

The Grant Writer's Paradox: Leveraging Public Scholarship Ideas When the Money Is Uncertain

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Abstract: Given the virtually universal need for resources to support public scholarship, collaborative grant writing is critical to most partnership-based research in any discipline. And yet collaborative grant writing is more often seen as an administrative hoop than as a process to facilitate strong projects and partnerships. This article considers grant proposals as a genre of scholarly communication that embodies the opportunities and limitations of advancing meaningful public scholarship within our imperfect system. Collaborative grant writing and the creative dialogues it prompts are presented as pathways to collective flourishing that encourage curiosity, knowledge sharing, and pragmatic discussions about needs and priorities to facilitate authentic, rigorous, and transparent partnerships in tandem with stronger funding applications. The article concludes with core principles for co-crafting grant proposals with partners that strengthen relationships, foster effective projects, and develop compelling narratives for funders. The authors propose that the collaborative grant writing process itself can help facilitate those tough conversations by creating the space and imperative to plan and communicate clearly.

Keywords: public scholarship; collaborative grant writing; participatory action research; in-kind support; knowledge mobilization; facilitation; community; engagement; hopeful

As philanthropic and government funders turn the focus of their investment toward social justice work, public scholars face increasing pressure and incentives to develop active, authentic partnerships. Proposals are more likely to be successful if the rationale for funding can demonstrate a non-academic partner's many commitments to the project, including intellectual and financial contributions.¹ Academic grant applicants

1. Throughout this article, references to "partners" indicates primarily non-academic (or extra-academic) actors participating in collaborative public scholarship.

wishing to pursue public, participatory, and community-engaged research are clear that shared design and implementation cannot be solely imposed and conducted by the scholar. And yet most potential partner organizations advancing social justice work have limited resources. The investment of time up front in an application that may not come to fruition can cause harm and take resources away from vital operations. Herein lies the paradox: asking for up-front investment from partners may make the grant proposal more competitive, but it may also erode trust and strain the relationship before there is an opportunity to flourish.

In addition, grant writing is seldom framed as a specific genre of scholarly communication (although various initiatives have sought to address the lack of recognition of grant writing in the scholarly communication cycle, notably the work of the 101 Innovations in Scholarly Communication; Bosman, and Kramer 2017), and yet drafting and submitting grant proposals is a regular practice and professional necessity for most academics. For many scholars across career stages, disciplines, and higher ed contexts, grant writing is the path to attending conferences, securing stipends or salaries, achieving tenure, and catalyzing new research. Coupled with the increased interest of university administrators and funders on interdisciplinary work this has steered many researchers toward collaborative research design within and beyond the academy (Wilder 2019). Even for scholars in disciplines where single authorship is the traditional norm, such as many humanists and social scientists, there is increasing pressure and motivation to work across departments as well as with partners and collaborators beyond the university.

As funder expectations and higher ed landscapes continue to shift (Grove, Scott, and Chapman 2023), acknowledging grant writing as a form of scholarly communication expands opportunities for considering the values and strategies underlying collaborations within and beyond the academy. Scholars in this shifting context are asked to advocate for themselves and their work in contexts where new expectations around collaboration and public impact are often out of step with the traditional and persistent metrics that lead to tenure and promotion (HuMetrics Team 2022). Furthermore, while academics receive rigorous training in the research conventions of their fields, few receive direct instruction in core competencies that can facilitate effective collaboration such as communication, partnership development, and project management. The tacit expectation that great collaborative research will simply “come together” perpetuates the undervaluing of public scholarship and collaborative research more broadly. By acknowledging collaborative grant writing as a genre of scholarly communication, this article seeks to recognize the opportunities and limitations of advancing meaningful public scholarship within our imperfect system.

First, addressing the “collective flourishing” paradox of partnership collaborative grant writing, we adopt a radically hopeful storytelling form to first outline challenges

around and synthesize key takeaways from successful and unsuccessful grant proposals.² We are centering a discussion that moves beyond contemporary debates around the inadequacies of the existing scholarly communication system (e.g., open access affordability, policies, mandates) to recognize the collaboration and community at the center of public scholarship and the urgent need for creating broader and more inclusive forms of knowledge and resources that benefit all and that are now emerging from such work.³ By centering the discussion on public scholarship in particular, we seek to address growing, undervalued, and underfunded work in the higher ed landscape. In doing so, we outline an example of a positivist framework for considering collaborative grant writing *as* scholarly communication and offer actionable advice that may be applicable to all and especially relevant to public scholars at all career stages, as well as non-academic organizations interested in pursuing engaged research collaborations. We are focusing on collaborative grant writing because of its potential to facilitate collaborative research by focusing those engaged on aligning values, leading with curiosity, and planning feasible projects. Collaborative grant writing is especially critical and complex in the early stages of public scholarship because of its capacity to facilitate public engagement and partnership development.

