



Mixing it up

The place of the arts in multidisciplinary contexts

In this era of change, when the placement of the arts is coming under scrutiny at local, national, and international levels, the time seems right to explore the role of the artist (broadly understood) in multidisciplinary contexts. What can we offer, what can others offer us, and how can such partnerships succeed?

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As the discussions around the reorganisation of UiT have rumbled on this year, my project on multidisciplinary collaboration has been drawing to a close. In this article I will put forward the conclusions that came out of that project, and what they can teach us in the fine arts as we take stock of our future.

Multidisciplinary projects: Multidisciplinary work is currently enjoying the favour of national and international funding bodies (e.g. Horizon 2020, Norges forskningsråd) because it is widely recognised and accepted that no single discipline can fully confront what are known as the ‘Grand Challenges’ – the fundamental problems facing humanity in the 21st century.

As part of its role as an agent of change in research, Norges forskningsråd launched in 2013 a call for an ‘idélab’. This approach – known as a ‘sandpit’ in English – puts together professionals from across disciplines and sectors to work together to generate research and/or industrial and/or commercial projects that can work towards solving the ‘Grand Challenges’.

I attended the first of these in January 2014. I was the only person there who was from the arts and humanities, to the extent that some of the publications about the event would state 'også en middelalderforsker' (yup, its me). It was a fascinating week, and at the end of it I had a small research project. Its remit was to follow the other funded projects as they set about their three years of work. Now, in 2017, the first idélab projects have just ended, including mine, and the results are out.

We found that while it is easy enough to talk about 'multidisciplinarity', it is much harder to put it into meaningful practice.

Meaningful. Practice. Those are two important words.

Practice makes perfect: I will start with 'practice'. Practice is something we in the arts know a lot about. We know how long it takes to get something 'right'. We also know how hard it is to change practices – how the old habits are so ingrained that it takes hard work and significant mental adjustment to overcome them. We know that there are always factors outwith our control, that however much we practice there is always an element of luck or adrenaline involved in creating or performing, and that, together with practice, the best protection is experience.

It was no surprise to me, then, to find in my project research that multidisciplinary research teams didn't necessarily get everything right first time. The teams who worked best were those who progressed gradually but together, finding common ground and establishing communication strategies, accepting that some things would take longer because of the multidisciplinary nature of the work. When you have team consisting of chemists, biologists, physicists, ICT specialists, and social scientists, there is a whole swathe of background knowledge that is fundamental to the project but is simply not shared by all the participants. No-one can really understand everything. As one person put it in an interview: to talk at length about the details of their work would simply put the others to sleep.

You need trust, you need communication, you need learning and a willingness to change, you need practice.

Meaningful collaboration: 'Meaningful' is a slippery word. What we found through our project was that for new, multidisciplinary 'knowledge' to be created, there had to be a mutual reliance on others' expertise. This required – here it is – meaningful collaboration between disciplines. If the ICT developer had merely created software to make fancy diagrams of the chemistry results, it would not have been meaningful knowledge creation. If the software could both contribute to the results that were being shown through the diagrams and be a new software advance in its own right, then the collaboration was meaningful for both sides. Likewise, research into the potential social outcomes of technological advances encourages scientists to constantly reflect and evaluate their practice in the light of its impact on society. Without this reflection and social stance, the 'Grand Challenges' will remain unsolved.

Absence of soft disciplines: Nevertheless, multidisciplinary collaboration that includes the so-called 'soft' disciplines (the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts) working with the 'hard' disciplines is relatively rare. We discovered that the principle reasons for this are that the soft disciplines are caught up in a vicious circle of self-doubt. And – sound the *no shit Sherlock* klaxon – part of the reason for this is to do with money.

We found that many individuals in these disciplines did not believe that collaboration was of benefit to them and the discipline they represent – in other words, that collaboration could not be meaningful. This attitude is quite common, and is often due to

unfulfilling experiences (either one's own, someone else's, or imagined). If we put this together with the fact that these disciplines are poorly funded (and employment generally more precarious) in comparison to the more technological disciplines, we find that resources for multidisciplinary col-

laboration come mainly from those disciplines that can afford it. Therefore, the multidisciplinary collaborations will be weighted towards those who are putting in the money, and so the role of the soft disciplines remains on the margins, and the cycle continues.

This is not to say that multidisciplinary is impossible for the soft disciplines under the current climate. Our work followed projects where meaningful practice took place and was

successful for all involved, despite the disparity in funding and time. It did, however, in some cases rely on the unwavering energy of relatively few individuals – and a desire to change practices.

A more proactive art industry: Where do the arts fit in here? Well, here I am going to move into the realm of opinion and say that we need to get out more. We need to be proactive, to look for opportunities. Norges forskningsråd has more idélabs planned – why not apply to one? If nothing else, you will have a few days of stimulating discussion with people you probably wouldn't otherwise get to meet. If we lock ourselves away and think we are precious we will only perpetuate the vicious circle. We must take a look at ourselves: we have so much to offer! We can move hearts and minds. We have impact. We are important. We can speak to people in ways other disciplines can't even imagine.

We can also speak to ourselves. The practice of reflection that is lacking in

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the hard scientists we have in abundance. We push boundaries all the time and are not afraid of experimentation. We know that failure is an inevitable step on the road to success. We know and have faith in the strength of our individual voices, and we know all about meaningful practice.

What will we get in return for this proactivity? We will be more able to proactively shape our place in a changing world. We will have more agency. We will learn from others and become even more creative. There is always room for improvement, and times of change can engender vulnerability or strength. Let's take ourselves out into the world and show it that we matter. ■

Kate Maxwell er førsteamanuensis i musikkhistorie, teori og analyse ved Musikkonservatoriet.

Selected further reading:

- Kate Maxwell and Paul Benneworth (2017). The Construction of New Scientific Norms for Solving Grand Challenges: Reflections from the Norwegian Idélab Research Programme. CHEPS working papers (forthcoming at <https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/cheps/research/CHEPSWorkingPaperSeries>).
- Norges Forskningsråd (2017). Forskningsrådets idélab (IDELAB). <https://www.forskningsradet.no/prognett-lab/Forside/1253988607568>. Accessed 9th August 2017.

- Anja Røyne et al (2017). Kunsten å arbeide tverrfaglig. Forkerforum, 12th May. <http://www.forskerforum.no/kunsten-a-arbeide-tverrfaglig/>. Accessed 9th August 2017.
- University of the Arts Helsinki (n.d.). The Utopia of Artistic Research. Issue X Taideyliopiston Lehti <https://www.issuex.fi/en/the-utopia-of-artistic-research/>. Accessed 9th August 2017.



De ansatte på Det kunstfaglige fakultet er stadig på jakt etter nye muligheter for tverrfaglighet. Fra venstre: Tore Morten Andreassen Figenschow, Geir Davidsen, Eero Voigt, Andreas Fliflet, Karen Aukner, Ingrid Eliassen, Lars Lien, Friederike Bischoff og Anne Lise Sollied. Foto: Lars Ake Andersen