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De-Centring During The Great Dithering



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Sophie Hope is a practice-based researcher and teacher. Her work is often developed with others through the format of devised workshops exploring subjects such as art and politics, physical and emotional experiences of work, stories of socially engaged art and the ethics of employability in the creative industries. She was an independent curator for 10 years, working locally and internationally to develop a collaborative, socially engaged curatorial practice. She has been a Lecturer in Socially Engaged Practices at Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London since February 2024 where she is co-developing the Guildhall De-Centre for Socially Engaged Practice and Research.

Sophie shared a provocation to attendees at our 2025 Networking Event: Collaborative Futures. In this issue of Create News, we asked Sophie to expand upon the themes and issues raised by her work in the Guildhall De-Centre and discussed at Collaborative Futures.

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De-Centring During The Great Dithering

Sophie Hope

The Performance and Communications Skills (PCS) programme established by teacher and researcher Peter Renshaw, which ran from 1984-87 at Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, placed final year music students in prisons, schools, hospices and other contexts. It was designed as a “fundamental challenge to the structure and assumptions of conservatoire education” (Kushner, 1985).¹

The following exchange between Peter Renshaw and his student Simon captures something that has not really changed in the forty years since: institutional transformation is sabotaged not only from outside, but from within – including within ourselves.

“Simon” Peter shouted across the bar, “will you be joining the course again next year?” Simon hesitated. “I don’t think so Peter. I might have a chance of getting on to the Opera course.”

“Oh, Simon,” Peter teased. “I thought you were committed to this innovation – I thought you’d abandoned the star system!”

Simon leaned over sideways as he reached for his pint at the bar – “well, there you are. You see you’re not just fighting the institution, you’re fighting the dream.”

¹ Saville Kushner, PCS evaluation report, Working Dreams, 1985

Forty years later, when a group of staff at Guildhall School proposed the title 'de-centre' for a new research centre for socially engaged practice², the term was met with similar resistance. "Why can't we continue to use the term institute?" we were asked. The question of what it means to de-centre as a socially engaged practice sits at the heart of this piece, as I draw on my experience of navigating the term in relation to the institution.

The Great Dithering

Referencing Kim Stanley Robinson's sci-fi novel *2312*, Donna Haraway coins "The Great Dithering" as what historians in the future will call this period (2020 – 2050) of indecision to act (Haraway, 2016, p.144). As practitioners, researchers, activists and teachers muddling through this frustrating time, the question of how to work, who with and where to put our energies, feels urgent, as does a critical awareness of context if we are going to try and imagine alternatives beyond the dithering. If being embedded, embodied, compromised and implicated in context is a given, the traces of an argument still sitting in the stomach, an anxiety over an overdue task, the kind of contract we are on, let alone our life experiences all shape if, how, when, where and why we can imagine otherwise. These are the complex contextual conditions of a de-centring practice that has a tricky relationship with a centre it's trying to pull away from.



Dr. Sophie Hope sharing a provocation as part of Create's Networking Event 2025: Collaborative Futures.
Photo: Joseph Carr

² The De-centre followed on from the Institute for Social Impact Research in the Performing Arts (which ran from 2020–2023, headed by John Sloboda).



I am interested in how de-centring necessarily implies an imagined otherwise, an alternative viewpoint or perspective on the status quo. Simon the student in 1985 was pulled to the relative 'safety' of a course that promised success in terms of notoriety, resisting the less well-worn path that de-centred the 'artistry' of solo music making and re-centred the relational to see what would happen in different, non-arts contexts. The PCS programme was an earlier example of 'de-centring' in a conservatoire, but helps me think about how 'centres' are defined – as canons, as curricula, as power, as discourse, as hegemony. Imagining otherwise proposes a different position from which to practise the future – one that starts away from the centre, or that side steps the centre, or that never knows or recognises there is a centre. adrienne maree brown reminds us that "adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience" (p.14). Lola Olufemi, similarly, proposes that the future is not in front of us but "everywhere simultaneously: multidirectional, variant, spontaneous. We only have to turn around" (p.35). These are de-centring ways of imagining: contesting ideas of progress, rooted in respectful relationships across times and places.

De-centring in this sense requires both a confidence in acting counter to the centre, but also a step into the unknown, unpredictable, unfashionable or not-yet-figured out. If de-centring is imagining otherwise, it also, as Olufemi reminds us, "requires a commitment to not knowing. Are you ready for that?" (p.17). De-centring means sitting with that not-knowing, which often feels at odds when faced with the realities of funding applications that require predictions of future outcomes and evaluation forms which rely on certain versions of events that back up those predictions, often editing out failures, detours and uncertainties.

Impact, Precarity and the Project Logic

The shift from 'Institute' to 'De-Centre' at Guildhall was never just semantic. It was a challenge to a whole framework for understanding what cultural institutions are for. The impact 'agenda' – which has come to dominate how arts organisations justify their existence – is almost always centred on the institution itself, measuring the positive effects it has had on others. Belfiore and Bennett traced the historical roots of this in their 2007 article 'Rethinking the Social Value of the Arts', noting that the focus on measurable impacts has "left a number of fundamental assumptions unchallenged" – and generated thousands of methodologically questionable studies in the process.

