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**Practice case study**

## *Defining in the doing*: listening and reflecting in a community–university collaboration

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## Abstract

*Defining in the doing* is an approach developed by the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) at the University of Brighton, UK. It prioritises action and recognises the importance of practice in developing partnerships, drawing from both academic and practitioner principles in community development, community-based research and theories of social learning. This article will draw on this approach to reflect on a community–university collaboration, sustained during the Covid-19 global pandemic, between a community music organisation, a sound archive project and a doctoral researcher. Between 2019 and 2022, these practitioners brought together their expertise in sound heritage, music making, listening and sound methods, and community engagement to deliver three interlinked projects: Sounds to Keep, Sound Mosaics and Remix the Archive (RiTA). This partnership created mutual benefits by bringing together practitioner and academic knowledge and experiences. Through shared reflections, we draw out in this article the ways that the pandemic generated difficult working conditions, while also opening up space for creativity, flexibility and curiosity. But we also

highlight how a *defining in the doing* approach is not commonly supported by the funding and administrative conditions within which we work.

**Keywords** collaboration; partnership; co-production; community engagement; listening; sound; heritage; community music; reflective practice; sound archives

### Key messages

- A *defining in the doing* approach is valuable in developing community–university partnerships for prioritising action, recognising the importance of practice, and enabling reflective and responsive delivery.
- Curiosity, creative and reflective practices can help partners to keep working together during crisis times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.
- It is challenging to build community–university engagement into PhD projects, but mobilising funding resources such as internships can lead to innovative knowledge exchange opportunities.

## Introduction

Collaborations between academics and practitioners that bring different knowledge, resources and experiences together can increase capabilities of society to address the issues faced in times of uncertainty, crisis and precarity. The Covid-19 pandemic increased the need for community–university partnerships, but simultaneously challenged their capacity to develop. The infrastructures, resources and conditions that support such collaborations are increasingly compromised (NCCPE, 2021). This article focuses on a collaboration that began just before the pandemic hit, and that found ways to adapt and grow into a trusting and creative partnership. It will look at the process of partnership development in the context of the pandemic through the eyes of the three partners: a community music organisation, a sound archive programme and a PhD project.

First, it will outline the *defining in the doing* approach that our partnership found valuable. Second, an overview of the partnership will explain how a community musician (Bela Emerson), heritage project manager (Esther Gill) and doctoral researcher (Bethan Prosser) have come together to deliver three interlinked projects since 2019. Third, individual reflections will be shared, followed by co-reflective discussion that draws out key learning from developing a partnership during a pandemic.

## Defining in the doing

*Defining in the doing* is an approach developed by the Community University Partnership Programme (CUPP) at the University of Brighton, UK (CUPP, 2013). The approach prioritises action, and it recognises the importance of practice, drawing from both academic and practitioner principles in community development, community-based research and theories of social learning (Banks et al., 2019; Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). It was utilised both to frame the CUPP model as it developed to broker partnerships between the university and local communities, and as a core principle guiding such partnerships. It advocates ‘doing’ over theorising too early in the process of creating innovative work, helping emerging partnerships remain fluid and flexible while finding commonalities that can transcend institutional boundaries. The doctoral research partner, Bethan, previously worked as a knowledge broker in the CUPP team, and she found it a valuable approach to share with the community partners, Bela and Esther.

Early on in the CUPP model, the importance of ‘doing and developing with’, rather than ‘delivering to’, was established, enabled initially by its privileged funded position that encouraged experimentation (Balloch et al., 2007: 21; CUPP, 2013: 1). It is a simple and light-touch phrase, attributable to Professor

Stuart Laing, who oversaw the development of the CUPP team, and it draws on a range of academic theories interested in knowledge production and practice (Banks et al., 2019; Beebeejaun et al., 2014; Hall and Tandon, 2017). In the context of community–university partnerships, a practice focus can help disrupt knowledge hierarchies that have traditionally elevated academic knowledge. By aiming to shift power imbalance dynamics, *defining in the doing* encapsulates the democratic approach at the heart of participatory action and community-based research (Beebeejaun et al., 2014; Hall and Tandon, 2017; Kemmis et al., 2014). It sits within the wider movement of knowledge democracy that values different types of knowledge (Hall and Tandon, 2017). It also links into theories of practice and social learning, such as the community of practice concept, which has been applied to community–university engagement (Davies et al., 2017; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Although practice-based theories vary, they commonly pay close attention to ‘what we do’, the everyday and our daily routines, and how these are resourced and the infrastructures that shape them (Adams et al., 2017: 23).

