

CREATIVE FACILITATION

Transforming approaches to interdisciplinary and
cross-sector research



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Patton

About the Institute for Medical Humanities, Durham University



The IMH is known for its research culture and its excellence in interdisciplinary medical humanities research. The role of creative facilitator is critical to that success. This report, which involves consultation with a wide number of beneficiaries of creative facilitation, is part of a wider process of understanding and documenting how interdisciplinarity works.

Professor Angela Woods, Director of the Institute for Medical Humanities

This report was written for the Institute for Medical Humanities (IMH) at Durham University by Victoria Patton, with advice and contributions from Mary Robson (IMH Creative Facilitator), Evelyn Tehrani (IMH Senior Research and Engagement Manager) and Prof Angela Woods (IMH Director). James Rákóczi developed the online survey 'Creative Facilitation: Reflections and Feedback' and collated the survey data in a preliminary draft. This work drew on funds from the Wellcome Trust awarded to IMH (Grant no: 209513/Z/17/A). The views and statements expressed in this publication are those of the author and contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Wellcome Trust.

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Executive summary

Durham University's Institute for Medical Humanities (IMH) conducts interdisciplinary research into 'hidden experience' – experiences of health and illness which are marginalized, difficult, unspeakable, unacknowledged or invisible. Creative facilitation – the use of arts-based and experimental techniques to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to collaborate, form meaningful connections and experiment with different methodologies – is integral to the operation of the IMH both intellectually and practically. It underpins the production of many of its initiatives and outputs, including workshops and conferences, public engagement and stakeholder involvement events, publications, grant applications and new research projects.

This report explains the history and practice of creative facilitation at the IMH as practiced by the Institute's dedicated Creative Facilitator, Mary Robson. It aims to capture people's experiences of creative facilitation, its strengths and challenges, and the reach and impact it has had within Durham and beyond – in research and non-academic contexts. Its findings will be useful for researchers, research managers, facilitators, research funding bodies and anyone with an interest in how creative facilitation can be used to foster excellence in interdisciplinary and cross-sector research.

Summary of main findings

Benefits	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Builds cohesive and effective interdisciplinary and cross-sector teams* Empowers everyone to participate* Innovative, intellectually stimulating and exciting* Enables deeply collaborative and participatory ways of working* Improves strategic planning and reflective practice within research projects and across centres and institutions* Flexible and adaptable, particularly to online formats* Engaging and fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* Can be resource and time intensive* Asks a lot from the participants and the facilitator* Requires trust in the process and needs to be linked to clearly defined goals* Requires a high level of skill and training* Should be used wisely* Unless people have first-hand experience of creative facilitation, its benefits are hard to understand and articulate

Reach and impact

Mary Robson has extended the practice of creative facilitation beyond its institutional embedding within the IMH. Its use in 27 different academic and non-academic contexts has involved 20 different organisations in 6 countries outside the UK, including Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the US, Australia and India.

Creative facilitation is currently:

- * Transforming understandings and approaches to interdisciplinary research and cross-sector collaboration
- * Creating positive research and organisational cultures
- * Enhancing skills in facilitation, relationship building and project planning for researchers and professional practitioners
- * Improving pedagogy

Future directions in creative facilitation

Recommendations for the IMH

This report offers the following recommendations to the IMH in relation to developing creative facilitation practice:

- * Continue to place creative facilitation at the heart of the IMH and its activities to foster excellence in interdisciplinary research and cross sector collaboration
- * Ensure that the reasons for employing creative and experimental methods are clearly communicated
- * Explore innovative ways to disseminate information about creative facilitation practice at the IMH to external stakeholders to address lack of awareness of the benefits of this approach
- * Develop robust systems and processes for mapping and monitoring the impact of creative facilitation on academics and professional practitioners across Durham University, within the UK and internationally
- * Continue to advance a training programme in creative facilitation and reflective practice for academics and practitioners to build skill and capacity in this field.

Guidance for others

For researchers who want to incorporate creative facilitation into their academic practice:

- * Invest in creative facilitation training to increase skills and confidence
- * Choose how creative facilitation will be used wisely
- * Leave time for adequate planning
- * Plan for the unexpected
- * Work with a co-facilitator where needed
- * Join or build a community of practice

For PIs or Directors who want to incorporate the role of creative facilitator into their research project, centre or institute:

- * Get informed about what creative facilitation means and how it works
- * Consider the scope of the research project or institute and think hard about what you need creative facilitation for
- * Value the role and resource it appropriately
- * Take care when writing the job description
- * Creative facilitation can lead to unanticipated outcomes so plan for the unexpected
- * Take time to reflect & evaluate



Small group work
at a workshop
facilitated by Mary
Robson (July 2022)


Introduction

1

Durham University's [Institute for Medical Humanities \(IMH\)](#) conducts interdisciplinary research into 'hidden experience' – experiences of health and illness which are marginalized, difficult, unspeakable, unacknowledged or invisible. Creative facilitation (CF) – the use of arts-based and experimental techniques to bring people from diverse backgrounds together to collaborate, form meaningful connections and experiment with different methodologies – is integral to the operation of the IMH both intellectually and practically. It underpins the production of many of its outputs, including workshops and conferences, public engagement and stakeholder involvement events, publications, grant applications and new research projects.

This report explains the history and practice of creative facilitation at the IMH. It aims to capture people's experiences of creative facilitation, its strengths and challenges, and the reach and impact it has had within Durham and beyond – in research and non-academic contexts. It maps the influence of creative facilitation across projects in different disciplines, sectors and countries, and explores how it transforms the way academics and practitioners understand and conduct their research or professional practice. The report makes recommendations for the further development of creative facilitation within the IMH and its dissemination to academic and professional practitioners across the UK and internationally. It also provides advice and guidance for those looking to incorporate creative facilitation into their own interdisciplinary research projects, centres and institutions.

The findings of this report will be useful for researchers, research managers, facilitators, research funding bodies and anyone with an interest in how creative facilitation can be used to foster excellence in interdisciplinary and cross-sector research.



Sensory objects at an interdisciplinary workshop (March 2022)

Information from different sources informs this report. An online survey in Qualtrics was shared on social media and circulated to known attendees of previous events facilitated by Robson between 2011 and 2022. Box 1 below summarises the number of survey respondents, their sector backgrounds and their experience attending events where creative facilitation occurred.

Other sources include interviews with creative facilitators and selected respondents to the online survey; articles for *Working Knowledge*¹ exploring creative facilitation as a form of transferable methodology for interdisciplinary research; and other relevant documents within the IMH including job descriptions, funding bids, event records (e.g. *Padlets*²) and training materials. The report is also informed by extensive conversations with Robson exploring her role within the IMH and reflecting on her creative facilitation practice.

1 *Working Knowledge* is a collection of online resources devoted to the practicalities of interdisciplinary research. See workingknowledge.webspace.durham.ac.uk. Three articles informed this report: '[The Creative Facilitator](#)', '[Voice Club](#)' and '[Transferable Methodology](#)'.

2 Padlet is a digital noticeboard which can be populated with rich media including text, weblinks, images and video. It updates instantly so that anyone sharing the Padlet can see new content right away. See en-gb.padlet.com

Box 1: Survey Respondents

36 individuals completed an in-depth online survey on 'Creative Facilitation: Reflections and Feedback'.

Of the 36 survey completers, the majority were either from the research (64%) or education (36%) sectors (see Appendix A for details). 19% identified as being from arts & culture, 8% from health, 3% from policy and 8% from the NGO or charity sector.

Approximately two thirds (66%) of survey respondents indicated that they had attended more than one event facilitated by Mary. 44% (n=16) could be described as highly familiar with the use of creative facilitation, having indicated that they attended either 'more than four' or 'countless' events in which it was deployed. Appendix A shows the number of events attended by each survey respondent.

What is creative facilitation?

3

The [Institute for Cultural Affairs UK](http://ica-uk.org.uk) defines facilitation as a process by which a person works with a team or group to enable and support them to ‘achieve their objectives in a way that involves and respects all contributions, builds ownership and releases the potential of the group and its members’.³ Creative facilitation does this through the use of arts-based techniques or by engendering experimental and creative ways of working. Within the context of interdisciplinary and cross-sector research, the creative facilitator develops processes that enable people from diverse backgrounds – for example, academics from different disciplines, practitioners, policy makers, third sector organisations and people with lived experience – to come together to collaborate, form meaningful connections, and experiment with different methodologies to generate new research questions and forms of knowledge.

Facilitators are often contracted on a freelance basis for short pieces of work – to convene an away day for a department, brainstorm a new idea for a company, or engage a particular stakeholder community in a one-off event. By contrast, the role of creative facilitator at the IMH is a full-time position held by Mary Robson. Robson is not an academic but trained as a theatre designer. She has a background in arts in health and education, as well as a formal qualification in facilitation. Robson therefore occupies a position ‘outside of academic hierarchies and independent of any particular disciplinary perspective.’⁴ At the same time, she is a central part of the core IMH team (see section 4). This ‘double location – “inside” but also “independent” – constitutes a unique vantage point’⁵ from which to understand and draw out the creative potential inherent in interdisciplinary and cross-sector ways of working.

