



Carnival at the Boundaries

Exploring Complexity in
Design Collaborations

Report of the Complex Design Collaborations
Research Group Launch event

Friday 8th November

Banqueting Hall, Chelsea College of the Arts, UAL

Carnival at the Boundaries is the inaugural event of the CDCRG convened by Dr Niki Wallace and Dr Rosie Hornbuckle. The event aimed to scope the theme of the group within and across UAL to uncover how researchers are experiencing and navigating complexity through collaboration in their research. The title 'Carnival at the boundaries' is inspired by the work of literary critique and philosopher Mikail Bakhtin, whose concept, carnivalesque, parodies what design distinctively does at the boundary with other knowledges. At the carnival we embrace a new order; norms and societal rules are subverted, and we talk openly.

Some Highlights:

- 🎪 The practices of listening and unlearning were seen as central to working in a complex collaborative context
- 🎪 Allies, gatekeepers, and protagonists can all have important roles to play (allies for building bridges with communities and opening doors to collaboration; protagonists for revealing latent tensions and signposting fertile ground for innovation and change)
- 🎪 Language, communication and relationships help build understanding and trust in collaboration
- 🎪 Open participatory processes were identified as key to a non-extractive approach that could realise equity and justice through learning together
- 🎪 Dominant, established research infrastructures enable or disable design researchers (and other researchers) to participate in collaboration, and this is supported or dismantled through design heroism and academic hierarchies
- 🎪 How collaborations are recognised in publishing and other research outcomes is an important area for further discussion.



About us:

Rosie Hornbuckle's work explores complexity within large interdisciplinary projects aimed at transition through new technologies and social systems. The innate translational and relational capacity of design works well in this context to enable different forms of knowledge to come together, emerging as something meaningful for all.

Niki Wallace's work explores just transitions and the kinds of complex collaborations that work across multiple levels and scales of systems to intervene in societal challenges. Design can operate like a magnet in these settings, convening people through collaborative problem mapping, analysis, and co-creation to design ecosystems of action with shared outcomes.

Research Seminar

The audience took their seats within a circular auditorium with eight speakers from across the colleges at UAL. Rosie and Niki began by explaining how they come to the complex collaborations space, and their motivations for forming the research group.

The seminar was organised in two panels with academics speaking briefly about how they experience and navigate complexity through collaboration in their research.

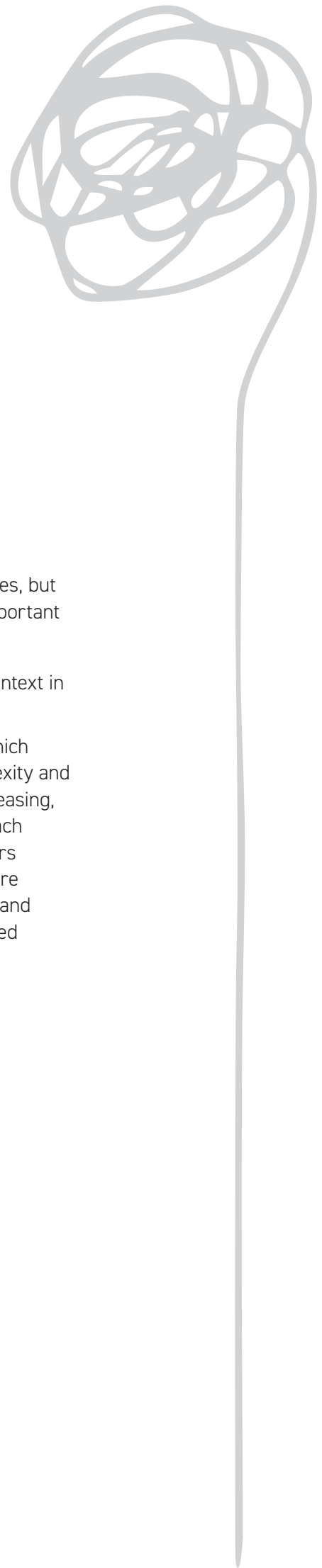


Panel 1 was chaired by Rosie and began with a presentation from **Alison Prendiville**, Chair of Service Design at London College of Communication (LCC). Alison presented her research exploring Anti-Microbial Resistance with scientific and community partners in India for the past 10 years. Alison discussed the importance of a trusted relationship with one scientist which has developed gradually through the work. The socially oriented approach that Alison brings to this work has been appreciated gradually and has taken courage and determination to build. The work has involved building important relationships with local health community gatekeepers – the ASHAs (Accredited Social Health Activists) – who bridge the gap between the researchers and women who frequently contract UTI's. This experience-centred approach resulted in a low-tech solution using inexpensive materials available locally.

