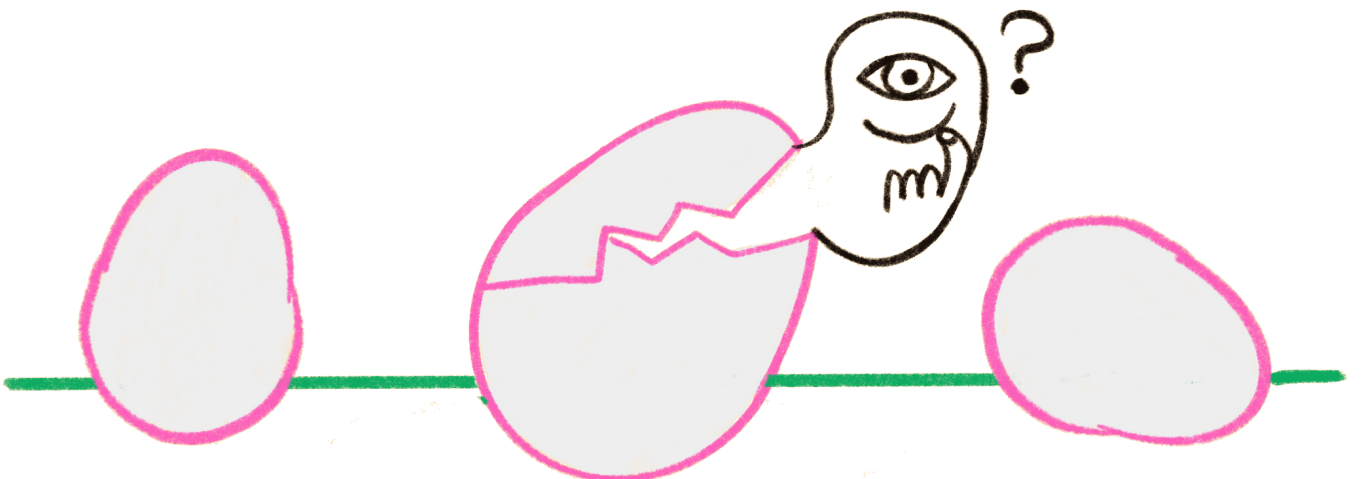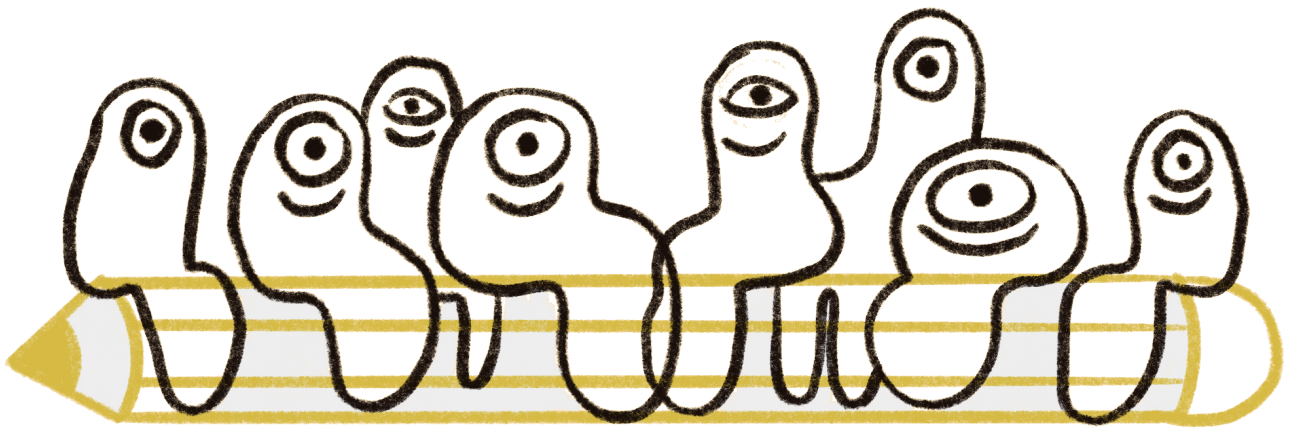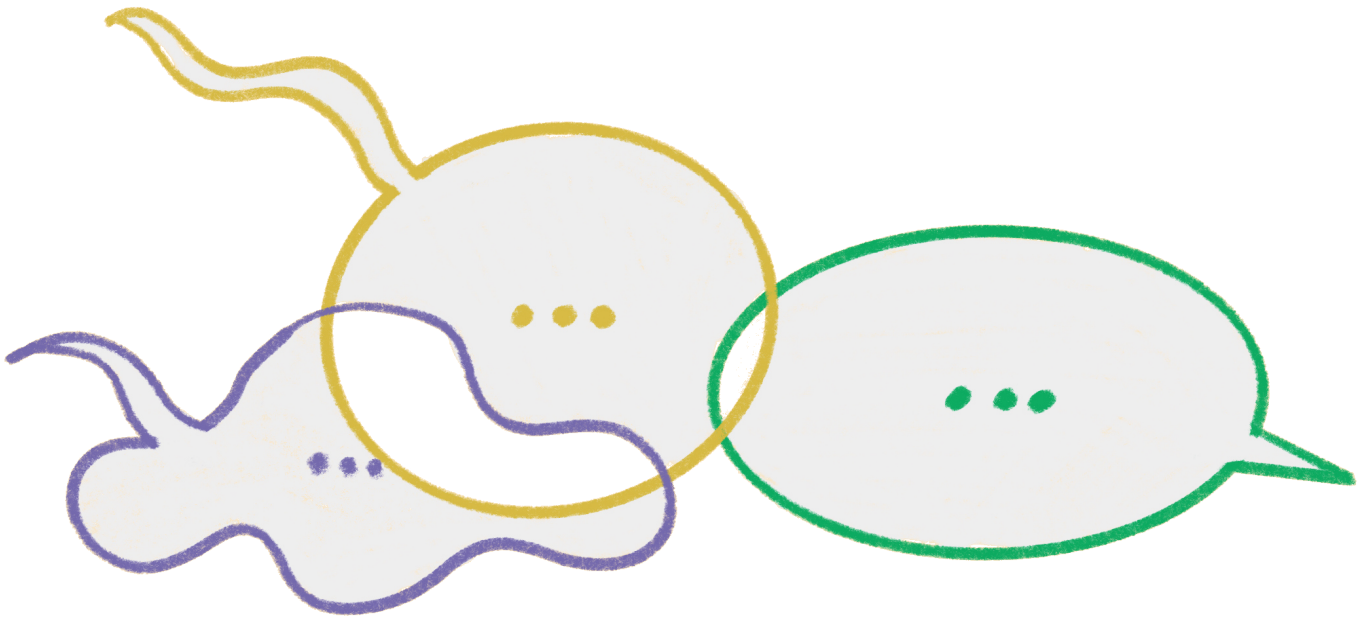# A recipe for
co-production