Second, the goal of this article is not to provide a blueprint for writing collaborative grants. Every partnership-based project develops its own culture of collaboration, negotiating everything from email conventions to synchronous writing in shared documents to terms of reference around accountability, decision-making, and co-authorship. In our experience, scholars in disciplines where academic collaboration has long been the norm, such as engineering lab environments, tend to approach new partnerships very differently from, for example, humanists designing research centers. As these scholars move beyond the academy, their collaborative norms within it inflect the ways they pursue and sustain new relationships. There is no single template or blueprint that will work for every scholar, project, or cultural context. Instead, we offer guidance on how to foster collective thriving by aligning values and tackling pragmatic considerations that may cut across partnership-based research in any discipline or sector. We include guidance on valuing partners' in-kind contributions, how to balance the limitations of grant funding, key questions to ask before embarking on a proposal, and advice to create value for partners while the proposal is under review. Our action-oriented approach is inspired by the case stories below, which provide a window into our direct experiences of public, participatory, and community-engaged work.

2. By "radically hopeful" we do not mean to incite radicality that may harm, but to bring a focus to grant writing as an essential form of scholarly communication, invoking Lizotte's (2023) "utter sincerity and generosity" in the progression of scholarly endeavors.

3. The call for greater recognition of public scholarship processes and products has been discussed elsewhere, not least in Fisher-Livne and May-Curry (2024).

This article is, therefore, as much about what has emerged for us from a direct, experiential involvement with public-facing scholarly projects as it is about musing on the paradox that has come up when considering how scholars work with organizations beyond the academy on collaborative grant writing projects. While our direct experiences have informed our thinking, we acknowledge that collaborative grant writing is not the sole domain of public scholars. However, we propose that the process of collaborative grant writing in public scholarship in particular provides a rich terrain on which to cultivate a discussion around the evolution of scholarly communication. The Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle and the associated steps in the *Pause, Shape, Make* rubric is a creative representation of what has emerged from our own experiences and offers a way to consider collaborative grant writing alongside more typical forms of scholarly communication. It is designed to address three points of tension that extend to many dimensions of collaborative research and scholarly communication: time, money, and power.

Finally, we have used an ecological metaphor to elevate a radically inclusive, hopeful, and positivist framing that articulates our more theoretical and philosophical position, rather than focus on the inequities of the scholarly communication system. As such, this article is divided into five parts: (I) public scholarship dimensions in the research landscape; (II) research frameworks moving toward knowledge mobilization; (III) unpacking the grant writer's paradox; (IV) case stories: grants crafting in community; and (V) how to leverage the process for more effective collaborative grant writing.

I. Public Scholarship Dimensions in the Research Landscape

While there is no universal definition of “public scholarship” or single way to pursue it, extending scholarship for and with publics beyond the academy inherently requires relationships and resources. These resources are often sought and secured through grants. For the purposes of this article, projects with “public scholarship” dimensions that we refer to encompass research, teaching, preservation, and programming conducted in partnership with and for diverse individuals and communities outside of the university.⁴ The research aims and methods of public scholarship are collaboratively conceived and designed with the aim of benefiting all participants. As such, public scholarship is integral to a faculty member's or student's academic discipline, deepening and broadening

4. A typology of the publicly engaged humanities by Daniel Fisher (now Daniel Fisher-Livne) as posted on the *Humanities for All* blog provides the broad outline that we draw on to define the contours of “public scholarship.” The *Humanities for All* database of publicly engaged projects is published by the National Humanities Alliance: <https://humanitiesforall.org/essays/five-types-of-publicly-engaged-humanities-work-in-u-s-higher-education>.

the horizons of their knowledge. It also serves the public good in both its processes and outcomes, directing resources to address society's most pressing challenges.⁵

