



Tips for cultural organisations considering collaborating with academic partners.

Case Study: Grid Iron (collaborating with the University of Edinburgh and Edinburgh Napier University)

Background

Leaving Planet Earth is a multi-layered transmedia theatre project produced by [Grid Iron](#), culminating in a live, site-responsive theatre production rich in technologies at the magnificent Edinburgh International Climbing Arena. The live production, scheduled for inclusion in one of Edinburgh's major summer 2013 festivals, will be preceded by an online, interactive project using social media platforms to expand audience, and engage them in the creation of theatrical narrative in a brand new way. With a lack of in-house technology and digital expertise, Grid Iron have developed collaborative relationships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to ensure they can develop the show with the most reliable but cutting edge technologies.

There is huge value to the cultural and heritage sectors in working with academics, but it is an under utilised opportunity. Universities in Scotland are funded by the Scottish Funding Council to collaborate and develop collective intelligence with businesses through sharing knowledge, expertise and research facilities. For cultural organisations, working with Higher Education Institutions can provide access to the latest research and development methodologies; academics and students; and other university resources - at no cost to them¹.

Grid Iron have shared their journey of planning and developing **Leaving Planet Earth** with the [Federation of Scottish Theatre's](#) Digital Action Research Group: the focus of their case study is not on the technologies chosen for inclusion in the show, but on the skills and capabilities needed to ensure an effective collaboration with HEIs.

How was the academic collaboration established, and how did the collaboration develop?



An existing relationship already existed between Grid Iron and the [University of Edinburgh's School of Informatics](#). Grid Iron started developing the relationship at the earliest stages of planning for Leaving Planet Earth in 2010/11, (long-term planning in terms of performing arts sector - for the academic sector, this same time frame is mid-term planning). Grid Iron recognised that they would need specialist advice on technologies, digital platforms, and support with creating digital content, so began discussions.

¹ Contact AmbiTion Scotland if you are interested in having a relationship with a Scottish university brokered. <http://getambition.com>



An additional new relationship with [Edinburgh Napier University's School of Arts & Creative Industries](#) came about through Hannah Rudman's introduction of them to the FST's Digital Action Research Group. Grid Iron have reflected that they may not have sought an additional relationship

with another institution left to their own devices, but recognise now that having two academic partners doubles the benefits.

Grid Iron's producer has taken the lead on setting up and attending regular meetings. The artistic direction of the show has remained the strict jurisdiction of Grid Iron, but the choices around what technologies to include in and enhance the show have been a collaborative decision. The relationship has not developed along the transactional lines of "You tell us what technologies you want and we'll provide it": Grid Iron do not know what the possibilities are, and so have needed to ask the questions "tell us what technologies you have got and what they can do?".

The academic technologists found dealing with the nature of a devised show and story in development quite difficult at the beginning - the script and action not yet being tied down added to their sense of not having enough constants/restraints/absolutes to make a good brief. However, once clarity was established around this being not a transactional discussion towards a brief, but rather a creative dialogue where choices about what technologies to include could still influence the details of the script and action, the relationships became easier.

Grid Iron hosted a collider day² at the suggestion of the academic partners - where academics went out to the climbing centre at Ratho to see the site of the show and some of the script in development played out. Grid Iron talked about the aims and objectives of the show, the director and scriptwriter were there. The walk round the site highlighted areas where some scenes might play out, and where site specific work presents challenges for the actors and audiences (e.g. in some areas, background noise could be heard; a traverse from one scene to the next up lots of stairs could take a long time for some audience members). The entire environment had to be

considered. The final part of the collider day was a round table meeting, and the reaction from the academics responding to the site visit was fascinating. Rather than seeing the challenges and problems of the site in relation to running technologies, these were simply seen as design constraints that solutions would need to overcome.

