

ART-SEA: Enterprising Arts on the Edge knowledge exchange

Tuesday 30 June, Gym Hall, Wasps Studios, Creative Academy, Inverness

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Introduction

This knowledge exchange event was attended by about 30 people, a rich mixture of artists, scientists and people working in health and wellbeing, some academic and the majority non-academic. Some had come long distances – e.g from Lochmaddy and Oban.

The aims of the day were to explore how UHI can support arts entrepreneurs, particularly those with an interest in the sea, to achieve more sustainable and life-enhancing creative enterprises; to share new knowledge, insights and best practice particularly between artists and scientists; and to foster a network of creative practitioners and others and to support creative arts enterprise, particularly about the sea. Most participants said that ‘making connections’ or ‘getting inspiration’ were the main reasons for being at the workshop and in the final round of take-aways many said that they had gained these.

We started the day by considering the seashore as a powerful metaphor for edges in our lives, which are vibrant and dynamic places to work creatively, and through a sequence of inspiring presentations and discussion sessions we created a metaphorical ‘sea’ of wishes, ideas and needs. The workshop used the marine theme to explore how artistic work can make the most of different worlds, discussing the edges between art and science, between art practice and teaching, between artists and communities and between art projects and other work. This was a highly interactive knowledge-sharing event, using the Open Space methodology to allow a free flow of conversation and connections and to allow ideas to emerge. We made use of the

physical space to display an exhibition combining the work from a previous UHI creative research project, the [Liminal Zone project](#), art from the [Argyll Hope Spot](#) artist residency as well as sea-related artworks from UHI staff and artists with studios at Wasps. There were presentations about the seashore as metaphor (Mandy Haggith), an introduction to the art in the room (Rosie Newman), Art-Sea Labour ([Kirsten Body](#)), art at the Scottish Association for Marine Science ([Andy Crabb](#)), a poetry residency with dolphin scientists ([Genevieve Carver](#)) and [knowledge exchange](#) and other funding opportunities (Darlene Russell). The Open Space discussion groups tackled a wide range of topics: Connectedness with nature; connections between people; making the invisible visible (using arts to show the wonders of microscopic algae); exploring the different umwelt of non-human animals through art; and blue.



Participants were first encouraged to express their wishes for the day or for their work relating to the sea more generally on blue paper waves. Through Open Space discussion they were asked to generate ideas for actions or projects that could help them move towards those wishes and to write these on paper representing pieces of seaweed. Finally they were offered the option to note down any specific needs for support or resources on brown cards representing the seabed from which the seaweed projects might grow. These were grouped on a wall and left as an interactive part of the exhibition while it remained on display. The final content of this display is recorded below.

A feedback session for all participants with a summary of the workshop outcomes and an opportunity to discuss next steps, was held on Microsoft Teams on Monday 5 June at 3pm.

Wishes

- Belonging + Communication + Understanding → Change
- Wonder and reverence for sea
- That the sea is respected
- Highlight benefits of algae
- To learn and interact with people. Be inspired and feed it into what I'm doing. Generally grow and be social and have fun!
- Being playful/silly
- More mermaids please
- Facilitating nature connection
- Bridging gap between physical and cognitive distances
- Bridging – how you create influence. There needs to be a different way of expressing data to the community. The Welcome Trust – how to articulate complex principles using artists.
- I'd like to collaborate with a scientist with an aim to bring research to a wider audience and explore visual and audio senses in order to cultivate a sustainable future. Peace!
- Translating animal emotional response into human 'umwelt' to create human animal response
- Exploring sound/vibration as experienced by the whale body/senses as opposed to solely aural/eardrums
- Creating a choir or orchestra with audios binaural sound to describe senses experienced by other earthlings - > a connection to place and home – magnetic ducks – gulf stream – pull
- Grandmothers tell stories – post-reproduction. Elephants, killer whales and pilot whales, dolphins have signatures. Paddling in songs of humpbacks. Air is everything and nothing. Connecting with the environment on a molecular level. Nan Shepherd – past/stories/grandparents -> maps -> language
- Inspiration & building a lab/studio in Orkney
- Solve the echoey acoustics of this room

Ideas for action and projects

- Sensory audio bi-aural installation - Travelling exhibition
- Multidisciplinary approaches
- School outreach programme
- Artists residency to explore algae collection
- Common language through storytelling - Intergenerational and interactivity
- Seaweed cookbook - Palatable medium
- Depth versus surface
- Values – what's a good life?
- Sense of community culture (rights and responsibilities)
- Psychology – how do we get people to notice and to 'buy in'
- Physio-geography (psycho-geography?) project based around swimming
- To create a studio and lab from two shipping containers so it can open up to artists and scientists
- Marine plastic rug for acoustics in the gym hall

