

Place in Engage- ment

A
COLLABO-
RATIVE
ENCYCLOPEDIA

By the CFA Collective

Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

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Place in Engagement – A Collaborative Encyclopedia

Editors

Jana Wendler & Kristin Bauer
Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science,
Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Layout & Design

Studio Ajot: Anastasia Marx & Johanna Klüsener

This encyclopedia is the result of the 4th Collaborative Futures Academy (CFA) held in July 2025. CFA is an annual online space of learning and exchange for researchers and practitioners working in Public Engagement. Each year, it focuses on a new theme of relevance to the engagement community, for example Ethics & Equity and Emotions. In 2025, nearly 50 participants, contributors, hosts and supporters from 16 countries came together to explore how Place matters in engagement work. The three-day programme included practitioner input, workshops, personal reflection and group sharing. As a collective, we expanded our understanding and skills across geographical, disciplinary and cultural boundaries, with new perspectives on Place in Engagement.

Collaborative Futures Academy is a collaboration between



C	Campus	<i>Place</i>	20
	Collective Design	<i>Framework</i>	22
D	Designed Discomfort	<i>Concept</i>	26
	Do One Thing!	<i>Framework</i>	28
E	Embeddedness	<i>Framework</i>	32
	Enchantment	<i>Method</i>	36
	Engagement Snob	<i>Concept</i>	40
F	First Impressions	<i>Framework, Method</i>	42
I	Ideological Dissonance	<i>Concept</i>	46
K	Knowledge Accessibility	<i>Concept, Place</i>	50
L	Language As Third Space	<i>Concept</i>	54
M	Mindful Transformation	<i>Method</i>	58
N	Narrative Resonance	<i>Method, Case Study</i>	62
O	Online Placemaking	<i>Framework</i>	66
P	Pavement	<i>Case Study, Place</i>	70
	Paying LIP Service!	<i>Framework</i>	74
	Playframe	<i>Framework, Case Study</i>	78
R	ROMO	<i>Concept</i>	82
	RuleBending	<i>Concept</i>	86
S	Science Mela	<i>Case Study</i>	88
	Slow Invitation	<i>Framework, Case Study</i>	92
	Spanner	<i>Concept</i>	96
	Starter Energy	<i>Case Study</i>	100
	Syzygy	<i>Concept</i>	104
T	Trennkost	<i>Concept, Method</i>	106

Editorial	6
An Experiment in Transdisciplinary Knowledge Integration	8
Place in Public Engagement	14
Index	112
Credits	116

“Attention to place is a means to cultivate care in a world that desperately needs it.”

This reflection by Professor Jaqui Goldin, offered during the Collaborative Futures Academy (CFA’25), beautifully captures the motivation behind this encyclopedia. It grows out of the tangled realities of a citizen science project on water in Limpopo Province, South Africa ([→Diamonds on the Soles of Our Feet](#)). On the surface, the project works with rural schools to collect water-quality data for scientific research, promoting a passion for science amongst students. Underneath, however, lies a much more complex story of place that permeates all activities: the difficulty of accessing the schools on crumbling roads, the role of local ecological and cultural histories, the emotional attachments of young learners to local water spots, the realities of working in under-resourced classrooms.

What this shows is that attention to place in Public Engagement with research is not optional. It is an essential factor in how engagement activities planned on the drafting board actually develop, and a necessary ingredient for a nuanced, caring exchange between research and society.

But how can we bring this topic of place more fully into our engagement practice? This question guided the three days of online learning at CFA’25, and it now sits at the heart of this encyclopedia.

An academy is more than the sum of its case studies and methods. What participants take away – whether it is a situation that resonates with their own experiences, a speaker’s inspiring attitude, or an emotion that lingers – often eludes formal documentation. The *Place in Engagement Encyclopedia* is an experiment to capture these insights, which would typically remain accessible only to those who were present. Yet it is precisely this kind of intangible, emotional knowledge stemming from academies that we need, in order to address complex questions – a transdisciplinary process of learning from others to create something new. Too often, such knowledge is not mapped as it defies established academic culture: it is unfinished, personal, and more a new hypothesis than an answer.

What you hold in your hands is therefore something **vulnerable**: it is neither a documentation of our Academy, nor a collection of academic papers. It falls in a grey space that some might find irritating, some might find refreshing: a poem by a postdoc; a messy, honest timeline of how engagement communities form; or an emoji comic on what exclusion can look like. Our collective encyclopedia intentionally provides space for a range of expressions, from abstract learnings to concrete methods of placemaking in engagement. To embrace the idea of transdisciplinary knowledge integration ([→ see p. 7](#)), this publication seeks not to describe the Academy itself, but to capture the knowledge, ideas,

and emotions that emerged within it. For the co-authors and editors, this experiment required stepping off the well-trodden path of academic writing, unlearning disciplinary codes and, most of all, embracing vulnerability.

When it comes to Place in Engagement, this encyclopedia will not give you definitive answers. Instead, it invites you to explore selected perspectives ([→ such as Human Geography and Design, see p. 14](#)), and observations from a group of experienced practitioners on how place manifests in their work, presented in a creative format. To help you navigate the varied contributions, we have grouped them into five categories:

- ✍ **Concepts:** metaphors or abstract ideas that describe common experiences and give us a language for observations about place in engagement. Explore what lies behind [→ Designed Discomfort](#), [→ ROMO](#) or [→ Syzygy](#).
- ✍ **Frameworks:** models and structures to help navigate placemaking in engagement. Discover different dimensions of [→ Embeddedness](#) or learn how to [→ Do One Thing!](#)
- ✍ **Methods:** tangible tools and processes that can be applied in engagement contexts to work towards desired outcomes. Try out a checklist on [→ First Impressions](#) or a recipe for [→ Narrative Resonance](#).
- ✍ **Case Studies:** concrete examples of projects or activities that illuminate how place has been addressed in practice. Take a deep dive into [→ Playframe](#) or a [→ Science Mela](#).
- ✍ **Places:** entries that reference specific places and share observations about engagement practice in these contexts. Here you find the [→ Pavement](#) as well as the [→ Knowledge Accessibility](#) in a hospital.

We invite you to approach this collection like a critical friend: it can provide inspiration, joy or simply be a useful tool. It may also raise questions or challenge how you see things. Above all, we hope it encourages you to give attention to place in your own contexts, to develop insights that matter to you and to cultivate the care our world so urgently needs.

Jana Wendler & Kristin Bauer
Editors, CFA Programme Team

An Experiment in Transdisciplinary Knowledge Integration

Kristin Bauer, Jana Wendler, Anastasia Marx

Reimagining a dusty format for transdisciplinarity

When was the last time you looked into an encyclopedia? Do you have one that does anything other than gather dust? It feels that the function of the encyclopedia as a source of knowledge has been made redundant by search engines and AI chats. So why create one now?

For us, this medium offers the basis for an experiment in knowledge integration: not to be nostalgic, but to reclaim its art of synthesis in a transdisciplinary field. Can the orderly structure of an encyclopedia help us weave together diverse insights emerging from an academy of Public Engagement practitioners?

In its original sense of the word, an encyclopedia implied a “circle of knowledge”, suggesting completeness and authority over a subject. This absolutist view has been overhauled in an age of information abundance and a more expansive view on how we come to know the world. As Haraway (1988) reminds us, knowledge is never neutral, it is situated, embodied and socially embedded. The academic knowledge of the encyclopedia, historically privileged, sits alongside experiential, indigenous or emotional modes of knowing, all of which are vital to our understanding of the world.

This multiplicity is fundamental to transdisciplinary research, and our own field of Public Engagement with research. Public Engagement practitioners act as mediators between academic rigour and community realities. They span the codified logic of scientific knowledge and the complexity of tacit, local, and experiential ways of knowing. Their dual role demands both scientific standards and human presence: the charisma, attitude and creativity that make engagement work. These tacit ingredients are deeply embedded in our craft, yet they resist scientific vocabulary and standardised collection.

This poses a challenge: how can we integrate different knowledges and expertise in our field in a way that honours this multiplicity, while remaining meaningful, navigable and relevant to others?

The encyclopedia as experimental method

At the Collaborative Futures Academy, we invite our participants to dive into these different ways of knowing. Our programme curation of case studies, creative methods, personal reflection and group exchange makes space for the vast diversity of embodied, practical and emotional expertise in the (virtual) room. It allows us to address themes that are central to our field but defy a simple narrative – as is the case for this year’s topic of Place. Such an exchange has clear value for those present,

but this year we wanted to go further: by finding a way to harvest the collective insights of this group and share them as a means to develop a wider engagement culture.

This brought us to our experiment: to make use of the orderly features of the encyclopedia, while subverting its traditional claims of completeness. By necessity, our discussion of Place was partial and fragmented – note the empty letters in the index. At the same time, the structure of terms, definitions and illustrations, and the unified design, help give tangible shape to ideas that are otherwise hard to capture. It allows a level of navigation and comparability that makes our collective exploration of Place accessible to others.

“Ultimately, transdisciplinarity may be understood as a creative process that is itself a form of design. In the absence of an a priori unity of knowledge or universal paradigm of practice, synthesis must be constructed.” (Klein, 2017, p. 65)

To move from the messy learnings of the Academy to a meaningful synthesis in the encyclopedia, we had to go beyond traditional academic methods. There was a clear need for translation: from participants’ individual practical experiences into short entries that made insights available to others. In collaboration with the design team at Studio Ajot, we developed a process to guide participants along this unfamiliar path (→ see p. 10), drawing on what Nigel Cross (1982) calls “designerly ways of knowing”. Creative practices, including visualisation, metaphor and narration exercises, enabled participants to intuitively reflect on experiences, articulate their essence and present them within the Encyclopedia’s format.

After the Academy, it was Studio Ajot’s design task to hold space for the plurality of voices while shaping a shared visuality and structure for this publication. We approached the encyclopedia not as a neutral container, but as an active co-creator in the process of synthesis. Each entry underwent a design translation to refine its core message. Alongside this, we developed a universal language of emojis, infographics and unified layouts that connects the contributions. This balance of coherence and individuality allows each entry to retain its unique tone and visual cues, while establishing a framework for dialogue between them.

Now it is your turn to continue our experiment: by browsing the entries, connecting them with your practice and finding new terms to fill the gaps of this open encyclopedia.

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Our Process

1 Engagement Case Study

Participants were asked to bring a case study from their own work, where place mattered in the context of a Public Engagement activity.

For example:

- An activity they ran in a specific location
- A community partnership they are involved in
- An initiative that works on place-based questions or challenges
- A personal experience as an engager in a particular place

2 New Perspectives on the Case Study

During the Academy, participants explored their case studies in different ways to deepen their understanding.

These methods included:

- Personal reflections based on the diverse session inputs
- Storytelling exercises in small groups, using active listening approaches
- Daily creative prompts that open up new perspectives

(→ see examples on p. 12)

3 Finding What Matters Most

In a final exchange, participants reviewed their reflections from across the Academy with the help of others. The aim was to distil key insights that would be useful to the wider engagement community.

Activity: Story Detectives – Groups of 3, 10 minutes per round

- One person shares their case study, and any reflections that emerged during the Academy. The others become Story Detectives, listen and take notes about what they hear.
- The Story Detectives give verbal feedback on what they think matters most in the reflections, seen from an outside perspective. They can suggest key terms that could be interesting for the publication.
- Switch roles and repeat this process.

From Case Study to Encyclopedia Entry

4 Encyclopedia Term & Creative Format

With the group feedback, participants defined one key term they wanted to develop further. Using a set of creative templates, they were invited to make a first sketch of how it could be presented creatively. These templates were inspired by different visual and textual information styles, and offered a stepping stone towards developing an optional full encyclopedia entry

(→ see examples on p. 13)

Template categories:

- Interview
- Timeline
- Mindmap
- Story
- Visual Contribution
- Manual
- Blank Page

5 Final Encyclopedia Entry

About half of the participants chose to develop their idea further after the Academy and submitted their entry for publication. Their material then went through an in-depth process of review and translation, to find the balance between personal voice and collective encyclopedia:

- **Peer Review:** A supportive group feedback process was undertaken to sharpen the core ideas of each entry and improve their transferability to other engagement professionals.
- **Design Translation:** In consultation with the submitting authors, Studio Ajot created a design to support the key message of each entry. The level of intervention varied – for some entries, it was simply a matter of polishing ideas, while others required more active development through symbolic imagery or layout.
- **Synthesis:** At the same time, the designers worked across the submissions to build a cohesive structure and visual language that connects the entries and enhances readability, bringing it into the final form of the encyclopedia.

Finding New Perspectives

Relations

Draw your place of your engagement as a (very simple) tiny house.
Now draw yourself in relation to it—are you inside? Are you far away?

Add dots for one or more other groups of people that mattered.
Where do they stand? How do they connect to you and others?

Gaps and Bridges

Imagine your place as a Valley. Think of a gap, a division, or a tension in your place of engagement. Use the space to sketch what lies on either side of this gap e.g. cultural differences, knowledge gaps, a gap in history vs. usage in this place. Then, illustrate a bridge: something that helped cross & connect these sides: a person, a practice, a moment, a gesture. You can label, draw, annotate, or symbolise.

(Un)written Rules

Imagine your place as a game.
What rules exist in order to play?
Did you (or others) respect them—or break them?

The Senses

Close your eyes. Imagine you are back in your place of engagement.
What do you smell, hear, feel or taste? What is down below?

Highlight the most memorable one.

Invitations

Imagine a simple door.
Note on the left side: what made you and/or others hesitant to enter?
Note on the right side: What welcomes you and/or them?

During the Academy, we ran several short creative check-in exercises. Participants were able to choose between six prompts to reflect on their case studies. These ranged from the concrete (sketching relationships, senses or materials) to the more abstract (associative reflections on gaps and bridges, door openers or unwritten rules).

Creative Templates for Encyclopedia Entries

Interview

Imagine you are giving an interview about your term.
Write the script. What questions should be asked, what answers would you give?

Interviewer Name: Interviewee Name:

Interviewer: Hello, how are you? Thanks for talking to me about today. Let's jump straight in: What does [term] have to do with places in public engagement?

Respondent: Good question, ...

Manual

Show others how to 'use' your term and write down tools and instructions.
You may add a sketch, if you want.

What we're building today:	The tools you need:
Step 1 ...	
Step 2 ...	
Step 3 ...	

Visual Contribution

Any kind of visual expression - photos, drawings, collage - with a brief description to explain the term in relation to engagement places.

Mind Map

Visualise your term in a landscape of ideas or practice. What associations does it bring to the fore, and how come you do that? Feel free to add your own shapes and drawings.

A Blank Page

Sometimes it's best to start with a space for your own exploration of your term - a prompt, a trigger, a starting point.

To capture the diverse insights from the Academy, and turn them into accessible encyclopedia entries, we offered a variety of creative formats as inspiration. These templates served as a final reflection tool and also set the tone for a publication beyond scientific codification: sketches, photos, timelines, manuals, self-interviews, mindmaps, storytelling or plain text.

Place in Public Engagement

Jana Wendler & Kristin Bauer

Our Perspectives on Place

The practice of Public Engagement naturally engages with a variety of places: practitioners look for suitable venues for festivals or workshops; researchers consider how to bring their work from the lab to the street or classroom; academic institutions seek to make their campus more accessible. Over time, a large amount of practical expertise has evolved around these questions, which informs individual work and is shared in professional forums.

Yet *place* is not just a matter of location. It also frames who is involved in engagement processes and how these processes are structured. In South Africa, for example, community engagement is recognised as a central mission of universities, rooted in the acknowledgement of local context and the responsibility to advance social justice (Council on Higher Education, 2010). In the UK, a recent pilot funding programme encouraged place-based partnerships for higher education institutions (Griffin et al., 2022). And on a smaller scale, projects explicitly work with place in many diverse ways: using participatory mapping to bring together research and lived experience of migration (MapUrban); foregrounding emotional connections to local water sources in citizen science (Diamonds on the Soles of Our Feet) or creating spaces for dialogue using cardboard boxes and local festivals (The Hopes and Fears Lab).¹ Together, these examples suggest a growing awareness of place within the engagement community.

At the same time, systematic, cross-cutting work on place within Public Engagement remains limited. There is value in drawing on disciplines with longer traditions of theorising place. For this reason, we chose to build connections with Human Geography and Design during CFA'25, reflecting some of the expertise in the project team. Both fields offer relevant conceptual frameworks and practical methods that enrich engagement practice.

The Perspective of Human Geography

Human Geography examines the concept of place as a lens through which to understand the relationship between humans and their environment. Commonly, we think of a place as a location or a point on the map, but geographical perspectives open up a more complex view.

¹ These three projects were presented as case studies during the CFA'25 programme.