Insights from the Meaning Making programme hosted by the Deutsches Museum

1 | Introduction

Why do we need to talk about co-production?

In the summer of 2020, we started the Meaning Making programme to support our colleagues in the cultural sector just as the first COVID19 lockdowns began. The first two seasons of this programme attracted participants from eight countries and highlighted the challenges for cultural institutions in redefining their role and purpose. There was also a growing awareness that this thinking cannot happen in isolation. By season 3 of Meaning Making - Understanding Co-production we had developed a methodology to explore how we can take good intentions and transform them into constructive action.

Our efforts on co-production had the following focus:

1. How do we support a network of multidisciplinary professionals to develop ideas when it isn't possible to meet in person?

2. How do we make relevant and interesting use of technologies to turn these ideas into action?

We ran two cycles of workshops to develop two prototype online exhibitions. The topics were the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals, citizen engagement and behavior change.

Based on the results of the two cycles, we have proposed a 'recipe' for co-production in which we offer a structure and workshop themes that can help people translate a collective vision into practical steps. We also suggest how you can create a variation of this recipe by changing the key variables so that it works for your organization or project.

Throughout the Meaning Making programme we relied on regular participant feedback and structured interviews to evaluate the impact. We share these with you as anecdotal insights and quotes.

We do hope you will try a variation of the recipe presented in this book. We would love to hear from you! You can find us via the Deutsches Museum Digital website or on Twitter and LinkedIn or you can email us.

Wishing you the very best.

Dr Andrea Geipel and Dr Abhay Adhikari

Who are we?

The core team works across different disciplines, cultures and sectors. We are fairly comfortable with the idea of 'making a mess,' a term that we explain later in this booklet.

Our participants come from different countries and professional backgrounds. We are immensely grateful to them for sticking with us as we tried different methodologies to develop the recipe presented here. Without their patience, contribution and thoughtful feedback this project would not have been possible.

The Core Team
Concept, design and co-facilitators: Dr Andrea Geipel and Dr Abhay Adhikari
Regular contributors: Isabel CZ and Alastair Somerville
Artists: Wana Udobang, Azam Masoumzadeh, Joshua Thomas
Producer: Jenni Müller

Did we crack co-production?

Before we dive into the recipe for co-production, we feel it's important to manage expectations. Did we crack co-production? To be honest: there is no perfect recipe. However, based on feedback and structured interviews with the participants as well as our own experiences, we believe that we have found a practical pathway that will help you become more creative when planning projects (for example, exhibition planning for museum professionals). Your colleagues will feel supported to share their perspectives and explore how other viewpoints can inform their work.

We encourage you to take a hands-on approach when it comes to the ideas presented in this booklet. The co-production recipe is conducive to the following scenarios:

1. If you are developing a new exhibition or changing a permanent exhibition, the recipe can help you rapidly iterate ideas while incorporating principles of user experience, storytelling and behavior change.

