



Mixing Methods: Creative Collaboration in Mobile Moviemaking

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This article is a reflection on creative collaboration and synergy, using a tertiary course in mobile moviemaking to explore ways in which collaborative projects involving people from different creative disciplines can generate creative outcomes that surpass – in both innovative value and aesthetic depth – creative outcomes that might be generated by the individual disciplines on their own. The article will reflect on the processes and outcomes of a collaborative class project within this course, with specific reference to the differences in ideation and making-methods used by creators in different disciplines and media.

By unpacking the differences between their two creative fields, participants from two different disciplines (Film and Contemporary dance) were able to define common ground through which to conduct a creative collaboration. This paper will contextualise their process, and will suggest a method by which future participants in interdisciplinary creative collaborations may reframe their perceptions of their own diverging disciplinary approaches in order to utilise these differences as strong points upon which to build and solidify their mutual efforts.



INTRODUCTION

When cohorts from different spheres of influence combine their efforts, the result can often lead to an output that is greater than the sum of its parts. This notion of collaborative synergy is age-old, and is not limited to human interaction; similar expressions can be found across the natural world.

Life science is replete with examples of interspecies interactions in which both parties – different as they may be from one another – work together towards mutually beneficial ends; an interaction known as mutualism (Bundy, 2011; Landry, 2010).

Across humanity, instances abound that illustrate convergences of diverse individuals or groups yielding synergistic outputs. Innovation can often be found emerging from seemingly unlikely combinations. Wilson (2009) suggests that “truly innovative ideas [come] from collaboration with people across traditionally demarcated fields of study. In science, economics, and business, it is new ideas that are imported from other realms that are most successful in affecting change” (para. 1). Candy & Edmonds (2012), find that collaborating on creative projects enables the participants “to address tasks via a number of parallel channels of thinking, which draw upon different types of knowledge. From this process, entirely new understandings can emerge that transform the outcome of the creative work” (p. 70).

The transformative potential of creative collaboration is particularly evident in the coming together of art and technology. One significant foray into this fusion was the *9 Evenings: Theatre & Engineering Project*, from 1966. This bold endeavour was a combination of avant-garde artists (including Robert Rauschenberg) and engineers from Bell Telephone Laboratories who used technology as the intermediary for, as participant artist Steve Paxton described it, a

...meeting, marrying, and mating of artists and scientists that was a kind of coupling, some form of, hopefully, a synergistic new wrinkle in artistic thought and scientific thought....they would repel each other, and attract each other in some strange dance, and we would get out of that the flowering, the explosion, the



evolution of something for the future. (Paxton cited in Oppenheimer, 2011, p. 1)

This seminal event inspired the formation of an international networked organisation of artists collaborating with engineers, called Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.). In her 2011 doctoral dissertation, Robin Oppenheimer argues that this project was a key influencer in mid-20th century collaborative technology-art models (p.12).

Another effort aimed at supporting interdisciplinary creative collaboration was BRIDGES, which brought forward and expanded the work of such groups as E.A.T.

Since the 1960's, artists and technologists have joined forces to create new forms of understanding and expression. Today, there is a worldwide community of innovators engaged in the convergence of art, technology and science, and a number of vital and active organisations are engaged in this work; yet there seems to be very little discourse about the process of doing interdisciplinary work. We feel that interdisciplinary collaboration is a discipline in and of itself. The BRIDGES Consortium seeks to create a collaborative forum for the study and development of interdisciplinary collaboration as a practice. (Pearce, Diamond, & Beam, 2003, p. 123)

Emerging as a co-creation of the Banff Centre New Media Institute and the Annenberg Center for Communications of the University of Southern California, BRIDGES sought to break down boundaries and map out synergies between disciplines that would seem, on the face of it, to be from totally different worlds. Focusing on methods by which people from different disciplines can leap across the barriers that are sometimes created by their own frameworks and languages, the group developed a valuable best-practices initiative that paved the way for other like-minded groups to develop their own interdisciplinary collaborative processes.

Recent years have seen much exploration and research around interdisciplinary creative collaboration, notably in the area of digital media art practice. In many creative collaborations, outcomes are uncertain at the outset and the processes for achieving these outcomes are equally undefined. When practitioners of divergent creative approaches and methods co-engage in an exploratory creative endeavour, two initial challenges are defining the problem through a common language and agreement around methods for ideation and making. As projects become more complex and integrate an ever-broader diversity of specialist input, so increases the need to spend



a bit of time maintaining the collaborative engine itself. When this is allowed to occur, the collaborative process itself ceases to become an obstacle, and members of interdisciplinary creative teams are able to “shift their focus from the subtasks to the overall task” (Steinheider & Legrady, 2004, p. 320).

