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DOTS knowledge exchange: Designing Open Third Spaces for equitable collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the DOTS framework, Designing Open Third Spaces, a practice-informed model for equitable knowledge exchange across academic, cultural, and community contexts. Developed over five years, DOTS offers transferable insights for international practitioners working across institutional and disciplinary boundaries. The framework is grounded in theories of learning, co-design, and relational practice, and structures collaborative work through three core modes: assembling, leading, and mediating. Drawing on four case studies, including oral history, performance-based co-creation, and intergenerational arts programming, the paper illustrates how DOTS helps partners navigate power dynamics, shared authorship, and hold complexity in culturally grounded ways. The paper concludes with a set of adaptable principles designed to inform cultural policy and practice in diverse international settings. As higher education, arts, and civic sectors increasingly prioritise collaboration and inclusion, DOTS provides a critical and practical framework for designing equitable, ethical partnerships that respond to local needs while addressing global challenges.

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1. Introduction

This paper shares the principles behind the DOTS Equitable Knowledge Exchange framework, which has grown out of five years of community-engaged work between university researchers, cultural practitioners, and grassroots leaders. DOTS, short for *Designing Open Third Spaces*, offers a way to think through how collaborative projects are started, negotiated, and sustained when people from different institutions, disciplines, and lived experiences come together.

The work builds on earlier collaborations which have been separately reflected on including *Becoming Civic Centred* (T. Ellis et al. 2020) and *Let Our Legacy Continue* (Hockham et al. 2022) and continues to evolve through our collaborative practices. In our earlier work, we defined *Open Third Space* (T. Ellis et al. 2020) as a space where

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performance and dialogue intersect to challenge traditional power structures and promote participatory creativity. In DOTS, we expand this idea by integrating spatial, material, and relational insights to support ethical, dynamic collaborations that operate across institutional and community boundaries.

DOTS helps visualise and structure what collaboration looks like in practice. It draws attention to how projects are formed: who initiates them, how power and responsibility are distributed, what kinds of relationships and rhythms develop, and how outcomes are negotiated along the way. The framework isn't designed to simplify complexity. Instead, it offers a way to notice it, to make visible the invisible dynamics that shape co-produced work, particularly where there are imbalances in status, funding, or access.

This article traces the emergence of DOTS across four projects, each shaped by their own contexts and constraints. We outline the framework's theoretical roots, show how its core concepts of assembling, leading and mediating were shaped by experience, and propose a set of principles that others can adapt to their own work. The goal here is practical: to offer a flexible framework that supports thoughtful, equitable partnerships between people working across boundaries of sector, community and culture, no matter where they are based, or what their role.

This paper addresses the question: How can equitable, cross-sector collaborations be consciously designed and sustained across institutional and community boundaries? It contributes a novel, practice-grounded framework – DOTS – that builds on and extends the concept of Open Third Space, integrating spatial, material, and relational theory to offer guiding principles for ethical, decolonial knowledge exchange.

2. Literature and theoretical influences

The DOTS framework offers a new model for collaborative design that brings together and operationalises existing ideas from across disciplines. It emerges from reflective, community-engaged practice and integrates concepts from performance studies, education, sociology, geography, and design. By aligning socio-material, socio-spatial, and relational insights, DOTS proposes a holistic way of thinking and doing, one that supports equitable collaboration across different types of stakeholders. Rather than applying theory to practice in a linear fashion, DOTS has developed as an applied conceptual model that foregrounds how collaborations are initiated, sustained, and rendered meaningful through practice. In doing so, it draws attention to the relational, spatial, and material conditions that shape collaborative knowledge work. This section outlines the key conceptual foundations that inform DOTS before showing how the framework has evolved in practice through community-partnered projects.

At the heart of DOTS is the concept of Learning Scenographics (Hockham 2022), which explores how social and material components combine to build shared educational or project-based worlds. The term 'scenographic' originates in performance studies, but its relevance extends well beyond theatre. Scenography refers to the spatial, material, and atmospheric dimensions through which performance worlds are built. Rather than simply decorating a stage, scenography attends to how environments are composed, felt, and navigated; shaping the conditions through which meaning can emerge (Hann 2019). In the context of DOTS, Learning Scenographics provides a lens to understand

how people arrange space, time, materials, and relationships to support collective modes of activity and learn to inhabit these shared environments.