2. If you want to understand how to incorporate input from specific groups (for example, colleagues from different sectors, heavy users or a visitor group) then this recipe will help you create a level playing field.

3. If you want to break apart a deadlock in an existing project (for example, the project team is not communicating, or despite everyone's best intentions, no progress is being made) then this recipe can help you think your way out of the situation in new ways.

Does the recipe for co-production guarantee a successful outcome?

That depends on what you define as success or failure! We believe that the process creates trust, which helps people to hand over projects to others at different stages.

"I found it surprising that working with such different people we were able to produce several ideas in such a short amount of time. The approach of coming up with ideas without knowing what is going to happen at the end is effective... sometimes, the end result - the room, the format, the website - becomes a barrier to creativity."
Etta G (Cycle 2)

2 | The co-production recipe

Letting go

People ... again!

Making a mess

Getting to know
each other?
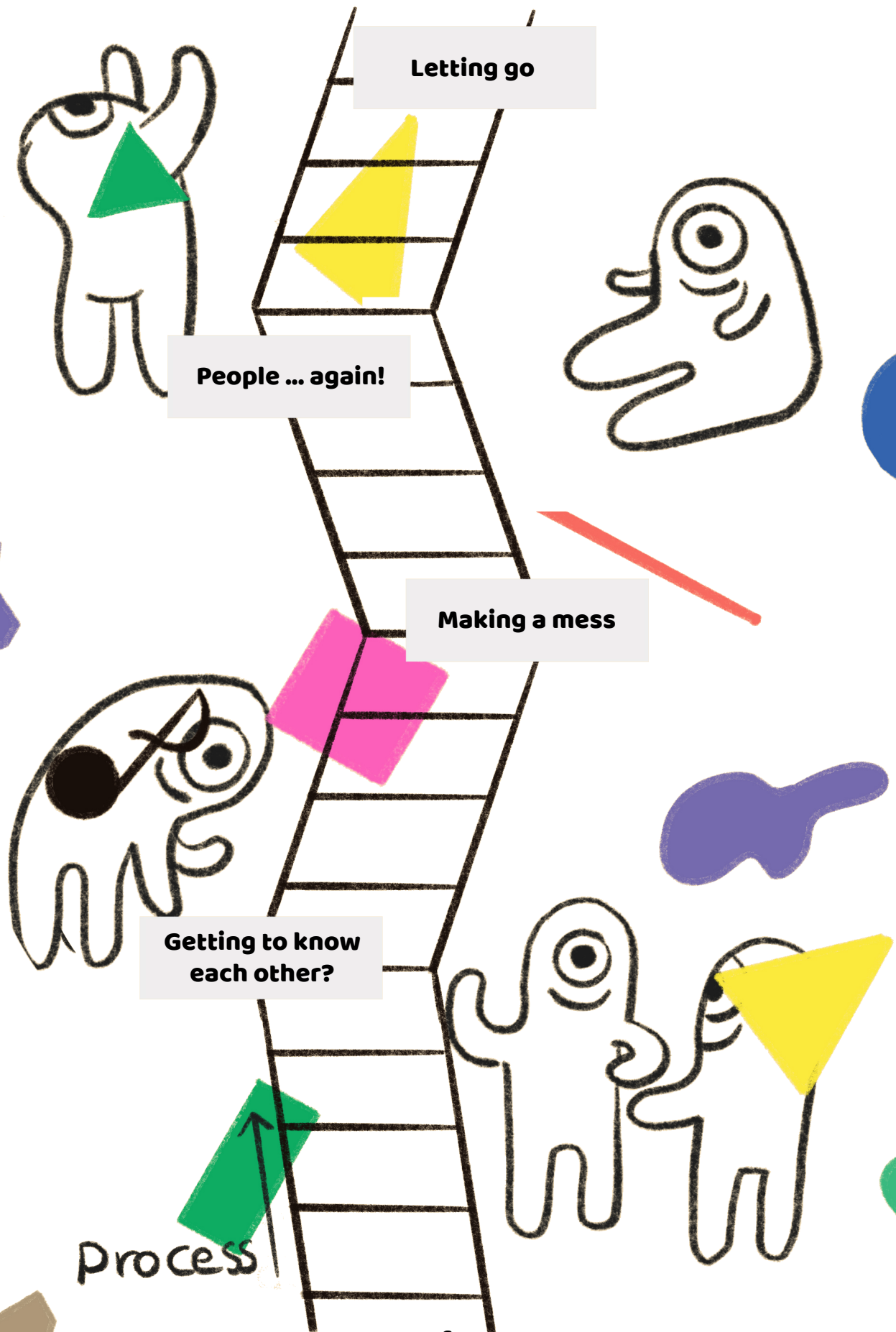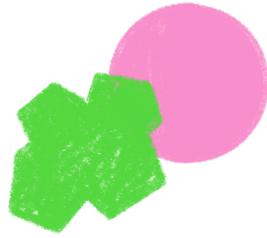
Process

There are three ingredients to the co-production recipe: people, process and facilitation.