Box 2 overleaf outlines some of the techniques that are central to Robson’s creative facilitation practice.



Mary Robson,
creative facilitator at
IMH

3 ica-uk.org.uk/what-we-mean-by-facilitation

4 M. Robson and A. Woods, 'Working Knowledge: The Creative Facilitator', 2015. p. 3

5 Woods & Robson, 'Working Knowledge: The Creative Facilitator', 2015. p. 3

Box 2: A creative facilitation toolkit

A creative facilitator will deploy a variety of tools drawn from different areas of expertise and practice. Examples include:

Clean Set Up

A technique devised by Caitlin Walker and Dee Berridge to help a group or individual work out what they want from a particular event or programme of activity and how this can be achieved.

The facilitator follows the format below:

Question 1: For this meeting/event/session/year to go exactly as I/we/you would want – what will it be like?

Question 2: For it to go like that, I/we/you need to be like what?

Question 3: For it to go like that and for me/us/you to be like that, what support and resources do I/you/we need?

Focused Conversation

A guided conversation technique based on a specific method of questioning. It helps people process information and reach their own thoughtful conclusions through discussing and answering a series of questions based on four levels of thinking:

Objective – dealing with the five senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) to get out the objective data (e.g. What are the actual facts?)

Reflective – related to personal reactions, emotional responses and associations (e.g. How do you feel? What do we prefer?)

Interpretive – to elicit ideas, meanings, and implications (e.g. What is the meaning? What can we learn?)

Decisional – concerned with resolution (e.g. What actions can we take?)

When using this technique, the facilitator always follows the order of the questions (ORID), adjusting the number of questions in each area to meet their needs.

Mapping Exercises

Using images (e.g. of islands or buildings) as a prompt, the facilitator provides a range of creative materials and asks the group to draw their own maps or blueprints to create a visual representation of the topic under discussion (see section 5.1 for an example).

Sticky Wall

A sheet of thin nylon coated with temporary spray-on adhesive and affixed to the wall.

When using a sticky wall, the facilitator gives all participants a stack of small cards or post-it notes (sometimes using different colours to represent different topics). The group is asked to place ONE idea, thought or suggestion on each card and stick it on the wall. With the group's guidance, the facilitator moves the cards around to put them under categories or place them in like groups.

Unconditional positive regard

The basic acceptance and support of a person regardless of what they say or do. It was popularised by the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers in 1956.



The history of creative facilitation at the IMH begins with [Hearing the Voice](#) (HtV, 2012–2022) – a ten-year interdisciplinary study of voice-hearing funded by the Wellcome Trust.⁶ HtV was the first research project within Durham University and globally to have employed a dedicated creative facilitator since its inception. Robson was initially employed two days per week on a freelance basis. As a core member of the research team, she had three main responsibilities:

- * Designing and facilitating fortnightly meetings of the research group ('Voice Club')
- * Facilitating public events with academic, clinical and public stakeholders
- * Leading on public engagement through the arts, including the production of short films and documentaries, art exhibitions, literary festival and creative writing events, as well as experimental theatre and sound installations.

Hearing the Voice was awarded the [2020 UKRI Medical Humanities Award for Best Research](#)⁷ and formed the basis of two impact case studies in Durham's 2021 REF submission: '[Normalising voice-hearing: from phenomenology to clinical practice](#)' and '[New perspectives on hearing voices: literary illuminations of auditory verbal hallucination](#)'.⁸ The 118 Voice Clubs convened by Robson over the course of the project – which became key spaces in which to exchange, challenge and develop ideas, generate interdisciplinary research questions, experiment with new methods and enable the participation of more than 140 collaborators – are institutionally regarded as one of the core reasons behind its success.

Inspired by Hearing the Voice, the freelance role of creative facilitator was built into two further interdisciplinary research projects originating from the IMH: [Hubbub](#) (the first project residency at the Wellcome Collection's Hub space) and [Life of Breath](#).⁹ In Life of Breath – a 5-year study of breath and breathlessness led by the University of Bristol and Durham University and supported by a Wellcome Senior Investigator Award – Robson facilitated 'Breathing Space', quarterly meetings of the research team. She played a key role in successfully establishing the community of the project across two geographically distinct sites, supported effective research planning and review, and used techniques drawn from creative facilitation within workshops, conferences and other events to stimulate new research priorities and collaborations (e.g. between neuroscientific and movement approaches to breathless people).

The role of creative facilitator is now a full-time, fixed-term position at Durham University, supported by a Wellcome Trust Development Grant for the Institute of Medical Humanities. It is core to the operations of the IMH and central to shaping and articulating its values and research culture. There is, to our knowledge, no other formal position within an academic research context in which the tools and techniques of creative facilitation are consistently utilised to foster excellence in interdisciplinary research. Robson currently leads structures within the Institute designed to facilitate cross-cutting connections, the integration of our six different research strands, and the development of our creative programmes. This includes planning and convening The Atrium, a regular research forum within the IMH modelled on Voice Club and Breathing Space. She is also spearheading the development of a new training and development programme in creative facilitation to address the increasing demand for her role and competencies across the field.

More detailed information about the role of Creative Facilitator at the IMH is offered in Box 3.

6 See hearingthevoice.org for more information.

7 See ukri.org/news/winners-announced-for-2020-medical-humanities-awards/

8 See tinyurl.com/HTV-ICS-Psych and tinyurl.com/HTV-ICS-English

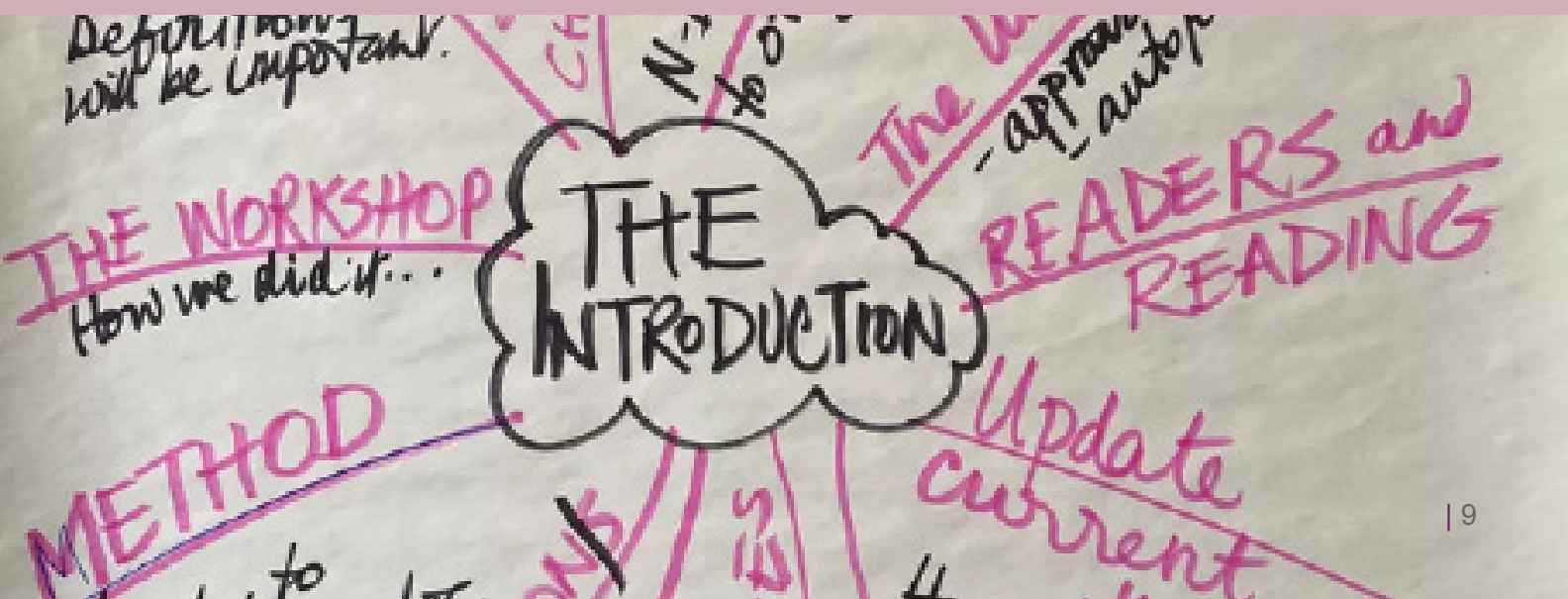
9 See lifeofbreath.webspace.durham.ac.uk and wellcome.org/news/what-our-hub-residency-taught-us-about-rest-work-and-play

Box 3: Creative Facilitator at IMH – A closer look at the job description

The Creative Facilitator at IMH works across levels – supporting individual researchers as well as engaging research teams, project leaders, and wider institutional and community stakeholders – at all stages of the research process, from initial ideas to implementation.

