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Investigating Linguistic and Cultural Transformations in Superdiverse Wards in Four UK Cities

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## **Paper 23**

### **Meaning making and collaborative ethnography in transdisciplinary arts**

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## Meaning making and collaborative ethnography in transdisciplinary arts

‘They are lines not of flight, but of interaction.’

(Ingold, 2011:63)

### 1. Introduction

This ‘work-in-progress’ paper focuses on meaning making and collaborative ethnography in a transdisciplinary arts engagement project. Here we introduce the concept of the ‘generative nexus of practice, research, and engagement’ and describe how we can engage in developing understandings of the entangled connections between each activity, as broadly defined in these terms. We draw from a research- and arts-based learning project, *LangScape Curators* ([www.langscapecurators.tumblr.com](http://www.langscapecurators.tumblr.com); [www.bricolagearts.org.uk](http://www.bricolagearts.org.uk)), which is carried out with young people in inner-city Leeds and through which processes of meaning making and collaborative ethnography are woven together. We then consider the parallels between the methodologies and epistemologies within LangScape Curators (LS-C) and those within our own practice and research. Through our work we are committed to making visible and theorising these parallels, and we draw out examples which illustrate this ‘nexus’ and ask how this develops new understandings of our work within the broad sphere of research-led engagement. Drawing on the analysis of two of the arts workshops, we set out recommendations for how these findings can be further developed in arts-based practice, research and engagement.

The example we present here is the LS-C project (see also Bradley et al., under review, 2018). As a visual artist working with ethnography (Louise) and a linguistic ethnographer (cf. Rampton et al., 2015) working in arts contexts (Jessica), we developed this project collaboratively over a series of months, building on our research and practice (Atkinson & Bradley, 2016). This project involves the use of creative practice and arts-based methods with children and young people to develop critical thinking skills through encouraging participants to become ethnographic researchers in the streets of their communities. LS-C takes as its starting point research into the linguistic

landscape (e.g. Blommaert, 2012; Barni and Bagna, 2015; Blommaert, 2016, Callaghan, 2016) and invites children and young people to explore and analyse the linguistic landscapes of their own spaces and places. The linguistic landscape therefore, as grounded in research, becomes a framework from which collaborative, co-produced, interdisciplinary and action research approaches are developed and also researched.

In this paper we describe the frameworks for our work. We then follow by using examples from one of the activities - collage - to highlight the processes of creating spaces for visual arts practice which foreground language and linguistic practice.

### 1.1. Transdisciplinarity

We each draw from different disciplinary frameworks and approaches and through this work we bring these different perspectives together, in what we consider to be a *transdisciplinary* space of practice, research and engagement. In defining our collaborative work as transdisciplinary, we posit, following Amelia Jones's definition of 'trans-' (2016), that we go 'across, through and beyond' (p.1) disciplines. A transdisciplinary approach enables us to develop epistemologies and methodologies which can lead to new meanings and understandings of linguistics- and art-based research and engagement. As Gunther Kress puts it,

The older theories, disciplines and methods no longer adequately frame or account for that which needs to be understood: a fact which leads to exploring complementarities of theoretical positions and kinds of work in order to provide such accounts.

(Kress, 2011:241).

Through LS-C we focus on the dialogic process of engagement with transdisciplinary research. This dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981) is evident between the transdisciplinary research team and the project participants themselves, and between the artistic practice and ethnography, all of which are brought into contact. We posit that these dialogic processes can develop a flattening out of hierarchies which is both made possible and visible through creative and translingual practice (Canagarajah, 2013) and through the conscious creation of spaces for these activities. Working in this way, we consciously explore the complementarities of the conceptual and methodological frameworks around this work.

## **1.2. Generative practice-research-engagement nexus**

We are using and developing the concept of the 'generative practice-research-engagement nexus' as a framework which enables us to investigate the possibilities for, and affordances of, creative practice within a research-led pedagogical environment. It also enables us to question our roles as artists and as researchers within these activities, through considering their boundaries and borders, the points at which they blur and the points at which they are more clearly defined and bounded. These different roles are embodied both simultaneously and at different stages by the artists and the researchers across the production process. These roles are also taken on by the participants in our workshops. We ask how we can navigate and traverse these boundaries through our work and how this leads to the creation of new knowledge

## **2. Research contexts: generative nexus of practice, research and engagement**

Here we situate the project as grounded in practice, research, and engagement. The methodological and conceptual underpinnings are also described.

