



Working Knowledge

Working Together

Collaborations between artists and academics

by

Fiona Johnstone

on behalf of Thinking Through Things





'Collaborations between artists and academics'
A Project Short by Fiona Johnstone on behalf of *Thinking Through Things**

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**Thinking Through Things* is a collaborative project that engages with and extends the visual and material turn in the critical medical humanities. The team comprises Fiona Johnstone, Marie Allitt, Ashleigh Blackwood, Bentley Crudgington, Ilaria Grando, Katherine Rawling, Olivia Turner, and Jacqueline Waldoock. The project is supported by a Wellcome Trust Discretionary Award.

<http://nnmh.org.uk/thinking-through-things/>



Collaborations between artists and academics

This *Working Knowledge* Project Short explores a number of practical considerations for artist-academic collaborations, with a particular focus on projects relating to health and medicine. Within the medical humanities – a field defined by its enthusiasm for collaboration, interdisciplinarity and dialogue – artists are often engaged as part of multi-disciplinary teams, or work with individual academics on specific projects. Collaborations between researchers and creative practitioners are generally perceived as highly desirable, with potential benefits for both sides: they are often recognised as a way for academics to bring their research to a wider public, and for artists to access expert knowledge that can be used as raw material for their own work. Creative collaborations can also be understood as an innovative method of alternative knowledge production, for example foregrounding collective, participatory or embodied forms of knowledge. However, presenting such collaborations in an exclusively positive light risks an overly idealistic vision of what it means practically to work together (see Pfoser and de Jong 2020).

This Project Short offers a toolkit for would-be collaborators: it outlines how collaborations between artists and researchers are initiated, the process that are involved, the outputs that might be expected, and how contracts, artists' fees, copyright, and intellectual property rights can be negotiated.

Methodology

Research for this Project Short comprised a series of interviews with fourteen artists and academics who had undertaken one or more collaborative projects since 2015. Interviewees were selected to ensure that the final report represented a diversity of projects in terms of size, funding, geographic location and disciplinary field. Interviewees were sent a series of fifteen questions in advance; interviews were conducted via Zoom in July and August 2020, and took a semi-structured format. Interview data has been used to construct a comprehensible overview of a field of practice, rather than a series of snapshots of individual projects. Interviewees are listed at the end of this report, with details of their respective projects and links to project websites.

Types of artist-academic collaboration

'Collaboration' is a flexible and capacious term, denoting a wide range of different ways in which artists and academics might work together. These include commissions, residencies, artist-led collaborative projects, individual collaborations, and group collaborations:

- For a **commission**, an artist is contracted to produce a piece of work in response to a brief (which can be mutually negotiated), within a specific time-frame, and for a set fee.
- In contrast to a commission, which has pre-defined parameters, the term "**collaboration**" was frequently used by interviewees to describe an ideally dialogic, exploratory, and open-ended process of working together.
- A number of collaborations were **artist-led**; typically, these projects were conceived by the artist, requiring a scientific or clinical collaborator for their realisation. In such cases, the artist assumed responsibility for securing funding, maintaining the working relationship, and delivering all project outputs.
- **One-on-one collaborations** involved one artist collaborating with one (sometimes two) academic(s), often with the initial aim of producing a single discrete output (perhaps a set of workshops or an exhibition), although this type of collaboration also sometimes led to more open-ended partnerships. This type of collaboration was more typical between artists and humanities researchers (as opposed to clinical or science researchers), and budgets for such collaborations were usually relatively modest.
- **Triangular collaborations** typically involved an artist, one or more academics, and one or more community or patient groups. The notion of **co-production** was often invoked to describe this form of collaboration.
- **Large group collaboration**: several artists were involved in ambitiously-sized, well-funded multi-disciplinary research projects with multiple co-investigators and collaborators. The artist might be involved at the planning stages and named

as a co-investigator on the initial funding bid, or might be engaged as an external collaborator once the project is underway.

- For a **residency**, an artist is given working space within an institution – for example, a research laboratory – for a specified period of time. Residencies are often applied for via a competitive process, which can be time-consuming for the artist (who is rarely remunerated for the labour that goes into the application process). Residencies are often part of a commission, with an outcome to be delivered at the end of the residency; for many artists, residencies function as a starting point for a new body of work (for which further funding will then be sought). **Digital residencies** are not currently a common form of artist-academic collaboration, although several interviewees noted that these might offer a practical solution to the challenges of collaboration in the wake of a global pandemic.

