THE UNTOLD CHALLENGES OF EUROPEAN INTERACTION THROUGH COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

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Taking inspiration from *Brit(ish)*, the title of Afua Hirsch's book on race, identity and belonging (2018), we are framing our reflections on projects, such as the Erasmus+ *European Academy of Participation*, from the perspective of a UK-based partner, whose project leads, whilst working in the British higher education sector, are not natives of the UK. Considering the colonial past of Britain, its position within Europe and its reception by others, an unpicking of the complexity in relation to inter- and multi-cultural interactions through collaborative projects seemed a worthwhile undertaking.

We are writing these words only a few days away from Britain's potential withdrawal from the European Union. Whilst the result of the UK referendum[1] is disheartening and will most likely lead to change at a scale we have no comprehension of yet, it also drove the nation to turn its eyes to members of the British society that may have felt left behind by the state. This highlighted a fraction based on differences and stretching across generations, backgrounds, economics and geography. It can be argued that not everyone benefitted from the multicultural, cosmopolitan, progressive, outward-looking aspects that a city like London can provide. However, the problems highlighted will not be solved by leaving the EU; Brexit will inevitably create even more division, and so we believe the change has to come from within.

It is also important to look back on history: the European Union was established to end continuous war and ethnic nationalisation in Western Europe. Whilst the focus may have shifted onto trade alliances, it is the

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[1] The 2016 United Kingdom EU membership referendum resulted in 51.9% of the votes in favour of the UK leaving the EU.

former we should all be looking back to. After all, Brexit is not a 'British problem'; it is a reaction rooted in attitudes towards immigration across the whole of Europe, a matter that needs to be addressed by all, urgently.

In disconcerting times like these, working in isolation is not an option. In our view, culture and education play a crucial role in building collective agency and in helping to overcome barriers to thought and action. Programmes such as Erasmus+ can function as a platform to develop meaningful, sustainable collaboration and intercultural exchange in our fragile political European landscape. Cultural participation has the potential to open up discursive spaces to initiate social change.

What barriers to thought and action did we experience during the European Academy of Participation, a three-year Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project involving ten partners across Europe? An immediate response might refer to the uncertainty of our current landscape: the growing challenges, which demand citizens to consider alternative ways of identifying and developing more sustainable solutions to cope with pressing complex issues, such as planetary boundaries, immigration and inequality. On reflection, however, the challenges began *within* the partnership, especially in the ways, in which the participants were working *with one another*. In that sense, the project in itself became a mirror of the challenges Britain and Europe currently face.

At this point, it is useful to establish what type of projects are considered for this strand of EU funding. The EU Erasmus+ programme has been providing opportunities for a variety of individuals and organisations working in the field of education, training, youth and sport for the period of 2014–2020. Within the programme, Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships foster the exchange of experience or the development of innovation through, in our example, co-created formal and non-formal learning activities, and intend to 'promote common European values, foster social integration, enhance intercultural understanding and a sense of belonging to a community' (European Commission, 2018, 5).

The key challenges identified by the Erasmus+ programme are also key priorities for Britain, as highlighted by the recent referendum: fighting high levels of unemployment, particularly among young people and adults with low skills who could be socially marginalised, and empowering young

people to participate actively in society. (European Commission, 2018). There are therefore a substantial number of shared outcomes between the EU and Britain, such as the contribution to the social capital of young people and ensuring equity, prosperity and social inclusion in Europe and beyond.

European higher education institutions that share a question or an issue that is being prioritised by the EU, develop a project proposal on how this question can be addressed. Through a consortium of institutions with transdisciplinary and complementary skills and knowledge, the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships aim to find solutions that are applied within each institution and impact beyond the consortium's immediate setting. This sets the context for the European Academy of Participation project, in which we participated.

