The Cultural Relations Collection

Call for Proposals: Essay themes

June 2020
1. Connecting Countries: Cultural exchange through the British Council’s teaching centre network
2. Festivals impact and interaction upon emerging creative economies in Sub Saharan Africa
3. The process of cultural relations: DICE and Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth
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5. Partnerships for the Goals. How collaborations in science and innovation contribute to sustainable development and cultural relations: The Newton Fund
6. On teachers as agents of cultural relations and intercultural understanding
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10. From Cultural Relations to Cultural Intelligence: Southern Africa Arts
1. Connecting Countries: Cultural exchange through the British Council’s teaching centre network

Connecting Countries is a digital cultural exchange initiative using videoconference technology to connect adult learners who are taking English language courses at British Council teaching centres in a growing range of countries, currently Czech Republic, Egypt, Jordan, Singapore, Spain, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, UAE and Vietnam. These sessions were initiated before the COVID-19 pandemic and have continued to run fortnightly during the lock-down periods in participating countries.

We are interested in taking this case study as an entry point to reflect on the possibilities for intercultural exchange through virtual/online synchronous interaction and dialogue. This would draw on the Council of Europe’s (2016) framework for democratic cultures and intercultural dialogue but broaden the focus from a European perspective to an international one (including in the context of our work in developing countries).

We are interested in exploring the variety of English language (EFL/ESL/ESOL) competences that adult learners can acquire and practise in order to demonstrate their individual approaches to valuing cultural diversity, and the linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills that are needed to support participants during their cultural exchanges, particularly when talking to strangers in a synchronous virtual/online educational setting. How, in practice, do participants utilise intercultural communication competencies to demonstrate freedom of expression and to build up (mutual) understandings between people of different cultures, backgrounds, and communication patterns?

We are interested in questions such as: plurilingualism and communicating perspectives on self-identity and the identity of others (what does this sound like?); L1 and L2 language code switching in sociolinguistics (does it occur, and if, so why?); and what are the sociocultural influences when communicating with strangers in a synchronous virtual/online setting?

The essay could draw on audio-visual recordings of the Connecting Countries sessions and participant feedback about the sessions and what their participation means to them in terms of demonstrating their values towards cultural diversity. There would be opportunities to undertake interviews with both participants and the teachers who host and run the sessions.

References:


2. Festivals impact and interaction upon emerging creative economies in Sub Saharan Africa

Festivals are the key sites of cultural relations – providing unique experiential spaces in terms of arts and culture. Festivals are frequently cited as the places where audiences might be most likely to try something new, take cultural ‘risks’ and engage with diverse groups of people they might not otherwise meet. They are cultural highlights that act as a placemaking benchmark for shared experiences, dialogue, skills sharing, art making and important celebrations of identity and heritage that have long term and far reaching impact on artists, audiences and communities.

Festivals have a big role to play in the continued growth of emerging creative economies and in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) specifically. They create economic employment, support local business and provide revenue to artists through access to national, regional and international markets. Investment in festivals creates access points for wider audiences to engage with festival platforms and the initiatives they offer. Festivals improve the ecosystem in which they operate through creation, production and distribution as they create a market place for artistic exchange.

We are interested in developing research questions to address and further analyse the impact of festivals as cultural relations interventions, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery from this. As we explore what a recovery from the pandemic might mean for festivals going forward, artists are finding new ways to stay creative online and convene audiences to engage, watch and see art. Drawing on our wide reach and connections to festivals across the UK and SSA, we hope an essay on this theme will strengthen and consolidate the support and knowledge sharing we can offer the sector as it adapts to a post COVID-19 recovery.

British Council SSA Arts Festival work to date spans East, West, Southern Africa and the UK. Key case studies of interest include:

- Our West African Festival Management partnership work with over 80 Festivals, which includes an upcoming two-year evaluation with new sector knowledge gained to support key learning about festival growth and development

- The Fak-ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival – a case study from our digital work in Southern Africa Arts over six years of engagement

- The impact of our seed grants in East Africa R&D in deepening ties and connections for practitioners and relations between UK practitioners and those in SSA (examples include Nyege Nyege supporting the dynamic festival growth in the region)

- Grant programmes to make new connections between young people (aged 18 to 35) across both SSA and the UK, including: Festival Connect, New Art New Audiences, ColabNowNow (a Digital Art Residency taking place within festivals) and Festivals In Motion (facilitating mobility among festival practitioners).
3. The process of cultural relations: DICE and Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth

**Developing Inclusive and Creative Economies (DICE)** is an Official Development Assistance (ODA) funded programme in Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa and the UK that aims to address economic and social exclusion by supercharging homegrown creativity, enterprise, and bold, generous and genuine collaboration. DICE supports a network of individuals, enterprises, and institutions in exploring how generosity, unconscious (and conscious) bias, vulnerability and human connection affect how we can best nurture our curiosity, communities, enterprises, policies, ideas and the environments in which we live. DICE's primary focus is to work with and for women, young people, those disabled by society, and those otherwise excluded from economic opportunity.

**Cultural Heritage for Inclusive Growth (CH4IG)** is an ODA funded programme exploring ways in which local culture can improve the lives of individuals around the world. CH4IG currently focuses on three countries – Colombia, Kenya and Vietnam – each adopting an approach that is distinct, unique and relevant to its particular place and context. The projects are all community-led, devised and managed with local partners on the ground. Central to this is for the definition and value of cultural heritage to be determined by those closest to it and facilitating an enabling environment which supports people to identify and create the opportunities it can bring for growth. A further key element of CH4IG is to collaboratively develop the concept more broadly through exploring synergies with existing initiatives, identifying and learning from best practice and assessing the benefit it can bring across sectors.

We are evaluating these initiatives, as well as considering how this global concept with local solutions might translate to a broader context. Both DICE and CH4IG have been action research programmes exploring how they might build long term trust and sustained relationships in the UK through their people centred, system-based approach. Both programmes take a systems/ecosystem approach to their work and have mutuality at their heart.

We are interested in developing case studies of how both programmes approach cultural relations, and the diverse cultural relations methodologies that can be employed across the two programmes, to assess the impact of such efforts, exploring the differences and their similarities across both programmes alongside each other.

A Cultural Relations Collection essay would engage with and support this work, drawing on the evaluation, data and research material we have commissioned across both programmes, as well as an ongoing study we have been undertaking on our creative economy work in ODA countries and how it leads to policy change and influence.

Possible questions to explore in the essay would include:

- Given some definition of cultural relations as a process of convening toward mutual understanding, what is the process of cultural relations and can it be ‘taught’?
- Is there a skillset required to create a quality cultural relations journey/approach? What is it?
• Not least given British Council's longstanding work in 'creativity', what more can we learn from the 'creative process' in relation to being people-centred within cultural relations? (e.g. design-thinking; innovation; exploration; failure; adaptation; action research; iteration)

• DICE and CH4IG have worked in a people centred way, collaborating with communities, heritage professionals, artists, organisations, policy makers, social entrepreneurs, and organisations to apply a process of creativity in how we (a) explore a concept, (b) ideate new programme ideas, (c) nurture a team and (d) learn from and communicate with one another from vastly different cultural, socio-economic and professional backgrounds. How effective is this process and how does it link to building trusted and mutual cross-cultural relationships?
4. 'Going virtual' through science communication at the time of a pandemic: FameLab

FameLab is the British Council programme offering professional development training and competition for early-career scientists, having run since 2007 in more than 35 countries, culminating in the international finals at the Cheltenham Science Festival (who created the original FameLab format).

March 2020 was the peak time in the FameLab International cycle. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries had to decide quickly if and how they could adapt to virtual delivery of Masterclass training and the national finals. This was at a time when science communication and public engagement regarding COVID-19 was at the forefront of news and media coverage, and the science communication community themselves had to consider how and whether they could adapt their programmes and festivals virtually.

We are interested in developing a Cultural Relations Collection essay that draws on the FameLab example to reflect on the cultural interactions, experiences and outcomes inherent in adapting to virtual approaches. We would be particularly interested in looking at this in the context of programmes/countries/regions that are relevant to the goals of ODA funding.

We are also keen to use the essay to look more broadly at research and evidence from the public engagement and science communication community (from recent COVID-19 related experiences, and historic cases). This might address live debates around the impact of COVID-19 on public trust in science, for example.

FameLab provides unique, valuable examples and experiences that can be applied more broadly to the important consideration of 'going virtual' with a programme - far cheaper to deliver and offering different valuable outcomes, but naturally not offering everything that the face-to-face experience would provide.

