A Short Guide for Developing Collaborative Projects between Universities and the Arts

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Overview

This short guide is intended to provide some general advice and pointers for people who may be new, or relatively new, to developing collaborative projects that might involve artists and/or cultural practitioners and/or arts/cultural organisations working with Higher Education institutions.

The guide is broken down into three key sections: Starting Out, Projects in Progress and Projects Approaching Completion. It may be that not everything on these lists will apply to your specific project, however we do hope it provides some useful starting points for thinking about how best to smoothly and effectively realise your project.

We have also included a very brief 'Top Tips at a Glance' for those who may just want a quick overview of things to be thinking about prior to the start of a collaborative project.

Starting Out

1. Objectives, goals and research questions. The start and early stages of any research collaboration or other type of cultural knowledge exchange is a crucial time. It is when collaborators establish the most fundamental elements to ensure that the objectives, process and relationships are clear and potential conflicts and limitations can be addressed. The two most central questions are: what does the team want to achieve, and what are the research questions that will guide the process? It's important that collaborators are on the same page, especially when their artistic and scholarly practices are different.

2. Models. Models for arts and culture KE projects have varied widely and are likely to encompass a wide range of objectives, art practices, sizes, budgets and participants. They might include: festivals, conferences, installations, performances, videos, networks, residencies, public art projects, exhibitions, community-driven projects, labs, multi-departmental initiatives and hubs and even new building-based or infrastructure partnerships. Each model should be conceived in order to address and suit particular objectives, funding, scales, contexts and areas of arts practice.

3. Structure. Like a model, the structure of a project is informed by the objectives, scope, time scale and funding of the collaboration. The structure should flow naturally from discussions around the needs and limitations of the project so that all participants have a realistic timeline within which to work and can understand which elements of the project might impact others.

4. Process. Cultural organisations, artists, researchers and artist/researchers may all have different approaches to making work, but it is important to discuss the process they anticipate undertaking and how it can possibly be adjusted. What are the methods to be used in the process? Who is driving it? Are all those involved clear about which partner is doing what? Creative research and knowledge exchange projects are often interdisciplinary by nature and thus involve careful planning in order to find ways for the research and arts practice to intersect and support each other. The use of common planning methods may also be very helpful in ensuring that each task is identified with one or more individuals named as leading on each element.

5. Relationships and roles. In conversations about cultural knowledge exchange, the relationship is frequently cited as the most important element of the entire endeavour. Clarity of roles and relationships can help establish boundaries, spheres of influence and workload. Issues to address are: what each person/organisation is responsible for, time commitment is, how research and administration will be carried out individually and collaboratively, what the relationship is between the artist and the researcher and also between the collaborators and any invited participants.

6. Contracts and agreements. Although a written agreement can't anticipate all potential issues, it can provide an understanding regarding roles, workload, payment, time commitment and deadlines, as well as ownership of the resulting artistic and academic outputs. In some cases (where fees and IP are involved), a formal contract is important to include. In others, a Memorandum of Understanding might be more suitable.

7. Communication. Again, this is often cited as one of the key elements determining the success of any collaboration. When establishing roles and relationships between collaborators, it can be very useful to discuss and agree at an early stage the possible style, methods and frequency of the communication that will be used throughout the project. Collaborators may come from different working cultures when it comes to communication, which can impact the execution of the project. As well as internal communication between the various actors involved directly in the project, it is worth devoting some time to thinking about the wider dissemination and communication of the project. In some instances there will be a public component to the project, an exhibition, event, or a performance. In such cases, it is important to ensure that all parties are properly credited, with correct use of logos and the like.

8. Documentation methods. Collaborators may also find it helpful to document the project's process and outcome. Sometimes a report will be needed, especially if there are funding bodies involved and because it's useful and good practice for the collaborators' own records. Documentation may help individuals to reflect on and understand what practices were successful and to identify challenges when considering future projects. Documentation that can be made publicly available is often helpful to others embarking on similar KEs. It can also create opportunities for kudos building and bringing the work to wider attention as appropriate.

Documentation considerations include: perspective, if it's the product of an end-of-project write-up or an ongoing analysis, level of detail and level of transparency (how open collaborators are about challenges). Documentation types are also important. Use of film, photography and visual methods will, for example, be helpful if the project is being communicated via social media.

9. Anticipated challenges and risks. While it isn't always possible for collaborators to anticipate all the possible risks and challenges that may arise, it is worthwhile to discuss what they consider possible obstacles and discuss how they might address and overcome them. A simple risk analysis may be useful to undertake at the start of the project. It may reveal useful 'unknowns' and can also be a good trust building exercise between partners. This could result in the production of a risk register that parties can reflect on as the collaboration develops. The need for this work to be undertaken is likely to be even greater with more complex projects, ones that are likely to be running over longer periods of time, or, for example, have multiple funders involved.

Projects in Progress

1. Progress and expectations. It is important for collaborators to check in partway through the process to understand how the project is going, especially if researchers and artists or cultural practitioners are working in separate spheres and/or with different methodologies. Regular discussion can help inform adjustments regarding deadlines, time commitment, communication and expectations. Collaborators might want to ask each other where they are in terms of progress at this point, if they're where they expected to be, farther ahead or behind.

2. Workload. Collaborators should assess their workloads as the project evolves to ensure that they are as anticipated and manageable. As is often the case, the invisible labour associated with administration can be significant. Collaborations are also often experiments into new areas of research and are often between partners who haven't worked together before. Researchers already have duties relating to their positions within HEIs and arts organisations and practitioners often have several projects happening at once, which is why the notion of workload is so important.

