

I have previously argued that collage celebrates failure because it:

*‘...draws attention to cracks and imperfections by ‘letting the seams show’ (**Farago, 2021**)...[It is] Rather like Kintsugi, the Japanese tradition of mending broken pottery by repairing the areas of breakage with gold, we are reminded that failure is something to be*

valued and celebrated, that the 'pristine is less beautiful than the broken' (Price, 2021: 1). The visible damage is integral to the history of the pot, and a potential source of new knowledge. (Richmond, 2022: 150)

Failure matters because it represents the messy moments where new knowledge emerges (Schultz & Legg, 2020: 250). Research assessment cultures emphasise 'outstanding and unique' research achievements that often overshadow the value of 'everyday failures.' (Wyatt, 2024). Collage exposes how messy research is, paradoxically situated in a culture where researchers 'feel pressured to hide messiness to 'highlight neatly packaged findings' (de Rijke, 2024: 304).

Collage defamiliarises the nature of reality, and how it is known, by bringing together the indexical real i.e., photographs that represent reality; the material real i.e., objects, which exist in themselves; and the embodied real by opening the potential for embodied engagement with materials that can be touched and felt. This juxtaposition of realities points to the process of destruction and construction, prompting us to reconsider the familiar as strange. The resulting collage possesses the materiality and stability of other representational forms yet simultaneously undermines these notions. Furthermore, a collage may also be subject to further cutting up and arrangement into new forms, a process known as 'décollage' (Kjellman-Chapin, 2006: 86). In research, this phenomenon is akin to research processes that deconstruct established knowledge to construct new knowledge.

Collage has a narrative quality that emerges through syntagmatic relationships between the elements used in its' creation. The canvas becomes 'an arena in which to act' rather than a space for reproduction (Schechner, 1968: 53). Through metaphor and metonymy, collage generates a visual language that enables the expression of something without saying anything at all. I have previously noted that this ambiguity offers safety and sanctuary, whether in the formulation of research problems or in confronting the vulnerabilities associated with problems with research (Richmond, 2022). Despite this ambiguity, paradoxically, a feature of collage is that it enables participants to make thoughts 'concrete' (Butler-Kisber, 2008: 6). The next part of the review will briefly summarise the method and its' applications.

Collage inquiry

'Collage as inquiry' (Butler-Kisber, 2008) is a research method that involves creating collages to explore topics or questions. The method has become established in the past twenty years (Gorman et al., 2023). An early example of the use of collage inquiry was in the context of research

exploring learners' experiences of learning (**Butler-Kisber & Borgerson, 1997**). Prior to this, collage inquiry was largely confined to psychotherapeutic contexts where the method was used with clients to support them to articulate or communicate difficult or painful experiences (e.g., **Ratcliffe, 1977; Feld & Hall, 1981; Taylor, 1990**). Most recently, collage inquiry has been used to examine dimensions of the researcher experience, including researcher identity (**Lahman et al., 2021; Li, 2023**), 'scholarly thinking' (**Simmons & Daley, 2013**) and the research process (**Lahman et al., 2020; de Rijke, 2024**). Furthermore, there is emerging literature describing analysis methods for collage (**Culshaw, 2019**). However, there are few examples where a specific procedure for collage inquiry has been documented. Exceptions here are the 'Markus Technique' (**Alnutt, 2013: 157**) and a procedure described by **Farenga (2018: 65)**.

The brief review of research culture literature has shown that research culture is a broad concept, often defined in abstract extra-individual ways.

The review of collage as an art form and research method, provides a means to explore the lived experiences of researchers. Collage's capacity to embrace failure, defamiliarise the familiar, and employ metaphor makes it particularly suited as a research method, and as a thinking method.

In the next section I describe and evaluate the methodology, and methods used to generate data in this study. This framework was designed for the early CM workshops, using a reflective question framework, that was informed by a reflective framework designed for object elicitation (**Bell, 2013; Richmond, 2018**).

Methodology and Methods

The study adopts an inductive, post-positivist, interpretive methodology, recognising knowledge as socially constructed and shaped by human interpretation. A qualitative research design (**McGregor, 2018**) aligns with this, aiming to credibly represent participants' experiences.

A six-stage collage inquiry process that combines image elicitation, collage-making, paired and group discussion, and reflective writing, was developed to generate data. Participants first selected an image representing their research problem, then created a collage using diverse materials. Participants engaged in reflective writing followed by discussions with peers, which was then followed by further reflective writing to document shifts in understanding.