How do collaborations happen?

Connections were often made through **informal networks**, including existing working relationships and personal recommendations. A number of collaborators had already worked together on previous projects. Artists frequently made connections through their work: there was strong agreement that one collaborative project led to the next. **Cold calling** was a popular strategy for **would-be collaborators**: one artist approached a number of clinicians to work with on a potential project, while an academic who admired an artist's work and could see its thematic connections with their own area of research, approached the artist directly, reasoning "they can only say no". Some academics were able to draw on external expertise: one humanities researcher worked with a local arts organisation to shape and disseminate a call for collaboration, and an interdisciplinary project was able to draw on the advice of the Curator of Exhibitions at the University Museum to develop an open call for a commission. (NB: artists are not typically remunerated for the time that they put into responding to a call for commission.)



Commissioners should ideally aim to make this process as unlabourious as possible).

"We'll just have a cup of tea" (or not): developing the working relationship

Once a collaboration had been committed to, working relationships were developed in a number of ways. All interviewees stressed the need to build in **adequate time (and budget)** to do this, particularly at the beginning of the project. Several underlined the benefits of using an **intermediary figure** to ensure the smooth running of the relationship: this could be an external facilitator, a project producer, or an experienced curator. One artist warned academics against thinking they could just assume a curatorial role - this work is immensely time consuming, and frequently relies on a knowledge of logistical processes that many academics lack.

Larger multidisciplinary projects were often able to **engage a facilitator** for initial meetings, which allowed all participants to explore the topic in an open and non-hierarchical way. One artist noted that, with an external facilitator, "you can really hammer out what you think is interesting ... it allows you to come to a common understanding through that process, which needs to be properly budgeted for, rather than just thinking 'We'll just have a cup of tea'."¹

On smaller projects without the budget for external facilitation, collaborators built their relationship in a variety of ways. One humanities academic and freelance artist met every fortnight, sharing small extracts of research – texts, images, objects, case-studies – with each other, triggering a process of secondary independent research for each of them. In another project involving a humanities researcher and an artist, a series of three trips to St Andrews were planned for the artist to introduce them to key people in the local community, with the aim of "overwhelming [the artist] with information [about the topic]".² On another project the lead researcher, a philosopher, shared a series of texts with the collaborating artist and team of neuroscientists, using this as a jumping off point for further conversations.

A number of artists interviewed were **working in collaboration with researchers in clinical spaces or research laboratories**. As part of a four-year project, an artist embedded themselves

within the hospital's simulation centre over an extended period: "A lot of the (artistic) labour was in building relationships. It's a work environment, so I would go in every couple of weeks, just as another pair of hands. I basically spent a lot of time observing, becoming one of the team."³ Another artist observed multiple different patient clinics and multidisciplinary team meetings; the process of collaboration afforded them entry to clinical spaces which they had no automatic entitlement to access as an artist, and which took **trust** on the part of both the clinician and the patients.⁴ For many artists working in this way, **maintaining dialogue** with often very busy clinicians and medical researchers was crucial in order to allow the collaboration to continue, and significant effort was put into maintaining the working relationship.

Benefits of creative collaboration

Almost all interviewees extolled the benefits and pleasures of collaboration:

"It is the best thing that you can do, it really stretches your brain as an artist, and a commissioner, and it's totally worth the effort required to build that relationship."⁵

"It's been one of the most joyful things ever. It's been so interesting talking to someone who has a very different way of conceptualising things, and completely different skills. It felt very enriching."⁶

Many people emphasised the **intellectual and methodological value** of collaboration, and the way in which it had **improved their own practice**:

"Each one of my collaborations has given me something completely different ... with Life of Breath I was bringing my visual language to the table, but what I got back from working with this immense wealth of talented people was an insight into philosophy, anthropology, art history, theory, literature, poetry, music, and the clinical side - it's really hard to pin down quite how extensive that benefit was."⁷

"I need to do this more often! A PhD or a post-doc is often a very individual experience, you do your work alone, and it's hard to get out of that mindset. Being in dialogue with someone else is a completely different way of thinking. We're all smart people, and I can do good work on my

own, but the work is better when it is in dialogue with someone else."⁸

"It's given something to my own research writing; it has allowed me to think about shape and morphology ... It has improved my own sense of the interdisciplinarity of my topic, and inspired me to try to be more interdisciplinary in my own work."⁹

