

The **Research** Shop

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DANCE-BASED RESEARCH: PROCESS AND PRODUCTS OF COLLABORATION

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Summary of Report: This report outlines a collaborative project between IMAGEO artworks, Musagetes, and the Research Shop, aimed at exploring what is in transition in Guelph using dance-based research. It provides an overview of both the process and products that emerged from this collaboration, including a literature scan on the subject of arts-based research and community arts, a movement-based workshop, a video, performance of a professional dance piece, and a facilitated discussion with the audience.



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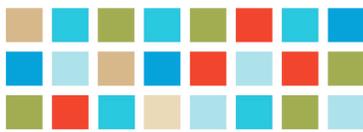


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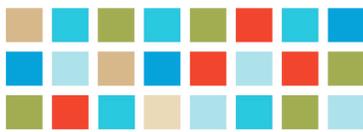
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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GOALS

This report highlights the process and products of a collaborative project undertaken by IMAGEO artworks, Musagetes, and the Research Shop.

BACKGROUND

This project builds on a research initiative by Musagetes that was conducted in early 2012. Musagetes is a Canadian public foundation with an aim to address issues of societal importance through the arts, creativity, and community¹. Musagetes' research was grounded in community round table discussions and investigated several larger themes, ranging from local agriculture to water protection to citizen engagement. The aspect of the research chosen for deeper exploration by project collaborators Georgia Simms and Tanya Williams investigated transition and inclusion in Guelph, particularly with respect to citizen engagement. This project was conducted under the Guelph Wellington Rural Urban Program². Musagetes' work in Guelph aims to address several central questions:

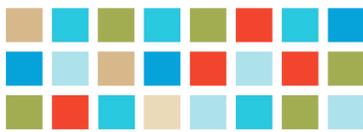
- What is in transition in Guelph?
- Which narratives of our hometown are important to share and why?
- Who shares them, how are they shared, and for whom?³

The project discussed in this report was one of several Musagetes initiatives designed to explore such issues using innovative methods and community engagement. Local artists were invited to submit proposals in order to engage more deeply in an exploration of these questions. Georgia Simms, a local dancer, choreographer and activist, was one of the artists involved. In the spirit of community collaboration, Georgia engaged with three other artists involved in Musagetes' work: Tanya Williams, Henry Wai, and Kevin Sutton. The Research Shop became involved as an additional community collaborator, and an intern (Andrea LaMarre) was matched to the project to help gather literature on the use of arts-based research methods, to assist in a movement-based workshop for community members, and to participate in the creation of a professional dance piece exploring themes identified in the workshop.

¹ <http://musagetes.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Musagetes-Manifesto-English.pdf>

² <http://cohstra.wordpress.com/2012/09/30/guelph-wellington-rural-urban-program/>

³ <http://www.musagetes.ca/programs/guelph/>



CENTRAL ACTIVITIES AND DELIVERABLES

This project had several stages:

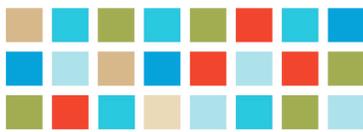
- A movement-based workshop facilitated by Henry Wai and Tanya Williams, involving members of the community in an exploration around themes of transition and connection to democratic processes and decision-makers (November 2012)
- A video documenting the workshop process and emerging themes (November 2012- May 2013)
- The creation of a professional dance piece grounded in themes from the workshop and movement vocabulary that was generated by the participants (January-May 2013)
- The performance of this dance piece during the Guelph Contemporary Dance Festival (May 2013)
- A discussion with the audience about the possibilities of dance-based research processes and their application in citizen engagement practices (May 2013)
- Reflection on the use of dance as a research methodology, to be written up and published in an open-access academic journal and presented at a conference (Ongoing)

ARTS-BASED RESEARCH?

