

Arts-Based Research: an introduction to creative approaches

This guide gives an overview of some of the key elements and principles of arts-based research. It will explain the value of creative approaches in research, how and when it might be useful, and what it might look like in practice.

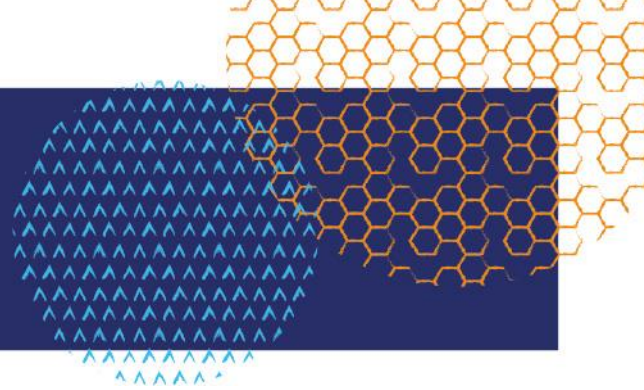
What is Arts-Based Research?

Arts-based research uses creative activities to carry out research interventions. **In arts-based research, we think of creative activities as tools for doing the research itself**, rather than solely being used to communicate our research or engage people with it. This might include using creative methods to encourage discussion on research questions, to generate data, or even to analyse the data we produce.

Examples of arts-based research can vary widely, depending on the type of art, how it is being used, and the stage(s) of the research cycle where it is being used .

How is it 'Research'?

At Imperial, we understand (University) research to be original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding for the public benefit. We might think of research as a process of repeatedly returning to an aspect of



the world that we pay close attention to and ask questions about. This definition can include both scientific and creative approaches to research. Both art and science can be revealing of different aspects our world, human experience, and deepen of our understanding of both.

Creative methods can enrich scientific approaches by identifying new and complex questions. It can be provocative in a way that can invite us to form new perspectives as well as identify new problems.

Arts-based research does not seek to replace a scientific approach but can complement it. It enables exploration of themes and issues that might otherwise be limited by more traditional approaches and can facilitate participation from groups traditionally excluded from scientific research. **This can be a useful, fun, and engaging way of collecting qualitative data from research participants or involving the public in your research using participatory approaches, particularly if your research deals with controversial or sensitive topics.**

When is it research and when is it engagement?

We can decide whether an activity is research by asking if it is being used to create new knowledge. **Research** furthers our knowledge, identifying something new that no one has discovered before. When **engaging** the public with research, creative approaches might be used to encourage a deeper understanding of the research, but not to generate new knowledge.

Below we will explore how arts-based research- extends beyond this approach to other stages of a research cycle.

The Value of an Arts-Based Approach

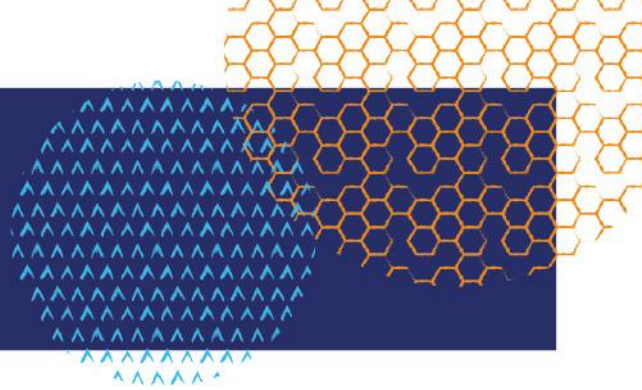
One of the crucial factors that distinguishes arts-based research from art practice with no research element is that the creative methods are used with the intention of creating new knowledge. This tends to mean exploring problems and questions or generating insights through creative practices to...

Encourage participation from a range of people

- Creative activities are playful in nature and can accommodate lived experience alongside academic expertise.
- Because of this, creative approaches can be useful for generating stories from multiple perspectives about an issue, place or community.
- Therefore, using creative activities can be an accessible and inclusive way to collaborate with a diverse range of public participants as part of a research process.

Arts-based approaches can be used within public engagement, to:

- Increase public awareness of the research
- Create opportunities for dialogue and debate around topics explored in the research
- Make research more accessible to a wider audience
- Help people engage emotionally with research content
- Create inspiring, thought-provoking artworks about the research that help raise the profile of the project or institution
- Translate the research into new and innovative forms that can be used to help influence policy and practice



To raise questions.

- Art can be striking in a way that helps us see things in new and surprising ways.
- Because of this, creative processes can challenge accepted knowledge and reveal the messiness of an issue.
- Therefore, art can generate questions and problems that can identify new avenues of research.

To produce knowledge.