The people are at the heart of the co-production process. We spent a lot of time figuring out how to get a diverse group of participants to join the programme, and then how to keep them engaged so they feel they can contribute and stick around for the duration of the programme.

As for the process, we ran four workshops. Each session was developed to achieve a specific outcome. We played around with the rhythm and group dynamics in each session. This included the pace of the sessions, the number of impulses, the workshop duration and number of break-out rooms.

As co-facilitators we were constantly thinking about our roles in the project. We tried to be aware when we were leading the process and actively steered our colleagues to get from one point to another, trusting them to arrive at a conclusion that worked for them.

"You need to create a setting when you explore freely first and not just find other ways around your existing path. It was a challenge for me but it was nice to see that it gave me freedom."
Jasmin M (Cycle 2)

2a. People

We recommend you to invite people based on shared interests and values rather than limiting participation to expertise and discipline. Having a broad mix of people can be creatively stimulating and conducive to unexpected connections. This idea of 'unexpectedness' matters if we are to develop new ways of solving well-known problems in the cultural sector, such as lack of visitor interest or inability of different departments to collaborate outside their traditional roles.

If you are dealing with complex subjects, it can be tempting to have a 'one-of-each-kind' approach. However, we recommend that you lose the idea of having a perfect mix. If you aren't sure who to reach out to, ask people in your network for suggestions and ideas. Encourage everyone to think outside of their bubble.

And finally, when it comes to participation, we encourage you to make it voluntary. Knowing that one can leave the programme puts people at ease and will encourage them to stay! We acknowledge that this sounds counterintuitive in an institutional setting but through the Meaning Making programme we found this to be the best approach.

"*This programme gave me the experience that it was never a weakness to say I am confused or I am overwhelmed. Misunderstandings do not have to lead to conflicts.*"
Manu W (Cycle 1)
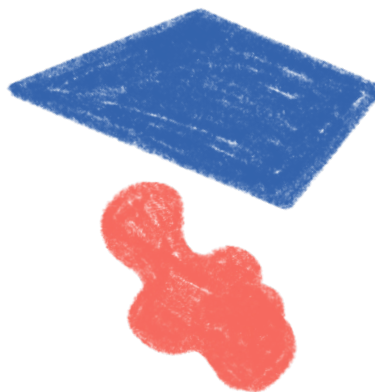
2b. Process

Step 1: Getting to know each other?

The goal was to help our participants overcome the typical anxiety that one brings to a collaborative, multidisciplinary project: Am I good enough to be here? To try and overcome this, we asked participants not to mention their job titles or organizations as part of their introduction when we met for the first time. Instead, we asked them to mention the one thing they felt they brought to the programme - professionally or personally. When we tallied up these points, everyone realized that they were part of a dynamic, resourceful group and this energized the participants.

Practical tips for getting to know each other:

1. Time
   If you are trying out new techniques for participants to introduce themselves, keep in mind that this might take more time than you expect.

2. Comfort zone
   Keep the threshold of participation low. It is possible that some of your participants may not feel comfortable with 'performative' aspects of the technique you want to use.

"I feel we overcame the distance that normally exists when we work with other museums… an opportunity for everyone to work together without worrying about job titles and hierarchy. The discussions were about what we brought to the table, not about who we were in our museums."
Clara S (Cycle 1)
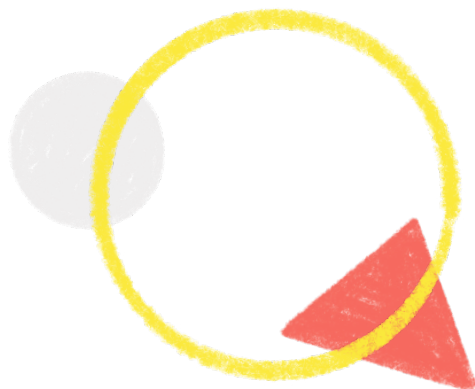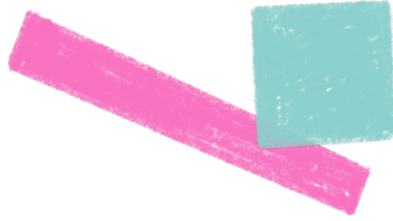
Step 2: Making a mess

What do we mean by making a mess? At some point in a collaborative project, despite our good intentions, we start to get anxious. This could be because we are expected to try new ways of doing things or there are too many impulses to incorporate in our work. Usually, in these situations, people clamp down and dig their heels in. We wanted to address this response in our programme.

We encouraged our participants to make a mess. For example, in one of the workshops, we had several short talks (we called these 'impulse talks') and multiple rounds of group discussions. There was a lot going on. We asked our participants not to rush to find a solution. Instead, we encouraged them to 'let the dust settle' in the week-long gap before the next workshop. In the following session we asked participants to reflect on their experiences and collectively make sense of any new knowledge they had gained.