BACKGROUND TO ELVSS

In efforts to overlay interdisciplinary creative collaboration with mobile moviemaking, students of different disciplines, at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand, were put together within a course in mobile moviemaking, entitled Entertainment Lab for the Very Small Screen (ELVSS), for which the author of this paper was the lecturer. The course was initially designed to sit within a film programme, as an effort to add another colour to the filmmaker’s palette, and to expand the parameters of what has come to be known as filmmaking. There is already a well-developed cinematic language for the 70-foot screen; ELVSS is an attempt to define a new cinematic language for the 70-millimetre screen.

According to the ELVSS Course Descriptor, the course aims “to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of evolving digital content platforms in order to reconceive processes for entertainment content creation and delivery into an evolving future” (Unitec Department of Performing & Screen Arts, 2014).

ELVSS has three Learning Outcomes:

1. Examine storytelling conventions in light of new modes of content acquisition and delivery.
2. Explore the transitioning parameters for storytelling influenced by emerging technologies.
3. Work collaboratively to conceive, plan, shoot, post-produce, deliver and reflect on an entertainment project designed for the Very Small Screen.

Previous iterations of this course (2012-2014) had seen students of various disciplines around the globe collaborating on large-scale mobile movie projects. The international groups were large, peaking in 2013 with 96 students worldwide. Lecturers of the various student groups – in England, France, Canada, and New Zealand – had necessarily focused on the huge organisational task of project completion, and had thus inadvertently minimised the differences in the students’



disciplines. The creative outcomes, while extraordinary in just having been accomplished, were not creatively compelling or adventurous. The students, focused as they were on the complex set of new tasks required to comply with the brief, kept their content safe, and broke little creative ground (Wagner, 2014).

In 2012, ELVSS transformed from a single course to an internationally collaborative venture amongst like-minded lecturers and their students in three countries. The large shared project in 2012 was to create videos around the issue of environmental sustainability. However, as Cochrane, et al. report, “the effort required to establish and nurture these international teams meant that there was less time for creative effort to be put into the mobile film production itself” (Cochrane, Antonczak, & Wagner, 2012, p. 6). See the ELVSS 12 blog for examples: <https://elvss2012.wordpress.com/>

In 2013, the international ELVSS cohort took on the task of providing the video backdrop for an eight-act opera that was to be premiered at the Tête à Tête Opera Festival in London. The acts had one-word titles (Love, Dance, Science, Jazz, Sex, Drugs, Death, Truth) which the students – divided into eight international teams of twelve – used as provocations for their videos. Due to a very short timeframe and a multitude of issues – some of which included steep learning curves, international communication between students hampered by vast time-zone differences, and the somewhat unwieldy nature of a twelve-member team spread over five countries – the resultant videos were very inconsistent and tended to take the provocations literally, rather than using them as metaphorical jumping-off points as was encouraged by the lecturers. (The video behind the act “Death” included shots of cemeteries, for example.) Suffice to say that it got done, and broke some ground for doing so, but the content was not particularly engaging. See the blog for this project, which contains links to the final product: <https://elvss2013.wordpress.com>

ELVSS 14 was a step away from collaboration, moving instead in the direction of co-creation. Bogota, Colombia was added as the South American chapter of the international group, and all students were directed to pitch their own ideas, which other students could then join and add to. The uptake was minimal, and there were no conversations across oceans as there had been previously. The output was of inconsistent quality, as most students remained content to do their own thing.



But ELVSS 15 was different. Whilst there was still an international component in 2015, focusing this time more on co-creation than on collaboration, the interesting activity occurred within the New Zealand cohort – at Unitec Institute of Technology in Auckland – on mobile projects that were engaged in during class sessions.

Previously, the ELVSS at Unitec had been comprised solely of film students. As stated above, the interdisciplinary component was negotiated amongst student cohorts from different parts of the globe. In 2015, however, ELVSS at Unitec was opened up to include students of contemporary dance in addition to the film students. Rather than de-emphasising the disciplinary differences, the lecturer chose to highlight and explore them. The students in turn focused on work which employed and celebrated these differences rather than sweeping them under the rug.

Interdisciplinary creative collaborations often challenge participants to embrace a central project from radically different viewpoints. Over years of development, each discipline evolves its own methods for solving its own particular set of creative problems. Each discipline takes its own approach to practice, and operates on its own set of assumptions around the process of creative making. This gives rise to a certain shorthand language unique to each discipline. The first challenge in an interdisciplinary project, then, might be to establish a sort of meta-collaboration wherein the different creative ‘languages’ and processes of the various disciplines are compared and contrasted, and where a common bridging language can be established (Candy & Edmonds, 2012). With a shared ‘lingua coloborare’, the group can get on with combining the creative efforts from their various disciplines.