The final stage involved identifying shared themes and actionable next steps in the wider group. See **Table 1**, for further detail.

Table 1: Collage Inquiry Schedule.

Stage	Activity
Reflect upon the research problem by choosing an image(s)	<p>Participants are introduced to the workshop through a presentation about the theoretical context for collage inquiry, as both a research method, and as a <i>thinking</i> method. The aim of this is to establish credibility of the method for thinking, but also to introduce a researcher audience to the potential of arts-based methods in research.</p> <p>Participants are asked about their experiences and perceptions of collage. The aim of this is to connect experiences of play with a playful attitude towards creative thinking.</p> <p>Participants are invited to select an image (postcard or printed material) that represents their research problem. In pairs, they share their image and describe its significance. The aim of this step is to 'warm up' participants' engagement with visual thinking.</p>
Create a collage using a range of materials	<p>Participants sift through materials provided (magazines, craft materials) to construct their collage. Participants are encouraged to attend to the concepts they are exploring and how aesthetic properties (colour, texture, shape) reflect the problem.</p> <p>Participants are provided with imagery representative of a range of disciplines, i.e., back copies of 'Physics Today' and 'Your Health' magazines, alongside lifestyle magazines. Postcard collections have included Penguin book covers, botanical and anatomical postcards.</p>
Individual reflective writing	<p>Participants respond to a reflective question framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you see in your collage? Describe it in as much detail as possible. • What do you feel when you look carefully at your collage? • What is the research problem (or 'problems with research') that your collage explores? • How does your collage represent or explore this problem? • What key decisions did you make in the process of creating your collage? (These could be conceptual or aesthetic choices.) • What are the outcomes for you of engaging in this activity?

Stage	Activity
Paired discussion activity	Participants share their collages and written reflections with a partner. They discuss any surprises, insights, or emerging ideas from the collage-making process.
Individual reflective writing	Participants consider new perspectives that emerged through talking about their collage, and the problem it represents: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How has your understanding of your research problem shifted?• What new insights, questions, or ideas have emerged?• Did the discussion reveal anything you hadn't previously considered?
Group discussion	Participants asked to identify actions and next steps for their research, arising from their insights.

Sampling

A non-probability, convenience sampling approach was used to generate exploratory data. Two groups were recruited. Group A comprises of three individuals from different CW workshops. These participants created individual collages. Group B comprises of twenty-two early-career researchers of different nationalities and disciplines, working together in interdisciplinary teams (five teams of four), producing group collages.

Ethical considerations

Three ethical issues were addressed in this study: my positionality (as workshop facilitator and researcher); mitigations for participants who may experience distress (given the nature of some of the *problems with research* highlighted in previous workshops); and copyright and creative artefacts.

As both workshop facilitator and researcher, I analysed only written reflections, not the collages themselves. There were two reasons for this. First this enabled me to focus on my primary duty which was to facilitate the workshop. Secondly, it was important that the workshop activities provide direct benefit to researchers, engaging them in the process of inquiry rather than positioning them *as* objects of inquiry. This stance recognises some of concerns associated with short-term funded research culture projects that may perpetuate issues of inequality by requiring additional labour from groups who are already marginalised within higher education (Reyes, 2022).

Collage can surface personal experiences, potentially triggering distress. Olson (2023) suggests that ethics review processes should closely examine research where there is a strong potential to cause distress or

trauma. However, she argues that it is important not to conflate this with research where an expression of emotion can be an appropriate response to a set of circumstances, and an important aspect of human decision-making and understanding. Given the issues raised previously by workshop participants, support mechanisms were in place to safeguard participants. These included emphasising to participants that they only share what they feel comfortable sharing, permission to leave the session without explanation (but a request that they follow up with a communication if requiring further support), referral information for counselling and coaching support.

Interestingly, no participants in this study expressed resistance or discomfort with the collage-making process. This may reflect a degree of self-selection among those who chose to take part. In earlier workshops, I learned that explaining the rationale behind the method and emphasising its value as a reflective and playful thinking space rather than an artistic activity helped ease any anxieties about creativity.

Finally, participants were informed of ownership rights via consent forms, ensuring agency over publication, exhibition, reproduction, and withdrawal. Group collages could be withdrawn if any team member opted out of the study. Participants could withdraw from the study within four weeks of engaging in a CM workshop.