Needs for support and resources

- We need to organise a bus trip from other parts of UHI to SAMS (especially the algal culture collection) –for poetry and visual arts students to collaborate with SAMS students - Funding needed.
- Opportunities and ideas for artists to meaningfully collaborate with scientists (with financial support)
- Partnership with tourism
- UHI graduate artists and creative individuals to be allowed to access research news/groups and library
- Time to explore liminal zones in the community as to what sustainability really means. Combined field trips either in person or via slide shows, drone flights or hydrophones! Experiencing a coastline, beach or sea vista through an artist or a scientist's senses could be stimulating for all involved and an unusual experience.
- Two shipping containers for studio-labs and someone to deliver them to Orkney!

Discussion

On 5 June a Teams call was held after people had had a chance to ruminate on the meeting. A summary of potential conclusions was presented for feedback and discussion, some notes of which are as follows.

- The process was intended to be an end in itself offering interaction and meeting of minds without explicit goal-orientation. Most participants said that 'making connections' or 'getting inspiration' were the main reasons for being at the workshop and in the final round of take-aways most said that they had gained these. The Open Space method was deemed to be a successful, playful, 'party-like' way of achieving fluidity and cross-pollination across conversations. It was noted by some scientists in the room that one of their realisations is that artists have different ways of thinking and working. There were several references to the different ways in which scientists and artists use language.
- Scientists and artists can and must work together more closely to address the biodiversity and climate crisis. Topics discussed included but were not limited to helping people to understand a range of spatial scales, from microscopic algae to the hugeness of whales, different sense perceptions, aural experiences, vibrations and ways of experiencing sound by underwater creatures; and new ways of visualising. Collaborations are already forming for joint research projects to integrate arts into scientific studies to generate new knowledge for humanity.
- We need to inspire students to learn in transdisciplinary ways to enhance ocean literacy. Lots of specific suggestions were made about how to do this creatively: encouraging playful and silly interactions, artists helping scientists (and science students) to tell stories and visualise data while scientists help artists to understand complex concepts. There was discussion of hybrid physical spaces, studio-labs, where art and science can both go on, with arts and science students learning together. There is enthusiasm for a joint teaching project with a visit by art & writing students to the algal culture collection at SAMS. The curriculum review at UHI may provide opportunities, but also challenges, to interdisciplinary learning or multi-disciplinary student journeys, but there was widespread agreement that these are a good thing and should be nurtured, using existing pathways within UHI where possible or creating new ones - the Net Zero Hub was identified as one new opportunity for innovative collaboration. Creative use of artist residencies could enable science students to engage with artists. Encouraging creative communications as science assignments is another possibility.
- There is scope for the arts to communicate a richer understanding of the sea with a wider range of people. There are well-being benefits to helping people to engage with nature. It would help policy makers and nature agencies (like Nature.Scot) to get more people valuing and engaging with marine protection. A formula was suggested: Belonging + Communication + Understanding => Change, the implication being that the arts can help to integrate different ways of thinking and being leading to action. Many specific suggestions of possible projects and activities were raised as helpful here: arts residencies, a binaural installation, touring exhibitions, a swimming project, a seaweed cookbook, intergenerational story sharing. Attention to community culture and values is noted as vital.
- One of the Open Space groups explored the colour blue and its power in drawing us to the sea and significance of this colour as representative of the whole marine space. This was a conversation that many of the participants took part in during the meeting, with the 'holdfasts' of that conversation reporting back that the colour blue is dense in meaning, powerfully good for well-being and a profound way of connecting us to the sphere we inhabit.

Suggestions of next steps

- Organise arts/writing student trip to SAMS (Rosie N)
- Short-term artists in residence in science depts and scientists in residence in arts depts (Rosie N)
- Interdisciplinary event at the next UHI research conference (Ben W)
- Explore how to speed up and encourage more cross department teaching and learning at UHI (Mari T)
- Set up a repository for continued sharing / connection (Rosie B)
- Keep this group in contact (Andrew D)

- Artists get involved in a marine science project, if interested in Irish connected opportunities contact Denise Risch - denise.risch@sams.ac.uk or look at the Marine, Environmental Science and Engineering Cluster database of UHI researchers – contact Rachel.culver@uhi.ac.uk

Participants

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Some other links

<https://thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/exhibition/blueborrowed-and-new/>

<https://www.creativecarbonscotland.com/project/climate-beacons-for-cop26/>

Nichols, W. J. (2018) *How Water Makes You Happier, More Connected and Better at What You Do*. Abacus

Nelson, M. (2017) *Bluets*. Vintage

Tamás, R. (2020) *Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman*. Makina Books.