In addition, we have prepared collaborative documents (Google Document & Miro Board) for the participants. These could be used to collect notes both individually and as a team during the workshop. All questions and tasks that were to be discussed or worked on during the workshop were also presented there. And finally, the document was used by the participants to exchange contact details as well as ideas.

Practical tips for making a mess:

1. External inputs
   Organize impulse talks by people outside the sector or the project theme. This can encourage participants to frame or reframe their own practice.

2. Change the way you usually moderate group discussions
   Do you need to always be present? This can pressurize participants to demonstrate that they have found a solution.

"I kind of liked the idea of making a mess. It might be liberating to do that, but also quite hard because culturally we are not supposed to make a mess. We need to be able to make a collaborative mess."
Jude A (Cycle 2)

Step 3: People… again!

We were pushing our participants fairly hard to break out of the typical patterns associated with collaboration. For example, not to mention their job titles in their introduction or encouraging them not to find a solution but to reflect on the new ideas they heard. But a programme that is only about taking people out of their comfort zone will not work, because outside of this unique experience, they will not be able to use the skills they are learning in their workplace. Therefore, in the third step we slowed down the pace. For example, after the session where we all made a mess we took some time to reflect together and gave the participants the opportunity to also discuss their ideas with the artists.

Practical tips to reframe collaboration:

1. Who is the expert?
    Try to question and reframe the idea of an expert. Is it someone with knowledge, someone with lived experience, or both? What really matters for the collaboration to have the best chance of success?

2. Just have a conversation
    Keep encouraging your team to just have a conversation, without the pressure to find a solution.

"*The pressure of not giving a correct answer was fantastic. This process started to help me connect the dots.*"
Sean A (Cycle 1)
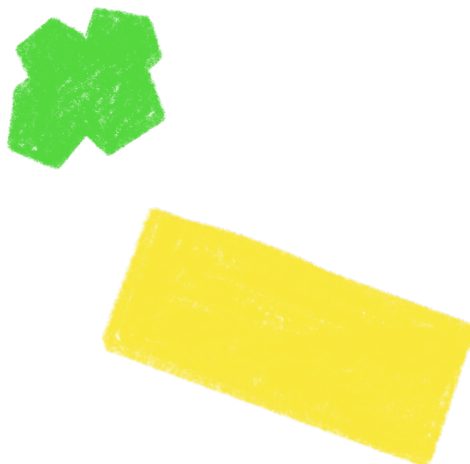
Step 4: Letting go

In any collaboration there's always a point where our idealism clashes with our inner perfectionist. What if the next step (which has to be led by someone else) isn't up to our standard? What if something breaks down/goes wrong? Who will pick up the pieces? What if we have to start from scratch? These are just some of the worst case scenarios that become a barrier to genuine co-production. In our programme we wanted our participants to experience what it means to share 'power'. As a result, in our fourth and final step we asked our participants to hand over the seeds of their exhibition ideas to our artists to develop further. Some people found it incredibly hard to not see the idea through to a conclusion, others felt frustrated by their inability to contribute. We did not challenge these reactions, but acknowledged the discomfort.

Practical tips to manage anxieties arising out of sharing power:

1. Manage expectations from the beginning
   Be honest about the process from the beginning of the project. The idea of handing over the project to others should not come as a surprise.

2. Create a level playing field
   It's important to create a level playing field. Try and address the hierarchies that inevitably creep into a project using suggestions from steps 1 and 3.

"My way of working is concept, content and form. But I am fine handing it over to the experts, and I really enjoy doing that."
Jasmine M (Cycle 2)
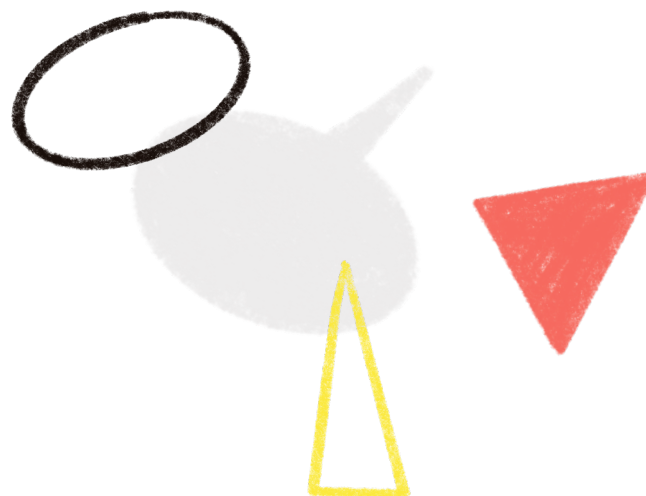
2c. Facilitation

We have talked about the anxieties of our participants. At this point, it is also worth pointing out the anxiety that we as co-facilitators of this programme felt. We were constantly questioning our role in the project. Should we steer or lead the discussion? How far can we push people? What is our responsibility towards our participants who are accustomed to certain ways of working?