You can find out more here:

→ [MapUrban](#)

→ [Diamonds on the Soles of Our Feet](#)

→ [The Hopes and Fears Lab](#)

Places are shaped by various structures, most obviously material ones such as the built or natural environment. Others are more subtle, such as cultural or social patterns of behaviour and shared expectations (consider, for instance, how you feel and act when entering a museum). Embedded within these patterns are power relations and hierarchies, which determine who is welcome, seen or heard, and who is excluded. These structures can manifest in a physical form, such as walls or signs, but often they are less tangible. Unwritten rules of behaviour can single out those less familiar with a certain place, while the names given to buildings and streets send clear signals about whose perspectives matter. These are important considerations for our work in Public Engagement.

These structures might lead us to think of places as fixed entities. But geographers like Doreen Massey (2005) highlight how places are just as much made of flows and relations (of people, resources, knowledge). Places are not isolated or clearly bounded, they are embedded in local and global networks with intersecting ideas and cultures. This too is important for engagement, especially when working with communities. It reminds us that people cannot be reduced to one fixed dimension. Instead, we constantly learn and exchange across places.

In addition, how these structures and flows are experienced is not uniform across different people and groups. Every person brings their own body, emotions and affective responses to a place, and their experience is shaped by race, gender, age or ability. Thinking about place from an embodied and sensory perspective brings us to questions of accessibility and atmosphere in engagement.

Applying these perspectives helps practitioners make more nuanced choices on where to conduct a specific engagement activity. They also offer a deeper reminder: knowledge is always situated. It emerges from particular contexts, and its place of origin affects how it is perceived. Engagement often brings together knowledges from different places (for example, research and lived experience). At other times, it seeks to generate new collective knowledge. Where this happens is essential. By adopting key elements of geographical thought – on power relations, histories, emotions or sensory experience of place (→ see p. 17) – Public Engagement can build the foundation for deeper, more collective and equitable knowledge exchange.

A note on the use of place and space:

→ In this encyclopedia, you will find several entries using the term space instead of place.

The distinction between the two is a long-standing debate within geographical literature. In practice, the terms are used flexibly, especially by those coming from other fields. We have therefore kept the choice of words made by individual authors.

The Perspective of Design

If Human Geography teaches us to view places as dynamic and relational, design expands this perspective to include a transformative stance: places are not only relational to the humans using them, but their use can be actively shaped by the designer.

Design methods can, on the one hand, help us to reveal and analyse the intangible characteristics of places, by giving shape to them via creative means such as maps and figures. On the other hand, design can become a tool for reworking or creating new elements of place. Unwritten rules of place, who feels comfortable and which interactions feel natural, all become mouldable in the eye of the designer (→ see “*Lenses on Place of Engagement*” on the right). Interventions can range from physical modification (architecture, interior design), to framing a space through posters or materials (communication design), to orchestrating a desired experience (service or interaction design). All these fields offer tools from which engagers can borrow.

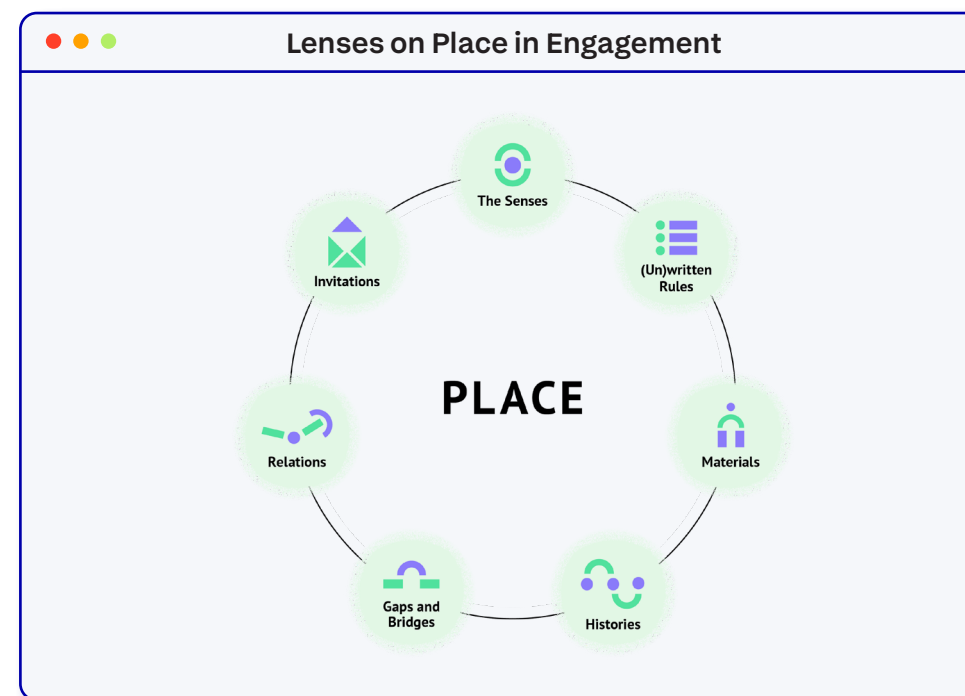
Public Engagement presents us with a particular challenge. From a cultural perspective, it is still at an early stage: the mutual exchange between science and the public does not yet have established habits, norms or dedicated spaces where such interactions usually occur. This means that we often ask participants to behave in ways for which they have no prior experience or, as Bourdieu (1986) would argue, no cultural capital. Here, careful design choices about the place, its material and immaterial aspects, become essential to build the potential for knowledge exchange.

A useful starting point is the human-centred design approach. It observes how people naturally move, act and respond in certain environments, and uses those insights to minimise friction towards a set goal. This invites us as engagement practitioners to leverage on desired behaviour that we see elsewhere and use this as a blueprint for how we design our engagement space. For example, if we want our participants to share emotional stories, we can adopt the circular seating of a campfire. To create evidence-based decision-making, we can lean on the materiality of an air traffic control tower by presenting our data using a big dashboard. Similarly, we can deliberately subvert the affordances of places to challenge our established norms: what happens if you fill a library with music or remove the chairs from a meeting room?

During CFA’25, we invited our participants to adopt a designer’s perspective by thinking of themselves as a director of a half-improvised theatre play. Imagine being asked to set up a stage: every choice – the location of the stage, props, furniture, wardrobe, even empty space – conveys a message. As Paul Watzlawick (1967) et al. remind us, “one cannot not communicate”. In engagement too, it is the setting itself that speaks and nudges participants’ intuitions and interactions. Choosing a community hub over a conference room, subverting expectations

by bringing microscopes to a café or designing a fictional menu for a bar – all these deliberate choices can softly guide and constrain how engagement unfolds. The setting, and the way it is facilitated, creates an atmosphere that gently establishes expectations, instead of dictating a set of explicit rules and outcomes. It sets a frame for shared knowledge creation but allows room for unexpected directions and surprises, which often lie at the heart of engagement.

Since Public Engagement is uncharted territory, placemaking must be approached as a conscious design decision – one that simultaneously builds Public Engagement culture. With this in mind, this encyclopedia could be seen as a collection of prototypes of how to use place in engagement: metaphorically, culturally or materially.



Original conceptual model offering six lenses through which one can analyse, adopt or create places. Source: own.

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Campus

Alessandra Frau

Public Engagement Manager, University of Lancashire

Campus is the area where all or most university buildings are. It is where research and teaching take place, as well as Public Engagement activities, although many of these also happen in other places, from schools to community spaces. As a Public Engagement practitioner, campus is my place. I value going out to visit community spaces and I believe these are the right location for many Public Engagement activities, but many of the activities and events we do take place on campus. People who come to our events often already have a link to higher education and we are trying to change this. My dream is that everyone in the city and in the region feels welcome to come over to enjoy our events.

*Campus is not for me.
Campus is shut.
Campus is there but I can't get in.
Campus exists in a parallel universe.*

*I have been invited,
I came with my youth group,
they know someone here,
I didn't know this was happening and was free,
Today was special,
I will come back*

*Campus is our place
Campus is open
Campus is joyful
Campus is for everyone to enjoy*

Think about *campus* as a place that may be seen differently according to who is looking at or thinking about it. Some people visit us often and come back; others may not feel welcome or comfortable or simply don't know about what is happening. In my experience, I found that establishing a relationship with community groups is the first and most important step in breaking perceived barriers. By inviting groups personally and welcoming them I feel we have made progress. It is also important to facilitate the visit, for example by covering travel expenses. We have also hosted events in partnership with other organisations large and small, and this has allowed us to reach out to community groups and attendees whom we wouldn't have otherwise. We also run activities in community venues, and I think this has contributed to establishing a relationship with communities in their neighbourhood, letting them know about our events and making our university a real presence in their lives and hopefully a resource for their community.

Collective Design

Custódio Efraim Matavel

Researcher, Leibniz Institute for Agricultural Engineering
and Bioeconomy, Germany

Collective design in the context of Place in Engagement means working with people instead of working for them.

It is a research and development approach where local knowledge, needs and ideas actively shape the creation of something tangible, whether a tool, a service or a shared practice.

The place is no longer just where the project happens; it becomes part of the process itself, holding the relationships, values and voices that guide the work.

Through this process, the facilitator's role in connecting expertise with local perspectives is essential for turning ideas into outcomes that matter to the community.

Others can learn that involving local communities early and truly listening to their ideas can make a big difference, not just in how a project is received but in terms of what it becomes. In our case, starting the conversation with local stakeholders before the technology was created could have shaped the design in ways that were more closely aligned with local priorities from the very beginning.

This experience has changed how I approach development projects: I now see early dialogue with the community as essential, not optional. It means inviting people into the process before the first prototype exists, so their knowledge and needs guide the direction from the start.

Practicing *collective design* in this way builds trust; for example, during our participatory redesign sessions, one community member said, "Now it looks good and will work the way we need it." That simple remark reflected a big shift: the technology had been adapted to local skills, routines and resources, making it easier for everyone to use and explain to others. This fit to local needs encouraged more people to try it, share it and keep using it over time. It has also made me more reflective and adaptive in my research approach, seeing the community as an equal partner rather than as an audience.

↳ *Collective design* changed our approach by making the local community part of the process from the inside out. In this project, I learned that entering a place before having a fixed method or prototype allows local priorities, skills and constraints to shape the work from the start. It meant letting go of some control as a researcher, listening more than leading and using the material realities of the place, from available tools to daily routines, as design inputs. This shift built trust, improved participation and turned the intervention into something created with the community, in a way that fit both the people and the place.

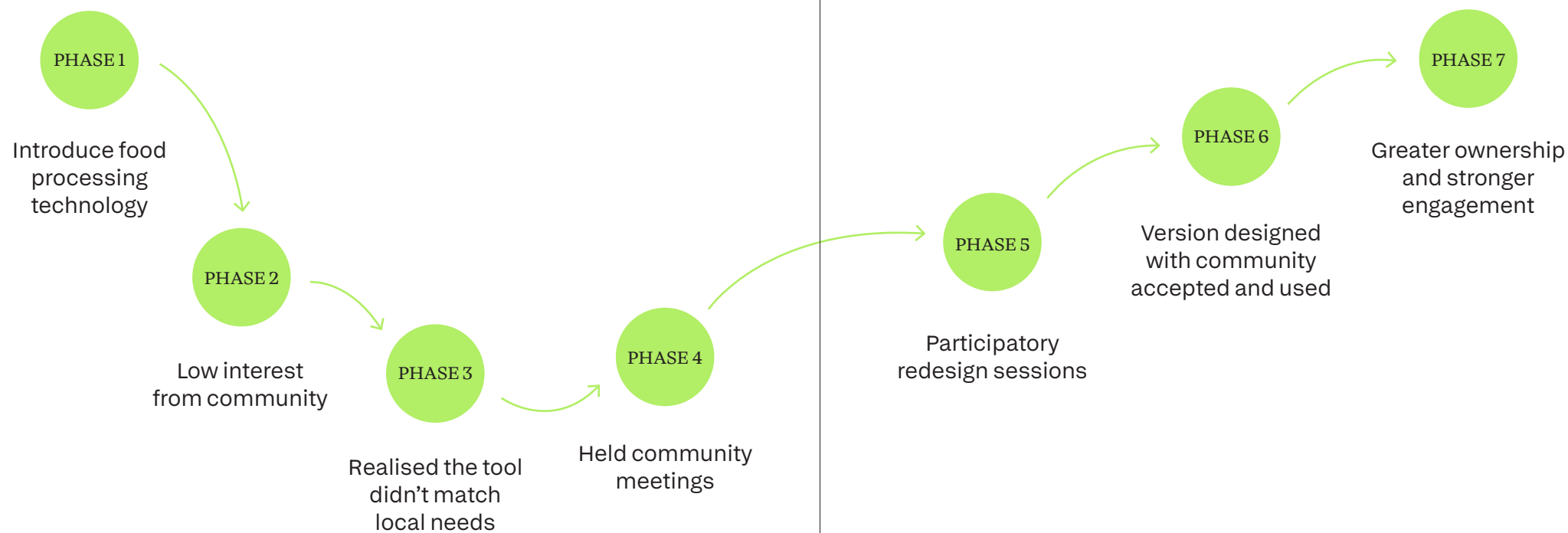
Related publications:

- Matavel, C. E., et al. (2024). Does participatory research stimulate sustained adoption of energy technologies? Lessons from stove dissemination in Gurué district, rural Mozambique. *Technology in Society*, 79, 102722. [Link](#)
- Matavel, C. E., et al. (2023) How to increase cookstove adoption? Exploring cost-effective dissemination techniques in Central Mozambique. *Energy Research & Social Science* 100, Article 103082. [Link](#)

What We Planned



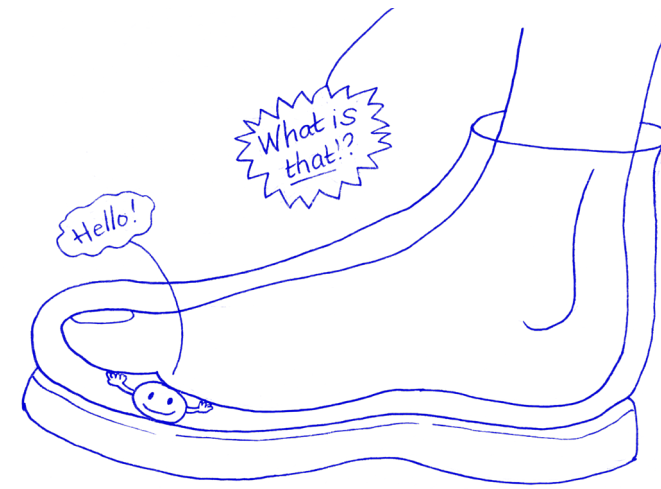
What Actually Happened



Designed Discomfort

Kathy Fawcett
Senior Lecturer Science Communication,
University of the West of England

Designed Discomfort is the idea that comfort is not always a desirable state to create for our audiences. Instead, the deliberate inclusion of elements in a space that cause a sense of discomfort and uncertainty can help us to attract their attention, arouse their curiosity and stimulate more meaningful engagement.



Put a stone in your shoe!

All human spaces were **designed** at some point – the result of active decisions that affect how they look, feel and sound, who or what is in them, and what happens there. Intentionally or not, they all “say” something to us. This is especially important when we’re creating a space in which we wish to engage with different publics.

But perhaps counterintuitively, stimulating and productive environments are not necessarily the easy or relaxing ones, the ones in which our audiences or participants might “naturally” feel the most comfortable.

The slight discomfort of **sub-optimal circumstances** and their unexpectedly positive outcomes is something many of us might relate to – the anxiety of a deadline that resulted in great work, a horribly restrictive budget that promoted sparkling creativity or a team in which the tension of disagreement produced innovation.

Sometimes, it’s the discomfort these challenges bring that invigorates us, helps us perform at our best and produces a different kind of experience or insight.

We’re not talking terrifying danger, anxiety or physical pain here, just the niggling, teasing unease that, in the end, you just can’t ignore – the social and cognitive equivalent of **a stone in your shoe**. Irritating, and quietly shouting at you. Demanding your attention. Stopping you fully relaxing until you **do something**. Making you alive to the reality of your physical being. Your shoe-wearingness.

Notions of how we experience designed spaces, engage with tasks and resolve problems connect to some well-known concepts such as flow, cognitive dissonance and curiosity:

- Flow: Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2014). *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*. Springer Dordrecht
- Curiosity: Silvia, P. J. (2012). Curiosity and Motivation. In R. M. Ryan (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Human Motivation* (pp. 157–166). Oxford University Press.
- Places: Chatterjee A, Coburn A, Weinberger A. (2021). The Neuroaesthetics of Architectural Spaces. *Cognitive Processing*. 22(12), 115-120.

Do One Thing!

Claudia Antolini

Public Engagement Manager, University of Cambridge

Often in engagement we want to solve issues of institutional imbalance of power, inequality, slow pace of change and lack of access to place. These goals are only reachable over a long period, and it can be difficult to keep the momentum going. I applied the idea of self-efficacy to place to motivate myself to keep trying and feel what I am doing is creating change – to only do one thing is a way to experience self efficacy and keep the momentum for change going.

