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# Strategies to strengthen European linguistic capital in a globalised world

Creative Encounters: Training Report Four

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## **Creative Encounters: Training Report Four**

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*I come to the present, to who I am, by a different route from yours; and therefore our conversation has to recognise that different histories have produced us, different histories have made this conversation possible. I can't pretend to be you. I don't know your experience. I can't live life from inside your head. So our living together must depend on a trade-off, a conversation, a process of translation (Hall, 2007)*

### ***Introduction***

A large, 3-year research project, MultiLX, set out to provide policy makers with comprehensive evidence of the communicative practices and language ideologies of young people, in order to inform inclusive language policy in digital, multilingual Europe. Multi-site, team ethnographic research was conducted with young people in contexts where speakers were concerned with language endangerment (Norway, Switzerland), where people were investing in revitalisation of languages (Spain: Galicia, Catalunya), and where the prevalence of migrant languages rendered multilingualism the norm (Germany, Italy). A particular feature of the research was an approach to data collection, analysis and dissemination which included collaboration with creative practitioners. The purpose of this approach was two-fold: first, communicative practice of young people was likely to be less constrained in informal contexts where they are engaged in creative endeavour; second, interpretation of semiotic and ideological material was likely to be more expansive and elaborated when viewed through an artistic lens.

In order to progress this approach to research we developed partnerships with artists who worked with young people in each of six research sites in Europe. Secondly, we created opportunities for sociolinguistic researchers to collaborate with artists. One of the ways we did the latter was to invite five international artists to a 'Creative Arts Lab' at Warwick Arts Centre in the U.K, where they spent three days with members of the research team in an exchange of practice and thinking. Eleven MultiLX project researchers from eight European universities took part. The programme for the three days, facilitated by an Artistic Director, included presentation of linguistic ethnographic data from ongoing research with young people in Barcelona, Berlin, Lucerne, Børselv in Northern Norway, Santiago de Compostela, and Turin. Concomitantly, five artists – a composer of opera, a puppeteer,

an immersive film-maker, a writer/producer and two dancer/choreographers – presented their artistic practice. Over three days the researchers and artists engaged in practical workshops and exchanged ideas about how collaboration would be mutually beneficial to their practice. The event was filmed by a professional film-maker. Four members of the research team wrote field notes of observations of some of the scheduled activity. In addition to the regular programme, the participants of the Creative Arts Lab met a group of apprentice playwrights who were graduating from a year-long programme of writing development. The researchers were tasked with communicating the essence of their research in three minutes, prompting creative response from the playwrights.

This paper presents a polyphonic account of the three-day Creative Arts Lab. What follows is extracted from observational field notes, participants' written reflections, and interviews with researchers and artists. No distinction is made between artists and researchers in this account. Text in italics refers to published research which continues to shape our thinking.

### ***Before***

I came into the space on the first day feeling quite hassled. I had dropped off my boys, and it had been quite a frantic morning because it was World Book Day, so we were getting costumes ready and so on.

Arriving to Coventry and Warwick for the Creative Arts Lab was a new and exciting experience. I had enjoyed our previous workshop in Turin and was looking forward to collaborating with artists working with different forms of art.

I felt a bit frantic entering the space, but I was greeted instantly by a member of the research team. We had a lovely hug and laughed about knowing how many kisses to do. I said, "Oh yes, I always forget this when greeting Europeans." I mentioned that my best friend is Greek and they tend to do three kisses when they meet, and she said, "Oh, it's the same in Breton - it's three kisses." So, this was a nice little moment. I started to relax.

*When we interact with strangers, we might not share the same beliefs, but we can find points of entry to explore beliefs and values further. When a stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, ways of communicating open up. (Appiah, 2007)*

I came to the Creative Arts Lab with a mix of excitement and wariness. My wariness dissipated quickly from the first sentences shared with us in the introduction to the three days ahead: “what happens when you listen to someone tell a story? We don’t need to be experts, we don’t need to control everything”.

### *Proximity*

It was so good to see all the familiar faces of the researchers as they arrived. I hugged everyone. I also greeted each of the artists, finding some really easy to talk to, and others, initially, overwhelming.

*We can make a difference to the way we encounter one another as individuals beyond the social and linguistic categories which name us. (Levinas, 1985)*

I overheard bits of conversation about how it was nice to meet people in the space and that meeting online is not the same. I also overheard someone say something about it being good to be “bodies in the space.”