Data analysis

Analysis focuses on participants' written reflections, following the systematic phases for thematic analysis described by (Nowell et al., 2017: 4). Participant written reflections offer insight into how they engaged with the creative process and constructed meaning. I explained earlier that the collages were not analysed, because interpreting them independently risks misrepresentation because of collage's polysemic nature (Alnutt, 2013: 157).

Findings

In this part of the article, I will first analyse the written reflections of group A (individually created collages), before analysing the written reflections of group B (group-created collages).

Figure 1: The Public Laundry Exhibition, September 2024
(Source: Author created photograph).



Group A: Individually generated collages

The thematic analysis of written reflections produced by group A, identified four themes; epistemic uncertainty, researcher positionality, affective dimensions of research, and the relationship between visual and conceptual thinking.

The term *epistemic uncertainty* describes the tension between researchers being shaped by disciplinary norms while simultaneously wanting to move beyond them. Collage-making highlighted these tensions. One participant expresses nostalgia for history versus its critical potential; another explores the rules imposed by a discipline and how this constrains their thinking; and another expresses frustration with the small-scale impact of research in the context of seemingly vast global challenges like climate change. Participants express how their collages physically represented these tensions through colour, texture, and spatial arrangements. One participant describes using structured forms in one corner before deliberately breaking rules as they worked across the collage, visually representing the tensions between structure in the discipline and creativity required for innovative research and teaching:

The collage explores challenging myself about the rules I follow/live by/do my research/obeying. How can I release myself from the rigid way of thinking? It explores this problem by being my structured self (in the top-right corner) and then as I worked down to the bottom left-hand corner I made choices that go against 'the rules' (It has to be pretty, look good, be conservative, mustn't be tacky, look neat etc.). I

was allowing myself to break the rules and not worry about what other people thought. (Participant insight)

Figure 2: Participant created collage. (Author created photograph).



Vaughan (2005: 8) describes collage as a ‘borderlands epistemology’ with the potential to hold multiple perspectives while foregrounding non-dominant ways of knowing. It appears that some of the participants grappled with a reflexivity paradox: articulating their research problems,

did not necessarily provide a way forward, but collage provides a space to explore these contradictions. For example, one participant writes:

I realise that this is an (unresolved) problem which requires continuing reflection but which cannot be easily solved...so perhaps a re-evaluation of the problem... (Participant comment)

Another participant writes that they can 'see the problem more clearly' but they do not feel able 'to visualise the way that we can tackle the problem'.

The term 'positionality' refers to an individual's world view and the position they adopt about a research task and its' wider context (**Darwin Holmes, 2020**) One participant writes about their realisation of the connection between the researcher's biography, and their research problem:

At the top centre of the collage there is a picture of half a record and two faces (which I see as female) and the words 'two' and 'limited'...it is a really important part of my current research project in which I position 'me' centrally. (Participant Comment)

Figure 3: Participant generated collage. (Author created photograph).