### **2.1. Practice-based: Collage, sculpture and anthropological approaches to art**

The creative activities undertaken in the workshops draw on a practice-based framework from Louise's own studio practice. Louise's practice uses elements of collage, sculpture, and the creation of and use of artists' books to explore notions of place, through artefacts such as the souvenir, postcard, or tourist guide. The making of these art works involve strategies of collecting and curating and often directly implicate the viewer in the interpretation of the work. Methods of this kind have contributed to the workshops through encouraging the young people to express often complex ideas and metaphors through artistic works, including collage, photography, zine-making, film and creative writing.

### **2.2. Research-based: Collaborative ethnography and co-production and educational engagement**

Within our research projects, we each use ethnography to explore relationships in material and linguistic cultures, and as a theoretical framework to understand our creative processes. Together we forge a collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005) of place, between our individual practices as artist-researcher and linguistic ethnographer.

Within our shared practice, we draw from our epistemological commitments to creating co-produced, collaborative projects which critically engage with notions of authorship. We consider the possibilities of co-authorship through our own experiences of transdisciplinary collaboration and we address how these forms of collaboration contribute to and develop our practice. These processes also involve engaging the participants' experiences and knowledges to 'co-produce' arts-based research (Facer and Enright, 2016; Pahl, 2014). In this way, we extend notions of co-authorship beyond that of our own collaboration to the individuals and groups with whom we are working, to allow for multiple agencies to emerge (for example, as described in McKay and Bradley, forthcoming, 2017).

In ethnography, the types of data collected and the community partnerships that are at the heart of collaborative forms of research quite naturally allow for the inclusion and amplification of voices other than the researchers' in research processes and outputs. Our understanding of ethical practice foregrounds such collaboration, to involve the 'collaborative reading and interpretation, between the ethnographer and his or her interlocutors, of the very ethnographic text itself' (Lassiter, 2005:3). LS-C aims to enable the voices of children and young people, and to bring their understandings of the semiotic worlds they inhabit together with our own understandings. Our ethical practice sees the co-production of new imaginings and realities with others as an opportunity for (re)inscribing meanings onto the world (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

The research from which this project extends takes the concept translanguaging, as a way to understand fluid multilingualism, (Creese et al., 2015; Baynham et al., 2015; 2016; 2017) as its focus. Our understanding of translanguaging (Garcia and Li Wei, 2014) as flexible and creative communicative practice accounts for the ways in which ideas and interpretations might transform in processes of dialogue.

### **2.3. Engagement-based framework: Educational engagement and civic engagement**

With such ethical practice in mind, we build on the linguistic landscape research being carried out across the AHRC-funded Translation and Translanguaging project ([www.birmingham.ac.uk/tlang](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/tlang)) of which Jessica's work forms part. With TLANG co-investigator James Simpson and visiting research fellow Emilee Moore, we embarked on the development of arts-based educational resources for work with children and young people that would link to the University of Leeds' educational engagement strategy and

extensive body of work in this area

([https://www.leeds.ac.uk/info/128010/teachers\\_and\\_advisors/249/what\\_we\\_do](https://www.leeds.ac.uk/info/128010/teachers_and_advisors/249/what_we_do)).

This builds on the university's policies of engagement as developing social responsibility, trust, accountability, and relevance to the communities where the engagement takes place (see, for example,

[http://www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff/homepage/387/public\\_engagement\\_with\\_research](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff/homepage/387/public_engagement_with_research)).

Both authors have worked for educational engagement in arts- and language-based engagement activities and had a joint interest in extending this work across to research-based engagement and collaborative ethnography. Jessica's professional work in this area had led her to question how research could be embedded in engagement activities and how children and young people might develop understandings of what it means to be researchers, therefore developing critical thinking and analytical skills. It also began as a response to a provocation: as researchers we often talk and write about disrupting hierarchies and co-production. How could we develop and extend our disciplinary understandings of co-production and develop work which enabled children and young people's voices to not only be heard but that which would also shape the research processes themselves? And how can we develop an ethical engagement-based research practice?