If Learning Scenographics offers insight into the textured composition of learning environments, then the spatial concepts of Open Space and Third Space help locate these environments politically and relationally. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (1986) Open Space arises from post-colonial community theatre in Kenya, where performance was used to reclaim cultural voice against top-down narratives. His work emphasises co-creation, participation, and the redistribution of narrative authority. Likewise, Oldenburg's (1997) Third Space describes informal public environments, such as cafés and parks, where community members come together to foster dialogue and belonging. Together, these spatial frameworks provide the roots for DOTS as a liminal space between institutions and the communities with which they intersect where new forms of collective work can emerge. This was first explored conceptually in earlier work (T. Ellis et al. 2020).

Alongside spatial thinking, DOTS is deeply informed by practice theory. Dreier (1999, 2008) introduces the idea of personal trajectories, recognising that individuals move through a nexus of social practices while carrying situated knowledge with them. This concept helped us articulate how community partners contribute deep, localised, and situated expertise across multiple project contexts. We aligned this with the notion of trans-situated expertise (Hockham et al. 2022; Nicolini, Mork, and Hanseth 2017), which describes how diverse expertise is called upon in specific contexts. In our work, this includes lived experience as a form of situated knowledge mobilised to solve complex, real-world challenges.

Building on these insights, we draw on Gherardi's concept of Practices of Communities (Gherardi 2009, 2012). Rather than viewing community as a unified or stable group focused on a single task, as in the Communities of Practice model (Lave and Wenger 1991), Gherardi demonstrates that communities are composed of heterogeneous, interrelated practices working towards multiple, interwoven outcomes. In DOTS, this framing allows us to understand collaboration as sustained not through uniformity but through the interplay of diverse practices that coalesce around shared goals, values, or concerns.

We foreground the emotional and ethical dimensions of collaboration by engaging with Gottlieb's (2024) notion of relational sensitivity, which describes the importance of openness, reflexivity, and the capacity to negotiate power in participatory work. This dovetails with the work of Finlay (2005) on empathy, who describes three interrelated phases: *connecting-of*, *acting-into*, and *merging-with*. These phases describe how individuals become attuned to one another and share in the collective process of meaning-making. This aligns directly with the three modes of collaborative activity inherent in DOTS: assembling, leading, and mediating.

These ideas resonate with a broader movement in design research that foregrounds ethics, reflexivity, and situated practice. Across this work, we see a shared emphasis on relational depth, humility, and care. For example, St John and Akama (2022) describe *co-design on Country*, a term rooted in Australian Indigenous contexts in which design takes place in relationship with Aboriginal land, knowledge systems, and protocols. Here, *Country* is not a neutral backdrop but a living presence, shaping the values, ethics, and tempo of collaborative work. Similarly, Tjahja and Yee (2022) advocate for sociable design, centring emotional and interpersonal dimensions as core to co-creation. Steen

(2013) complements these perspectives by identifying curiosity, cooperation, empowerment, and reflexivity as foundational virtues in participatory practice. These writers speak not only to technique but to a mode of being, a position that aligns closely with DOTS as a living, relational framework. This is particularly significant when working with historically marginalised communities. Barcham (2021) highlights the value of radically inclusive design grounded in Indigenous storytelling practices, underscoring the need for attentiveness to difference and for researchers to act with responsiveness and care. These insights strengthen our own approach to relational sensitivity, reminding us that equitable collaboration is not guaranteed by principle alone, it must be sustained through ongoing reflection, accountability, and the ability to sit with discomfort.

Taken together, these theoretical influences do not stand apart as a list of ideas but interweave to form the scaffold for DOTS as an integrated model. Learning Scenographics shows how social and material worlds are composed; Open Space and Third Space reframe the location and politics of these collaborations; practice theory foregrounds personal and collective expertise across contexts; and relational sensitivity and empathy shed light on the affective work required for authentic collaboration. DOTS emerges from the interplay between these perspectives, a spatial, material, relational, and practice-led approach that underpins equitable, ethical collaboration.

3. Methodology

The DOTS framework has emerged over a five-year period through iterative cycles of project-based collaboration, critical reflection, and situated learning. It is grounded in the lived experiences of those involved and was shaped not by a single research question or traditional study design but by the cumulative affects of working relationally across diverse institutional, community, and artistic contexts. In this sense, our methodology resonates with what Burnard et al. (2022) describe as a *rebellious* approach to research, one that defies prescriptive planning in favour of responsiveness, shared authorship, and an openness to uncertainty.