Whilst focusing on science communication and FameLab International, the implications of an essay on this topic would be relevant to any activity supporting cultural relationships and are certainly not science specific. The global impact and relevance of COVID-19 also means the essay would provide a unique opportunity to capture our learnings and the broader applications or implications of virtual training and events, compared with face-to-face.
5. Partnerships for the Goals. How collaborations in science and innovation contribute to sustainable development and cultural relations: The Newton Fund

The Newton Fund is part of the UK’s official development assistance (ODA) and managed through the UK Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The British Council is one of seven UK delivery partners.

Science and innovation can help tackle global developmental challenges such as climate change, infectious diseases, ageing societies or access to clean energy and water. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for action by all countries to address these challenges worldwide. International, multi- and inter-disciplinary partnerships between researchers are fundamental in finding solutions to the most pressing issues listed under the SDGs.

Under the Newton Fund, the British Council encourages researchers from around the world to work together across borders to contribute to the socio-economic development of partner countries. Through the Fund we also help to build trust between national funding agencies in the UK and in partner countries and foster a deeper understanding between people from different cultures and backgrounds.

Since 2014, we have successfully connected thousands of researchers through Newton programmes. We are interested in using the Cultural Relations Collection to identify, explore and showcase examples of international ODA-funded research partnerships, highlighting their contributions to sustainable development. We would like to show how international research collaboration can effectively inform changes to policy and practice, whilst taking the opportunity to consider how COVID-19 will affect research partnerships with partners globally.

Equally, we want to analyse and reflect on this work as a form of cultural relations and consider the specific role of the British Council in this context as a Newton Fund delivery partner. Encouraging international scientific collaboration is an essential part of the British Council’s cultural relations approach. What distinctive contribution does this approach make to the development and impact of international research partnerships? How might this contribution evolve in response to the long-term consequences of COVID-19 for societies and communities worldwide?
6. On teachers as agents of cultural relations and intercultural understanding

As a cultural relations organisation, the British Council invests substantial funds in and reports on a large audience of teachers in national education systems globally. They are a key audience in every aspect of our reach: they access broadcasts and publications, form a large digital audience (for example, five million unique visitors to the TeachingEnglish website each year) and, in 2018-2019 figures, 245,000 teachers engaged in professional development activity supported by the British Council.

Within the areas of English and education, teachers are seen as key players in reaching and influencing young people. Teachers are ‘multipliers’, each one providing benefit to several classrooms of children through improved methodology and access to resources every year. They also form a key audience for the UK’s English language teaching industry of publishers, language testing providers, teacher training organisations and language schools.

On the other hand, there has been a strong academic focus in the last 30 years on issues of the English language and ownership. English is ‘pluricentric’ and, for most users, not a national language but a ‘lingua franca’ adapted and used as part of multi-lingual repertoires in a variety of ways, often unconnected to the UK. It is in this context that these teachers engage both bilaterally with the UK, and multilaterally with international communities of teachers, often on our websites, social networks and MOOCs.

Importantly, through these and other professional development opportunities, many teachers actively seek the British Council out, not just to learn themselves, but to exchange knowledge and expertise that we in turn learn from and share. They contribute to international understanding both as ELT practitioners and as experts in the lives of their students, offering insights into the broader educational, social and cultural contexts where they live and work. In other words, they are agents of intercultural relations.

Examining our engagement with teachers through a cultural relations lens will better capture its value. This will also improve the impact of our work with teachers in national education systems and what we contribute to partners and the wider field of teacher development. A traditional, transactional approach to teacher development imagines expert input leading to teacher improvement and consequently an increase in student achievement. Such a model treats teachers as adopters and transmitters of someone else’s knowledge and expertise, students as metrics, and the British Council as merely a training agency. However, as pointed out by Gillespie et al in their paper Cultural Value (2018), ‘Cultural relations practitioners aspire to genuine reciprocity and mutual understanding.’

We are interested in developing an essay to explore this aspiration, particularly with regard to countries/regions and contexts relevant to the goals of ODA funding. This should incorporate the growing body of research into teacher identity and agency as key aspects of teacher education and development, an approach which goes hand-in-hand with this Cultural Relations aspiration. As Varghese et al (2005:22) point out: ‘... in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are: the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them.’
Beyond this deeper understanding, the essay would consider how a cultural relations focus on this major audience might strengthen the British Council’s role in promoting teacher agency, increasing their potential for contribution to their own education systems, the international ELT community, and intercultural understanding.

