

CROSS-POLLINATION WRITING RETREAT

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Other reports from the Catalyst Fund can be found at the link below.

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Aim & Rationale

The aim of this small project was to consolidate the knowledge and insights gained through different research projects funded under the Connected Communities (CC) programme and to maximise the opportunities for cross-pollination through a writing retreat. We saw multiple overlaps across the CC projects that we, academic investigators and community partners, have been involved in. Moreover, all projects involved applying creative approaches and methods to engage with communities. Our studies were selected as useful case studies for two CC projects, which enabled us to compare strengths and limitations of our approaches in uncovering and mobilising different community assets and identify a number of intangible values emerged from the studies. Nevertheless, we believe that there are more insights to be extracted from our studies, especially the way in which our creative and open-ended approaches influenced the co-creation of knowledge between academics and non-academic partners. While regular individual and group reflections were employed in all projects and, indeed, via the co-design workshops organised by the Leadership Fellow, the opportunities to share reflective thoughts and insights across our projects on this particular aspect were limited.

This cross-pollination writing retreat has enabled us to compare and contrast the experience, practical knowledge and insights captured through different projects in order to identify good practices and develop robust intellectual insights. A number of potential benefits have been identified. Firstly, academics and practitioners in the creative fields working on community development projects could benefit from better understanding of potential impact of their design/creative approaches. This new knowledge could help them plan and design their approaches more effectively. Secondly, our process of reflecting and extracting knowledge through cross-pollination activities could be useful for other academics in terms of capturing their practical knowledge. In addition, many emerging themes could inspire further investigations in various areas.

Activities & Outcomes

The project focused on how communities and universities could collaborate using creative practices. We aimed to extract good practices from the various projects we were involved in, such as Unearth Hidden Assets through Community Co-design and Co-production¹; Scaling up co-design research and practice: building community-academic capacity and extending reach²; and Bridging the Gap between Academic Theory and Community Relevance: Fresh Insights from American Pragmatism.³

This writing retreat aimed to 1) identify and map out the relevant knowledge we co-created with our partners and 2) reflect back on how it was created and in which way our creative approaches might have helped/hindered the co-creation of knowledge. Through this process, a number of useful insights that had not been previously captured were identified. The expected outcomes, two high-quality academic papers, enabled us to deliver tangible outputs to a wider research community. The writing retreat included two one-day events. The activities can be divided into four stages:

1. Preparation

Prior to the first event, raw data and reports from all projects that we have been involved in were revisited in order to extract insights and key lessons learned. Key points and notes were created individually and shared with others via an online repository.

2. The first writing session

The first event was organised on 29th November 2016. Firstly, all notes (which were prepared and shared in advance) were critically reviewed and discussed to identify how communities and universities may best collaborate using creative practices. Through this exercise, a number of key themes with potential for further exploration were identified as follows.

- **Theme 1 – Influence:** The emphasis of the discussions under this theme was on academic-practitioner collaborations and different ways of co-developing new knowledge. The conversations generated a number of questions, which could help other academic researchers, practitioners and community partners reflect on long-term impact and legacy of CC projects:

¹ <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project/unearth-hidden-assets-through-community-co-design-and-co-production/>

² <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project/scaling-up-co-design-research-and-practice/>

³ <https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project/bridging-the-gap-between-academic-rigour-and-community-relevance-fresh-insights-from-american-pragmatism/>

- a) *How the CC projects have influenced their practices, (individual/collective) reach, (followed-on) projects, and relationships?*
 - b) *What are (long-term) effects of CC projects on participating organisations?*
 - c) *How have the relationships developed through CC project(s) affected the way academics, practitioners and community partners collaborate?*
- **Theme 2 – Different Ways of Knowing:** The emphasis of the discussions under this theme was on ‘how’ the investment in the design of the CC projects might create impact and knowledge. The focus was on the design of the research (especially the thinking and the processes) and the operation/management of the research projects (e.g. the positions and contributions). The discussions led to a number of sub-themes, which could help other academic researchers, practitioners and community partners think about different types of outputs and their value:
 - a) Individual and collective knowledge creation
 - b) Expectations of different outputs from different stakeholders
 - c) Different usage of knowledge (e.g. how the outputs are adapted to suit different needs)
 - d) Notion of ‘research’ – expertise and skill development
 - e) Authority of the creator of knowledge
 - f) Transformation and confidence building
 - **Theme 3 – Experiential Quality:** The main question emerged from the conversation under this theme was: *what difference have we made?* Subsequently, different ways of assessing the quality of the research outputs were discussed – e.g. should the outputs be evaluated on the quality of sound academic background? Or should the outputs be evaluated on the quality of experience/story? The conversations resulted in a number of sub-themes, which could be useful for other academic researchers, practitioners and community partners considering ‘qualitative’ ways of assessing their research outputs.
 - a) **Sub-theme 1 – Experiential Quality:** This area was considered important to CC projects, since they encouraged the use of the design process and design thinking. It was observed that CC projects offered opportunities for people to create and design. Arguably, this kind of experience has strong ‘transformative power’ and promotes ‘relationship building’. It was noted that there was a spectrum of approaches within CC projects – some emphasised on **co-designing solutions** (or collective creativity) while others focused on **transformative power** (or empowering). Cultural Animation (CA) was given as an example of one approach that could be used as methodology, tools or ways of working. It was pointed out that relationships between experiential quality and transformative power were rarely explored and should be investigated further.