#### **2.4. Methodology: LS-C workshops**

We now focus on the project itself. LS-C is an ongoing, transdisciplinary, co-produced project which uses arts methods to engage young people in thinking about research and in becoming ethnographic researchers of their communities through introducing them to linguistic landscape research methodologies and findings. We consider methodology as being directly implicated in the research itself – not as separate to the research (Pahl, 2014). In this sense, following Kate Pahl, we consider the development of transdisciplinary methodologies as affording the spaces for different ways of knowledge making, as a process of 'coming to know' (ibid, ph.191). The activities are carried out in neighbourhoods in the city of Leeds in partnership with a third sector organisation IntoUniversity and through the educational engagement team for social sciences at the University of Leeds. The workshops took place outside of term time, and scheduled into the holiday club timetables for the centres. The linguistic landscape therefore, as grounded in research, becomes a framework from which collaborative, co-produced, interdisciplinary and action research approaches might be developed and researched.

Working with young people in inner-city Leeds wards, we use elements of photography, film, writing, and visual arts to explore ideas of home and belonging through researching local semiotic landscapes. These co-produced workshops – co-produced across disciplines and with the children and young people with whom we are working – are considered as ‘meshworks’ (Ingold, 2011) AND are developed within the broader generative nexus of practice, research, and engagement. The workshops are developed within this nexus and this enables us to focus on the relationships between artistic practice, our research and the engagement activities themselves. It disrupts the often linear process of higher education engagement and impact. This is framed through the concept of ‘collaging’ as a system of synthesising disparate practices, and draws on Latour’s (1991[1993]) notion of ‘hybrids’. Working in this way develops spaces for dialogic reflection on our hybridity and on the research process. Figure One (below) shows the broad workshop structure.

Day	AM	PM
One	Introductions, warm up activities; Group ‘language portraits’ (based on Busch, 2016)	Linguistic landscapes: street and community ethnography, interviews in groups.
Two	Synthesis, analysis and communication of findings, collage as method.	Continuation of synthesis, analysis and communication of findings, creation of ‘zines’ as method.
Three	Creative writing and performance of spoken word poems and texts.	Communication, dissemination and exhibition of findings to the visitors from the public.

*Figure One: Workshop structure*

During the workshops and across the course of the three days, different arts practices were introduced as creative methods for the young people to use to synthesise and visualise their findings. The workshops were developed to link to different aspects of the school curriculum, albeit in a non-formal way as the workshops took place in the

school holidays. The participants produced artistic products within each of the arts sessions: a shared linguistic portrait, a collaborative collage, a sole-produced 'zine' and a sole-authored piece of writing. The artefacts produced within each of these arts sessions then developed into different ways of presenting and communicating the research findings. All the pieces of work were then exhibited as part of a celebration and sharing event. Although the creative methods were set in advance of the workshops, they were developed and delivered in a way which allowed the participants to decide in small groups and also individually which elements of their research they wanted to include and how. For example, the language portraits (Busch, 2016) were developed as group portraits, to enable communication about language repertoire and open up discussion about our shared communicative practices and through the development of a visual representation of shared repertoire.





sometimes competing institutional aims and objectives which also work to drive and develop the work, as well as funding it. Here we ask how we can draw attention to the broader ecologies within which these practices are both created and emerge?

### *2.5.2. Translanguaging*

With translanguaging (García and Li Wei, 2014; Otheguy et al., 2015) we move away from the notions of bounded languages linked to nation state building and instead consider communicative repertoire as made up of traces of our pasts, our presents and looking to the future. We are exploring how far translanguaging can be considered as resource for linguistic creativity within arts-based learning, but also as encompassing the arts-based learning practices in themselves. It enables us to consider the multimodal - to go beyond language in this way. Therefore, as co-producers of this work, we can use translanguaging as a mechanism for helping us move across, through and beyond languages but also across, through and beyond modes. This takes the focus for the workshops from the verbal to the visual and to the spaces in-between.

The project also develops our understanding of the multimodal affordances of translanguaging and enables us to explore how it 'foregrounds the different ways multilingual speakers employ, create and interpret different kinds of linguistic signs to communicate across contexts and participants and perform their different subjectivities' (García and Li Wei, 2014:28). We do this through extension to visual and creative arts, as ways to draw attention to and develop our communicative practice within the workshops but also as ways to analyse and synthesise our understandings and findings together. We can also consider this as a form of ethical practice - in this case, how can we develop workshops which create space for fluid multilingual practices and also fluid creative practices?