The insights we have gathered as participants in a collaborative grant writing project (Young Foundation 2023), grant implementation, and project management (Schallié 2023) and wider reflections from a range of public scholars (Burton, Cocks, and Russell 2022) inform our thinking and offer a commentary on how public scholarship processes are embedding within and across the research landscape and where there is a need for more structured resources to support and exemplify model practices. Illustrating how collaborative grant writing activities are now evolving, we will explore the insights and evidence gathered from both a personal experiential perspective and in the wider research landscape, drawing on the context of public scholarship in the research landscape as it relates to review, tenure, and promotion (RTP) evaluations (Alperin et al. 2018) and the tensions emerging from mission-based/philanthropic programs.

While public scholarship's potential for addressing society's many challenges is high, there still remain several challenges associated with collaborative grant writing for public scholarship projects. With these challenges in mind, we explore how frameworks such as True Storytelling principles devised by Jens Larsen, David Boje, and Lena Bruun (2021) and participatory action research methodologies infuse the collaborative grant writing process with a sense of radical hopefulness in the two case stories we use as illustrations. As such, the case stories shared offer an alternative perspective on the potentially destabilizing dimensions of collaborative grant writing: time, money, and power.

II. Research Frameworks Moving toward Knowledge Mobilization

Proposals are more likely to be successful if the rationale for funding can demonstrate a partner's many commitments to the project, including intellectual and financial contributions. However, the conditions for truly collaborative grant writing are not always determined with a public partner's needs in mind first. This may be due to the nature of the funding call or a lack of clarity around the shared values that underpin the project's aims.

How might the appropriate conditions for truly collaborative grant writing be achieved? Adopting a values-based approach to research design preferences the needs of the community or public partner above and beyond those of the researcher and is grounded in building trust between scholar and partner alike. But how do you establish

5. We include in this definition the contexts of collaborative grant writing (collaborative grant writing) that have been informed by participatory action research (PAR) methodologies and approaches.

the appropriate levels of trust that lead to effective collaborative grant writing? In the context of designing the research, finding community members who are already doing the work is an essential first step to ensuring that problems to be solved through the collaborative grant writing process are addressed from the ground up, establishing trust through participation in a partner's every day.

As described by Dave Tell (Burton, Cocks, and Russell 2022, chap. 2.2), establishing trust takes time and requires literally showing up with partners “over time . . . to help them move their work forward” (Tell 2022). The grant cannot simply be written as a one-off collaboration. In the context of Tell's work, the conditions for crafting successful collaborative grant writing rest on a commitment to the process of establishing trust, a commitment that demonstrates an enduring process of showing up as one's authentic self. According to Larsen, Boje, and Bruun, this is the first principle of “True Storytelling”: “True Storytelling principles are an ethical approach to self-correcting the Fake to get closer to the True. We have developed True Storytelling as a philosophical and storytelling science scaffolding. It is an ethical and sustainable approach to work with change and development, for example, related to climate change, mental health, start-ups, communities and fundraising” (2021, x).

The true storytelling model developed by Larsen, Boje, and Bruun (2021) is centered on seven principles that provide a “scaffolding” for more authentic communication. We offer them here as a theoretical framing loosely woven through our reflections on collaborative grant writing as illustrated in our personal experiences noted in Section IV's case stories:

1. True: You yourself must be true and prepare the energy and effort for a sustainable future.
2. Making room: True Storytelling makes spaces that respect the stories already there.
3. Plotting: You must create stories with a clear plot, creating direction and helping people prioritize.
4. Timing: You must have timing.
5. Helping stories along: You must be able to help stories on their way and be open to experiment.
6. Staging: You must consider staging, including scenography and artifacts.
7. Reflecting: You must reflect on the stories and how they create value.

Applying storytelling as a framework for cooperation and collaboration is a well-established element of research design. Citing Gubrium in *A Guide to Selecting Participatory Research Methods Based on Project and Partnership Goals*, Stephanie Duea, Emily Zimmerman, Lisa Vaughn, Sónia Dias, and Janet Harris (2022) note how the use of narrative forms creates powerful conditions for participatory knowledge

exchange: “The Visual and Narrative domain includes participatory research methods that use visual and narrative approaches to data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The methods in this domain generally emphasize the sharing and co-production of stakeholder experiences and ideas through alternative, multimodal approaches to data collection and interpretation. Participatory visual and narrative methods are guided by stakeholder interests and priorities, ‘putting the methods literally in the hands of participants themselves and allowing for greater access to social research knowledge beyond the academy’” (Gubrium, Harper, and Otañez 2015, 13; quoted in Duea et al. 2022).