The essay might also provide an opportunity to reflect on the nature of this engagement across different platforms. The COVID-19 response has necessitated a sharper focus on the benefits and drawbacks of remote and face-to-face delivery and has also had the effect of bringing larger numbers of teachers than ever before together online. This has highlighted inequality and diversity, but there has also been the sense of a common, global challenge.

We would expect the essay to draw on analysis of some of our extensive data of both online and offline engagement with teachers, both quantitative and qualitative. It could also make reference to our own publications and research related to the topic and insight from our staff. Where possible the essay would highlight the voices of teachers themselves from countries round the world.

Prospective research partners should be familiar with the research literature on teacher agency and identity, and on specific issues about language: ownership and identity (e.g. work on English as a Lingua Franca by Jenkins, J and others, and the work of those such as Canagarajah, S, Pennycook, A. and Kumaravadivelu, B. on global language teaching and translingual practice) which are relevant specifically to the area of English language teachers.

References:


7. Lifelong connections: The value of British Council alumni

The British Council is implementing a global Alumni Strategy to create lifelong relationships with our alumni and better understand our impact. Galvanising relationships with international students who studied at a UK University and beneficiaries of our flagship leadership programmes, primarily through digital technology, we are creating a long-term powerful and engaged alumni network around the world.

A Cultural Relations Collection essay would support us to find ways in which to conceive and measure the mutual value of these relationships. We already deliver a number of alumni programmes and activities in various countries. The essay could draw on data from these programmes and could disaggregate this data various ways (including by ODA countries – a context of particular interest for this area of work).

In terms of returned value to the UK, staying connected to UK alumni means we have an extensive and powerful network of influence all around the world. This leads to the enhancement of the UK’s soft power, attractiveness, prosperity and influence internationally. Alumni engagement is also indicative of the way that the British Council is thinking more closely and more broadly about people’s lifelong relationships with the UK and how these can be nurtured, leading to greater trust and alliances and other mutual benefits.

Having robust trusting relationships around the world has never been more important, given the current context of the UK seeking to maintain a strong international position whilst leaving the European Union and recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, there is no other UK-wide voice on Alumni engagement and the British Council has an important role in leading research and insights in this part of the Education sector, informing policymakers and stakeholders (including UK universities) about the value of Alumni Engagement. This aligns to the British Council’s mission of building trust and the Educational sectors goals of enhancing the reputation of a UK study experience overseas.
8. On Language for Resilience in Cultural Relations: Then and now

In 2016 the British Council published the Language for Resilience Research Report ‘The role of language in enhancing the resilience of Syrian refugees and host communities’. This Levant-centric research proposed five principles for Language for Resilience. Now, four years later in 2020, what is our understanding of Language for Resilience and what is its role in cultural relations?

Language for Resilience thought leadership, research and programming is the British Council’s response to education in emergencies and at its heart connects networks of teachers, teacher educators and academics across the globe to address the effects of conflict, migration, trauma, prejudice and inequality on the classroom.

Language for Resilience addresses two key aspects of Cultural Relations: access to opportunity via language and skills learning from which hope and opportunity develop and relationship and trust building through the exchange of knowledge, insight and experience that engenders. Its impact is felt globally whether in response to the Syrian crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, complex migration issues in Sub-Saharan Africa and Wider Europe or the teaching of Spanish to Syrian refugees in the Americas.

Its core focus is on resilience in conflict-affected parts of the world – showing young people alternative pathways and offering hope largely through education. However, insight from the programme has potential to be related to a broader consideration of resilience in other contexts – including in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are interested in exploring what learnings from regional programming and research in Language for Resilience may be transferable to the UK (and beyond), remembering that the British Council works with one in five schools in the UK who themselves encounter a range of language, equality, inclusion and migration issues. We are also interested in questions such as ‘When is Language for Resilience not English?’ and ‘When is Language for Resilience not language?’ and in engaging with wider research around issues of social cohesion, home language literacy, language learning and psycho-social support.

The proposed essay would seek also to expand on the concept of English as Vector in Martin Rose’s Cultural Relations Collection essay where Language for Resilience is described as ‘a pure and energising vision of language in cultural relations’ and points to ‘an altruism and an understanding which is not always the leading characteristic of English-as-Commodity but which represents the best of English-as-Vector. This work occupies with comfortable precision the overlap between the two which is the Golden Spot of cultural relations impact.’
9. Cultural Relations in International Intercultural Urban Environments

Exponential urbanisation is a dominant global trend of the 21st century, fundamentally changing the patterns of millennia of human habitation. By 2050, it is predicted that an estimated 70 per cent of humanity will be urban. In this era of globalisation, capital, information and production can be moved across national borders seamlessly. People and talent are also flocking to cities for employment, security and self-actualisation, creating burgeoning population growth in cities fuelled by these different types of migration.