### *2.5.3. Translanguaging space*

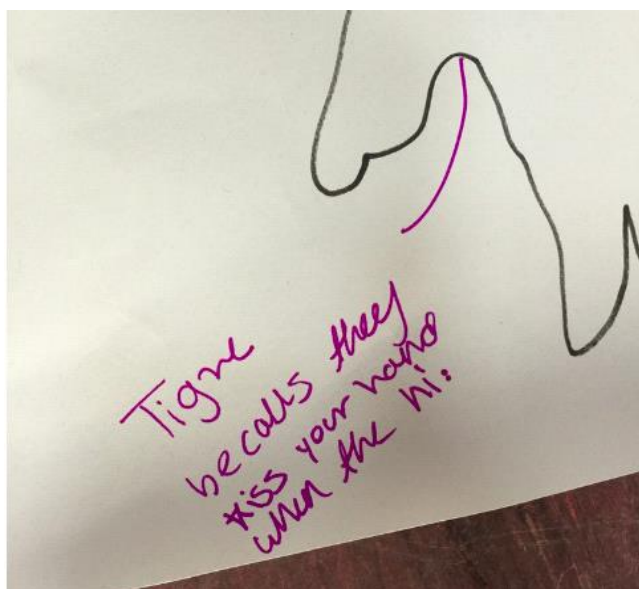
Using the concept of translanguaging space - as a space both created for translanguaging and by translanguaging (Li Wei, 2011; García and Li Wei, 2014) we demonstrate how collage can be considered as a tool for visualising spaces of creativity and criticality. Using analysis of the collaging process, we focus firstly on the methods involved, and secondly on how these begin to build and open up what we are describing as a creative translanguaging space. These collages are iconic of the flexible

communicative practices and processes in play within the workshops. How can we represent these spaces visually and multimodally?

### 3. Analysis: The workshops

#### 3.1. The portraits

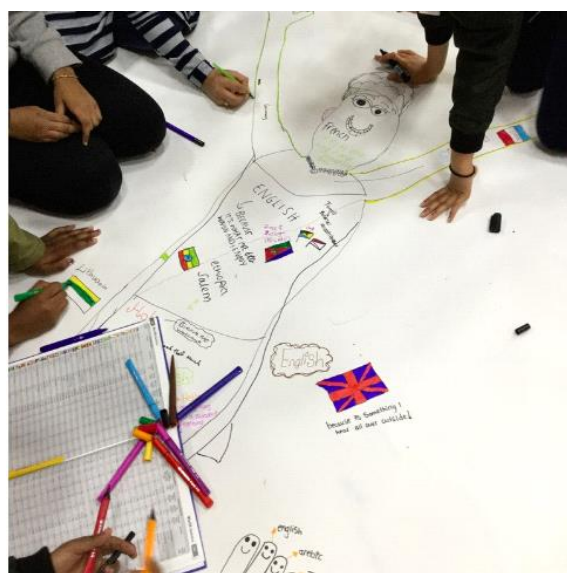
Throughout the activities we focus on language as a broad theme and we pay attention to the ways in which we as a group draw from our communicative repertoires. With the language portrait activity, we explore biographical approaches to the linguistic repertoire (Busch, 2016). The activity seeks to develop understandings of the different languages spoken within the group and open up discussions around repertoire. This leads to consideration of discourse (Baynham et al., 2015) and modality – going beyond the notion of bounded languages. It also develops the participants' understandings of embodiment. Figure three shows a detail from the language portrait shown in Figure two. Here the group have focused on what the young people referred to as 'Tigre' (Tigrinya – spoken in Eritrea and northern Ethiopia), a language shared by a large proportion of the group, and the hand. The reason for this is due to a greeting in Tigrinya being accompanied by hand kissing.



*Figure Three: detail from language portrait*

The same group developed the visual characteristics of their character in the portrait. The characters were created by drawing round the outline of a nominated group

member. This served to focus the attention on the group and their own biographies, as developed through attention to the communicative repertoire. In Figure four, the group are working on the development of their portrait and the character who has become a superhero with a cape. We see this character reappear again in one of the collages produced the following day (see Figure ten). The character served to represent the group and became emblematic. The group called themselves the 'Super 6', continuing the superhero theme (Figure five) and developed a group 'motto' of 'a different language is a different vision of life', a quote from Federico Fellini. This further served to develop the metacommentary (Rymes, 2014; Creese et al., 2015) around language within the group exercise and embodiment of language.