In PAR, storytelling provides participants with an empowering model of knowledge exchange, describing the detail of their own experiences and the needs to be addressed in their own words and using a variety of visual and narrative approaches to creating rich pictures of the solutions being sought. As Duea et al. (2022) describe, PAR creates the conditions for “co-production of stakeholder experiences and ideas,” which sits at the heart of producing values-based public scholarship as described by Tell in explaining how to develop trust above. There is an already well-established body of work exploring the public benefits of participatory methods in the research process (Cornish et al. 2023; Chevalier and Buckles 2019; Lucko 2024) and the need for scholarly communication to accommodate more of the process of engaging with the public (not just for evaluation purposes; MLA 2022) for increased social innovation and public benefit. However, much of the literature is informed by research outputs, not *inputs*. This is why we raise the paradox of collaborative grant writing as an under-recognized form of scholarly communication and suggest that using participatory and storytelling frameworks during the grant writing process will lead to more effective and inclusive forms of knowledge exchange.

To illustrate this further, we introduce here the Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle as a framework that public scholars can use to model the best practices of their collaborative teams, save time, and facilitate the conversations that drive successful projects.

The Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle and associated creative steps of *Pause*, *Shape*, *Make* (discussed in detail in Section V.1) is an embodied approach to research, teaching, and learning. It is a radically inclusive change-making craft that facilitates stronger partnerships and more feasible projects by surfacing tensions early and holding all participants responsible for the success of the collective. To illustrate how this process operates, we have drawn on imagery from a community gardening setting to highlight the perspectives, conditions, and initiatives associated with collaborative grant writing.⁶

6. All illustrations in this paper were designed by Sophia van Hees for the Hikma Collective. CC BY 4.0

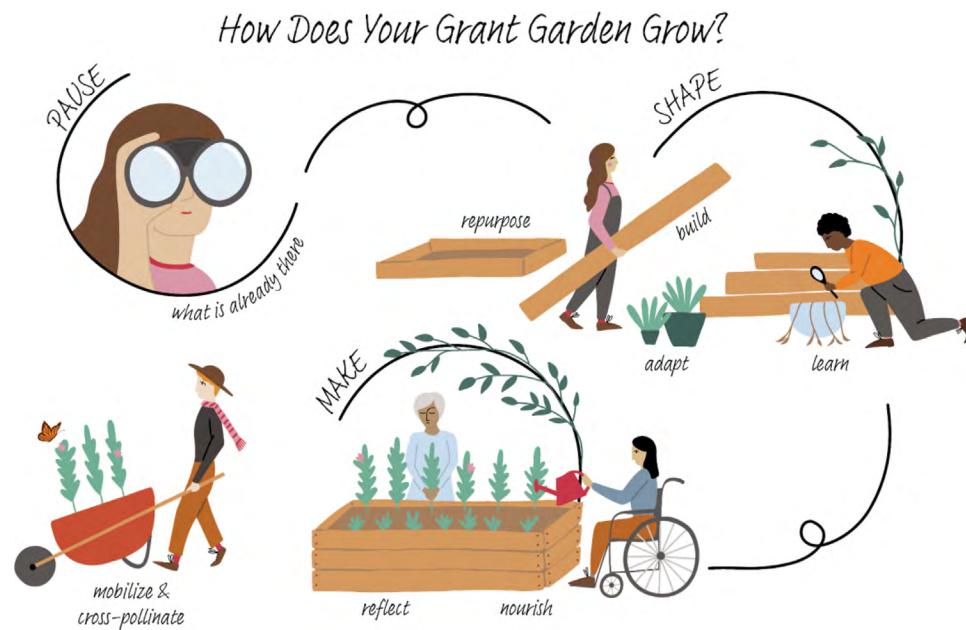


Figure 1. The Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle of *Pause*, *Shape*, *Make*. (Designed by Sophia van Hees.)

