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Voice Club

by

Hearing the Voice

Durham University

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Strategic Award

‘Voice Club’
A Project Short by Mary Robson, Angela Woods and Charles Fernyhough

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Voice Club

"What makes it work? The careful and considered facilitation of Mary; the willingness of all participants really to enter into the promise of that interdisciplinary space. The tight 'boundaries' of Voice Club – we know exactly when it will start and finish, and the dates on which it will happen. That the academic hierarchies in the room (which of course can't simply disappear) do not over-determine what happens in the space."

– Feedback from a member of the research team after the first year of the project.

Bringing project researchers together for regular meetings can make or break an interdisciplinary team. How can you find common ground among academics from very different backgrounds? How can you set up the venue in order to ensure effective interactions? How can you make the most of the time you have? This Project Short invites you in to Voice Club, the fortnightly meeting of the researchers of Hearing the Voice, an interdisciplinary project on the phenomenon of voice-hearing.

Sketching a plan

Voice Club arose from a conundrum that faces many interdisciplinary projects. How can we create the kind of **environment** in which researchers from a wide range of disciplines can exercise their curiosity about the topic, learn about sometimes radically different approaches, and test their own disciplinary assumptions as well as their new ideas?

From the earliest planning stages we knew that we wanted our research meetings to go beyond a typical reading group or journal club, and we had a hunch that, as academics accustomed to the traditional formats of our disciplines, we lacked the skills and experience to pursue something more innovative.

To that end, we engaged Mary Robson [see **The Creative Facilitator**] with a brief to help to build the community of the research team by convening and facilitating these gatherings.

Laying out the site

We agreed from the outset that fortnightly meetings, timed to allow plenty of informal interaction, would be a good starting point, and were fortunate enough to be given a home for our Voice Club meetings in the Institute of Advanced Study (IAS), a Georgian building on Palace Green in Durham. We use the Seminar Room, which is situated on the ground floor with a view of Durham Cathedral through its two large windows. None of the project team has the IAS as their workplace, and so the venue has some neutrality. Participants can leave behind the tasks of academic office life and enter a space where the physical context is not providing any established cues about how to think or behave.

The room comfortably accommodates around twenty people when the chairs are arranged in a semi-circle; it is only occasionally set up theatre-style when numbers demand it. There are standard AV facilities and an anteroom in which refreshments are always available. The IAS kindly provides tea and coffee, and we take it in turns to provide the biscuits. This room additionally serves as an extra space when the group splits for conversations. We also break out into outside spaces such as Palace Green when the weather is fine.

The **timing** of the sessions is important. Friday afternoon has proved a good time slot: it is the end of the working week, and conversations can be extended over a drink afterwards. We start at 2:30pm and end punctually at 5pm, when those who can stay around

to continue the conversations retire to the pub. Keeping strictly to time, while allowing conversations to flow naturally, has been an important aspect of the format's success.

Breaking ground

The **first meeting** of Voice Club was crucially important in setting the tone for what was to come. It came early in the project – within the first month – and it needed to be an

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out-of-the-ordinary experience that would engage academics and doctoral students from a wide range of disciplines and career stages, many of whom did not previously know each other. Put simply, we wanted people to keep coming back. The space had to be more than just physically inviting: it needed to feel safe and bounded, but also to be a place in which anything – from the cherished and familiar to the radical and new – could be explored, assessed and criticized.

Mary came up with the idea of centering the afternoon's activity around the Plan of St Gall, a ninth-century monastery plan whose purpose (it has been claimed) was to act as a 'meditation machine'. She invited each participant to create their own **blueprint or ground plan of their knowledge** of voice-hearing: what they knew, where they'd got to in previous work, and where they saw themselves going over the course of the project. The resulting plans, diagrams and mind-maps were then the focus of conversations in small groups. Working in this way gave people the opportunity to articulate ideas and feelings they may not otherwise have felt comfortable sharing. For example, one of the humanities post-docs could explain that the forbidding mountain range on her map symbolised cognitive psychology, which she was approaching with some trepidation.

In hindsight, asking people to make this initial attempt to orient themselves in relation to the topic was very valuable. It provided a constructive and non-threatening context within which to establish, map and share our varied starting points.

Levelling the terrain

Subsequent Voice Club meetings were dedicated to bringing everyone up to speed with a range of key disciplinary perspectives on voice-hearing. Working alongside the project directors and project coordinator, Mary laid these foundations with the help of some more creative modes of presentation and engagement than are usually found in the academic seminar setting. Here are some examples:

Meet the Brain: Two sessions, led by post-docs, tackled what we know about the brain and voice-hearing. One session was a tour of the parts of the brain most relevant to voice-hearing, with a neuroscientist or a psychologist speaking for each one.

The Demonic and the Divine: Our medieval historian hand-made four copies of an original board game introducing us to the eleventh- and twelfth-century *Miracula* that are the focus of her work. Playing the game (a version of Snakes and Ladders) enabled the group to look in detail at the ways in which voices and visions are described in these ancient texts.

Voices, Identity and Personification: Clinical psychologist Dr Angela Kennedy brought her perspective to the group with details of her experience of working with voice-hearers.

The early days of Voice Club also provided opportunities to hear from and meet **people who hear voices,** ranging from voice-hearers in our local community to those like Eleanor Longden who have a strong public profile within and beyond the Hearing Voices Movement.