Try: **DO ONE THING!** In psychology, the concept of self-efficacy is the belief of an individual that they are able to accomplish their goals. I see I become more self-effective when I give myself permission to be imperfect and instead focus on identifying ONE THING I can do. This helps me to create momentum, convene allies and achieve more than giving in because I couldn't achieve a perfect goal.

Do you ever feel frustrated by how hard it is to get your institution to

THINK DIFFERENTLY about place?

Do you see that events all happen in the same set of venues, which are often inaccessible or not welcoming to minorised groups?

How do we create change in institutions when Public Engagement in research is not consistently resourced and building a culture of care takes a long time?

Maybe you feel brought down
by the slowness of change?

Do you experience



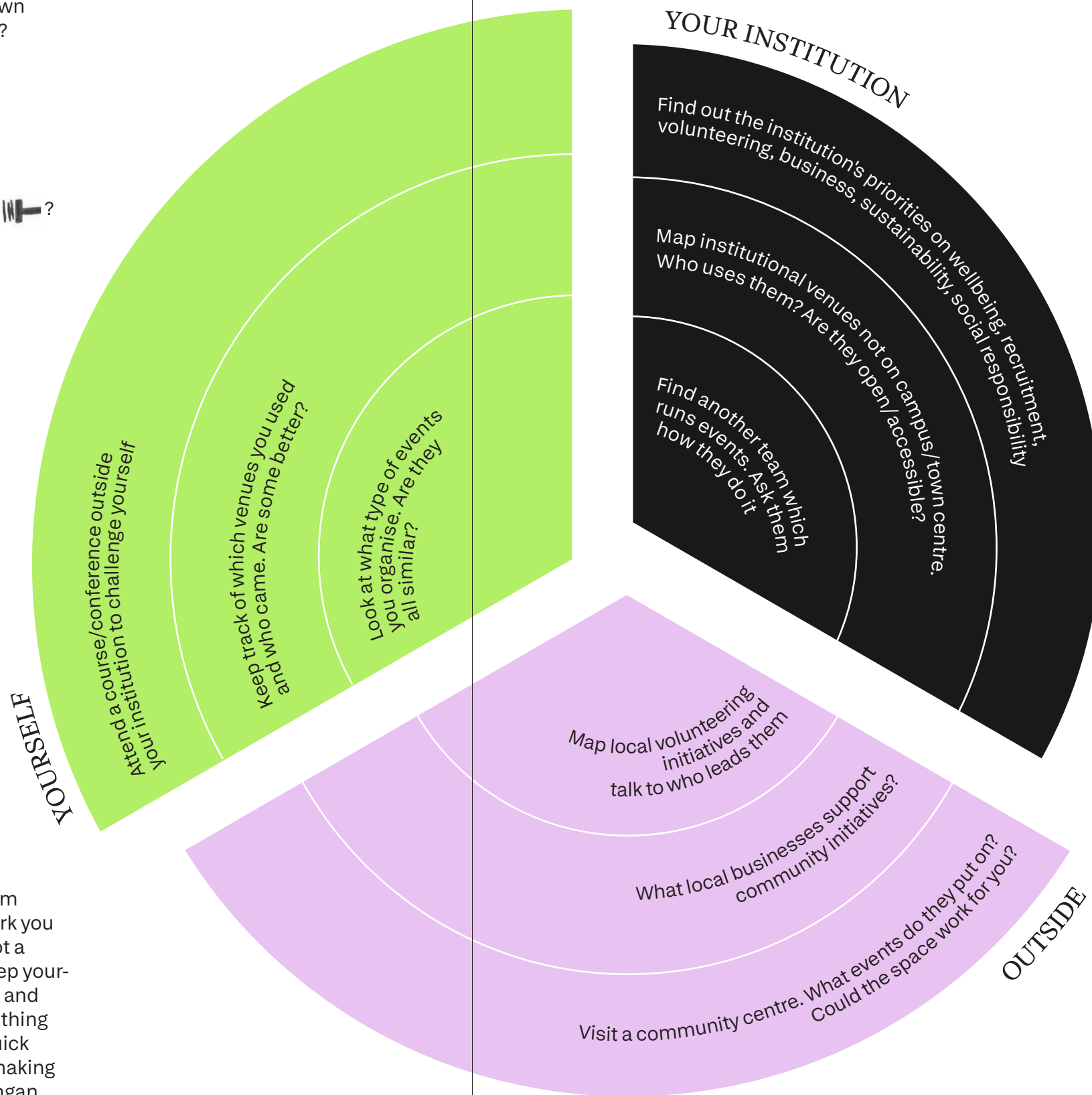
by having to deal with



How do we go from



to **empowered**?



Try to let go of perfectionism and remember that the work you are doing is a marathon, not a sprint – it's important to keep yourself psychologically strong and motivated. Just trying one thing will help you to focus on quick wins and feel like you are making a change, rather than having an "all or nothing" mentality.

Embeddedness

Jen Tuttle Parsons

Civic Science Fellow, American Physical Society

E

Embeddedness means being rooted in place through sustained, reciprocal relationships. It grows by showing up with humility, staying long enough to be changed and allowing for local context to shape the work. Embedded engagement resists the transactional and rejects the temporary, challenging the legacy of fly-in approaches. It is place-aware, trust-based and accountable over time.

Impactful engagement begins with a deep understanding of your audience and the contexts that hold them. Their histories, relationships and lived realities shape what is possible and where belonging begins. Your goals and theirs must find convergence. Embeddedness asks us to stay long enough to understand and to honour mutual transformation.

Working as an embedded engagement partner

In practice, \Rightarrow *embedded* work starts with being present before there is a project to pitch and remaining in touch even when no deliverable is due. I have found it valuable to build relationships in local gathering spaces such as coffee shops, by volunteering at regional events and by attending neighbourhood meet-ups before formal engagement begins. Inside institutions, this may require translating community priorities into language that resonates internally and with funders while being transparent with partners about organisational limits. It helps to have tools and resources that can adapt to different contexts, like templates for co-creating objectives, agreements that prioritise local facilitators and participatory evaluation so everyone can see how the work is progressing. The role of an embedded engagement practitioner requires flexibility and curiosity, with a focus on creating outcomes that provide mutual value for communities, institutions and individuals.

Dimensions of Embeddedness in Public and Community Engagement

E

CULTURAL

Deeply embedded engagement reflects the values, languages and shared meanings of the communities involved. Culturally responsive practitioners can help build this by learning and respecting local norms, working with cultural liaisons and developing activities that navigate across difference without erasure or tokenism.

COGNITIVE

Embedded practice involves diverse ways of knowing by reflecting on whose knowledge is validated, centred and shared. Co-creators of knowledge can support this by creating space for epistemic diversity, applying storytelling methods to elevate local narratives, and validating artistic and place-based forms of knowledge as “legitimate” evidence.

INSTITUTIONAL

Embedded practice is grounded in how organisations support, hinder or shape conditions for meaningful engagement. Facilitators can strengthen relationships by advocating for policies and incentives that value long-term relationships, encouraging leadership models that share power, and by prioritising equity in engagement.

RELATIONAL

STRUCTURAL

Embedded engagement acknowledges the power systems and infrastructures that shape what is possible. Practitioners can respond by mapping decision-making structures, naming inequities openly and working with partners to design alternative pathways within or alongside existing structures.

Engagement that is embedded is built through trust, reciprocity and long-term relationships. Those doing the work can sustain this by showing up consistently, practicing humility, creating spaces where all voices are heard, and by sharing decision-making and credit in ways that are not extractive or transactional.

SPATIAL

Embedded engagement is tied to context and place, acknowledging that local histories, ecosystems and built environments shape the work. Practitioners can spend time listening in the community, use place-based stories and examples, and design activities to reflect the physical and cultural landscape instead of using a one-size-fits-all model.

SITUATIONAL

Embedded approaches recognise that context shifts over time, including changing political climates, community trauma, leadership transitions and funding fluctuations. Facilitators can revisit goals with partners, document shifts over time and use participatory evaluation to respond to the conditions of now, while acknowledging historical situations.

Embeddedness

Enchantment

Jana Wendler

Coordinator, Berlin School of Public Engagement
and Open Science

E

Enchantment refers to an intense experience in both body and mind: a state of wonder, a sense of surprise, a feeling of connectedness that is triggered by things (objects, ideas, people ...) in the world around us.

Philosopher Jane Bennett describes how enchantment often emerges from the small, hidden things – “the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday”: a plant growing between concrete; fragments of a choir practice; a taste that is both pleasant and strange. Really noticing these materialities brings us into “a mood of liveliness” and helps us appreciate the value of what is around us – in our everyday life, and in Public Engagement.

In Jane Bennett’s work, *enchantment* is an ingredient of ethical care for the world. Enchantment makes us feel connected; we actively engage and it is impossible to remain passive or neutral. This experience allows us to build more caring relationships to the places, people and things we encounter. As engagement practitioners, we often look to generate a similar attitude of generosity and attention towards new ideas or knowledge among the people we connect with.

Every place carries the potential for *enchantment*, often through small things and little surprises that linger in the background. The challenge is to train our senses and attention to be open to this experience. Using techniques of playful, embodied curiosity allow us to draw out these possibilities, nurturing an attitude of care and appreciation for the world.

Recommended Reading:

→ Jane Bennett (2001): *The Enchantment of Modern Life*. Princeton University Press.

BUILD A ROCKET LAUNCHER

(without knowing any of the constituent parts)

**An exercise to cultivate the possibility of enchantment
for engagement practitioners**

People:
any number of people

Time:
around 10 minutes

Location:
anywhere – a lecture theatre, a workshop room, a hallway, a park...
(the less “interesting” the place, the better the discoveries!)

STEP 1 Invite the people you work with to take 2 to 3 minutes to move around and explore the space they are in. Ask them to pay particular attention to the materials around them.

If needed, you can prompt people to touch, listen, smell; to explore textures, movement, weight...

STEP 2 Ask them to stop where they are and gather in small groups (1–4 people is ideal)

STEP 3 Tell them a story: their task is to send a rocket to the moon from where they are right now.

Rules:

- ☞ They only have the materials and objects available that are present around them.
- ☞ They need to build a rocket and a launcher. Throwing something in the air will not get them to the moon.
- ☞ Distance, height and precision all matter (but achieving one of them is already great).
- ☞ Ask for permission before using things that belong to someone else.

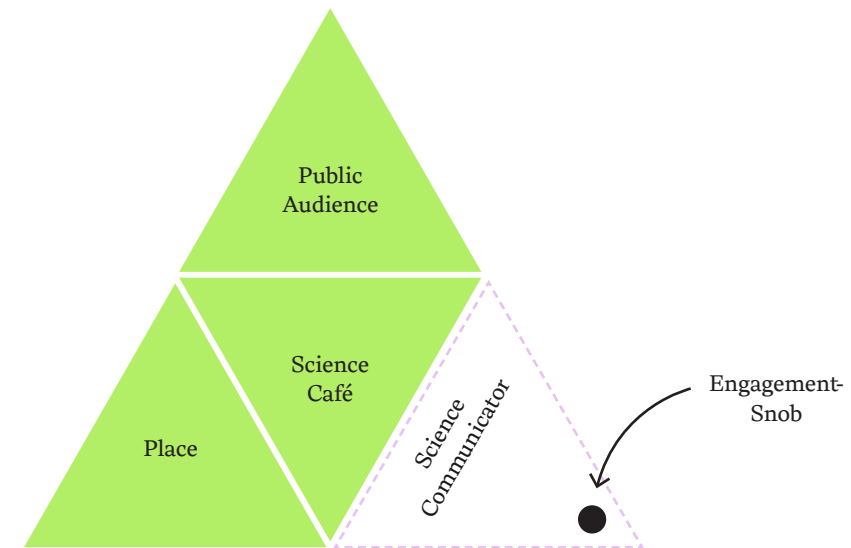
STEP 4 Give the teams around 5 minutes to build their rocket.



Engagement-Snob

Seyed Mohammad Hossein Mirhashemi
Science Communicator, University of Tehran

Engagement-snob is a colloquial term referring to academics and scientists who look down on Public Engagement and hold pessimistic views about its results. As a result, they refrain from participating in activities that constitute Public Engagement, through which researchers and the public are connected in accessible, interactive ways. They prefer to discuss scientific topics solely within academic circles and with other specialists.



I have always been faced with an issue called scientist engagement as much as I have been with the challenge of improving Public Engagement.

Reasons for avoiding Public Engagement vary amongst researchers. Some consider scientific topics inherently irrelevant to the public, while others refrain due to limited communication skills or political, social or institutional constraints. A specific subgroup believes that scientific and specialised topics should not be discussed with general audiences or in everyday, non-academic venues. Their stated reasons may include preventing the “illusion of knowledge” among the public or avoiding the “spread of misinformation”.

Science Cafés are a format that brings together members of the public with varying backgrounds for informal dialogue with a scientist, usually guided by a moderator. Held outside traditional academic settings, often in actual cafés, these gatherings aim to lower barriers to Public Engagement. Scientists are encouraged to present concepts in plain language to ensure accessibility for all participants. But the aspects that make science cafés accessible and welcoming to a wider audience – such as the non-university place and informal setting – can be deterrents to the participation of *Engagement-snobs*.

It takes some work to convince sceptical scientists of the benefits of getting involved in such formats, even though it can enhance scientific literacy, strengthen societal support for research and may inspire younger audiences. Science Cafés, by bringing together participants with diverse backgrounds, can also stimulate interdisciplinary dialogue.

In practice, science communicators can encourage participation among colleagues through support with multimedia tools, skilled moderation and by giving examples of prominent scientific peers. Concerns about limited reach may be addressed by disseminating reports through mass media and social networks.

First Impressions

Isa Kleine-Bekel

*Science Communicator and PhD Student,
University of Duisburg-Essen*

F

First impressions are shaped not just by people but by the places that greet us. A doorway, a scent, a sound – each element hints at whether there’s something here worth staying for. Think of place as your silent co-host: its atmosphere, design and accessibility set the emotional tone before a single word is exchanged. In engagement, place speaks before we do. It sets the stage for curiosity or caution, shaping how open we are to connect. Using the lens of first impressions is an act of preparation and respect, honoring the time and attention people bring.

⇒ *First impressions* aren’t just about people – they’re about the spaces we invite others into. When we create a sense of genuine interest and welcome from the very start, visitors feel more connected and engaged – and we, as hosts, can find it easier to inspire and interact. Knowing we’ve shaped those first moments with care boosts our confidence and presence, elevating the whole engagement.

Imagine if we treat place as a silent co-host and start asking: if this place were a person, what personality and vibe would they bring? Would they be playful and full of surprises, or calm and quietly attentive? This perspective shifts our planning from logistics to atmosphere.

Small, intentional choices can transform a neutral setting into a space that says, “You belong here.” Balloons or a bubble machine can spark curiosity from across the street. Comfortable chairs and fresh air make people more likely to linger and focus. Limiting the number of participants in a hands-on activity avoids overwhelm and keeps the experience personal. Even how we present ourselves can be part of the message: when I, as a physicist, stand on stage looking nothing like the stereotype, it signals that science welcomes more than one type of person.

Working through the lens of ⇒ *First Impressions* means preparing the environment with as much care as the content. In the end, a welcoming place doesn’t have to be perfect – but it should feel like it wants you there.

First Impressions Checklist: Tuning into Place

This checklist isn't a rulebook but a gentle companion – an invitation to reflect, with curiosity, on how your place shapes first impressions and sets the stage for meaningful engagement.

15:05

- ☐ **Firm Ground**
Do I, as a host or creator, feel grounded here? Am I at ease, excited and ready to interact?
- ☐ **Curiosity Triggered**
Is there an unexpected or inviting visual, sound or gesture? What draws people in at first glance?
- ☐ **Inclusive by Design**
Can everyone enter and feel comfortable here – physically, emotionally, intellectually?
- ☐ **Breaking the Mould**
Are we disrupting stereotypes about who belongs here, who speaks, who listens?
- ☐ **Audience-Sensitive**
Does this space resonate with the audience we want to reach? What prior knowledge or barriers do they bring? Are signs, symbols and language tailored to their world?

- ☐ **Permission to Linger**
Are there cues like seating, lighting, smells or quiet zones that say: “You’re welcome to stay”?
- ☐ **Invitation to Co-create**
Does the place offer small openings for participants to shape their experience? Are they just visiting, or joining?
- ☐ **Documentable Moment**
Is there a natural moment or spot where people might want to take a photo, write a thought or share their experience?
- ☐ **Shared Lens**
Have I identified where my own view-point might limit my judgement, and sought feedback to fill those gaps? Have I invited others to co-interpret and refine the first impression?
- ☐ **Lasting Firsts**
Is the first impression part of a deeper experience? Do we create a sense of continuity, not just a flash?