In the face of pandemic-heightened uncertainty and disrupted working conditions, *defining in the doing* was usefully revived in this partnership case. It proved beneficial for framing the constant adaptation and experimentation required. The approach gave us permission to remain flexible in our thinking, which chimes with the curious, creative and reflective practices we drew on to keep working together in changing institutional and policy contexts.

## The partnership: Sounds to Keep, Sound Mosaics and Remix the Archive

In summer 2019, three partners started meeting to develop a small sound heritage project: Esther Gill from Unlocking Our Sound Heritage, Bela Emerson from Brighton and Hove Music for Connection (formerly Open Strings Music) and Bethan Prosser from the University of Brighton. Unlocking Our Sound Heritage (UOSH) was a British Library programme funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to preserve and improve access to sound collections in archives across the UK. The UOSH South East Hub was based at The Keep, a regional archive centre, between 2018 and 2022. Brighton and Hove Music for Connection (BHMC) is the city’s specialist community music service for adults of all abilities to connect and create together. Founded as a non-profit community interest company in 2014, BHMC offers interactive music as a tool for engagement, well-being and social inclusion.

By autumn, the Sounds to Keep project had begun, commissioned by UOSH, delivered by BHMC, and joined by Bethan as a PhD intern. In her PhD project investigating urban seaside gentrification on the UK south coast, Bethan had started experimenting with listening methods, and had previously volunteered for BHMC. In passing discussion, Bela and Bethan started to realise the possibility of working on this together. This led to Bethan securing internship funding from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership to assist in project delivery and lead on its evaluation. Sounds to Keep piloted sound activities (sound walks and foraging) to engage people living and working around The Keep in the sound archive. There were several successful outcomes and outputs from the project, including a digital story (Sounds to Keep, 2019).

This pre-pandemic project brought together our expertise in heritage, sound archives, community music, music for well-being, academic research, sound methods and community engagement. However, we also all gained new insights and understanding, which was captured through reflective practice embedded in the evaluation approach (Prosser, 2019). In particular, we found a shared interest in the significance of listening as a practice and tool for community engagement, well-being, heritage and research purposes.

In 2020, just as we were due to share learning through a University of Brighton knowledge exchange event, the Covid-19 pandemic struck. We quickly moved online and adapted our use of archival clips and sound foraging for collaborative music making. Seeing its potential, Esther commissioned a series of online workshops, called Sound Mosaics, delivered from autumn 2020 to spring 2021. Sound Mosaics gave us the chance to experiment further, and to work with community groups supporting older people,

refugees and those with mental health issues. This included the development of a new digital music-making tool, Remix the Archive (RiTA), with Maxgate Digital (a software development company). As UOSH neared the end of its funding, we managed to work together one last time on a RiTA development project. We tested out the tool with a group of learning-disabled musicians, who contributed to how we define and understand the tool. Reflectively learning from each project, the *defining in the doing* approach has characterised the partnership, which we explore in the following sections.

## Partner reflections

A reflective practice approach was embedded from the start of the partnership (Prosser, 2019), and we have drawn on it to explore the collaboration dynamics for this article. Reflective practice is a vital part of *defining in the doing*, positioned within a long history of reflection in and on action (Moon, 2004; Schön, 1983), social learning theory (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) and co-inquiry (Banks et al., 2014). First, we wrote individual reflections using a series of prompt questions, and we circulated these to each other. Second, we came together for a shared reflective session where we delved into deeper discussions stimulated by our writing pieces. We offer our individual reflective writing unedited in the following vignettes to bring our different voices into this article. In the final section, we present more detailed discussion based on our shared reflective session. This partnership therefore acts as a case study that uses reflective practice as a method of co-inquiry to capture and share learning for others engaging in community–university projects.

### Esther Gill (UOSH Project Manager)

How it started: spring 2019, a chance meeting with Bela from Music for Connection (BHMC) and a conversation about sound walks and community music making. How it's going: a successful partnership, a collaborative sequential approach, and three creative projects bringing people together to explore sounds and recordings, in and out of the archive.

Unlocking Our Sound Heritage at The Keep, Brighton, was a three-year project to preserve at-risk sound recordings in regional archives, but also to raise awareness of sound recordings and how they could be used. The partnership with BHMC and Bethan Prosser gave us the opportunity to work with new groups, and to work in ways that pushed us to think beyond the intellectual content of the sound recording. What started as a series of sound and listening walks – Sounds to Keep – grew into a programme of work that focused on and encouraged the act of listening. It prompted discussions about what sounds were recorded and what weren't, and reflection on the sounds that we take for granted, but which have changed over time, and which we maybe don't hear any longer (anybody remember the pips when your 10p was running out in the telephone box?). Listening together – as an active and communal experience, as an inquisitive archive skill – became a *leitmotif* for the UOSH project.