Rather than starting with a fixed hypothesis, the DOTS framework evolved through a series of collaborations where ideas, practices, and values were negotiated in real time. This process aligns closely with the Build – Measure – Learn cycle described by Ries (2009) in *The Lean Startup*. In that model, innovation emerges through action: you build an initiative, measure what matters, and then extract learning from the results. This iterative rhythm resonated deeply with our community collaborators, whose work is grounded in intuition, responsiveness, and lived experience, and who are often entrepreneurs themselves. This orientation reflects a broader shift towards participatory forms of collaboration in university-community work, where power is redistributed and all partners are recognised as knowledge holders (Facer and Enright 2016; Petrella, Yee, and Clarke 2020). Working across difference also requires reflexivity: we were constantly negotiating assumptions, positionalities, and institutional constraints. These negotiations echo Easterby-Smith and Malina's (1999) call for cross-cultural research to centre reflexive practice and acknowledge the partiality of academic perspectives.

Over the course of multiple projects, we refined our process by integrating critical insights from performance studies, sociology, and human geography. Theory did not precede practice; rather, it emerged from it. Reflections produced in co-authored

publications, internal evaluations, and informal debriefs gradually contributed to the articulation of the DOTS framework: a set of patterns, insights, and principles arising from collaborative doing rather than abstract speculation. A central tenet of our methodology was relationality. Rather than extracting data from participants, knowledge was co-constructed in the shared spaces of activity. Our approach drew on principles from co-design, critical pedagogy, and decolonial practice, which collectively emphasise that lived experience is a crucial source of expertise. Co-design requires a state of readiness, a shared willingness to engage despite ambiguity, which Akama and Light (2018) describe as a form of situated poise. This readiness shaped how we approached uncertainty and difference and enabled us to create work that was both situated and responsive. Our methodological process resonated with Haki'so and Mattelmäki (2019) awareness-based co-creation model, which foregrounds relationships, values, and collaborative rhythms in design work. They emphasise situational awareness aligning to our ethics and responsiveness of co-design across our projects. As researchers who were also participants in the work, we recognise that our roles were embedded, not observational. Our methodology therefore echoes traditions of collaborative and autoethnographic research (C. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011), where insights emerge from within the doing, and the boundary between researcher and practitioner is intentionally blurred. This positioning allowed us to speak with, not about, the communities we were working alongside.

Our work took place across iterative cycles of practice, an established design-based and practice-led codesign approach (Candy and Edmonds 2018). Across these cycles, knowledge is generated through iterative, situated creation. Our model was built by reflecting at each stage, recognising themes and patterns. This methodological stance enabled us to notice recurring dynamics and scaffold a framework that is both flexible and grounded in lived experience. We also drew on situated learning theory (Lave and Wenger 1991), which frames knowledge as relational and embedded in social practice. In our case, learning happened not through instruction but through participation in a shared world of doing, co-building projects alongside others, and learning through the rhythms of collaboration. Simultaneously, our approach was attuned to the physical and social environments in which collaboration occurred. We paid careful attention to questions such as: Who has access to particular spaces? What historical relationships or exclusions shape participation? How do material arrangements influence power dynamics? These questions, often sidelined in conventional research, became central in our analysis of how equitable collaboration unfolds.

Finally, we treat the production of this article as an enactment of the DOTS approach. Its co-authorship reflects the cross-positional partnerships that DOTS seeks to nurture; its narrative mirrors the shift from situated practice to collective insight; and its framing evidences our commitment to both rigorous analysis and transformative practice. In line with Walsh's (2002) reflections on effective university-community collaborations, DOTS reminds us that success depends not only on content but also on how we work together, through trust, responsiveness, and shared purpose.

Throughout this article, we draw on thick description as a methodological tool, both to evoke the atmosphere and rhythm of each project and to convey the complex social dynamics that shaped them. As Ponterotto (2006) notes, thick description in qualitative research is not simply about detail but about embedding participants' voices, actions, and

contexts within broader cultural and interpretive frames. For Tracy (2010), it is also a marker of quality, demonstrating depth, resonance, and the capacity to transport the reader into the lived world of the research. In our case, thick description enables us to show how scenographic, relational, and affective elements converged in practice, not just what happened, but how it felt, and why it mattered.