- Creative methods can produce knowledge that is harder to reach through more traditional approaches, e.g. types of knowledge that are emotional, cultural, or based in lived experience.
- Because of this, using creative practices to generate, analyse and engage with data can offer ways to share different forms of knowledge or to explore the same issue from multiple perspectives.
- Therefore, insights can be revealed through the act of creating something that might not be revealed through more traditional methods.



Photo: participants share drawings and maps as part of a project to creatively map feelings about flood risk in coastal communities (copyright Hannah Mumby 2024)



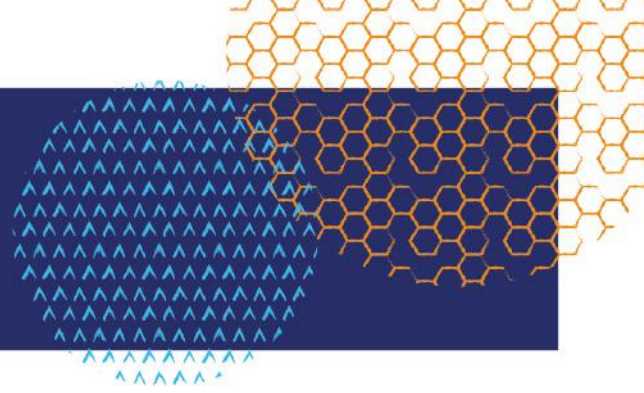
How to use arts-based research

Arts-based approaches can be used at various stages of a research project. In the following section we give examples of real projects that have used arts-based approaches at different stages of a research cycle.

Identifying problems and developing ideas

In their paper '[Broadening diversity through creative involvement to identify research priorities](#)', Tierney et al. outline how they use art-based methods to involve the public in brainstorming research questions and planning how they would be answered.

The project targeted groups who experience barriers in engaging with health research. This included people with dementia, mental and physical health conditions, and people of South Asian Heritage. They ran three workshops where participants discussed their experiences of health research with researchers and a local artist.



These discussions were used to create three visual art pieces that reflected the participants' research priorities. The artworks were then used to stimulate discussion beyond the group, where they were shared on social media and presented in person.

These activities allowed the researchers to discover what mattered most to the groups affected by their areas of work. In their feedback, participants said that the use of art made them feel as though their voices had been heard and sparked their interest in how research is planned and delivered.

Gathering and analysing data

Some studies use creative approaches to generate data. [This paper from Rivard et al.](#) explains how they used photography techniques to gather and interpret data with cancer survivors.

As part of the study, patients were asked to take photographs that showed aspects of life that have been challenging to deal with since undergoing treatment. These photographs were then used as prompts and discussed during semi-structured qualitative interviews exploring participants' lived experiences after treatment.

Researchers reflected that using photography was particularly valuable in that it allowed participants to self-select meaningful images, rather than the research team assigning importance based on their own interests or existing literature. In this sense, participants have more control over the topics covered during the interviews and, in exploring the meaning of the photographs with the research team, how the data is interpreted.

Writing up findings

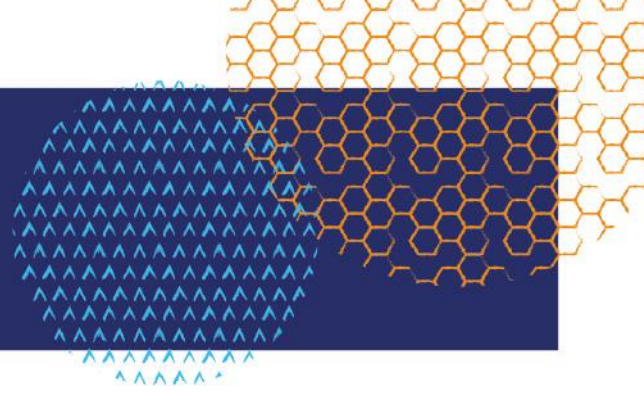
The '[Unearth Hidden Assets](#)' project brought together an academic partner, a health-based organisation, a local theatre and members of the local community in a series of co-design activities. The project used art-based approaches such as installation building and creative writing exercises such as poetry to cooperatively frame and carry out design tasks.

The poems were included in academic journal articles co-authored by both the academic researchers and some of the non-academic partners. As with the use of photography above, the creative writing exercises allowed the participants to be more involved in creating meaning from the data produced by/about them.

The project team reflected that one of the key challenges was finding a shared language between partners. For example, the language of researchers was often perceived as 'too academic', while some of the expressions used by non-academics were perceived as 'fluffy'. Here, creative approaches enabled multiple ways of expressing ideas and knowledge and ultimately provided the space for participants to discover connections as well as conflicts between different ways of thinking and knowing.

Sharing knowledge and building impact

The '[Decommissioning the Twentieth Century](#)' project used art-based activities to co-produce research into industrial decommissioning policy with three affected communities. Community participants engaged in the co-creation of artistic outputs such as a film, animations, and visual artworks using collage. The artworks were inspired by a series of workshops and interviews which generated insights and contributed to data collection. The artworks were also used at later stages of the research cycle as part of engaging the public through screenings and exhibitions.