Working with BHMC for almost three years allowed the partnership to follow the interest we saw in other people, and to respond to challenging and changing circumstances of Covid-19 in a creative way. The reflective evaluation process, led by Bethan, then enabled us to build upon what worked, and to share our respective areas of expertise. If archives are to work with more diverse audiences, we need to work with community groups that have a reach, a trust and a local relevance far beyond the walls of most GLAM – (galleries, libraries, archives, museums) sector organisations.

### Bela Emerson (BHMC Programme Manager)

This project was the most meaningful, effective and enjoyable online delivery work that I did during the pandemic: the sessions were designed to be delivered online, and made dedicated use of the resources available. We were offering something new and genuinely exciting, rather than trying to replicate in-person sessions online.

The project has taken me and BHMC's work in new directions, due to Bethan's PhD work on listening, and Esther's access and approach to sound-based resources; it has allowed BHMC to fully explore our work in bringing people together in the moment creatively, irrespective of their experience or ability.

The way in which the three-way creative partnership has emerged and developed has been a delight; it has drawn on the partners' curiosity, reflective practice and shared interests. I've really enjoyed the spaciousness of being supported to develop sessions, practice, and our new online tool as we've been working – that's been really exciting for me as both creative practitioner and facilitator. I really wasn't anticipating the project to grow in the way it has, so that's been inspiring and a real joy.

For BHMC it's been wonderful to bring people in from other projects of ours, who have been able to benefit from this partnership; for example, a participant of Silver Strings (an older people's community string band) saying that at the age of 88, she is experiencing the world in a new way (that is, through her ears).

Working on the project has given me three things:

- a new sense of place, in the city, and also at this time in the city – a feeling of this project being part of Brighton's heritage (rather than just 'consuming' heritage that already exists)
- developing my listening skills – enhancing both my professional and personal life
- feeling creatively supported and inspired; I am doing things that are new to me as a result of being part of this project (including new partnerships with Stephen Wolff of Maxgate Digital and the Stanmer Restoration Project – also with Bethan).

I'm thrilled that we have such a tangible – unanticipated – legacy from the project, too, in the form of RiTA; I'm excited about where this will take us next.

### **Bethan Prosser (University of Brighton doctoral researcher)**

Thinking back, there are so many sounds that conjure up my experiences of the partnership. I can hear my own breathing in between deep listening questions as I try to set a pace for listening with a group, and the hum of The Keep building as we walk around it with our ears open. I hear the archive-sampled words that participants loved pressing in RiTA – 'Oh this' of the rural steam engine driver, and 'Christmas pudding' in the French accent of the Brighton hotel chef recorded in the 1970s.

These sounds make me smile and feel very warm about all the activities I've experienced through working together. It's brought out my own playfulness and curiosity, and left me more confident to keep finding these creative aspects in my work. I also feel very grateful to have had the opportunity to spend three months working substantially on Sounds to Keep, which seemed to fortuitously come together, and then also grew very naturally into finding new ways to adapt activities to a Covid-restricted digital world.

It has been the highlight of getting through difficult 'pandemic times'. I've treasured working in a small inspiring team, especially when my PhD could often feel very isolated and disconnected. After spending so much time in my previous CUPP role facilitating others to meet and find shared passions, it has been amazing to do it myself! And to find out that I can also generate ideas and bring useful knowledge from sound studies into the community realm. It's kept me hopeful in the face of marketising forces in higher education that threaten the vital community–university engagement and partnership work across the sector.

We've hit stumbling blocks in delivery, especially when it comes to recruiting more marginalised groups to take part, when so many face increasing difficulties. But it's been reassuring to work with others who have enough experience to be pragmatic, flexible, discerning and resourceful ... we've always managed to make something worthwhile happen. I just wish there were more resourced opportunities to keep this going further...

## Defining our partnership

We all found reading through each other's reflections affirming. There were no surprises, because we had openly communicated throughout the partnership. However, Bethan felt uncomfortable that the vignettes presented an overly 'feel-good news story'. This speaks to the different drivers in our sectors, whereby the community/voluntary sector is under pressure to present a positive narrative within competitive funding regimes, in contrast to the academic desire to critique and problematise. In this final section, we aim for somewhere in the middle, as we share our critical reflections of our positive experiences of this partnership.

