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

Utopia as Method exchange

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Introduction

This small exchange project was funded through the Catalyst programme. It involved three research projects in the Connected Communities programme working together for the first time. All received funding through and participated in the Community Futures and Utopias Festival 2016. All worked in, and with, urban and ethnically diverse locations and communities. They are: Craftspace and University of Wolverhampton Maker Centric project led by Principal Investigator (PI) Deirdre Figueiredo; University of Bristol and Single Parent Action Network Life Chances project led by PI Dr Debbie Watson and The Open University and The Glass-House Community Led Design Prototyping Utopias project led by PI Dr Katerina Alexiou.

The three projects met at the Utopia Fair at Somerset House in 2016. We observed that our projects had synergy but also interesting differences. Catalyst provided the opportunity to conduct a thought, methodology and artistic exchange – comparing and contrasting creative/artistic methodologies and tools as a means for engaging communities, thinking about the particularity of the hyper-local and urban locality, place and place-making in each geographic context (Bow London, Handsworth Birmingham & Bristol).

Co-ordinated by Craftspace, we conducted an exchange by Skype and organised a Learning Lab at Soho House Museum in Birmingham involving researchers, academics, artists, and participants from all three projects plus additional professionals and policy makers locally and regionally.

The group referred to ‘Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society’ by Ruth Levitas as a framework and lens.¹ We wanted to consider her ‘open definition of utopia’ and explore how knowledge gained by communities through collective working is more beneficial to development of neighbourhoods than privately owned knowledge that is often exploited for profit. Through active creative exchange and discussion, the group reflected on and shared insights about the extent (or not) that our collective and speculative approaches aligned to and enacted some of the ideas in Levitas’s thinking. Working together would provide collective insight to inform and expand our future practices.

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¹ Levitas 2013.
Activity and Outputs

The exchange began through a series of Skype meetings to begin to share thoughts about Levitas’s ‘Utopia as Method’ and to shape and define the means to conduct a productive, meaningful and useful Learning Lab.

The Learning Lab took place on 29th June 2017 bringing people together who had travelled from Bristol, Cardiff, London, Wolverhampton and Birmingham. It was located at Soho House Museum, Birmingham – heritage site of the Maker Centric Community Futures and Utopias project. Soho House was home to Birmingham industrialist Matthew Boulton. It was there that ‘The Lunar Society’ exchanged ideas, discussed philosophy and conducted experiments. They aimed to bring science, culture and commerce together to imagine and enable a better future. As such this was an ideal setting for speculative and future thinking.

Each of the three projects had a cross section of representatives participating: an academic, artists, a community organisation, and community participants/researchers. There were 26 attendees, 20 from the projects and 6 external individuals. We also commissioned an artist/illustrator to document the day through image. The day was conducted like a workshop with a mixture of presentations and interactive sessions. Each project re-created their stall from the Utopia Fair at Somerset House. The displays included materials, publications, films and props.

We began with each group giving a presentation about their project and its methodology. Each showed the film they had made for the Utopia Fair. This was delivered collaboratively by the PI/Co-I, community organisation and community participants so a range of voices and perspectives were represented.

After questions and discussions, the interactive sessions began in which each project facilitated the others to engage in their methodology:

- The Life Chances project invited us to play the game based on the co-authored novel they had produced based on real life experiences of recent refugees or people living on the breadline. This involved people taking up a fictional character and physically moving around in response to a series of statements whilst having a conversation about their
circumstances. They also had a display of jewellery made by community participants during the project.

- The Prototyping Utopias project took us through the physical outputs of their project including aural recordings, images and collected words. We were invited to choose from a range of materials in a suitcase and make prototypes to stimulate future thinking.
• The **Maker Centric** project took us through the physical outputs of their project which included a praxinoscope featuring utopian/dystopian imagery linked to the locality as well as universal themes. A story teller re-acted a method used to facilitate community participants to make links between past, present and future. An artist re-created a metalwork/making activity resulting in a collaborative artwork giving perspectives on utopia.