"The collaboration forced me to explain what I was doing, over and over, to my collaborator; this really helped me to articulate my vision for the project to myself."¹⁰

For one early career art historian, working with an artist brought a quality to the exhibition that they could not have achieved on their own:

"the exhibition simply wouldn't have been done to the standard that it was had I not collaborated [on it] ..."¹¹

Another researcher noted that collaborative working could be particularly useful for those researching niche or taboo topics:

"If you are working on a very niche topic, then you are stronger together. And if you are talking about taboo topics, like menstruation, then an artist can break some boundaries that I can't [as an academic]; I find that very interesting."¹²

A number of artists, particularly those working alongside scientists and clinicians, noted that collaboration afforded them **access to people and places** that they could not have gained by themselves:

"Working on a collaborative project with a consultant surgeon offered me a privileged opportunity to witness a secret, fascinating world that is unseen by the general public."¹³

"The collaboration afforded me access to people and spaces that I simply could not have accessed by myself. It facilitated a lot of relationships and opportunities, without which I wouldn't have had any material ... It was about being in spaces where my professional role [as an artist] gave me no automatic place or right to be. It was about access, opportunities, relationships, material."¹⁴

Many artists emphasised that for them art-making was an inherently collaborative process, and

that the work simply could not be made without engaging with a range of collaborators, including community and patient groups, researchers and clinicians, and other creative practitioners like photographers, film-makers, animators, dancers, actors, and musicians.

Holding it together: the challenges of artist-academic partnerships

Interviewees agreed that most challenges typically posed by artist-academic collaboration could usually be resolved with **clear and respectful communication**. When difficulties arose, it was often because time hadn't been taken to clearly discuss each party's expectations at the outset.

"Where it has [previously] gone wrong for me, is where we haven't devoted enough time to building the partnership that holds the thing together ... that means that the minute the partnership comes under pressure, there is nothing to hold it."¹⁵

Challenges were typically experienced around **conflicting disciplinary values** and resulting **imbalances of power**, as well as **misunderstandings about artistic process and purpose**. Whilst the specific collaborations represented in this document were generally experienced positively by all parties, artists often articulated frustration with the common misconception that their role was to 'illustrate' the academic research.

“The power in the situation is held by the person with the budget... and you've got to be straight about that.”

Anxieties and frustrations around disciplinary power structures and pre-defined definitions of research 'value' were most often expressed by artists working in collaboration with clinicians or science researchers. One artist expressed frustration that their work was not regarded by clinical collaborators as 'proper' research:

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that they don't consider art to be research, but the way that valid research is defined through their current criteria implies the clinical. None of my

outcomes were clinical ... It is a question of defining value. Often the artist has very limited power in these situations."¹⁶

An artist who regularly works with clinical researchers recognised the "risk of appropriation, where you feel that you are making their work sexy for them", and advised of the importance of being able to clearly articulate your own position as an artist:

"I had to have my own voice [within the collaboration]. I felt that it was really important that I spoke for myself: when you are up against the medical landscape, which has such authority, it's really important that the artist has the language to hold that space."¹⁷

Another artist explained that arts-science collaborations are

"not just about illustrating what they are doing ... I don't just go in to explain the science, I go in to critique the context. I try to do it in a very respectful way - I know that I'm privileged to go into these environments - but I am going in to have philosophical and critical conversations about the work they are doing, because these are important questions for society to ask."¹⁸

Several artists undertaking participatory projects in healthcare settings, often working with vulnerable communities, noted their surprise that such work generally did not require formal ethics clearance: effectively, because 'art' was not conceptualised as 'research' within this environment, normal ethical protocols did not apply. In such situations, artists were frequently obliged to develop their own ethical frameworks.