Ideological Dissonance

Caitlin White

Research Fellow, Trinity College Dublin

I

Ideological dissonance is the felt mismatch between a person's values and the values a place appears to honour – often through its architecture, symbols, rituals or unspoken rules. In institutions with complicated histories (e.g., colonial, exclusionary, classed), that mismatch can make a space feel beautiful yet uneasy, and it can shape whether, how and how long people choose to engage.

You might be familiar with cognitive dissonance, which describes the discomfort we feel when our actions and beliefs don't align. → *Ideological dissonance* takes that idea and applies it to places. It's the tension you feel when the values a place celebrates clash with your own – when you admire a campus's beauty and contemporary diversity but notice it memorialises people whose legacies you oppose. You want to engage, yet part of you feels out of tune with the space. As with cognitive dissonance, that tension can prompt you to reframe, adapt or step away.

Engagement happens in contexts with histories. Courtyards, portraits, plaques and naming conventions communicate what an institution chooses to honour. When those signals conflict with participants' values, engagement can stall unless we acknowledge the feelings of discomfort, anger, frustration or anxiety; contextualise the signals; and offer ways to participate that respect the tension.

- 1. Name it early.** Signal awareness (e.g., "This site's history includes X; you may feel Y. That feeling is valid.")
- 2. Offer multiple modes of engagement.** Allow for quiet reflection, dialogue circles, alternative routes/exhibits, opt-in content warnings.
- 3. Contextualise monuments/symbols.** Add honest labels, counter-narratives, timelines of change and harm.
- 4. Invite lived experience.** Co-facilitate with stakeholders affected by the history; pay them for their labour.
- 5. Create consonance on purpose.** Pair hard histories with visible present-tense actions (scholarships, restitution, governance changes).
- 6. Design "micro-exits".** Let people step out, debrief or choose different activities without penalty.
- 7. Close the loop.** Share "what we heard/what we're changing" after engagements to reduce future dissonance.

Ooh! What's in there? Can we go inside?

Oh ya, that's the old university. I think... I suppose we can.

Have you never been there before? Let's go in.

Wow, it's gorgeous. Can you believe this is right here?

Ya, I suppose. We came with our school a few times. I just... never think to come on my own.

But look at all the people, and the buildings, and the flowers. It's like a scene from a film!

I suppose I just never think of this place being for people like me... It always seemed built for someone else – someone different.

Like him – Salmon. He kept women out for years when he was in charge, but here he is being memorialised in the front square.

Sometimes I feel like I'm meant to admire it all. But part of me just feels uncomfortable. Like I'm standing in a story that doesn't see me – or maybe never wanted to.

I never thought about it like that. Like... how a place can be beautiful, and feel different now, but still feel wrong to be in.

I think that's what they mean by *ideological dissonance*. It's not just disagreeing with something – it's feeling the clash in your body.

Like your values and a place's values don't quite line up. It doesn't mean I hate it. It really is beautiful. But its legacy... it's heavy. And it's hard to un-feel that.

Knowledge Accessibility

Andrea Kuckert

*Department for Research and Development in Nursing,
Alexius/Josef Krankenhaus, Neuss, Germany*

K

In my context, accessibility refers to knowledge – specifically, knowledge in the field of nursing science. It involves staying informed about what is new, what has changed and what is no longer relevant. Many researchers and scholars in nursing generate new insights, develop innovative ideas and formulate new theories. This knowledge must be accessible and integrated into nurses' daily practice. In this sense, accessibility means that nurses in the non-academic hospital (place) can either easily locate and apply new knowledge in their practical work, or that this knowledge is actively provided by individuals or groups – so-called knowledge brokers – who facilitate its transfer.

A researcher (R) from a university somewhere in the Netherlands, lecturing in the Bachelor of Nursing and conducting research in community health care with a Public Engagement approach

A nursing scientist (N), who is employed in a non-academic hospital in Germany, who is asked by management to improve the quality of care in the hospital

R: Hello, how are you?
Thanks for talking with me today. Let's jump right in: What does
↳ *knowledge accessibility* have to do with Public Engagement in health-care settings in Germany?

R: Just to clarify – are you saying that there's a lot of new scientific knowledge in nursing, and the challenge is how to bring that knowledge into everyday practice?

N: Yes, exactly!

N: Good question ... Let me put it this way: When you attend a nursing conference, read various nursing journals or chat with someone from nursing school, you'll be amazed by the amount of knowledge available today. You go home feeling inspired, energised and intrinsically motivated, thinking: How can I share this new scientific knowledge with my colleagues? How can they benefit from it?

R: Could you give an example?

N: Sure. Dementia is a topic that comes up quite often. Due to demographic changes, the lack of curative therapies and the emotional burden on relatives, there are many complex challenges in caregiving. You'll find plenty of advice and new ideas addressing

these issues, such as non-pharmacological interventions. What is the impact of building a relationship with the patient? How can we de-escalate aggressive situations in care? There are many answers. Especially in psychiatric hospitals, where nurses care for this specific group, there is a strong need for updated knowledge and reflection on how the team can define their ward as “dementia sensitive”.

R: That makes sense. But what’s the connection to *knowledge accessibility* in a place like the psychiatric hospital, which is a non-academic hospital, as I understand it?

N: Yes, the place is a non-academic hospital. That means that there is no natural connection to a university, no research is conducted, no conferences take place on a regular basis. This whole culture is missing. So there is the question of how nurses actually access this knowledge. Many nurses don’t have an academic background; they may not have learned how to search for relevant scientific information or read research articles. Often, they rely on knowledge from years ago – and if the whole team works this way, no one questions it. Not everywhere of course, but you can imagine what that means for the patients we are caring for.

R: Couldn’t you just organise a training session if someone has the knowledge?

N: Yes, of course. But here’s the issue: Not everyone can attend a training. Some nurses need to stay on the ward to care for patients; others may be sleeping after a night shift. And besides – who’s responsible for ensuring that the team learns this new knowledge? The ward managers? They might say it’s the responsibility of the qualified staff. The manager of the hospital? She argues we already have trained psychiatric nurses – but we haven’t on this specific ward. You see, it is challenging. And since the staff is used to their existing care routines, they may wonder: Why should we change? That is the second important step. The first step, making knowledge accessible, moves into the second step: implementing knowledge into practice.

R: I see. Many challenges. To sum up. Scientific nursing knowledge has to be made accessible for nursing staff, paying attention to contextual factors and nurses’ knowledge in relation to a specific topic and ways of learning. And of course, the ward manager has to support these kinds of developments. In this context I have come across the concept of a knowledge broker – someone who bridges the gap between scientific knowledge and professionals working in practice. Could such a role be a potential solution for your setting,

specifically the psychiatric hospital?

N: That’s a great point. In our hospital, the management has decided to employ more nurses with an academic background. What’s important is that they continue working in direct patient care while also having the skills to lead projects aimed at improving the quality of care. Crucially, they work in close collaboration with the rest of the nursing team. I would see them as knowledge brokers in the future.

But, there is a big but! Experienced nurses have gathered knowledge over years, have intuition, often know exactly what to do and what not. We don’t want to devalue experienced nurses. Here Public Engagement can play an essential role. It’s important to talk with nurses, not about them –

listen to what they have to say, and not assume that an academic background makes someone an expert. They bring a wealth of practical knowledge, and together, meaningful improvements can be made. From my perspective, without a knowledge broker, it can be very challenging to translate new knowledge for nurses. But together with the experienced staff, new knowledge can be implemented into everyday practice.

R: Thanks a lot for that interesting conversation. I can tell you, in the Netherlands the situation is different. More nurses have an academic background, but still, it is a long way from bringing new knowledge into practice. You are not alone.

Language as Third Space

Claire Förster

Post-Doc, Leibniz Institute for Science and
Mathematics Education, Germany

L

Third Space refers to “hybrid” places which are not associated specifically with or do not belong to any one agent, but are generated through mutual engagement and relating together on a topic. In Public Engagement, we heavily rely on language to facilitate relationships between people and topics. The language we use may be new, transformative and/or come with a history of preconceptions that need to be negotiated together. This suggests that language itself can be understood as a Third Space.

The implications are that we should not take anything for granted when it comes to communication; and that we should not be afraid to go beyond language to facilitate engagement, e.g. through arts, crafts and creativity.

*[we are surrounded by words.]
[what do they mean?]
[to you? to me?]
“Meet me in the middle.”
But where is the middle
between
you and me,
or
your body
and
mine, or
between you and me and science?
Maybe we
can meet
in language,
on a bridge built
by the words that we say.
Maybe.
But that is not a place
where we can stay:
with our minds and bodies and
the actions I aspire
to
inspire
in you.*

*Language is unstable,
ever-changing –
it can be our tool
to
bring into this new space of ours
to
build something
new
and make it
feel
inclusive and open and forever-changing and
welcoming and creative and
undefinable: impossible to capture by
words
and language.
because I don't know what you mean
when you say
what you say.
But what I want to
give you
is a safe place
to play.*

Interviewer: Thank you for taking the time to meet me to speak about your latest work.

Author: My pleasure.

I: I understand you work through the concept of “Third Spaces” here. Could you give me the in-a-nutshell-pitch on this?

A: Happily so, if you forgive me for not going all the way into depth and quoting all the brilliant theorists who have worked on this before.

I: I think I can forgive you for that, yes.

A: Great. Because “Third Space” is a concept that, I believe, is attributed to the post-colonial scholar Homi Bhabha,¹ who spoke of a “Third Space” to refer to a hybrid territory that is neither yours nor mine. As opposed to a neutral space, which I don’t believe exists, the Third Space is something that is created, formed. A Third Space gets made, if you will, because of encounters that happen therein.²

I: And how can language be a “Third Space”?

A: Well, the obvious point is that language is not “neutral”, either. Language is, if you follow writings

e.g. from Lacan,³ something foreign to humans, too. We adopt it, as we are socialised, because we need a common, shared, tool to make sense of the world and build meaning. We use it to make ourselves understood to others, but it always falls short of expressing exactly what we mean, what we feel, what we experience and seek to communicate.

I: Uh-huh...

A: And I think by considering *language as Third Space*, this concept gets a little more optimistic. You can build a Third Space together by using the foreign medium of language to approach each other, create something new – a new knowledge, a new discourse, a secret code that works for you, in that space and time, in that encounter. You explain to each other what you mean by the words that you use and you try and take the other’s perspective on the words that are out there, between you and the others. A potential bridge, but also a divider.

I: Uhhmm...

A: See – now I’ve lost you with my forever-insufficient words! – Maybe, by pitching *language as Third Space*, I want to tear through the illusion that language is self-explanatory and fixed. Language doesn’t suffice to express experience. – So ... so, maybe we need a safe space, places, in which we can use more-than-words.

I: What do you mean?

A: I mean – think of Public Engagement.

I: Right...?

In one way, we want to engage with people, connect with them. Here, language can be the tool that we, and those we want to reach, use to approach a topic. Even though language is something foreign and external, as we have said, it is still the “common ground” between us. Using the same language can be a means of reaching out, meeting others “half-way” – Or...

I: Or what?

A: Or we can turn Public Engagement into an experience. Make people feel whatever it is that we try to get them engaged with. Have people explore on their own,

and show and tell us what their experience, their knowledge is like, through means that do not rely on an exchange of words. We could “do” engagement – plant a tree as a statement about your future wish for comfort, dance your protest when words fail you to express your outrage, paint your visions of peace on concrete slabs.

I: That sounds ... unusual.

A: Maybe – but maybe that’s what Public Engagement, and communication more broadly, should be: defiant of norms. Happening in and afforded by a safe space, in which to encounter each other and make new knowledge-experience. Be creative. Be playful. Try to understand that others are also just working with less-than-perfect tools to make themselves understood.

¹ Bhabha, H. K. (1990). The Third Space: Interview With Homi Bhabha. In J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 207 – 221). Lawrence and Wishart.

² c.f. Pink, S. (2008) An urban tour: The sensory sociality of ethnographic place-making. *Ethnography*, June, 2008, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 175 – 196. [Link](#); Ingold, T. (2013) *Making Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. Routledge.

³ Interview with Jacques Lacan, 1957, published in *L’Express* in May 1957. Retrieved via [Link](#)

Mindful Transformation

Susanne Klimroth

Doctoral Researcher in Literature, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

M

“Mindful Transformation” describes a form of engagement that allows participants to perceive a place’s ongoing change and transformation (*impermanence*) as a personal experience, in which they are actively involved. It can inspire insight into the interconnectedness of past, present and future, and thus the possibility of transformation through concrete actions and decisions made in the present moment. I suggest that by integrating mindfulness practices into Public Engagement, participants are invited to develop their own discoveries about and their connection to the given place – intellectually, somatically and emotionally.

⇒ *Mindful transformation* represents an inspiration for researchers and practitioners in two interlinked ways, especially when engaging with a historical subject.

Firstly, it does this by specifically choosing places for their engagement practice that carry visible traces of the past, and potentially even reflect different periods of history.

Secondly, the integration of mindfulness practices as part of the facilitation enables participants to perceive and (where possible) interact with the space visually, tactilely, olfactorily, gustatorily and auditorily.

Example Scenarios

- **Walking Tour:** Between phases of storytelling and input on the place, facilitate a walking meditation either led by an idea, e.g. of “change happening in every step”, or in complete silence so that participants have space to establish connection to the place and let their own perceptions and ideas arise.
- **Citizen Science:** As part of a larger project, invite participants to engage with a task at hand or in combination with engagement forms rooted in mindfulness, such as a “working meditation”. For example, participants can be encouraged to sort parts of an archival collection for 30 minutes while actively focusing on its material qualities – including all senses – before analysing the collection.

Recommended Reading:

→ Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017). *The Art of Living*. HarperCollins.

→ A Short History of the European Institute of Applied Buddhism: [Link](#)

Mindful Transformation of Place

My proposition is grounded in a personal, deeply inspiring experience I had while attending an international meditation and mindfulness retreat at the European Institute for Applied Buddhism (EIAB, Waldbröl, Germany). The EIAB is located in a building of remarkable and charged history.

Through meditation and ceremonies, the monastic community has initiated a process of healing and transformation of the building and the surrounding grounds. This process, involving visitors, continues to this day. Throughout my stay, I noticed that acquiring informative knowledge about the location's history, while practising the mindfulness techniques taught there, led to a deeper understanding of the site's ongoing evolution



Waldbröl sanatorium and nursing home

“Kraft-durch-Freude”-Hotel:
Attempt at reconstruction and installation of art work

1933

National Socialism

Former patients were distributed to other places, suffering compulsory sterilisation, forced abortions or euthanasia

1895–1897

Construction Waldbröl Sanatorium
for people with mental and physical disabilities

1975–2006
German Federal Army Building
Nazi-era art continues to be veiled

After World War II
Used as a hospital again
with Nazi-era art veiled



Heart exhibition:
a response to the
building's history

2008

Foundation of EIAB

European Institute of Applied
Buddhism Art deliberately unveiled



Meditation cushions in front of a
Nazi-era mosaic



Stupa Tower at the EIAB in
Waldbröl

During my time at the EIAB, I developed a connection to the place, especially through working meditations like preparing the building for a celebration. This also gave me the opportunity to engage personally with its history – for example, the Nazi-era mosaic in the hallway. As I worked through the many layers of difficulty, I realised that this place is transformed moment by moment, aspiring towards a peaceful future – without negating its horrid history.

I suggest that applying mindfulness practices into Public Engagement strategies allows for a profound and personalised journey for each participant when engaging with a specific location. Public Engagement practitioners can create a space for participants to form a direct visceral experience with the place and perceive themselves as part of its timeline, by combining information about a subject and its local representation and allowing space for personal exploration during meditations.

→ Image source Waldbröl sanatorium: [Link](#). Photo credits: All photos by the author.

Narrative Resonance

Annabelle Toole

Public Engagement Analyst, Graphic Science UK

N

Irrespective of where people come from we all have a story to share. Stories of heritage, culture or personal history share – stories of our lives/our experiences can show that regardless of where we come from and who we are, we have something in common. Narrative resonance describes the effect storytelling has on the listeners and tellers. It is a moment when our brain waves align and we connect with the other person. The place or the storytelling in relation to narrative resonance can nurture this connection or complicate it.

Narrative Resonance in Practice

To help create your own event focused around narrative resonance you can take inspiration from the “Cut from the Same Cloth” project from the Conway Institute in Dublin, Ireland. This activity brought women from minority communities across Ireland together with female researchers of the Conway Institute. It aimed to build trust and increase the diversity of voices present in their Patient Voice initiative. In their Get Together workshops women shared stories about a piece of material or fabric that meant a lot to them; many shared deeply personal stories. Everyone connected through their shared humanity before speaking about bio-medical science and research. The workshops took place in a variety of spaces but were always set up so researchers and community members sat in a circle to share and listen. Place here meant a neutral space to share and build new relationships, regardless of the Participants’ heritage and going beyond the location where these communities came together.