- b) **Sub-theme 2 – Haptic Experience & Boundary Object:** It was observed that haptic experience could help provoke conversations between different stakeholders. Other related topics were also examined, e.g. power of story and anecdote – *how they could trigger explorations and provide aspirations*. The importance of tactile information (**Boundary Object**) was also discussed. It was pointed out that a combination of objects and tactile experience could help bring back memories, enable people to connect with each other and help them tell their stories. This combination could help people ‘*experience*’ the story of someone else (in other words, put people in another person’s shoes). This could promote empathy building among different stakeholders.
 - c) **Sub-theme 3 – Roles of Prototype:** The notion of collective creativity was also explored. The main focus was on how CC projects could help people imagining or ‘*designing the future*’. The discussion covered the notion of expertise (including experiential expertise) and roles of prototype. In this case, prototyping refers to the act of creating something that does not previously exist. The team considered the ‘*prototyping*’ process to be important to several CC projects, since it enables people to pilot something (or experiment with new ideas) and obtain ‘*experiential knowledge*’ from the process.
- **Theme 4 – Safe Space:** It was observed that there is a need for a safe experimental space in CC projects to pilot, prototype and/or experiment with unconventional ideas. It could be seen as ‘*learning*’ space or ‘*delivering*’ space. One team member described it as a ‘*rehearsing studio*’ where people try something, learn from it, and then choose what to take forward. The most important thing is that mistakes are not perceived as failure. The core idea is to 1) bring together different people (multidisciplinary team) and 2) create a unique safe space for all of them to experiment with disruptive/unusual ideas. The discussions led to a number of sub-themes, which could help other academic researchers, practitioners and community partners explore to create a safe space for different partners to experiment with unconventional ideas freely:
 - a) **Sub-theme 1 – Neutral Space:** The ‘*neutrality*’ of the space was considered very crucial to the success of the experiment. It is about providing a welcoming and neutral space that promotes independence and empowering. ‘*Intent*’ of the space should not be predefined so that people use/make it the way they want.
 - b) **Sub-theme 2 – Transitional Space:** The space can also be perceived as a ‘*transitional*’ space where nobody knows and/or cannot anticipate what is going to happen. This could take people out of their comfort zones and put everyone on a level playing field. It could help participants become ‘*a person*’ again and leave their profession/expertise behind. It may help people step into the role play position (see Design by Consensus for an example) and be able to withdraw

from their usual roles. This may help them 1) empathise with others, 2) think outside the box and 3) imagine/envision the future.

The opportunity to discuss and reflect how communities and universities may best collaborate using creative practices has helped identify numerous areas for further exploration. We grouped all key themes and sub-themes together focusing on the process, e.g. the ways we have collaborated, the ways we worked with communities and the ways we co-create knowledge. Two key areas emerged from the clustering exercise for the two journal papers. To ensure the balanced mixture, each team comprised of two academics and one community partner.

- **Topic 1 – Different ways of knowing/learning:** This paper will discuss how communities and universities co-create knowledge using different tools and techniques, especially creative and art-based approaches. It will explore what different team members have learned through different routes. This paper will also cover the concept of experiential quality (Haptic Experience & Boundary Object), such as how people think through objects. The team includes Dr Theodore Zamenopoulos, Professor Mihaela Kelemen and Sophia de Sousa.
- **Topic 2 – Safe Experimental Space (Neutral & Transitional Space):** This paper will explore the idea of neutral space (e.g. key characteristics and how create this kind of space) and how it could help people imagine the future for their communities. The paper will explore the notion of being safe, neutral and transitional through the lenses of liminality. The key question is: how can we create safe and neutral spaces (or liminal spaces) through different design and creative methods and what are the values/benefits of these spaces? The team comprises of Dr Busayawan Lam, Professor Martin Philips and Susan Moffat.

3. Paper development

After the first session, all members were expected to work on the drafts and complete them to their best ability prior to the second session. The drafts were shared via the online repository so that people from different teams could contribute.

4. The second writing session

The second event was organised on 14th February 2017. A professional facilitator was presented to help both teams develop the papers further.

- The first paper titled *'The role of boundary objects and processes in co-design: empowerment and democratisation of knowledge'* was submitted to CoDesign. International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts on 21st September 2017 (manuscript ID: NCDN-2017-0080).

- The second paper titled '*Design and Creative Methods as a Practice of Liminality in Community-Academic Research Projects*' was submitted to The Design Journal on 30th October 2017.

Conclusion

The cross-pollination writing retreat has given us opportunities to extract further insights from our CC projects. The main focus was to reflect and discuss how communities and universities may best collaborate using creative practices. This focus gave us a clear direction by concentrating on the collaborative processes, e.g. different ways of learning, different ways of co-creating outcomes and how to provide safe experimental for all parties. The cross-pollination activities and paper developments have helped advance our knowledge gained through CC projects in an integrated manner and explore areas we have not investigated during the projects, such as liminal spaces and boundary object. They also enabled us to share new insights with the wider audience. The knowledge captured through this project and its cross-pollination activities could benefit other academics and practitioners in the creative fields in a number of ways, e.g. providing better understanding about potential impact of design/creative approaches and how to extract practical knowledge.

Suggested Reading

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