At the end of the day the discussion focused on utopia as method and reflection or observation about the comparative methods, experiences and outputs. The exchanges were documented by a young artist/illustrator (see Appendix).
Additional Output

The observations, learning and experiences from this Catalyst project which has built on the Utopias projects will be incorporated into a chapter of ‘The Organisation of Craftwork, Identities, Meanings and Materiality, Studies in Management, Organization, and Society’, edited by Emma Bell, Gianluigi Mangia, Scott Taylor and Maria Laura Toraldo to be published by Routledge in 2018.
What was learnt and achieved by the activity and the developments for project participants?

Figueiredo from the community organisation Craftspace was a first time PI for this catalyst project. Facilitating the parameters and methods of the exchange built on and strengthened her skills and experience as a researcher. Learning from other PI’s about how to frame a reflexive process in theory and in practice was very useful. She will be able to apply this to future research projects as well as the work and practice of Craftspace.

• The artists involved from each project developed insight, learning and rigour from hearing about other creative methodologies and conceptual frameworks, reflecting on the value of co-creative community practices and reflecting on their own practice. The young artist/illustrator gained awareness of arts as a method for research which will inform her career possibilities.

Paul Burgess – Artist with Prototyping Utopias project

For me, many of the key points of exchange and learning centred around practicalities: the most successful ways to make an invitation to the public, or how to get people involved in hands-on participation, or how to open up one’s personal creative practices for discussion and engagement. Getting an insight into other practitioners’ methods was fascinating and informative. I was very interested to see how metalwork, which appears to be exclusively specialist and technical, can be made extremely accessible. I was also struck by the breadth of the Bristol project, encompassing as it did writing, game-playing, designing, making and enterprise. It’s also interesting that it was starting to move towards applied theatre – something of great interest to me as an artist whose practice combines theatre, visual art and social engagement. It was also extremely helpful to revisit our Prototyping Utopias project one year on, and to articulate our thoughts around it.

As someone whose work is essentially non-academic, even though I have some limited university teaching experience, I found it fascinating to see the range of ways in which creative projects can support and be supported by research programmes. The experience certainly broadened my sense of what collaborating with academia can mean. This is especially useful as I have a university residency coming up early next year.

In terms of creative methodology, there were a number of things I took away that will influence my own ongoing practice. Utopianism as a kind of (problematic) modernist aesthetic is a particular interest of mine. I’ve long been both seduced by and suspicious of the term. But I hadn’t been aware of ‘Utopia as method’ until starting work on Prototyping Utopias. Even then, my energies were all taken up with the many practicalities of public engagement, so it wasn’t until the Utopias Learning Lab that I was
really able to think about the implications of the idea in more creative terms. It sounds very exciting indeed, and I looking forward to seeing how it will inform my ongoing work.

Finally, it was very helpful to see the various practical ways that participation had been achieved through genuine collaboration across several sectors. It was great to see methods that maintained both artistic integrity and academic rigour. Co-creating work with communities is one of the main aspects of my practice, and I have a fair amount of practical experience. But I found there was plenty more to learn, not only from other practical approaches and techniques but also from the more conceptual frameworks in which the work flourished.

**Gauri Raje – Story Teller with Maker Centric project**

It was good to go back to the Utopia project and work with sharing reflections - something that does not happen very often in my field of work. It seemed quite striking how the context (space/place, the social groups and the nature of the questions) informed each of the approaches. The group from London seemed to have worked with the questions of space and place, and refiguring the nature of place. The group from Bristol responded with a sociological approach that took the possibility of utopia to subverting dominant narratives and reimagining life situations. The group from Birmingham similarly seemed to respond to the material heritage of crafts of the city and to encode the imaginings of utopia through the metal work fabric of the city’s heritage.

What struck me the most was that despite the differences, each of the groups worked through definite ways of playing-making being part of that. It seemed essential to play - whether through creating games or making or playing with space and movement. Play seemed to be what allowed the participants to set themselves free within their utopic imaginings. For the participants across the three workshops on utopia, what was striking were the universality of themes in terms of the nature of utopia - an everydayness of longings of green space, peace, spaces to dream that makes the concept of utopia so potent.