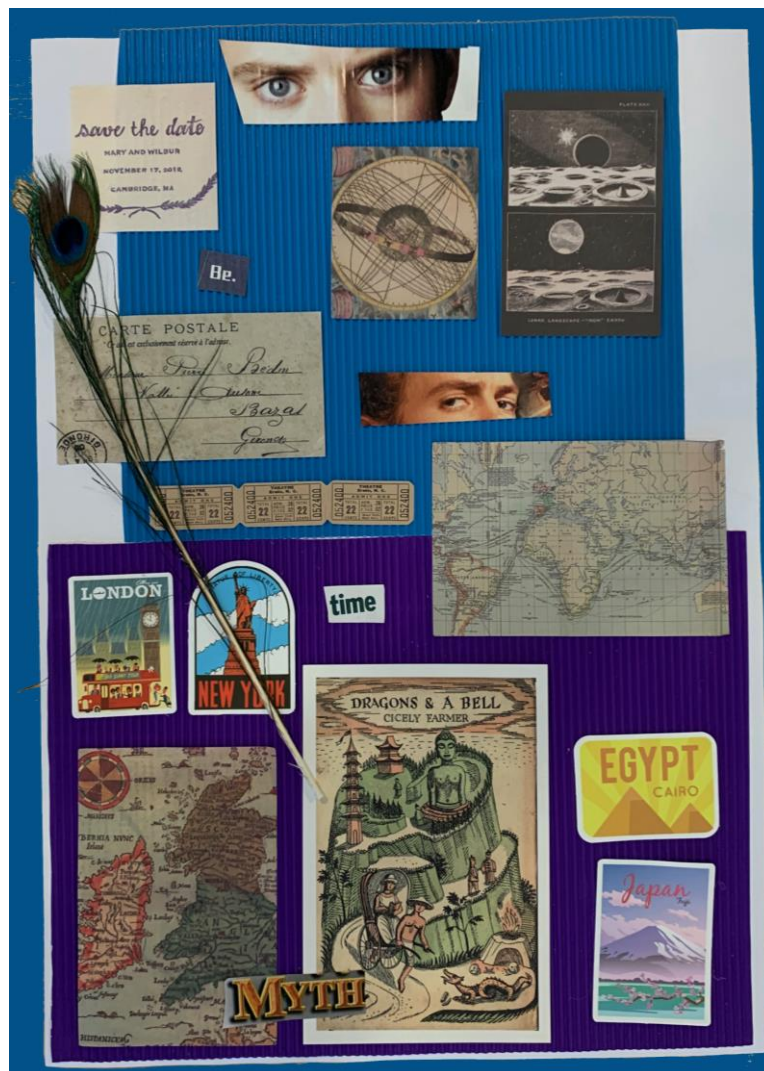
Another participant recognises that they have unconsciously drawn parallels between self and the problem they are navigating, describing the collage as representing 'the two halves of me stuck on a piece of paper...'.

Written accounts expressed a range of emotions, elicited through the collage-making process, for example, pleasure, happiness, sadness, frustration and feeling overwhelmed. One participant connected engagement with the collage with feelings about the various dimensions of the research problem they were grappling with:

I feel a kind of nostalgia, provoked by some of the historical images and a sense of curiosity. I also feel, to some extent, uplifted by the planetary images in the top right-hand corner. I feel pleasure at having been creative and intrigued by the combination/juxtaposition of words: myth – time - be. I'm happy with the process of the eyes, not so happy about the way it shows to me I'm nostalgic about history, since my intention was to show its forward-looking potential!

(Participant Comment)

Figure 4: Participant generated collage. (Author created photograph).



Collage-making appears to prompt engagement with affective dimensions of research and being a researcher. Loughran and Mannay (2018: 3) refer to the phenomenon of the 'emotional turn' in social science research, that recognises how emotion operates in knowledge-formation in these disciplines. However, the written accounts of both individual (and group generated collages) are threaded through with expressions of emotion about the research process, and so there may be scope to explore the role of emotions in the doing of research, in more depth.

Each participant acknowledges how visual representation contributes to the way they conceptualise their research. For example, using spatial relations in the collage to represent opposing beliefs, or visually articulating different epistemologies, using contrasting colours and materials. Creative choices appear to assist in helping researchers reframe their research questions, with collage playing a generative role in thinking. However, the participants all commented on how they struggled with translating their visual insights into words:

I was surprised how I found the research question easier to explain in words and how difficult I found explaining and describing my collage in words. (Participant Comment)

Another participant writes about the challenge of getting into a creative flow, saying 'I kind of knew I was not letting creative juices flow enough' highlighting that visual representation may be unfamiliar to those more familiar with written forms of expression.

Collage emerges as an important tool for critical reflection, exploring positionality and developing awareness of affective responses to the research process. Participants shared a common observation about collage, that is not merely a representation of research but a way of thinking through it. Participants identified collage as a valuable research tool with tangible applications. One of the participants plans to integrate collage into their teaching, and another envisions adopting it to open the chapters of a book, or as a method for 'organising thoughts'. Participants express the value in dedicating time and space for stepping back and reflecting on their research.

I noted earlier in this review that policy definitions frame research culture in institutional, ethical, epistemic, and international terms, but they often feel abstract and disconnected from researchers' lived experiences. For the participants in this study, collage has surfaced different cultural dimensions of research and being a researcher.

Group B: Group generated collage

The analysis of written reflections from group-generated collages reveals similarities and differences compared to the reflections of individual researchers. For example, many of these written accounts observe epistemic tensions between team members, rather than internal debates about the nature of knowledge. Similarly, these written accounts attend to the affective dimensions in research, but from a team-based perspective, with accounts expressing emotion arising from group collaboration and accomplishments:

I feel happy and it gives me a sense of satisfaction. The collage reflects coordination and good teamwork and effort. It shows our vision come to life!