*Figure Four: portrait in development; Figure Five: Super 6 detail*

The language portraits enable the group to consider the language of text messages, of social media – and the language of different subjects at school. Through this activity we can also explore ways in which translinguaging spaces – as spaces of criticality and creativity, draw from the work of Li Wei (2011) – can be created and enabled. How does working together on a language portrait open up the opportunity for language learning, through sharing and communicating different experiences of language? We also focus on the metacommentary around language and the ways in which this opens up and develops dialogue about multilingualism and translinguaging as ordinary, or 'commonplace, and everyday' (Blackledge et al., 2015). At the end of the workshops at

the celebration event, the participants show their portraits and describe what they have written, drawn and the reasoning behind it to members of the public.

In starting the workshops with the language portraits we set out to create the foundation for the analytical work which is developed across the programme. The language portraits serve to start the process of critical engagement with verbal, visual and embodied language. The workshop is followed by an excursion into the neighbourhood – still in groups – during which the participants set out to take detailed accounts of the streets surrounding the centres. The methodologies employed by the participants here include photography, video, note taking and interviews. The ‘ethnographic’ research is followed by arts workshops which serve to gradually synthesise the knowledging process and into which the research ‘data’ is developed and folded.

### **3.2. The collages**

Visual art activities allowed participants to investigate their own neighbourhoods in different ways – both to the usual ways they might navigate their neighbourhoods and in terms of more bounded and traditional ways of synthesising and analysing ethnographic research. Before producing their collages the pupils photographed their neighbourhood and interviewed community members about the linguistic landscape. This had the effect of participants becoming more familiar with their surroundings, and therefore able to feel more comfortable with their greater understanding of the area – they became ethnographers themselves, taking the role of researchers. They were the experts in their area. However, the exercises that we undertook over the three days were also intended to open up the participants to new ways of seeing and thinking about these areas. This created a nearness – and a distance – simultaneously. The activities aimed to create ways for the participants to do and see things differently in familiar spaces.

Through the collaging the participants learnt practical skills and developed different and alternative ways of visualising the research that they found from their neighbourhoods. These workshops emerged from Louise’s own creative practice in which she uses collage to explore ideas of place and memory.





*Figures six and seven: examples of Louise's collage work*

These collages are created from a combination of coloured paper, maps and images from travel brochures, and are intended to provoke an affective response in the viewer by suggesting different aspects of place. This includes aspects of visual landscapes including style, architecture, and natural features, such as countryside, deserts and mountains. Participants were introduced to Louise's practice and asked to analyse the collages, using the tools they had started to develop over the previous activities. Participants also discussed the effects of colour on how this shaped their interpretations of temperature and mood.

In addition to the images and text taken from the participants 'fieldwork', the collages also included elements taken from the programme as a whole, for example in terms of the linguistic or communicative repertoires which had been explored in previous activities. An example of this was the way in which the portraits reappeared in different forms but still recognisable in the collages. The development of tasks relevant to artistic methods as and for research, showed the potential for the artist to create connections between disparate practice for pedagogical aims. However, the focus on autonomous and peer-led learning also allowed the participants to develop their own responses to the project, often continuing to produce additional work at home.



*Figures eight and nine: examples of the collages in progress*

### **3.3. Translanguaging epistemologies, collage and research**

Engagement or schools activities leading from research can often be considered as post-project activities, as dissemination, or as educational work relating to the public engagement or impact agenda. With LS-C we wanted to explore how engagement might work, or how engagement might look, as developing alongside and in dialogue with the research itself. In this sense, our translanguaging developed beyond a focus for the workshops towards epistemology, recognising and creating spaces for the group to draw from their communicative repertoires in different and creative ways –and extending towards creative practice. With our shared interests in collaborative ethnographic and arts-based learning, the workshops also began to demonstrate for us how important these spaces were in terms of our own practice and research.