The choice of arts-based research is not an obvious one - for a number of reasons, individuals inside and outside of the academic community may choose to avoid research methodologies that transcend the typical. However, in accordance with Musagetes' commitment to mobilizing the arts in an exploration of community-relevant issues, as well as the researchers' personal commitments to the power of the arts to create and mobilize knowledge, arts-based methods were chosen to move the discussion forward. The use of the arts to generate and disseminate knowledge is not new; however, the field of arts-based research in general and dance-based research in particular is ever expanding. In preparation for the more hands-on aspects of this project, the Research Shop intern assigned to this project prepared a brief scan of the literature on arts-based research, a summary of which is detailed below.

LITERATURE SCAN

Building upon previous research about the usefulness and importance of using the arts in educational environments and research (see Simms 2011), existing programs that employ arts-based methods in creating and sharing knowledge through artist-community collaborations are discussed. Scholar's Portal and Google searches were performed with the search terms: arts, knowledge mobilization, community engagement, research, knowledge translation, dance, engaging communities, research translation, and "dance your PhD." Due to time and scope



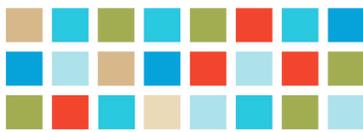
constraints, this search likely only scratches the surface of the existing body of resources relating to the use of the arts in research and community mobilization. However, it helps to evidence the myriad forms of arts-based research that drive community connection and generate new, innovative findings on a variety of issues.

COMMUNITY ARTS: “ANOTHER VITAL LINK” (OAC 1998)

The idea of using arts to engage communities has deep roots in Canadian communities. In 1998, the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) released a report entitled “Community Arts Workbook: Another Vital Link.” Intended for artists, and the general public alike, the workbook explores various iterations of community arts projects that have engaged communities around issues ranging from use of public space to labour and social justice movements. Defined as “a collaborative project between a professional practicing artist and a community,” community art focuses on the collective, process-oriented, and mutually beneficial character of arts-based engagement. According to the OAC, promising community-arts projects incorporate and consider:

- Patience
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Ongoing renegotiation of meanings for both artists and the community throughout the process
- Time
- Respect
- Funding
- Clear decision-making
- Clear management

As the OAC report notes, collaboration between artists and communities can help to share ideas and knowledge and serve as the basis for community creation, transformation and social change. Importantly, the OAC emphasizes the artist’s role in helping communities to access the elements that make them unique, and their ability to increase the visibility and voice of often-unheard groups. Community arts projects outlined in the OAC report helped to give communities ownership over their unique elements, and to express their voices through often-permanent, highly visible means. Overall, attention is drawn to the need for thoughtful engagement processes between artists and communities in order to achieve true participation and engagement.



CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE AND ENGAGING RESPONSE

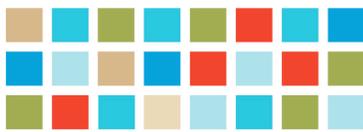
In much of the literature about community arts, arts-based research and engagement through the arts, there is a focus on the mutual construction of knowledge through the inclusion of multiple voices. The focus on reflexivity in arts-based collaborations raises questions of how to make multiple voices heard, and how to navigate the interface between research and practice. Qualitative research in general tends to open up the dialogue to include a wider variety of perspectives (Borg, Karlsson, Kim & McCormack 2012; Boydell, Gladstone, Volpe, Allemang & Stasiulis 2012). In fact, qualitative research and arts-based research share many goals, including the valuing of subjective experiences, the adoption of an interpretative approach to the way knowledge is produced, and the creative translation and transformation of experience (Boydell et al. 2012; Wainwright & Rapport 2007).

Engaging in arts-based research may make community voices yet more accessible through active interaction with communities themselves (Keen & Todres 2007; Jones 2006; Colantonio et al. 2008). Arts-based approaches may be particularly valuable for engaging with complex social issues. As noted by Gergen & Gergen (2010), using performance or arts-oriented research dissemination strategies enables researchers to obtain “a more fully embodied response from their audiences; performances can more effectively motivate interest and action, and they can enhance dialogues on important societal issues” (p. 4).