It connected us a lot and we all smiled when we discussed this experience :-) **(Participant Comments)**

It is important to note that the research teams were engaged in the same topic of water security and comprised multi-disciplinary teams with varying research interests, and this may explain why researcher positionality was less of concern in these written reflections. The groups were much more focused on group cohesion and negotiation. However, the collaborative nature of group collages, produced new insights into the cultural dimensions of team dynamics, and consensus-building in interdisciplinary teams, and the analysis of group reflections will focus on these aspects.

Figure 5: Figure 5: Group generated collage (Author created photograph).



Participants' written reflections identify the challenges experienced by them of integrating different cultural and disciplinary perspectives and approaches. One participant writes that making a collage emphasised the 'Importance of negotiation and consensus in a multi-disciplinary team'. Another participant reflects that 'The collage-making process was also a good way to bond and establish team cohesion'. Another participant draws parallels between the sometimes-messy process of collage making and team cohesion, writing:

I feel fascinated by the 'un-coordinated coordination' of colours, themes and the set of patterns to be addressed. Un-coordinated means random materials. 'Coordination' means team coordination and cohesion. (Participant Comments)

Similarly, another participant observes that the collage provided a focus for negotiation, suggesting that '...our [group's] ideas were transformed through making the collage...'.

However, for some, the interdisciplinary teamwork was challenging. For example, one participant reflects on their approach to communication in the group, suggesting that 'I need to work more on myself on explaining my thoughts'. Another participant wrote about the need for their group to be given more time for the collage-making activity, commenting that:

We are still unsure about common research questions...we realise we need more focused time to discuss... to find common ground because sharing how we interpret the collage leads to somewhat richer individual expression and understanding. (Participant Comments)

Mengis et al. (2018: 597) suggest that researchers often draw upon tacit disciplinary knowledge in interdisciplinary teams, and the absence of dialogue between team-members can prevent 'knowledge integration'. They define dialogue as 'simply mentioning and displaying knowledge'. From my observations of the group work in action, the joint task of making creates the conditions for a rich, energising (and sometimes challenging) dialogue amongst team-members as they work with one another to make sense of the world and problems represented in the collage, suggesting that the method is effective for interdisciplinary research.

Participant written reflections acknowledge the role of collage in conceptualising complex research topics. For example, a participant writes that the activity had enabled the group to 'Include different perspectives on a single issue...simplifying what would otherwise be a complex issue'. An interesting phenomenon of collages with the group-making exercise is that they had all realised the complexity of their topics, through depictions of stakeholders in research. The written

reflections contained several references to this, for example: that collage-making enabled 'simplification of problems through visualisation' or simplified 'what would otherwise be a complex issue', with one participant stating that the activity '...helped me/us ideate concretely and succinctly what the research problem is'. A particular benefit that is highlighted in several accounts is collage's ability to 'physically represent the problem'. This is realised in the collages through the depiction of communities and individuals that are directly impacted by issues of water security, alongside specific examples of flora and fauna. This visual representation was identified in many written accounts as representing an important call to action in research:

I feel sadness that this activity has made this problem 'real', '...it [the collage] is real and the project will be real

Looking at the collage, I feel the need of immediate action to address something that is real, that is happening now... (Participant Comments)

de Rijke (2024: 301) proposes that only multimodal research can do justice to complexities in research. She proposes that collage fosters pluralistic thinking. I propose that collage has a quality akin to pressing the 'google earth' button, enabling one to zoom out to hold a research problem in all its' complexity, whilst providing the opportunity to zoom in on how the problem impacts on 'real' individuals and communities. As one participant observes 'I see all the jigsaw pieces in the collage and how all these elements are connected and interrelated'.

Figure 6: Group generated collage (Author created photograph).



The findings from the thematic analysis of participant written reflections, reveal insights into the cultural dimensions of research.

Epistemic uncertainties are expressed in both participant groups, with researchers acknowledging how their disciplines enable and constrain their thinking or shape their experiences of working in interdisciplinary teams. Researcher positionality emerges as a core concern for individual participants, exploring how their values, beliefs and experiences shape their approach and understanding of research problems. This is not entirely unexpected as one might expect the process of making an individual collage to involve a greater degree of introspective reflection,

with group generated collages reflecting negotiated and shared concerns of collaborative research.