→ The Fabric of Our Lives: [Link](#)

Narrative Resonance and Place in Engagement

For this you will need:

- Some:
Public Engagement
professionals
- A number of:
participants/audience
members
- A location for the event
- A storytelling tool

To prepare:

- Determine the community
you want to engage with
and why.
- What do you want the
participants/audience to get
out of your activity?
- Do you know why they would
want to know about this?
- How do you want these
different groups to meet?
- What do you want the
dynamics in the groups to be?

For ideal results:

- ☞ Provide a space for participants to share stories –
ideally in a neutral location or a location close
to the community you're engaging with (unless a
specific dynamic is desired).
- ☞ Find an object to guide storytelling that all partici-
pants can bring with them, for example an item
of clothing or piece of material linked to a memory
or event.
- ☞ Encourage sharing of stories around the object
first and ask professionals to talk about their ob-
ject before speaking about their work.
- ☞ Leave space in the timetable for flexibility and
give space for storytelling as a priority.

At the end:

- Towards the final part of the activity start talking
about your aim/agenda
(*example: participants should join a specific
initiative or sign up to a newsletter*).
- Ensure this is part of the wider conversation.

Online Placemaking

Victoria Shennan

Head of School, Berlin School of Public Engagement and Open Science



This is the intentional shaping of a digital space into a place of meaning, memory and connection. Rooted in Human Geography and practice, online placemaking draws on cultural sensitivity, emotional resonance and shared presence to transform ephemeral virtual environments into memorable places.

In *Space and Place* (1977), geographer Yi-Fu Tuan writes that “*place is security, space is freedom*”. Where space is open, neutral and abstract, place is paused, rooted, emotionally charged. Place, in his view, emerges when space is experienced, remembered and made meaningful through human presence. In the digital realm, this duality is more relevant than ever. Virtual environments begin as spaces: neutral rectangles on a screen, grids of faces, floating cursors on shared boards. But under the right conditions, through care, culture, ritual and attention, they can become places: sites of trust, belonging, reflection, even transformation.

Yi-Fu Tuan explores spacethem, for/place as not just a physical distinction, but an experiential one shaped by dualities: nearness and remoteness, openness and enclosure, abstraction and intimacy. Many of these are echoed in digital engagement:

Near vs Far: Online platforms can shrink distances, creating a sense of nearness even among global participants, yet virtual interactions may still feel distant or alien without meaningful connection.

Open vs Enclosed: Plenary sessions and group forums offer openness and inclusivity, while private breakout rooms or chats foster enclosure and intimacy, both necessary for diverse engagement experiences. Similarly, sessions require clear structure but also room for flexibility, spontaneity and participant contribution.

Movement vs Stillness: Navigation through an online space, from passive observation to active participation, mirrors physical movement with different modes of engagement and levels of stimulation, while moments of pause allow reflection and deeper connection.

Timelessness vs Temporality: Unlike physical spaces, digital platforms can feel timeless and ever-present. Yet place emerges through the temporal rhythms of human interaction, bounded moments of shared activities, evolving conversations and collective memories that anchor experience in time and meaning.

By attending to these dualities, *online placemaking* is a deliberate balance of openness and intimacy, control and freedom, and distance and connection. This negotiation shapes how virtual spaces transform into meaningful places by fostering belonging, engagement and co-creation. Online placemaking is often quiet and layered, found in welcome rituals, well-timed pauses, private reassurances and shared moments of laughter or occasional discomfort. Though not always visible, it is felt.

Recommended Reading:

→ Tuan, Yi-Fu. (1977). *Space and place: the Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press.

A Hierarchy of Online Placemaking and Practical Programme Design

A sense of place is not instantaneous. Like human needs, it builds from the ground up, layered, contextual and changing over time. The diagram below adapts **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** to illustrate a nuanced approach to online placemaking with practical examples.

Programme design often begins at the bottom with infrastructure and collaboration tools, but a sense of place is imbued and strengthened as layers are added and refined; this is where meaning, connection and agency reside. These aren't technical strategies, they're relational human ones, and they turn screens into shared worlds.

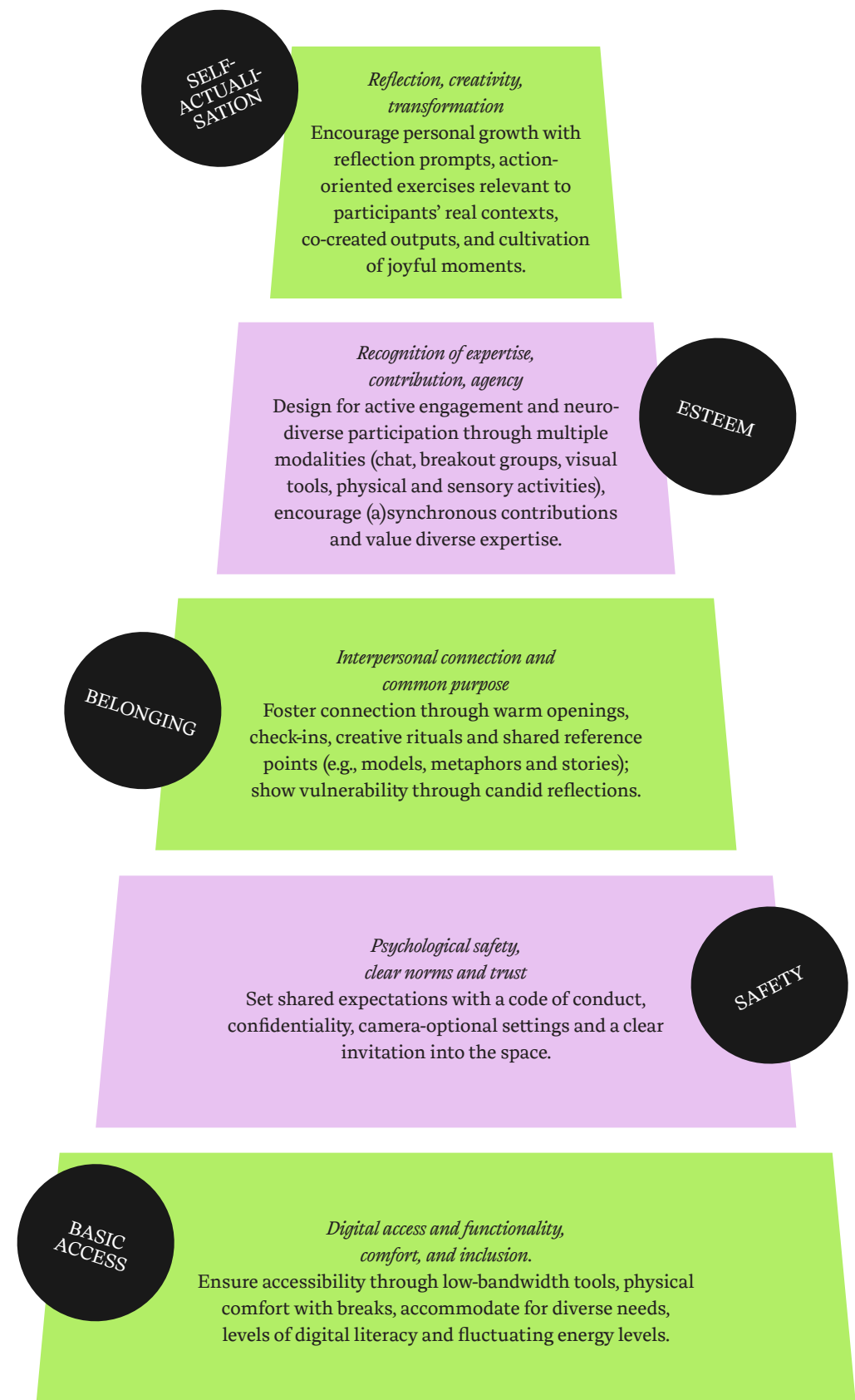
Why This Matters

We think of place as something physical. Yet placemaking is also possible and necessary in online environments. It requires intention, care and attentiveness to human needs. Without this, even the most well-designed programme can feel transactional or disorienting.

When digital space is only treated functionally, we risk alienation and burnout. But when we attend to its human dimensions, we craft centres of shared value, containers of meaning, care and belonging. Tuan reminds us that “place is pause”. In a world of hyperproductivity and scrolling, pausing together, even online, becomes a radical act. To craft a place is to offer shelter from the abstraction of space, however briefly.

⇒ *Online placemaking* is not a lesser form of presence. It is a new craft, one requiring emotional intelligence, digital fluency and cultural care. Whether in a two-hour Zoom session or an intensive virtual academy, we have the tools to shape meaning.

What matters is the intention to pause, reflect and truly engage.



Pavement

Olivia Durand

*Historian and Director, Uncomfortable Oxford and
Uncomfortable Tours CIC, UK*

P

Pavements are the vehicle for all residents to make their way between places that are relevant to them across an urban space. They are also places where engagement can happen – in the public space of the street, rather than the institutional space of libraries and laboratories. Through the embodied practice of walking and talking, this public space becomes the connective bridge between researchers and participants, and enables new forms of knowledge-creation and interrogation.

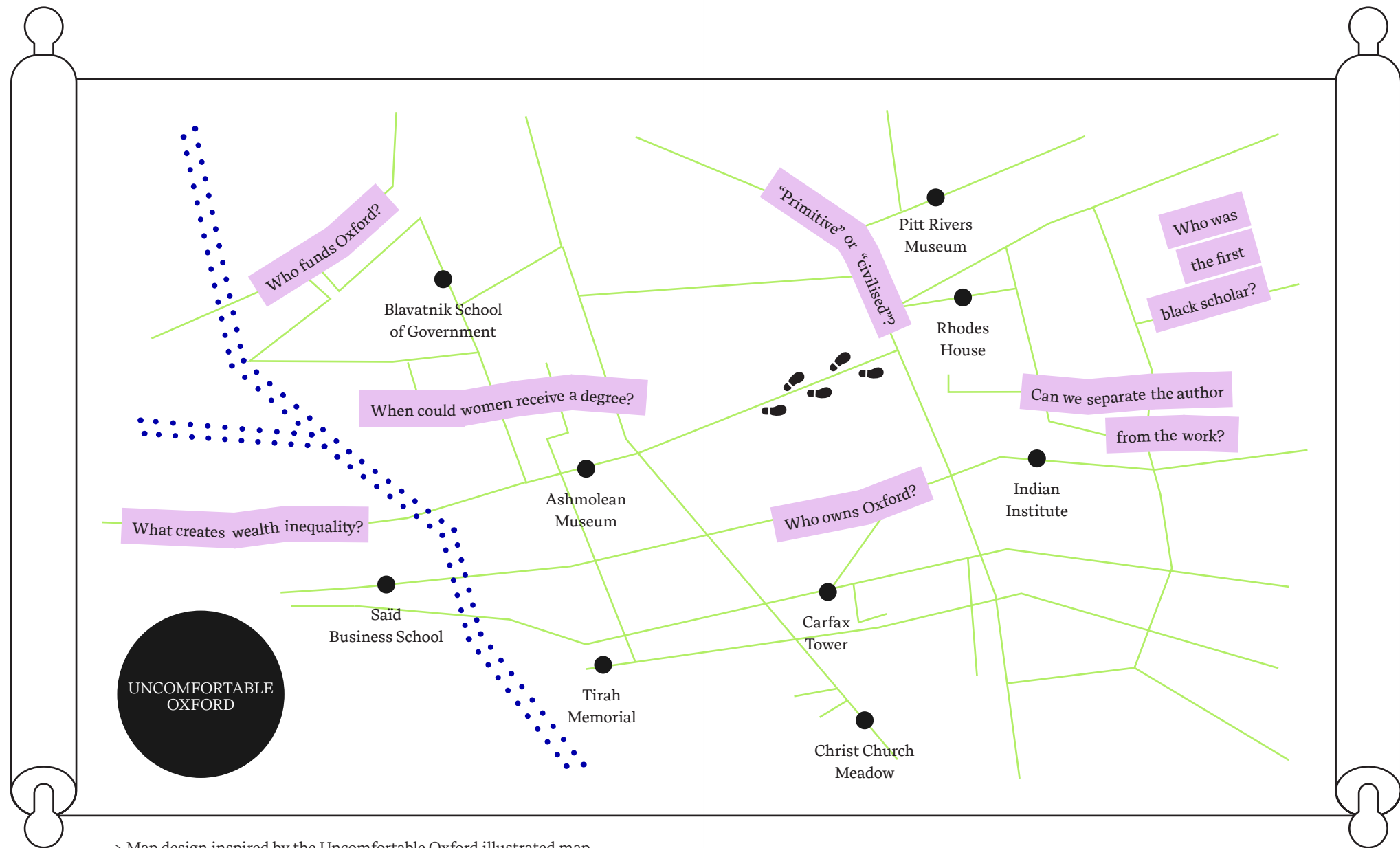
The *pavement* on which we walk in the cities where we live and work represents the tangible materiality that connects us all: researchers, community members of the public, temporary visitors. Designed by definition as spaces to be walked on, pavements provide a place and method of engagement through the act of walking (and talking) together.

By choosing to focus on *pavement*, we recentre the place of engagement at the level of the street. It becomes a physical experience of heat, cold and tiredness, as much as an intellectual experience of learning and exchange.

Walking and talking are an inherent feature of walking tours, themselves existing at the intersection between academic research, heritage and tourism. These peripatetic walks make knowledge exchange both mobile and rooted, and call on the Greek word “Peripatos”, or the act of knowledge acquisition through walking and talking. This pavement-based learning puts the emphasis on public and shared spaces as places of engagement. The mobility associated with walking is extended through talking, through the intellectual development of new pathways of knowledge.

Uncomfortable Tours, an organisation active in Cambridge, Oxford and York, focuses on deploying critical pedagogy on the streets through the organisation of educational walking tours. Their tours are a vehicle for knowledge exchange and perspective shift, with critical and research-based discussions about the past and present shaped by open-ended questions. These engagement tours are designed to invite participants into a discussion with the researchers, but also with each other as peers and knowledge creators. The aim of these conversations is to make space for a range of responses – curiosity, discomfort, resistance – while enabling collective meaning-making.

Uncomfortable Tours thus consciously use the act of co-walking and talking as a key moment to open and disrupt existing and/or dominant systems of knowledge. Through these tours, the street's pavement becomes the medium and meeting place of engagement, each time bringing together and into conversations new unique combinations of individuals.



→ Map design inspired by the Uncomfortable Oxford illustrated map, created by [Kati Lacey](#).

Paying LIP Service

Siddharth Kankaria

Independent Consultant – Science, Society, & Justice, India

P

In everyday English, “paying lip service” means expressing verbal support for something without taking real action to back it up. It is often used to call out insincere or superficial gestures.

The “Paying LIP service” framework reclaims and subverts the phrase to mean the opposite: a call to go beyond tokenism and anchor Public Engagement in the specific issues, contexts, needs and aspirations of the communities we work with.

Here, LIP stands for Localise, Indigenise and Pluralise – three interlinked principles to anchor Public Engagement not just geographically, but socially, culturally, historically and epistemologically as well.

Further Reading:

- Halpern, M. (2019). Feminist standpoint theory and science communication. *Journal of Science Communication*. [Link](#)
- Canfield, K. N., et al. (2020). Science Communication Demands a Critical Approach that Centers Inclusion, Equity, and Intersectionality. *Frontiers in Communication*. [Link](#)
- Finlay, S. M., et al. (2021). From the margins to the mainstream: deconstructing science communication as a white, Western paradigm. *Journal of Science Communication*. [Link](#)
- Dawson, E., et al. (2022). Exploring the politics of science communication research: looking at science communication from a social justice perspective. *Journal of Science Communication*. [Link](#)
- Rasekoala, E. (2023). Advancing Globally Inclusive Science Communication – Bridging the North-South Divide through Decolonisation, Equity, and Mutual Learning. *Bristol University Press Digital*. [Link](#)

Paying LIP Service: A Relational Framework for Place-Based Engagement

The LIP Framework

Are we truly listening to the land, the people and the histories where our work is happening?

How can we centre place – its people, pasts and knowledge systems – in meaningful and transformative ways?

