



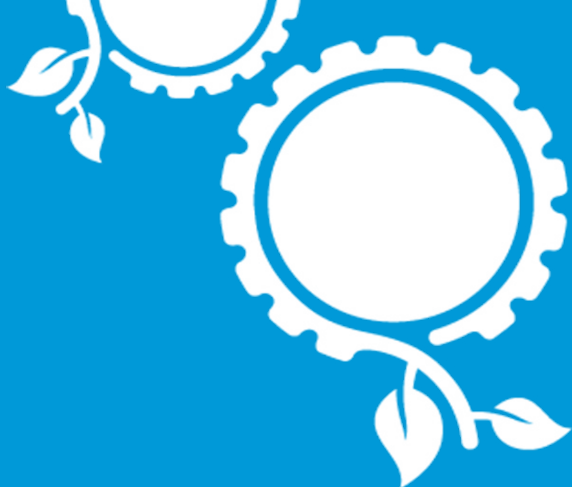
# Working Knowledge

*Engaging Others*

## Arts–Research Collaborations

by  
Edinburgh International Book Festival





**'Arts-Research Collaborations'**  
**A Project Short by Roland Gulliver & Janet Smyth**

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# Arts–Research Collaborations

## *Conversations with Ourselves* at the Edinburgh International Book Festival

As a central part of the 2014 Edinburgh International Book Festival we created *Conversations with Ourselves*, a series of events exploring all aspects of voice-hearing in partnership with Durham University's Hearing the Voice project. Our aim was to develop public understanding, both social and scientific, of voice-hearing and reduce the stigma surrounding the experience by placing it within a broader context which relates to everyone. This Project Short reflects on the process of creating and delivering the project and offers insight in how an interdisciplinary collaboration can work.

### What started *Conversations with Ourselves*?

*Conversations with Ourselves* started, appropriately, from a conversation in the Edinburgh International Book Festival Author's Yurt in 2013 with Prof Charles Fernyhough. Charles was with us as a fiction writer but he is also a psychologist at Durham University. He told us about Durham's Hearing the Voice, an interdisciplinary research project funded by the Wellcome Trust. As we had already been thinking about how exciting it would be to explore the inner authorial voice as part of the Festival programme, the conversation with Charles seemed to **open up so many connections and possibilities**. We were at the first stages of shaping a People's Award application to the Wellcome Trust ourselves and realised immediately that a partnership with Hearing the Voice in some form could form the core of our project plans.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival is an 18-day festival taking place every August presenting over 750 events for children and adults, involving writers from Scotland and over 40 other nations. Viewed as the world's premier book festival, the programme brings together authors, academics, politicians and scientists to discuss a range of topics and themes. Over the past 5 years as the Festival's Associate Director, and Children's and Education Programme Director, we have developed a range of thematic projects with the likes of the Open University and the ESRC Genomics Forum.

As experienced festival programmers, we were immediately drawn to two aspects of voice-hearing. The first was a curiosity around how authors 'hear' their characters' voices, the autonomy of characters, where authors think their characters go when a book is finished and how they deal with that if it is felt as a loss. We were struck by a [Guardian interview](#) with children's author Michelle Paver, who spoke about completing her *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* series: 'I met my Japanese publisher and she asked how I felt about saying goodbye to Torak and Wolf. I started crying. Not even decorously crying, but great big jerky sobs. As soon as you write that last line and finish the book they are gone and they don't come back. But I told myself it was OK, they were out in the world and having new adventures. So I thought it was all fine.' Suddenly, through *Conversations with Ourselves* we had **the opportunity to explore this inner world of the writer**. It is a privilege to be able to peer inside and to challenge writers to externalise that vibrant and complete reality, a reality that some live with for years and years and over multiple books but which we, as readers, experience in only one form, the published end product.

The second aspect of voice-hearing that intrigued us was the number of books, both fiction and

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non-fiction, that have been published recently on the theme of mental health. Many writers – of fiction and non-fiction – have been reflecting on and responding to **the way mental illness is dealt with in contemporary culture** and we wanted to find a way to debate and discuss these issues. We were also interested in the relationship writers have to mental health, in particular the idea that creative people might have a closer relationship to what we think of as 'madness'. Then as we began to have conversations with publishers we became aware of more and more novelists publishing fiction on topics relating to voice-hearing, featuring characters who were having auditory and sometimes visual hallucinations, stories

of imaginary friends, visitations by spirits, vicious and undermining inner voices or dead siblings who refuse to rest in peace. One key question kept resounding for us: what elements define and influence our internal authorial voice?

We embarked on a **process of research** involving several long and very productive meetings with Charles Fernyhough and his colleague Dr Angela Woods when we would hear about their interdisciplinary work and all the spin-off projects and research. We also started to read and to talk to writers, publishers, artists and basically anyone else prepared to listen and be enthused by the project. And we learned so much about voice-hearing. Throughout we were impressed and inspired by the creative response from everyone we spoke to; the challenge for us was to remain flexible and take on board these new ideas without losing the original focus of the project.

In February 2014, it was time to shape all our amassed knowledge, ideas and excitement into a unique strand of events that would investigate the medical, historical, spiritual and literary aspects of hearing voices. *Conversations with Ourselves* focused on three broad areas:

- ◇ the experience, examination and perception of hearing voices; what is its cultural, medical and religious significance, and what has happened to change and develop those understandings?
- ◇ the meaning of finding your voice through childhood to adulthood; why do we create imaginary friends, and how does the definition of your inner voice shape your identity through your teenage years?
- ◇ the importance of voices in creative fiction; what are writers' relationships to their characters' voices, and why is an autonomous inner voice viewed as being creatively successful?