Whilst the above challenges mainly applied to arts-science collaborations, **money and institutional access** had the potential to affect the balance of power across all projects:

"The power in the situation is held by the person with the budget, and the space that you will show the work in, and you've got to be straight about that."¹⁹

Some artists felt that academic partners didn't always appreciate the amount of **time and labour** that goes into producing an artwork:

"I don't think people always understand how long the creative process takes. When you

work with visual language, collaborators or funders understandably may not grasp what you are envisaging until you can show them an outcome, and early work in progress may not inspire confidence or accurately represent the ambitions of the project ... consequently, the work that has gone into each phase of progressing the outcome is not always apparent."²⁰

In particular, the **intellectual labour** underpinning artistic endeavour often remained unrecognised (and thus unremunerated):

"I think that a lot of people don't realise that art is intellectual work. If you are expected to digest neuroscience and philosophy and bring those ideas together in a new work, then quite a lot of thinking has to happen! And that takes time..."²¹

Affective labour was similarly under-acknowledged: this could be particularly problematic in the case of participatory arts projects, where the artist was obliged to take on a duty of care towards participants:

"It's not just about doing the workshops, it's about looking after the participants afterwards. What is the duty of care to that group? If you are working with 100 people, that's a lot of extra care. As soon as you start working with people and patients that are vulnerable, you have a whole other narrative that needs to be managed, and I don't think that people (especially researchers) necessarily appreciate the time involved in that."²²

Further challenges were experienced around funding structures, researcher precarity, and the difficulties presented by UCU industrial action and a global pandemic.

Several artists noted that in a number of universities, internal funding for medical humanities projects (such as Wellcome Trust ISSF grants) is typically held by medical schools, science department, or humanities departments; artist-led projects can struggle to get recognised and funded within these institutional structures.

For one early career researcher, **lack of ongoing job security** presented a serious obstacle to developing a successful collaboration further:

"It would be worth doing a much bigger exhibition around the issues that the collaboration raised,

perhaps something that tours, but that is years in the making and requires a massive budget ... I can't do that kind of thing without stability and a permanent job."²³

Finally, budgetary constraints were often cited as the most significant challenge facing collaborative work, particularly as it often meant that artists could not be properly remunerated for their labour.

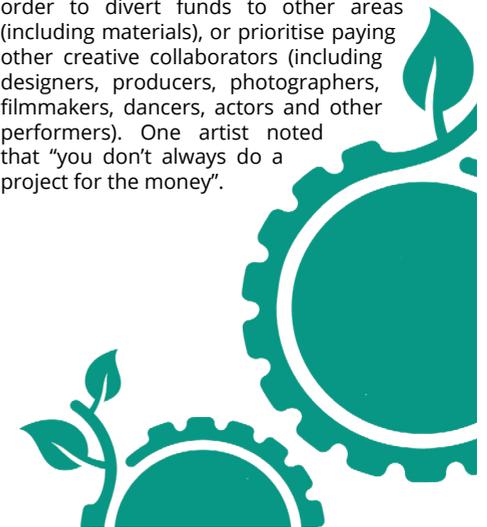
Negotiating artists' fees, intellectual property and copyright

All interviewees stressed the importance of **paying artists a proper day rate**. Guidance on rates of pay is provided by Artists' Union England and Creative Scotland; a-n The Artists' Information Company also offer artists advice on negotiating fees and day rates.

<https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/rates-of-pay/>

<https://www.creativescotland.com/resources/our-publications/funding-documents/rates-of-pay-guidance>

However, a fair rate of pay was not always achieved in practice. Some artists reported under-quoting for day rates or under-estimating the amount of work that was involved. Artists leading on projects (and thus in charge of budgets) frequently reported under-paying themselves in order to divert funds to other areas (including materials), or prioritise paying other creative collaborators (including designers, producers, photographers, filmmakers, dancers, actors and other performers). One artist noted that "you don't always do a project for the money".



Funding processes typically mean that a project has to be at least partly developed before a funding application can be submitted; often this requires un-remunerated labour on the part of the collaborating artist. Ideally institutions would pay artists a fee for contributing to the development of a funding bid (whether successful or not): however, in practice, inflexible institutional structures often proved an insurmountable barrier to this.

*"In an ideal world, the artist would be involved in the project from early on. The problem with that is the problem that we have had – that you are then seeking funding together which might not necessarily come through [meaning that the artist's work goes unpaid]."*²⁴

One artist and academic had co-applied for numerous funding schemes; although those applications were not successful, the collaboration had by that point become so intellectually and creatively fruitful that the artist continued to collaborate without payment.

“ It is important to value the artist's research methodology as a methodology in its own right.”