Next on the panel was **Veronika Kapsali**, Chair in Material Technology and Design at London College of Fashion (LCF). Veronika's monologue focused on the importance of language in her project Bio-inspired Textiles, which sought to make biological structures available to textile designers through translation into more accessible language. The work enables textile designers to explore the possibility of making beautiful textiles that function well with lower environmental impacts. Veronika discussed how the language of science can be at once incredibly powerful but also frustratingly inaccessible and contested by different sub-disciplines which can slow progress. In the hands of textile designers, these concepts resulted in incredible prototypes that wouldn't have been possible without Veronika's translational work.

The third speaker was **Peter Hall**, Reader in Graphic Design at Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon (CCW) who discussed his work with students and scholars from different disciplines on the Plastic Justice project. The research and knowledge exchange approach rested on building of an interdisciplinary repository of knowledge in different forms that acted as a reference point for research conducted in different places by people with different backgrounds. Use of more accessible communication formats such as video, images and other media made the sharing of knowledge easier and more meaningful for all. Peter talked about the 'small wins' and 'gentle nudges' that allowed the shared learning and collaborative experience to emerge. The project demonstrated a convivial approach to collaborative understanding, learning and change, for the partners and their networks, that was greater than the sum of the parts.

Hena Ali, Course Leader for MA Service Design at LCC, was the final speaker on Panel 1. Hena talked about her experience of 'emotional and ideological complexity' in her collaborative work with communities in Pakistan. Hena approaches collaboration as a way of avoiding non-extractive approaches to social change with unintended consequences, where complexity is important for collaboration, which can be enabled through active listening and communication. Her approach also highlights the importance of the process of 'unlearning' and a 'willingness to fail' from all partners to make space to re-learn. Hena raised a central, albeit inconvenient question: 'How do we do that? And if we cannot, then what?'.



Rosie drew together some themes across the Panel 1 presentations:

- ④ Much of the work demonstrates a bridging between research and practice whilst also testing assumptions.
- ④ Design researchers are working with others in the in-between spaces to find opportunities for collaboration and identify ways forward.
- ④ Often complex collaborative work rests on 'allies' - the gatekeepers to communities, but also the protagonists that stretch our collaborative understanding and reveal important tensions.
- ④ Local context is particularly important, and Design offers new ways to explore context in ways that other investigative methods are not able to.

Follow-up discussion revolved around the tensions in epistemological differences, which then brings new opportunities for Design Research which is comfortable with complexity and uncertainty in understanding the world. The appetite for Design approaches are increasing, but often there is a lack of understanding of the design research and practice approach that requires extensive experience and deep understanding just as design researchers are not social sciences: 'we're not there to tell people only what is happening, but we're there to change something'. This is reflected in the need for change in funding policy and infrastructures as well as understanding HOW knowledge can be effectively integrated within complex transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research projects.



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Panel 2 was chaired by Niki and began with a presentation from **Lara Salinas**, Reader in Public Design at LCC who shared insights from a transportation project with an evolving size and shape. Lara began with the provocation, that innovation fails when it ignores social factors. She carefully outlined some of the key challenges this presents before describing how her project team is navigating these challenges. Their digital service project provides innovators with a framework for transport innovation that is ethically and socially engaged, place-based, and quantifies value across multiple systems. The framework has multiple forms (from conversations, to papers, to Miro boards) and Lara shared the benefit of being responsive, using different forms with different stakeholders to demonstrate value in different ways that can evolve the service across the ecosystem.

This was followed by **Becky Earley**, Chair of Circular Design Futures at CCW, who shared insights into the presence of neurodivergence in the art school and how this offers a 'superpower' to practitioners who can flex themselves across multiple contexts. A riff on Edward DeBono's 6 Thinking Hats provided 6 Thinking Coats as a structure for her exploration of the collaborative design of six shirts that embody circular design principles. Each coat provided a different view of the act of making, not only of the shirts but also of co-authoring. And through collaboration (with people but also with the shirt itself) Becky also gained insights into the problems and systems the shirts connect across and beyond and emphasised the benefit of co-learning through collaboration. Becky finished with a provocation about collaboration with AI, describing it as an invisibility coat that design must familiarise itself with.

Nanthini Sampath, UAL Climate Advocate, Carbon Literacy Trainer and MA Global Collaborative Design Practice alumnus, presented Carboned Out! an evolving project which began as her Masters project. The game has since been adapted across multiple languages and spaces and has been integrated into UAL's accredited Carbon Literacy Training programme. Nanthini described the different scales in her collaboration which started as 1:1 with her project partner (Ozge Sahin) but at different times, scaled to include different subject experts and organisations, alongside other researchers and educators. These multi-scale and inter-cultural collaborations have enabled game expansions and translations as well as new contextual versions of the game that have been embraced in many different settings. Nanthini emphasised the roles of trust and communication in navigating the complexities that inter-cultural and multi-scale collaborations present.

