Building Capacity for the Cultural Industries: Towards a Shared-Island Approach
IRC New Foundations, Shared Island Initiative 2021-22
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Workshop 2 Discussion Paper: Understanding Cross-Island Working
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Academic Partner

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Background to the Discussion Paper

This discussion paper summarises key findings from Workshop 2 of *Building Capacity for the Cultural Industries: Towards a Shared-Island Approach (CI Develop)*, held on 9th May 2022 at Queen's University Belfast. Further information on Workshop 1, held on 28th February at University College Dublin, is available upon request and will soon be accessible online.

This paper was prepared by Emma McAlister (UCD) in collaboration with Victoria Durrer (UCD)

Project Background

Funded by the Irish Research Council's (IRC) New Foundations Scheme, under the Shared Island Initiative Strand supported by the Shared Island Unit, *CI Develop* brings together existing academic and sector-based research to understand how all-island relations within the professional, publicly-subsidised performing arts of dance and theatre may be nurtured. The project is led by Dr Victoria Durrer (UCD) in partnership with Dr Aoife McGrath (QUB), Theatre & Dance NI, Arts Council Northern Ireland, Dance Ireland and Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre. Cavan County Council Arts Office, British Council Ireland and Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon are core research participants, with Dr Emma McAlister supporting the work as Research Assistant. All of these individuals are referred to in this document as the Core Research Group.

Project Context and Inquiry

CI Develop focuses on the professional, publicly-subsidised performing arts of dance and theatre as a sector or cultural industry that is interconnected across the jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and Ireland. We consider this industry as interconnected for a number of reasons: due to the mobility of artists for work in both jurisdictions; cross-border co-production and development of art work through partnerships between different dance and theatre companies and venues; funding mechanisms that facilitate all- or cross-island relationships within the arts; local-authority arts office initiatives; and activities of arts resource organisations that operate either on an all-island basis or through partnership with organisations across the border (Hibernian Consulting, 2010; Durrer et al., 2019). Very little documentation is available regarding how this interconnection functions and with what impact. This lack of understanding limits how to consider strengthening but also nurturing this industry collectively and within each jurisdiction in a post-Brexit and post-pandemic context as part of the wider ecology of the region's 'cultural and creative industries'. [1]

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[1] We employ the term 'cultural industry' to the specific field of the professional, publicly-subsidised performing arts of dance and theatre on two key points. First, is that dance and theatre are 'cultural' products because they produce and share "symbolic ideas" (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007, p. 26). As such, "they play a central role in freedom of human expression", personal and collective identity, democracy, and cultural rights (Galloway & Dunlop, 2007, p. 26). Second, and with freedom of expression, identity, democracy and rights in mind, is their relationship to cultural economics; essentially, that economic value and market success alone is not the value on which public subsidy and state support for dance and theatre is measured in either jurisdiction on this island (O'Hagan, 1998; Durrer & McCall Magan, 2017). Wider public benefits are also important aspects.

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As a result, over a series of workshops during 2022, individuals in academia and the arts have been exploring the following questions together, revised as a result of Workshop 1:
1. What cross-border / all-island relations currently exist in this specific industry?
2. What aspects of cooperation should be prioritised for future action, and why?
3. What might enable or hinder the development of relations?
4. What institutions are best placed to help us learn and support the building of capacity for cross-border and all-island relations?

Focus of Workshop 2

To answer our research questions, members of the Core Research Group worked with the Project Lead Victoria Durrer and Research Assistant Emma McAlister, to identify and invite professionals who currently work on an all-island basis to engage and share their expertise with the Core Research Group at Workshop 2.

Workshop 2 was attended by most Core Research Group members and a group of 15 additional individuals comprising local authority arts and cultural officers, arts managers and researchers with a range of interests, including cultural policy, social policy and spatial and regional planning. The aim of the Workshop was to learn from the experiences of professionals working in areas identified in Workshop 1 as relevant to our learning goals regarding capacity building in an all-island context.

The approach involved a brief presentation explaining our project goals and situating our work within the context of the aims of the Shared Island Unit. Individuals engaged in discussion that was prompted by a series of questions on the following topics.

In the morning session, groups initially explored the nature of the cross-border working relationships in which they engage through mapping and discussion of the following questions:
- Where do you work?
- How do you work across the island of Ireland?
- What / who benefits from this work?
- What enables these cross-border working relationships?
- What are the barriers to these cross-border working relationships?

