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Embedding Structures of Resilience:

Working with difference, diversity and conflict within collaborative work



create national development
agency for collaborative arts

One of Create's core purposes as a resource organisation is to ensure that artists working in the field of collaborative socially engaged arts are supported to operate to the highest possible standards. In reviewing our training offerings, we consistently hear from artists and community members that conflict resolution and working sustainably with difference is an area of anxiety. In response to this we have in recent years hosted two CPD workshops on this topic, drawing on work by Dr Eve Olney alongside her collaborators Krini Kafiris, Spyros Tsiknas and Rachel Botha.

In order to further explore this important issue, we have invited Dr Eve Olney, socially engaged artist, activist, curator, educator and practice-based researcher to share some of her own experiences of collaborative work, addressing them in terms of identifying common issues that arise during social practice, and which frameworks and processes can be used to deal with difference, diversity and conflict in this work.

Front Cover:

Non Violent Communication within Social Collaborative Projects, a Workshop with artists Eve Olney, Spyros Tsiknas and Giorgos Tsitsirigkos. Part of Create Networking Day 2019. Photo by Joseph Carr

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My main focus in this piece will be on the preparatory work that needs to be put in place before any collaborative project begins, in order to create the right conditions for working productively with difference, diversity and dealing with conflict. Coping mechanisms are not something that inherently emerge during a collaborative process but must be strategically implemented and consciously maintained throughout the lifetime of a project. Hindsight is everything in relation to my own developing praxis and that involves trawling through an embodied archive of experiences of sometimes very difficult and complex projects.

Within the field of socially engaged practice our collaborators might be friends, communities of interest, peers, different professions, organisations, funding bodies. It is important, from the offset, to identify the main stakeholders of the project and negotiate agreed processes and procedures beyond the institutional policy-led criteria for any funded project. There are many variables with regard to how an artist might enter a collaborative practice, for example, they may be the main stakeholder initiating the project, or they may be joining an existing collaborative project where power dynamics and modes of behaviour and practice have already been established. These are two very different experiences and therefore I present examples from both of these perspectives. For the sake of coherence I am organising my experiences under what I think are the main themes that require consideration.

Acknowledging Power Dynamics

I am drawing here from a collaborative project that was already almost a year into its existence when I became involved. I entered this collaboration with a clearly defined role, as socially engaged artist engaging in ethnographic field work with the community of interest in order to produce an exhibition of work to make what is a highly complex and multifaceted housing project accessible to a broader public. I joined this group due to sharing a political perspective (anti-capitalist / anti-neoliberal) with the individual who initiated the project as well as agreeing with the objectives and ambitions of the scheme. The collaboration worked well enough for the first year as we focused on engaging with the community and producing the work for the exhibition. It was after those tasks had been achieved that the first red flags began to appear.

Without a specific role I began involving myself in the general running of the project and became increasingly frustrated as I felt the individual leading the project was deliberately withholding information. I came to also believe that their means of communicating to the rest of the group was strategic and divisive. In addition, they began bringing more people into the project without discussing it with the existing group. When challenged with these breaches of trust they seemed confused as to why their behaviour caused concern and upset for others. This was a time before my training in dealing with such matters and my response to this behaviour became increasingly emotive and aggressive towards the individual. Having invested three years in the project I ended up cutting all ties to the project, leaving angry and upset.

If I am ever in a similar situation in terms of joining an existing collaborative project the first factor I would need to discern is how the group collaborate? How are the current power relations within the group understood and being enacted? What is the breakdown of roles and tasks in relation to the objectives of the project as well as in relation to my role and tasks? What are the agreed time-frames? What are the agreed modes of communication? What are the agreed methods of decision making? How does the group deal with difference of opinion and/or conflict? What resources do we have access to and is this the same for everyone involved? I would consider these points as the most basic requirements for any collaborative project. If there has not been a previous consideration of these issues I would request that an organisational structure be established in order to create the conditions for a transparent and fair collaborative experience for all involved. If this was deemed unnecessary by the group / leader I would wish them good luck with their project and decline the offer of involvement.

Every individual carries their own expectations and assumptions into a new or existing project. We are mostly unaware of this until such time that an inherent belief is challenged during the course of the work, and this can be quite a jarring experience. It is usually registered in the body as a sudden ache or shortness of breath, what Ulex trainers refer to as the 'power shock'¹. When we are at the receiving end of this we are also suddenly thrust into an acute awareness of our own 'values' and 'norms', as it is these that are being challenged. The further into the project this is realised the more damage it can cause. In my example I had assumed a shared set of values with the individual leading the project would manifest as a shared need for a direct-democratic and transparent governance structure within the group.