The role involves working closely with Institute and Project Directors to foster excellence in interdisciplinary research in four key ways:

- i. **Developing research agendas** through...
 - * One-on-one conversations with individual researchers and prospective PIs to explore ideas for new research strands and projects.
 - * Bringing potential academic and non-academic partners together at the early developmental stages of research and cross-sector collaborations to exchange perspectives, identify and agree priorities, and develop new research funding applications.
 - * Supporting established teams to monitor progress against agreed outcomes and plan future research and engagement activity at both the individual and project level.
- ii. **Advancing the practice of creative facilitation** by...
 - * Convening and facilitating academic events such as research meetings, workshops, roundtables, and major international conferences, as well as public engagement and stakeholder involvement events that bring together people with lived experience, health professionals, advocacy groups, policy makers, third sector and charitable organisations.
 - * Developing and using new methods and resources for creative facilitation and reflective practice within the IMH.
- iii. **Disseminating research and creative facilitation practice** through...
 - * Identifying, overseeing and evaluating the production of creative ways of to disseminate research (e.g. through films, art exhibitions and festival events)
 - * Contributing to high-level written publications (including journal articles, strategy documents, and funding bids) as well as making formal presentations at national and international conferences and workshops.
 - * Developing academic and professional practitioner skills in interdisciplinary and cross-sector collaboration through one-to-one supervision of individuals, seminars, workshops, masterclasses and the development of a large-scale creative facilitation training programme.
- iv. **Playing an active leadership role within the IMH** through...
 - * Serving on the operations and strategy groups responsible for the high-level management of the Institute and its individual research projects.
 - * Developing wider infrastructures and processes that ensure ethical and values-based research and engagement practices across the Institute and contribute to the development of a positive and nurturing research culture.



Contributors to this report (e.g. survey respondents, interviewees) have all experienced creative facilitation through organising and participating in events facilitated by Robson either within the IMH and its projects, at other UK or international universities, or within non-academic contexts such as the health, arts & culture, or charity sectors. They identified the following benefits:

5.1 Building cohesive and effective interdisciplinary and cross-sector teams



From the outset, Mary has enabled a working space within Voice Club in which senior professors are comfortable learning from postdoctoral fellows, and more junior staff are open to new insights on their detailed knowledge from experts in different disciplines.¹⁰

97% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that creative helped with team building & developing new relationships (see Appendix B). At the beginning of an interdisciplinary research project, this team building can involve using visual mapping exercises to plot individual starting points, help team members to get up to speed with different knowledge areas, and understand each other's diverse disciplinary, professional, or personal perspectives. Creative facilitation makes teamwork and sharing across a large interdisciplinary group easier. It encourages respect for different disciplinary methods and forms of knowledge, leading to a team culture where diverse viewpoints are valued, and criticism is seen as constructive. It also helps team members forge meaningful connections with each other and promotes the creation of strong, productive and long-lasting working relationships.

¹⁰ J. Macnaughton, 'Working Knowledge: Transferable Methodology', 2015.

Box 4: Voice Club #1 – The Plan of St Gall Adapted extract from *Working Knowledge: Voice Club*

The first Voice Club (November 2012) centred on the Plan of St Gall, a ninth-century monastery plan whose purpose was to act as a 'meditation machine'. Each participant was invited to create their own blueprint or ground plan of their knowledge of voice-hearing: what they knew, where they'd got to in previous work, and where they saw themselves going over the course of the project.

The resulting plans, diagrams and mind-maps were then the focus of conversations in small groups. Working in this way gave people the opportunity to articulate ideas and feelings they may not otherwise have felt comfortable sharing. For example, one of the humanities post-docs could explain that the forbidding mountain range on her map symbolised cognitive psychology, which she was approaching with some trepidation.

Asking people to make this initial attempt to orient themselves in relation to the topic was very valuable. It provided a constructive and non-threatening context within which to establish, map and share the team's varied starting points.

Image: Plan of St Gall.

5.2 Empowering everyone to participate

Creative facilitation actively involves all members of a group in discussions. Robson uses small group work, coloured cards and sticky walls to share and regroup ideas, encourage participation from quieter group members, and make sessions accessible to visual thinkers who prefer to see ideas listed rather than hear them aurally. 97% of survey respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that CF made them feel comfortable to contribute their own views to the group.

Creative facilitation also has advantages for team leaders, including principal investigators and research directors who are traditionally tasked with responsibility for convening research reading groups, or departmental or institute research strategy, planning and review meetings. 75% of survey participants endorsed the statement that a key strength of creative facilitation is that it allows team leaders to fully participate in the discussion. The principal investigator of an EU Horizon 2020 funded project reported how employing Robson to plan and facilitate a major international workshop was immensely helpful and enriching: 'it was a great relief to me to be able to "hand over" control of this event and just become a participant and able to think more freely. This took the pressure off me and allowed for a different dynamic to develop.' This sentiment was echoed by others, who noted that a creative facilitator enables all those in attendance to 'focus on, and learn from, the topic of the day without concern for, or involvement with, issues around structure, flow, and moderating of discussions.'

By freeing team leaders to become participants, creative facilitation provides time and space for all team members to think deeply and creates a non-hierarchical structure in which everyone is encouraged to take ownership of the tone and direction of discussions, as well as the outputs of conferences, workshops and research planning meetings.



Participants at a creative facilitation workshop with Mary Robson (July 2022)

5.3 Innovative, intellectually stimulating and exciting



... what is exciting in the process is the potential to observe in others, and experience in ourselves, a series of dawning realisations that we had not considered before ...¹¹

Creative facilitation is commonly experienced as innovative and intellectually exciting, enabling participants to exchange, challenge and develop ideas, generate new research questions, and experiment with novel methods and ways of working. 94% of survey respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that CF enabled them or someone else at the event they attended to come up with something original. Participants at research meetings, workshops and conferences facilitated by Robson indicated that they valued the small group sessions, mapping exercises and ‘provocations rather than longer, fully formed research presentations’ as they enabled ‘more exploratory discussion’ and gave them ‘valuable time to formulate thoughts’ and ‘think more freely’. Other survey respondents remarked:

“Making maps and drawings ... has made us look at things in a different way.”

“... the process of working to produce a shared sticky wall of ideas that then reveals patterns and occasionally unexpected connections is a real strength.”

The processes facilitated by Robson support participants to question thinking in other disciplines or sectors from their own perspective, but also to go back to their own discipline or profession with new insights that challenge preconceived ideas and may change deeply entrenched ways of thinking and working. Event participants were regularly struck by the productivity of the group, a strong sense of progress and working together to create new knowledge:

“For me, the best thing was how I could see new ideas coming together, how I could see us being productive as a result of Mary’s facilitation.”

5.4 Enabling deeply collaborative and participatory ways of working

“I got to experience a truly collaborative and interactive academic space for almost the first time.”

Creative facilitation fosters deeply collaborative and participatory ways of working among people from a wide variety of communities and backgrounds, a core requirement for engaged research and co-production projects. 86% of survey respondents endorsed the statement that creative facilitation helps with collaborative decision making and reaching consensus. (6% disagreed and 8% said the statement was not applicable to the events they attended.) Participants at events facilitated by Robson left with a strong ‘sense of creating something together,’ a ‘heightened sense of involvement, achievement and enjoyment’ and felt that their ‘own personal input was important to the final outcome.’ Delegates at conferences and workshops were struck by the ‘constant and energising participation from all involved’ as well as the generous spirit in which ideas were shared. Creative facilitation thus helps to develop a culture of participation in research in which a diversity of voices, experiences and perspectives inform and influence decisions and research directions, challenging the top-down approaches traditionally found in academia, and promoting democratic and ethical processes essential for true collaboration and partnership.