Arts-based research may engage and empower participants to a greater degree than “traditional” forms of research (Boydell et al. 2012). In addition to adding to dominant dialogues by engaging with multiple voices in creating social change, arts-based techniques provide opportunities to create shared experiences between audiences and participants (Clover & Craig 2009; Haines et al 2010; Lapum 2005; Roberts et al 2007; Rossiter et al 2008a, 2008b). In such capacities, arts-based research demonstrates its ability to transcend the idea of arts as mere decorations for society, and instead serve as a site for exploring the deeper meanings of human experience (Clover & Craig 2009).

ACTIVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

One of the most commonly cited reasons for choosing the arts as a basis for research and knowledge mobilization is its ability to create truly engaged partnerships. The arts, seen as a tool for community engagement, are moved away from their traditional conceptualization as entities to be passively absorbed, and participants and audiences alike are encouraged to take part in building the knowledge that most pertains to and represents them (Keen & Todres 2007). Beyond “art for art’s sake,” art for community engagement focuses on the ability of the arts to create “a holistic and deeply felt personal or social impact” (Chwe 1998). Audiences are invited



to take part in the process of making meaning, allowing for a more dynamic interchange of various types of knowledge and “expertise” (Clover & Craig 2009). By translating research into forms of art such as movement, and encouraging the active participation of the audience and the “research subjects” themselves, arts-based research makes research more accessible and engaged. Arts-based research thus extends beyond simply transferring information from an “expert” to an “observer,” by collaborating with, rather than experimenting on, participants (Clover & Craig 2009; Rossiter et al 2008a, 2008b).

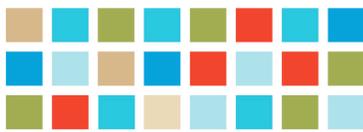
POWER AND ETHICS

Power dynamics inherent in research situations are also re-adjusted through the use of arts-based techniques. As Barndt (2008) notes, “for some, using the arts is a way to represent the major social schisms with a clear sense of the powerful social, economic and political forces that perpetuate injustice and feelings of powerlessness” (p. 355). For arts-based research to be truly effective in creating such readjustment in the allocation of power, however, it must include an evaluation of the impact of the research on the participants, as well as on practice, policy and research itself (Keen & Todres 2007). Considering the ethical challenges of engaging in arts-based work (for example, focusing on the creation of quality projects) has been identified as a necessary next step in arts-based research and knowledge mobilization (Boydell et al. 2012).

FORMS OF ARTS-BASED RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

“The arts” is often broadly defined, and includes a vast array of artistic practices in arts-based research generation and dissemination. Beyond being used to generate research through active engagement of the community, the arts can be a useful tool in the dissemination research. Keen & Todres (2007) identify several successful examples of arts-based research dissemination strategies in their scan of the literature, including:

- Theatre
- Ethnodrama
- Dance
- Poetry
- Evocative writing
- Storytelling
- Multi-media presentation
- Patchwork quilts
- Documentary film
- Websites
- DVD/video



- Brochures

All of these forms of art are noted as having potential to reach broader audiences than other forms of research and research dissemination, for example the traditional research report (see also Gergen & Gergen 2010). However, the importance of choosing a form of dissemination that aligns with the goals of the community and the researcher is a notable consideration (Keen & Todres 2007).

SPHERES OF INFLUENCE FOR ARTS-BASED RESEARCH

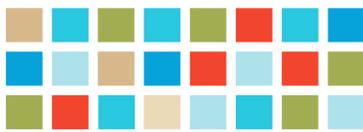
As noted above, arts-based research has broad and increasing appeal within and beyond academia. Though the use of and interest in using the arts in research in general is increasing, it has predominantly featured in several spheres in particular. These include:

- Adult education (Clover & Craig 2009)
- Health research and policy (Boydell 2011; Boydell & Jackson 2010)
- Public “placemaking” and public space use (Flinn 2010)

Further, the ability of the arts to cross disciplinary lines opens up the possibility for exciting new collaborations between spheres (Rossiter et al 2008a, 2008b). Moving the arts into the world of academia is seen as holding great potential for radical redefinitions of the borders of scholarship, meaning-making, and knowledge (Boydell et al. 2012). While it may involve profound shifts in ways of thinking on the part of researchers, artists, and participants, engaging in community arts and arts-based research holds promise for extending research beyond the Ivory tower (Boydell 2011).