So, in theory, the idea of creating a European Academy of Participationis rather compelling: a consortium made up of universities, cultural institutions and umbrella organisations in the arts and creative industries—crossing several European borders—collectively developing an accredited award to be taught in the respective countries, aiming to enable students to experience and learn about participatory art in diverse contexts, whilst gaining credits against the award for their achievements en route. However, the reality looked different and presented challenges that had not been envisaged during the successful funding application process, nor at the outset of the actual project. The challenges that we faced related to the wider context of the project: the recognition of European similarities and differences in developing and building a meaningful, sustainable collaboration.

The concept of borders provides a useful frame, within which to explore the idea of a pan-European collaboration. Borders can function in multiple ways: as barriers, allowing access only to a selected few; as a mechanism for safeguarding, protecting the status quo of a specific territory; or as an indication of entering the unknown, challenging limitations to expand perspectives and to grow knowledge. The latter can create safe zones of enquiry that, if each partner engages responsibly with the cultural, social and political contexts in which the collaboration is taking place, have the potential to become fruitful regions within the borderland. These regions can act as a catalyst for the development of 'cultures

in between—a permanent state of transition in the positive sense of producing creativity and diversity' (Dzierson, 2012).

We would suggest that the participants of the European Academy of Participation experienced borders in various forms and from varying positions: both its context and content, addressed political and historical borders, such as the East/West divide, different histories, cultures and languages, as well as perspectives on contemporary politics. The participatory element of the project raised questions about ethical and psychological borders, including power structures, institutional differences and the nature of participation (Kester, 2011). It is within the element of power structures that we found ourselves having to deal with an ambiguous and challenging position: being non-British, representing the British partner. We will discuss this in relation to language later in the text.

Throughout the collaboration, borders became a dynamic phenomenon that emerged, disappeared and re-emerged, having a transitional character, as being internal zones of negotiation (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007). In this sense, the borders were not seen as barriers, but often thought of by the participants as points of contact. This offered opportunities to create conditions for diverse voices to emerge, which unfortunately were not always capitalised during the project.

For instance, one of the key elements of the European Academy of Participation was to test a participatory training course in London, Bucharest, Amsterdam and Marseille. Students, tutors, practitioners and creatives participated in iterations of the course, exploring its application to different contexts within the consortium. However, the high level of complexity arising from a pan-European project involving students, tutors and practitioners from ten institutions was not fully anticipated. The subtleties of the constituencies were not actively recognised: a Singaporean student based in the UK, participating in a course in Marseille; a German student from a French institution in London, a Chinese student from a German University in Bucharest, a British artist based in Bucharest; a Syrian refugee based in Germany participating in the course in Bucharest, to name but a few. The multiplicity of backgrounds and fluidity of identities challenged the interpretation of the 'European identity' and pointed to the often overlooked interrelation of cultural influence between Western and non-Western societies.

The multiplicity of backgrounds did not only raise questions of identity, but also questions of governance and modes of communication. It is undeniable that within a programme where the working language is English, the English-speaking partners, in our case British and Irish, are privileged. Within higher education and academic publishing, this dominance of the English language is not a new subject, and has been addressed as 'commonly expressed fears over an unhealthy homogeneity, or even cultural imperialism, in the sector's widespread reliance on English' (cited in Shaw, 2013). How does this apply to pan-European projects that aim to enhance intercultural exchange and understanding? There is no doubt that the non-English-speaking participants of the European Academy of Participation would have perceived the dominance of the English language as a disadvantage, that instead of asking questions to clarify, assumptions were being made, allowing misunderstandings to grow. Perhaps relying less on the spoken or written words, and employing visual methods of communication could have helped to better move between cultures, elucidate, interpret and uncover nuances of meaning and expression.

Given the intricacies of working in a contemporary European setting, the conditions for a meaningful and sustainable collaboration could have been better explored from the start: for instance, by identifying the need for, what Kaospilot[2] and Lotte Darsø describe as *preject*—the chaotic non-linear, information-seeking process, where a group of people probe a field for new possibilities before the result-driven, linear *project* starts. Setting the appropriate conditions and relational competence, where the basis of team dynamics is created, forms the foundation for building the mutual trust needed for venturing into areas of new possibilities' (Darsø, 2003, 5). However, this entails continuously asking questions and working with ignorance[3], an often uncomfortable and exposing, thus anxiety-provoking realm, which commonly leads to a preference in reverting to

[2] Kaospilot is a hybrid business and design school based in Denmark. The Kaospilot Programme is centred on teaching 'change makers' the ability to navigate their way through uncertainty and complexity. Rooted in action rather than theory, Kaospilot aims to be the best school for the world, with a focus on social change, creative entrepreneurship and personal growth (Lähdemäki 2019, p. 378).