11 Macnaughton, ‘Working Knowledge: Transferable Methodology’, 2015.

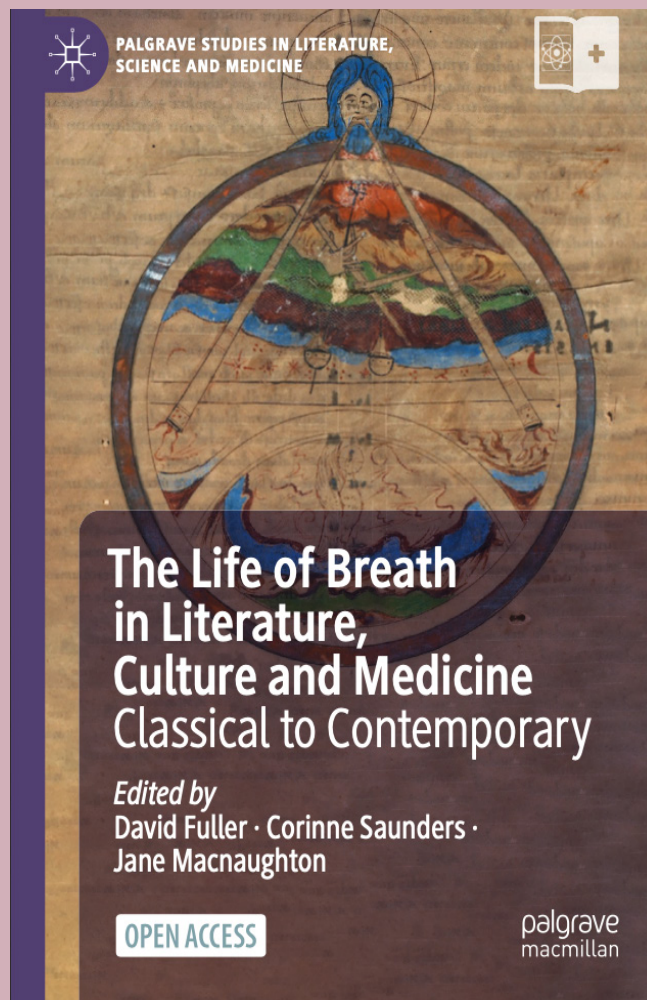
Box 5: The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine

A key output of one of the IMH's flagship research projects, [The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine](#)¹² is an edited collection of essays exploring 'breath and breathing in literature and culture, which provides crucial insights into the history of medicine, health and the emotions, the foundations of beliefs concerning body, spirit and world, the connections between breath and creativity, and the phenomenology of breath and breathlessness.'¹³

The volume grew out of a three-day conference held at St John's College Durham in July 2018. Papers at the conference were structured chronologically, beginning with the classical and medieval periods and continuing through the eras all the way through to the twenty-first century. Led by Mary, a small team of postdoctoral researchers (dubbed 'The Feedback Loop') were invited to engage intellectually with the conference presentations and pull out the themes emerging from each session. They created a 'working wall' of ideas, insights and connections that shaped the reflections and concluding thoughts delivered by [Professor Peter Adey](#)¹⁴ in the final session.

Creative facilitation is described by the editors as playing a crucial role in the success of the conference.

It fostered 'exchange within and between panels, and across the whole conference membership' and enabled 'creative dialogue between periods and between disciplines.'¹⁵ The use of different experimental and interactive techniques, the editors write, 'was fundamental to the ways in which participants considered the focus of their individual contributions in the context of the subject overall, and to the ways in which the papers were developed into essays for [the] collection.'¹⁶ The final chapter by Peter Adey directly reflects the themes and insights depicted on the working wall, married with a new awareness of breath and breathlessness brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.



12 link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-74443-4

13 Fuller, D., Saunders, C., and Macnaughton, J. (eds). 2021. *The Life of Breath in Literature, Culture and Medicine: Classical to Contemporary*. Palgrave Studies in Literature and Medicine. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

14 [pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/peter-adey\(f18a8880-6aba-4e77-9dab-bdf5baf0d9e7\).html](https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/peter-adey(f18a8880-6aba-4e77-9dab-bdf5baf0d9e7).html)

15 Ibid, p. xiii

16 Ibid

Working Wall at
The Life of Breath:
History, Texts,
Contexts conference
(July 2018)



Box 6: Participatory research with Bidi workers in Vellore, India

In December 2019, Mary worked with Pradeep Narayanan from the [Praxis institute for Participatory Practices](http://praxisindia.org)¹⁷ in New Delhi to co-facilitate a three-day workshop with 11 bidi workers as part of a larger piece of participatory research exploring the circumstances, experiences, and aspirations of bidi (leaf cigarette) workers in Vellore, India. Creative facilitation generated a set of values and intentions in response to the question 'how will we best work together?' that set the tone for the discussions. The workshops enabled all bidi workers to have a voice, weigh up the positives and negatives of bidi work, and open up new possibilities for alternative lives to tobacco. The results of the study were later published in the journal of [Nicotine and Tobacco Research](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12014-020-0969-2)¹⁸.

Image above: Participatory research workshop with Bidi workers in Vellore, India (December 2019).

¹⁷ praxisindia.org

¹⁸ [dro.dur.ac.uk/35569/2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12014-020-0969-2)

... are staying at the
... hotel in Durham which is
... rately a 10 minute walk
... the Institute for Medical
... anities, see below photos for
... /v to get from hotel to the
...orkshop space (details about
... the workshop space also on this
... padlet)

...n the side entrance



Box 7: (Neuro)divergent textualities

On 12–13 April 2022, the IMH hosted a two-day hybrid workshop for contributors to (Neuro)divergent Textualities, a forthcoming collection on neurodivergent literary studies edited by Drs [Louise Creechan](#), [Jenny Bergenmar](#) and [Anna Stenning](#)¹⁹. Many workshop participants described themselves as neurodivergent.

Working with the event convenors, Mary used a range of different methods and creative facilitation techniques to support everyone to participate and make the event accessible for different learning and communication styles, including:

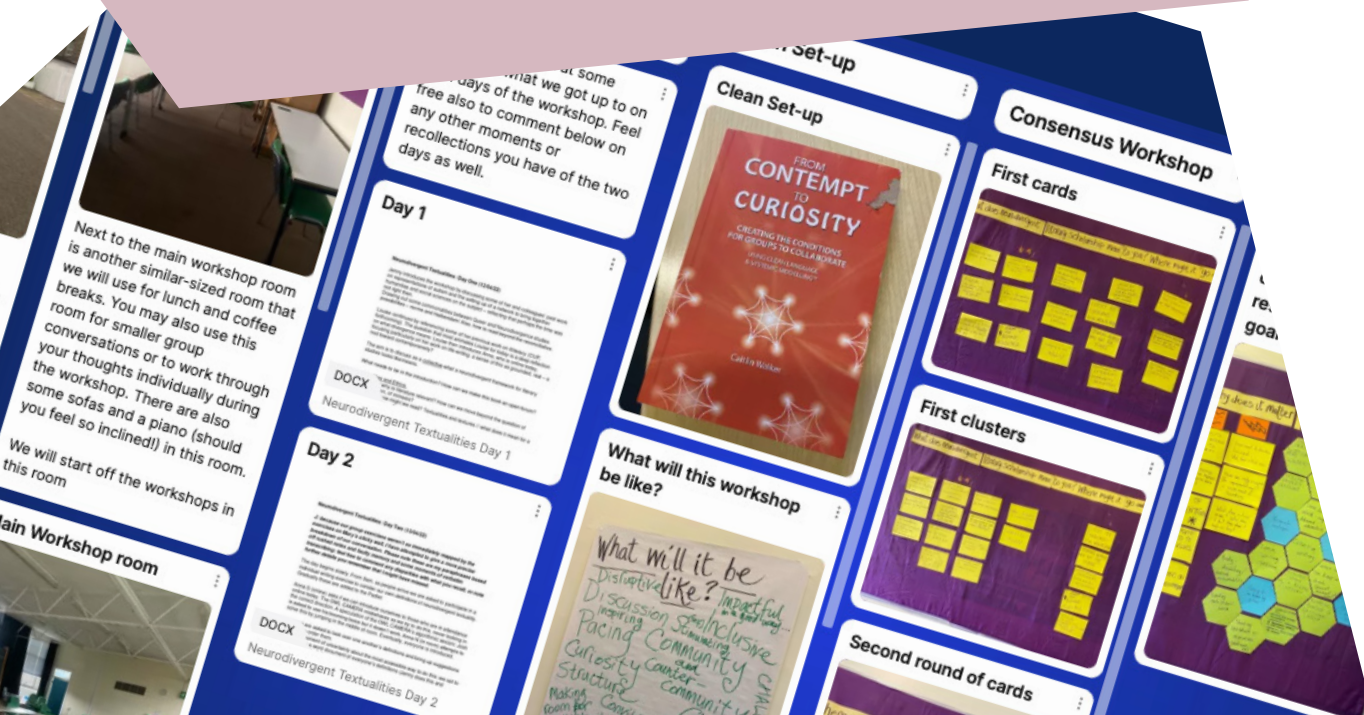
- * A consensus workshop using coloured cards and a sticky wall so that people could contribute either verbally or in writing
- * A note taker to record the discussions and share these with the group online
- * A suite of resources on the event Padlet, including a photo guide to directions from the accommodation to the venue, and images of the spaces where the workshop would be held so that people could familiarise themselves with this in advance.

The workshop followed a ‘relaxed’ structure as established by ‘relaxed theatre’ practices. This meant contributors could stim as required, could move around the space, wear headphones, and interact in whatever ways they felt most comfortable. Sensory objects, including pipe-cleaners and fidget toys, were provided. There was also a quiet room where people could go to decompress during or between sessions.

Reflecting on the event afterwards, participants said that these techniques ‘made everyone feel comfortable and included and, as a result, people were happy to speak up and take things at their own pace’. Creative facilitation transformed the event: ‘it was a game changer’ and ‘it felt like a paradigm shift in an academic space’. Contributors to the edited collection emerged with new ideas and plans for the introduction and individual book chapters, as well as ‘a clearer vision for a neurodivergent literary studies framework’ going forward.

Image below: Padlet for contributors to (Neuro)Divergent Textualities workshop (April 2022).

