

Willing Conversations: The Process of Being Between

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This short essay is a response to an invitation to write about working as a facilitator of interdisciplinary research for this special section of *Leonardo* featuring the Arts and Science Research Fellowships. My specific connection to the Fellowships was as research organizer and facilitator for Choreography and Cognition. The Artist-Fellow for the project was London-based choreographer Wayne McGregor, and the science host was Rosaleen McCarthy at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Cambridge. A description of this project is included in this issue under the title “Bodies Meet Minds: Choreography and Cognition” [1]. In the following essay, I explore the themes of willingness, inter-profession, conversations and wording, empathy, and collaborative writing. These relate to the conditions for and relationships within interdisciplinary collaboration.

WILLINGNESS

The Arts and Science Research Fellowships emerged from a socio-cultural context that has provided major support to collaborations between artists and scientists since at least 1996, when the Wellcome Trust launched their “sci-art” scheme. In 1998, the U.K. National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts was created, and in 1999 the sci-art Consortium was established, comprising no fewer than five major funding bodies coming together to support art and science projects. At the end of 2001, the Arts Council England and Arts and Humanities Research Board agreed to set up a new joint funding strand for interdisciplinary research fellows working across science, technology and art, and the call for proposals for the Research Fellowships came out in November 2002. This was the first art and science initiative in the U.K. to bring together cultural and education funding, and its emphasis on fostering mutual collaborative research between art and science practitioners differentiated it from other art and science programs.

This is the background of support against which I propose that a large number of people based in the U.K. with diverse professional practices think differently now about the relation between art and science. Growing interest stems from a curiosity about the intrinsic value of these exchanges, as more and more colleagues are seen to derive benefits from engagement across disciplines. Significant informal networks have resulted from the steady progression of productions, conferences, publications and other events and outcomes of collaborative projects. The evolution of support from sci-art to the Fellowships and toward more open-ended research has re-

sulted in unique conditions for productive creative exchange. There is, I believe, more willingness on the part of individuals operating from within diverse communities of professional practice to participate in interdisciplinary art-and-science collaboration.

INTER-PROFESSION

The Choreography and Cognition project was organized and facilitated with full acknowledgment that

the participants were professional practitioners. This implies having specialized knowledge acquired through long and intensive preparation, engagement in a principal calling, vocation or employment, and being part of a larger body of persons engaged in the same calling. In this article I explore a few other terms such as “domain” and “communities of practice” as alternatives to “discipline,” as I do not believe the term “interdisciplinary” fully captures the complexities and challenges facing these collaborations. In face-to-face meetings in the context of a project, it is professional borders that drift and open as collaborators search for the best means of relating to one another and stimulating creative and lateral thinking. However, these borders will constantly reassert themselves, for example, in the forms of obligation, responsibility and duty. Within the arts it is quite common for a practitioner to migrate or rove across disciplinary borders. Due to larger structures, including educational, subsidizing and institutional, it is difficult for an individual practitioner to move easily between professions as different as art and science (I recognize this foregrounds social and cultural formations over epistemological ones). Therefore, the organizing and facilitating of inter-profession projects should include an orientation to these formations, as in understanding the background and needs of the professional practitioner.

CONVERSATIONS AND WORDING

Choreography and Cognition grew out of conversations with Wayne McGregor in September 2001 about the field of artificial intelligence and how an investigation of this field might generate a better understanding of creative thinking and enhance his work with dancers and other artistic collaborators. These conversations led us a year later to contact practitioners working in the area of cognitive science and neuroscience and to organize conversations with them about brain/mind,

ABSTRACT

The author argues that the role of facilitation within art and science collaboration projects is perhaps best described not as a function or position, that of the facilitator, but as a framework for thinking about relations and how to encourage a certain quality of exchange. The article reflects on how the themes of willingness, inter-profession, conversations and wording, empathy, and collaborative writing relate to the conditions for interdisciplinary collaboration. This is based on the author's experience with collaborative projects, most recently as research organizer and facilitator for Choreography and Cognition, one of the first Arts and Science Research Fellowships jointly funded by the Arts Council England and Arts and Humanities Research Board (U.K.).

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creativity and movement. My role was to locate interested individuals and organize and facilitate these meetings. The background for support and networks I mention above in writing about “willingness” made this possible; it would be difficult to imagine the project without them.

The wording of the invitation that went out in September 2002 was more or less as follows:

Choreographer Wayne McGregor, director of Random Dance Company, and I are organizing a series of conversational meetings with researchers who are working in various ways on the study of the brain. Our aim is to stimulate an exchange of ideas between this field and the field of choreography/dance; and we seek psychologists, neurologists, philosophers and cognitive scientists who would find this interesting and would be willing to share their knowledge in an informal setting.

Through this networking and invitation process we eventually organized a series of nine meetings with interested scientists throughout the U.K. and one in Paris. The wording of the invitation with its emphasis on conversation established the informal tone of exchange for these meetings. However, even conversations require focus. In our case, Wayne began these meetings with the description of exercises he would give his dancers to create initial movement material for a choreography. This was enough to stimulate a long, informal but focused conversation about how mind, brain and body interact.