[3] The most important of the dimensions in Darsø's 'Diamond of Innovation', together with concepts, knowledge and relations (Darsø, 2003).

working within the certainty of one's knowledge and given skills. The project requires, therefore, mutual trust to be established in order to dive into ignorance and spark innovation (Darsø, 2003). *Negative capability*, a term coined by the poet John Keats, which evolved to mean being comfortable with, and able to embrace, complexity, can consequently be seen as a useful personal attribute to hone, in order to navigate current and future uncertainty. It is also a key mindset being developed at Kaospilot, where 'failing, as well as not knowing or understanding, are both allowed and even encouraged' as part of the students' development (Lähdemäki, 2019, 392). Negative capability refers to the ability to tolerate the ambiguity of difficult problems and to stay in the moment that much longer, in another border zone—between the known and the unknown—in order to 'suspend judgement about an end result and stay open to many possible outcomes, rather than become fixed early on to one version of success' (Furr, et al., 2018).

Setting appropriate conditions for sustainable collaborations also means understanding the personal context of each participant before engaging in the project and redefining the structures, within which the consortium operates. Referring back to what Brexit made evident, the multiplicity of the ethical/linguistic background is one that is perhaps most visible, but discussing a range of individual diversity, such as socio-economic, socio-cultural, neuro-physical or ability could go a long way in opening up a dialogue to foster better collaborations. This kind of discussion could, in fact, be essential in ensuring project outcomes positively impact on the wider society. Considerations around questions of privilege of the white/neurotypical/less disabled/affluent people, as well as how assumptions may hinder collaborations, could be identified when setting project contexts.

It is, of course, simplistic to think that ensuring the prejekt is addressed as a process means people will be open, more inclusive and less assuming, but these are factors that are too often ignored, yet critical to meaningful, sustainable collaborations.

Whilst our piece has predominantly focused on the challenges we encountered during our participation in the EU-funded European Academy of Participation project, we also recognise the value of being involved in such partnerships. Similarly, to our earlier reflection on Brexit, we could

not have aspired to consider the challenges we experienced during the European Academy of Participation by not being part of such projects. Change, it seemed, could best be initiated by being at the centre of the action, as observed by the external project evaluator:

> The most striking and possibly unanticipated outcome of the European Academy of Participation is a clarification of the extraordinary potential of civic participation in contributing to a more inclusive and hopeful Europe. The European context changed dramatically during the seven years over which the project was developed and delivered. Partners conceptualise European-ness itself as a participatory practice offering critical value in the current crises both locally and across the world. Sustaining the new networks of relationships, thinking and practice between organisations, partners and the next generation of practitioners was identified as a realistic priority, with preliminary pragmatic proposals made.

A sustainable well-being society empowers 'individuals and communities, moving to a regenerative and collaborative economy, building competencies for a complex world, and developing inclusive and adaptive governance'. (Lähdemäki, 2019, 377). The Erasmus+ Programme recognises that 'Europe needs more cohesive and inclusive societies, which allow citizens to play an active role in democratic life' (European Commission, 2019, 5). European collaborations tackling European priorities are an effective means to also consider some of the British societal concerns, promoting the inclusion of multiple voices and the diverse contexts of our current landscape, including the participation of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, and newly arrived migrants' (European Commission, 2019, 5). In addition, what European collaborations could promote is the importance of developing inter- and intra-personal mindsets, such as negative capability, to provide young people with the sought-after attributes to be future change makers.

The prospect of British educational institutions removing themselves from the opportunities that are available through Erasmus+ funding because of Brexit is both alarming and damaging, and we hope that it will be avoided.

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