¹⁹ See durham.ac.uk/staff/louise-creechan, gu.se/en/about/find-staff/jennybergenmar and ahc.leeds.ac.uk/english/staff/3076/anna-stenning



5.5 Creating safe, equal and inclusive spaces

“A brilliant workshop in which diverse people could fully participate and be heard.”

A further strength of creative facilitation is that it creates safe, accessible and inclusive spaces. 100% of survey respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the use of creative facilitation at the events they attended created a supportive and welcoming space in which everyone was fully supported to participate; 94% that it helped participants explore diverse viewpoints in a respectful manner; and 91% that it meant that different forms of expertise (e.g. academic, clinical, experiential and professional) were recognised and valued. 86% of participants endorsed the statement that creative facilitation helped to reduce pre-existing power imbalances within the group. (11% said this statement was not applicable to the events they attended.) Many reflected that it was ‘accessible for people with different starting points and learning styles’ and allowed ‘all voices to be heard’ – an important factor when working with diverse communities, especially those that are highly stigmatised or marginalised. For example:

“We had a mixture of people including health professionals and people who use mental health services. In this situation the power dynamics can be pronounced and we wanted a facilitator and method of facilitation that would mitigate this. Creative Facilitation did this and helped ensure that all participants were able to contribute.”

“... [Creative Facilitation] made everyone feel comfortable and safe ... The events were also friendly and inclusive ... This was really important as we had people who did not have a lot of experience of events like this and sometimes some voices are less heard.”

“The processes and events Mary has led on have been incredibly valuable to the participants. Their views, ideas and opinions have been heard and honoured and this in itself is essential and important for the work we do.”

Creative facilitation has also helped shape an inclusive organisational culture within the IMH – for example, Robson has co-developed a protocol for events informed by her own practice that are now used in all IMH events, whether facilitated by her or not.

Participants at ‘The Fundamentals of Creative Facilitation - The Pilot’ (July 2022) standing in front of the Clean Set Up for the event.



Box 8: Listen Up!

During the summer of 2016, Mary joined [Rai Waddingham](#) (voice-hearer, mental health trainer and Chair of the [English Hearing Voices Network](#))²⁰ to facilitate a series of four creative workshops in Bradford, Leeds and Durham. The aim of the workshops was to enable young people who hear voices to come together to share experiences, challenge stigma and create artworks for an [exhibition on voice-hearing](#)²¹ that sent a positive message to other young voice-hearers and their families.

Many of the 11 participants had recently been discharged from children and young people's mental health in-patient units or were living in supported accommodation. In addition to experiences of psychosis, some had other complex mental and physical health needs, including paranoia, anxiety, vision and mobility impairments. Using a range of different techniques drawn from creative facilitation and peer support practice, Mary and Rai created a safe and welcoming space in the workshops and ensured that everyone was fully supported to participate.

Although some people found attending the first session 'nerve-wracking', they ultimately found it helpful to explore shared experiences and different ways of representing these in a group setting. ('It was amazing to realise that other young people like me feel like this'.) The workshops had a huge impact. As a result of taking part, the young people reported reduced social isolation, self-stigma and blame, as well as increased self-confidence and hope for the future. All created [artworks](#) of which they were proud.²² One posted on social media:

Today was one of the proudest days of my life. Finally saw the Hearing the Voice exhibition in person. A world first (we think) exhibition on voice hearing. Myself and other young people who hear voices worked so hard to create work for our case. The best feeling? Having my artwork next to originals of fellow voice hearers': VIRGINIA WOOLF and Julian of Norwich!! WHAAAAT!! This time two years ago I was curled up on the floor of a hospital room unable to deal with anything, thanks to projects like these I'm alive and kicking. An amazing, amazing day. I am so grateful.

Facebook post, 10 December 2016



Listen Up!
artworks (2016)

20 See [behindthelabel.co.uk](#) and [hearing-voices.org](#)

21 [hearingvoicesdu.org](#)

22 To view the artworks, see [hearingvoicesdu.org/listen-up](#)



Creative facilitation being used at a Hearing the Voice project planning day, 2018.

5.6 Improving strategic research and engagement planning and review

75% of survey respondents endorsed the statement that creative facilitation contributed significantly to project planning. (22% said the statement was not applicable to the events they attended.) Within the IMH, creative approaches to participatory strategic planning have been used to shape the Institute's research and engagement agenda as well as the direction of individual projects. For example, at the beginning of Life of Breath, Robson invited team members to share their vision of what success for the project would look like and then facilitated a discussion in which the team reflected on current reality and developed a realistic timeline of activity to achieve their goals. Creative facilitation can also be used to map core project and institute work alongside that of individual team members, enabling management teams to get a visual overview of activities, plan accordingly, and monitor progress against agreed milestones.

5.7 Flexible and adaptable, particularly to online formats

Creative facilitation is flexible and adaptable to a variety of formats, including online. During the restrictions introduced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Robson facilitated a slew of collaborative digital events, ranging from online poetry workshops using metaphor to explore how weather affects people's daily lives to creating 'islands' in [MURAL](#)²³ to visually articulate and explore a unified identity, impact and influence strategy for the Centre for Society and Mental Health at Kings' College London. [Padlet](#)²⁴ continues to be used extensively within IMH events to ensure everyone can participate and co-produce a comprehensive record of the workshop or meeting. One of the organisers of these events said:

"The workshops were very well planned and highly participatory in ways that overcame the problems of communicating online, creating intimacy and a strong group ethos."

23 MURAL is a digital whiteboard tool that contains a range of visual collaboration features such as sticky notes, diagramming and gifs. See mural.co

24 Padlet is a digital noticeboard that allows users to share rich content (e.g. text, weblinks, images and video) in real time. See padlet.com

5.8 Engaging and fun

Finally, 97% of survey respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that creative facilitation kept engagement levels high throughout the event. Participants remarked that it was ‘fun sharing thoughts in a creative and out of the box way’ and that they left events feeling more motivated and imbued with a fresh sense of excitement and enthusiasm for their work. ‘For what may be the first time’, one survey respondent commented, ‘I left an academic event feeling completely energised and happy (not drained, feeling like I’m stupid, frustrated and grumpy as is more often the case)’. Another remarked:



My prior experience of attending research workshops in my former department had been very dispiriting. There was an atmosphere of inhibition and boredom, and it was not uncommon for a sizeable proportion of the participants to spend the session staring at their mobile phones or covertly answering e-mails. They were clearly completely disengaged. I got nothing from these events and hated attending. The quality of the discussions was often very poor. It was only when I attended a workshop ... [at IMH] that I realised just how bad these departmental workshops had been, and how much more useful they could have been if properly managed and approached in the right spirit.”



Figure 1: A word cloud displaying responses to the creative facilitation survey question ‘What three words would you use to describe the events you attended?’

All survey respondents reported positive experiences of creative facilitation. The prominence of ‘engaging’ and ‘fun’ suggests that participants enjoyed and were actively involved in the events they attended. The prevalence of ‘creative’, ‘inclusive’, ‘collaborative’, ‘inspiring’ and ‘safe’ suggests they valued the use of arts-based and other experimental techniques, the opportunity to work in partnership, and the creation of a supportive and inclusive space for sharing ideas, taking risks, and thinking differently together.

Survey respondents and other contributors to this report also identified a series of challenges that are relevant to creative facilitators, event participants, and those thinking about bringing creative facilitation into play in their own projects or organisations:

6.1 Can be resource and time intensive

Creative facilitation can be resource intensive, requiring careful planning and considerable time to prepare for events. Creating a welcoming and inviting space, choosing activities that support a strong group ethos and facilitate the gathering and sharing of multiple perspectives, and structuring sessions so that the event flows well requires attention to detail, patience and thought. For example, Robson estimates that preparing for a research team meeting like Voice Club – which typically ran for 3 hours and included a 30-minute refreshment and comfort break – required at least 5 or 6 hours' preparation time, involving conversations with researchers to plan the content and structure of the session, briefing invited guests, organising materials and preparing the venue. The creative facilitation of a two-day workshop (e.g. the (Neuro)divergent Textualities workshop) needs at least 3-days' preparation time, while a large-scale online conference with more than 1000 delegates can require up to 15 days' preparatory work over the course of a six-month period within the context of a large team of researchers, managers, administrators and technical specialists.

6.2 Asks a lot from the participants and the facilitator

Creative facilitation can also be demanding of workshop participants, requiring high levels of energy and concentration. It is sometimes 'difficult to be creative to order' and participants can find themselves 'tired as well as stimulated at the end of these events because of the focus and engagement they call for'. The facilitator must also be highly skilled, with the ability to sit with tension, manage difficult conversations, and the flexibility to 'improvise and change direction when responding to the room.' One survey respondent noted:

"It was challenging ... and tiring. But Mary's facilitation overcame all that and made it a wonderful experience!"