What follows is a discussion of the processes and outcomes of a three-hour collaborative class project within this course.

ELVSS 15 – COLLABORATIVE CLASS PROJECT

SELF-INVENTORY

Prior to engaging in this interdisciplinary mobile movie project, the class was prompted to explore and enumerate the similarities and differences between the methods and processes of filmmaking and of contemporary dance. They identified such divergences as: Initial Ideation; Creative



Hierarchy (including varying levels of task-interpretation afforded the dancers or film crew); Creative Tools (complex hardware vs. the body); and Delivery (the ephemerality of live performance vs. the still temporal, yet repeatable, screening). This is discussed further in the “Freedoms/Constraints in ELVSS 15” section below.

Convergences were also discussed, such as the fact that both involve time, movement, emotion and the expression of different sets of ideas within one creative piece. With dance, this could be a change in the soundscape and/or dance-phrase groupings; with film, it takes the shape of inner- and inter-scene editing. It was pointed out that a choreographer has a similar role as a film editor, shaping the piece to convey meaning.

The class then set out to create mobile movies which incorporated the differences and similarities between the two disciplines. I will discuss one of the projects, which was based on the student-generated provocation of Construction/Deconstruction.¹

IDEATION

For thirty minutes, the whole class searched for ideas for a video which would embody the similarities and differences they defined through their discussion. They resolved to use the camera as a movement tool and the body as an editing tool, a reference to the discussion mentioned above.

They would accomplish Construction/Deconstruction as one long take, with both camera and bodies moving through space. In this single-take exercise, the students sought to achieve a distinction between visual phrases by using body movements instead of actual edits.

CREATION

Once the entire cohort established their provocation and their parameters, the students divided themselves into two teams with an even mix of students from each discipline. They would each go to different areas of the campus and plan the specifics of each mobile movie, then shoot it. The intention of the split was both to have smaller working groups and to see how the different groups would each interpret the parameters they had established in the full group.

¹ Construction/Deconstruction was created 29 May 2015 by the 18 students in ELVSS 15. See the end result at: <http://bit.ly/ELVSS-Con-Decon>



The self-inventory and ideation was a forty-five-minute process. The group-split took fifteen minutes. They then had one hour to formulate and shoot their pieces. This left an hour to come back together, view and reflect. When the allocated time was up, they came together again and viewed each others' pieces. Ultimately, the two pieces were assembled and posted online.

REACTIONS

After the reflections on the movies, the lecturer convened an overall debrief of the session. The students shared that going into the screening, they had imagined that since each discipline was treading into unknown territory – film into dance; dance into film; and both into mobile – the results would be more piecemeal and disjointed. But upon viewing each others' pieces, each team was surprised at how cohesive both ideas were.

They also observed that having had the discussion beforehand in which they voiced the similarities and differences of their practice methods, the collaboration flowed much easier than in previous attempts they had made earlier in the course. They attributed this to having more insight into the body of knowledge from which students from the other disciplines were basing their creative suggestions and decisions. This insight was directly attributable to their self-inventory discussion.

FREEDOMS/CONSTRAINTS IN ELVSS 15

Students from both disciplines felt both creatively energised and somewhat daunted by the ELVSS 15 course, but for different reasons. These reasons reflect the differences in their disciplinary cultures.

The entire milieu of filmmaking was largely foreign to the contemporary dance students, as was mobile moviemaking. Because they hadn't spent two years learning the conventions of narrative visual storytelling, as had the Film students, the contemporary dance students had no precedent for adopting the 'proper' methods of filmmaking. In the contemporary dance world, the choreographer engages in 'tasking', whereby they'll require the dancers to accomplish certain phrases, but it's up to the dancer to interpret the task based on their own creative approach.



Further, being themselves the vehicles for expression, rather than relying on mediating tools as in film, the dancers were able to transfer the ethos of tasking and physicality to the new frontier (for them) of mobile moviemaking. Their individual mobile movies tended to be more raw and textural than those of the film students. Yet, in reflection, the dancers said that they found working with the filmmakers refreshing, finding the filmmakers more disciplined and focused on the ‘science’ of visual storytelling. The dancers appreciated the creative constraints offered by the filmmakers.

The film students, on the other hand, were quite familiar with visual storytelling, but from a much larger, more top-heavy, specialisation-centric model than that which mobile moviemaking affords. In the film world, the director is the sole keeper of the vision, which s/he entrusts to be manifested by the cinematographer and the production designer, who then instruct their crew on specific tasks to accomplish this vision. There is very little room for interpretation or creative ownership, except on the highest levels. The Unitec film students are predominantly taught this conventional, cinema/TV-bound form of filmmaking. The portability, app-centricity and openness to spontaneity of mobile moviemaking were the elements the film students found themselves most challenged by. For them, it was a matter of deprogramming themselves from their ingrained methods. Due to its focus on career skills, their film education is less built around artistic exploration and aesthetic subtleties than it is around technical execution and professional practices. So the film students found working with the contemporary dance students refreshing, due to the dancers’ relative lack of creative constraints and their overlay of emotional and kinetic spontaneity onto the mobile moviemaking process. The dancers injected an infectious sense of freedom to their collaborations, said the filmmakers.

