

Expression of Interest
Collaborate Round 2

November 2022

Applicant Group

Museum professional/educator
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What is the topic, issue or question you want to explore?

Can the particular process of collage making be beneficial in enabling under represented community voices to be heard?

We want to find out whether the process of making collage could give local communities the opportunity to articulate better what they have experienced, and what they might need or want. Can this simple but creative process support better outcomes in mental health and wellbeing as a research tool for communities themselves to use? Our project would be place-based.

We have given our project the working title 'Tree'. Starting with the idea of growth, and building on collective documentation, we have taken the image of the tree as a starting point to explore family trees, broken trees (exile), trees as symbols of future, past and present (roots, branches, buds).

As a small group made up of two artists and one museum professional/educator we want to explore 'Tree' working alongside communities ensuring co-design, and collaboration where individual and group voices are made visible. 'Tree' would also aim to find models that would work at a local level using Froebel's theory of 'connectedness'. Context is everything. It is important to get a sense of how people are feeling and what their needs are before developing solutions for living better. It can be difficult to articulate things about your life for all kinds of reasons especially if they are negative or perceived as deficit.

We have asked ourselves 'why collage', and would like to find out whether it enables people to clarify what is most meaningful in their lives. Collage is accessible to all ages and can be undertaken in a community setting at little cost in terms of materials. We want to find out whether it could be considered as a 'universal' language; one that is a powerful form of visual narrative.

Why do you want to explore this topic, issue or question?

Understanding whether and how the use of collage might be seen as a universal language to enable local communities to better articulate their histories, desires and hopes is an under researched area. There is some material looking at the use of collage as a therapeutic tool for individuals within art therapy (medical model) and as a research tool for academics.

Even though there is evidence of the contribution that the arts in general can make to improving wellbeing outcomes for communities (launch of Greater Manchester's Creative Health Strategy, November 2022), it can still be hard to work effectively with local stakeholders as individual artists. As artists we have developed work in collage over many years to better articulate our own feelings about complex and hidden narratives about displacement and exile within our own families. Our art practice has led us to question whether the experiences within collage making can be developed as a tool to share with other communities. Collage is a way of 'articulating in a familiar language' (Ian Wright). In the current national context there is a mental health crisis that needs urgent attention and a lack of funding for health and local services. Creative solutions need to be found in the short and long term, and as the GM Creative Health Strategy concludes, artists will need to be made central to the development of work that engages those in the most need. However, understanding the best art methods and practices to employ within this strategy is not well understood.

Another reason for exploring this issue concerns the development of our own art practice. By working in collaboration with communities we may find that different techniques and concepts emerge. This possibility for change through collaboration provides an opportunity to review the core of our working processes in the studio.

What are you looking for in an academic research partner?

We are looking for support and expertise in developing and evaluating the use of collage as a research method that local communities can use themselves.

Our research partner would ideally have an understanding of the way that artists work within local communities and of the complexities inherent in the development of Arts and Wellbeing research.

As we are a small group with different professional backgrounds that includes Community Education, Counselling and Fine Art we would need our research partner to be open minded about the structure and methodology used in this research and be able to work collaboratively with us to find the best possible research strategy.

A rigorous Ethics process is essential for this type of research, and we are looking for guidance from our research partner in this area.

The academic evidence our research partner provides would add credibility and profile to raise the profile of this research. We would hope to share with them opportunities to communicate with and engage with health and local government service providers. Our reflections have provoked us to ask the following questions before 'Tree' can be developed as a model for further programmes:

How does collage help me to explore my feelings and let people know how I feel about the world?

Can collage help me to feel free to explore complex issues in my life (less inhibition)?

These questions lead us to suggest that we would probably need a research group made up of individuals with different specialisms. Although our interdisciplinary project is rooted in a feminist Fine Art practice it includes core research themes from psychology, economic and political geography and community education.

Please provide details of previous experience of working with academic researchers and/or using research to inform your practice.

In the post of early years coordinator at Manchester Museum, Elaine undertook practitioner research in order to develop and evaluate a natural history gallery for children under 5 alongside families and early years staff. This included visits from families who had not previously visited a museum.

The research is documented in a Masters study (2013 – 2016) and through publications:

Bates,E. (2018)' Can natural history collections support a connection to nature for young children and families?' *Museum & Society*, 16(3) 369
Ed.Hackett,A; Holmes,R.: *MaCRae.*(Ed's) (2020) *Working with Young Children in Museums*
(Case study) 93

Helena has worked with two departments within the University of Manchester as a commissioned artist. With The Centre for Jewish Studies she worked in collaboration with the '50 Objects' Projects team within the Centre and also with the John Rylands Library. 'Lodz Banquet' was the result of this project which involved selecting a small number of objects from the library and making an artwork in response. Helena has written a chapter for a proposed book by Silvana Silvestri (publication date tbc).

<http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/50-jewish-objects-blog/2020/4/2/artists-corner-lodz-banquet-by-helena-tomlin.html>

She also developed visual literacy training modules for dermatologists at the medical research team, Manchester Centre for Dermatology Research and Salford Art Gallery:

[https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/a-visual-literacy-course-for-dermatology-trainees\(c465af6a-9508-4b77-ba32-8dab8387c4e6\).html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/a-visual-literacy-course-for-dermatology-trainees(c465af6a-9508-4b77-ba32-8dab8387c4e6).html)

How might this project contribute to a longer-term research partnership or programme of activity?

In terms of a longer term research the project might contribute to a larger pilot research scheme in other geographical areas in the UK to understand whether different communities in contrasting areas of the

country might make use of the collage process in a different way. Equally important would be a research strand to focus on follow up with original participants to assess outcomes in the longer term.

The research would contribute to the understanding of how local solutions are found to complex community issues, shining a light on the spaces, charities, and local government organisations that are enabling creative wellbeing projects such as our 'Tree' initiative to flourish – for example the use of public spaces as 'warm hubs' where creative activity takes place over the winter. The research also has powerful possibilities for workforce development within these different organisations.

Our project findings also have the potential to be used to research the use of collage within the established programme of 'Arts on Prescription'. This might be formed from a longer term partnership between HEIs, local government service providers, artist collectives and contribute dynamically to the GM Creative Health Strategy, which has links to 'Arts on Prescription' programmes.