*The beginning of language is in the face. In a certain way, in its silence, it calls you. Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but a responsibility. Language is above all the fact of being addressed, which means the saying much more than the said. (Levinas et al., 1988)*

People were milling about and getting coffee. I could see the dancer/choreographers, and we ended up having a nice chat. I had met one of them before and we had worked together on a previous project, so it was nice to connect. We got quite deeply ensconced in conversation.

*The Other can be grasped primarily through the proximity of the human face and through the possibilities of human relations. (Levinas, 1998a)*

The first day. People are arriving. I cross the studio floor to greet one of the artists. I offer a handshake. The artist presents as if to hug. I open my arms to hug, at the same moment as the artist

reverts to a handshake gesture. We both laugh and embrace. The artist says, “I’m a hugger”. I say, “Yes, let’s start as we mean to go on”.

It’s 9.45 a.m. and we will start soon. I’ve hugged several of the researchers. A couple of them are looking at their computers. They are presenting today. There is a sense that we are in a room with people who have never met each other before, people who are strangers. This is obviously part of the premise of the whole three days: to feel out those kinds of connections, disconnections, and not-yet-connections.

I found the interactive dance very moving. It was impressive to see how a collective choreography came together and how much fun we had moving in unison.

*Humans have the capacity to forge connections relationally, in ways which transcend signification through language (Critchley, 2013)*

Through collaborative thinking we managed to translate research concepts and data into harmony and time. I found this metaphorical work very inspiring.

*The resonant subject is attentive to the sonorous present in which the voice echoes, reverberates and rebounds. It is a subjectivity in which the body senses what is outside and inside the self, in which listening is to be open from without and from within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other (Nancy, 2007).*

All the researchers are language activists and it was good for me to find a way into that story and ask why does this matter, what does language have to do with things.

*The ethical demand emerges not through language but through the proximity of the human face, which is the ultimate signification process, more central than language. Signification happens primarily through the potential of the human face to remain open to others. (Levinas, 1998b)*

Whenever we were workshopping an idea, I felt emotionally close to the other participants and was immensely proud of the short performances we collegially produced in dance, puppetry and storytelling. Proximity was central to what we achieved.

*We trust, and we do not; we are equally afraid of trusting (that will render us easy prey to any confidence man) and mistrusting (regular mistrust would render our life unbearable). Left to our own devices (what would they be?) we are incapable of choosing between trust and mistrust. (Bauman, 1993)*

We needed to be in the same room and build trust. I found that this took longer with some people than others. I also found my relationship with the researchers changed as the time went on and we found ourselves living our selves differently with one another.

*It is a characteristic of human life that we normally encounter one another with natural trust. This is true not only in the case of persons who are well acquainted with one another, but also in the case of complete strangers. This may indeed seem strange, but it is part of what it means to be human. Human life could hardly exist if it were otherwise. (Løgstrup, 1956/1997)*

We were here to share practices, share research, and inspire each other. All of this sat within an emphasis on public engagement. The facilitator invited us to notice what happens when we are listening to someone else's story. I really loved that phrasing: not just listen to someone else's story, but notice what happens when you listen to it. That feels like a different emphasis. It is about how the story affects you and the impact of a story on the listener - a reciprocal, relational dynamic that I think she was intentionally trying to set up.

With the Kven story I was thinking about the strength of that kind of activist vision and I guess I got quite influenced and moved by the sadness of lost languages and maybe the bitterness of the impossible task.

*Ethical space is where we recognise that our deeply held beliefs are contestable, where a stance of generosity and trust means living with ambiguity, and where we accept that not everything is fully comprehensible (Kelz, 2016)*

We were invited to catch these moments: capture them, write them down. We would not always be able to talk about them, so we should find a way of catching those stories. Impulses and sparks would form part of our reflection. We talked about visiting each other's worlds - worlds that other people have inhabited.

There was beautiful telling of the Kurdish relocation of space, which was framed as a happy story, although it starts with this real terror that the Kurdish people experience.

From a hospitality perspective, I found it interesting that we were told we were going to visit each other's worlds. We were going to be talking, playing, and doing, and we did not know what the outcome would be - and that that was okay.

*Ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. (Butler, 2005)*

The Artistic Director emphasised how rare this moment was: a moment where we had time to dwell and share together, and how important it was to make the most of that offering. Particularly on the first day, but also throughout the lab, she kept talking about being open and being empty: stay open, observe the process. I think this was an important framing - not arriving with an agenda but trying to listen deeply and engage in the work.

*Listening is an intensification and a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety, in which the self enters an attentive state. (Nancy, 2007)*

Altogether, I thought this framing set up expectations well, without becoming overly laboured. It struck a good balance.

*The desire to be free, at least in one's imagination, from the tyranny of one's own deepest convictions, and the moral obligations they impose, is part of the pleasure of pluralising the confines of a strictly linear biographical narrative. (Bernstein, 1994)*

People seem at ease as they enter the room. I compliment one of the artists on his hair, which on reflection is totally inappropriate, but ever since I did a study on compliment giving in my 30's I am aware of their power, and also their threat. Always risky giving men appearance compliments though. He seemed happy enough, commenting that he'd had it cut recently. In a later break I have a conversation with one of the researchers about her hair, which I compliment her on. She makes me

laugh as she tells a small story about asking the hairdresser for something contemporary, only to end up with a 1980s hair style.

*Plurality is not made possible through fraternity – a common identity or a cosmopolitan sense of sameness – but relies on the preservation of distance and strangeness. (Biesta, 2014)*

While I certainly see how strong emotions and abstract concepts can be distilled and represented through movement, I am not yet fully convinced that the complexity and plurality of our research can be captured.

I'm having another moment of feeling very positive about the way we are all working together, supporting one another, protecting one another. It feels that the artists are supporting the research team, helping us in moments that feel a little scary. More and more it feels there is no division between us.

### ***Encounters***

*Levinas' utopia, for that is what it is, is grounded in human encounters. It describes the disposition to be open to difference. (Bauman, 1993).*

The first day of the workshop began with a cozy coffee and chat as I got to know one of the artists. I asked him if he would support me with singing a song during my presentation, and he agreed with great enthusiasm. We sang the song together two or three times and then finally sang it with the audience.

*In the contact zone a human being is an 'Anyone' – an individual who moves between what is and what might be. Relations in the contact zone evolve through an openness to another's being. (Rapport, 2010)*

Through collectiveness, which is predominantly how we work in dance, we can find a collective power and help make the invisible visible.

A collaboration had already formed backstage, and I felt very supported; I found our spontaneous collaboration very enriching. The composer's expertise and enthusiasm for singing the song with the audience took me to another level. I felt confident on stage and enjoyed being able to perform this sequence in collaboration with him.

*Sonorous time takes place in waves on a swell, not in a point on a line; it is a time that opens up, that is hollowed out, that is enlarged or ramified, that envelops or separates, that becomes or is turned into a loop, that stretches out or contracts. (Nancy, 2007)*

Opera is more than what people think it is. It doesn't have to be serious, it doesn't have to be grand, it doesn't have to be tragic - it can be fun, it can be inclusive, it can be political, it can be radical. It's all about how the process of making opera is carried out. Opera can be repackaged or reprocessed to be far more inclusive and participatory.

*Listening is both a process of self-discovery and a willingness to be open to another's story. It is an opportunity to connect with and share the moment. (Nancy, 2007)*

I hear someone speaking Spanish and my ears prick up. People are speaking animatedly. I hear one of the artists say she speaks some Spanish and understands it. I am drawn to their conversation, perhaps because it seems to be a spontaneous interaction between artists and a researcher. They are smiling and I can see they are genuinely interested in what one another has to say.

*The individual is interconnected through relations with others, rather than isolated in their own consciousness or being. (Kelz, 2016)*

I particularly liked the session in which we tried to create an opera based on the concept of translanguaging and, the following day, on the Barcelona data. I would never have thought this was possible.

*Imaginative thinking is communal, dialogical and relational. Ideas develop in social and moral space, not in individual minds. (Peirce, 1905)*

It is through collaboration, leaving behind individualism and forming part of a collective work, that we enable other ways to think and evaluate, give visibility to less seen and heard people and their voices, and provide more opportunities to be able to connect with others.

When we enter the workspace at the theatre to meet the emergent playwrights, I am shocked by the size of the room and the number present. I count 34 people – 14 playwrights and 20 Creative Arts Lab participants. I suddenly find it daunting to speak to them all, but I manage to do it. The facilitator prompts me to say a bit more. I know I will always say less rather than more if I can get away with it.