Here the artworks were produced while generating research data. But they later served as fun and novel ways of engaging key stakeholders with the research. Here, we can see how arts-based approaches help to embed engagement into an entire project. Researchers reflected that the artworks, produced at earlier stages of the research, became central to raising awareness of their work and creating impact on local public engagement policy.

Using art-based research well

We have seen that art-based practices have a range of applications for research. It is important not to see these approaches as a 'soft' or easy option. Creative practice requires specialised skill, combined with focused intention, and can present challenges.

What are the challenges?

Arts-based research presents its own set of challenges. It is important that these challenges are considered when planning the research activity to ensure that everyone benefits from the process. Below are some of the challenges to consider when using an art-based approach.

1 Designing and implementing your activity

As with any method, it is important to consider whether an arts-based approach is appropriate for the research you want to do, as well as for the participants you would like to work with.

The interpretation of art can be subjective, based in specific cultural contexts and individual perspectives, or require specialist training and expertise. For these reasons, it is important to **consider designing your research to allow for more participatory approaches** rather than attempting to apply an arts-based method as part of a more traditional approach to qualitative data collection. Collaborating in a more embedded, long-term way with participants will better enable you to interpret meaning from your artistic outputs and minimise the risk of misinterpretation.

2 Time and resources

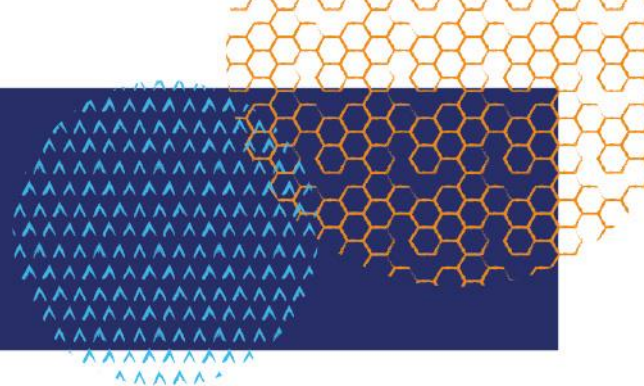
Using art-based approaches can take more time and resource than a traditional research method. The artworks have to be created, usually in collaboration with participants. This all requires access to materials and often working with external practitioners.

If you plan on using arts-based approaches for a project, **ensure that sufficient time is set aside with participants and that resources to work with external arts practitioners are built into your budget!**

3 Ethical considerations

As with any research project, considering the ethical implications of using art-based approaches is of central importance. Some considerations include determining who will own the artwork produced, how anonymity will be maintained if using film/photography, and if you are using art to explore sensitive or controversial subject matter.

Here, as is true of all research, **it is important that everyone engaged in the process has received clear information about what taking part will entail and have given their informed consent to participate.** This consent process might include clarifying that participants own their individual artworks but that you as a researcher will have access to a copy of them for analysis purposes, that film and photography should not include any images of people or personal information like house numbers or license plates, it may also signpost to available support if any of the subject matter is upsetting.



Collaborating with artists and creative facilitators

The best way to conduct successful arts-based research is to **collaborate** from the beginning with artists and creative facilitators who have an established practice, sharing and utilising each other's ideas, opinions, and voice on a project.



In their [guidance on collaboration with artists](#), the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement provide some indicators for healthy collaboration. These include:

Equality - acknowledging experience and creativity on both sides.

Open mindedness - being prepared to change and adapt in response to each other.

Mutual trust and respect – a safe environment for experimentation and discussion.

Art is a valuable method for exploring knowledge and experience as it provokes questions and challenges the assumptions we often take for granted about the world. This can offer ways to explore the problems that we explore in research in greater depth and lead us into uncharted territory. The opportunity this offers can be one of innovation, insight and discovery.

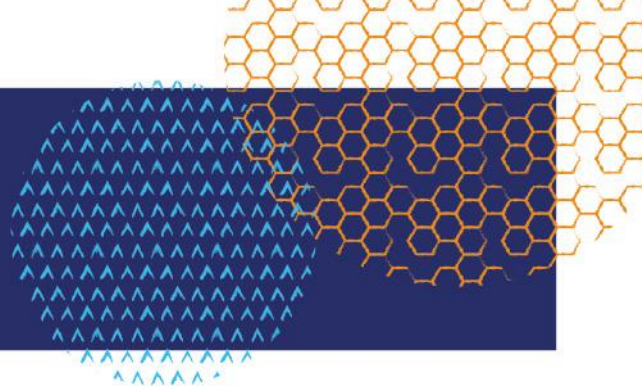
Resources and Further Reading

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