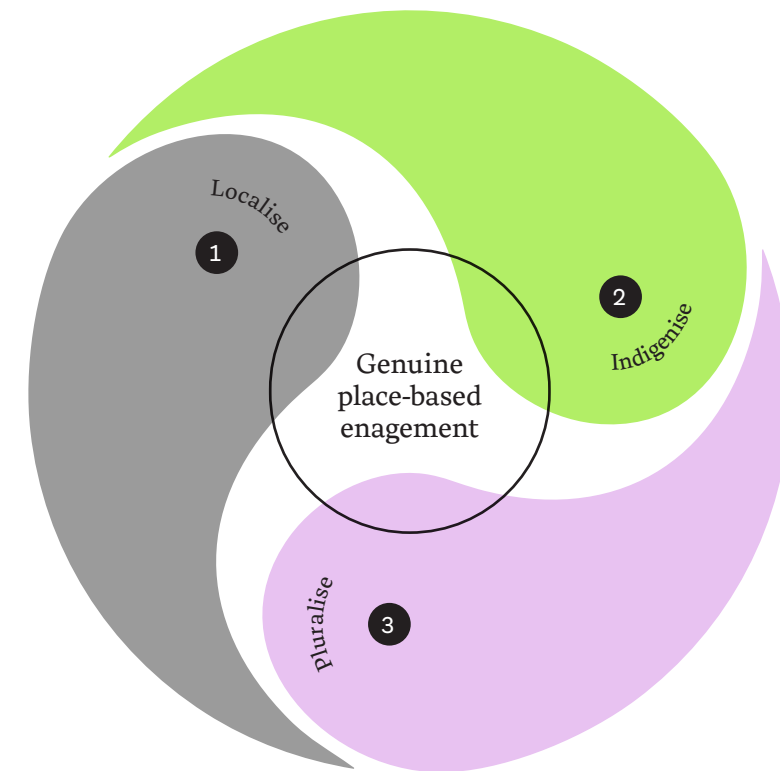
↳ *Paying LIP service* blends critical reflection with epistemic humility. It asks us to de-centre dominant knowledge systems and design engagement that is situated (rooted in local contexts), relational (built on trust and accountability) and transformative (open to being changed by the process).

How to Use LIP in Practice

You don't have to apply all three principles at once – start with one and deepen from there. A powerful entry point is the practice of unlearning: intentionally stepping back, questioning your own assumptions, listening without defensiveness and being willing to reshape your process in response to what you hear. This creates space for community priorities to reshape the engagement itself, making it genuinely co-owned and place-led.

Why This Matters

Too often, Public Engagement – especially in the Global South – is extractive, top-down or disconnected from lived realities. LIP-centred work roots our practice in community and place, and shifts the role of the practitioner from delivering content to co-creating meaning, from performance to presence, from outreach to relationship. The result is engagement that is situated, relational and transformative – open to being changed by the process itself.



1. LOCALISE

Understand the social, cultural, political and ecological contexts of the communities you engage with.

- Value local knowledge systems and the deep importance of place-specific histories, languages and cultures.
 - Design for participation, not consultation – invite co-authorship and shared ownership from the outset.
 - Ask: What histories, challenges and values shape this place? How can my engagement emerge from these realities rather than be imposed on them?
- ☞ Localising means more than “adapting” to context – it’s about rooting your practice in the lived realities of a place.

2. INDIGENISE

Move beyond token inclusion to actively centre indigenous knowledge systems, ontologies and worldviews.

- Integrate multiple epistemologies instead of defaulting to Western frameworks – even when they don’t align neatly with scientific paradigms.
 - Embrace decolonial practice by acknowledging and challenging power dynamics across geographies and cultures.
 - Ask: Who are the traditional knowledge holders here? How would their ways of knowing reframe the problem or process?
- ☞ Indigenising challenges us to rethink what counts as “expertise” and who gets to define knowledge.

3. PLURALISE

Embrace epistemic diversity and make space for multiple, even conflicting, ways of knowing.

- Audit your practice: Whose voice is centred? Who is invited? Who is missing? Who benefits?
 - Stay open to unlearning – recognise what you don’t know, listen intently, and embrace discomfort as a catalyst for deeper engagement.
 - Ask: How can I design for multiple points of view? What emerges when I de-centre myself and allow other voices to lead?
- ☞ Pluralising is not about consensus – it’s about co-existence and complexity.

Playframe

Liyan Smeding

*Doctoral Association of Life Science Students,
École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL)*

P

Playframe refers to a set of gentle, game-like structures that guide how people can join and interact. Whether through board games, shared crafts, sports or similar formats, a playframe helps shape engagement where expectations are clear, participation feels safe and even hesitant people can find their way into the group.

To engage, people need to feel comfortable and open to contribute. The context that creates these feelings differs between people. While some thrive in open, unstructured settings, others (like myself) benefit from playful structures that offer clear roles and low-pressure entry points. A *playframe*, like that created by a board game night, can act as a gentle catalyst, helping people move from presence to participation.

Case Study: Game Nights for PhD Students

To help PhD students in my department connect, I organised a series of game nights. These were simple, informal gatherings (board games, snacks, no pressure) designed as an alternative to the usual happy hour mixers that often didn't lead to real mingling for me.

Social Structure of Place

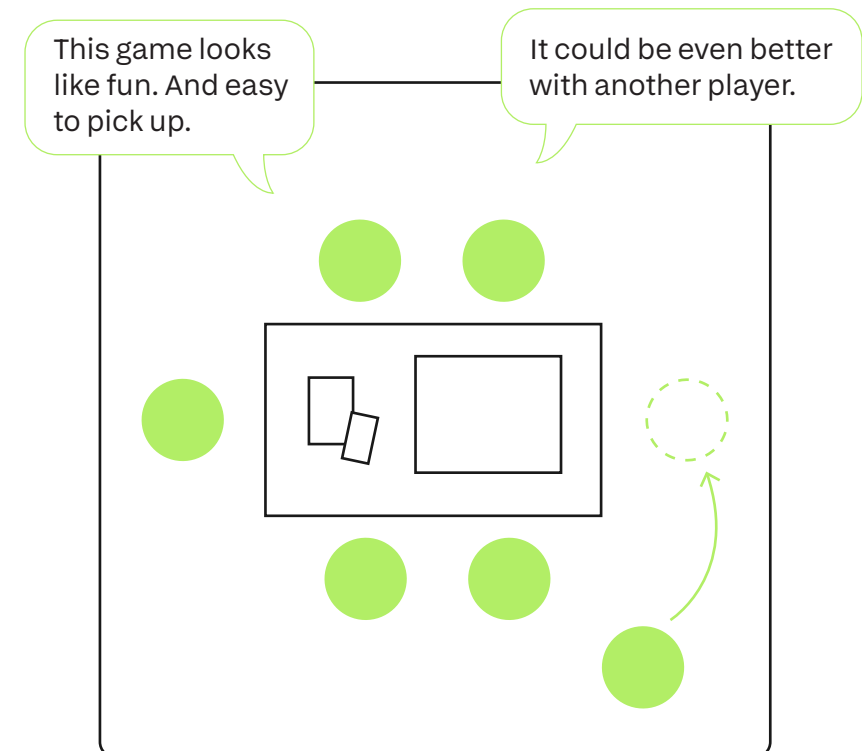
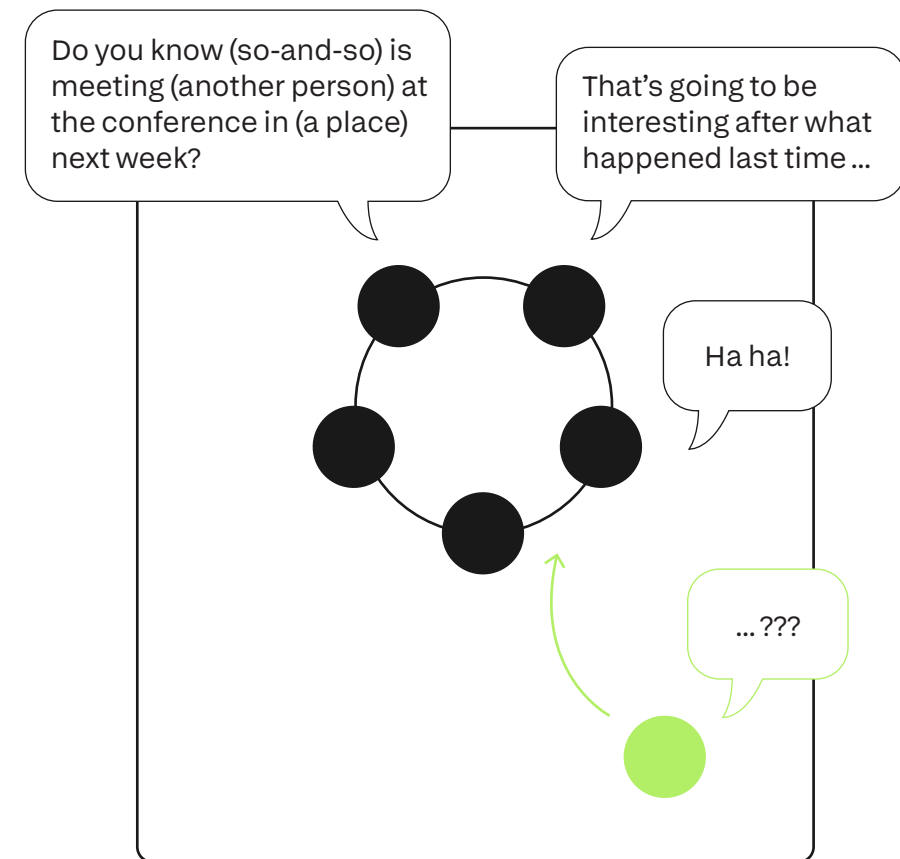
The space was the same (a lounge or shared kitchen) but the experience changed completely depending on what framed the interaction. During happy hours, I often found myself feeling invisible. I don't drink, I'm shy, I struggle to just walk into a group and join the conversation. Technically I was in the room, but socially, I only interacted with people I already knew.

Game nights created what I now think of as a playframe: a structured but light format where everyone has a reason to interact. Of course, other activities such as sports, crafting or cooking can provide a similar gentle structure. The shared rules, defined turns and small tasks all naturally led to moments of connection. And once people have that entry point, other conversations follow more easily.

What I Learned

"Open space" doesn't always feel open to everyone. Sometimes it takes structure, not rigid rules but a playful frame, to create a sense of safety and access. Games offered a model for how engagement can be designed with gentle scaffolding: clear roles, shared tasks, low pressure, high participation. In my experience, a *playframe* is a form of scaffolding, one that's rooted in play and lightness.

For me and many others, that made the difference between watching and belonging.



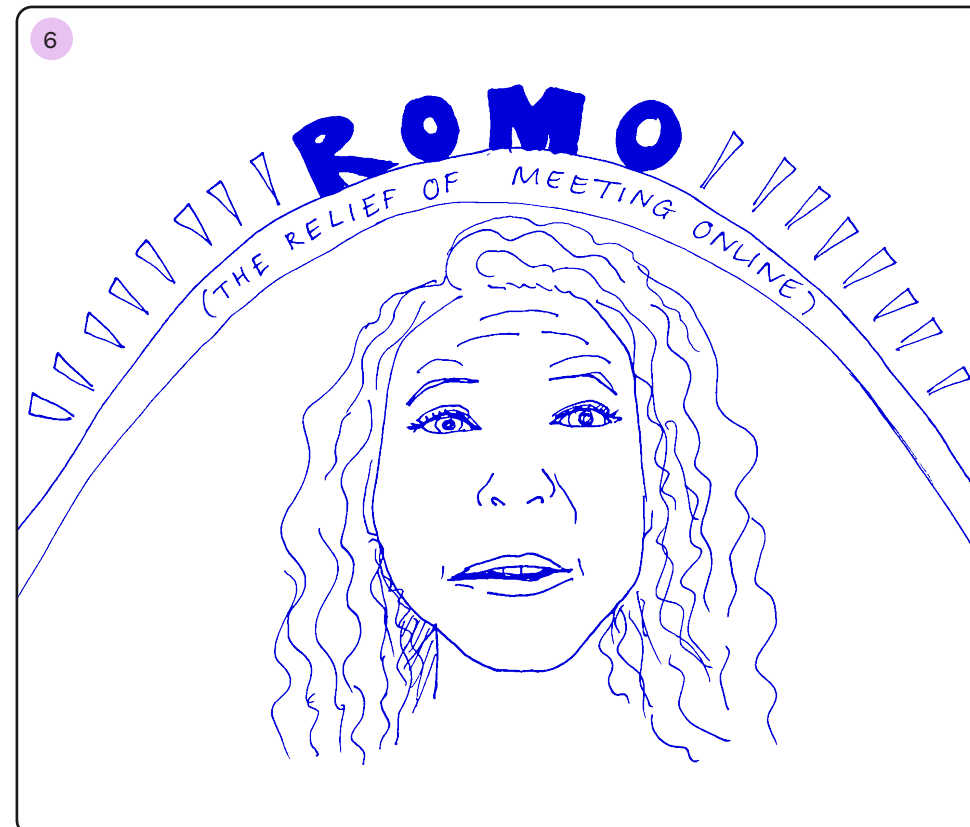
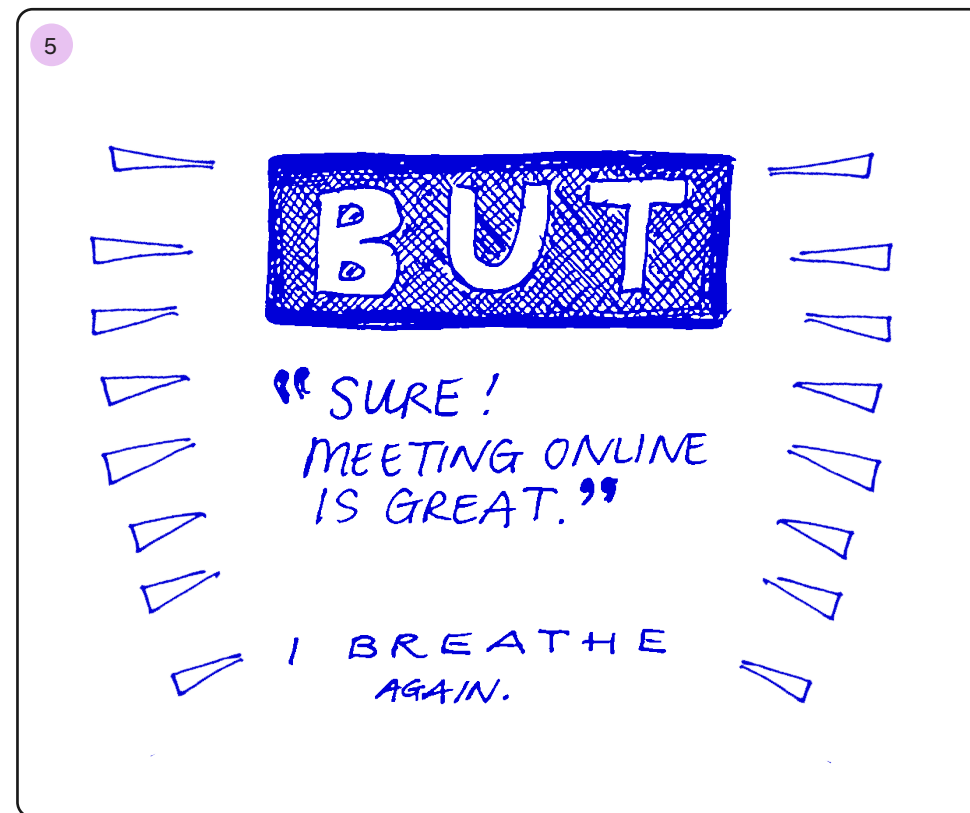
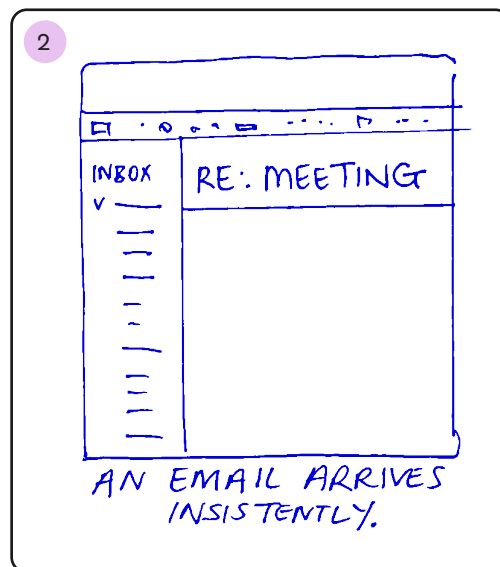
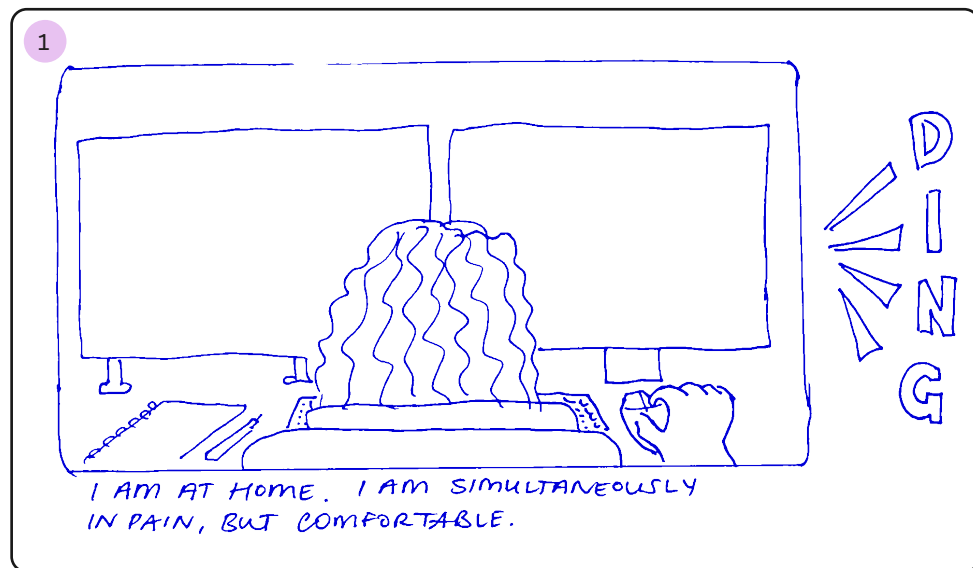
ROMO (Relief of Meeting Online)

Lucy Rycroft-Smith
*Knowledge Broker in Mathematics Education,
University of Cambridge*

R

This is the feeling of release from of anxiety and worry when a meeting, event, conference, talk or discussion is held online, and is therefore accessible to those who have particular needs that make this necessary. It also encompasses the relief of not having to advocate, argue or persuade someone to make their event accessible in this way.