RECENT EXAMPLES OF ARTISTS ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

Beyond the academic literature pointing to the benefits of using arts-based research to engage communities and share mutually created meanings with broader audiences, there is growing knowledge in the general public about the intersection of arts and research. The recent “Dance Your PhD” contest garnered a fair amount of public interest, as scientists were challenged to translate their dissertations into movement. Pioneered by Science Magazine, Dance Your PhD brought research often kept within the walls of academic institutions into the public view. As one participant described, “Dance is a universal medium. It transcends cultures, ethnicities and language barriers. Dance is useful as a tool of communication, but also as a tool of education. This is applicable to people of all scientific levels; professors to industry professionals to laymen and the general public” (Mmckeague 2011).



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It is important to note that aside from the impetus from academic institutions to make research more accessible by way of engaging with the arts, there has also been interest from the arts community to engage communities and make the arts themselves more accessible to the general public. Such initiatives as the Arts Engage! Conference (Halifax, 2010) and the Dancing on the Edge Festival (Vancouver, 2012) make it clear that artists of various types continue to be interested in discussing the social, political, and economic impacts of dance, and seek community feedback and involvement in their creations. To discuss the use of arts-based research is by no means to suggest that academia is the driving force of the use of arts as a means to engage community; quite the opposite. The goals of community building shared between members of the arts and academic communities appear, based on the literature, to be culminating in various exciting projects that extend the focus of both sectors beyond their “traditional” realms.

These are just some of the many interesting findings about the utility of the arts as mechanisms for community engagement and knowledge mobilization. For a more detailed and thoughtful description of the ability of the arts to engage around issues such as the creation of a civil society education program, see Simms 2011. The purpose of this scan was to lay the groundwork for an emerging project aimed at engaging the community around issues of democracy and transition in Guelph, rather than to unquestioningly accept this research methodology for all types of research.

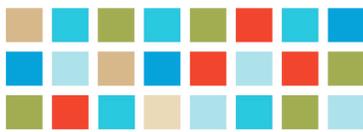
REFLECTING ON THE PROJECT

The following sections detail findings and reflections generated through the process and product of the collaboration between local artists, Musagetes, and the Research Shop.

EMPOWERING THE PUBLIC BODY WORKSHOP THEMES

Henry Wai and Tanya Williams, who both have experience using movement as a way to get individuals involved in an exploration of a number of issues salient to the community, facilitated a movement-based workshop. This workshop was entitled “Empowering the Public Body,” and took place on Saturday, November 10th, from 12:30-4:30pm. Eleven participants were involved in an exploration of transition in Guelph. Participants took part in a number of guided activities, including moving and sharing, gesture creation, brainstorming, and various forms of group activities, including “sculpting” in groups and pairs to embody themes. Some of the key themes that emerged from these activities included:

- Mixed expectations, disconnections, and being “unplugged”



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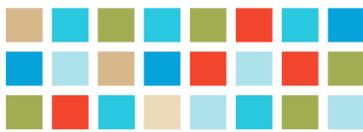
- Adversarial relationships (us vs. them)
- Genuine intention and struggle on both sides
- Invisibility and power imbalances

Gestures and movements were recorded using video and still imagery, and incorporated into the dance piece, presented several months later. Further, feedback was obtained from workshop participants. These participants were asked what the most helpful things about the workshop were, what parts of the workshop were most interesting or personally salient, and how they might like the insights to be shared. While participants identified the workshop's interest and the idea of movement-based initiatives as useful tools for seeing issues in a new light, a certain degree of skepticism was expressed with respect to the utility of the workshop in terms of actually making change. In an effort to continue the momentum of this dialogue and further extend the conversation, it was decided that the dance piece would include a discussion about the potentials and tensions involved in exploring these issues through movement. The workshop was also captured on video, and the video is available online at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28RZ517OqME&feature=youtu.be>

INVISIBLE HANDS: A DANCE PIECE AND COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

