



Working Knowledge

People & Roles

The Creative Facilitator

by

Hearing the Voice



'The Creative Facilitator'
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The Creative Facilitator

It is often assumed that the Principal Investigator or other senior members of an interdisciplinary research project will take sole responsibility for organising and chairing research meetings and for ensuring positive group dynamics. When planning Hearing the Voice, we felt that the project as a whole could benefit from the expertise of someone specialised in creative approaches to facilitation; someone independent who could take responsibility for convening our research meetings and building the wider community of the project in ways which would harness the creative potential inherent to interdisciplinary working. This Project Short introduces the role of the Creative Facilitator, explains how it has developed and diversified over the course of the project, and suggests how it might be possibly be replicated.

What is a creative facilitator in this context?

Common definitions of facilitation emphasise the neutrality of a facilitator who helps a group explore an issue, come to agreement or make informed choices. The facilitator focuses on the content and process of a meeting, a conference or series of events. The creative part can sometimes mean using arts-based techniques, or it can describe engendering creative ways of working in the group. However, most definitions of facilitation are of processes that are relatively short-lived: the away-day for a management team, or the development of a new idea for a company. Hearing the Voice is an ambitious research project involving a number of disciplines looking through a variety of lenses at the complex, shape-shifting phenomenon of voice-hearing. The job of creative facilitator here is a long-haul one – it means working in the business of sustained inquiry, in an atmosphere of constant development, across the full duration of the project.

The creative facilitator occupies a neutral position outside academic hierarchies and independent of any particular disciplinary perspective. While this objectivity is undoubtedly useful, if not essential, the creative facilitator is also engaged by the subject of the research and so has become very much part of the core team. This double location

– ‘inside’ but also ‘independent’ – constitutes a unique vantage point from which to understand the ways in which creative facilitation contributes to and in some cases directly enables the development of new interdisciplinary methodologies [see [The Experimental Design Hackathon](#)].

What does the job entail?

Utilising a range of different modes and methods of working, our creative facilitator works alongside colleagues to disseminate the findings of the project and to help generate an interdisciplinary methodology that can be transferred to other research contexts. For example, in 2014 our creative facilitator and project co-director were invited by the [Academy of Finland Research Programme on the Human Mind](#) to run a workshop on interdisciplinarity. After introducing the research aims and methods of Hearing the Voice, the workshop invited participants to create an archipelago of visual representations of their projects as islands, exploring the possibilities, challenges and practical dimensions of interdisciplinary collaboration.

However, the core task for our creative facilitator is to convene [Voice Club](#), the fortnightly gathering of our Durham-based research team. The challenge of Voice Club is to find new ways of bringing together a group of academics and to encourage them to take part in innovative, creative ways of working that go beyond the usual conventions of the reading group but aren't perceived as patronizing or 'wacky'. Sessions have to engage a wide range of individuals from different disciplines and at different stages of academic careers and build a sense of community in the process. Their design includes a neutral space, a designated time and a lot of planning.

The creative facilitation of research meetings (or, planning Voice Club)

Planning is critical to the success of Voice Club and can involve a number of members of the research team as well as invited guests. Once an annual timetable of meetings is established, the creative facilitator meets with the project leaders every 1–3 months to discuss upcoming

topics of Voice Club in response to the current needs and interests of the project members. Keeping a watchful eye on the flow of the series as a whole as well as the detail of each individual episode is a key responsibility – learning accumulates over time, and some sessions or activities are only possible once the team has developed mutual trust and comfort with the process.

Three or four weeks before every session, the creative facilitator meets with relevant team members and liaises with invited guests to determine a precise plan for the afternoon and any background reading or preparation required. It is very often this meeting that unleashes the creativity of researchers in some quite surprising ways...

Case Study: Exploring felt presence

Felt presence – the often uncanny sense that ‘someone is there’ – can arise in a range of contexts, including when people hear voices. Like voice-hearing, it names phenomena amenable to multiple avenues of interpretation and investigation, ranging from the psychological to the literary and theological.

Planning for this Voice Club, which was held at the beginning of the third year of Hearing the Voice, started with the creative facilitator and project leaders and swiftly expanded outwards to include other members of the team with a keen interest in the topic. Various elements were identified: excerpts from a Buster Keaton film written by Samuel Beckett; a presentation on the empirical assessment of felt presence; a mind-map of the topic informed by the book The Third Man Factor; and contributions from a guest researcher and poet who had personal experience of sleep paralysis. The creative facilitator played a crucial role in determining the flow and balance of the session and ensuring sufficient time for questions and discussion along the way.

The challenges

Sustaining interdisciplinarity is hard work – from the early days of getting everyone up to speed with each other’s disciplines through to nurturing exchanges between disciplines and leading presentations and workshops on the topic. There is a need for constant attention and reflection on what happens so that learning is captured and applied.

