Reflecting on ‘Impact’ in Artist–Academic Collaborations in Times of Conflict

Sara Wong
PhD Candidate, London School of Economics (formerly Research and Project Manager, PositiveNegatives); s.wong23@lse.ac.uk

Abstract
This article explores some of the challenges, learnings, reflections and opportunities involved in collaborating with grassroots artist collectives in conflict-affected places in academic settings. Using as a case study the collaborative production of the animated short film ‘Colombia’s Broken Peace’, as part of a wider international research project, I reflect on our experiences in co-producing this piece by drawing out lessons that might be relevant for others interested in undertaking similar inter-disciplinary work. In doing so, I aim to re-frame notions of ‘impact’ and ‘capacity building’ in conflict research to a more complex picture of mutual learning and knowledge exchange.

Keywords: co-production; artist–academic collaborations; interdisciplinary research; impact; capacity building

Introduction
Artist–academic collaborations are becoming increasingly popular in socially engaged research. Often, this comes from a drive to ‘have impact’ outside of academia, as creative pieces are often seen as more engaging and accessible for non-specialised audiences. The impact on collaborators (both on the collaborating ‘researchers’ and ‘creatives’) also comes into play here, as interdisciplinary work could be a form of re-thinking how we approach knowledge production by recognising knowledge systems traditionally not valued within the boundaries of conventional social science research. At their best, participatory approaches to arts-based research also aim to confer greater ownership over historical narratives and dominant discourses to those directly affected by the events or phenomena in focus.

This article explores some of the challenges, learnings, reflections and opportunities involved in collaborating with grassroots artist collectives in conflict-affected places in academic research settings. Using as a case study the collaborative co-production of our animated short film ‘Colombia’s Broken Peace’, as part of a wider international research project, I reflect on our experiences in co-producing this piece by drawing out lessons that might be relevant for others interested in undertaking similar inter-disciplinary work. In doing so, I aim to re-frame notions of ‘impact’ and ‘capacity building’ in conflict research from often unidirectional conceptualisations (i.e. skills and knowledge flowing from the ‘Global North’ to the ‘Global South’), to a more complex picture of mutual learning and knowledge exchange. While our key objective, as situated within a wider international research project, was to create a locally relevant ‘creative research output’, I suggest that a significant ‘impact’ made through our collaboration was in the process itself – and, ultimately, the relationships we cultivated.

On Artist–Academic Collaborations
The potential benefits of artist–academic collaborations are multifaceted, and their contributions can vary from communication to methodological development to growing networks to theory building (Pahl et al., 2017). Often, the incentive to collaborate with artists in order to demonstrate non-academic impact comes from funding bodies or universities themselves. For some academics, working with artists offers an opportunity to engage with more embodied, intuitive and sensory practices. For some artists, collaborations with researchers can offer an opportunity to engage with a topic more deeply in a theoretically engaged way. For research participants, participation in an arts-based project can provide a unique space for self-expression, belonging and relationship building (Nunn, 2020).
Working with conflict-affected communities in the context of artist–academic collaborations brings up even more unique opportunities and challenges – especially in terms of trust, access and risk. Yet, issues of awareness-raising, capacity building and narrative ownership are perhaps all the more urgent in conflict settings. As Alison Baily (2019) has demonstrated in their review of the British Council’s programming in conflict-affected places, *The Art of Peace: The Value of Culture in Post-Conflict Recovery*, arts and culture can play an impactful role in peacebuilding efforts. Their review of arts and cultural programmes across Colombia, Rwanda and Syria identified the following key benefits of such programmes in (post)conflict settings: ‘community engagement; skills for employment; inclusive development; therapeutic interventions; social cohesion; and voice and agency’ (Baily, 2019: 4). Although hopeful about the prospect of creative engagement’s orientation towards positive social change, they caution against narratives which position the arts as a magic bullet for social cohesion in post-conflict recovery.