6.3 Requires 'trust in the process' and needs to be linked to clearly defined goals

A further challenge relates to the use of novel and experimental methods. Creative facilitation requires high levels of engagement from group members, a willingness to take risks, and question their own disciplinary or professional perspectives and entrenched ways of working. A minority of survey respondents reported tensions arising from event participants feeling 'pushed out of their comfort zone' or finding it difficult to engage in activities due to a lack of 'trust in the process'. (Creative facilitators are aware that some people find the way their processes undermine traditional academic hierarchies challenging, and report using tools to mitigate against this during sessions.) It is also crucially important that the purpose of creative facilitation is clearly communicated and linked to specifically defined goals. Reflecting on the use of creative facilitation in IMH strategy and planning meetings, one survey respondent remarked:

"At times, the means of CF were not paired to clear ends for those in attendance. Seeking high levels of engagement without a clear understanding of why sometimes felt trying. Also, the events sometimes remained in a middle ground between higher-level abstract thinking and concrete goal-oriented action – a sort of perpetual collaborative brainstorming that at times felt desultory."

6.4 Should be used wisely

A small number of survey respondents reported that the use of creative facilitation to support discussions around research and engagement strategy within the IMH sometimes felt repetitive and that the emphasis on mitigating power imbalances and disrupting traditional hierarchies could occasionally make it difficult to solidify decisions and firm up action plans. Other minor criticisms of creative facilitation within the context of academic conferences and workshops included the need for more time to ask questions of speakers and digest presentations before moving on to teamwork or group discussion. Some survey respondents, reflecting on the use of short talks and provocations within workshops and conferences, also reported missing some of the structure and detailed information afforded by more traditional formats. ('It really would be helpful if all presenters had slides or else circulated their papers – I frequently missed out on key names, titles of works, or only partially grasped quotes because I don't quite hear as well or quickly.')

These criticisms point to the importance of choosing methods of working wisely. Sometimes creative facilitation isn't appropriate and more traditional formats – say, structuring a seminar around a research presentation or chairing a project planning meeting – can be more effective.


6.5 Requires a high level of skill and training

Robson is a highly skilled and respected practitioner with a formal qualification in facilitation, and over 25 years' experience in creative facilitation and reflective practice. She has worked in a variety of different academic and non-academic settings and with diverse communities including children and young people who hear voices, chronic pain sufferers, and tobacco workers in Vellore (see Appendix C). While many survey respondents reported having used clean set up, mapping exercises, sticky walls for consensus building, and other techniques used by Robson, some currently lack the confidence to incorporate creative facilitation into their practice. 64% of survey respondents were interested in the creative facilitation training programme that is currently being developed within the IMH, suggesting there is a strong demand and need for skill and capacity building in this area.

6.6 Benefits of creative facilitation are often poorly understood by and difficult to articulate to people who haven't experienced it

This report identifies a lack of awareness of the benefits of creative facilitation outside Durham's IMH. 'When you go to other departments,' one respondent remarked, 'people aren't even aware that creative facilitation is a skill set and that it makes such a large difference. You can really feel the difference in workshops where someone has carefully thought through what this kind of event needs and contexts where they haven't'. This lack of awareness is even more striking in continental Europe where 'creative facilitation is looked upon with suspicion.' One researcher based in the Netherlands said: 'I would love to have a creative facilitator on all my projects, but ... I don't get the funding for it, because it's just very difficult to get this idea going on the Continent'. The advantages of creative facilitation are sometimes hard to articulate; the best way to get people to appreciate its benefits is to get them to experience it themselves in action.






I now understand facilitation as being one of the most important skills to develop as a researcher and academic.

Creative facilitation as practiced by Robson has extended beyond its institutional embedding within the IMH to use in 27 different academic and non-academic contexts, across 20 different organisations, and in 6 different countries outside the UK, including Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the US, Australia and India.

Appendix C maps the details of the different contexts in which creative facilitation has been embraced. In each example, Robson was employed on a freelance basis by the host institution. Often this was after the organiser had attended events facilitated by Robson and could see how her methods and practice could benefit their own project.

This report identifies four ways in which creative facilitation is transforming academic and professional practice within Durham, across the UK and internationally:

7.1 Changing understandings of and approaches to interdisciplinary research and cross-sector collaboration



I have talked about events led by Mary Robson in many contexts since my time at Hearing the Voice, in the positions I have held subsequently at other universities. They have left a lasting effect on me, and they have changed the way I think about interdisciplinarity and collaborative working. I am yet to come across anything quite like it in any other contexts.

Robson has shaped the practice of researchers through planning and delivering interdisciplinary development events, participatory research action initiatives, and research and engagement strategy development days at universities across the UK and internationally, including the University of Exeter, King's College London, the Academy of Finland, the University of Groningen, and the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has also used her expertise in a range of non-academic settings, including working with care experienced young people for a charity based in the North of England, delivering group sessions for chronic pain sufferers in a local GP practice, and facilitating public and patient involvement initiatives for NHS-facing leadership collaborations.

Academic contributors to this report said that they now appreciated the value of creative facilitation: it has increased their knowledge of specific subject areas, ways of working in other disciplines and sectors, and led to new and unexpected collaborations, as well as providing a better understanding of interdisciplinarity and the medical humanities in general. In many cases, creative facilitation influenced the direction of their research as individuals, within projects, across departments, centres and institutions, leading to new ideas for book chapters, journal articles, grant applications and novel research projects, as well as concrete outputs (e.g. the development of a Child Centred Disaster Management Framework for Europe in a Horizon 2020 project).



Creative facilitation has also enhanced researchers' understandings of what meaningful collaboration looks like and improved the way they collaborate on their own projects, particularly with non-academic partners. One survey respondent remarked: 'Virtually everything in my professional life changed. I now seek collaborations regularly ... and have a generally more optimistic orientation to what can be achieved in the University.' Others reported that their experience of creative facilitation led to greater awareness of potential power differentials when working with stakeholder communities and strategies to help mitigate them, as well as increased confidence to continue with participatory approaches and challenge traditional 'us and them' models of knowledge production. As a testament to the benefits of CF in interdisciplinary and cross-sector research, the role of Creative Facilitator (modelled on Robson's) has been built into two UK-based research projects: AnNex (Animal Research Network) and [Multispecies Medicine](#) at the University of Manchester. Creative facilitation was also incorporated within the role of Engaged Researcher in the Wellcome Trust funded project '[The Cross-Disciplinary Invention of Sexual Science: Sexual Science Beyond the Medical, 1890-1940](#)' led by Professor Kate Fisher and Dr Jana Funke at the University of Exeter²⁵.

7.2 Creating positive research and organisational cultures

Within the IMH, creative facilitation has helped to create a positive and nurturing research culture that values generosity in sharing ideas and resources, encourages experimentation alongside intellectual rigor, and embraces diversity and alternative perspectives. One researcher said:

Creative facilitation is crucial to setting the tone of interdisciplinary conversation and creating a culture of intellectual humility and playfulness. It is equalising and it flattens hierarchies of knowledge.

Similar impacts have been felt outside academia; professional practitioners reported that events and processes facilitated by Robson have led to a clearer idea of their organisation's vision, ethos, values and direction.

'As a result of the processes [Robson initiated],' the Director of a charity supporting care experienced individuals remarked, 'our learning as an organisation has deepened and expanded. We have greater insight into our work and can articulate what we do with greater confidence and clarity'.

²⁵ See engagement.manchester.ac.uk/stories/people/bentley_crudginton.html and rethinkingsexology.exeter.ac.uk

7.3 Enhancing facilitation, relationship building and project planning skills

Although using individual techniques from creative facilitation does not make you a creative facilitator, a large number of survey respondents indicated that their experience of creative facilitation had improved their own facilitation skills. For those in the research and education sector, this was often within the context of improving the way they lead seminars and workshops, chair meetings and panel discussions or host public and stakeholder engagement events. They reported using techniques learned from Robson for agreeing boundaries and ground rules at the beginning of an event or meeting; sticky walls to share, regroup and establish new connections between ideas; ‘provocations’²⁶ rather than more traditional PowerPoint presentations to deliver more engaging research showcases; and focused conversations guided by the ORID framework for decision making. Academics and practitioners who participated in a recent IMH pilot training course on creative facilitation said they planned to use the skills and tools they acquired in a variety of contexts including a) managing hierarchies and tensions, b) building relationships with participants and external stakeholders, c) mapping different knowledge areas and keeping track of knowledge change, and d) planning structure and processes at the beginning of interdisciplinary research projects.

7.4 Improving pedagogy

Survey respondents reported that the use of techniques drawn from creative facilitation has improved their skill and confidence in teaching, leading to ‘new ways of engaging students and helping them to feel heard’. Some indicated that they had used Clean Set Up with students to help them map out what they wanted from a course or seminar and how they can achieve it. Others referred to ‘open-ended questioning’ and ‘techniques like: write three words that sum up what you think about xyz and then discuss as a group’ and said they were ‘hugely valuable’. Robson also co-delivered (x2) and contributed to the design of an undergraduate module on critical medical humanities within Durham’s Department of Anthropology, transforming the delivery of the course, its content and the nature of the assessments, leading to greater levels of student engagement, learning and satisfaction.

