

2 Dialogue as social sculpture: a visual method of graphic-ethnography for storytelling

Exploring participation and collaboration in research and socially-engaged arts

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Description of theme

The focus of artistic productions is expanding towards addressing contemporary societal challenges, such as social inclusion, poverty and ageing. The great complexity of the ‘wicked’ problems and the shared ambitions and values to transform society and society’s impacts drive the collaboration of artists, arts and cultural organisations and communities actively engaging in the field of socially-engaged arts. Socially-engaged arts as collaborative efforts are shaped by the intentions of participants, artists and the arts and cultural organisations and can result in sites or situations of great complexity. The partnership with interdisciplinary expertise allows for experiments, interventions and impacts to reflect, extend and evaluate arts-based approaches. It is essential to establish relationships and partnerships among the artists, arts and cultural organisations of strategic importance for art researchers in tackling the ever-wicked problems and combating the inequalities faced by marginalised communities. However, it is unclear how the connection, partnership and fixed or formal association are created within a particularly complex set of interconnected contexts. This chapter outlines research that has been undertaken to articulate stories of connection and association within an externally funded international, interdisciplinary research project AMASS.

Description of target population

A graphic-ethnography method was used as the basis of the participatory storytelling sessions that capture and/or (re)articulate the points of correspondence and present opportunities at which connections can be made and reinforced within art-based activities. Making use of participatory methods to reveal attachment and connection, our research aims to identify how a critical lens of correspondence can help to identify and describe the factors influencing the development of any relationship for research partnerships, but also how they can form the basis of meaningful and impactful communications as the art practices and outcomes develop and research project works through its own processes. The academic beneficiaries of this research can be characterised by end-user status. Our peers can use the findings of and the visual methods developed as a result of the case study because it was the first attempt to capture the dialogue and help identify or even understand instances of correspondence within a very specific set of moments of the AMASS research project.

Description of methodology and procedure

The overall aim of AMASS project is to explore the potential of the art and design-based participatory research to respond to contemporary societal challenges. AMASS requires each project partner to develop the ‘external’ partnerships so that a range of testbed experiments take place to reflect, extend and evaluate arts-based approaches in the field. The AMASS testbed experiments investigate the educational effects of the STEAM model in integrating the socially-engaged arts with science through participatory and multidisciplinary approaches. More than 30 new innovative testbed experiments have been set up over in six European countries in culturally underserved Northern, Southern, Western and Eastern regions, including Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Malta and Portugal. This case study reports the partnership study’s initial findings that aim to explore the complexities of association, entanglements and movements in the testbed experiments between each project partner (and their academic institution) and the external organisations or institutions with which they are working.

The auto-ethnographic tools are useful and effective in encouraging intra-community communications and understanding the interrelationships of researchers engaging in interdisciplinary socially oriented research projects (Wilson 2020). These graphic tools are deliberately designed to create experiences of participation which, through reliance on textual production and dialogical interaction, are embodied, performative and encourage the use of memory or recall to identify significant moments or events in a community’s life and the lives of its members. Such activities have the potential to reinforce the value and potential power of storytelling as a means to articulate certain experiences in such a way that their recall both identifies and reinforces a value. Therefore, the stories become a means for communities to co-design a shared sense of identity that can have practical value in helping to address challenges that they might face. Such tools could be used as a locus for ‘connected knowledge’ and to facilitate (and mediate) a range of ‘dialogical interactions’ (Kester 2013, pp. 14–15) – where a community’s structures or situations can be acknowledged and formalised through the visual appearance and design of tools such as those used in our research. With this knowledge becoming a basis for the tools’ design, they can also activate or reveal people’s reflexivity in their community – and such revelation can help determine a future for how they might then be used.

The four assumptions that underpin research making use of such a participatory approach within the context of the AMASS project are summarised as follows:

- 1 Interpersonal relationships are works-in-progress: making, growing, giving and taking. These can be caught or described at certain moments in their development.
- 2 Active reflection on recent experiences (of how relationships are formed, for example) by way of them recalled as memory lets us interrogate the interactions and dialogues that constitute how and why these relationships might persist and sustain (since these scenarios might be described as being moments of meaningful correspondence).
- 3 Reflecting on experiences prior to the formalisation of a relationship (a moment such as the successful submission of a funding application, for example) often reveals much which can further inform or reveal a relationship’s critical foundations, shared objectives and intentions for achieving impact – such ‘infrastructuring’ can clarify the vision that may be used to help.