4. The DOTS framework

The DOTS framework, *Designing Open Third Spaces*, offers a way of structuring and understanding equitable collaboration across diverse communities, institutions, and cultural contexts. It builds on the foundational concept of Open Third Space (T. Ellis et al. 2020), which originally emerged as a way of challenging conventional hierarchies by enabling community members to co-create meaningful cultural work with larger institutions. DOTS expands on this idea by integrating spatial, material, and relational insights to support ethical co-design and dynamic collaboration.

At its core, DOTS recognises that collaborations are contextually situated, emerging from specific social, cultural, and institutional landscapes. Whether bridging universities and grassroots organisations or uniting artists, academics, and public stakeholders, the challenge lies not merely in gathering participants but in co-creating the conditions for equitable work. DOTS therefore provides a vocabulary to speak to and harness underlying power dynamics.

The framework is structured around **three modes of collaborative activity**: *assembling*, *leading*, and *mediating*. These align with the phases of empathy articulated by Finlay (2005): *connecting-of*, *acting-into*, and *merging-with*. These modes describe the varied ways individuals and groups contribute to collective work and navigate shifting relationships and responsibilities.

- **Assembling** involves bringing together diverse resources, people, and ideas in an open, flexible space. It is the stage of initial connection and mutual recognition.
- **Leading** is not about top-down control but underscores the importance of community-driven direction and shared responsibility. Here, leadership is enacted in context through ethical collaboration that values local expertise and lived experience.
- **Mediating** speaks to the facilitation of dialogue and creative exchange across different stakeholders. It supports communication and negotiation to foster conditions collective understanding and support collaborative ideas.

We propose these modes are not static roles but practices that shift and evolve throughout a project. Whilst each mode emerged from individual case studies, in operationalising these modes we envisage an individual moving fluidly between assembling, leading, and mediating depending on the stage of the work or the needs of the group. The flexibility of these roles reflects the improvisational and affective labour involved in co-design (Hochschild 1983), where care, attention, and emotional nuance are central to navigating complexity.

DOTS is also a metaphor: it reminds us that every project comprises discrete yet interconnected components, people, relationships, institutions, and ideas, that must be

intentionally joined. When we ‘join the dots’, we create a multi-dimensional picture of collaboration that captures not only its structural aspects but also its affective and material dimensions. This framework thus provides a means both to see and to shape equitable collaborative practices.

Crucially, DOTS is not presented as a one-size-fits-all model. It is a tool for reflection, a flexible scaffold, and a relational prompt. It draws from our own experiences of situated, practice-led research (Candy and Edmonds 2018), and invites others to build their own frameworks in context. By offering DOTS as both concept and action, we aim to support others in designing collaborations that are sensitive to power, place, and people and to the messiness that sits between them.

5. Case studies: applying DOTS in practice

This next section speak to a number of case studies framed around three modes: assembling, leading and mediating

5.1. Assembling: what about us – empowering community voices

What About Us (2019) was a community outreach project designed to bring together a university with local people, developed to support dialogue through creative exchange. It provided an opportunity and access point for a range of diverse communities to come together. In this paper, we recognise this as a process of assemblage where different organisations can be brought together united by shared concerns and overlapping values supporting collaboration.

The programme began with a coffee and cake meeting attended by over 40 individuals including: community leaders, councillors, university staff, and partner organisations. This informal gathering laid the groundwork for trust and exchange. Participants shared details of existing projects, brainstormed future initiatives, and identified key social needs. The early stages of the project established a broad vision: to support sustainable arts activity, enhance community engagement with academic research, foster new learning opportunities, and build connections between university students and local people.

Over the following eight weeks, the programme convened 16 Saturday workshops. These sessions included:

- Music and singing workshops led by Galeforce Productions Universal Ltd.
- Spoken word and rap workshops facilitated by Tatiana Ellis (aka Q-Tee) of the ROMEL Foundation.
- Communal lunches that served as informal spaces for reflection and intergenerational exchange.

Onboarding data indicated that about 50% of attendees had experienced domestic abuse or violence, with a significant proportion being Black African women aged 30–40. The sessions created opportunities for expression, healing, and creative practice, supported by accessible amenities (including halal, vegan, and gluten-free food options). The provision of university theatre space, coupled with support from Dead Rabbits Theatre for technical and workshop support, was critical in establishing a collaborative atmosphere.