It offers the experience of those with disability, caring responsibilities or other needs which counters the exhausting and untrue narrative of “face to face is better for everyone.” It critiques the ableism of being “present” in physical place, suggesting that hybrid options benefit everyone and emphasising the importance of never assuming, always asking. Additionally, it highlights the responsibility of anyone organising an event to consider hybrid as the default option, educating themselves about technology to support this, and to interrogate their own biases and defences regarding how “difficult” this may be to set up.



RuleBending

Jess Shaw

Public Engagement Manager, Lancaster University

RuleBending means shifting the power dynamic related to a place of engagement by recognising the unwritten rules attached to it and responding to them. This could involve choosing to do something unexpected or changing the status quo of the place by re-writing one or more of its rules.

We as Public Engagement professionals make decisions about the places where we do our engagement all the time, consciously and unconsciously. Much of this comes down to a sense of place, which is so much more than the physical attributes. The underlying assumptions and unwritten rules of a certain space can determine if we, and the communities we work with, are drawn to or repelled from it.

We can choose to bend the rules: to play with them, rebel against them. Sometimes when you break the rules, you create magic.

What Bending the Rules Looks Like

- ☞ Permission to play in a space where you traditionally can't touch, can't be loud, such as a library.
- ☞ Being enabled to create, and use your voice, in an environment where you usually must listen to others and look on in awe at what other people have created, such as a gallery or lecture theatre.
- ☞ Turning the lights down and illuminating the unseen at a light art festival.
- ☞ Flipping something upside down: physically, or figuratively.

An Example

A seemingly sterile, white gallery space. Vast, echoey, empty. A stoic marble statue watching over you as soon as you dare to cross the threshold to enter the hall.

We chose to engage here, for logistic reasons. And we decided to rewrite the perceived rules.

What was once a sterile, quiet gallery for grown-ups became a lively, loud, colourful space filled with various hands-on activities and kids running around with arms full of plants and crafty creations. The white walls were covered in bunting and balloons and colourful pictures. Children were invited to build a robot, create noise, make a mess. Lie on the floor, write on the walls, touch, move, create, play, explore.

A Guide to RuleBending

⇒ *RuleBending* creates surprise, wonder, curiosity. More importantly, it changes the dynamic. The power shifts. It is relinquished from the usual people who hold it and instead lies in the hands of the participants. Yes, you can come in. This space is yours. You make decisions here. You hold the knowledge. No, this isn't what you expected from us.

It takes time to build relationships and trust and this is required for understanding the unwritten rules of a place. You need to get to know the place, understand how others perceive it and where it creates barriers for engagement. ⇒ *RuleBending* to accommodate those you want to work with to feel safe and able to engage, will in turn build trust, and the process can therefore become cyclical.

Science Mela

Amna Lal Hussain
Science Communicator, Khwarizmi Science
Society (KSS), Pakistan

The word Mela (Urdu for festival) is common parlance in the local language and embodies the essence of blending ideas, people and activities. This word itself traces its roots back to Persian (Farsi): میل

Mingling knowledge with fun coined the term “Science Mela”. Once people are curious and are having fun, they start to develop a relationship with science. In contrast to conventional student science exhibitions, Science Mela involves crafting museum-quality live demonstrations and experiments, which spark unexpected conversations and turn “untouchable” science into shared wonder.

How Can You Create Your Own Science Mela?

Top Three Tips:

- ☞ The term “Mela” instantly evokes trust through cultural resonance – channeling memories of Eid fairs and harvest gatherings. It declares: “This is yours, not imported.”
“Replicate the principle” by anchoring your event in local traditions (e.g., Rio’s “Science Carnival”, Kenya’s “Harambee Fair”), and co-design names/icons with communities to honour context.
- ☞ The right venue doesn’t just host a Science Mela – it activates it. By selecting inclusive, everyday spaces like public schools, you transform passive spectators into co-creators of discovery. Your location is your first statement of purpose: Who is science for?
- ☞ The term doesn’t just describe the event, it dictates its spirit.
 - Volunteers become “Mela guides”
 - Experiments are “Mela interactive games”
 - Attendees touch, debate and laugh with science. They don’t just observe, they participate.

Explore the example of the Lahore Science Mela on the following pages!

More Information:

→ Lahore Science Mela Website: [Link](#)

→ Lahore Science Mela 2023 Highlights Video: [Link](#)

Transforming a Public School into a “Science Mela”

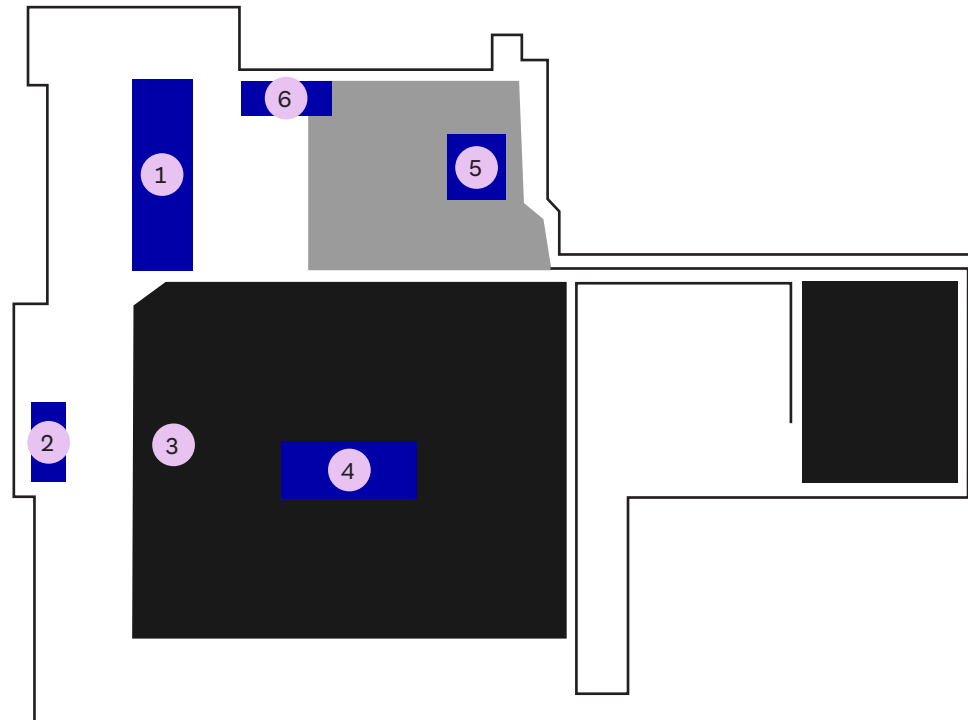
What Does it Look Like? ... Welcome to the Lahore Science Mela (LSM)

Open to all and absolutely free of cost, LSM is Pakistan’s largest citizen science festival. In 2023, it welcomed over 100,000 visitors to the Crescent Model Higher Secondary School in Lahore. It hosted over 140 exhibitors, featured 23 insightful indoor workshops and auditorium sessions, and showcased thousands of captivating artifacts including our own 50 in-house built demonstrations.

Where Does it Happen?

The essence of a successful science mela lies in two fundamental principles: accessibility and community. Public schools, by their very nature, embody both and are therefore excellent venues. Embedded within the neighbourhoods they serve, these institutions transcend socioeconomic barriers – imposing no entry fees, requiring no academic pedigree – while serving as familiar gathering spaces for families.

Here is how we transformed the physical spaces of the school into a hub of discovery:



Turn rote learning classrooms into interactive workshops!

From textbooks to test tubes and formulas to adventure games.



Create spaces for close exchange with scientists!
“Meet the Scientist” – “Science Ki Baithak” in Urdu.



Transform static models into a highlight experience!
The ‘Khalai Kachwa’ (Urdu for Space Turtle) mobile planetarium.



Add something special!
The Lahore Science Mela featured a “surpriseum” (Hairat Ghar), with mesmerising in-house built demonstrations.



Invite international partnerships!
The Large Hadron Collider (LHC) tunnel as augmented reality experience.



Turn academic lectures into popular lectures!
A parallel world of knowledge alongside the outdoor stalls.

Slow Invitation

Beth Elliott and Lucinda Spokes
Public Engagement, University of Cambridge

S

An invitation is defined as an action that encourages something to happen. We often speak about engagement through the lens of invitation. How can we create places within our own institutions where people feel welcome and confident that their questions and views will be respected and valued? And can we receive and accept invitations into community spaces to have conversations about subjects that matter to us all?

While both these types of invitation are important, within community engagement we are moving from invitation as an act of welcome, to invitation as an intentional action that creates space for new ways of genuine collaboration and knowledge exchange. This is described by the term Slow Invitation.

In our community engagement work, invitation is not just a welcome but rather an intentional act to help create the conditions for new ways of working together. We invite community members, university staff, facilitators and creative professionals to collaborate to uncover the expertise we all hold and the stories that bring us together.

When we work together in this way, we offer a piece of ourselves, our experiences, our perspectives, our values. Telling our stories and hearing others tell theirs can be emotionally charged and change the way we see things and what happens in the future.

So how do we create the places, the invitations and the boundaries where this deep and honest work can happen safely and respectfully?

On the next two pages, we share an example from one of our projects. Untold Stories is a series of community films examining what defines us and what brings us together across Cambridgeshire. Through stories, it explores intergenerational, community and embodied knowledge and lived experience. The project was commissioned by Beth Elliott, Community Engagement Manager at the University of Cambridge, and was co-created with local community groups and artists.

Find out more about our community engagement work:
→ Connecting Communities Website: [Link](#)

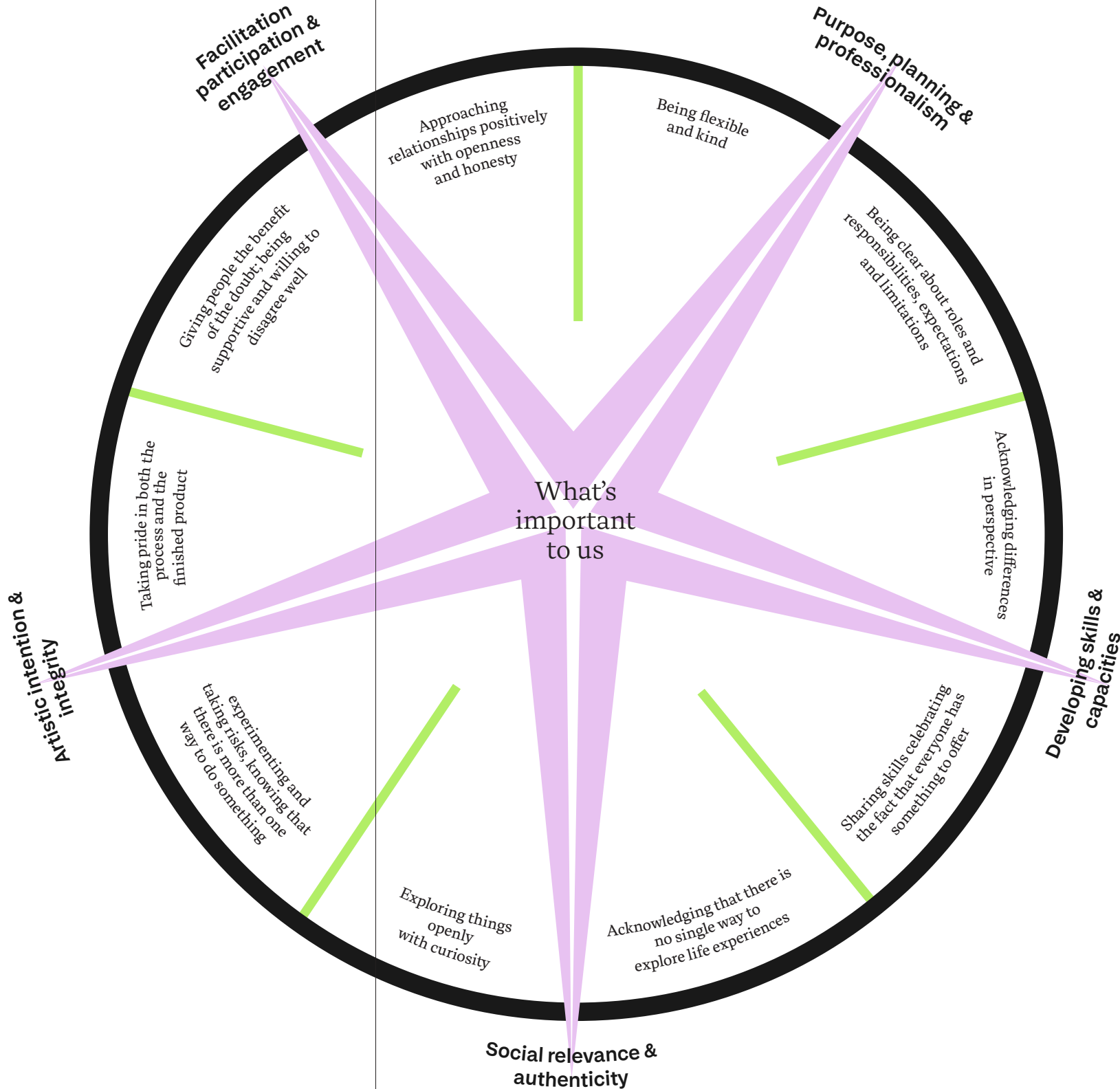
Practicing Slow Invitation

While the initial invitation came from the University, the intentional and slow way the invitation was positioned and subsequently extended by all members of the group was important. It wasn't enough to just welcome people to the table; success relied on taking the time to build trust and shared understanding.

As part of this intentional invitation, and led by creative professionals, the group used a tool – a guiding compass* – to shape how they interacted with each other to create this space for experimentation. Using the five headings of the compass, the group co-developed guiding principles for this project.

This compass served as a navigational tool for the group, grounding them in the place they were working. It helped them reconnect with their core values and ensured actions remained true to the shared intentions of the project and the group.

*The guiding compass tool is available for all to use from the → [Creative Scotland website](#)



Spanner

Edwin Colyer
Founder, Scientia Scripta, UK

In an engagement context, a “spanner” is not a tool for turning nuts and bolts, but rather a person who bridges or “spans” places and people, cultures, mindsets, ways of being and knowing. They see connections by drawing from diverse banks of lived experiences and networks. They build up trust between individuals and communities; they focus on shared humanity, without ignoring differences. They give their time, attention and emotion. And yet, because they experience life beyond a specific place, they are never fully “of” that place. They may even be seen as a “spanner in the works” who challenges and disrupts the status quo.

In another definition, a spanner is “a person who is foolish, careless, or incompetent; a tool”. Anyone playing a spanning role should consider the precariousness of the position – and whether they are on a fool’s errand.

⇒ *Spanner* is a term I jokingly use with a former colleague of mine who is a “spanner extraordinaire”. I have huge respect for how she successfully connects, supports and advocates for different and diverse individuals, groups and communities with deep empathy. But this vital, supportive, affirming and enabling role can come at a cost. Bridges have footings in different places, never quite here, never quite there. By being the go-between, the spanner may lose their own sense of belonging and identity.

I’m now in a quandary. I have this idea for a collaborative community innovation project – but in the very community where I have lived, worked, volunteered and worshipped for many years. How do I navigate relationships, conversations and collaborations for this to happen, yet retain both my professional and personal identities? Can I really span these very different worlds?