These trends and processes are reflected in the SDGs, in particular SDG11. Cities in the global north and global south face shared challenges including rising inequality and poverty (heightened in a city context), fragmentation of communities and the complexity of managing social relations in cities which are often fractured by national, ethnic and religious differences/conflicts and migration of peoples and movements of transient populations. One of the biggest challenges in urban environments is how people from many different backgrounds, histories, belief systems, values and cultures can learn to live together and collaborate to address their urban challenges.

In the last fifteen years, the British Council has built a body of work on the theme of cities through projects including Open Cities (2006-2010), Creative Cities (2010-13), Digital Cities (2017-18) and UK Cities of Culture; through research (2015-18) exploring city diplomacy and soft power; and through a framework for our Global Cities work from 2019-25.

For our cultural relations work to be relevant to the places and peoples where we work, we must understand the profound challenges faced by cities, the opportunities they present, and how our cultural relations work can help create better, more inclusive cities across the world.

We would like to develop a Cultural Relations collection essay to support this work, with a particular interest in relating this to ODA contexts and the global south, while referencing the global north urban experience too. The essay would synthesise existing research into the role which international and intercultural exchange, ‘flows’ of people, trade, cultures and ideas, and cultural relations combined play in shaping cities over time. It would also explore the powerful part cities play as dynamic nodes for negotiation of difference and diversity in continually creating identities. We are also keen to engage with new thinking and hypotheses around the importance of cultural relations within and between cities, and also to reflect on what may be change as global cities emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research questions and themes for the essay to address would include:

- What is the role of ‘flow’ in the creation of identities and histories of cities?
- What does it mean to think of cities as sites for the negotiation of ‘difference’ and how does this play out in the narratives and identity-forging of cities over time?
- What does it take to develop people, communities and cities/places with an international outlook and with broad intercultural and international fluency/capability that creates trust, rapport, friendship, understanding with people from other cities?
- What is the value for cities of building trust, connections and understanding with other cities and places and how does this contribute to the social cohesion within cities?
• How are international and intercultural relationships for cities/city regions foundational for other business and economic relationships?
• What kinds of processes do people and institutions go through to create that value?
• How might the impact of COVID-19 relate to, complicate, change or transform our understanding of these questions?
10. From Cultural Relations to Cultural Intelligence: Southern Africa Arts

This essay theme is focused on our work in Arts across Southern Africa, where the team has in recent years consciously developed a more ‘contemporary’ cultural relations style based on the idea of ‘Cultural Intelligence’. Approaching their work as equitable, curious and observant ‘cultural specialists’, the team is driven less by the question of ‘How can Southern Africa Arts benefit the UK?’ than by the question of ‘How can we benefit from knowing more today than we did yesterday from and about each other?’.

This subtle but important shift has reshaped the team’s thinking on the practice of cultural relations and had an impact on how artists, creatives and producers relate to and understand each other. Three case studies have been developed to examine this and to outline the methodologies used:

- ColabNowNow – A digital Arts residency in South Africa, Mozambique and the UK
- SoCreative Summit – a Summit on Creative and Social Hubs in Southern Africa partnered with Goethe Institut Zimbabwe
- Rackless Kazi – an all-woman group of DJs and music producers sharing and gaining from each other in art form and business

We are keen to build on these case studies and to develop a Cultural Relations Collection essay that would relate this work to wider issues and questions around equity and decolonisation in the context of the British Council, particularly in countries who were previously colonised.

How does acting with honesty, integrity and being transparent about your agenda impact on power dynamics and shift power relations? How can collaborating through creative practise generate ‘Cultural Intelligence’ (and what is meant by this)? What does mutuality actually mean to the creative sector in building trust and interaction? How can making art or ideas together generate compassion and inter-cultural understanding?

Drawing on data from our programmes and insights from the team, the essay would support this ongoing reflection on our professional practice in Southern Africa and help us to better understand and analyse the relationship between art, cultural relations and Cultural Intelligence more broadly.