Each organisation maintained its autonomy throughout the project, with workshops being independently designed while the programme as a whole fostered cross-organisational learning. These interactions illustrate the early phase of what Finlay (2005) calls *connecting-of*: an initial attunement to different ways of working and being.

The final public event featured original spoken word, group music, a solo performance by a student, and the debut of a new song composed by a participant's child. Themes of identity, struggle, and resilience emerged naturally. We argue that, by inviting and supporting diverse collaboration through projects such as this, lays the foundation for deeper, subsequent collaboration. These informal, relational structures describe as the invisible work of emotional scaffolding, holding space for others, navigating cultural expectations, and allowing the group to roll forward through moments of discomfort and ambiguity (Hochschild 1983)

It also demonstrates how relational learning unfolds over time. Rather than delivering pre-set outcomes, the programme generated new forms of insight through co-presence, practice, and situated dialogue. This reflects what Lave and Wenger (1991) describe as *legitimate peripheral participation*, where learning occurs not through formal instruction but through participation in evolving communities of practice. Within DOTS, assembling becomes a way to learn collaboratively, by doing, witnessing, and co-creating in real time.

5.2. Leading: Franklin and the Caribbean Social Forum

If assembling is about building the space for collaboration, the DOTS mode of leading focuses on how groups help shape that space. In this case, the leadership demonstrated by Pamela Franklin of the Caribbean Social Forum (CSF) reflects a collaborative and mutually agreed model. Rather than simply accepting institutional parameters, Franklin offered an alternative vision: one in which the CSF, with its 600-member network of Caribbean elders, would define its own terms of engagement.

Franklin responded to the university's initial invitation by saying, 'This is not what you can do for us; this is what we can do for you'. This statement, rather than positioning her group as outsiders, was an invitation for mutual partnership, asserting that community expertise should be recognised, valued, and actively integrated into project design. Franklin's approach underscored that leadership in this context emerges from a deep well of cultural capital and lived knowledge rather than formal title.

Based on her vision, Franklin and her network initiated a series of events that challenged traditional top-down collaboration. These events included:

- Windrush Day celebrations hosted jointly by the university and the Maritime Museum
- A Black History Month series at the Bathway Theatre
- A symposium on knife crime

Franklin's leadership was expressed not by imposing decisions but by ensuring that CSF's expectations and expertise were central to all negotiations. Her vision created conditions in which community members moved from being mere participants to becoming active co-designers of the project. This dynamic of *acting-into*, as described by Finlay (2005),

illustrates how leadership is enacted when stakeholders step into each other's roles and establish a shared, contextually grounded direction.

Franklin redefined the relationship between academic institutions and community groups, fostering a model where decision-making is shared and community expertise drives the agenda. This model, in which leadership is enacted in context rather than imposed top-down, represents a transformative approach that rebalances power and uplifts local knowledge. The role Franklin took on also highlights the emotional labour involved in ethical leadership. Her presence was not only strategic but deeply relational: holding space, navigating tensions, and nurturing participation with attentiveness and care. This kind of leadership is not easily captured in institutional metrics, but it is foundational to the creation of truly open third spaces. It echoes what Gottlieb (2024) calls *relational sensitivity*, and what Hochschild (1983) would recognise as the affective labour of keeping a community in motion.

The university, in turn, was required to respond flexibly. Timelines had to shift. Planning processes were adapted. Resources were negotiated in real time. This created tensions at points, but also enabled deeper, more meaningful engagement. As Barcham (2021) notes in the context of Indigenous co-design, radically inclusive practice requires responsiveness to community rhythms and priorities. Franklin's leadership model offered a live example of this, providing both a political and emotional site of what shared authorship might truly look like.

As with other aspects of DOTS, this case also challenged our own assumptions about what leadership looks like in co-created work. It invited us to consider not only who leads but how, when, and under what conditions. And it reminded us that shared leadership is not the absence of leadership, it is the presence of multiple, grounded, and culturally located ways of holding responsibility.