Ontologically these were not spaces in which to disseminate our work, but instead spaces in which we all became co-learners. The processes themselves became part of the fabric of our practice and research. In this way we began to think about how our practice is developed across research and across engagement, and how these come into dialogue with the other, mirroring the activities within the project. Ways of knowing

here are challenged and the hierarchies displaced. Notions of authorship and where ideas come from are also challenged in this way through the creation of shared pieces of art. In this way, the work develops our notions of collaborative ethnography from our starting point of collaborative ethnography, as described by Luke Eric Lassiter's (2005) . In participating in the activities ourselves, and critically engaging with the process alongside the participants, we - in our roles of researchers, practitioners and workshop facilitators – can develop critical reflexivity. The workshops themselves – rather than sites of 'data collection' become a reciprocal analytical process (Pahl, 2014:182).

#### **3.4. Multimodal collage as translanguaging space**

The collage workshop served to synthesise the participants' findings, and opened up a creative space to develop their ideas and thoughts around their experiences. It also served to provide a space of generative analysis. Translanguaging is observed visually within the collage in Figure ten as multiple languages and texts emerge alongside the images and colour. We can observe how the different words, different languages and different visuals combine to produce the pieces. The collage, and the act of collaging within the broader workshop activities, enabled creative and critical spaces for languaging. They also acted as media to develop a shared language within each group as the participants worked collaboratively on their pieces of work. We see the collages themselves as examples of spaces of fluid multimodality and fluid multilingualism. As spaces opening up for exploration of language and of the semiotic landscape. And as meta-commentary on language, repertoire, space and the semiotic landscape.





*Figure ten: multimodality and translinguaging space in collage*

#### 4. Conclusions

In this paper we have foregrounded the concept of the generative nexus of practice, research and engagement through attention to meaning making and collaborative ethnography in a transdisciplinary arts project. We set out the frameworks for this work in the following structure: practice-based, research-based, engagement-based, methodological and conceptual. We then went on to describe and show visual examples of two of the arts workshops within the LS-C programme. The concept of the generative nexus of practice-research-engagement enables us to consider the different aspects of our work, our different interactions and the different spaces in which we develop and carry out our work and which are developed by our work. We can see how our own practice (as an artist-researcher and as a researcher-practitioner) is in constant dialogue with our practice and with the engagement activities we carry out. This work, and our understandings of this work, develops slowly over time. Our engagement with our participants and our work is in constant negotiation. Our understandings of collaborative ethnography – its affordances and its limitations – develop and build across the different aspects of our work. Here we make a number of suggestions for the possible applications of this work. Our understandings of co-production also develop and we consider it as ‘commitment to retaining the visions and strategic priorities of

partners within the process of knowledge creation' (Pahl, 2014:189). Creating, developing and delivering programmes of language- and arts- based work of this kind has potential for broader application and take up, particularly in the area of transdisciplinary educational work and community cohesion. The following sets out implications for further practice, research and engagement activities.

#### **4.1. Implications for (arts- and linguistics-) practice**

For Jessica, moving in between research into translanguaging and flexible and fluid multilingualism in community arts and engagement as practice, this forms a way of understanding these three elements of her work as meshworks, the points of connection and the dialogue between them. For Louise, this work both informs her studio practice, which is in turn relayed to future participants, as well as becoming a different strand of work, aligned with forms of socially engaged practice.

#### **4.2. Implications for (arts-based, language-based, practice-led) research**

By developing this engagement-based work, we are also developing our own understandings of our different approaches to arts-based and practice-led research. Jessica's research is practice-led, as she works with artists and creative practitioners and Louise's research is practice-based. Working in this way to develop generative practice, the distinctions between the two approaches are also blurred and allows us to reconsider what practice is and how it informs and moves forward our work.

#### **4.3. Implications for (arts- and language-) engagement**

Through these activities and through the work of the young people with whom we are working, we are challenging consider the roles of artists and art - and how authorship and notions of ownership are subverted and questioned through this practice, creating a new space, challenging notions of hierarchy. The lines here are interacting and converging, creating new meshworks and transforming those from which we travel. Our work develops ongoing empirical evidence for how creative methods can be used to enable, foster and build rich and innovative spaces in which often un-heard voices can be made visible and audible – and which bring communicative repertoires to the fore.

This work-in-progress paper aimed to outline a developing project which links to the TLANG research project. It is intentionally messy, and marks a point of departure for considering how the generative nexus of practice, research and engagement' can

develop a way of understanding the affordances of arts-based learning for research-led engagement.

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More information about Louise and Jessica's developing work in practice, research, and engagement is available here on their website, [www.bricolagearts.org.uk](http://www.bricolagearts.org.uk).