3. Process. When assessing progress and workload, it's also useful to assess the process used to execute the project. Collaborators might be engaging in the same process of working, or they may be engaging in different processes, specific to their areas of practice and research. It's important for collaborators to understand each other's working methods in order to meet shared goals.

4. Communication. It is important for collaborators to consider the quality of communication midway through the project, including its effectiveness, consistency, methods used and frequency. Collaborators should ask each other if there are differences in communication styles that need to be discussed, as well as whether there is sufficient communication between them and the organisations involved. It is also important to keep a watch for communication drift. Often people are very enthusiastic at the start of projects but it is even more important for good communication as the project evolves and the real work kicks in.

5. Evaluation. All too often, evaluation of collaborative projects can be left until the end of the work but it is recommended that evaluation thinking is embedded in the earlier stages of the project. The method of evaluation to be used will require thinking about as will the key questions or areas to be evaluated. Depending on the scale of the project, it may be appropriate to engage an external evaluator to support the team in embedding an evaluation culture into the collaboration. This may of course not always be possible, especially for smaller-scale projects but regardless of scale or duration, taking time to develop an evaluation strategy and plan, however simple, will help collaborators to think about the project and its wider goals, impacts and longer-term potentials.

6. Challenges and roadblocks. Collaborators should discuss challenges of the KE, approaches to tackling them, how they've been met so far, if there are any unresolved challenges and whether they're on the side of the arts organisation or practitioner, the researcher or shared between both parties? Common challenges include: unclear and/or inconsistent communication, mismatch of expectations between participants and/or institutions regarding process and expected output and a fundamental misunderstanding about effective collaboration.

7. Documentation. Some questions to ask during a mid-point check-in regarding documentation can include whether the project needs to be documented at this stage; if so, how, by whom, what the purpose would be and whether it would be analytical, descriptive or both. Possibilities for documentation can include: blogs, websites, videos, audio recordings, interviews, articles, reports, book chapters, lectures, handbooks/brochures or conference papers.

8. Engaging participants. For some projects, collaborators may need to consider the nature and role of external participants at their mid-way check-in. If there are participants, these are some issues that will be important to consider. How are the participants expected to be engaging with the project? Is there clarity around that process? Who are the participants? Students? Members of the local community? The general public? Other artists? Other researchers? Is their feedback and/or other contributions being invited and recorded? How is the project being framed for and presented to them? How is their involvement being supported and credited?

Projects Approaching Completion

1. Project completion. Whether open to the public or an invited audience, whether it's an elaborate process (producing a play) or a more streamlined one (a single piece of visual art), collaborators will have been spending a lot of time thinking about and deciding how to execute the final product. Some questions collaborators should ask themselves when considering the final delivery and presentation of the project include the following:

What is the nature of this presentation and the work being presented?
Will it be public-facing? On what scale? To the general public or a specific audience?
If there is a venue needed, what/where will the venue be and who will go about sourcing and booking the space?
If it is public-facing, how will the project be promoted and by whom? Will it be a ticketed activity?
How will it be framed and explained?
How will the practitioners, researchers, arts organisations, HEIs and participants (as relevant) be credited?

2. Formal evaluation and impact. When evaluating KE projects, one of the most significant questions is: what is the impact on researchers, institutions and organisations, practitioners and any participants involved? As previously indicated, the earlier you start your process of evaluation, the more effective it is likely to be. Here are some key questions you may wish to consider:

Was the KE project produced within the initially agreed timescale?
Was it produced within the given budget?
What was the experience of the researchers and artists involved?
What was the response of the audience or readership when the piece was produced?
What were the results of the project?
Were the researchers and artists involved able to answer their original research questions?
Was the collaboration efficient and successful?
What were the challenges that arose and how were they met?
What could have been improved, both in terms of the process and the resulting product?
Does the project have any longevity or legacy? How can this be supported going forward after the end of the project?

3. Informal debrief and celebration. Although different partnerships may take different approaches, it can be useful for a team to have an informal debrief in addition to the evaluation process. A casual discussion can create an opportunity to reflect on the more and less successful elements of a collaboration and to give each other credit for the work undertaken. It is important to create time to mark and celebrate the achievement and thank and acknowledge those who have worked to make it happen, including those who may have been working behind the scenes. Creating this time is important as it can bring in a range of perspectives and insights as well as opening up the space to discuss the possibility of a next phase or next project on which to collaborate.

Top Tips at a Glance

A best practice approach to implementing an arts/culture KE project can be boiled down to the following guidelines:

1. Establish shared **goals** and **research questions** at the beginning to ensure all participants have a shared understanding of the project.

2. Choose a **model, structure** and **process** that suits the scale, scope and budget for the project, as well as the skills of the team and medium of the art engaged.

3. Be clear about **roles** and **relationships**, as well as the **responsibilities** and **workload** entailed therein. Be willing to re-evaluate these roles and responsibilities as the collaboration progresses.

4. Write an **agreement**, **contract** or **Memorandum of Understanding** for those involved, before the process begins.

5. Use clear and consistent **communication** throughout the process.

6. Find workable and realistic approaches to **documentation** that will suit the project and the goals of the team.

7. Attempt to anticipate **risks** and **challenges** that may arise in the beginning. Find ways of evaluating and approaching them as the process unfolds.

8. Find time to check in regarding **expectations** throughout the process and, if necessary, be prepared to adjust them.

9. Develop the best approach to **presenting the final product**, whether for a public or private showing. Credit all participants (scholars, artists, organisations, HEIs, students, members of the public) accordingly and fully.

10. Make sure to have formal and informal **debriefs** with the team.