5.3. Mediating: Let Our Legacy Continue

If assembling invites co-presence and leading facilitates directional input, the third DOTS mode, mediating, focuses on how collaboration is held between people with different strengths, practices, and needs. Mediating is often carried out by artists, facilitators, or cultural practitioners who navigate the boundaries between groups. In *Let Our Legacy Continue*, mediation played a critical role in shaping multiple contributions into a cohesive shared outcome, drawing together differing voices, practices, and priorities into a single public-facing exhibition. The project began with an idea: to preserve and celebrate the stories of the Windrush Generation. Franklin brought this to the university in dialogue with Hockham and Reynolds, offering a vision rather than a finished plan. That invitation sparked a collaborative process in which the group: community members, artists, and university staff, negotiated what the project could become.

Artist facilitators were brought in not to 'lead' the work but to help hold it together. Their role was to mediate between different forms of contribution: oral histories, personal photographs, archival text, community context, and curatorial expectations. They listened, shaped, translated, and invited. In doing so, they built a shared visual and narrative language that could hold the complexity of what was being offered. This was not always easy. Community members brought different ideas about tone, emphasis, and

how their stories should be represented. The artists made space for these differences while guiding the group towards a coherent final outcome.

The resulting exhibition, mounted in the university gallery, combined photography, recorded testimony, installation, and archival material. It was designed collaboratively and curated with care, balancing institutional processes with community priorities. The presence of elders and their stories reframed the space. What was displayed was cultural memory, shared authorship, and lived narrative. Mediation here was not necessarily about solving problems, but about holding difference long enough for something shared to emerge. The artists drew connections and curated how stories might sit alongside others. As Finlay (2005) describes in her third phase of empathy, *merging-with*, this is the point at which boundaries soften and relational understanding begins to form. This project also highlighted the centrality of aesthetic judgement in co-design. The mediators had to make choices about image selection, sequencing, and presentation. These were not neutral acts. They required ethical and emotional labour, what Hochschild (1983) would call affective labour, in shaping how people's lives and memories were seen. In this sense, mediation was both creative and curatorial, requiring sensitivity not only to content but to context and consequence.

The university's role in this process was to host and to hold. Hockham and Reynolds acted as bridges between institutional requirements and community priorities, supporting the artists and maintaining momentum across partners. This labour was often invisible, but it was essential to keeping the collaboration intact and aligned. Mediation, in this case, moved across roles, artists, academics, elders: all participating in the act of translation, coherence-building, and narrative care. This aligns closely with design-based and practice-led research methodologies (Candy and Edmonds 2018), in which knowledge is not simply reported, but generated through iterative processes of making and reflection. *Let Our Legacy Continue* was not a project with predefined outputs; it was a process through which meaning was assembled, layer by layer, from a diversity of contributions.

This, ultimately, is what DOTS understands mediation to be: not a role, but a mode of practice: an attuned, generative, and often quiet labour of making things cohere without flattening them. It requires artistry, patience, and ethical attention. It is what enables a project like this to roll forward without losing the richness of what it was trying to hold.

5.4. Operationalising the framework: *grandma and the Rum Shop*

While previous examples illustrate how DOTS emerged from reflective practice, *Grandma and the Rum Shop* was our first attempt to consciously operationalise this learning. Here, DOTS was not only an interpretative lens but a design tool consciously embedded in every phase, from planning to performance. The project began when Franklin suggested that the rich life stories of Caribbean elders could be transformed into a live performance. Drawing from earlier successes and informed by DOTS principles, she proposed that the Caribbean Social Forum collaborate with Dead Rabbits Theatre and the university to create an innovative, co-designed event. Crucially, this project did not retroactively apply DOTS; it built with DOTS principles at its core.

During an open planning phase, all stakeholders engaged in co-developing a shared vision. Budgets, timelines, and roles were discussed transparently; each

contributor was assured equitable payment and ownership. The collaborative design emphasised flexibility: the final form of the performance was intentionally left open to allow the process itself to shape the outcome. This shared design structure reflected what we were beginning to call ‘designing open third spaces’, building from the base of DOTS, but allowing the form to emerge through relational and creative exchange. As with other projects, timelines and institutional rhythms had to flex to accommodate lived realities. Many of the elders were caregivers or managing health needs. The process required us to design with slowness, openness, and emotional presence at its centre.