Professor Jane Macnaughton, who designed and co-delivered the module, remarked:



Mary’s input meant that the module used creative approaches to understanding the contribution of medical humanities to public health, expanding the students’ ideas about the places and spaces where health and ill-health were constituted and arose. She especially ensured the effectiveness of group working, facilitating the tasks undertaken by the group and enabling participants to use metaphor and image to bring together a wide range of disciplines that enabled understanding of a range of chronic health conditions. She also made the sessions fun!

²⁶ A provocation is a short talk designed to stimulate a response by raising new questions or challenges to current ways of thinking about an issue. Unlike more traditional conference or workshop presentations, it does not seek to present a full summary of (say) the speaker’s research findings.

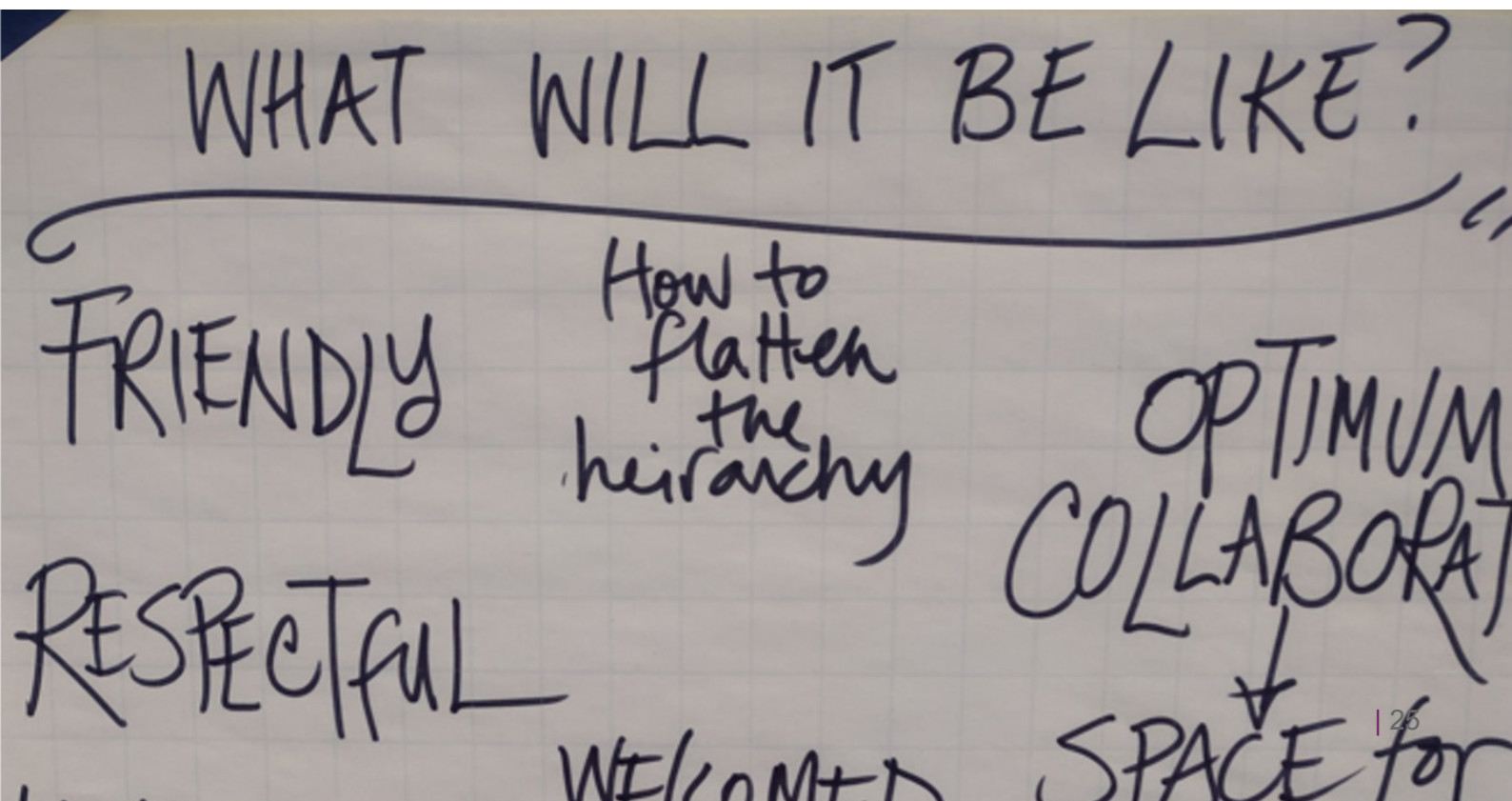
8.1 Recommendations for the IMH

Reflecting on the strengths and challenges of creative facilitation and the impacts identified above, this report offers the following recommendations for the further development of creative and reflective practice within the IMH:

- * Continue to place creative facilitation at the heart of the IMH and its activities to foster excellence in interdisciplinary research and further develop a culture of collaboration and participation within all its research and engagement work.
- * Ensure that the reasons for employing creative and experimental methods are clearly communicated to all participants in academic, public and stakeholder involvement events delivered at the IMH.
- * Explore innovative ways to disseminate information about creative facilitation practice at the IMH to external stakeholders to address lack of awareness of the benefits of this approach.
- * Develop robust systems and processes for mapping and monitoring the influence of creative facilitation as a methodology for interdisciplinary research and cross-sector collaborations (including participant follow-up) to track its impact on academics and professional practitioners across Durham University, within the UK and internationally.
- * Continue to advance a training programme in creative facilitation and reflective practice for academics and practitioners to build skill and capacity. To find out more about IMH Creative Facilitation or to join one of our training programmes go to durham.ac.uk/imh.

8.2 Guidance for others

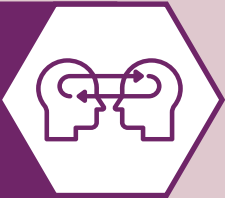
Boxes 9 and 10 overleaf provide guidance for those looking to incorporate creative facilitation into their own research and collaborative practice, whether that be as individual researchers or within the context of interdisciplinary and cross-sector research projects, centres or institutions.



Box 9: Advice for researchers

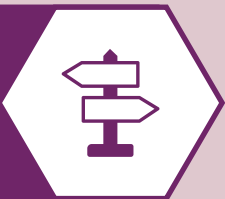
There are plenty of different ways you might choose to incorporate techniques from creative facilitation in your research, ranging from using mapping exercises to plot your existing knowledge of a field or plan a book chapter, to running a focused conversation or consensus workshop as part of a consultation or coproduction process with external stakeholders.

Here are some suggestions to help get you started:



Invest in creative facilitation training to increase your skills and confidence.

The IMH runs training in creative facilitation and reflective practice training programme for academics and professional practitioners. Keep an eye on the IMH website for more information and updates (tinyurl.com/IMHnews). The ICA also offers a range of excellent training courses on tools and methods that are regularly used in creative facilitation, including group facilitation methods, transforming difficult conversations, participatory strategic planning, and facilitating virtual and hybrid events. Courses vary in length from 2.25 hours to 3 days and can be taken at foundation, intermediate and advanced levels. To find out more, see ica-uk.org.uk/public-training-courses



Choose how creative facilitation will be used wisely.

Work out what tools and techniques are best for your own unique context. Remember that creative facilitation is not a magic bullet: it won't work for every situation and sometimes more traditional event formats can be more effective and/or appropriate. And if you are using techniques from creative facilitation, always ensure that you apply them with an ethos that embraces diversity and alternative perspectives.



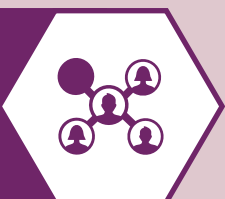
Plan, plan, plan...

If you're using creative facilitation to run an event or workshop, allow plenty of time for planning. Think about the different starting points of each participant, potential areas of tension or disagreement, and what materials and room settings can create the most welcoming and inclusive environment.



Work with a co-facilitator.

Partnering with someone else (ideally someone more experienced in creative facilitation) can help share the workload, bring a different energy to the event, and help manage any difficult conversations or glitches if things don't quite go according to plan.



Join or build a community of practice.

Connecting with other creative facilitators can be highly beneficial. It's a great way to share ideas and experiences, celebrate successes and reflect on and learn from mistakes. If you're not sure where to start, email imh.mail@durham.ac.uk and Mary will point you in the right direction.

Box 10: Advice for team leaders or institutions

If you are thinking about embedding the role of creative facilitator into your research project, centre or institution, the following tips and suggestions might be useful:

Make use of existing resources and seek advice from others.

There is plenty of information on how the role of creative facilitator works within interdisciplinary and cross-sector research projects on [Working Knowledge](#).²⁷ See especially '[The Creative Facilitator](#)', '[Voice Club](#)' and '[Transferable Methodology](#)'.



Consider the scope of the research project or institute and think hard about what you need creative facilitation for.