After much discussion, we realized that all we could do was create boundaries rather than set down rules. During the workshops, we left it to our participants to negotiate these boundaries when it came to their individual contributions as well as group dynamics. Even though we were fairly hands-off, we developed some questionnaires that we asked everyone to fill in at different points in the programme. The purpose of these questionnaires (submitted anonymously) was to help our participants reflect on their process. It also helped us gauge the mood of the group as a whole, just in case we had to step in with some active moderation. In both cycles, that did not happen.

The following are examples of the questions we asked:

Are you clear about how you can contribute to the process?

Do you know what you are bringing to the programme?

*How has your experience of working with others been so far?*

Can you share one positive experience so far?

Throughout the programme we encouraged our participants to be honest, which is why they had the option to answer the questions anonymously. As a result, the responses didn't always make for comfortable reading. This is where we, as facilitators, reminded ourselves that we had to be fine with 'making a mess' and see the process through to the end rather than jumping in to find a solution or fix.

3 | Creating
your own mix
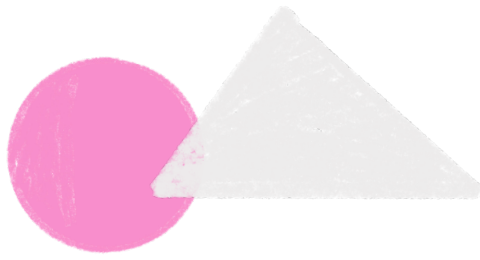
In Season 3 of Meaning Making we ran two cycles of co-production. In each cycle we had to adapt the recipe in real time to address the needs of our participants who came from different cultural and professional backgrounds. If you are planning to run a cycle of co-production based on the recipe presented in this booklet, we suggest that you change the following aspects to best meet the needs of your programme.

Duration

As we've successfully worked in three month sprints in the past, we set the duration of the cycle as three months with a clear beginning, middle and end. As for the workshops, given that our participants were coming from different time zones and had existing personal and professional work commitments, we settled on two hours in the afternoon - 3-5pm CET. As you can see, the guiding principles here were based on past experiences and convenience. We recommend you follow a similar logic. Keep in mind that it will never be possible to meet the needs of everyone, all you can do is lower the threshold for colleagues to participate.

Frequency

The question of how often we should meet was answered by the question - why are we meeting? This was to get to know each other, to jointly learn about as well as explore new topics, and to develop and interrogate each other's ideas. Based on this logic, our cycle of co-production had four workshops. That's the minimum number we recommend. You may, of course, want to have additional sessions but be aware that meeting fatigue can set in. We encouraged our participants to reach out to each other outside the workshops and continue the conversation. As facilitators this meant that we had to 'let go' and be comfortable with the idea that we would not and could not be privy to all conversations.

Facilitation

We've already talked about the style of facilitation - to lead or to steer? Here we ask you to consider who should facilitate - should it be a member of your team or should it be an external moderator? Or could it be, as was our case, that you have two co-facilitators? Regardless of your choice, the role of the facilitator(s) should be to accompany the participants rather than supervise them. Explore playful formats especially as you may encounter frustration or disagreements along the way.

Outcome

Why do you want to explore co-production? Is it the desire to explore new processes or develop a new product? Be clear about your intentions from the start. It is also important to communicate this with the participants. In our case, we were working towards a tangible (prototype) and intangible (process) outcome.

There will be points in the project where people will lose sight of the end goal. They may not recognize the value of what they have created because the institutional norms of evaluating success (and failure!) are not conducive to co-production. Therefore, as facilitators, it is important to constantly point out these details and celebrate the differences.

Prototypes:

Instagram Cycle 1 and 2:
https://www.instagram.com/gods_of_indigo/

Mozilla Hub:
Cycle 1: https://xrhubspace.de/nJQvjrp/indigo-blue
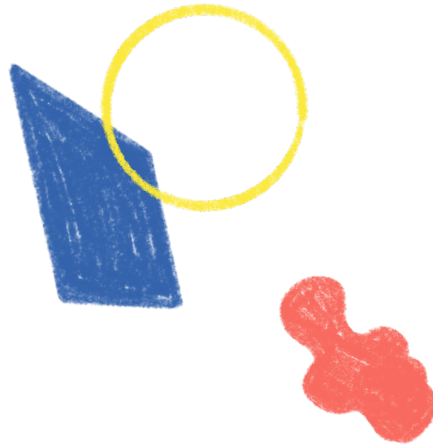Cycle 2: https://xrhubspace.de/9XHGQwh/ocean-belly

4 | Afterthoughts

We're writing this booklet six months after the second cycle has concluded. Reflecting on the process we realized the extent of our anxiety as the designers and facilitators of the programme. We were constantly looking for ways to improve the experience for our participants. The positive side of this was the freedom to experiment. On the other hand, we had to live with the discomfort that we could always be doing more, which wasn't constructive. If you want to instigate co-production, you may also have to deal with similar conflicting feelings.

