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Speaking the lingo

When a £20m fund opened in her field, Catherine Boyle moved from small pockets of funding to a big bid, as **Anna McKie** found out.

For 30 years Catherine Boyle, professor of Latin-American cultural studies at King's College London, has worked at the crossroads between cultural studies and modern languages. She was the first head of King's Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American studies department.

Your work mixes cultural studies with language research. How did that come about?
It started with my interest in Latin American cultural studies as an undergraduate [Boyle read modern foreign languages], and also theatre and performance and gender studies. I also looked at social science, economics, geography, history and politics, alongside language, during my MA.

So you were interdisciplinary early on?
Yes. During the 1970s, the dictatorship in Argentina made me think about what it was like to create culture under oppressive regimes. It opened my eyes to the way culture, languages and creativity work in the world and in difficult circumstances. That's what I did my PhD on and that's what has informed my thinking for my research.

What has your funding strategy been?
Success rates in humanities funding are quite low, partly because there are not many major funders around, and this makes things difficult. I've always tried to create spaces, even if they are very small, to be able to do my work, and have also joined up with different teams. I've concentrated on winning smaller pockets of funding for conferences or seminars. I've had just two really major grants, which involved a lot of hard work.

What were they?
The first, Out of the Wings, around £800,000 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. It's about translating Spanish language theatre into English to bring the research out of the academy and into the area of practitioners and the theatre industry. Strands of that work are still ongoing. [Work started in 2008.] The second, Language Acts and Worldmaking, again came from the AHRC. It was for around £3.5 million.

What scheme was that for?
The AHRC's Open World Research Initiative, which opened in 2014. It was quite brave of the council to come out and say that there was a crisis in modern languages and to provide a £20m pot for modern languages research. Fewer young people are doing language GCSEs and A-levels and university departments are finding it increasingly difficult to get students into the research pipeline.

What was the thinking behind your proposal?
The simple premise that humans create the world through the languages we speak. We are taking language as a historical and material force in the world, people create their different selves through it, on national, local, and spiritual levels.

Why do you think your bid won?
The reasons for success or failure are often quite opaque, but I think that circle of research feeding into teaching back into research was really important. It showed that this was a project with real integrity. I think the complementary strengths of the university partners also helped the bid. Those different disciplinary approaches are crucial.

Who are your partners?
Queen Mary University of London, the Open University and the University of Westminster. All together the partnership contains expertise across linguistics, social linguistics, migration studies, identity studies, and digital humanities. They also bring different student demographics to the project.

How do you go about building a team like this?
We started by thinking about different people whose work could connect with our idea, across the disciplines. It was about trying to find people to challenge the ideas that we already had and bring focus to different aspects of the research.

What was the AHRC application process like?
We first met the AHRC for discussion in June 2014. By the end of October we had put in our first expression of interest and made it onto the shortlist of eight. Until June 2015 we were building the project for the full submission. Each bid has six peer reviews and you have a week to respond to their comments. Then there is the interview.

How did you find the interview?
It was a tough interview but I had expected it to be a lot worse. I'd worked on the bid for a year and a half and was really excited and passionate about it, and I knew all the flaws and gaps.

Do you have any concerns for the next generation?
Yes, increasingly in the humanities, institutions rate success through funding and there is a real pressure to be seen to be going for the grants, often before people are ready. I think that is counterproductive and counterintuitive; you should go for the grant when the research is ready.

This article first appeared in Research Professional's Funding Insight service.