The Learning Lab which brought together participants, artists and academics was unique. Having come from the background of academia, but not having worked within a university for many years now, I was present at the Learning Lab in the capacity of an artist. As an artist, it was fascinating to realise the possibilities that engagement with academic reflection opens up to make esoteric concepts such as ‘utopia’ much more accessible. It seemed to make the reflection upon the artistic work much more rigorous and opened up newer possibilities.
Melanie Tomlinson – Artist with Maker Centric project
As artists and facilitators working in the community, it is important to make participants feel safe and give them a sense of confidence in what they do. Working on a making activity whilst talking means there is not so much pressure on participants to feel under focus and so the process leads to a natural flow of conversation. This is extremely important when discussing difficult themes that conversations about Utopian and Dystopian societies might throw up. By making people feel comfortable and safe you allow them to open up and really reveal what they are really thinking and feeling. I think a lot of feedback can be missed when working in communities by not really delivering workshops that make people feel able to open up. It was encouraging to hear that all of us are very keen to not deliver token projects – projects that have a short shelf life and are not benefiting the community once our delivery is over. This is extremely important when asking communities to engage with you – you need to make sure there is an ongoing legacy and point of contact, so people can access information and not feel abandoned and used for the purposes of a research project. It is a two-way dialogue and I felt all our projects were mindful of this.

I was very interested to see the different delivery methods from the projects in terms of use of materials and use of acting. I am more familiar with the Bow methods of community engagement through the use of materials, craft and allowing people to play. I think play and being able to use materials in a free way really enables people to grow an idea and I thought the responses of the participants to this workshop were really interesting. The Bristol methods of acting through the game project were more unfamiliar to me and it was interesting to see the results of the game and the shocking reality of not being able to progress depending on your individual circumstance. I felt this was a very direct activity in the sense that you got to know the characters and then watched as certain ones moved forward and others stayed put.

I was interested in Ruth Levitas’s comments on private knowledge often being exploited for profit. I think there is a very real yearning in communities to engage in projects that are trying to move away from this dystopian activity. The Fab Labs that are setting up across the country are a great way for people to interact with each other, technology and make things they have designed themselves rather than feeling that it is only big companies that can access these exciting processes and make ‘stuff’! They are also a great way for people to gain new skills and push themselves and not to feel left behind, daunted or isolated as the technological world advances. By allowing people of any age to access these facilities, particularly the over 50’s, there is the very real chance this knowledge will filter down to younger generations in families/friends and vice versa promoting intergenerational dialogue and the development of interesting collaborations.
• The project researchers (including academics and community organisations) gained a deeper and more embedded understanding of outcomes arising from different creative research methods and different configurations of working.

Katerina Alexiou – PI for Prototyping Utopias project
I found that the workshop was a good opportunity to share and engage with each other’s projects and outcomes. It helped us open a joint conversation on the theme of utopia as a subject and as a method, and reflect on our respective theoretical and methodological underpinnings. I took away several observations and ideas for further exploration, but I include a couple of key summarising points below.

We approached the subject of utopia from different disciplinary starting points or lenses. The Maker-centric project saw utopia through the lens of heritage and embarked on exploring the past as a catalyst for future thinking. The Prototyping Utopias project used the lens of design and explored how dreaming can help explore and develop ideas for future realities. Life Chances saw utopia from a social science perspective and used creative disruption as a vehicle for creating novel futures.

Despite those different starting points there were many commonalities between the projects. They all saw the past as a foundation but also limitation for the future, which necessitated an effort to re-examine, re-construct and to a certain extent let free of the past. They all paid particular attention to place and the specificity of the local context in which project activities were carried out. They all also focussed methodologically on making and acting, as vehicles for helping engage people from diverse communities in utopian thinking.

It was also interesting to see the different configurations of working between academics, practitioners, artists and community participants adopted in each case, all however agreeing on the benefits of collaboration in research, design and action and the richness of knowledge and outputs resulting from the process.

For me, the most affecting aspect of this exploration of community utopias was exactly the emotional engagement of people with this question and the realisation that we dream the same dreams of peace, equality, diversity, opportunity and respect for each other and for the planet. But we all strive to realise them differently in our locations and contexts through, mostly, small steps.

Louise Dredge – Co-I for Prototyping Utopias project
The Learning Lab created a valuable and timely space for reflection and interdisciplinary exchange between academics, community partners, and community participants involved in work exploring and supporting social policy, design of the built environment,
artistic practice, community engagement and participatory practice. The process offered us the opportunity to reflect on and share our Utopia-themed collaborative action research, and learn from and explore the creative methods and outcomes of others.