1. Critical Incidents p3 <https://ulexproject.org/poder/>

“The most important aspect of group formation is setting out an agreed decision making process as this is where the central core of power resides.”

I hadn't considered that a shared value can be performed in many different ways². For example, a shared concern for climate change can be enacted as anything between merely recycling to the extreme act of protest of gluing oneself to a main access road.

Creating a sustainable and resilient collaborative group practice requires establishing relevant processes as agreed by the group as a whole. Even if you are familiar with, or friends with, your collaborators, it is really essential to build more formal structures into the organisational process. In addition, establishing coherent meeting facilitation processes as well as workable communication methods and mediums is vital. The most important aspect of group formation is probably setting out an agreed decision making process as this is where the central core of power resides. Finally, it is imperative that a process for both addressing and understanding diversity and difference in tandem with process(es) for dealing with conflict is agreed upon. It might be valuable to note also, that, in my experience, those who complain that such detailed organisation takes up too much time or is not required, are usually the people who hold most unacknowledged power within groups and therefore literally cannot see the need for it.

2. https://commoncausefoundation.org/_resources/the-common-cause-handbook/ offers an in-depth guide to working with values

My solicitor didn't
really fight for me.
If she had pushed
him further...
he'd show his true
self.
He cried, + talked
bullshit

usually give them
out.'

Addressing diversity and difference – as a creative process

Sometimes there is a tendency in groups to feel uncomfortable with and avoid engaging in discussion around the ways that diversity and difference in the group might be relevant to the collaboration. When working with a diverse group of people, ignoring or not acknowledging difference can cause some individuals to feel isolated or of limited relevance to the project. Conversely, diversity might be foregrounded in a group in a way that projects unnecessary limitations on people as well as being counterintuitive towards the creative progression of the work. For example, if the lead artist is white-Irish – as is the case in many of the projects I have initiated – and is working with an ethnically diverse group of people, as Ulex trainers argue, there is the added danger of ‘enforcing identity on individuals’ or ‘reproducing oppressive colonial narratives by ‘falling into a kind of “folklorisation” of diversity’³. It is therefore important to adopt an intersectional approach to discussing and exploring difference in the group by acknowledging not just the dominant categories of oppression, such as racism, sexism, homophobia etc but also understand the complexity of fluid and more subtle layers of oppressive behaviour in order to create the conditions for an open and explorative creative process.

Even if the group share an ethnic background and gender it is still vital to consider how differences within the group might be relevant in terms of having a creative and productive impact on the collaboration. Ulex trainers also emphasise that working with difference is arguably the most creative zone of learning within group work.

3. Competence Framework p10 <https://ulexproject.org/poder/>

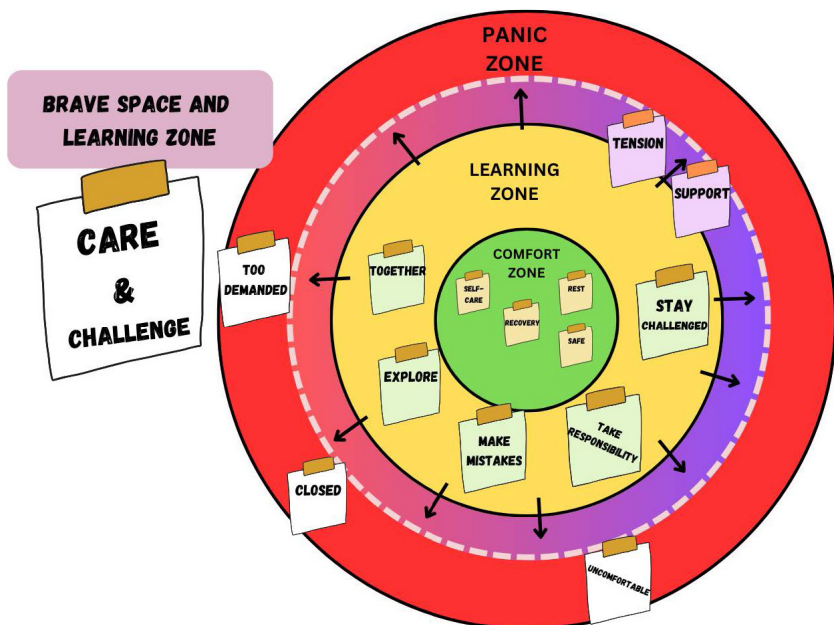


Figure 1:
Creating Brave and
Transformative Learning
Spaces. Poder (2023),
courtesy the Ulex Project

