

Arts and Cultural Research: Impact through Partnership

A one-day conference jointly organised by the Arts Council England and
the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities

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**ARTS COUNCIL
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UNIVERSITY *of* York

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1.0 Introduction

The *Arts and Cultural Research: Impact through partnership* Conference was held at the University of Leeds on 14 May 2015. It brought together academics, artists and cultural organisations from across the North of England to share experiences of the benefits and challenges of long term research partnerships between cultural and research organisations.

There is an increasing acknowledgement of the positive value of relationships between artists, arts organisations and research institutions. The development of strategic partnerships between organisations can help to deliver impactful research contributions, evidenced in a number of existing successful and mutually productive research partnerships in the North – the general feeling at the conference was that the ‘will’ and ‘excellence’ required for successful partnership development was alive and kicking in the North of England and should be acted upon. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) demonstrates an increasing focus on the importance of wider research impact, making this a critical area of focus for both arts and research organisations. In the wake of recent economic crises and likely further reductions in public spending in the near future, organisations are faced with an opportunity to re-evaluate the functions of their relationships. The question of how to become impactful becomes increasingly important. The issues of ‘best practice’, ‘benefit’ and ‘sustainability’ in collaborative partnerships require continued exploration in the context of current practice.

2.0 Conference Proceedings

2.1 What can WRoCAH do?

(Julian Richards, WRoCAH Director)

Director of the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH) Professor Julian Richards opened the conference with an introduction to WRoCAH and the role played by the doctoral training programme in supporting researchers to realise their career aspirations within and outside of academia. Each WRoCAH doctoral student develops their skills by learning and networking with each other through a bespoke training programme. Professor Richards detailed the *Researcher Employability Project (REP)*, part of the WRoCAH training programme in which all students are required to spend a minimum of a month working with an external partner. The REP project design is flexible and offers a wide range of opportunities for engagement with other arts and cultural organisations. The REP provides possibilities for WRoCAH students, arts and cultural organisations to collaboratively foster interdisciplinary partnership projects which benefit the organisation through the enrichment of their work and support the student in gaining experience and developing their research skills.

2.2 Connecting the Cultural and Higher Education Sectors

(Sarah Fisher & Sarah Maxfield, Arts Council England)

The Arts Council England are part of an ongoing programme to encourage collaborations between cultural and educational organisations, including supporting early career researchers to connect with arts organisation to develop impactful research. Sarah Maxfield discussed the increasing recognition over the last 5 years of the role that universities play at

the heart of making cities interesting and favourable. The university organisation is a key provider of cultural infrastructure and driver of a city's cultural agenda. Sarah highlighted the unique expertise that the university organisation possesses which can be utilised within a research partnership to help the cultural sector to refine and innovate in the arts. She explained that through partnership with a university institution a cultural organisation can add rigour to its research endeavours. It can help the cultural sector to better understand 'evidence' for demonstrating 'cultural value' and can offer training, consultancy and business planning expertise of benefit to partner organisations. Sarah also underlined the importance of benefit on both sides as a pre-requisite of the successful research partnership.

Sarah Fisher, Arts Consultant, then went on to discuss sustainability in research partnerships, citing the importance of developing partnerships that enable long term thinking. She explained that the success of inter-organisational partnership working depends on respect and understanding. The university plays a role in developing understanding of how the cultural sector works and it is the interrelationship between this tacit and academic knowledge that a partnership must work to extract. Sarah discussed the cross disciplinary nature of the partnership and the need for co-design of projects with real communities. She explained the need for partnerships to be bespoke, developed through distributed leadership, joint experiments and shared objectives. Sarah also highlighted the advantage held by the North of England in terms of a strong cultural infrastructure and appetite for cross-organisational partnership development.

2.3 What's in it for us?

(Dominic Gray, Opera North)

Opera North's Projects Director Dominic Gray explained that it is in the DNA of the cultural sector to co-operate and to innovate in interdisciplinary working – after all, Opera itself is arguably the most interdisciplinary of all art forms. He spoke about the issue of access to funding for cultural organisations and the need for resilience in partnership working and the negotiation of a '3rd space' – a thinking space that is autonomous and neither 'Opera North' nor 'the university' citing the case study example of *Phase Revival (Beccs Andrews and Opera North)*. Within this space a partnership can construct its own identity. In terms of benefit to arts organisations, Dominic explained that university partnerships can offer credibility to the research outputs of an organisation. Universities have access to well-developed networks and are engaged with contemporary thought and society; they are therefore well placed to provide support to organisations who aim to drive thinking in their field of expertise.