Ground works

With these foundations in place, the group has gone on to explore (from multiple disciplinary perspectives, and often with visiting academic speakers) 'cross-cutting' issues including loneliness, deafness, musical hallucinations and taxonomies of voice-hearing. It has also been possible to tackle more complex scenarios, including converting cross-disciplinary

conversations into practically realisable plans for empirical research [see the **Experimental Design Hackathon**].

As well as engaging with topics directly associated with voice-hearing, the sessions are sometimes focused on **interdisciplinarity** and transferable methodologies. One ongoing project, inspired by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's Oblique Strategies, is **The Lexicon,** a jointly produced living dictionary that defines terms used and ideas held, in distinctively different and sometimes discipline-specific ways, by project team members. The end product will be seriously playful: a pack of cards full of meaning.

The final Voice Club of the second year of the project, entitled **The Offers**, invited each researcher to think about what kind of experiences, skills or advice they could offer to other members of the project. The results bear witness to the distance travelled by the team. Here are some of the offers taken up in the months following the session:

From a **philosopher**: *Book in for a 'conceptual hygiene' clinic – we'll go through any paper you're working on to identify conceptual ambiguities and presuppositions.*

From a **theologian**: *Explore the dialogue between science and religion in relation to a journal article of your choice.*

From a **social scientist**: *Learn more about the creative ways in which voice-hearers use poetry and storytelling to cope with their voices.*

From a **psychologist**: *Join a design meeting for a new experimental study*.

Taking stock

Crucial to the ongoing development of Voice Club have been formal and informal processes of **reflection and evaluation**. Towards the end of the first year we designed a questionnaire to investigate people's experience of Voice Club and the effect it was having on their research, their disciplinary identity and their sense of belonging to the team. We obtained ethical approval for the study, with one implication being that any published scholarly work on our approach to interdisciplinarity could incorporate this feedback. The honest responses make plain some of the challenges of the project:

How would you characterize the dynamics of Voice Club? What makes Voice Club 'work' or 'not work?'

Each session is different – so it's very difficult to generalise in this way. However, generally, it is a friendly, supportive and creative environment for exploring the themes of our project. I think it works less well when it becomes more traditionally academic in its format and presentational style.

It works because of the people and the strength of the idea. It also works because a lot of effort goes into planning it and it is expertly facilitated. The main threat to it is that there are a lot of people with interesting ideas, and we need to make sure that everyone has a say. But I feel that people are enjoying it, so we are getting it mostly right. I have particularly been pleased to see the ECRs engage so enthusiastically. One ongoing question is how best to engage with visitors including voice-hearers.

To what extent, if any, has Voice Club has influenced your methodological approach?

I am not sure my approach has changed, although it may change in the future. The design of neuroscience experiments, for example, is governed by very strict parameters, many of which I am still learning. Voice Club has provided ideas about topics to study, but I am not always in a position to change my methods of measurement.

The facilitator's role

Working with an in-house facilitator ensures consistency across sessions, and also means that underlying attention is given to the creation of the frameworks that make for the best experience: that deliberate space, this playful intention [see **The Creative Facilitator**]. The fact that Mary has less of an academic stake in the discussions – although she is of course fully intellectually engaged – means that she can keep a supervisory eye on the process at all times.

At other times, Voice Club requires something more like a traditional academic chair,

particularly when the format is more like a conventional research seminar. In such cases, academic team-members typically step in to chair question-and-answer sessions and to introduce visiting speakers.

Landscaping

Voice Club has an episodic narrative: each session is a discrete unit, and together they tell a bigger story. Conversations that begin in one week are often picked up again at the next meeting almost as if there had been no interruption – one clear benefit of a regular meeting schedule. There is always a sense of making it up as we go along, partly because we have broken new ground, but also because it must be custom-made for the people involved.

It is challenging to **capture and document** the processes and experiences involved, and to make Voice Club accessible to team members who cannot be there in person. While we occasionally make audio recordings of particular presentations for use within the team, we've felt on the whole that it's important to ensure that discussions can remain exploratory, spontaneous and confidential rather than becoming part of a permanent record. There are also practical problems with audio or video recording, such that both result in some very large data-files that are difficult to transfer, store and manage.

Another ongoing challenge is to **sustain the momentum** and to maintain the flow from session to session. We want to ensure that people keep coming back and that Voice Club remains a highlight of the working week. A further risk is that the format becomes **repetitive**, or becomes dominated by a particular disciplinary perspective. All of these challenges can be addressed, even if not fully resolved, through careful planning and a responsive, flexible approach to monitoring the process.

At the heart of Hearing the Voice is the desire to make a difference to the people who hear voices. Voice Club is one of the ways in which we maintain the presence of the voice-hearer at the centre of our research. This in turn presents challenges, in that the presence of someone with **lived experience** can make the expression of certain views, particularly those that challenge dominant models of the experience, more difficult.

Voice Club is a work in progress and is continuing to develop as we extend our inquiries into new domains. It is not a model that will suit all projects [see **Transferable Methodology**], particularly those in which team-members are more geographically dispersed, or where a suitable venue is not available. It has been a foundation for Hearing the Voice, but other projects will have very different structures, interests and needs, and settling on the 'right' format will likely always involve a certain amount of trial and error.

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 interdiciplinary research.

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