Georgia Simms of IMAGEO artworks, undertook the choreography for the dance piece resulting from this collaboration, entitled *Invisible Hands*. This piece was inspired by the workshop, as well as insights from political theory and experience working with communities in collaboration. Tanya Williams also participated in the choreography, providing an “outside eye” and influencing the direction of the piece. Andrea LaMarre, the Research Shop intern involved in the project has been trained in classical ballet and contemporary dance and participated in the process of transforming themes into movement. Lisa Bush, a student in International Development trained in dance, was also a part of the piece and choreography. Together, the dancers and choreographers spent time in the studio exploring ways to translate the ideas and themes generated in the workshop into a 20 minute piece designed to stimulate dialogue. Kevin Sutton, a local spoken word artist who has worked with Musagetes in the past, also joined the process to lend words to those elements of the story that were not accessible through movement and to provide a clear context that the audience could use to frame their experience. Over the course of several months, the dance piece took shape, and it was presented on May 31st, 2013 as a part of the Guelph Contemporary Dance Festival's “Local Initiatives” series. It was set to 3 pieces of music: “Transitions” by the Beastie Boys, “Giant” by The Bad Plus, and “Clarity” by Jaron Freeman-Fox.



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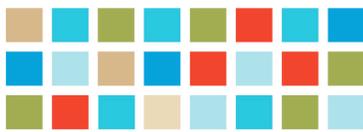
The piece sought to answer fundamental questions that kept emerging over the course of these research and arts-blending initiatives:

- What could transition in local democratic culture look like?
- How can we move past entrenched beliefs and assumptions about the way things are?
- How can we improve the quality of relationships that exist between people who engage in making challenging decisions?

The three distinct sections of the piece looked to explore the “invisible hands” that guide group decision-making and actions. Patterns of conflict and blame may emerge from even those actions with the best intentions. The shift away from these patterns involves a deeper exploration of compassion and connection between individuals and within ourselves. Dancers embodied such experiences as conflict, blame, avoidance and defensiveness, moving toward a place of communication, empathy, opening and change as the piece progressed. While we may not always achieve neatly wrapped up, “happy endings,” the piece finishes with a sentiment of hesitant hopefulness, opening up possibilities for further dialogue and negotiation.

INVISIBLE HANDS AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

Following the performance, audience members were invited to participate in a discussion about reactions to the piece, guided by Dr. Erin Nelson, an Institute for Community-Engaged Scholarship Postdoctoral Fellow. This discussion also engaged audience members in an exploration of the idea of “policy theatre,” and whether participating in and/or bearing witness to dance- or theatre-based experiences might open up new spaces of understanding and connection that may guide and influence policy and decision-making. Audience members discussed the potential for such initiatives to move beyond the ideas generated by individuals sitting around a table toward greater connection through embodied experience. Whether this kind of research has the potential to influence spheres beyond what might typically be expected was of interest to audience members. Some, however, questioned whether the discussion was “preaching to the choir,” or using arts-based approaches with those who already have an interest in dance and/or other arts. While this is always a risk, many audience members were optimistic about the potential of continuing the conversation with those who might not initially be open to the idea of engaging with dance or “policy theatre” (e.g. could the dance be performed at City Hall?). Overall, the discussion was a key part of the process, allowing audience members and dancers alike to reflect on the experience of participating in dance-based research. Audience members noted a deep emotional connection to the piece, reflecting on the possibility of taking this kind of engagement in multiple directions to help to transition toward a more engaged, collaborative community environment.



CONCLUSION

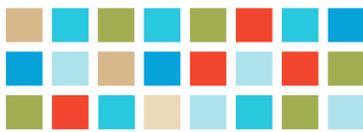
This report has outlined reflections on the process and products of collaborative dance-based research. As the literature reveals, this method offers a new way of connecting to research participants and audience members alike, generating research findings unlike those traditionally published in academic journals. Dance-based research can be taken in a number of different directions, yielding varied results. While full participation was not always achieved, this project aimed to engage members of the community in new ways, exploring issues of community importance. The challenge, moving forward, will be to continue the conversation, expanding boundaries of communication, connection, and interaction using innovative methods.

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