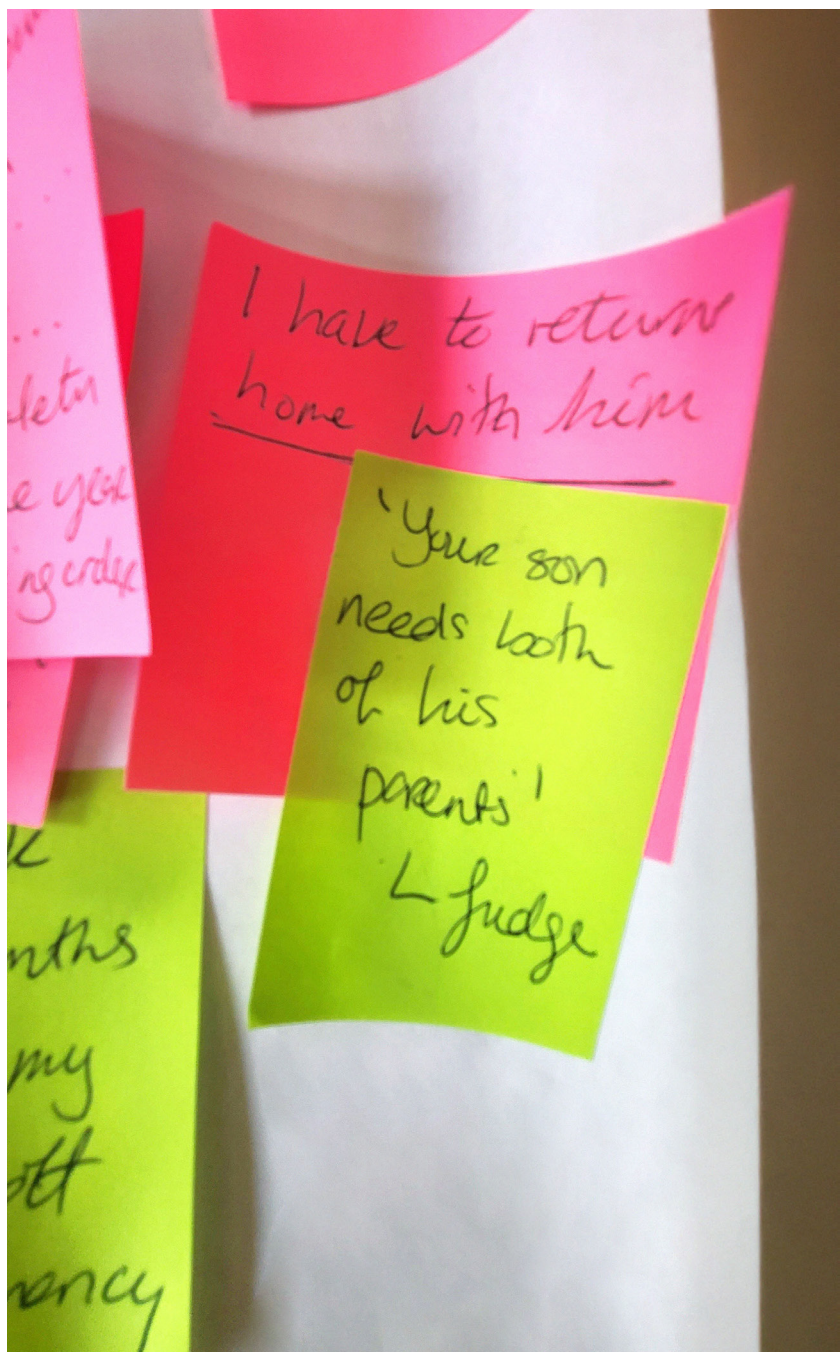
They present multiple methodological approaches to realising this, one of which I will focus on here called, The Learning Zone. As demonstrated in Figure 1⁴, reproduced with thanks to the Ulex Project, the process of learning within a group is divided across the 'comfort zone', the 'learning zone' and the 'panic zone'. Within the context of this model, a group remaining in the comfort zone during group work indicates a regurgitation of knowledge already understood on a particular topic. It may also relate to the beginning of a collaborative process when people might be finding their voices and not yet comfortable putting their opinions 'out there'. A collaboration that moves towards the learning zone is willing to engage with differences in perspective and opinion in order to learn more about a subject.