- 4 Visualising, spatialising and materialising dialogue (or ways that dialogue can take place) and, in particular, using writing as a particular method for knowledge-making offer opportunities to articulate memory, narrative and experiences in novel ways.

'Relationship-as-process' tools

The 'relationship-as-process' tools were developed based on the work of anthropologist Tom Ingold on 'Correspondence' and psychologist George Levinger on 'interpersonal relationship'.

Correspondence acts to generate possibilities and opportunities for speculation that themselves are responses-in-process and answers to a discrete situation or context (Ingold 2017b). Openness is essential to any activity (Ingold 2017a), where a life lived with others is determined by others' engagement and participation. Such relationships depend on meshwork, entanglement and movement of things travelling back-and-forth between participants and of a joining-together (Ingold 2017b). According to Ingold (2017b), such partaking does not necessarily transform into correspondence. Instead, it calls forward a synchronisation between participants – an attunement and receptivity shaped in the becoming – that is so critical to correspondence. Ingold's concept of correspondence allows for a particular mapping of ideas and how we can understand or reflect upon how relationships are and will be 'entangled'.

A bespoke set of design-led methods and visual tools – 'Relationship-as-process' – were designed and used to encourage conversation and narrative elicitation. Such a tool allowed both exploring and visualising each partner's relationships with their external partner as a process or state that could be distinguished by points or moments of exchange within which they have particular characteristics of correspondence. The methodological approach taken in our research centred on two interconnected activities: active reflection and active writing. A visual canvas (such as that accessed through the Miro platform) allowed for the spatialisation of these activities and framed how memories of relationship could be elicited and articulated. We used three categories of experience as a structure through which the reflection could be organised: 'Ideas' – 'Actions' – 'Agreements' (they might be interchangeable). These three categories also allowed us to map the phases of the partners' interpersonal relationships through a structuring of events, recollections and outcomes.

The work of psychologist George Levinger (1976, 1980) proposed a framework of interpersonal relationships and defined four stages – association, build-up, continuation and transformation – of a lifecycle of human relationships. The 'relationship-as-process' tools were structured around the four specific stages or themes of interpersonal relationship formation and related questions and three categories of experience of dialogue and reciprocal communication, as shown in [Figures 1.1–1.4](#).

Association

How did you find each other or first meet? How did you establish a common language in order to discuss a working relationship?

Here, the intention was to establish a context for becoming acquainted or being matched, of initiation or introduction and the significance of first impressions and initial 'attraction' in establishing mutual or having 'things-in-common'. Identifying experiences of STIMULUS often regarded as demonstrating shallow or self-interest.

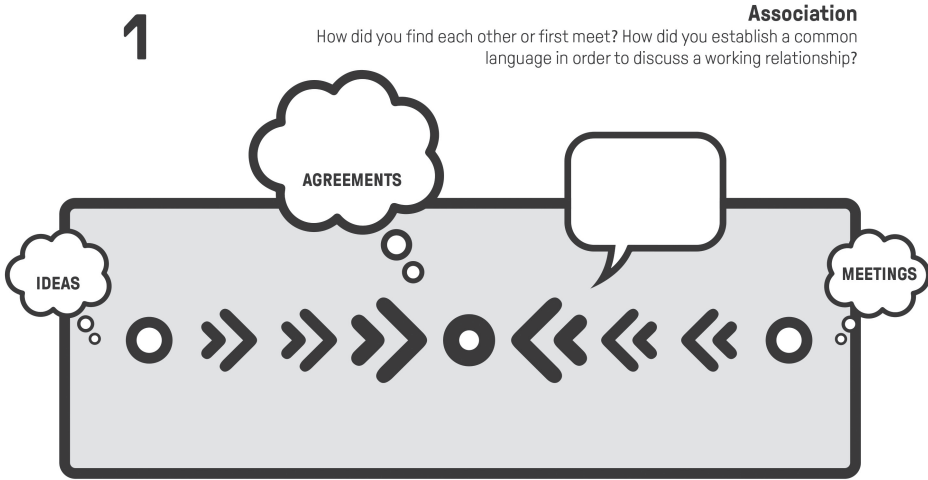


Figure 1.1 Relationship-as-process association tool.