2.4 York Curiouser

(Lara Goodband, York Curiouser & Kate Giles, Department of Archaeology, University of York)

York Curiouser is a contemporary visual arts project, which last year installed nine new artworks by different artists in outdoor heritage sites in York. This presentation reflected on the success of the project in generating new forms of collaboration between the creative sector and HE institutions. Lara explained that the York Curiouser project required careful negotiation with the Council. The partnership between the City of York Council, the

University of York, the University of St John and York Curiouser effected in changing the functions of buildings to become an active part of how we learn. The installations, including ceramic sandwiches, handbag pot plants and blue balloons invited the public to interact with and experience heritage sites in York in a different way, thus creating a new interrelation between the city, its buildings and its communities. Lara also explained that the York Curiouser partnership provided opportunities to increase the impact of the project through a multi-stranded approach to the installations, including guided tours, workshops and lectures.

2.5 Harvey Teasdale ‘The Sheffield Man Monkey’

(Dawn Hadley Department of Archaeology, University of Sheffield & Amy Beard, Point Blank Theatre Company)

In 2014 Point Blank Theatre Company and The University of Sheffield Department of Archaeology collaborated using an Arts Council England grant to tell the story of Harvey Teasdale the Sheffield ‘man monkey’. The collaboration aimed to explore working class culture in Sheffield through the production of a performance informed by historical material on the life of this lively Sheffield character. The presentation discussed the challenges of the culturally delicate project and the opportunities created by bringing together academics, members of the public, actors, performers and writers. Point Blank highlighted the importance of building trust within a partnership, and the need to insist on a 2-way flow of ideas within any collaboration of this nature. The presentation discussed in detail some of the benefits of developing such a partnership. The Harvey Teasdale project offered the potential to develop new methodologies for enquiry by using creative practice as a research methodology. Point Blank Theatre explained that their partnership helped them form

strategies for investigating the questions facing their work e.g. ‘how do you think about creating a new or corrected history?’ or ‘how performance outcomes can help us learn about wider society?’ and also helped identify research possibilities that arise out of the work they do.

2.6 Integrating Impact and Research through Creative Practice

(Tom Cornford, Department of Theatre, Film and Television, University of York)

Tom Cornford posed the question ‘how do we articulate the value of an intangible cultural artefact?’ He explained the capacity of research partnerships to devise strategies for the exploration of such questions through his experience of practice-based research with his company Common Ground Theatre. Tom highlighted benefits to research organisations of partnership working through the inclusion of creative practitioners to extend the impact of work and to develop new research methodologies. Tom also spoke about the need for cultural and arts organisations to develop a strong public narrative to demonstrate the value of research impact. He explained that this is necessary for organisations to ‘get good at telling their story’ and share the success of their research to strengthen the presence of the creative sector as a driver of research innovation and facilitator of social impact.

2.7 The Hepworth Gallery, Wakefield

(Abigail Harrison-Moore, University of Leeds and Natalie Walton, Hepworth Gallery)

The Hepworth Wakefield develops the impact of its research through a range of ways. The presentation discussed the Hepworth’s impact work engaging young people with the gallery

and its work as well as raising young people's aspirations about attending university. The Hepworth's approach is described as research embedded in socially engaged creative work. Some of the benefits to early career researchers of partnership working were discussed, including the opportunity to develop advanced research skills such as audience segmentation. Natalie Walton described the benefit of a research partnership as including access to a 'critical friend' throughout the project. She also highlighted the benefits of increased access to academics, and increased credibility for funding for cultural organisations.