Still, this drive to facilitate collaborations between researchers, practitioners and artists rarely comes with a set of tools for facilitating critical reflection about what the impacts of such interventions are. Some scholars, such as Pfoser and de Jong (2020), have warned that these collaborations risk actively reproducing hierarchical power structures between those working in academia and their artistic collaborators. According to Pfoser and de Jong, this is so because of the nature of current neoliberal university apparatuses that these partnerships must work within. They argue that overly celebratory accounts render tensions invisible and, instead, propose more comprehensive systemic change, rather than focusing on the challenges and opportunities of individual projects and programmes. Although these types of structural critiques apply vital systemic pressure, they do not necessarily offer reflections for practitioners, academics and artists actively involved or interested in this work, those who may be acutely aware of such contradictions and power hierarchies inherent to it. While holding these critiques and cautions in mind, this reflexive exercise offers an account which toes this line between reflection and celebration.

**About the Drugs & (dis)order Project**

For the past four years, PositiveNegatives has been collaborating on the Drugs & (dis)order project, an international research consortium exploring the relationship between drugs and conflict in three conflict-affected countries: Afghanistan, Colombia and Myanmar. The project, funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), comprises over a dozen partner organisations from around the world. PositiveNegatives’ role and focus in the project has been to co-produce creative outputs with artists utilising academic research conducted in the project and to build capacity while doing so. As part of the project, we’ve collaborated with over a dozen artists from around the world, created four research-led comics and (co)produced two short animations based on first-hand testimonies. Five of the artists we’ve worked with are from and based in the borderland and conflict-affected regions with which the research engages, and two of those artists/collectives produced work in mediums brand new to them. In lieu of having the scope to go into the learnings and outcomes from across our entire four-year programme and across all three country-sites, here I focus on the Colombia creative team that we have built a partnership with through this work over the last three years, using the production of our animation ‘Colombia’s Broken Peace’ as a case study.

**The Team**

The core of the PositiveNegatives internal team was myself, as Programme Manager, overseen by PositiveNegatives’ Founding Director, Dr Benjamin Worku-Dix. Ben, whose background is in visual anthropology, founded PositiveNegatives in 2012. With an emerging interest in the intersection of research, artistic practice and activism, this was the first major project that I managed as a Research and Project Manager at the organisation. Because of the nature of the work at PositiveNegatives, we also needed to bring on specialist expertise for this project. Andrei Gomez Suarez, an academic whose work focuses on the Colombian peace process, narratives and emotions, was brought on board to act as co-producer, scriptwriter and ‘bridge’ for our artistic outputs in Colombia (although, many of us wore a number of hats throughout this project, so characterising our roles neatly is no easy feat).

Before even starting to begin the production of the animation, which is both resource and labour-intensive, we decided to start off the project by first producing a research-based comic, which tends to have a shorter turn around and could be used as a means of initial relationship- and skill-building. We considered this production of the comic a pilot or research and development (R&D) exercise of sorts, although the project was also output-driven in that we were able to publish the piece itself as well. This is where our partnership with Inty Grillos began. We were first introduced to the collective’s work through Andrei, who was tasked with making connections with local artists in the borderland regions of Colombia where the Drugs & (dis)order research was focused. Through his research and networks, Andrei got in touch with Inty Grillos, an artist collective based in Putumayo.

Inty Grillos are a grass-roots arts collective, mainly creating vast eye-catching murals across Colombia –
particularly in conflict-affected areas. They are also a community organisation, working with youth, social leaders and former combatants on community cohesion projects, in which they actively employ their arts practice. At the time of introduction, they had never drawn a comic or illustrated for animation. When searching for creative collaborators for the Colombia creative team, we prioritised lived experience and engagement with the research themes in their own work over technical knowledge of certain artistic mediums. As a collective from 'the territory' – or the research site of focus in the borderlands in Colombia – we knew that Inty Grillos would have embedded and lived knowledge around the issues of drugs, conflict and peacebuilding. This initial collaboration, Jessica’s Story, built the trust and working practices upon which we could then move forward with co-creating an animation (Figures 1 and 2).

One of our core aims going into this project was skill building with local artists to grow their capacity in illustration-animation and to grow our own capacity in collaborating with collectives and local grass-roots organisations. As such, we needed to work with an animator who was both skilled at illustration and animation – as well as pedagogy, as this would be a large part of their role. They also needed to be both fluent in Spanish and English to be able to work across the multilingual production team – and ideally from Colombia. When Diana Garcia, our lead animator, eventually joined the team, she was the missing piece in our puzzle.