Build-up

How did you identify common goals? Were there opportunities to bring together pre-established directions for the project?

Here, the tool hoped to reveal tactics or means of developing intimacy, trust and understanding conditions for compatibility, allowing for the identification of common goals and how conditions of interdependence could be created. Identifying the value of VALUES regarded as being deeper or more meaningful in helping to understanding the other.

Continuation

How did you establish mutual trust? Are there any Considerations you had to make with regard to power within the relationship?

Here, the experience of participant dialogue aimed to uncover the contexts or motivations for mutual commitment and how stability was or could be established,

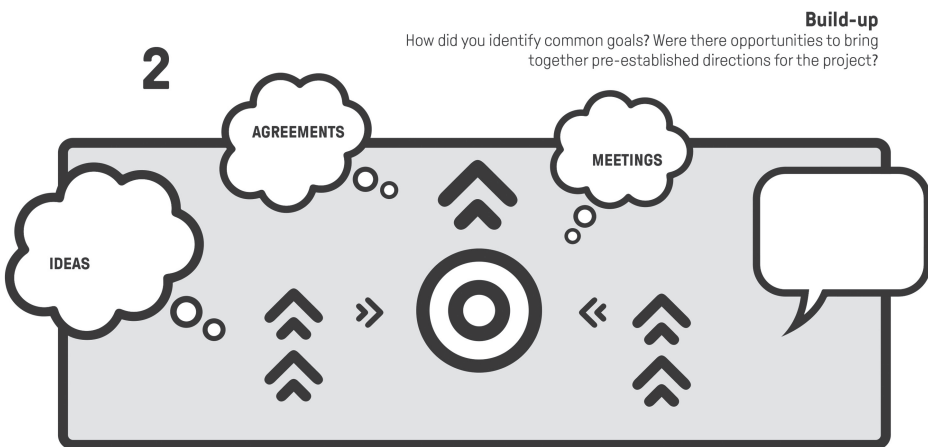


Figure 1.2 Relationship-as-process build-up tool.

Continuation

How did you establish mutual trust? Are there any considerations you had to make with regards to power within the relationship?

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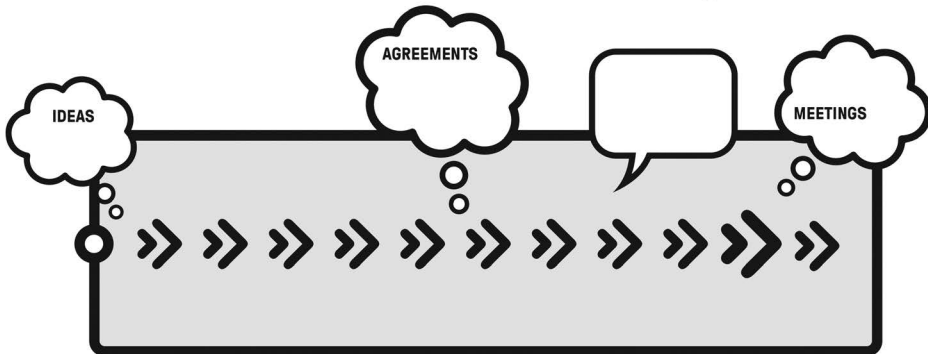


Figure 1.3 Relationship-as-process build-up tool.

grown and developed – such progress is usually dependent on a deepening of mutual trust and the continued association with mutual benefits and goals but might be jeopardised when issues of power and/or hierarchy are introduced. Identifying the significance (or not) of ROLES and how they help establish or develop the contexts for working together.

Transformation

Has the relationship changed since the first discussion and decisions? How have you been able to manage these changes?

Here, the tool sought to acknowledge a fluidity or process or development that is necessary in any relationship, and how participants viewed the relationship as being something dynamic and whether the earlier acknowledgement of mutual goals or values has helped to manage any changes which took place.

Transformation

Has the relationship changed since the first discussion and decisions? How have you been able to manage these changes?