2.8 A Collection of Small Choices

(Jonathan Eato, Department of Music, University of York & Hannah Bruce, Hannah Bruce & Co)

This case study involved a partnership collaboration between the University of York, Hoxton Hall and Hannah Bruce & Company. The leading research issue was how to creatively guide audiences around a space, and how a physical building can engage with the arts. This project brought together artists and technologists, but Jonathan Eato explained, those involved were not thought of in terms of academics or technologists, but rather people who were all commonly engaged with a subject. He described the importance of finding this shared commonality and using it to drive the partnership forward, using the Hoxton Hall partnership as a successful example.

2.9 Negotiating the Mini-City and the Sandpit

(Antony Dunn, Yorkshire Dance)

Antony Dunn spoke about the ways of successfully negotiating a research partnership with a university; he cited examples of two different collaborations with researchers from the University of Leeds. Through reflection on these experiences Anthony highlighted the need for research partnerships to ensure adequate planning time within the collaboration. He explained that a project can derail quickly if its outcome depends on one person within an organisation and recommended building a robust partnership infrastructure between organisations. Anthony also stressed the importance of trust, 2-way negotiation and understanding between often very different organisational cultures. He highlighted the complex organisational structure of the university and the challenge of accessing the 'right person'. Similarly, the need for more networking opportunities between organisations through sandpit and open space workshop events was highlighted.

2.10 REF 2014 Impact Case Studies

Martin Iddon, Department of Music, University of Leeds

The work of University of Leeds, Department of Music Professor Derek Scott was presented as an example of how performance research can be used as a lens for understanding more about popular music through studying the historical sociology of previously marginalised music forms such as music hall and operetta. Professor Scott's work investigates these music forms in the context of class and imperialism, and exists as an example of how research impact can be developed through creative practice.

Brendan Stone, Department of English, University of Sheffield

Brendan Stone introduced his 'Storying Sheffield' project as an example of how community or social change can be genuinely led by communities through research collaboration/partnership.

Scott Palmer, School of Performance & Cultural Industries, University of Leeds

Scott Palmer presented information about his and Professor Sita Popat's recent collaborative partnership with small-medium commercial enterprise KMA Ltd, a digital arts company. The partnership was developed to develop new visual digital arts ideas and shift their product focus toward live installation and performance. Scott highlighted the importance of planning in an initial exploratory workshop phase to the project in order to develop a creative space where all parties could 'be free' to explore their research issue separate from their usual organisational institutions. The importance of play and chance was also discussed in relation to the success of the research partnership, the partnership was a creative expedition therefore it was productive to develop space to be creative and also appreciate that sometimes in creative explorations, the 'answer' may surface from a chance encounter or idea. Scott Palmer also reiterated the need for an iterative and dialogic process in partnership development. The work of this partnership resulted in learning opportunities for the University of Leeds School of Performance and Cultural Industries, as well as helping KMA to respond to issues facing their business. It developed new opportunities for public to interact with their city in a new way and catalysed the design of progressive digital projections since used by DV8 Theatre company.

3.0 What can a Research Partnership do?

A research partnership may evolve for a number of reasons; these can revolve around the creation of new work or the evaluation of existing work. A partnership can be designed around a particular stage of the research process for example the beginning (development of questions, research design), the end (dissemination, evaluation) or can be an ongoing integrated exploration (e.g. digital projection project - Scott Palmer, University of Leeds). Whichever part of the research journey a partnership concerns, the key point of note is that it is likely to be most successful if it is designed around the research needs of all parties involved and there is a strong justification for the involvement of each party in furthering or enriching the research.

3.1 Develop a Research Question

Research organisations have a wealth of experience in developing and initiating research programmes. Creating a partnership or collaboration with a research organisation can support arts and cultural organisations in the development of research questions at the outset of their research journeys (e.g. Dominic Gray, Opera North, or Tom Cornford, Common Ground Theatre). A research organisation can work with a cultural organisation to draw out themes for future enquiry from previous work, as well as refine existing 'issues' into suitable research questions and helping to co-create effective strategies for the exploration of questions. In this way a research partnership can take the form of methodological research collaboration or an initial 'research ideas development partner'.

3.2 Explore or Answer a Research Question

An artist or arts organisation may have an existing research question to pursue. In this case the development of a research partnership can be useful in order to explore or answer a

question that could not otherwise be answered (or be answered comprehensively) by a single organisation (Dominic Gray, Opera North). A research partnership can help to bring fresh perspectives to bear on a complex research issue, it provides an opportunity to approach a research issue with a multiplicity of research experience, knowledge and access to new sets of skills and technologies. A research partnership can supplement the 'critical arsenal' of the arts organisation to develop a more robust methodological approach or avenue of enquiry to address issues facing the organisation.