Building on those discussions, groups then sought to identify opportunities for cross-sector connection and development:
- What opportunities for exchange exist between those of us present?
- What might the benefits be for us, our sectors, and our stakeholders? What key actions need to be taken to make this exchange possible?
- What else should we consider to support all-island relations for the dance and theatre industry?

In addition to the discussion, reflection forms were circulated by email to participants after the event. Completed by 7 of the 15 attendees outside of the Core Research Group, the forms sought to gauge what (if any) changes in knowledge, relationships and / or attitude may have resulted from attending the Workshop.

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Summary of Learning:

This section summarises both what we know and what is left unclear as a result of our discussion.

The nature of cross / all-island relations

Cross-border and all-island relationships stretch far across the island. The map drawing exercise of Workshop 2 revealed that these relationships are more numerous than participants had expected to discover upon speaking with one another.

Relationships and flow of connections are operating both border proximate and across the island and engage partnerships across multiple sectors (as indicated in the discussion): higher education, local authority, civil society, tourism, cultural industries.

In both the cultural industries as well as other fields of practice, cross-border and all-island work operates through formal and informal networks. Formal networks, include structures, and arrangements such as funding streams, resource allocation and memoranda of agreement. Other cross-border and all-island work relies on more informal relationships, such as social relationships, which require trust built over time between individuals, groups and organisations.

Enablers to cross / all – island relations

Qualitative data gathered from Workshops 1 and 2 have demonstrated that cross / all-island working relies on collaborative relationships that, while potentially enabled by particular types of project funding, must have a foundation of mutual understanding and trust established often prior to any agreement to apply for funding to work together. Other requirements for cross- / all-island relations noted in the workshop are: enthusiasm, drive, commitment, trust, goodwill, alignment of interests and mutual benefit, as well as differing knowledge, which might include the capacity to negotiate local politics or gain access to necessary resources.

Participants indicated that local authorities, organisations located on the border and international-facing bodies such as Tourism Ireland, Culture Ireland and the British Council have been important in a) facilitating and building relations across the island and b) raising awareness of the connected nature of the island to international audiences and organisations.

Top-down support, through legislation, policy or higher level funding initiatives that are explicitly supportive of cross / all-island relationships was noted as a key enabler to cross- or all-island working. Tourism was noted as a sector where this is particularly the case, as cooperation is enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement. Another example includes where local authorities along the border region have been supported or enabled to join up practice through former INTERREG funding.

Shared or common strategic concerns are an important enabler for partnerships, even when resourced or supported through top down initiatives or frameworks. Connecting on shared environmental concerns, and enterprise / industry developments were noted as examples by which local authorities across the border have connected. Further examples are available

through the series of local authority networks referenced in the Discussion Paper from Workshop 1.

On a practical level, digital Tools and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Teams, as well as Social Media, have facilitated people being able to meet and develop projects, particularly in relation to places that are difficult to get to for those without access to transport.

Challenges to nurturing cross-border / all-island relations

Despite the commitment among those in attendance to continuing to nurture relationships across the island in their different areas of work, common frustration was expressed at the lack of opportunity to engage on an all-island basis more strategically. Lack of top-down, policy and strategic level support is argued to result in less sustainable cross / all island initiatives. Instead, their initiation and maintenance may often be reliant upon personal interest, will and commitment. Some also indicated that they are required to have "permission" granted by line managers or broader institutional / organisational remit— however formal or informal. This dependency may mean that only those most personally connected to or familiar with engaging cross-border may be keen to do so.

It may not be surprising then, that participants indicated that networks and relationships, even if availing of formal opportunities, are often ad hoc and initiated from the bottom up. This more grassroots and organic development was described as providing flexibility and freedom in the development of activities. In other words, without a strict timeline and required and pre-determined outputs, partners were felt to have time to get to know one another, find common ground and explore (potential) working relationships. At the same time, participants explained that the lack of discourse on the topic from higher-level bodies hampers the development of strategic, longer-term practice. What results is a series of challenges to cross-border and all-island relations, which may be classed as overt or covert.

Covert barriers are those conditions that make developing all-island ties more difficult. They include the precarity of particular sectors (e.g. project based working in the cultural industries, pandemic-related concerns around career livelihoods and tourism / group gatherings), including undisclosed reasons for decisions made concerning funding cuts or decisions not to fund particular companies / initiatives / activities in addition to the unclear context of political leadership in Northern Ireland.

