

Adapting production models from the commercial performing arts for CX projects in the arts, industry and academia: a provocation

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This paper is intended to provoke debate regarding the most expedient processes for delivering creative economy/academia collaborative projects in which the conflicting goals of a research-led or product-led agenda may need to be reconciled within an interdisciplinary context. It posits that within creative economy and academic partnerships, research imperatives are usefully addressed by embracing the controversial notion of impact as specified by RCUK, while product imperatives are best realised by applying models from the commercial performing arts. This twin approach best accommodates the diverse goals of an interdisciplinary collaborative team set up to realise a CX remit.

It would be presumptuous to suppose that the commercial performing arts offer a definitive collaborative model for CX projects. However, it may be fair to suggest that the current collaborative models are not without difficulties. Partnerships between academia and the creative industries do seem to struggle to produce outcomes that have impact beyond academia and to respond effectively to compressed timescales. The advantage of the model posited here is that it is well understood by the performance community and has shown itself to be robust, agile and flexible enough to work in many different contexts and at many different scales.

Keywords: Creative exchange, knowledge exchange, interactive conference

Motivation

This paper has been written by a professional commercial theatre director, now an academic working in the highly interdisciplinary field outlined in the main text of the paper. The position it sets out is based on the author's wide creative industry experience and is presented as a provocation to Creative Exchange (CX) delegates who may wish to counter its assumptions and disciplinary limitations. It is not intended as scholarly work. A more scholarly version may be developed if, after scrutiny and discussion, the emerging thesis proves sufficiently robust. It is intended to provoke debate regarding the most expedient processes for delivering creative economy/academia collaborative projects in which the conflicting goals of a research-led or product-led agenda may need to be reconciled within an interdisciplinary context.

Problem statement

"Adequately nurtured, creativity fuels culture, infuses a human-centred development and constitutes the key ingredient for job creation, innovation and trade while contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability." (United Nations 2010)
"The interface between creativity, culture, economics and technology as expressed in the ability to create and circulate intellectual capital..." (United Nations 2008)

Definitions of the Creative Economy (CE) and the Creative Industries, such as those proposed above by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, hint, among other things, Copyright © for each paper in the conference proceedings will remain with the author(s).

Adapting production models from the commercial performing arts for CX projects in the arts, industry and academia: a provocation that the inherent property of any creative economy project is a convergence between:

- Diverse disciplines – CE projects are essentially interdisciplinary
- Diverse values - The participants may have different philosophies, working practices and priorities
- Diverse goals - It may be difficult to agree on common aims and objectives

Add an academic or research agenda to this already complex convergence, and differences in the participants' disciplines, values and goals may become a catastrophic impediment to progress if not addressed effectively. How should progress be made?

Proposition

The proposition in this paper is that:

Within creative economy and academic partnerships, research imperatives are usefully addressed by embracing the controversial notion of impact as specified by (RCUK 2013), while product imperatives are best realised by applying models from the commercial performing arts. This twin approach best accommodates the diverse goals of an interdisciplinary collaborative team set up to realise a CX remit.

Performing arts practitioners are accustomed to producing outputs in challenging circumstances such as that outlined above. Short timescales, limited resources, poor facilities, 'on-the fly' organisational structures along with interdisciplinary teams and untried collaborations are commonplace project configurations in the performing arts. Solutions to these issues have been integrated into production models and training for decades. The 'Fringe' or alternative comedy scene that the case-study in this paper is concerned with may be said to have survived because of the effectiveness of these models.

What distinguishes a performing arts project from other CE projects is the presence of some well established common disciplinary ground among the interdisciplinary participants. The author proposes that this may be further refined as **a sense of common purpose and urgency catalysed by the booking (date and venue for the performance, gig, exhibition, etc.)** and further proposes that an effectively motivated and focused production model can be constructed around this core imperative. In addition the author believes that such models have the agility and openness that make them appropriate for adoption within many of the collaborative environments supported and encouraged by CX.

Critically the model suggests that collaborative teams focus from the start of the project on the non-negotiable constituents of the end product (e.g. the performance, gig or exhibition). This unambiguous statement of intent is followed by a series of subsidiary production guidelines or recommendations to progress the project. The author believes that this model aligns well with the rapid production of research outputs that complement the RCUK statement on 'research impact.' (RCUK 2013)

A model emerges with the following components and structure:

- Establish the non-negotiable constituents of the end product at the commencement of the project.

Then:

- Focus on production outputs at all times
- Focus on deriving impact through public engagement and presenting a continuous open and outward-facing research and production narrative during the lifetime of the project
- During the project encourage rehearsing and rapid prototyping
- Research through practice

Case Study

This proposition is supported by a case-study entitled 'Voice by Choice'¹ in which a creative industries professional (Lee Ridley (Ridley 2013), a stand-up comedian), a commercial technology developer of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices (Toby Churchill Ltd (Toby Churchill Ltd 2013)) and an academic research group (The Creative Speech Technology Network (CreST Network)) collaborated successfully on the production of a short comedy film within a very limited four month production window. The film was subsequently shown in six different venues, featured on TV and radio, and streamed online. It also constituted a significant 'parent' node for a number of 'child' research outputs returned via the RCUK research outcomes system. (RCUK 2013)

The background to the case study is as follows:

As a result of a variety of impairments, some people are unable to speak using their bodies alone. Some of these people use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices. These usually consist of some form of input interface and generate synthetic speech. The user's choice of voices is very limited, usually being constrained to selecting one of a small set of given 'characters'. There is typically no means for changing the expressive paralinguistic aspects of the resulting voice. This project took a highly interdisciplinary approach to the requirements elicitation process and the development of a prototype AAC device which allows users to make real-time adjustments to the voice output. The project was structured in four stages spread over four months:

Stage 1 – Researching and writing the script (July 2012)

A short comic 'playlet' exploring the theme expressed above was developed by Lee Ridey (a stand-up comedian and user of AAC technology with cerebral palsy) and the author. The concept was that three performers with cerebral palsy engage in a comic conversation lasting approximately seven minutes set at a speed-dating event. They all had an identical AAC voice – farcical comic scenarios ensued.