Working with technology adds a different kind of unpredictability. Prototypes can break down or refuse to work. The more experimental you are, the greater the risk. Take this into account. The best approach is to be honest about this from the beginning. So whilst it might be tempting to have deadlines, we don't recommend it.

Co-production puts people at the heart of the process. It can be stressful to manage different expectations and take on the responsibility of instigating such a process. However, our experience has shown that at some point we started to relate to each other as people rather than job titles and a bunch of skills. This enabled us to have honest, playful conversations, which made the entire process worth it.

5 | Credits
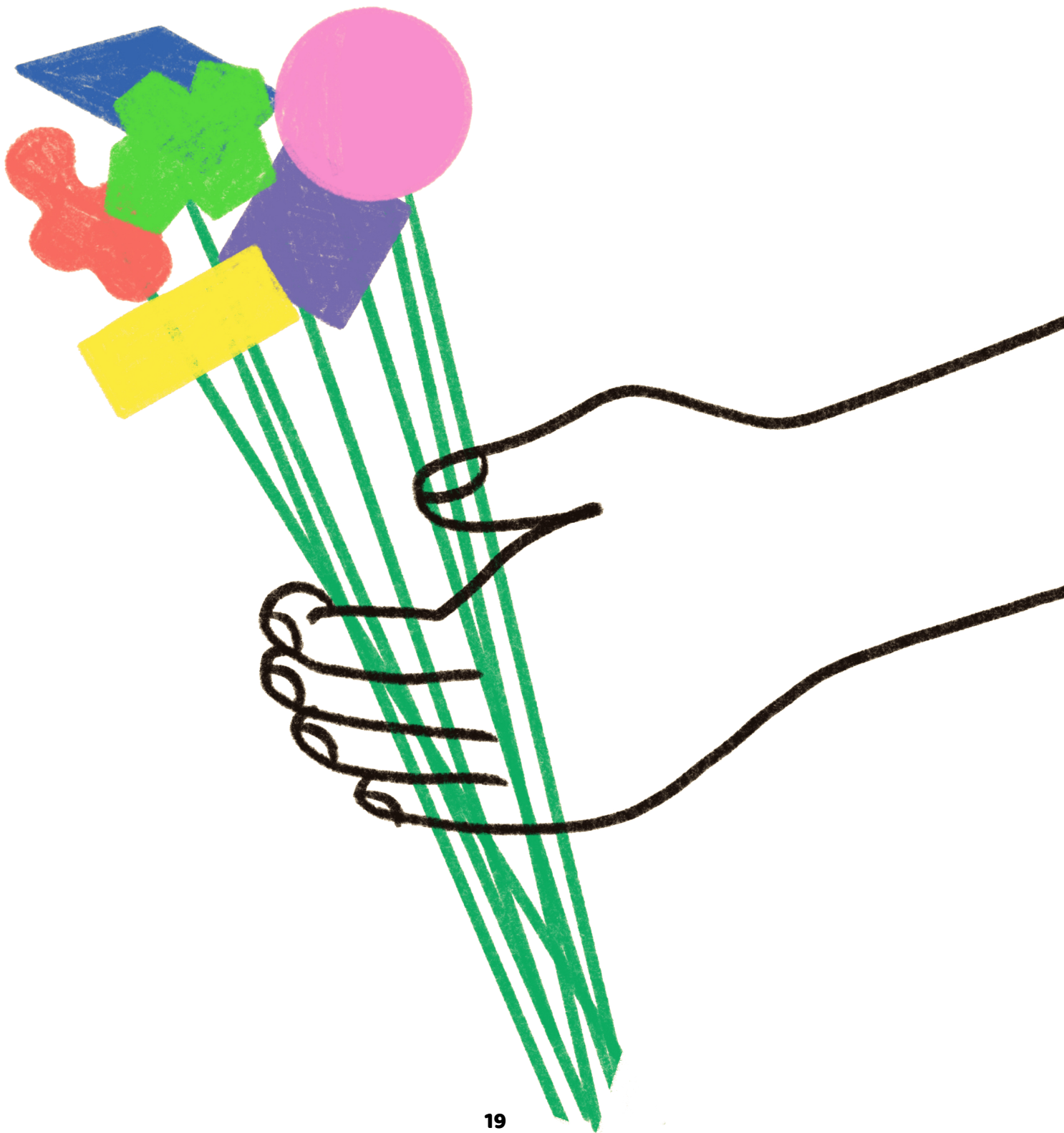
Concept, Design and Co-facilitation

Dr Andrea Geipel

Dr Andrea Geipel is deputy head of the department Deutsches Museum Digital and head of the VRlab at the Deutsches Museum. She coordinates several projects focussing on 3D digitalisation and museum education. After studying sports science with a major in neuropsychology, she completed her doctorate at the Munich Center for Technology in Society on the question of how YouTube's platform politics influence the term of expertise in science communication. In 2020, she developed the online course series „Meaning Making" together with Abhay Adhikari. Together with Johannes Sauter she founded the conference series „Das Digitale Objekt" at the Deutsches Museum and together with Anke von Heyl and Johannes Sauter she founded the „DigAMus Award" for digital museum offers in 2020. Central to her interests is multidisciplinary collaboration between science, art, culture and technology.