Each of the three projects revealed the collaborative and fluid way in which partners worked together as researchers and practitioners not just on this particular project, but in their ongoing collaborations as community-academic partnerships.

The creative, participatory research methods shared by each project were all distinct but were characterised by a ‘learning through doing’ approach and the creation of supportive creative environments for making and for exploring social, economic, environmental issues of the past, present and future. In employing the utopian lens, what emerged from each of the projects were visions and aspirations for more diverse, caring and inclusive environments, rooted in local and interpersonal connections.

Marilyn Howard – RA for Life Chances project
- Importance of 'making and talking' - doing a task as well as discussion helped to generate ideas and to create safe spaces to talk about sensitive issues.
- Utopia as a useful mechanism - I wonder if it almost 'legitimates' imaginings? With visualisation/making things as a way to create something new to reflect utopian ideas as a group. Utopia seemed to work across all projects in different locations/contexts.
- Importance of helping to create a sense of agency in individuals/connecting on an emotional level.
- Project participants seem to feel their experiences/opinions have been valued - in some cases perhaps helping them to move on to other things?

Deirdre Figueiredo – PI for Maker Centric project
I found the reflexive nature of the day, a mix of active listening, talking, making and doing, thought-provoking and illuminating. In all projects the activity of making or doing seemed to enable a ‘holding of space’ without distraction. This allowed for dreaming or imagining – individually or collectively. Across all the presentations the consistent consequences of the creative methods employed were forms of self-realisation and empathy towards others. Are these the requisite characteristics required to enable community participants/community groups to engage in future thinking?

I was interested in how all three projects employed different methods of inserting ‘the body’ into the research process/activity in some way through story-telling, physically making or through playing the game. I wondered if embodied methods which involve an investment of time enable participants to engage in filtering their thoughts more deeply.

Through hearing about the Life Chances project methodology, I was interested to learn about the importance of devising safe spaces and safe ways to employ disruption as a
technique for radical re-thinking. One of the presentations quoted Unamuno: "one has to feel the thought and think the feeling" – this was a helpful way to acknowledge the importance of thinking through forms of making and doing which characterises arts-based research methods.²

Dr Fiona Hackney referenced the writing of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart in her presentation.³ The ideas of ‘affect theory’ (“those visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing that can serve to drive us toward movement, thought, and ever-changing forms of relation”) seemed to relate to the explorations of utopia in our three projects. Also, the ideas of ‘worlding’ - the process of how adaptive strategies happen seemed pertinent to explore further in relation to utopia and community futures. What Stewart describes as ‘bloomspace’ was also posited as a methodology to think about whereby times of crisis cause people to re-prioritise values and allow different sets of skills and abilities to rise to the surface in order for people to re-organise themselves and relate to each other in different ways.

- The people attending the learning lab (a mix of policy makers, local HE representatives, educators and individuals from the local community) who were external to the project recorded that the collective co-reflection of methods had been very helpful in assisting their thinking of the potentials for community engagement. They were keen to take the learning back to their organisations/communities to inform their practice. Only a few had heard of Connected Communities programme and were keen to investigate the portal further.

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² Unamuno 1917.
³ Stewart 2007.
How did the activity contribute to the development of the Connected Communities programme?

Questions addressed in the course of the three utopia projects and referenced in the Catalyst exchange were:

- The importance of the spaces that artists create for dreaming.
- Past visions of the future and the role of the past in community futures.
- The future as a lens or safe space for exploring challenges facing communities.
- Community fears and aspirations for the future.
- The role of the future in bringing together or dividing communities.
- Utopia as participatory/ creative method.