At Hearing the Voice we are fortunate to have a team of academics who get on very well with each other and are up for experimental ways of working. However, there is always the risk that some will find interdisciplinary innovation uncomfortable or unsettling. The facilitator needs to be

skilled in dealing with group dynamics in all their manifestations.

The creation of a nurturing culture that is different from much academic experience means that guests of the group can feel mis-matched. It also means that planning for session content and process can be problematic where the expectation of the guest speaker is for a standard presentation/discussion model and they are geographically distant. In some of these cases, it has been helpful for parts of Voice Club to function as more conventional research meetings and to invite one of the project leaders to chair the session.

Job description: Creative Facilitator

Creative Facilitator

A Freelance Post

Working with the project leaders to build the community of the research team, and create and respond to opportunities for the development of this interdisciplinary project.

40–50 days per academic year
with the potential for additional project work.

Key responsibilities and duties:

- ◇ **Convene** and **facilitate** the fortnightly gathering of the research team
- ◇ **Design** and **plan** the process of each research meeting, working alongside researchers and invited guests to determine the content and how it is conveyed
- ◇ Choose existing and develop **new methods and resources** for facilitation
- ◇ Work closely with project leaders to **design** and **curate** events that **enhance** and **disseminate** the work of the project
- ◇ Work with the project coordinator to develop **online and multimedia projects** which enhance and disseminate the work of the project
- ◇ Work alongside project researchers to enhance and disseminate the work of the project through **academic conferences** and events
- ◇ Work alongside project researchers to generate a **transferable interdisciplinary methodology** that can be applied to other research areas
- ◇ **Document** these processes when necessary

Please note: Recruitment for this role will include a practical workshop, with the candidates asked to lead part of the session.



Person specification

Attributes	Essential	Desirable
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ A minimum of 5 years' experience in facilitating events/meetings/workshops or equivalent ◇ A minimum of 5 years' experience in project design and management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Experience of facilitating events in academic settings ◇ Experience of the independent development of delivery of projects and initiatives.
Job-related skills and capabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Specialized knowledge of creative processes and their potential use in facilitation ◇ Experience of and commitment to interdisciplinary working ◇ Demonstrated knowledge of and/or interest in the topic of research ◇ Mental agility and the ability to improvise, think quickly and use methods flexibly ◇ Ability to adapt to changing situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Evidence of successful professional networking ◇ Formal training in facilitation
Interpersonal Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Effective oral and written communication skills in both individual and group situations ◇ Ability to relate to people with diverse backgrounds, ages and experience ◇ Skilled in active listening, reading group dynamics and encouraging participation ◇ Ability to work as a member of a team and to motivate a team ◇ Undertakes reflective practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◇ Calm and welcoming and has an enthusiastic presentation style ◇ Has a strong sense of presence and performance

Case Study: My time at Hearing the Voice

I was trained as a theatre designer and now work as an artist, social educator and creative facilitator. My arts in health and education work in schools focuses on the social and emotional development of children and I work with communities to make site-specific celebratory events. I am also the Associate for Arts in Health and Education with the Centre for Medical Humanities at Durham and during my time there, I began to use my experience to help run meetings and events. As a result, I was asked to develop the role of Creative Facilitator for Hearing the Voice.

My working life has been deeply influenced by my background – I am from County Durham, the daughter of a miner and a schoolteacher. A rich seam of social justice runs through my work in communities and in theatre. So interdisciplinarity is another word for what I have done all my working days: that is, to make things with people. Those things might be objects but can also be events. All are inherently interdisciplinary – shared experiences that are only possible to achieve through communal effort. There is a sentimental view of a theatre production as some kind of love-in but of course that isn't true. It is about community and complex communication – between writer, director, designer, actors and audience - a distillation of living. As my time with HtV has gone on, I have realized that my background in theatre and participatory arts is wholly relevant to the job in hand.

In the course of what has proved to be a highly responsive project I have had the chance to develop my role. We have taken the concept of Voice Club to the funders, tailoring an event for the Wellcome Trust. Along with academic colleagues, I have presented at conferences and run workshops on interdisciplinarity and worked with the project coordinator on designing the Prezi for the project website. I have also taken on a new additional role, facilitating voice hearers to make short films about their experiences which have shown at a number of film festivals and have proved to be useful educational resources.

It has become evident that the role of creative facilitator has life beyond Hearing the Voice. I have been invited to have a similar role on other projects and events, including Life of Breath, a Durham University research project and the Hubbub summit meeting – part of the first residency at Wellcome's Hub space. The next step is to run training sessions for those interested in developing such a role in other academic contexts.

Working Knowledge is a collection of accessible and user-friendly resources dedicated to the practical ins and outs of interdisciplinary research.

Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdisciplinary research.

Series editors: *Charles Fernyhough, Angela Woods and Victoria Patton.*