We realised through our discussion that the partnership felt so good overall because 'it doesn't always!' (Bela). This highlights what is often missing in collaborations, much of which centres on our inability to define partnerships as they develop. Competitive funding systems create unfavourable conditions for a *defining in the doing* approach, instead generating precarity, short-termism and data burden (Adams et al., 2017). In contrast, this partnership operated with more flexibility due to the circumstances of each partner and the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Esther had the resources to commission small projects, bringing a degree of autonomy to the partnership. While the pandemic interrupted planned work, it also created space for UOSH to try out new avenues to meet its objectives. Bela was able to work responsively and adapt quickly within a small social enterprise set-up. For BHMC, the pandemic propelled practitioners into finding ways to meaningfully continue their work, and heightened the need for creative social inclusion activities.

In contrast to other academic positions, Bethan had a degree of freedom as a doctoral researcher. The internship provided additional resources, which Bethan found was the most productive way of creating official space for community engagement during her PhD. The PhD set-up can restrict community engagement, if this has not been written into a project from the start. This includes pre-existing project agreements with funders that set strict parameters and timelines, university-driven topics that lack benefit or appeal to community partners, and narrow interpretations of project ownership (Jones and Hunt, 2022). The internship option frames collaboration as professional development that opens up career opportunities, rather than valuing community engagement in and of itself. However, in practice, this internship created the foundations for ongoing knowledge exchange that significantly shaped Bethan's methodology as an original contribution to knowledge. In many ways, the restrictive results-based management and competitive funding systems within academia echo those experienced in the community/voluntary sector.

In somewhat surprising ways, the pandemic helped us to continue working together, sustaining our delivery beyond the initial Sounds to Keep project. In the early stages of the pandemic, we continually asked 'What can we still manage to do?', encouraging an open, pragmatic and more risk-taking attitude. This chimed with the creative practice we had already begun to develop in 2019. However, there were also negative aspects to the pandemic working conditions. While online delivery enabled us to work with some participants outside of the city (and, in some cases, internationally), it does not lend itself to cross-fertilisation. During the internship, Bethan had hoped to embed relationships further into the university through the knowledge exchange event, but this became less feasible. Screen fatigue spread, and we found it hard to identify groups that still wanted online opportunities while piloting RiTA in summer and autumn 2021. Furthermore, although constant adaptation was a strength of the partnership, it took its toll, and these pandemic burdens and consequences continue to unfold across our sectors.

Throughout our reflective discussion, we grappled to pinpoint where effective collaboration can best be attributed and situated. Many of our positive experiences come from the strength of our professional relationships, which shifts the emphasis away from organisations. With widespread temporary contracts in the community/voluntary sector, and precarity and casualisation becoming more common in higher education, professionals often take their collaborating contacts with them as they move between organisations. In our partnership, Esther and Bethan take these relationships with them as UOSH and the PhD both end. Fortunately, RiTA is a legacy of the work hosted by BHMC, although resources need to be secured for future work. This indicates that people matter in collaborations.

However, while we do share similar social demographics as White, cis-gendered women, we decided that practices rather than people were more significant in our collaboration. The creative practice of curiosity was central to driving our work, alongside creating a safe environment to allow inquisitiveness, open communication and shared reflections. Developing the practice of listening was also crucial. Listening sat at the intersection of our expertise, and it came to define the work. We have come to understand that developing shared practices are more important than who we are. This chimes with the *defining in the doing* practice-based approach. Taking on board this learning, Esther noted that if she was in a funder position again, she would formally establish a longer-term and flexible partnership arrangement from the start of a programme, rather than a series of self-contained commissioned projects. While we now benefit from hindsight, it is interesting to think about how *defining in the doing* can be facilitated in the future by more formal administrative processes.

## Conclusion

This article offers reflections on a partnership between a community music organisation, a sound heritage programme and a PhD project. In reflecting together, we have drawn out the ways that the Covid-19 pandemic generated difficult working conditions, but also opened up space to continue to work together. This partnership has created mutual benefits by bringing together practitioner and academic knowledge and experiences. It created significant creative connections and well-being benefits for a range of people at times of heightened isolation and distress. It has also had a lasting impact on a doctoral research project that continues to disseminate knowledge. We have detailed the successful partnership practices, including creativity, curiosity, listening and responsive reflexivity. The *defining in the doing* approach is a useful framework within which to situate this learning. Moving forward, with increasing uncertainties facing communities in all parts of the world, a *defining in the doing* approach has a lot to teach us. But we have also highlighted how it is not commonly supported by the funding and administrative conditions within which we work.

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### Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

## Consent for publication statement

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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