4.0 The Benefits of Research Partnerships for Organisations

A successful research partnership should benefit all involved. It is important that the benefits of research partnership working are clear to organisations and that the features of the partnership are designed to provide maximum added-value for those involved (Sarah Maxfield, ACE). The conference discussion helped to draw out some of the common benefits experienced by arts and research organisations which are part of a long term collaborative partnerships.

4.1 A Critical Partner

Artists and arts organisations which have developed productive partnerships have found that their relationship benefits them by providing a research partner who can act as a reflective critical partner as well as a co-creator (e.g. Natalie Walton, Hepworth Gallery, Wakefield). Having a research partner who is critically engaged in reflection and evaluation throughout the research journey of the can provide valuable insight and has enriched the outputs of arts research projects undertaken by a number of arts organisations.

4.2 Skills, Technologies & Communities

As well as access to a critically reflective partner the successful research partnership can and should provide the arts organisation with access to a range of new skill sets. The engaged and sustainable research partnership depends on mutual benefit and value for all parties, part of which is determined by the capacity for an increased pool of research resources and an interdisciplinary perspective that benefits the objectives of the partnership. Successful existing partnerships have benefitted from access to new technologies (and new ways of using those technologies for example the University of Leeds and KMA Ltd *Projecting Performance* and *Dancing in the Streets*). Arts organisations also show that their work

benefits from access to a wider research community. The effective research partnership offers opportunities for immersion in current research culture for arts organisations focussed on becoming drivers of thinking and research in their particular specialism (Domenic Gray, Opera North). In the case of successful partnerships arts and cultural organisations have found that the relationship strengthens their presence within the wider arts research community as a whole. Improved access to a wider research community has benefitted arts organisations by encouraging impact through increased potential for dissemination of research as well as the opportunity to network and engage with other researchers in the field.

4.3 Rigour & Credibility

The benefits of successful partnership working include the impact of increased rigour in research endeavours. This is reported by arts and cultural organisations to be particularly valuable in improving the quality and credibility of their research. Improved credibility in research endeavours has benefitted arts organisations and artists through increased recognition of their research. This in turn can add value to the organisation's reputation and attractiveness as a potential future research partner.

4.4 Access to Funds

The interdisciplinary research organisation-arts organisation partnership can increase eligibility for additional streams of research funding for artists and arts organisations, which otherwise they would not be able to access. It is important to note however that most examples of successful research partnerships are not financially-led and have instead evolved organically and are led by a clear set of mutual objectives and a focal research issue or question.

5.0 The Shape of a Successful Partnership

As demand for collaborative partnership development increases it is important that examples of successful practice and experiences are shared. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to partnership working that has emerged, instead successful examples of practice focus on flexibility, interpenetration and continued dialogue between parties. The conference highlighted the importance of this flexible model of partnership working as well as a number of key common tropes shared by successful arts research partnerships.

5.1 The '3rd Space'

When organisations come together to form a partnership this may mean that a number of very different working cultures 'collide'. Incongruent language, different modes of working and organisational cultures can impact the progress of a research partnership. It is therefore important that the involved parties initially carve out a '3rd space' that is separate from their respective organisational environments (Domenic Gray, Opera North). In this space the partnership can create its own distinct identity and develop an integrated collaborative approach. This 3rd space recurs as a key theme in successful existing research partnerships and provides benefit to the partnership by creating the opportunity to start with a 'blank canvas'. The 3rd space, in whatever form, is a vital tool for ensuring the partnership involves a genuine 'interpenetration' of partner perspectives. It allows the partnership to exist as something new, rather than an extension of one or another partners' ways of doing things.