4

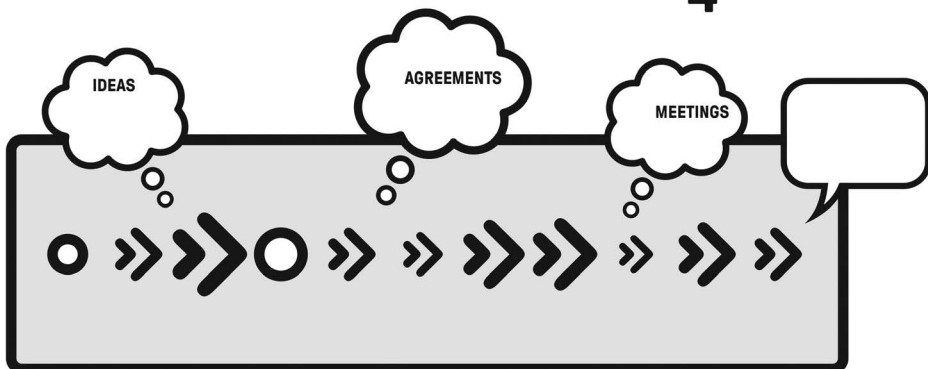


Figure 1.4 Relationship-as-process build-up tool.

The institutionally derived tools were used to facilitate a discussion of partnership, relationship and connection established and developed between each project partner (and their academic institution) and the external organisations or institutions they are collaborating with in the testbed experiments.

Procedure

To explore the foundations of the relationships the AMASS testbed activities were built on, a series of participatory activities were developed so that each project researcher could partake in an experience of design-led dialogue around the values, needs and motivations which helped establish their being in the individual country.

As illustrated in [Figures 1.1–1.4](#), each tool formed the basis of a semi-structured conversation between members of each AMASS testbed experiment team, which was prompted and facilitated by the researchers. The workshops took place using the MIRO online platform, allowing for a digital experience of remote participation. From each of the six institutions/seven testbed sites (two participants per testbed site), 14 participants took part in the workshop.

Summary of assessment methods and outcomes

The relationship-as-process tools allow to outline a range of scenarios within which correspondence (as an activity that was distinguished by particular types of relationship) when partaking in an AMASS testbed experiment: the institution – an individual – an activity. Such correspondences are often situated or use a series of ‘place events’ which act as markers through which significant moments in a project might be identified and, consequently, where categories or characteristics of participation or, more importantly, the correspondences can be mapped. This echoed Wilson et al.’s (2018) findings of the ‘correspondence’ model as a means to explore the range of complexities that occur within scenarios such as international research projects.

This case study reports the preliminary findings from two workshops conducted with project partners from PACO, Italy and Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary. The following themes were identified as the most helpful for further analysis and discussion.

- 1 Collaboration as a process of ‘knowing’ and arriving at a mutual understanding: A desire for reciprocal connection and the innate forms of socialisation experienced was observed through any meaningful act of communication. Working with other institutions (e.g. local NGOs, museums) required clear management of interactions and establishing reciprocal expectations.
- 2 Skills are an essential pre-requisite to managing conditional and context-specific collaboration: Correspondences can be identified as being constituted through an individual participant’s subject-specific knowledge and skills in relation to their partners in the testbed site and the experiment objectives.
- 3 Being change-capable to collaborate: The collaboration relationship is in a flow state.

As new partnerships are established, they are often accompanied by a number of unanticipated problems, mainly divided into how to deal with the diversity of objectives among members, and how to improve communication and face changes in the collaboration environment. Defining testbed experiment objectives required newer sets of activities

which translated abstract concepts into concrete actions, and recognised uncertainties to co-create meaningful roles in the partnership (e.g. researchers/observer, gatekeepers). New relationships emerged within the testbed teams. The roles of the partners and relationships built from practical activities kept changing, taking into account their institutional positions and requirements and individual skills and expertise.

Conclusion

The study attempts to identify and discuss important threads or themes in developing sustainable relationships in the socially-engaged art-based activities between researchers and their own external (local) partners. The design-led methods and visual tools created have been useful to uncover the contexts and motivations for the partnership and how stability was or could be established, grown and developed. In international, interdisciplinary research projects like AMASS as a model of knowledge creation, the collaboration and partnership in the local testbed experiment are established upon the project's ambition, experiment objectives, the project team's shared motivation and individuals' own needs.

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