OVERLAPS AND SYNERGIES

As both films were executed in one take, there was quite a bit of handing the camera off from one person to another. This enabled members from both disciplines to dip a toe into the pools of each others’ craft. Some of the film students became performers, even adding hints of physicality into their on-camera work; and some of the contemporary dance students operated the camera for sections of their pieces, bringing their discipline’s interrogation of spatiality into their use of framing and camera movement. Roles and boundaries thus became much more fluid while making Construction/Deconstruction than they had been in collaborative mini-projects prior to the self-



inventory. Students also reported experiencing a greater sense of synergy and of focused play than before.

Their freedom to experiment was bolstered by the ability to alternate at will between the safety of their familiar domain and the adventure of the new territory they were allowed to explore. Some students described a sense of hyper-awareness of their surroundings and of their actions, when creating inside the new domain. According to the students, the balance of familiarity and newness allowed them to dwell on a creative edge that brought a fresh energy to each film.

MOVING FORWARD

The inventory and analysis of contrasting creative methods added the element of meta-cognition to the participants' combined effort, enabling students from different disciplines to collaborate with deeper, more informed engagement than they might have without the knowledge that came from the inventory exercise. How might other collaborations across disciplinary boundaries benefit from an initial stock-take of the similarities and differences between different creative methods prior to collaborating on a creative project? Further research might interrogate specific methods for bridging creative languages between particular discipline areas, with the ultimate goal of establishing a universal methodology for enhancing interdisciplinary creative collaborations, utilising disciplinary divergences as a foundational creative provocation.

What follows is a first attempt at such a system. This is intended as a placeholder, to be developed and honed as interdisciplinary collaborative projects from a variety of creative arenas contribute to this process.

1. Discipline-specific creation process
 - a. Members of each discipline take inventory of discipline-specific creation processes
 - i. Each discipline spells out their ideation process
 - ii. Define balance between individual and hierarchical decision-making structures in creative execution
 - iii. Define balance between linear (e.g. film) and iterative (e.g. design) creation processes

- iv. Identify execution-specific particulars (how does each discipline ‘do what they do’ similarly to/differently than the other)
 - b. The whole group compares and contrasts, then generates a list
2. Cultural background
 - a. Each member discusses their cultural background and any relationship it has with their creative practice
 - b. Distill these and add to each discipline-specific creation process list.
3. Differences/commonalities
 - a. Make a mind map or other graphic chart which visualises shared and disparate influences
4. Create task/provocations which endeavour to:
 - a. Utilise commonalities as the foundation for the work
 - i. E.g. – film + dance = a video piece involving movement at its core
 - b. Utilise disparities as creative strengths to energise the work
 - i. E.g. – film director engages in tasking (suggesting movement ideas, rather than solely holding the vision); on-camera talent interprets based on their own creative understanding of the task
 - c. Address cultural influences by either:
 - i. Combining all or most influences into whole piece
 - ii. Alluding to one at a time within the piece
 - iii. Choosing just one or two as themes for the entire piece
5. Engage in project creation
6. Debrief
 - a. Once completed and reviewed, participants share any insights they might have gained about their own creative practice
 - i. Participants describe how the process was different to just working in their own discipline
 - ii. Participants address any new understandings they have about collaboration, based on this experience
 - b. Viewing of the collaborative work
 - c. External supporter (e.g. unrelated but interested academic staff) gives feedback on their takeaway from the viewing. Not a quality-focused review, but rather their reading of the works



- d. Participants' responses
 - i. To the external reading
 - ii. To the work itself
 - iii. Projection into future collaborations
 - 1. How has this experience shaped their understandings of creative collaboration?

The methods employed by ELVSS 15 for establishing a common creative language represent one step towards a model for teaching and facilitating interdisciplinary creative collaboration, both on a local and on an international level. The differences between people – in creative approach, in methods of practice, in cultural assumptions – need to be highlighted, celebrated and incorporated into interdisciplinary collaboration in order for significant creative synergy to occur. Students thrive in collaborative projects in which the contributions reflect a healthy variety of influences and methodological approaches (Pun, 2014). It is hoped that students who engage in interdisciplinary creative projects in which diversity itself is baked into the collaborative model will emerge with an associative connection between collaboration and the conviction to embrace difference.

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