In both jurisdictions, the emphasis on funding for project-based work, not only in all-island relations broadly but also within particular sectors, e.g. cultural industries is seen as a threat to cultivating relations. For those in the cultural industries, sporadic and project-based work means that many individuals -artists, arts managers and arts officers- spend their time focused on 'getting the next gig' or being 'constantly on the hamster wheel' (Workshop 2. 9/5/22). This time includes a focus on various projects' administrative tasks over strategic development. It has led to a fragile cultural ecosystem dependent upon much part-time and freelance employment. It can often involve heavy amounts of project-based administration (and reporting to various funders which have varying needs / requirements), making planning anything strategic a difficult endeavour. As a result of the nature of working from project to project, practitioners are understood to be 'always in motion and never in [strategic] action' (Workshop 2. 9/5/22). The project cycle of working hampers the strategic

work required to strengthen the administrative and management infrastructure required to sustain dance and theatre companies in either jurisdiction. While this is not a circumstance unique to those working on the island of Ireland, this cycle further inhibits the spatial, and thus, regional development of the art forms for the purposes of creative expression, attendance and participation on the island and has a knock-on effect in the potential of nurturing all-island relationships.

Covert challenges may also be related to personal biases and relationships. For instance, while informal networks are indicated as a very strong source of cross / all-island working, they are also fragile. Due to the nature of informal work, there may be a lack of record-keeping. As a result, there is a real possibility that networks which nurture all- / cross island activity are lost because they are not embedded in working practices or held in institutional memory when a colleague moves on. Another barrier is simply a lack of information. Despite the types of all-island information available through, for example, organisations like Theatre Forum, which lists all local authority arts / cultural officers, there is a lack of knowledge exchange taking place about what is happening on the island in some sectors. There appear to be potentially more strategic links occurring where this knowledge exchange does take place. Participants indicated that the fields of heritage, tourism and and climate action appear to have stronger links within one another, but not necessarily with the cultural industries.

Participant discussions further noted an urban / rural divide in opportunity to develop and nurture a professional career in dance and theatre, with the rural and particularly along the border area needing developmental support. It is challenging for dance and theatre professionals to establish and/or maintain careers within rural areas because they do not have the infrastructure to foster their creative process or to support their professional, social or personal needs. For instance, while some areas may have venues, they may not have strong transportation links to connect in (and travel out) audiences and creative professionals for the making, presentation, or touring of work.

There are further concerns regarding the development of livelihoods that present a common challenge to relations. Participants also discussed how young people from the island of Ireland have to go abroad to seek professional dance and theatre training. Furthermore, dance and theatre professionals often emigrate permanently for what has been indicated as greater opportunities for work in the sector abroad. Those dance and theatre professionals who do return to the island of Ireland are often drawn to the bigger cities. Northern Ireland colleagues noted additional challenges due to the loss of 25% of the arts workforce recorded in 2020/21.[2]

Overt challenges include poor transport links, practicalities around working within / across two different legal frameworks on the island, (e.g. involving pay and budgeting in different currencies, PPS and National Insurance numbers, bank accounts etc.), and the re-emphasis of the border since Brexit.

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[2] This information is referenced in the ACNI Annual Funding Survey of core funded organisations . Information is also available via Arts Professional here: https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/newsreel/covid-cuts-northern-ireland-arts-workforce-quarter

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Participants reflected a perception that Ireland has been more oriented towards Europe rather than Northern Ireland or the UK since Brexit. Brexit is perceived as presenting a challenge to existing relationships and forging new relationships, locally, nationally and internationally. One area highlighted was visa issues for international professionals wishing to engage across the island.

The data from Workshops 1 and 2 indicated several key requirements to nurture a fruitful working relationship beyond funding. These requirements are: enthusiasm, drive, commitment, trust, goodwill, alignment of interests and mutual benefit, as well as differing knowledge, which might include the capacity to negotiate local politics or gain access to necessary resources. In Workshop 2, participants discussed how young people from the island of Ireland have to go abroad to seek professional dance and theatre training. Furthermore, dance and theatre professionals often emigrate permanently for what has been indicated as greater opportunities for work in the sector abroad. Those dance and theatre professionals who do return to the island of Ireland are often drawn to the bigger cities. Common frustration at a lack of opportunity to engage on an all-island basis more strategically was expressed.