The cycle has three iterative steps: *Pause*, *Shape*, and *Make* (PSM). Before beginning a grant application promising something new, the team *pauses* to take stock of existing strengths and achievements; reflect upon learnings from past collaborations; and assess which needs, challenges, or opportunities are the highest priorities for the team to pursue. After doing that collective reflection and consensus-building, the team *shapes* a project that aligns with shared goals and priorities. This is a moment to ask questions about co-authorship, leadership, resource allocation, and other key principles that often fall between the execution of day-to-day activities and the articulation of theoretical scholarship. Teams keep this reflection and planning in mind as they *make* the project move forward through coordinated, deliberative action.

III. Unpacking the Grant Writer's Paradox

By understanding collaborative grant writing as a form of scholarly communication, we can discover fertile ground to till that can facilitate better projects and partnerships. Virtually all public scholarship, regardless of its specific framework or methodology, requires funding to succeed. True Storytelling, participatory action research, and related partnership-based research approaches typically focus on the value of communication and collaboration, articulating modes to achieve it that vary by discipline

and application. Even public scholars who value and employ storytelling in their work treat collaborative grant writing as a separate category of activity. In public scholarship, community dialogues, multimedia projects and even peer-reviewed articles in conventional academic journals can be understood as creative endeavors and modes of co-production. The grant proposal, however, is often treated as an administrative hoop rather than a contribution to knowledge and process. This genre complicates the True Storytelling principles with three tensions that are especially prominent in collaborative grant writing: *time*, *money*, and *power*.

Government and philanthropic funders alike are showing growing interest in supporting public scholarship. These developments in the funding landscape are encouraging, but they have yet to address some of the core points of friction between conventional research funding processes and the realities of scholarship with partners beyond the academy. The Grant Writer's Paradox refers to the complex dynamics that emerge when a scholar, typically based at an academic institution, seeks funding to support a project with one or more non-academic partner organizations. Most academic scholars understand collaborative grant writing to be a necessary part of their jobs, albeit one that takes time away from other responsibilities and for which they receive recognition only if the grant is awarded. Depending on the country and institution, grants are at minimum an important metric of professional performance and potentially a component of their salary.

Typically, the academic has the flexibility to apply for grants that align best with their self-designed research programs. This is a key structural difference from their non-academic partners, for whom grants must be justified within organizational priorities and overarching budget lines. Even government, private, and not-for-profit organizations with dedicated research arms are unlikely to have excess human and fiscal resources to support academic-led grants for public scholarship. Unless a proposed public scholarship project falls directly within the organization's mandate and operational priorities, it is likely that new tasks related to that proposal will create work for staff that extends beyond their existing responsibilities. For social sector organizations with limited fiscal and human resources, there is significant risk and potential opportunity cost associated with investing time and attention in a public scholarship project. This is especially true at the grant proposal stage, when the money is uncertain.

Experienced public scholars want input in the early stages of their project design, but they also appreciate their partners' constraints. Leaders of non-academic organizations considering academic partnerships face difficult questions about how to allocate their team's labor, how to position new projects within existing priorities and commitments, and how to justify their decisions to those to whom they are accountable. If an organization decides to support a proposal, they have yet more decisions to make about how much time, money, and energy to contribute. These pressures on both sides often

surface points of friction at the grant development stage that will continue to present challenges regardless of the grant's outcome.

TIME

For both academic applicants and their partners, investing time in a grant means diverting time from other endeavors while accepting the risk that the grant will not succeed. Given that unsuccessful grants are neither publishable nor CV-building, this is a significant tradeoff for early-career researchers in particular. Most partner organizations, especially those advancing social justice work, have limited resources, and the investment of time up front in an application that may not come to fruition can detract from vital operations.

Mismatched timelines between academics, partners, and funders create workflow challenges up front. The time gap between the grant deadline and notification of the outcome exacerbates these difficulties, since scholars and organizational leaders alike must plan for the grant's success and failure while balancing other projects and priorities. Even in cases of awarded grants, the ramp-up time for all involved is often slower than anticipated, as is the administrative process of accessing the funding.