This has been an extensive introduction to the ‘who’ of the project and intentionally so because, to us, that is the project. The collective process is the outcome in many ways – and the relationships that we built have had profound impacts on each one of us in our work and lives going forward. I would argue that by reflecting on how we relate to each other in this work and what we bring to it, we can learn an incredible amount about how to forge meaningful relationships in interdisciplinary artist–academic settings, despite considerable challenges. The stakes for supporting more relational and reflexive approaches in artist–academic partnerships are perhaps even higher in conflict settings where issues of trust around international collaborations can be especially fraught. In line with this approach, I reflect our learnings and challenges within this partnership with our key collaborators in the following sections. These reflections were synthesised from conversations that I facilitated with Andrei and Diana, and a discussion with the Inty Grillos collective facilitated by Andrei. I’ve also included screenshots from our meetings and workshops and illustrations from our collaborations in order to showcase the processes and outputs that were integral to our partnership.

About the Animation

'Colombia’s Broken Peace’ is a 10-minute illustrated animation produced in Spanish and English spotlighting the lives of Roger, an Afro-Colombian activist and Joanna, a peasant farmer (campesina). Based on research done by the Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL), the aim of the piece is to humanise the stories of those directly impacted by the fractured peace process in Colombia and the illicit drug economy in the region, with a particular focus on the ways in which these issues overlap and are interrelated. In doing so, the animation seeks to illustrate the human impact that these issues have on borderland communities trapped in cycles of conflict.
Figure 2: Page from Jessica's story comic, produced by Inty Grillos and PositiveNegatives
poverty and violence and the ways in which they are resisting such oppression through political solidarity, activism and collaboration (Figures 3, 4 and 5).

Reflections on the Collaboration

Our reflections on the production of the animation coalesced around a few key learnings:

1. Authorship and roles are messy in co-created projects

Working within the ethos of a collective (as we learned from Inty Grillos’ practices), allows for a more decentralised approach to role allocation. At the same time, dealing with the issue of who is ‘leading the narrative’ in co-produced creative work is complex, and sometimes different stages in the project call for more or less stringent roles. But in that messiness there is also a rich space for interdisciplinarity to be cultivated. Researchers can put on the hat of being an artist – and artists can pursue ethnography. We found that interdisciplinary work isn’t simply about having a diverse team, but also about each of us thinking in interdisciplinary ways within our own individual work. We also found that because of the multi-sensory nature of the medium, authorship could be shared across different elements within the story. For example, while the script was largely set by the testimony gathered in fieldwork done by the UNAL team, Inty Grillos fully led on the development of
the visuals, the colour palette and the sounds – all of which were informed by ethnographic research.

Still, there are tangible structural issues when co-producing within academic settings, and the desire to produce research-based work (i.e. outputs based directly on fieldwork), bring up its own challenges of sharing narrative ownership. The trick is to find the right balance between anonymising personal testimony, maintaining the integrity of the research findings and creating space for creative collaborators to cultivate shared ownership over the story. At times, these different considerations could be in tension with one another, so transparent conversations about this at the start would likely make this process less ambiguous while it’s unfolding.

In addition, attribution structures and practices need to be more conducive to collaborative working and co/shared authorship. Working closely with Inty Grillos and observing their collective approach to collaboration has encouraged us to think more critically about how we can work more collaboratively and in ways that are networked in order to reach the aims of different projects. Our partnership has also made us think more critically about how knowledge is produced, and the ways in which co-authorship is acknowledged in academic settings. For the creative outputs produced within this project, shared authorship is perhaps easier to articulate, as there are less stringent practices around attribution – indeed you will see a long list of collaborators and their roles in the end credits of the animation. Still, what’s left unsaid in credits demarcating the roles we played in this collaboration is the ways in which we all broke out of our roles, when artists became researchers and when academics were encouraged to work in a more creative capacity.