Capacity Building—Areas for development

Based on the discussion outlined above, Workshop 2 exposed a number of potential actions to nurture all-island relationships for the cultural industries of dance and theatre. All of these were noted by participants themselves.

Build on our existing frameworks to foster relations more formally. Participants noted the emphasis in Europe on multi-level governance for fostering cohesion. On the island of Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement facilitates a framework of accountability for nurturing strategic relations. This was argued to likely facilitate greater and more strategically-minded "permission to act" within organisations for individuals interested in building relationships.

Build connections with, within and across local authorities. Local authority border networks were noted as having much experience in all / cross-island relations that extend across a number of different sectors, such as enterprise and tourism and some in the arts field. There appears to be limited engagement between the local authority border networks and the cultural industries.

Build on the interest in networking and sharing information across the island. Participants indicated that Workshop 2 allowed time and space for those working in these areas of practice to reflect.

The Workshop enabled people to network with professionals they would not have typically met. Perhaps, by attending Workshop 2, they have created new working relationships: "The workshop enabled me to liaise with people that I had lost contact with, as well as making new contacts. The island feels smaller as a result" (Workshop 2: Feedback 2022). With consent, we have compiled a list of professional content details of those who attended Workshop 2 and circulated it with those who attended.

Foster knowledge exchange opportunities
Individuals reflected that they gained new knowledge from the Workshop. The Workshop

provided a platform for cultural workers to identify the strengths and limitations of the sector. It was also perceived as helping to facilitate important and pressing conversations. Others gained a new awareness of how people work in different jurisdictions and / or different professional contexts. For many this was their first introduction to the work of the Shared Island Initiative, and a number of participants have indicated interest in either pursuing stronger relationships as a result of learning about the potential supports available with some of those indicating they have made contact to do so as a result.

There is an appetite amongst those who attended for (more) connections to be built. These interests relate to touring work, programming venues, conferences, professional development, and networking events. It was noted that there are particular times of the year when venues in Northern Ireland are looking for performances and that they would be open to hosting these from performers in Ireland.

There is a real appetite to engage across the border through opportunities and existing models, such as Arts Council Ireland's Places Matter Biennial Conference, as well as setting up a meeting exchange between the two local authority arts and cultural officer bodies: ALA:AO (http://www.localartsireland.ie/contact/arts-officers/) in Ireland and its Northern Ireland equivalent.

Raise the profile of cross-border working
It was recognised that much more is happening regarding cross-border collaboration than individuals initially realised. Beyond the research project, there could be greater visibility of the links through different showcase events at venues and festivals (both on and off the island)

Tourism Links
Participants recognised there is a real lack of connection between those working in tourism with those in the dance and theatre industries. It was indicated that those who have attempted to connect with tourism professionals had met challenges. It was noted that building capacity is as much about raising awareness about the potential mutual benefits that exist between dance/theatre and tourism.

Seed Funding
'Go-see' funding opportunities currently exist in which artists may apply for small pots of funding to attend festivals in other jurisdictions, which may lead to other opportunities. It was indicated that there could be a similar practice to seed funding to explore potential cross-border dance and theatre activities.

Research and Development
Gathering to actively participate in a discussion / workshop-based forum allowed for exchanging ideas about what was or wasn't shared practice on the island, as well as how relationships operate. These meeting points provide space for time and reflection not often available within the sporadic and project-based dance and theatre working environment. More opportunities to do so would be welcome, including flexible funding that allows for research and development time, to foster the flexible timelines needed to grow relationships both strategically and in the long-term.

Engage with the Shared Island Initiative and Peace Plus
These initiatives were argued to provide higher level potential for all-island development.

New, strategic initiatives were suggested:
The development of
- A cross-border touring network. Local authority arts and cultural officers in NI are often the programmers of key venues in the area and indicated an interest in exchanging in touring network development.
- An all-island dance company with a physical home / building
- Audience research on the border areas
- Residencies and exchanges on an all-island basis.
- climate action. Groups recognised the shared interest in fostering a more 'carbon neutral' cultural industries and suggested touring / sustainability / climate action as an area for nurturing connections (e.g. Touring Green Book (with TDNI, ITI and others)).
- Tourism related projects: public art / sculpture trail across the island
- Build connections between festivals

References

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