The critique was growing from inside Guildhall School too. John Sloboda, who established the Institute for Social Impact Research in the Performing Arts, expressed scepticism about "possibly exaggerated or overblown claims for the capacity of music to address long standing intractable social problems." (in Gibson and Hope, 2026). Imogen Flower, a PhD researcher at the Institute, questioned how we can measure impact when it flows in multiple directions at once – and when much of what happens in socially engaged practice is "not necessarily effective, but rather affective." (ibid). Maia Mackney, who led the Institute's Evaluation Working Group, pushed back against the success/failure binary altogether (ibid).

"creating the conditions by nurturing the soil rather than assuming flowers will grow in soil that is suffering from erosion or degradation."

What these critiques share is a recognition that impact thinking assumes a uni-directional flow of influence: from a privileged centre outward to recipients. De-centring challenges this by acknowledging the harm that such a model causes to those without keys to the centre from which everything is measured. Drawing on decolonial theory, feminist epistemology, and cultural democracy, de-centring tries to account for the polyvocal, multi-directional, co-dependent ways people (and the environments we work in and with) interact, affect each other and co-exist.

But there is an uncomfortable question here that cannot be side-stepped: what does de-centring work mean when it is carried out by people in precarious working conditions? Arora Swati's 2021 manifesto to decentre theatre and performance studies draws on Harney and Moten's notions of the undercommons and fugitive planning to suggest that "the university, with its histories of colonial exploitation and racialised violence, was never meant to be transformed". Perhaps, she writes, "we need to imagine and build alternate spaces for collective learning and thinking... outside of the gated corridors of the university" creating "a coalition with those who were left out."

De-Centring as Practice

The paradigm shift suggested by the term 'de-centre' has long, tangled roots at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Through a podcast series I've developed with Jo Gibson called 'Echoes and the Unsaid', we have been exploring past experiments in social practices that have incrementally challenged dominant conservatoire paradigms since the 1970s – from the Music Therapy programme to PCS, the MMus Leadership programme, BA Performance and Creative Enterprise, and others. Each initiative faced institutional resistance while trying to open different ways of working with and beyond artistic training, whilst powerful gravitational forces continued to pull some students and staff back toward established hierarchies and individualistic models of success.

What this history shows is that de-centring has been slowly occurring anyway, in the gaps, without permission, often despite institutional structures rather than because of them. Such paradigm shifts are gradual, co-existing uncomfortably with dominant paradigms rather than replacing them. As Donella Meadows wrote: "We can't control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!" (2008).

Through the De-Centre we have been exploring what operating in a de-centred, socially engaged way might mean structurally and infrastructurally – not just in programming and content, but in funding, governance, staffing, and relationships – dancing with the systems rather than pretending we can control them. This has entailed imagining a research culture in a conservatoire otherwise. For example, we opened the process beyond research to include staff doing socially engaged practice through their teaching and practices more broadly, recognising that those doing the most sustained community partnership work are predominantly on teaching-only contracts or PhD programmes, not research positions. We formed 'Lines of Enquiry' – a group of staff and postgraduate researchers building community around different forms of social practice. We set up peer



Dr. Sophie Hope sharing a provocation as part of Create's Networking Event 2025: Collaborative Futures.
Photo: Joseph Carr

triangles of support, held internal gatherings each term, ran monthly 'mobile common rooms' in corridors across the school, and hosted public events placing different lines of enquiry in conversation. We began working with students and staff to create a community garden, growing vegetables and natural dyes as a way to bring people together across the institution around something slow, alive, and process-orientated. We developed a social art seminar series drawing on interdisciplinary expertise across the school that brought together staff, students and de-centre mailing list members from outside the institution.

These are glimpses of what infrastructural thinking has looked like to me in practice: tending connections rather than focusing on outputs, creating the conditions by nurturing the soil rather than assuming flowers will grow in soil that is suffering from erosion or degradation.



Can You De-Centre from the Centre?

One and a half years on from launching the De-Centre, I find myself wanting to de-centre the De-Centre – to enact it as a verb rather than declare it as a noun. As resources reduce in general, how do we continue holding space for each other within and beyond institutions, rooted in community and solidarity?

Returning to context, Guildhall School is part of the City of London Corporation, at the heart of the square mile³, with its roots in racial capitalism. Is it in a position to de-centre, decolonise, practise epistemic democracy? The question is not rhetorical. Audre Lorde's insistence that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house has to be held alongside the reality that many of us are, for now, dependent on those houses.