Panel 2 closed with a presentation from **Ramia Mazé**, Professor of Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability at LCC who presented three examples of co-authorship as a counterpoint to the individual 'hero' designer in Western cannon. Three co-authorship examples were presented, each reflecting different approaches to the inseparable nature of collaboration. In the first, a nom-de-plume is used to represent two authors, thereby enabling their presentation of what happened in between them as an assemblage. In the second, a joint PhD thesis used feminist authoring practices to question the 'single knower' and shifting to a con-constitution of knowledge. And lastly, a triple-authored PhD, written from the perspectives of different personas to represent pedagogy, practice and research. Ramia also highlighted how this author presented a character map of all the different personas that had to be adopted to do the work, revealing interesting insights again into knowledge co-production, even with personas.

Cutting across the diverse presentations from this panel were ideas about the ever-changing dynamics of collaboration. Different people, lenses, forms and perspectives each enable new and different things, and this panel gave several concrete demonstrations of this in action. From the evolving forms in Lara's project, to the intentional changing of coats (perspectives) in Becky's, the shape-shifting project teams for Nanthini's project through to the advanced forms of co-authorship presented by Ramia. Each provides a different view of these dynamics in action.

Questions and provocations for the audience provided some rich discussion after the panel, particularly in relation to change within hierarchical institutions and whether collaboration can enable change in this context. Discussions also about co-authorship connected neatly with discussions from the morning workshop, where PGRs also explored how to tackle authorship in/of collaborative projects.



Emerging Researcher Workshop

As part of the launch of the Complex Design Collaborations Research Group, we invited Post-Graduate Researchers from across UAL to take part in a scoping workshop on the morning before the inaugural seminar.

Niki Wallace and Rosie Hornbuckle set up the session to explore:

- 🌀 How complexity is experienced in collaboration in different contexts
- 🌀 Who might join our community: what they would like from the community / how might it support them / what can we do together?
- 🌀 What is 'best' within different contexts?
- 🌀 What are the 'go-to' or adaptable practices?
- 🌀 What works in multiple scenarios?
- 🌀 What are the most useful tools?
- 🌀 What care practices do we perform?
- 🌀 Soft & smart skills needed for complex collaborations

The workshop involved researchers exploring two questions through a 1:2:4:ALL format, (1=individual reflection > 2=paired discussion > 4=small group discussion > ALL= plenary discussion). The workshop concluded with 'MyPractice:YourPractice', where participants reflected on what they'd learnt about their own approach and what they'd learnt from others.

This structure aimed to allow participants to gain:

- 🌀 Clarity about how they articulate their own practice
- 🌀 Insights into other things that could expand their practice
- 🌀 Connect to an emerging community of practice



First Question: What complexities do you experience in your research?

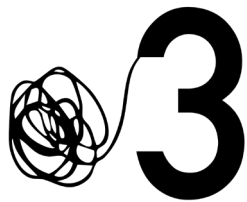
The group discussed the important role of listening, to build trust with people with different backgrounds; being attentive to this at the beginning of the collaboration can help. There was also an interesting discussion about the problem of design-by-committee, where outcomes can feel too safe. One of the suggestions here was not being afraid to have difficult discussions that can lead to the emergence of more challenging ideas.

The group rested on a useful metaphor of making a stew, using different sieves for filtering through different lenses, with different reduction and cooking styles being part of each researchers' unique approach.



Second Question: How does this complexity impact the collaboration?

Here the discussion revolved around the balance between guiding the direction of the collaboration to navigate complexity, and the skills involved in that role. At the same time, the need to provide a brave space as well as a safe space so that collaborators can grapple with challenging topics and allow the pathway to be defined by the group discussions. Here, the metaphor of the river from one of the participant's research projects became a fitting metaphor for the discussions that followed. How do you collaborate with the river, listen to it, and allow it to set its own path rather than restricting its flow? Similarly, we must listen to the ebb and flow of the collaboration. The group also discussed the challenge of recognition for each contributor in a collaboration, particularly in relation to writing about a project; working with principles of 'citation justice'; and avoiding assumptions about what participants want to achieve from their input.



YourPractice:MyPractice

The final reflections included the role of listening as a tool for navigating complexity, as well as careful consideration of the role of language as a something that wields power. Complexity was also brought into question – it shouldn't be an excuse for reduction, but an opportunity to engage in detail and reveal new pathways. The researchers riffed on the metaphor of making a stew to with the concept of the '100-year stock', where your research becomes the essence of someone else's research, there being no beginning or end to collaborative endeavour, as a counter to the 'hero' academic. The metaphor of the river came through again during these reflections which were written and drawn on paper and placed on the floor in the centre of the group. As each participant connected their reflections to those of others, the pages took on a river like shape, complete with estuaries of ideas and an energetic flow.



If you are interested in joining the research group or attending a future event, please contact either Rosie or Niki via email.

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