Our objectives in exploring these themes were to provide a platform for the role played by voice-hearing in human consciousness and creativity, to provide a forum for voice-hearers to tell their stories and to destigmatise the experience, and to highlight literature's ability to create empathy and awareness, exploring the human impact of scientific and social understanding.

## Audience(s)

Over the 18-day festival we heard from voice-hearers, academics, comedians, children's authors, crime writers, the former Bishop of Edinburgh, psychologists, playwrights, professors of literature and theology, plus a range of novelists from Scotland, the rest of the UK and overseas. It was important, given the amount of writing for young people on mental illness, that **our events were accessible to all** and spanned our public, school and children's programmes. We also had a specific event aimed at teachers and others working with young people. As well as regular Book Festival channels (social media, e-bulletins, the Festival brochure) we linked in with Hearing the Voice to promote the series more directly to those already engaged on some level with voice-hearing, and made complimentary tickets available to members of hearing voices groups in and around Edinburgh.

We aimed to attract an audience of over 1,500 but surpassed that with a total of 1,756 people – from teenagers to octogenarians – coming to the events. Each event was followed by a signing session which allowed the audience further space to question participants or talk to one another. This was particularly valuable for the Making Meaning of the Voices event which directly tackled psychiatric understandings of voice-hearing.

The audiences were positive and receptive to all the events. Of those who completed a survey about their participation in *Conversations with Ourselves* public events:

- ◇ 69% felt their **attitude** to voice hearing and hearers had changed
- ◇ 77% had **enjoyed** the events
- ◇ 75% felt they were **better informed** after attending an event

We also asked our audiences to add their own anecdotal responses which included:

- ◇ 'Given me different perspective on voices and opened up voices in relation to other mental health issues such as anorexia.'
- ◇ 'Useful as a parent of a voice-hearer to know that a person-centred approach is helpful.'
- ◇ 'Can identify with what was heard,

and delighted that the subject can be discussed nowadays.'

- ◇ 'After studying mental health had a negative view that recovery was possible, but opinion has changed since the event.'
- ◇ 'It helped me to understand the fundamentals of the phenomenon. Its multiple manifestations.'
- ◇ 'It hadn't occurred to me that hearing voice might not be a negative.'
- ◇ 'Provided greater understanding and raised interesting questions. An inspiring panel.'
- ◇ 'Hearing Eleanor Longden's experience has changed my perception of voice hearing.'
- ◇ 'Has improved my understanding of the experiences of a friend who suffered psychosis, and how to now speak to her.'
- ◇ 'Was given hope from the event.'
- ◇ 'My son, who is 'in recovery', attended with me. It was useful for discussion between us.'

## Why did this work?

The success of this project lay in the Book Festival's capacity to **produce a creative, artistic response to the scientific challenges offered by the Hearing the Voice project**. The Book Festival was aided by the fact that Hearing the Voice was already well established and outward-looking both in the project leaders' interdisciplinary perspectives and in what they had already achieved, including through working with the arts.

For us as a Book Festival, the primary challenge as non-scientific, non-academic partners was to be able to understand the biomedical issues well enough to interpret them into a creative setting. We have created many interdisciplinary events and projects in the past but *Conversations with Ourselves* was successful we felt as a genuine creative response to the issue, which placed literary, cultural and social perspectives alongside the academic and scientific. This captures why interdisciplinary projects are important, and

why arts and science together exploring the same subject can create outcomes greater than on their own. The arts – and literature in particular – are all about exploring what it means to be human, hypothesising on our understanding of the world around us, defining and redefining our structures. The key to a successful project is clearly agreeing and defining the subject, that point of commonality that the partners will be responding to.

The Book Festival was particularly suited to responding to Hearing the Voice for two reasons: reading is the one art form that involves empathy, imaginative identification, internalisation and our own inner voices; similarly, the process of writing enables or even requires people to gain control and define their own internal voices. The

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creative conversation – the internal dialogues that writers have when they write – was a central idea explored by the project and highlighted a positive relationship with the voices in our heads. Many authors cite that their novels only worked when their characters spoke back to them and became autonomous. This was important for us as it highlighted that social, cultural and medical context defined the voice-hearing relationship.

These ideas were further explored in a research project with Hearing the Voice that arose directly from *Conversations with Ourselves*. The **Writers' Inner Voices** study began with an invitation to all writers at the 2014 Festival to complete an online questionnaire about the experience of their characters' voices. Twenty-five writers were then interviewed by postdoctoral researcher Dr Jennifer Hodgson over the course of the festival. Together these written and oral testimonies yield fascinating insights into the creative process which will be analysed in depth over the course of 2015. The widespread interest in *Conversations with Ourselves* and *Writers' Inner Voices* was recognised by *The Guardian* who invited Hearing the Voice to publish the Inner Voices series of literary and science blogs about the research, linking directly to the programme, and also hosted a large-scale questionnaire about the experience of reading which is a topic we hope to explore in future Festival events.

## The Festival and the research team: Recommendations for collaboration

- ◇ Find partners who offer **expertise** that complements yours or **fills your knowledge and skills gaps**
- ◇ Don't **underestimate** the value of **meeting in person** – brainstorming is difficult via email
- ◇ **Research** your ideas and **respond creatively** to feedback but **maintain clarity** of your **core aims**
- ◇ **Engage other partners** and **stakeholders** throughout the process
- ◇ **Respect** that different sectors work to **different rhythms** and **deadlines**
- ◇ Have a **variety of outputs** for reaching your audiences
- ◇ Aim to create a project that becomes **more than the sum of its parts**





**W**orking 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.