Stage 2 - The video (late July 2012)

The playlet was filmed on location in York. This was followed by editing and post production of the final DVD and online video.

¹ 'Voice by Choice' may be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/46831064>

Stage 3 – Presenting the video (September 2012)

The video was screened to a road-show preview audience at the Creative Speech Technology (CreST) Network meeting in York on 18th-19th September 2012 and the Communications Matter Conference in Leicester on 23rd September. The screenings were filmed and facilitated in a quasi-Boalian (Forum Theatre) style.

Stage 4 – Analysis and specification (October 2012)

The video was analysed and requirements for the 'Voice by Choice' technology specified.

Case study participants

The aims of the principal participants were as follows:

- Lee Ridley (writer, comedian, performer, creative industries professional) – for the film to be funny while communicating some of the absurd constraints endured by users of AAC technology. To enhance his career as a comedy writer. To provide material for his live show. To receive income.
- Toby Churchill Ltd (Commercial AAC developers, retailers) – to demonstrate their systems and to raise public awareness of their products and of the industry.
- The CreST Network (an EPSRC funded network investigating creative computer speech) – to encourage public engagement with the field and to explore alternative requirement elicitation techniques for AAC devices.

The application of the model

Establish the non-negotiable constituents of the end product

From the commencement of the project in July, the non-negotiable constituents of the end product were agreed: a first performance at the CreST Network meeting and the Communication Matters Conference in September. All collaborative partners were made immediately aware that the project was to operate over the summer break and had to be ready for public scrutiny in three months time. Whether or not we were fully satisfied with our work it would still be made public. This imperative always applies within the professional performing arts but may not do so in other industries or in academia.

Focus on production outputs

A significant effort was made to specify the quality and appropriateness of the final product in terms of 'fit for purpose'. It was decided that the extra expense of a professional TV director and production team could be accommodated if the duration of the film was kept to a minimum. Its duration was precisely determined to optimise the potential broadcast opportunities and different platforms. A marketing and PR strategy was designed and integrated into several of the production stages including the later rehearsals.

Impact derived through public engagement

As a part-EPSRC funded project, research outcomes with impact had to be a significant priority, and the divergent aims of the participants could be comfortably accommodated within the RCUK's definition of impact particularly pertaining to "Increasing public engagement with research and related societal issues" (RCUK) as well as the assessment framework and guidance on submissions in which the following statements are made:

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“Public discourse: Extending the range and improving the quality of evidence, argument and expression to enhance public understanding of the major issues and challenges faced by individuals and society.

Policy making: Informing and influencing policy debate and practice through interventions relating to any aspect of human or animal well-being or the environment.” (Research Excellence Framework 2013)

Identifying specific impact objectives early on helped focus the work of the researchers and provided reassurance that the production goals were appropriately targeted.

Rehearsals and prototypes substitute for meetings

Meetings between the key players were kept to the minimum with most critical decisions being led by issues in the evolution of the script and the production schedule. These could usually be resolved by e-mail, or (occasionally) Skype. More formative activities took the form of readings, casting discussions or rehearsals. This process encouraged engagement from the diverse set of collaborators who could see tangible progress and only had to engage when they had something specific to contribute.

Research through practice

In the performing arts, actors may research roles by reading around, observation, visiting sites, interviewing, etc. However, the bulk of the important research is done by experimentation, discussion, and practice in the rehearsal room. This was the approach adopted in this case study in which many of the most important decisions relating to the script, timing, choice of shots, selection of props, integration of AAC technology, lighting, sound and music design, and editing were made as part of the production process. Led by the TV director but supported by the diverse team of additional collaborators (including many users) and researchers, the entire process was documented in its own right and subsequently provided material for other research outputs as well as the requirements elicitation.

Conclusion and discussion

It would be presumptuous to suppose that the commercial performing arts offer a definitive collaborative model for CX projects. However, it may be fair to suggest that the current collaborative models are not without difficulties. Partnerships between academia and the creative industries do seem to struggle to produce outcomes that have impact beyond academia and to respond effectively to compressed timescales. The advantage of the model posited here is that it is well understood by the performance community and has shown itself to be robust, agile and flexible enough to work in many different contexts and at many different scales.

Performance practitioners are arguably some of the most adaptable individuals in any creative environment (after all, they have been trained to be so) and are likely to respond readily to some of the challenges commonly found in CE/CX projects. It may be that we have become suspicious of the types of creative practice and preparation championed in the performing arts because it is easily ridiculed (by those who don't know it) as 'woolly' and 'twee'. So it seems appropriate and overdue to bring models, attitudes, and experiences that have demonstrated longevity to bear on the new configurations of academia, the arts, and industry which have yet to really prove themselves.

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