MONEY

Most funders want to see partners' authentic engagement reflected in the grant proposal, and yet that engagement puts pressure on partners to contribute uncompensated labor without the promise of future returns on that investment. Many grants require cash or in-kind matching funds, and that means raising and committing budget lines that must be justified before the grant is submitted, protected while awaiting an answer, and claimed if the project is successful—all of these tasks present unique challenges in different organizational contexts. Furthermore, while most funders want to see “innovative” projects that break from ongoing operations, most long-term projects need guaranteed operational funding over time to justify their investment in co-producing sustainable public scholarship activities into their existing portfolios and activities. While some public scholarship projects are well suited to generate their own income sources, building sustainable operations takes time and experience. The best funded pilot can only thrive for so long without the promise of long-term, day-to-day fiscal support. The pressure to spin an effective project into something new for existing and potential funders can disrupt its momentum and perpetuate a scarcity mindset.

POWER

Money brings power dynamics into all kinds of relationships, and grants are no exception. In most cases, a particular individual or organization takes responsibility for steering the grant development process, submitting the application, and administering the funds should the proposal be successful. As needs and opportunities evolve, that person is often responsible for making speedy decisions about the budget and project steps, not to mention conflict resolution. Without clear communication around expectations and deliberate collaboration, partners can get left out of key decisions or overburdened by last-minute expectations and changes.

Within and surrounding the complexity of research partnerships themselves, perceptions and misperceptions about funders presents additional challenges. Funders reasonably expect competitive applications to follow their guidelines and align with their priorities. While this alignment is key to any partnership, the purse strings involved can create complicated assumptions and expectations. Many applicants treat grant proposals as prescribed formulas, often assuming from the outset that the goal is to figure out the “magic words” the funder wants to hear and say those words. When funders are seen as antagonists or goalies rather than advocates and partners, scarcity prevails and it becomes more difficult to focus on designing the proposal to reflect the authentic goals, purpose, and project design of the project.

It is true that some level of formula is strategic in collaborative grant writing, as funders typically want their reviewers to be able to compare apples to apples rather than digging for the elements of your proposal that meet the criteria. However, every genre has formulas, and having a formula does not inherently mean that there is no room for creativity or process. In the next section, we explore this process of creativity through the lens of our own participation in collaborative grant writing projects.

IV. Case Stories: Grants Crafting in Community

The Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle and its iterative steps of *Pause*, *Shape*, and *Make* have emerged from the authors’ personal experiences working for and with public scholarship initiatives. In keeping with our ecological metaphor for *Pause*, *Shape*, and *Make*, we have learned to understand time, money, and power as resources that can be conserved, recycled, and wasted depending upon project participants’ shared commitment to and investment in their collective flourishing. In the two case stories that follow, we will share our personal experiences working in collaborative contexts of public scholarship toward funding for public-facing projects. These stories show how the collaborative grant writing process intersected with collaborative teams’ existing

methodologies and approaches to advance public scholarship in a good way. Well before the grants were submitted, the collaborators in these case stories approached the proposal design process as an opportunity to build trust, clarify shared priorities, and foster practices that have enabled them to flourish.

The authors bring to this framing our engagement with the specific projects described below as well as our broader positioning as “community scholars” who work within the academic ecosystem, but not in traditional research positions.⁷ As a publisher who has shaped a career in scholarly communication within the humanities and social sciences, Kath Burton has worked with researchers, scholarly societies, and educational partners to develop dynamic publication pathways that have most recently included exemplifying the model practices of publicly engaged scholars. In addition to convening the Publishing and the Publicly Engaged Humanities working group, Burton has taken an active role in developing projects around social cohesion, climate adaptation, and community knowledge exchange.⁸ As a research consultant who has worked with research teams on public-facing projects ranging from digital humanities to human rights policy, robotics, and healthcare accessibility and wildfire resilience, Erica Machulak engages deeply and intensively with partnership-based teams to develop grants that map the design of public scholarship projects from their inception. Through her social impact startup, the Hikma Collective, Machulak has also joined research projects as a partner and navigated the complexities of entering into university-led research initiatives as a non-academic participant.⁹

From these experiences, we have learned that collaborative grant writing can deepen and augment methodologies like True Storytelling and PAR by providing space and parameters to facilitate dialogues about the mission and vision of the project as well as more granular conversations about intellectual sharing, leadership, resource allocation, and other project dimensions that often fall between the work of day-to-day operations and the work of peer-reviewed publications. As a genre of scholarly communication, the grant proposal can be both a site of co-authorship and a prompt to articulate

7. Machulak introduces the idea of the “community scholar” as a counterpoint to the “independent scholar.” She describes this concept as follows: “Community scholars across professional contexts are creating spaces and dialogues to reexamine whether and how the humanities (and, by extension, humanists) serve society. This conversation has become a crossroads for multimodal dialogue that intertwines peer reviewed publications with scholarly society programs, philanthropic priorities, journalism, and social media. Much of this conversation is driven by academics with extensive hands-on experience in higher ed administration” (Machulak, forthcoming).