Expectations regarding **intellectual property rights, copyrights, and ownership** of any resulting artworks (and related responsibilities such as storage and insurance) were rarely discussed at the outset of projects. In many cases, individual copyright was assumed rather than formally negotiated: it was frequently presumed that the artist would retain copyright to all artworks, and the academic would retain copyright to all text-based outcomes. Although this did not create problems for any of the projects addressed here, it retains the potential to generate tensions, perhaps where outputs have been co-produced, or where collaborators have multiple professional identities (for example, an artist who is also an academic).

In many instances, artists worked **without formal contracts**. Where contracts were issued, these often used a standard template produced by the employing university or funding body: frequently there was insufficient flexibility within the system to change or adapt these to suit the

requirements of individual projects, although one artist had successfully challenged a draft contract, requesting that a clause giving the university automatic sole copyright to the work be removed.

Exceptionally, one project PI was able to consult with the university museum and a colleague in museum and gallery studies for advice on contracts. It was agreed that the artist would retain ownership, IP rights and copyright to any works produced during the collaboration; an agreement was struck with the museum that if a work was created (including a performance piece), the museum would document or acquire it.

Artists' Union England has produced guidance on copyright which can be accessed here: <https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/copyright-guide-for-artists/>

What does good collaboration look like? Advice and recommendations

The diversity of projects addressed in this report means that there is **no 'one size fits all'** check-list of recommendations for best practice in artist-academic collaborations. However, a number of points were iterated by the majority of interviewees.

All stressed that the artist should ideally be **involved from the outset** of the project, and that a successful collaborative should be a mutual research process.

*"Collaborations should inform the research. It shouldn't be that you [as the academic partner] do the research, and then the artist communicates it. The artist is not a megaphone for your research findings."*²⁵

*"The artist shouldn't be an afterthought – they don't just come in at the end of the project and ice the cake."*²⁶

Many underlined the **importance of intellectual equivalence and respect for each other's working methods**; it was particularly emphasised that academic partners must recognise the artist as an equal partner, and as a professional researcher in their own right.

"It is important to value the artist's research methodology as a methodology in its own right."

*To make good art you need to be as rigorous as you do to be a good researcher."*²⁷

*"Trust the other person's process. That person comes with their own training, and their own way of doing things, and that is why you are collaborating with them."*²⁸

Some artists developed group exercises and workshops designed to actively encourage mutual respect for different skill sets, incorporating these into the collaborative process:

*"It was interesting for me to incorporate an exchange of skills into the commission such as experimental drawing techniques that offered opportunities for creative thinking and visual literacy for the researchers that I was working with. This also helped to encourage a level 'playing field'."*²⁹

Both parties should **remain open as to where the collaboration might lead**, and should try not to entertain rigid ideas about the outcome. As one artist noted:

*"Don't have a preconceived idea about what you want an artist to make. What's the point about getting them in as an equal creative partner if you have predetermined what is being made? If you want that, commission someone rather than asking for a collaboration."*³⁰

Don't underestimate the amount of time that collaboration takes. Building and maintaining relationships can be enormously time-consuming. Exhibitions were a typical output for many collaborations, and many academics expressed surprise at the amount of administrative labour required to put on even a relatively modest show. As one early career academic warned:

*"A project like this necessarily demands a lot of time. It can become almost a full-time job when you are doing it, particularly in the run up to a big event or exhibition. A great deal of the work will be admin, so make sure that you overestimate the time that you will need to do administrative tasks."*³¹

Ultimately the success of a collaboration rests on **clear and ongoing communication**. Be transparent and professional and respectful. Set clear parameters at the outset of the project. Have proper rates of pay, which reflect guidance set out by Artists' Union England and Creative Scotland

(<https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/rates-of-pay/> and <https://www.creativescotland.com/resources/our-publications/funding-documents/rates-of-pay-guidance>). Have clear conversations about the expectations regarding IP, copyright and ownership of any resulting works.

Ideally there should be a contract in place, although these can vary hugely between institutions and projects, and there is no one-size-fits-all template. Artists and other creative freelancers should be aware when signing documents (such 'suppliers forms' for payment) that a link to terms and conditions that incorporate IP and copyright may be included.



Conclusion

While creative collaborations are increasingly common within the medical humanities (and indeed within the academic sector more broadly) and their potential benefits are widely acknowledged, scholars are not typically trained in the skills required for this kind of work, or equipped with an understanding of what such collaborations require in practical terms. Consequently, many would-be academic collaborators are unsure as to how to go about collaborating with artists and other creative practitioners, with the majority forced to figure out the structures and processes as they go along. Additionally, there are still a range of entrenched attitudes and ideas about artists that need to be challenged: academic partners must acknowledge artists as fellow researchers and intellectual equals, rather than mere 'illustrators' or intermediaries for public engagement, and universities and funding bodies must be prepared to properly remunerate artists for their work.