Abhay Adhikari (PhD)

Abhay Adhikari (PhD) is the founder of Digital Identities, a global programme to create new models of engagement and social impact. This programme has been commissioned by organizations such as Google, the Guardian and NESTA. He has run Storytelling Labs in thirteen countries with the private, public and cultural sector. Participants have ranged from BMW and Coca-Cola to museums such as Tate (London), Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam) and Nordiska museet (Stockholm). Abhay also leads the Urban Sustainable Development Lab, which has been named one of UK's 50 New Radical projects by the Observer newspaper. He currently leads the Careview project to help cities tackle social isolation. This programme has been co-funded by the European Space Agency. He has spoken on digital culture and social impact at events such as Deutsche Welle Global Media Form (Bonn), International Journalism Festival (Perugia) and Battle of Ideas (London).

Production

Jenni Müller

Jenni Müller has a background in cultural and international business management. Between 2016-2020 she led the financial management of smARTplaces, a €4m audience development project with eight European partners. This programme was co-funded by the EU. As a producer Jenni has designed and managed conferences, workshops and events for Dortmunder U, Leibniz Association and NEO Collections. She currently leads the production and project management of Re:Vision, an innovation programme offered to 654 recipients of the €20 Neustart Kultur fund by the German federal fund - Fonds Soziokultur.

Artists
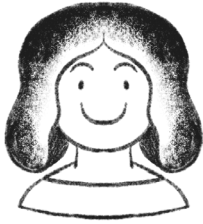
Azam Masoumzadeh

Born in Isfahan (Iran), Azam Mazoumzadeh is an award-winning storyteller. She has a background in speculative narration (L'ERG, Belgium) and is trained as a comic artist (LUCA – School of Arts, Belgium) and digital storyteller (KASK, Belgium). Her work has been shown in South Korea, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. In 2020, her virtual reality project based on the poetry of Omar Khayyam - Glad that I came, not sorry to depart, received a Special Mention at Anima Festival.

„I create layered worlds of alternate realities using different media such as line-drawings and comics. In my work, I dig into my memories of childhood and represent them as a collision of culture and spirituality."

Wana Udobang

Wana Udobang is a multi-disciplinary storyteller working at the intersection of writing, poetry, performance. Her works seek to create visceral connections for people to see themselves and be heard. As a poet, she has written three studio albums: Dirty Laundry, In memory of forgetting, and Transcendence, which interrogate memory, familial bonds, healing and joy. She has been commissioned by Edinburgh International Festival, Deutsches Museum and ThankYou Australia. She has performed her work across Africa, Europe and North America. She runs The Comfort Food poetry workshop which uses memories around food as a conduit to create poems that become recipes for joy. She is a 2021 University of IOWA International writing residency fellow. Her writings have appeared on the BBC, Aljazeera, The Guardian, Observer and CNN. Wana curates Culture Diaries; an archival project which uses multi-platform storytelling to document African artists. She is frequently invited to speak and teach on poetry, creativity, communication, archiving, culture and digitality.

Josh

Joshua Thomas aka tig3rbabu is a Mumbai based singer-songwriter and Sonic Pi live-coding musician. By day he edits and produces podcasts on current affairs.

Regular Contributors

Alastair Somerville

Alastair Somerville is a sensory design consultant. He provides expert advice on cognition and person-centered design to companies and public organizations who provide both physical and digital products or services. He facilitates workshops on sensory and emotional design for major conferences and corporations, including SouthBy Southwest (SxSW) and Google. He is currently involved in wayfinding projects in historic buildings and virtual reality.

Isabel Cebrián

Isabel Cebrián is a communications expert who collaborates with organizations and brands, helping them to communicate their values and actions through content creation. With a degree in Journalism (UCM, 2007) and studies in Art, New Media and Contemporary Society and Open Innovation, she has more than 10 years of practice in different roles related to communication and cultural management. She is passionate about designing strategies as well as participating in the tactical implementation of campaigns. She collaborates daily with people from organizations in the cultural field such as La Nave Nodriza design school, Etopia Center for Art and Technology, and design studios such as Tropical, Bronce and Montalbán Estudio. She lives in Zaragoza, Spain, from where she works with projects all over Europe.

Cooperation partner

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Silke Schmit, Bruno Deussen, Marvin Ehlers

Subject Matter Experts

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Sumit Dang, Meraki Signature
Hizqeel Mohamed, Bakr

Cycle 2:
Michal Lovecky, Cyan Planet
Jana Hoffmann, Museum für Naturkunde

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