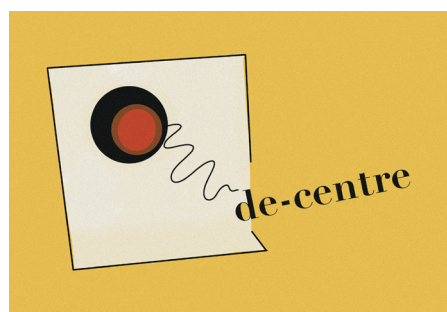
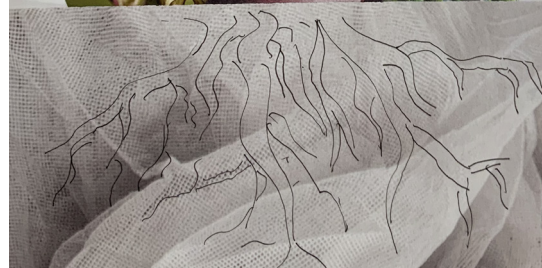
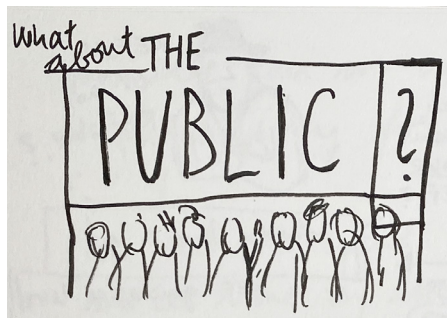
Viviana Checchia,
Joon-Lynn Goh and
Dr. Sophie Hope at
Create's Networking
Event 2025: Collaborative
Futures.
Photo: Joseph Carr

Rather than competing for scarce arts resources, what if we used our creative energies to imagine infrastructures of the future – ones that are multi-species, reciprocal, genuinely inter-dependent? Haraway asks whether we can become communities of compost: cultivating and inventing “the arts of living with and for a damaged world in place”, not as abstraction but as and for those living and dying in ruined places (p.143). De-centring will probably happen despite and around institutional structures, not because of them. It will be smuggled in, out and across. It will be gradual, partial, contradictory.

De-centring is not a destination or a badge; it is a persistent unsettling. It means being willing to be changed by the contexts we engage with. It means connecting seemingly disparate projects to broader struggles – finding where circles of concern in the polycrisis (such as climate crisis, poverty, the rise of the far right) overlap, so we can share circles of influence and support each other in what is actually within our control.

Simon, reaching for his pint in 1985, chose the dream that promised him a future at the centre. I'm not sure what happened to Simon, but for many of the people I've met through my work at Guildhall School who did the PCS course and other socially engaged courses since, they have persisted at de-centring in ways that disrupt and challenge assumptions about what it means to be artists, teachers, activists and/or researchers in society. De-centring then might be about reminding each other to re-orient ourselves and constantly question the paths we are on, finding stability in togetherness to keep things wobbly whilst the world dithers.

³ The Square Mile, or City of London was founded by the Romans in 47 AD. It is a global financial centre and self-governing entity distinct from the rest of London with its own police force and governance structure, managed by the City of London Corporation.



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More info on the De-centre:
www.gsmd.ac.uk/de-centre

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

In December 2025, we were thrilled to announce the five recipients of **NEIC Community Arts Programme Research and Development Awards**. The Research and Development Awards, valued at €5,000 each, are designed to support artists and creative practitioners living or working in the North East Inner City of Dublin to explore new ideas and develop meaningful relationships with local communities. This award recognises bold, brilliant ideas rooted in the community. Congratulations to Ciara Byrne, Romi Beiroa Rey, Seán Farrelly, Shireen Shortt and Sylvain (Silver) Kezir.

Since September 2025, Dublin City Council, through its Arts office, has been working with Create and artist Evelyn Broderick and the community of **Dolphin House** on a Public Art programme which places the community at the heart of the **Public Art Commissioning Process**. In March we were delighted to share an open call for a commission, the first of 3 mini public art commissions which are part of a wider programme of work, culminating in a larger scale public artwork that will be commissioned in 2027. We look forward to working with the chosen artist(s) and the community of Dolphin House as this work emerges.

In early 2026, we published two new publications which emerge from the Artist in the Community Scheme Artist Mentoring Award (AMA). The **Values Framework** was researched and compiled by Dr. Ciaran Smyth, and outlines Create's approach to mentorship within the scheme, while the **Mentorship Toolkit** is designed to support artists engaging with mentorship, whether part of the AMA or externally. The toolkit includes a collection of information, tips, templates, and resources for mentees and mentors to use at their own discretion. You can read both publications in the Resources section of our website.

Coming soon

Create is delighted to announce the **Collaborative Arts Training Programme (CATP) 2026**, following a highly successful and over-subscribed pilot in 2025. This is a practical suite of essential training and professional knowledge for emerging artists, recent graduates and third-level students as well as artists and cultural practitioners who are interested in learning more about the basics of collaborative art practice.

Delivered by staff members of Create with guest artists, the Collaborative Arts Training Programme is a learning arc with practical tips and essential information about collaborative arts, and can be booked as drop-in webinar sessions as well as continuous training programme.

Informed by a four-session pilot phase last year, we are launching the full suite of six sessions in 2026, running between May and October. Find out more and apply to attend on our website.

Welcome to Create News

This is the thirty-ninth 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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2 Curved Street
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D02 PC43
01 473 6600

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