References and additional resources:

Pfoser, Alena, Sara de Jong, "I'm not being paid for this conversation": Uncovering the challenges of artist-academic collaborations in the neoliberal institution". *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (May 2020), 317-333.

King's College London, *King's Artists - Toolkit* provides advice for artists in residence: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/cultural/artists-in-residence/191120-kings-artists-toolkit.pdf>

a-n The Artists Information Company (www.a-n.co.uk) offers a range of useful resources. *How to work with artists* (2010) is targeted at local authority organisations who want to work with artists; much of the advice is transferrable to the academic sector, and the report contains some useful sections on drafting person specifications, working agreements and budgets. <http://www.art-connections.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/how-to-work-with-artists.pdf>

With thanks to the following people for sharing their experiences of artist-academic collaboration:

Emma Barnard (independent artist): <https://www.emmabarnard.com>

Benjamin Dalton (Philosophy, Kings College London) and Amanda Doidge (independent artist): *Narrating Plasticity*, 2017-18. <https://narratingplasticity.wordpress.com>

Isabel Davis (English Literature, Birkbeck) and Anna Burel (independent artist): *Conceiving Histories*, 2015-ongoing. <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/conceivinghistories/>

Beverley Hood (artist and Reader, Edinburgh College of Art): *Eidolon*, 2013-18; *We Began as Part of the Body*, 2017-20; and *Immobile Choreography*, 2019. <https://www.bhood.co.uk/>

Victoria Hume (independent artist): *The Isle is Full of Noises*, a commission for Hearing the Voice, Durham University, 2017. <https://victoriahume.com>

Sofie Layton (independent artist): *The Heart of the Matter*, 2017-8. <http://www.sofielayton.co.uk> and <http://www.insidetheheart.org/#home>

Angela Maddock (independent artist): Crafts Council Parallel Practices Award recipient with the Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care, King's College London, 2016-17; and thereafter a King's Artist. <http://www.angela-maddock.com>

Camilla Mørk Røstvik (History of Art, University of St Andrews) and Bee Hughes (artist and researcher, Liverpool John Moores University): *Blood Lines: Exploring the History of Menstruation at the University of St Andrews*, 2019-2020. <https://www.beehughes.co.uk>

Liz Orton (independent artist): *Digital Insides*, 2015-20. <http://digitalinsides.org>

Amanda Sciampacone (History of Art, Warwick University): *Art, Air and Illness*, 2018.

Jayne Wilton (independent artist): *Visualising Breath*, 2012; *The Life of Breath*, 2015-2020; and *Art, Air and Illness*, 2018. <https://www.jaynewilton.com> and <https://lifeofbreath.org>

Footnotes:

- 1 Victoria Hume
- 2 Camilla Mørk Røstvik
- 3 Beverley Hood
- 4 Liz Orton
- 5 Victoria Hume
- 6 Isabel Davis
- 7 Jayne Wilton
- 8 Amanda Sciampacone
- 9 Isabel Davis
- 10 Liz Orton
- 11 Amanda Sciampacone
- 12 Camilla Mørk Røstvik
- 13 Emma Barnard
- 14 Liz Orton
- 15 Victoria Hume
- 16 Liz Orton
- 17 Sofie Layton
- 18 Beverley Hood
- 19 Victoria Hume
- 20 Jayne Wilton
- 21 Amanda Doidge
- 22 Sofie Layton
- 23 Amanda Sciampacone
- 24 Isabel Davis
- 25 Anna Burel
- 26 Isabel Davis
- 27 Sofie Layton
- 28 Isabel Davis
- 29 Emma Barnard
- 30 Bee Hughes
- 31 Benjamin Dalton



Working Knowledge is a collection of accessible and user-friendly resources dedicated to the practical ins and outs of interdisciplinary research.

Covering everything from managing a research project's social media presence to conducting experimental design 'hackathons', the series is a must-read for anyone considering funding or embarking on interdisciplinary research.

Series editors: Charles Fernyhough, Angela Woods and Victoria Patton.