Conversations and wording overlap in the building of shared terms of reference from the careful composition of an invitation; to varying types of spoken exchange, moderated and un-moderated; to the drafting of applications for funds; to documentation and transcription of discussion; to exposure and explanations to a growing public and the writing of reports and other outcome-related publications, etc. Certain phrases or larger language constructions weave and morph their way throughout such a project, gathering relevance and changing emphasis within shifting contexts, coming over time to represent the process of negotiation, shared agreements and divergent imaginations. Facilitation supports these developments, reviewing and clarifying, adapting and editing, observing the evolution of what is written and spoken.

EMPATHY

These initial nine meetings eventually led to the Fellowship research period, in-

volving some but not all of the scientists originally contacted. Relationships with chosen collaborators grew as the first 3-hour conversations turned into long-term commitments and dialogue gave rise to agreement on concepts, sharing of aims and objectives and acceptance of different goals and needs. In my opinion, these mechanics should be underpinned by empathy, an understanding rooted in curiosity. The mechanics make a certain aspect of the professional relationship explicit; empathy helps guide social contact and nurtures forms of friendship. Inside this intersection between friendship and professional relation, the value of the interaction and exchange can be more appropriately assessed. The curiosity I refer to is expressed in the following: What constitutes the choice for a certain professional life, a life within which competence and expertise and their correspondence to value are essential? How is this choice the expression of someone's desire for a creative and challenging life path, where the hope is fulfilment beyond mere livelihood? Questions like these lie at the heart of this empathic approach.

How does one say something useful about empathy, which by definition is more intuitive or “felt” than systematic or logical? How does one translate the empathic approach into something concrete enough to be organized and facilitated? A way to start might be with someone's working environment; for example, these initial nine meetings all occurred in the scientists' workplaces. The firsthand ex-

perience of the instruments and spaces of laboratories, sizes and scales of office and seminar rooms, building facades, front doors and stairways brings the artist into a particular relation with the rhythms of the scientist. A year later, the scientists with whom we continued our relationship were invited to work where the dancers spend their days in the rehearsal studios, cafeteria, changing rooms and backstage of a major performing arts venue in London (Fig. 1). How someone thinks and sees is at least partly captured and expressed in his or her surroundings and environment, and when communities of practice and working cultures are so different, this location exchange can help build empathic relations.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

As mentioned earlier, inter-professional research facilitation provides support for the evolution of shared and divergent language, sometimes guiding and ensuring clarity of communication and at other times just observing how others talk and write about the project. This can lead to the eventual production of a range of public texts from press releases to final project reports that take their place alongside other research outcomes such as new artworks and experimental data. Some public texts will be aimed at a general audience, explaining the project in accessible terms, while others may be written for a specialized arts or science readership. Both are acceptable markers

Fig. 1. First joint research session of Choreography and Cognition: scientists and dancers in the studio together, Sadlers Wells Theatre, London, November 2003. (Photo © James Leach)



of the project's success, but one may be deemed more significant than another depending on the domain within which the valuation takes place.

However, when it is the aim to foster mutually collaborative research (as was the case with these Fellowships) the production of texts should go beyond general description or purely specialized analysis. A third possibility exists in the form of collaborative writing or joint authorship involving at least one participant from each professional domain (art and science) working together on a single text to stand as an outcome of the research. Such a text should be intended for acceptance as an article, essay or chapter within a specialist publication in either one or the other (or both) professional domains.

Collaborative authorship takes as its starting point the existence of these specialist publications, for example, peer-reviewed journals, whether in the field of art or science, that patrol and maintain the knowledge perimeters of a professional domain. What I imagine are inter-profession infiltrations that use writing to creatively contextualize outcomes and, through persistent production of these

texts (co-authored by at least one artist and one scientist), make it possible for knowledge from one domain to furtively seep into another. This would loosen the borders of professions without erasing them. The image here is of folding fresh thinking, derived from the collaboration between art and science, back inside of the specialist domain rather than necessarily disseminating the results of such collaborations to a wider public. In the context of the Choreography and Cognition project, the mutual interest sparked by our initial informal focused conversations has arrived at this point of *writing together*, and two such texts have been collaboratively produced [2].

To close, rather than a summary I offer this final reflection. The role of facilitation within art and science collaboration projects is perhaps best described not as a function or position—that of facilitator—but as a framework for thinking about relations and how to encourage a certain quality of exchange. If the collaborators themselves possess the willingness and empathy, and have an understanding of inter-profession issues, the implications of wording and how to focus conversation, for example, then it may

not be necessary to create an additional job within this framework. It may be a result of previous relations or even of chance that someone from within the collaboration appears to fill this role. A part-time position could be required as a practical matter to handle administrative aspects of facilitation the collaborators do not have time for. However, avoiding the promotion of a “necessary someone” to fill the facilitation position helps reduce the possibility that this way of thinking about relations becomes a mechanical part of the structure of inter-profession collaboration. This then frees up facilitation, in whatever form it takes, to remain as the process of being between.

References and Notes

1. See in this issue Rosaleen McCarthy et al., “Bodies Meet Minds: Choreography and Cognition,” *Leonardo* 39, No. 5, 475–477 (2006). Also, an extensive report can be downloaded from <www.choreocog.net>.
2. Scott deLahunta and Philip Barnard, “What’s in a Phrase?,” in Johannes Birringer and Josephine Fenger, eds., *Tanz im Kopf/Dance and Cognition*. Jahrbuch der Gesellschaft für Tanzforschung (Yearbook of the German Dance Research Society) 15 (Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag, 2005) pp. 253–266; Scott deLahunta et al., “Densities of Agreement,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 21, No. 3, 17–23 (Autumn 2005).

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