5.2 Starting 'Properly': Play, Chance & Exploration

The 3rd space can act as a platform for initial thinking and exploratory practice. A foundational period of exploration can provide crucial insight early on that can help to usefully shape the identity of the ongoing partnership. Some partnerships have increased

the impact and longevity of their research projects by building this foundational phase into the initial stages of their partnership journey (e.g. *Projecting Performance* University of Leeds, York Curiouser Partnership, Common Ground Theatre). This phase allows space for the flexible exploration of research issues and formation of questions or methodologies. It may take the form of practical workshops, a 'blue sky' brainstorming process, a platform for 'play' or 'chance encounters' or may be more structured. This space of play creates an opportunity to formulate as a partnership, to shake off organisational habitus and engrained modes of thinking and for all partners to freely approach the research issue.

5.3 A Shared Language

Partnership working involves 2 or more organisations joining forces that may bring with them very different ways of working, jargon and language. There is a need to work towards the development of a shared language separate from either party's usual lexicon and devoid of jargon, which can at best confuse and at worst alienate research partners (Dominic Gray, Opera North; Anthony Dunn, Yorkshire Dance). The development of a shared language implies the need for dialogue - a central theme of the successful research partnership experience. In order for research partnerships to be sustainable ongoing dialogue is needed, which should take the form of a 2-way flow of information (Dawn Hadley, University of Sheffield).

5.4 A Bespoke Design

There is not an off-the-shelf solution for the arts research partnership. Organisations have benefitted from developing bespoke partnership designs that respond to the needs of all parties involved (Abigail Harrison-Moore, University of Leeds). An individual partnership model also allows organisations to remain flexible and responsive to changing needs within

the partnership. The shape of the partnership will necessarily depend on its objectives, though a bespoke design that allows for organic growth in the partnership and its aims has proven a successful approach.

5.5 A Long Term Investment

Whilst collaboration may be short term or conceived for the purpose of completing a single project, a research partnership, especially if it is to be sustainable, is a long term endeavour that requires commitment and ongoing investment from all parties (Sarah Fisher, FACT). A longer term investment in partnership is also important for taking the time to build trust between parties (something arts organisations do not underestimate) and also so that all parties may have the time to properly plan, develop their '3rd space' and 'shared language' all of which impact on the continued success and robustness of a partnership. From the panel discussion also emerged the argument that we should not be afraid of 'slow burning relationships' between organisations and extended conversations in response to the issue of how to find and develop partnership opportunities.

5.6 A firm plan, a flexible plan

The case study examples of research partnership working highlighted the need to outline a clear set of mutually beneficial and shared objectives of the partnership from the outset. Partnerships can fail if all parties are not clear about their role from the inception of the project (Anthony Dunn, Yorkshire Dance). This is not to say that research outputs must be agreed on at this stage, in fact a number of research partnerships and collaborations (e.g. University of Leeds School of Performance and Cultural Industries & KMA Ltd) have found that allowing for an iterative and emergent research journey has produced very successful results and allowed them to remain flexible throughout the project.

An initial 'plan' should be formed collaboratively and consider the investment from all parties in terms of time, resources and employees. It is also important at this stage to agree exactly whom the partnership is between, whether it is with a person or a wider organisation and the implications for the project if one or more people involved has to leave the process for any reason. For these reasons the arts or research organisation embarking on a collaborative partnership project requires resilience. Patience and understanding has also been known to produce positive results!

5.7 Shout and Share

There is a need for arts organisations and research organisations to develop a clear public narrative to demonstrate the impact of their research (Tom Cornford, Common Ground Theatre). Through the panel discussion this emerged to be increasingly important in terms of ongoing support for those organisations and also contributing positively to the recognition of arts organisations and the research of the arts community.

5.8 Utilising 'brokerages'

The panel discussion highlighted a need to continue developing research networks that can broker partnerships between arts organisations and research organisations looking for partners. For smaller arts organisations access to suitable partners can be an obstacle and therefore it is important to maximise the role of organisations such as the Arts Council and University Research Exchanges in supporting the introduction of potential research partners. It is also vital that the capacity of such organisations to function as 'brokers' is promoted to smaller organisations. Potential for the role of early career researchers and PG students in developing research collaborations was discussed, however there was also a strong feeling that involvement by people at all levels in both organisations is needed. The need for

further networking opportunities to catalyse research partnerships was also felt to be a positive thing and a useful response to the question of how small arts organisations and HE institutions can identify partnership opportunities.