The rehearsal process surfaced new challenges. While there was strong alignment around the project’s aims, different collaborators brought different working methods. McKenzie’s intuitive and character-driven writing practice sat in tension with Zaremba-Byrne’s ensemble-led devising process. These tensions were not unproductive, but they needed attention. Rather than rushing to resolve them, we paused. Hockham convened a facilitated meeting where the group named their frustrations, clarified needs, and reconnected to shared values. This moment, though brief, was pivotal. It echoed what Finlay (2005) describes as the second phase of empathy: *acting-into*, stepping into another’s position long enough to understand their frame of reference. Mediation here wasn’t performed by a single person but emerged through the group. The artists, the elders, the facilitators all contributed to re-aligning the work. This process was as much affective as structural: it involved acknowledging discomfort, adjusting pace, and listening to what remained unsaid. This was emotional labour in the truest sense, supporting not just the task, but the people within it (Hochschild 1983).

The resulting performance, *Grandma and the Rum Shop*, was staged at Tramshed Theatre. It blended spoken word, devised performance, and live storytelling. A rum shop was recreated on stage. Community members, professional actors, and musicians co-performed narratives that mixed history, memory, and contemporary reflection. The audience were given rum punch and greeted by cast members. The line between stage and life blurred. This was more than theatre, it was shared authorship in action. This project was markedly different from the ones before it. Previously, community members had been invited to share stories in carefully designed workshop settings, often facilitated by others and edited asynchronously. They were not required to learn lines, perform, or understand the technicalities of production. Their expertise lay in lived experience, which was shaped into a public form by others. Here, the ask was different. Community members were asked to co-devise and perform alongside professionals, in a process that required improvisation, repetition, and ensemble work. This presented both creative potential and practical challenge. Theatre is intensive. It requires people to be in the same room, at the same time, for long periods. For elders balancing caregiving, medical appointments, and life’s unpredictability, this was hard. Tensions arose around time, method, authorship, and voice. Collaborators brought different creative languages. There were moments of frustration, misalignment, and even vulnerability. But these were not failures of the process; they were the process. What DOTS offered was not a way to prevent tension, but a way to hold it. It helped us name where friction came from, notice the emotional weight it carried, and stay in the discomfort long enough to reach shared ground.

6. From framework to principles

The DOTS framework emerged from practice and was continually refined through the complexities of real-world collaboration. As we advanced through multiple projects, and particularly as we intentionally operationalised DOTS in *Grandma and the Rum Shop*, recurring patterns began to crystallise. These patterns have been synthesised into a set of working principles, designed not as rigid instructions but as provocations to support ethical and equitable knowledge exchange. These principles reflect both the successes and the challenges encountered. They draw on the theoretical scaffolding introduced earlier: Dreier's personal trajectories; Gherardi's Practices of Communities; Finlay's (2005) layers of empathy; Gottlieb's (2024) relational sensitivity; and the emotional labour of affective practice (Hochschild 1983), and translate these ideas into practical guidelines.

They are also grounded in practice-led, design-based traditions (Candy and Edmonds 2018), where insights emerge through process and reflection, not just planning. These principles are not designed to be universally applied. They're there to be interpreted, adapted, and shaped to suit local context. We offer them here as one possible scaffold, rooted in what we've learned so far.

Seven Principles for DOTS Equitable Knowledge Exchange Projects

(1) Shared Vision

All participants should have clarity about the project's purpose and intended outcomes. This principle does not require agreement on every detail, but it does require a common horizon towards which the group moves.

(2) Shared Plan

The project plan must be co-created, encompassing an understanding of time, people, spaces, and resources. Co-planning is itself a site of knowledge exchange where assumptions are surfaced and commitments are negotiated (Facer and Enright 2016).

(3) Shared Ways of Working

Ground rules for communication, decision-making, and role allocation should be established collaboratively. These agreements are expected to evolve over time as the project adapts to new challenges.

(4) Leveraging Strengths

Recognise that different stakeholders offer diverse forms of expertise and power. A successful project is designed to enable individuals to work to their strengths, while also redistributing institutional advantages (e.g. access to space, funding) in a way that supports community priorities.

(5) Transparent Negotiation of Roles

Clear and honest conversations about roles, responsibilities, and expectations are essential. This process includes allowing time for partners to build genuine relationships, thereby ensuring that trust, and not just institutional dictates, guides collaboration (Finlay 2005).

(6) Identifying and Addressing Conflicts

Potential conflicts or discrepancies (whether personal, political, or logistical) should be identified and openly discussed at the outset. This proactive approach

protects the collaborative process and creates a foundation for long-term engagement.

(7) Ongoing Monitoring and Flexibility

Collaboration is dynamic and must remain adaptive to changing conditions. Regular feedback, reflection, and renegotiation are integral to sustaining equitable practice.