A broad range of developing, bleeding-edge, cutting-edge and established technologies have all been tabled by the academics and considered, but the most resilient against break-down, and accidental human destruction will be chosen for the show (probably those at the established



² A term from Edinburgh University's Informatics department, referring to cross-departmental knowledge sharing days they hold at the university to inform colleagues about latest research developments and work.

and cutting-edge of the spectrum) - practical pragmatics must be equally considered alongside showcasing the capabilities of the technologies. Again, lots of discussions have helped narrow down what these will be.

Grid Iron and the academics have spent time understanding each other's languages. Theatre terms, processes and shorthand have been defined, as have technical terms and processes. Grid Iron may well still say that they have been "devising ideas in rehearsal"



with the academics; and the academics may well reflect that they have been "rapid application prototyping" with Grid Iron - it is essentially the same activity and process! As well as understanding each other's specialist terms, a common language has developed.

Key learnings

It is good to talk. Lots of meetings and frank and open discussions have created the successful collaboration.

Start talking early. Early knowledge allows the dramatic story to be constructed to reflect the technological and digital opportunities. Work together at the earliest opportunity as developing a strong collaboration will take time.

Constantly remind everyone that everything developed has to serve the story. Expectations will need managing! Where the show is now will not be where it ends up in performance - it will flow and change and develop as rehearsals progress - and this will need constantly communicating. (This of special relevance to devised shows).

Understand each other's processes and language. Devised theatre and rapid prototyping might not mean much to those not in the sectors where the terms are common.

Key players must be at all meetings. When there are lots of different people from the collaborating organisations inputting work into the project, ensure there is a lead at each organisation making sure nobody is going off on a tangent, and ensure that those lead contacts are at all meetings of the collaboration.

Be open about the budget. Budget is a significant design restraint in relation to technologies. A range of solutions will need to be mapped out, to fit a range of budgets. Timescales around fundraising also need to be shared: it is no good depending on a last minute grant to ensure a certain technology's inclusion if that technology has a lead-in time to get it ready of six months!

Have an open mind to all ideas. Academic institutions brought on board early in this process have been able to influence and enhance the developing script and narrative. Brainstorming sessions have been fruitful on both sides. It has been important to learn to keep an open mind to all ideas.



What are the benefits of collaborating with academics to the cultural organisation?

A whole world of digital and technical possibilities opened up, and can be translated into something deliverable and tangible.

A definite sense that this will be an ongoing relationship, not just a one-off for this specific project, because the collaborators will always share a common desire to explore, innovate and to provide practical opportunities.

What are the benefits to the academic partners of working with a cultural organisation?

Collaboration is at the heart of what a University is all about. At Napier for example, there are professionals in a number of key areas: TV, graphic design, lighting design, digital content, multimedia, and this is a project that can pull all of those skills together into a compelling creative mix. It is also a great opportunity for a University to reach out into the community and engage with other cultural organisations and institutions. This may develop into other partnerships and projects in the future. There might also be opportunities for creative students to get involved in some areas and enhance their learning through this project.

What are the implications for the cultural partner of working with academics?

Some creative control does have to be relinquished. Not around the point of the story, nor any of the key artistic decisions around direction and casting, but around the realisation of the aspects of the show where technologies are involved.

What are the implications for the academics of working with a cultural organisation?

Edinburgh Napier University is full of eager, creative people who will gain a great deal individually from working with such an innovative organisation like Grid Iron Theatre. The project offers scope for professionals to develop and enhance their creative talents. It also enables people to meet and collaborate with others on a very interesting project. Inevitably, then, new partnerships will be formed and new skills developed.

Further Reading

[AmbITion Scotland's case study and webcast](#) of Jupiter Artland's project in collaboration with Edinburgh Napier University.



[AmbITion Scotland's brokering service](#) - get introduced to Higher Education Institutions in Scotland from whom cultural organisations could receive support, and develop innovation and research and development projects.

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with Judith Doherty, Grid Iron; and James Blake, Edinburgh Napier University's School of Arts & Creative Industries.

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