4. PODER (2023). Creating brave and transformative learning spaces.

“Most conflicts can be understood to stem from certain expected or assumed needs of an individual or group not being met and not being acknowledged properly.”

This zone can be explorative, challenging and a place where mistakes are made and forgiven. The more the group pushes this kind of engagement the closer some individuals might move towards the panic zone. If you have ever been involved within a discussion on a complex and emotionally sensitive topic you might know what this feels like. For me, it is uncomfortable, I feel unsure of myself and I fear being caught out through a lack of knowledge or inability to communicate what I am thinking. I therefore, enter these zones carefully whilst attempting to remember what the training has taught me about avoiding communicating in a hierarchical manner. It doesn't always work out for me. But this awareness I carry enables me to participate whilst also being mindful of what the trainers call my 'edges'. Edges are felt in the body, and indicate that you are pushing the boundary of learning into the panic zone. It can feel very uncomfortable but also exhilarating and produce innovated results for the project. How able the participant feels to get to this point is dependent upon how well the group formation has been considered. The panic zone is also the space where imbalances in power can be laid bare, for example, if the direction of the discussion is led by whoever has a better command of the English language or is more self-assured in character or has a more in-depth knowledge base etc. That is why it is so important to have structural reflective processes in place where these kinds of imbalances can be unpacked and resolved.

Productive Encounter
workshop for Speaking
Back. An AIC Scheme
funded project (2024).
Photo by Eve Olney





Addressing Difference and Conflict in Creative Collaborations with Radical Institute (2024). Photo by Vance Lau

In preparing the right conditions for this kind of work, I refer to Ulex's concept of Brave⁵ or Courageous Space as a method of enabling groups to address the complexity and discomfort of individuals working with difference. Skilled facilitation is required for this. I employed this methodological approach when working with survivors of domestic and gender violence on a recent collaborative practice project. The women wished to creatively represent their experience and knowledge in a way that could help others. We did months of preparatory reflective work before beginning the project. One of my main concerns was not having the professional credentials for working with the psychological embodied trauma that could be triggered during our workshopping strategies. We discussed how we might create a space that could carry this kind of work without causing harm to ourselves or to others. We agreed upon the concept of Brave Space for a number of reasons. We understood that our project was very different to art therapy and we wanted to make these characteristics clear. In keeping with the Ulex training model we agreed to:

5. The brave space concept comes from *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections From Social Justice Educators* by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens (2013)



1. Embrace complexity

Being honest about our discomfort and understanding it as an opportunity to learn

2. Listen to understand

Active listening in order to gain another perspective, not as a springboard for our next point

3. Controversy with respect

We don't need to agree with someone in order to work with them.

4. No attacks

Understand the difference between disagreeing and aggressively denying the other's opinion.

5. Owning intentions and impacts

Acknowledging our own negative behaviour and how it might impact on others and try to resolve with others.

6. Being challenged by choice

We have the option to step in and out of the 'space', for example, when we need more time to gather our thoughts, understand our position or need more information before continuing with the group-work.

This approach worked well for us, as each participant retained their autonomy and control of their input and had the option of stepping out at any time should something not feel right. When this did happen, we immediately stopped the workshop process and made time for reflection and then made changes in order for us to be able to continue in a way that worked for us all.

“I find it useful to understand collaborative practice as a continuous balancing act of often complex sets of cultural and social relations”

Managing Conflict

The final observation I want to make is that even when these methods, methodologies and organisational strategies are implemented as the foundational mechanism for creating a resilient collaboration, there may well be times when the group dynamic is threatened by some unforeseen conflict. I have deliberately left the topic of managing conflict until last as I hope that the work that has preceded this can prepare and equip those who work collaboratively to build upon examples given here and seek out strategies that will work for them. I think it is reasonable to expect that collaborative work will contain some level of conflict at some point in the process due to the messy and explorative nature of socially engaged practice.

Most conflicts can be understood to stem from certain expected or assumed needs of an individual or group not being met and not being acknowledged properly. In dealing with conflict we need to create a calm space where this can be explored. Addressing the feelings being felt through a facilitated process can lead us to the needs creating these feelings or emotions, that in turn can lead to the articulation of specific requests in order to resolve the feelings. The next step is for the individuals and the group to discern whether this request can be satisfied by agreeing on whether it is related to the needs of the project, or simply to an individual need that cannot be satisfied within the particular context of the project.