A greater openness to creative outputs that are inspired by or informed by academic research (rather than based on it in a more literal way), could lead to non-academics and creatives having more ownership over the narrative. Such a shift could take the academy a step further towards democratising the knowledge production process outside the walls of the university by putting more authorship in the hands of non-academics. Still, there is an inherent tension at play here, particularly if source material is primary research or direct testimony. To this we return to the guiding question: to whom does a story belong? We see no easy answers to this, but the co-created approach we took within this project helped us navigate it with our collaborators in ways that felt grounded (Figure 6).

2. Capacity building is often too narrowly understood in academic projects

While growing technical skills is a vital component of capacity building, the professional component of having such skills shouldn’t be overlooked. It is not simply enough to acquire skills, if they are not sufficiently supported by the practical knowledge of how to implement them in the context of lives and livelihoods. Still, it can be difficult to know what needs there are within a specific collaboration or project. For us, a more consistent dialogue around capacity-building practices within the creative team could have allowed for support in the pragmatic elements of creative production. This might look like an emphasis on the ‘practical aspects’ of capacity building, for example by facilitating workshops on budgeting, working as a professional artist and project management.

Additionally, the flow of funds from partners in the ‘Global North’ to partners in the ‘Global South’ means that capacity building is often portrayed as unidirectional. This problematic set up within academic research can be seen to reproduce some of the global power imbalances that lead to the very issues that are under study in these projects, at least in a broad and structural sense. This was something...
that the Drugs & (dis)order project was committed to challenging from the outset, which bore out in a number of working practices – not least in how we actually reported on the capacity building and impact within the project itself. This reframing from the consortium level nurtured an environment which allowed us to work in the way that we have, which was a space of mutual learning and complex skill-sharing. organisationally and individually, it is worth reiterating that through this co-production we learned an immense amount about working as a collective, communication and collaborating with grass-roots organisations in conflict-affected places. In doing so, we were also able to grow the capacity of a grass-roots arts collective by providing mentorship on animation, and sharing best practices around working with research and collaborating with academics.

3. Creative production can build trust, which can act as a foundation for future collaborations

Our top key learning had to be around trust as a point of entry into this work; there was no word that we uttered more in our team meetings, production workshops or emails. In a multilingual setting such as this project, direct and consistent communication can be difficult to sustain – this is especially so in conflict-affected places where access to technology or telecommunications may be inconsistent. Working on a mutual project where each partner and individual has their own stake in the work can cultivate a space of collaborative learning, comradery and energy to create meaningful work together. Our initial successful creative production formed the basis upon which subsequent collaborations could flourish. In retrospect, it’s clear that each project and each step within the production process was a building block for us to build mutual trust.

Closing Thoughts

This article has focused on the internal and relational impacts that co-production has had on collaborators, but it’s also worth noting that this work will hopefully have audience-related impacts as well, many of which are still to be borne out as the animation makes its way out into the world. As with tracing the impacts of the piece on the co-creators themselves, understanding its impact on audiences and viewers is another messy task, but one worth critically engaging with. While quantifying views and reach is important in tracking who is interacting with the story and ultimately the research, understanding how it’s contributing to broader narrative change around conflict and peace is perhaps even more difficult to analyse. Such a challenge adds further weight to more consistent and transparent reflections on learnings from those involved in such work.

Like creative production itself, there were many more reflections that didn’t make it into this write up – ideas left on the cutting room floor. And, also like in the production process, we’ll carry those with us into our future work, even if they aren’t fully tangible or articulated as of yet. The nature of novel, interdisciplinary collaborations often produces outcomes or impacts that are difficult to distil. I’ve tried to surface some of our own key learnings in this collaboration, but if there is anything this project has taught us, it’s that ‘impact’ and ‘capacity building’ are both rarely defined and even

Figure 6: Screenshot from a storyboard meeting with the production team
more difficult to ‘evidence’ – and, still, academic incentive structures often perpetuate narrow conceptions of each, to the effect of ignoring immense impacts which are relational and methodological in nature. Though such insights are perhaps more difficult to characterise, reflexivity is a useful starting point and guiding practice in doing so.

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Notes

2 positivenegatives.org (accessed 6 April 2022).
3 drugs-and-disorder.org (accessed 6 April 2022).
4 All of the published creative work that we produced as part of the Drugs & (dis)order project can be found at positivenegatives.org/story/drugs-and-disorder/ (accessed 6 April 2022).

Works Cited