These principles do not represent an endpoint but rather a starting point for the further development of a practical toolkit. They encapsulate the lessons learned from our experiences and serve as a guide for navigating the uncertainties of co-designed work. In DOTS, these principles are both descriptive and generative, providing a framework that informs practice while also inviting continuous refinement.

7. Discussion

Design, as a frame, expands the concept of Open Third space. In our work, design is a collaborative act which brings people into ideas at the beginning of work. As such we describe this as a practice of co-design, a term which, within the literature has overlapping and ‘slippery’ meanings (Branden and Honingh 2018). In our work, we consider Co-Design in similar ways to Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers (2014) definition of Co-Creation which speaks to the ways different groups of people ‘(co)-initiate’ projects’ (15) collaboratively drafting the ways in which projects evolve together. This differentiates them from the idea of ‘citizens as co-designer’, which they articulate as being concerned with the content of services and process of delivery or ‘co-production’ involved as co-implementor of public services (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2014).

While DOTS shares with existing co-design frameworks a commitment to participatory planning, shared authorship, and responsiveness, its emphasis differs in three key ways. First, DOTS explicitly integrates spatial, material, and relational theory into the design process, recognising that the arrangement of space, tools, and relationships actively shapes collaboration. Second, DOTS frames co-design through three shifting modes, assembling, leading, and mediating; rather than static roles, allowing collaborators to fluidly adapt their contribution over time. Finally, DOTS embeds affective and relational labour as core design concerns, attending to the emotional, cultural, and political work needed to sustain equitable partnerships. In this way, DOTS builds on the concept of Open Third Space by offering both a conceptual and practical scaffold for holding complexity across institutional – community boundaries.

We offer the work as a novel framework, with guiding principles that are grounded in practice, to support decolonial thinking and break down knowledge hierarchies. Through rich description, we have attested to the success and limitations of these principles when consciously applied for the first time. More work is needed in this area to understand how we might build systematic change in Higher Educations to ensure Co-Design, as methodology, supports true equitable knowledge exchange, benefitting all.

8. Conclusion

The DOTS framework was born in practice from years of collaborative engagement across universities, communities, and cultural organisations. It emerged as an innovative response to the challenge of designing equitable partnerships. It asks: How can equitable, cross-sector collaborations be consciously designed and sustained across institutional and community boundaries? This article has traced the evolution of DOTS, from its theoretical roots in Learning Scenographics (Hann 2019; Hockham 2022), Open Space (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986), Third Space (Oldenburg 1997), and practice theory (Dreier 1999; Gherardi 2009) to its affective dimensions (Finlay 2005; Gottlieb 2024; Hochschild 1983). We have demonstrated through case studies how the DOTS modes of assembling, leading, and mediating are enacted in real-world projects, and we have developed a set of guiding principles that articulate the framework's transformative potential.

At its core, DOTS challenges extractive models of collaboration by foregrounding trust, shared vision, and equitable participation. It articulates a process of world-building, one that is spatial (learning to inhabit shared environments), material (recognising the influence of tools and physical spaces), and relational (attuning to power dynamics through empathy and sensitivity). DOTS is not (yet) a plug-and-play toolkit; rather, it is a dynamic framework that invites practitioners to create conditions where equitable collaboration becomes possible. In this light, while a future toolkit is envisioned, the current framework serves as a robust foundation for rethinking how knowledge exchange can be truly shared and transformative.

This work also has implications for funders, institutions, and policy frameworks. Too often, collaborative projects are constrained by rigid timelines, prescriptive outputs, and narrowly defined notions of impact. Our experience suggests that equitable knowledge exchange requires different conditions: slower starts, relational infrastructure, and space for emergent outcomes. If universities, cultural bodies, and funding agencies are serious about supporting co-designed work, they must rethink how support structures are designed and shift from transactional to relational models of engagement.

In closing, we return to the idea that every element, every dot, is crucial. When joined together, these dots create a three-dimensional, holistic picture of collaboration that is as much about process as it is about outcome. It is our hope that by sharing the DOTS framework, we inspire others to critically examine their own practices and to design partnerships that are not only effective but also ethically grounded. The work presented here is a step towards that vision and offers a challenge to those working in education, culture, and beyond: to reimagine what equitable collaboration can look like in an increasingly complex world.

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