What I have outlined above should hopefully provide strong foundational structures for general conflictual moments to be avoided, addressed, and resolved by the group. Should something more serious arise there are many methodological approaches offered in the publications and websites I have referenced that might suit the specific sets of conditions of a particular group. Drawing from my own experience the most important fact to remember is that any conflict is the problem of the group not just the individuals directly involved and the group must take responsibility and seek to resolve the issues together through the agreed process

To conclude, the mentorship and training workshops I provide around collaborative social practice include a chronology of steps that participants are encouraged to follow in order to be able to create the conditions for healthy and resilient collaborations. The first step involves an in-depth practice of self-awareness and being able to read our emotions and feelings as registers for reflection and action. Once we have gained insight into our own tendencies and 'edges' within collaborative contexts we are better equipped to relate openly to diversity and difference within the group dynamic. We are more able to learn from each other and work through our differences creatively. Finally, I find it useful to understand collaborative practice as a continuous balancing act of often complex sets of cultural and social relations that, in order for it to be a rewarding experience for all involved, must have underlying social processes consciously integrated within its organisational structure.



Non Violent Communication within Social Collaborative Projects,
a Workshop with artists Eve Olney, Spyros Tsiknas and Giorgos Tsitsirigkos.
Part of Create Networking Day 2019. Photo by Joseph Carr



Acknowledgement

This article draws primarily from a collaborative praxis I undertook with Dr Krini Kafiris www.sym-poesis.org, as Radical Institute www.thelivingcommons.com/radical-institute (2020- 2024), as well as Ulex Project ulexproject.org trainings and methodological approaches to resilient activism through an Erasmus+KA1 partnership between Living Commons and Ulex Projects (2023), further collaborations with curator Rachel Botha, explorative collaborative work on Non Violent Communication with Spyros Tsiknis, and finally my own lifelong experience of collaborative creative and activist work. I am integrating this experience within a focused professional practice I am referring to as collaborative social practice through which I currently provide mentorship, presentations, workshops and training.

In Short WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO...

On St Patrick's Day 2025, Create were privileged to join artists working in the collaborative arts field to celebrate President Michael D. Higgins' **Samhlaíocht agus An Náisiún – Imagination and The Nation** initiative in Áras an Uachtaráin.

Each year, the President and Sabina Higgins mark St. Patrick's Day by hosting a reception for people who have made a particular contribution to Irish society, and in 2025 – the President's final year in office – they chose to highlight the contribution of the arts at local level as community and personal experience, asking for Create's support in preparing for the event.

In his speech, the President spoke of his belief that ***“the more critically informed and alive we are to the possibilities of what it is that artists of all types do, the better it will be for the kind of society that genuinely commits itself to the formation of citizens with minds richly furnished by what the arts can offer”***.

This unique event was an inspiring moment to recognise the enduring power and importance of artists and communities creating exceptional art together. The President's words, rooted in life-long passion and first-hand experience, will provide an enormous boost to the community of collaborative, socially engaged artists working in Ireland today.

We were delighted, with the support of the British Council, to send artists William Bock, Abi Ighodaro and Helen O'Keefe to London in April to attend The British East India Company on Trial, a collaboration between academic, writer, lawyer and activist Radha D'Souza and artist and propaganda researcher Jonas Staal. This was part of the **Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes (CICC)**,

which stages public hearings in immersive installations functioning as a court, to prosecute intergenerational climate crimes committed by states and corporations acting together.

We look forward to working with Jonas and Radha to share the work of the Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes in Dublin later in the year.

Applications will close on the 5th of May for the **Artist in the Community Scheme Artist Mentoring Award 2025**. The Artist Mentoring Award aims to offer capacity building and arts practice development for collaborative socially engaged artists, pairing five artist mentors with five artist mentees. We look forward to working with the recipients over the next year.

Coming soon

We look forward to sharing news in the coming weeks about a new major community arts programme for **Dublin's North East Inner City**. We are delighted to work with Dublin City Council to develop collaborative, co-creative models of engagement in one of the most diverse and densely populated areas of the country which has suffered from significant reputational challenges and systemic inequality for generations.

We look forward to implementing tools and skills learned during our work on the Creative Places Tuam project, in another place-based programme. Keep an eye on our website and social media to find out more!

Welcome to Create News

This is the thirty-seventh edition of Create News.

Create News is published twice yearly in spring and autumn. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer or writers and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

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