8. Burton (2024) is currently engaged in the Gathering in Food, Telling Stories (GiFTS) project supported by Transition Together and in partnership with the Englefield Green Team. The GiFTS project is a continuation of the community food-growing initiatives that Burton has been participating in since the COVID-19 pandemic (June 2020). The *Imagining Tomorrow* podcast offers more background to the radically hopeful approaches working in community to grow food (Newman 2024).

9. As an example of these partnerships in progress, listen to Machulak (2023a).

the project's plan and purpose for the benefit of funders as well as the team's internal development.

Kath's Story: Digital Storytelling for Community Food Growing

I've always tried to grow my own food. When visiting my grandparents in Kent (the "garden of England") as a child, the jobs to be done in the garden were always accompanied by a nibble of a sun-ripened tomato here, the promise of delicious meals to come with every potato unearthed, and a share of apples split in two, right down the core, by my granddad's powerful tenant-farmer hands. Later I dabbled with growing tomatoes and herbs wherever the light was good in the many rented houses I shared with others. Later still, when I had a garden of my own, I grew an array of vegetables and fruits to supplement our diet with a greater variety of fresh, organic, homegrown food. It was only with the onset of pandemic lockdowns, however, that I found myself growing food with others, in an urban community garden in the center of our town. Growing food with others was a wonderful way to connect in a safe, socially distanced way and soon became a fascination for me. It's there that I connected with researchers who were exploring the benefits of community food growing (CFG), looking at how CFG initiatives provide health and well-being, social cohesion, and planet-friendly food-growing benefits for all. As our group of growers grew, so did my interest in the process of designing and conducting research. I joined the steering committee for a project on Digital Storytelling about Group Food Growing, led by researchers at the Open University and funded by AHRC (Levidow, Berardi, and Jung 2024). Joining the committee, I provided participant insights about food growing and helped shape content for an online open course on digital storytelling methods, based on the videos we had created as participants (Levidow et al. 2022).

Having worked in scholarly communication for many years, I had some insight into how research was designed and conducted but had never been a participant in a project like this. Could I become a participant and a publisher? And I can do this round the corner from where I live and enjoy growing low-carbon, locally produced food in a flourishing shared green space? What a brilliant opportunity to better understand what goes into the research process rather than focus on creating publishing conditions for research outputs!

Growing food together, sharing knowledge and stories of the benefits of food growing soon turned to campaigning for the collective use of public spaces.¹⁰ I was hooked.

10. The Right to Grow campaign was formally launched in 2023: <https://www.incredibleedible.org.uk/what-we-do/right-to-grow/>.

Inspired by the PAR models that had empowered our digital storytelling project, a subset of our steering committee embarked upon a series of grant writing exercises. Drawing on the PAR techniques that had underpinned our previous project (collaboration, empowerment, evidence-based change, etc.), we developed a process of participatory ideas gathering that emerged from the stories we had shared in our community food-growing group. Our purpose/message was clear and formed the basis of our proposition: the knowledge produced and held by community food-growing initiatives has the power to change policy, specifically at the local authority level in the UK. Our aim was to integrate community food-growing initiatives into our councils' climate adaptation and sustainability strategies. We adopted a multimodal approach to creating a strategy for ideas gathering to feed into grant design—e.g., rich pictures, filming techniques, storyboarding, video production and screenings, miro boards, video hosting, youth digital eco warriors. We responded to a situation where we wrote an Expression of Interest for a newly founded Community Knowledge Fund (CKF) supported by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the Young Foundation. Our delight at being awarded Phase 1 grant funding (six months) was huge. We had been selected as one of 24 projects from over 350 entries to design and test our research assumptions and gather inputs for the Phase 2 application. We attended a research training program by the Young Foundation. We learned how research works in the UK and how the Young Foundation's research methods originated from the Open University, where our project coordinator works. We also learned how much that meant to him as a participant. All our values were lining up. We were getting the opportunity to put forth some of the BIG ideas that we had nurtured, the social innovations we had hoped to ignite, and the community stories we had gathered for a radically hopeful community food-growing vision for people and planet!