Do you need someone to facilitate meetings of the research team and help establish the community of the project, centre or institution? To plan and convene all public and stakeholder involvement events? Or do you just need a creative facilitator for one off events like annual project planning, research and engagement strategy meetings? Answering these questions will help you decide how embedded the role needs to be within your research team and whether the creative facilitator should be employed on a freelance basis or a fixed term contract.



Value the role.

At the IMH, the role of creative facilitator is a Grade 8 position (equivalent to a Senior Lecturer). When you write it into your funding bid, ensure there is adequate financial and structural support for the role across the duration of the project or the institution's life span.



Take care when writing the job description.

Think about what kind of specialist skill set the creative facilitator might need in relation to the subject of the research. In addition to being skilled in creative and experimental methods, they might need knowledge of a particular subject area or experience working in different sectors. In the case of a research institute or centre, think about how the skills and personal qualities of the creative facilitator will contribute to the dynamics of the organisation and the research culture within it.



Plan for the unexpected.

The use of creative and experimental methods in research and cross-sector collaborations can lead to unexpected and surprising outcomes. Be prepared to be responsive and allow enough flexibility in research and budget planning so you can change direction when the time arises.



Take time to reflect.

Evaluate what worked and didn't work in order to advance the practice of creative facilitation within your research project or institution and foster a culture of continuous improvement.



Appendix A

Creative Facilitation survey respondents by sector background & event participation

The tables below show the sector backgrounds of survey respondents and attendance at events facilitated by Mary Robson.

**Table 1: Sector backgrounds of survey respondents
n = 36**

Arts & culture	7
Education	13
Funding body	0
Health	3
NGO or charity	3
Policy	1
Research	23
General public	0
Other	4

**Table 2: How many events have you participated in that were led by Mary Robson?
n = 36**

One	13
A few (2-3)	8
Many (4+)	6
More than I could count	10

Appendix B

Benefits of creative facilitation

Table 1: Benefits of creative facilitation					
n = 36	(% n)				
	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
It helped with team building and developing new relationships	72 (26)	25 (9)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (1)
It created a welcoming and supportive space in which everyone was fully supported to participate	92 (33)	8 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
It meant that different forms of expertise were recognised and valued	66 (24)	25 (9)	3 (1)	0 (0)	6 (2)
It allowed team leaders to fully participate in the discussion	67 (24)	22 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	11 (4)
It helped participants explore diverse viewpoints in a respectful manner	75 (27)	19 (7)	3 (1)	0 (0)	3 (1)
It helped me understand how someone from another background might approach a problem differently	56 (20)	38 (14)	3 (1)	0 (0)	3 (1)
It helped reduce pre-existing power imbalances within the group	58 (21)	28 (10)	3 (1)	0 (0)	11 (4)
It allowed me or someone else in the group to come up with a new idea	72 (26)	22 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	6 (2)
It helped with collaborative decision making and reaching consensus	67 (24)	19 (7)	6 (2)	0 (0)	8 (3)
It contributed significantly to project planning	61 (22)	14 (5)	3 (1)	0 (0)	22 (8)
It kept engagement levels high for all or most of the event	67 (24)	30 (11)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (1)
It made me feel comfortable to contribute my own views to the group	69 (25)	28 (10)	0 (0)	0 (0)	3 (1)

Appendix C

Mapping the reach of creative facilitation as practiced by Mary Robson outside Durham's Institute for Medical Humanities

No.	Where?	What?	When?
	Within Durham University/Local		
1	Public Health, Wakefield Council	Facilitating workshops for education and early intervention workers, to increase their confidence and skills in supporting children and young people in emotional literacy and managing change. Also created Luggage for Life - resources for the Wakefield Resilience Framework (riskandresilience.org.uk/) that are still being delivered.	2015-2018
2	Families in Care, Newcastle upon Tyne	Working with a Social Science researcher to develop and deliver creative methods with women who are victims of domestic violence/coercive control.	2018
3	St Anthony's Health Centre and Benfield Park Medical Group, Newcastle upon Tyne.	Working alongside two GP practices in Newcastle to design and deliver group sessions for chronic pain sufferers.	2018-2019
4	Department of Anthropology, Durham University	Co-delivering a module in medical humanities in Anthropology with Hearing the Voice as a case study (x2) and advising on the development of online pedagogy for teaching medical anthropology.	2019 and 2020
5	Blue Cabin - a charity nurturing meaningful relationships between care experienced individuals and the people and organisations who are part of their lives.	Facilitating meetings with staff, Children's Services and Associate Artists to produce reports: a) detailing the impact of Arts Council England Covid 19 Culture Recovery Fund and b) gauging the progress of Creative Life Story Work. Facilitating sessions for staff/children and young people and associate artists as part of online projects during Covid.	2021 - present
	National		
6	Hubbub, Wellcome Collection	Facilitated the launch event, and subsequent sessions.	2014
7	Mind Space, Windsor	A collaboration between the Wellcome Trust and the AHRC bringing together artists, humanities scholars, neuroscientists, psychologists and social scientists to explore the inner and outer dimensions of the mind. A residential event held over 3 days.	2015
8	CUIDAR: Cultures of Disaster Resilience Among Children and Young People. Lancaster University in partnership with other European Universities and organisations. See lancaster.ac.uk/cuidar/en/	Workshop to deliver a child-centred disaster management framework as part of this EU Horizon 2020 project. Also a member of the ethics board for the project.	2015-2018

9	Wellcome Trust Joint Investigator Award: "The Cross-Disciplinary Invention of Sexual Science: Sexual Science Beyond the Medical, 1890-1940" led by Jana Funke and Kate Fisher at the University of Exeter.	The role of Creative Facilitator has been modelled on Robson's and built into the project. It is now held by Jen Grove.	2015-2020
10	Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Exeter.	Working with Rebecca Langlands and Classics scholars to develop a strategic plan to launch the new Centre for Knowledge in Culture in Antiquity and Beyond.	2016
11	University of Exeter/ University of Birmingham/ Trinity College Dublin	Creative Facilitator for workshops for a Wellcome Seed Fund project, Shame and Medicine, to explore the subject with a wide range of collaborators, ultimately leading to a current funded project	2016 - present
12	AnNex (Animal Research Network) and Multispecies Medicine	The role of Creative Facilitator has been modelled on Robson's and built into both projects. The role is now occupied by Dr Bentley Crudington	2017-2023
13	South London CLAHRC and the Centre for Implementation Science	Design and facilitation of public involvement and engagement workshops	2018-2019
14	British HIV Association (BHIVA) funded Deliberative Fora on Understanding the Anatomy of Shame and Stigma in HIV Treatment and Care. Manchester Metropolitan University	Working alongside philosopher Phil Hutchinson to design and deliver a Deliberative forum for health practitioners.	2019
15	King's College London	Working with neuroscientists and researchers in artificial intelligence to engender new collaborations.	2019
16	Health Services and Population Research Department, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience King's College London	Facilitating workshops for academics, health professionals and people with lived experience to develop a Theory of Change for the Health Champions study.	2019
17	IOPPN, King's College London	Working with staff to design and deliver workshops for the STEP Study (The Schools Training to Enhance support for LGBTQ+ Young People's study)	2020
18	Centre for Society and Mental Health, King's College London	Working with staff and scholars to develop a unified Centre identity, impact and influence strategy and advising on CF involvement for ongoing funding applications.	2021
19	Edinburgh International Book Festival	Working with Festival staff and external stakeholders to develop a safer spaces policy.	2022
20	Middlesborough, Redcar & Cleveland Joint Authority	Along with Dawn Williams, designed and delivered a three-day training/development course on 'Everyday Ethics and Reflective Practice' for arts in health practitioners in South Teesside.	2022

International			
21	Arts and Health Australia	Facilitated the 'Critical Mass' initiative to help promote new international understandings in arts in health. Delivered the Mike White Memorial Lecture and 'Making space in the academy' based on IMH and Hearing the Voice.	2011-2018
22	Academy of Finland, Helsinki, Finland	Alongside Angela Woods, invited to deliver a workshop on interdisciplinary ways of working to project leads and representatives from the Academy of Finland.	2014
23	University of California, Santa Barbara, United States of America	Invited to lead multiple workshops, meetings and consultations re the development of interdisciplinary projects and ways of working.	2018
24	Christian Medical College, Vellore, India	Working alongside anthropology staff from Durham University and clinicians and social workers from Vellore, designed and delivered workshops for academics, clinicians, tobacco workers in Vellore, India.	2020
25	Centre for Medical Humanities and Bioethics, Linköping University, Sweden	Workshop on medical humanities at the Centre for Medical Humanities and Bioethics in Linköping University.	2022
26	Aletta Jacobs School of Public Health, University of Groningen, Netherlands	Working with key academic staff to develop interdisciplinarity, using HtV/IMH as case studies	2020-2021
27	Free State Arts in Health	Guest presentation on 'Everyday Ethics in Arts and Health Practice' at the Free State Arts and Health Summit – a pioneering arts and health initiative in central South Africa. The focus of the summit was to map out the parameters for ethical practice in Arts & Health	2021

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