*Where interaction is difficult, where no common ground can be assumed, we ask, might there be something beyond the social which can explain the moral desire to continue the dialogue, despite the vulnerability it exposes. (Butler, 2005)*

There are seven groups working together. They each consist of one researcher, one artist and one or two playwrights. The researchers speak for three minutes, with everyone hanging on every word spoken by the researchers. Then there are questions, before the playwrights respond with ideas of their own for a play or drama. The researchers make me very proud at this point. It's daunting, but they do brilliantly.

*Ethics is located in relations between people. The individual comes into being through a responsibility to the Other. (Kelz, 2016)*

The room is incredibly buzzy. However, the listening is intense and it is quiet when the researchers speak. The room smells of sweat and people working hard. People lean in.

*'Face' is a place for beginnings. It offers openness to difference through a summons to respond to the needs of the Other. To be open to another's face is to adopt a positive disposition towards humanity. It is a philosophical attempt to conceive of humanness as that which precedes any claim to knowledge (Levinas, 1996)*

In one of the groups the listeners move towards the speaker, one of the researchers. They appear to be writing a play. They tell her she has created a dramatic situation. They are giving her characters

to work with. They are ventriloquizing the characters' voices. Another member of the research team is using her hands as she explains the research.

*The task for us as both story-dwellers and storytellers, that is as individuals who learn to understand ourselves and our world through the stories we tell and are told, is how to construct the meanings we require in our personal and collective narrative without hypostatizing those narratives as absolute and inevitable. (Bernstein, 1994)*

One of the researchers tells the whole group they have all been locked in a room for two days, which makes people laugh. She tells everyone the playwrights have helped the researchers narrow down their stories, helping us to focus.

We use story to relate and connect to the world and each other, to change our position in relation to others, to the world, and to ideas, to handle complexity, maintain our identity, manage change, place ourselves in time, and move through it.

It was great to feel the buzz of positive energy and engagement during the workshop and to see the sense of elation and excitement among our group afterwards.

*Ethical responsibility is an element of everyday living. (Levinas, 1985)*

Yesterday was amazing, it really felt like we came together as a single group and broke down these boundaries between researchers and artists. We felt like one group.

### **Beliefs**

*Aesthetics asks scientists not only to reveal the ideals behind their beliefs but also to practise those ideals and beliefs. (Peirce, 1905)*

I believe the challenge is to get to the heart of the matter, as the session with the playwrights has shown us, by focusing on the poetic or the philosophical, so that the message resonates not only intellectually but also emotionally.

I loved the insight that I am a researcher, an artistic researcher; this is something that I will take away.

I saw the researcher from the artists' perspective, and this new perspective expanded what I thought a researcher could be and do.

Artists have tendrils, and the practice of being an artist is allowing those tendrils to get into real material and go through it and into it and with it and translate it through whatever machinery you have available.

It is through collaboration, leaving behind individualism and forming part of a collective work, that we enable other ways to think and evaluate, give visibility to less seen and heard people and their voices and provide more opportunities to be able to connect with others.

*Science is a social and communal activity based on experience with others. Science takes place through encountering others. (Peirce, 1905)*

I got out of the lab that knowledge is a process rather than a product. This is quite important for me as it relates to a lot of my subject matter. The artistic content that I make refers to knowledge, and to see knowledge as a process changes the way I see my own artistic content, it changes the kind of stories I tell, and I think it will change the way I tell those stories.

Collaboration fosters dialogue across ways of knowing. It enables coproduction of insights that are richer, more nuanced, and more impactful than either group could generate alone.

*Responsibility is an elemental quality underpinning human relations, an openness to, and willingness to engage with, the otherness of the other. (Levinas, 1989)*

A final insight I got from the workshop was that I need to engage with my own multicultural background more deeply, and especially in terms of my Bangladeshi heritage. I feel that I really need to learn that language, which is not something I felt at all before the workshop. The story of how I got here tells me about where I need to go. I have a good idea already, but this will make it more profound and concrete. That is a personal insight that will affect the work I do in the future.