Outside In

*How long must I be in place to become of a place?
I have lived, loved, played, and worshipped.
Given time, thought, commitment.
I have roamed the streets, grown apples and plums,
found friends, lost others.
Kids became adults became parents.
I share meaning and memories, good and beautiful, bad and ugly.
Festivals, young people, burglary, muggings, marriage, shootings, parties,
kindness, activism, redevelopment, new homes, new spaces, new people.
I span this place through time and space.
Yet do not belong.
Slightly apart.*



*A different life, a different path.
Me is me.
Still, I dare to explore something new.
A chance to build, to change, regenerate.
Innovate and celebrate.
Across streets, ages, barriers physical, psychological, practical, personal.
I am small, this is huge. So many voices, too many thoughts.
How do I start?
Should I be here?
Do I belong?
Or am I a spanner?*



Starter Energy

Sambhavi Varadarajan
*Transdisciplinary Researcher and PhD Student,
 Geography, City University of New York*

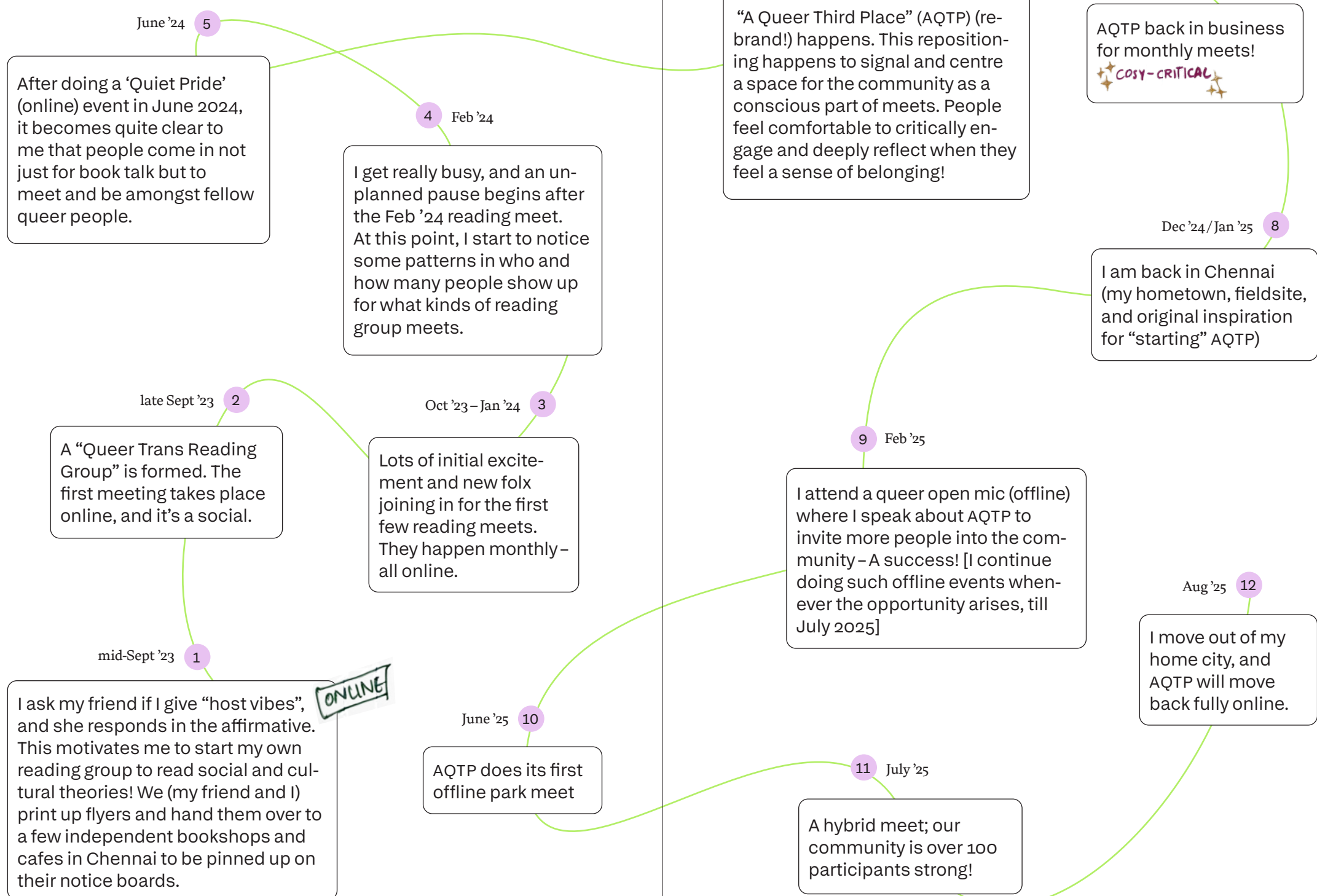
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Term common amongst digitally native and socially conscious GenZ that refers to the sensibility to be willing to do the hard task of setting up (flexible) base structures for a community-oriented purpose. It's usually used in the context of doing admin work/ taking up infrastructural roles. The way I understand it, "starter energy" also borrows from astrology, where cardinal signs (Aries, Cancer, Libra, Capricorn) are said to display a tendency to initiate new ideas and projects. In the context of engagement in place it encapsulates the idea that gumption is all that is required to get started on nurturing places of belonging.

My place of engagement started out as a reading group but then later gained capaciousness and now functions as a community space where we come together in the spirit of friendship and curiosity to form new connections ultimately to deeply engage with cultural and social theories critically.

So much of being someone who has \mapsto *starter energy* is having clear goals for your engagement practice, but being open to having a malleable "form"! It is very important to have an excellent understanding of your "why" because that is what will guide you when you find that you have to tweak your "how". That is to say, be certain of your larger goals and always have those be what lead you instead of the immediate engagement activity that you are organising/engaged in.

A Queer Third Place: How starter energy helped nurture a *✧ COSY-CRITICAL ✧* queer space



Syzygy

Davide Faggionato

Research Associate, Leibniz Institute DSMZ, Germany

An astronomical term for the alignment of three celestial bodies along a straight line (e.g., Sun – Earth – Moon).

In a negotiation, syzygy can be imagined as a moment when different positions evolve in such a way that they align to make an agreement possible or even inevitable.

Alignment and agreement between parties are achieved through negotiation; however, this process does not take place in a vacuum. Both the negotiation process and its outcomes are contextualised and often defined by the timing, procedures and place where they happen.

An Observation of Syzygy in Negotiation

As in a cosmic dance, negotiations and negotiators sense and are affected by interactions with other bodies and their surroundings. Similar to the syzygy of celestial objects, local groups and communities, stakeholders, experts, and communities of interest can mediate, facilitate but also oppose and hinder this alignment with their pull toward their own interests.

All this unfolds in the venues in which they meet. These are usually very large conference centres with multiple spaces. In addition to large plenary halls, there are medium and small rooms where parallel meetings are held and, if the season allows, outdoor spaces with pavilions or small food stalls for a more informal interaction.

Within these spaces, interactions occur on many levels. Delegates and negotiators engage in formal, sometimes heated discussions in the main plenary halls. Other exchanges occur more informally in the corridors or in parallel rooms. It is a sort of “constant movement” with people meeting and then leaving the room to meet or debrief somewhere else, forming another constellation of people, then returning to update their delegation before setting off to their next meeting. Almost like celestial bodies, they orbit, gravitate and affect each other to various degrees.

At UN Convention Conferences of the Parties (COPs) for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, these negotiations are key moments where conflicting interests come face to face. At first, these are often voiced as positions shaped by regional blocs or specific interest groups. Real progress, however, begins when these differences are worked through: when parties move past their differences, balance trade-offs with their national interests and recognise the common ground that can form the basis for shared solutions.

It is at this moment that a sort of diplomatic syzygy emerges – a rare and precious alignment, not between celestial bodies, but between political wills. It is in the final hours of deliberation, when the plenary session at last seals the agreement, often late at night, that a wave of liberating energy sweeps through the room, as if the global community itself were finally taking a long-awaited, collective breath. Yet unlike the ephemeral astronomical events, these agreements aim to find global alignments that last far into the future.

Trennkost

Kristin Bauer
Independent Design Researcher, Germany

Trennkost (lit. “divided eating”) is a diet claiming that certain food groups should not be eaten together because they are digested differently and supposedly cause problems when mixed. While the diet is scientifically outdated, its principle offers a playful metaphor for engagement practice: Should we be mixing different modes of knowledge exchange all in one go or would our “engagement menu” be easier to digest if separated into distinct environments? Do networking, ideation, emotional sharing and deep focus each need their dedicated spaces or compartments of time?

Adopting Trennkost as a metaphor encourages us to reflect on the “shifts” between the different kinds of thinking we facilitate. It invites us to deliberately design these shifts by compartmentalising activities in time or space, so each mode gets the setting it needs to thrive.



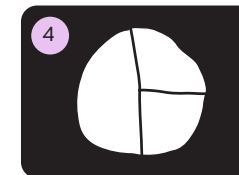
Have you ever been in a workshop where the vibe was open and chatty one moment, then instantly tense when everyone was asked to share emotions? “Digesting” emotional vulnerability in a noisy, open room full of strangers can feel uncomfortable, because it is not the right environment for this information.



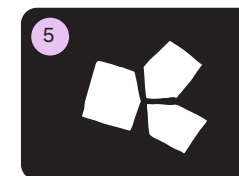
These sudden shifts in our interactions can throw participants off and make them withdraw from the engagement – **so how do we manage these shifts by adopting the metaphor of ↪ “Trennkost”?**



Let’s picture engagement workshops like a compartment plate. Each section holds a different “dish” that represents a way of sharing knowledge that our participants will need to “digest” well.



For instance, the “dishes” might be: mingling and sensing the group (systems knowledge); emotional sharing to identify local challenges (experiential knowledge) and lastly solution-oriented ideation (target knowledge).



Every knowledge exchange comes with its own “social rules” so switching modes without a clear transition can leave people discouraged from engaging. To help each mode of knowledge exchange be properly digested, create distinct “compartments” by rearranging the space or inviting a moment of transition.

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How to Design Spaces for Different Modes of Knowledge Exchange

2 Sharing Experiential Knowledge to identify challenges

Let's say you need to identify local challenges as a starting point for your engagement and ask participants to share their story. Emotional sharing needs a different setting from casual mingling. It might feel threatening to share in an open space, so ask yourself: Where does this happen naturally? In this example, we roughly try to recreate what makes campfire storytelling work: the security of seeing everyone's facial reaction, the privacy of a closed circle and a sense of closeness.

Compartmentalise this mode by sending smaller groups into closed-off spaces such as a place under a tree or a small room, where chairs or cushions are arranged in a tight circle. Ask participants to leave any distracting material like laptops or food behind. This signals safety and fosters an attentive atmosphere.

1 Mingling & sensing the group – building Systems Knowledge

In trans-disciplinary transformation processes, it is crucial to navigate **Systems Knowledge**: it is the ability to understand the structures, processes and dynamics that shape a situation (Karrasch et al., 2022). This knowledge goes beyond facts, is tacit and can often only be obtained by experience.

If you want to kick off this process, start by helping participants simply get a feel for each other informally. Research shows that spatial proximity paired with informal interaction can help participants develop tacit knowledge naturally and, over time, build “cognitive proximity” through interdomain learning (Bouncken & Aslam, 2019).

Compartmentalise this mode by creating an open, informal space where people can mingle with a casual focal point, like posters, maps or objects that naturally spark conversation. Social glue like coffee, snacks and buffet tables can foster casual conversations as well.

Ideation is where perspectives blend into something new. Creativity blossoms when there are no hierarchies, no fear of judgment but a sense of playful co-creation. This needs energy, movement and space for ideas to bounce.

Compartmentalise this mode by using flexible furniture, standing desks or unusual arrangements to break habits (Wagner & Growe, 2019). Provide prototyping materials – clay, building bricks, craft supplies – which act as **boundary objects** to spark new thinking (Wagner & Growe, 2019) and prototype ideas.

3 Target Knowledge through solution-oriented ideation



A

Alessandra Frau
Public Engagement Manager,
University of Lancashire
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Campus*, p. 20

Amna Lal Hussain
Science Communicator, Khwarizmi
Science Society (KSS), Pakistan
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Science Mela*, p. 88

Andrea Kuckert
Department for Research and Development
in Nursing, Alexius / Josef Krankenhaus,
Neuss, Germany
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Knowledge Accessibility*, p. 50

Annabelle Toole
Public Engagement Analyst,
Graphic Science UK
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Narrative Resonance*, p. 62

B

Beth Elliot
Community Engagement Manager,
University of Cambridge
[Website](#)
 ↳ *Slow Invitation*, p. 92

C

Caitlin White
Research Fellow,
Trinity College Dublin
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Ideological Dissonance*, p. 46

Claire Förster
Post-Doc,
Leibniz Institute for Science and
Mathematics Education, Germany
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Language as Third Space*, p. 54

Claudia Antolini
Public Engagement Manager,
University of Cambridge
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Do One Thing!*, p. 28

Custódio Efraim Matavel
Researcher,
Leibniz Institute for Agricultural
Engineering and Bioeconomy, Germany
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Collective Design*, p. 22

D

Davide Faggionato
Research Associate,
Leibniz Institute DSMZ, Germany
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Syzygy*, p. 104

E

Edwin Colyer
Founder,
Scientia Scripta, UK
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Spanner*, p. 96

I

Isa Kleine-Bekel
Science Communicator and PhD Student,
University of Duisburg-Essen
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *First Impressions*, p. 42

J

Jana Wendler
Coordinator,
Berlin School of Public Engagement
and Open Science
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Enchantment*, p. 36

Jen Parsons
Civic Science Fellow,
American Physical Society
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Embeddedness*, p. 32

Jess Shaw
Public Engagement Manager,
Lancaster University
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *RuleBending*, p. 86

K

Kathy Fawcett
Senior Lecturer Science Communication,
University of the West of England
[Mail](#)
 ↳ *Designed Discomfort*, p. 26

Kristin Bauer
Independent Design Researcher,
Germany
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Trennkost*, p. 106

L

Liyan Smeding
Doctoral Association of Life Science
Students, École polytechnique fédérale
de Lausanne (EPFL)
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ *Playframe*, p. 78

Lucinda Spokes
Head of Public Engagement,
University of Cambridge
[Website](#)
 ↳ *Slow Invitation*, p. 92

Lucy Rycroft-Smith
Knowledge Broker in
Mathematics Education,
University of Cambridge
[Website](#)
 ↳ *ROMO*, p. 82

O

Olivia Durand
*Historian and Director,
 Uncomfortable Oxford and
 Uncomfortable Tours CIC, UK*
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ Pavement, p. 70

S

Sambhavi Varadarajan
*Transdisciplinary Researcher
 and PhD Student,
 Geography, CUNY, New York*
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ Starter Energy, p. 100

Seyed Mohammad
 Hossein Mirhashemi
*Science Communicator,
 University of Tehran*
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ Engagement-Snob, p. 40

Siddharth Kankaria
*Independent Consultant –
 Science, Society, & Justice, India*
[Website](#)
 ↳ Paying LIP Service, p. 74

Susanne Klimroth
*Doctoral Researcher in Literature,
 Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin*
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ Mindful Transformation, p. 58

V

Victoria Shennan
*Head of School,
 Berlin School of Public Engagement
 and Open Science*
[LinkedIn](#)
 ↳ Online Placemaking, p. 66

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The CFA Programme Team

Catherine Galloway – Kavli Centre for Ethics, Science, and the Public, UK
 Jack Monaghan – Wellcome Connecting Science, UK
 Jana Wendler – Berlin School of Public Engagement, Germany
 Lucinda Spokes – University of Cambridge, UK
 Mariam Rashid – Kavli Centre for Ethics, Science, and the Public, UK
 Marietjie Botes – Stellenbosch University, South Africa
 Victoria Shennan – Berlin School of Public Engagement, Germany

CFA Creative Team

Kristin Bauer, Anastasia Marx, Johanna Klüsener

Tech Support

Chris Steinbrenner

Administrative Support

Clare Hutton

CFA'25 Contributors

Alejandro Marín-Menéndez, Sorka Tzschabran, React UK, Sylvana Jahre, Jaqui Goldin, Sarah Cruise, Amber Bosse, KOI, Archimedes, Uncomfortable Tours

CFA'25 Participants

Alessandra, Amna, Andrea, Andreas, Anisha, Annabelle, Caitlin, Cheyenne, Claire, Claudia, Custódio, Daniel, Davide, Edwin, Fatma, Francisca, Isa, Jen, Jess, Josephin, Kathy, Laiba, Liyan, Lucy R., Lucy Y., Micheal, Mohammad, Nchangwi, Olayinka, Olivia, Sambhavi, Sara, Shaun, Siddharth, Stefanny, Susanne

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