The reflective exchange enhanced research knowledge and methodology from a solid base of community engagement, focusing on arts-led creative making, co-production, heritage and design thinking. It contributed to the Connected Communities project in the following ways:

- Demonstrated the effectiveness of co-reflection in deepening and drawing out knowledge and method (one year later).
- Evidenced the most successful ways to make an invitation to the public to engage in participatory research.
- Identified creative, sensory and participatory methods which make research activity extremely accessible to diverse communities.
- A deeper realisation of the possibilities that engagement with academic reflection opens up to make esoteric concepts such as ‘utopia’ much more accessible.
- Articulated participatory methods that maintained both artistic integrity and academic rigour.
- Broadened the sense of what collaborating with academia can mean for artists, community organisations and community participants.
- Identified the effectiveness of making and acting as vehicles for helping engage people from diverse communities in future thinking/engaging in research and moving from inner to outer agency.
- Affirmed the value of interdisciplinary exchange to share and widen knowledge and learning.
- Identified the fluid way in which partners worked together as a success factor in enabling research to succeed and have legacy.
- It highlighted the importance of situated research – ‘place’ as a key component of unlocking community potential, meaning and legacy.
Appendix: Documentary illustrations of the Learning Lab

All illustrations by Katie Tomlinson.
LIFE CHANCES:
re-imagining regulatory systems for low-income families

UTOPIAN METHODS
- creating new images
- making & talking
- co-writing novel

"How do we share people's traumatic journeys safely?"

 DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERS
TO TELL FAUTUAL STORIES
allows us to talk deeper

GAME OF LIFE CHANCES

- put yourself in someone else's shoes
- use multimedia & creative arts as a vehicle to engage socially excluded & marginalized groups.
MAKER-CENTRIC

Local heritage site - LENS to explore the past as a CATALYST for future thinking.

SOHO HOUSE

HOME OF

INDUSTRIALIST

Matthew Baxton

Thinking through the ACT of MAKING.


His UTOPIA has led to a current DYSTOPIA

CONSUMERISM

MATERIALISM

EXCESS

WASTE.
UTOPIAN IDEAS

PLACE TO
CREATE

SHARING
& COMMUNITY

WORK TOGETHER

PRIVATE SPACE

FUTURE

GROW & FLOURISH

BE SELF SUFFICIENT

OWN PRODUCE

BLOOM SPACE

LOCK BOTH MEMORIES & VISIONS

WHAT UTOPIA X DYSTOPIA

YOU HAVE?

WHERE YOU'VE COME FROM?

Woke as WORDS?

BRING IT BACK TO LIFE
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Authorship
APPLIED RESEARCH
BLOOMSPACE
SHARING STORIES
GLOBAL
LOCAL
HONESTY
COMMUNITY
DIGITAL TOOLBOX
MATERIALS
CREATING
NEW
IMAGES
PRACTICAL
MULTIPLE VEHICLES
OF EXPRESSION
COLLABORATIVE
PLAY
DREAMING
THINKING
MAKING
LISTENING
EMBODIED IN SPACE
EXTERAL
INSPIRATION
WORLDING
IN
YEAR
FRIENDLY
FORMING & FILTERING
THOUGHTS
NATURE
ARE PRESENT
IN OUR BODIES
HYPERLOCAL
SOLUTIONS
WEENESS

Who’s at the centre of decision?
ABSTRACT IDEAS TO CONCRETE
IMAGE
ARTS = FLUIDITY
WHERE DOES THE BODY INSERT ITSELF?
AESTHETIC
IN
HISTORY
EXTERNAL
INSPIRATION
WORLDING
IN
YEAR
FRIENDLY
FORMING & FILTERING
THOUGHTS
NATURE
ARE PRESENT
IN OUR BODIES
HYPERLOCAL
SOLUTIONS
WEENESS

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List of participating projects and associated contributors:

Maker Centric, Birmingham: https://cocreatingcare.wordpress.com/maker-centric-2016/
Deirdre Figueiredo, Craftspace, Craftspace.co.uk
Fiona Hackney, University of Wolverhampton
Melanie Tomlinson, Artist
Gauri Raje, Artist
+ 7 community participants

Marilyn Howard, University of Bristol
Akilah Tye Comrie, Creating Life Chances CIC, Bristol
Moestak Hussein, Creating Life Chances CIC, Bristol
Nathan Evans, South Riverside Community Development Centre, Cardiff
+ 1 community participant

Katerina Alexiou, The Open University
Paul Burgess, Artist

Link to blog post about the Learning Lab http://empoweringdesignpractices.weebly.com/blog/reflections-on-utopias
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