## *Creativity*

When you're making puppet shows you have to make the puppets, you have to make a story, and you have to animate the puppets. Everybody was willing to work with their hands. Then we did the characters. And I said everybody do one character, because everybody wants to do one. We are not going to see what story we want to tell and then make the characters. Let's work the other way round. Each of us will make one and then we will see what happens. When the characters were done, I said, okay, what shall we do now? Because I didn't know what to do. What information do we want to tell with these puppets? And I think it was the project leader said, why don't we do reguiefa? Everybody was very happy to do it.

*Creativity, our ability to bring a sense of newness into the world, enables us to overcome not only the fatigue of language, but also its violence. (Deumert, 2018)*

When we started making the puppet, I said don't worry about the character, because the character will come to us. With puppets we do that, we make the puppet and then we look at the puppet like it was a mask. And you have to listen carefully what the puppet is telling you, instead of you telling the puppet what to do. That way we say it's like you are listening, it is not imposing, but you are talking with yourself, somehow the puppet speaks, they tell something to you.

As the project leader explained to all of us afterwards, she intuitively went through the process of bringing the puppet to life all by herself. She felt secure and appreciated not having to know what sort of character her puppet was going to be. She first made the puppet without imposing the character's personality then looked at the puppet face to face and listened to it.

To uncover the soul of a mask without forcing it you must treat it not as an object, but as a silent companion. The secret lies in active contemplation and in allowing your senses to take in the information before your brain starts to categorise it.

*What drives our ethical behaviour cannot only be explained as duty or obligation set out by societal institutions, but as a recognition that the Other must come before us if we are to retain our humanity. (Smith, 2017)*

The puppet making was wonderful. I have always been incompetent in making things. I am comfortable with dance and theatre, but can't do anything practical or craft based, so I was worried. A good deal of fun and calm time was spent making puppets, but we realised we needed to show our work at some point. So, when the time came to create a story, I was really surprised that the idea I put forward for regueifa was taken up. But it turned out to be suitable because it involved all six puppet makers working together. Three puppeteers sang anti multilingualism opinions and three voices sang pro multilingualism views. The opera composer directed us, helping us find rhymes between our individual lines, and rhythm and melody to make the piece coherent. We also made it bilingual, with the puppeteer introducing the performance in Galician. The audience clapped loudly!

*To listen to the voice of the other is to attend not only to the message but also to the tone, timbre, rhythm and vibration of how something is said. The sonorous body amplifies and brings density to the interpretation of sound beyond perceived meaning. (Nancy, 2007)*

In the puppetry workshop I felt challenged to create a hand puppet out of paper in a short amount of time. As a young teacher, I had once offered a puppet-making workshop myself, where students could design hand puppets. My hand puppet took shape as I worked on it, and I had a lot of fun modelling it in even greater detail until its character was fully formed. It had a cheeky look, perfectly suited for its role in regueifa. Now it came to life alongside its fellow performers, who presented witty, political, and humorous verses.

*'Saying' involves the multiple possibilities gained through contact and perception, rather than representation. We look for non-representational ways of knowing and communicating. (Levinas, 1989)*

Puppets gave us the freedom to express ourselves and enabled us to regain our ability to play. They were incredible people, just open and attentive and generous, just watching them transform things with their bodies and their puppets and their voices, such super smart skilled individuals. We created operas and we sang, we danced, we told three-minute stories; we were immersed in a VR story and we played puppets. And we shared our reflections and worries with each other. Can we work with art not only to create or share a story, but also to support data analysis? How important is quality in the artistic form that is produced? How important is the final product versus the progression we have experienced during the creative process? How to not lose complexity and

critical capacity when translating data into art? Can art help to transform realities, change minds, engage new audiences with our causes?

The Creative Arts Lab was the very first point in time where all of a sudden it seemed as if the impossible was possible, realistic and right.

### *Coda*

Representation of the polyphony of the communicative practices we encounter and observe in linguistic ethnographic research requires an openness to a range of artistic forms. Adopting a polyphonic approach we aim to achieve a kind of coherence in the representation of multiple voices and worldviews. Polyphony does not merely refer to the coexistence of voices. It also refers to engagement with the voice of the other and to engagement with difference. In polyphony we do not seek representation of a finalised account. The polyphonic text is not finished; it does not have a beginning, a middle and an end. The ethical imperative of polyphony insists on the engagement of self and other. It displays the human condition through representation without explanation. We make no final argument, but leave the way open for further interpretation. The polyphonic voices of the Creative Arts Lab are unfinalised. But they testify to the life and language of a particular time and space.

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