In group reflections, themes of collaboration, decision-making, and negotiation take precedence. The collage making process became a microcosm of research collaboration, requiring negotiation, consensus-building, and the balancing of different perspectives. In group contexts, the findings suggest that visual methodologies can facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue, surfacing implicit assumptions and helping researchers navigate complexity. However, for some, this was a challenging process that requires time and space for full engagement.

Across both groups of participants, the written reflections note how collage making helps them step back from habitual ways of thinking, creating space for critical reflection. The process enables researchers to see their work differently, reframe questions, and explore unspoken tensions, that may be overlooked in conventional research practices.

The findings reinforce the argument that arts-based methods could contribute towards research cultures that value reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, and inclusive knowledge production. Arts-based methods in researcher professional development may have a role to play in shaping research culture itself, by fostering slow deliberative environments for research exploration, and team research.

Conclusion

This Public Laundry Project has shown that research problems are sites where aspects of research culture are enacted and embedded in research practices. Furthermore, this study contributes to methodological innovation in researcher development, demonstrating that collage inquiry can function as both an ‘outward-facing’ research method and an ‘inward-facing tool’ (Ayrton, 2020: 1230) for professional reflection.

As a research method, collage inquiry has shown the ways in which researchers grapple with the structural, epistemic, and emotional dimensions of their work. The qualities of collage-as-art form, namely; recognition of failure, the foregrounding of reality through deconstruction and reconstruction, and narrative qualities, enables researchers to grapple with the unknown and the complexity associated with this position:

...the potential of collage for thinking synecdochically in reciprocal loops makes possible nuanced appreciation of where research emphasis actually lies, at the heart of the researcher’s multimodal understanding. (de Rijke, 2024: 308)

Therefore, collage is a reflexive tool that enables researchers to visualise, question, and reframe the problems they encounter in their work, as well as a means of fostering interdisciplinary dialogue. Future work could investigate how other creative and arts-based methods could be used in researcher development and interdisciplinary team development. Additionally, there is scope for developing structured approaches to collage analysis, refining how visual data generated through these methods can contribute to broader research culture discourse. There were two areas for development in this study. First, the data generated from Group A was limited and so further research with individual researchers is needed to explore whether the findings of this study are robust. The second restriction in this study is that the collages produced by participants were not subject to a visual analysis because my dual role as workshop facilitator and principal investigator, prevented opportunities for conversations for interviews about their work. I would anticipate that careful consideration of these artefacts, in conversation with researchers would yield further insights.

My final observation is a personal one, in that I have become aware that the findings turn a meta lens on the research questions I formulated at the start of this study, revealing the limitations of my own reductive thinking when attempting to define the aspects of research culture that enable or constrain researchers. Rather than a simple binary of enablers and barriers, the findings indicate that dwelling in a state of ‘not knowing’ is an important part of the research process. Uncertainty can feel discomfoting but creates the conditions for deeper reflection and intellectual risk-taking. Therefore, higher education institutions (HEIs) might enhance research culture by fostering spaces for researchers to engage with open-ended, deliberative thinking. This indicates the potential of arts-based methods in creating a ‘slow scholarship’ space (Karkov, 2019), where researchers can step back from metric-driven pressures to engage in deep, reflexive inquiry.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by The Enhancing Research Culture Fund, at the University of Warwick (funded through the Enhancing Research Culture funding from Research England) in 2023-24. The author would like to thank ‘The Write Space’ and ‘The Write Time’ writing groups at the University of Warwick for their support and suggestions throughout the development of this article, and discussions with colleagues from The Non-Traditional Research Methods (NTRM) Network. The author also extends appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive critique, which helped to refine and strengthen the manuscript.

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List of Images

Figure 1: The Public Laundry Exhibition (Source: Author created photograph).

Figure 2: Participant created collage (Author created photograph).

Figure 3: Participant generated collage (Author created photograph).

Figure 4: Participant generated collage (Author created photograph).

Figure 5: Group generated collage (Author created photograph).

Figure 6: Group generated collage (Author created photograph).

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To cite this article:

Richmond, H., 2025. The Creative Researcher: Mapping research culture through collage inquiry. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 12(3), 1–30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v12i3.1844>.