We didn't get the Phase 2 funding.

All of the activities that we had engaged in during the first phase of the CKF project served to create a model for collaborative grant writing that relied on us holding space for the energy it would take to create the right conditions for grant writing success. We made room for one another's stories, coming together once a week to explore what had come up for us in our various roles (participatory researcher, publisher, educationalist) and our learnings from the CKF "becoming researchers" program. We had experimented with community building activities and evaluation frameworks and gathered evidence of need from the communities who would be direct beneficiaries, as participants, of our project's inputs and outputs. We created things—digital and physical—describing our shared vision and how we would deliver innovation in research design and gifting knowledge before it's lost. We had amazing plans for building on that knowledge gathered and using it to create income streams and provide essential resources for CFG initiatives.

Despite being unsuccessful in the Phase 2 funding round, our collaborative grant writing project ignited a naturally cooperative way of working that has returned more in kind than the grant award itself. As our process was built around the mutual respect for the expertise and knowledge held by each of our collaborative grant writing group members (regardless of their research or PAR expertise), our foundations were strong.

We didn't get the money, but we did create incredible value. This manifested in many ways, from reinforced friendships to mutually supportive ways of working that we now carry through into future grant writing projects.

The next time round, we got the funding.

With thanks to Andrea Berardi and Kirsty Dabbs for permitting use of this story drawn from the community-led research, learning, and knowledge exchange among food-growing initiatives project (Young Foundation 2023).

Erica's Story: Planning to Plan a Plan

It was a Saturday afternoon, and I was sitting in a Zoom room with three women I had come to know well over the past year. I had a half-crocheted tentacle in my hands—one of eight limbs I was working on for a long overdue birthday gift for my nephew. Google Doc open, we were trying to figure out how to cram everything we wanted to say into the three pages we had another 24 hours to write. This was the final stage of a rigorous application process for the Partnership Grant, the largest and most competitive grant offered by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

The proposal for “Visual Storytelling and Graphic Art in Genocide and Human Rights Education” had been years in the making, and the time that 30 to 40 co-applicants, collaborators, and partners had invested in the proposal made the stakes feel higher than ever before. Historically, applicant teams who passed Stage 2 of this competition were invited to a virtual interview with the review committee to address, in similar fashion to a dissertation defense, any outstanding questions or concerns about their proposals. This time around, SSHRC changed the process. Applicants were informed that they would receive written feedback on a particular date and have three days to respond in three pages or less.

“Game on,” we said. In this last stage of writing, we sought to articulate a critical piece of the project's design: Why was the first year of our seven-year timeline set aside to plan our project? This was a multi-stage application process for a grant valued at \$2.5M CAD. From the beginnings of Stage 1 to present, we had been working on this for well over a year, with funding to do so during Stage 2. Shouldn't we have a plan by now?

For this team, the survivor-centered ethos of the program was its backbone, and tailored planning was critical to both research and practice. The work had started as a

three-year pilot pairing Holocaust survivors with scholars and artists to co-create graphic memoirs of the survivors' experiences. Its goal was to develop trauma-informed, arts-based testimony collection practices with the survivors, reaching beyond the historical record to honor the authenticity of their experiences. With their support, the research team was now extending the project to other sites of genocide and mass atrocity: Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo, Iraq and Syria, and Turtle Island (Indigenous survivors in Canada).

This was not a project where the successful pilot with Holocaust survivors could be stamped onto the four new sites. In keeping with PAR principles, the research team had spent years building local relationships. The project could only be survivor centered, and yet the applicants were cautious not to engage survivors before securing funds for many reasons. They were, and continue to be, cautious about overpromising, protective of survivors' privacy, and committed to letting the co-creative process unfold organically. Work with local partners, artists, and survivors at the five sites would take time and resources. Without that investment and space to plan together, there was no project.

In the language of this article's proposed collaborative grant writing framework, this was a moment to *pause*, digest reviewer feedback, and clarify for us the reason that we had crafted our proposal the way we had. Citing established PAR methodologies and laying out the team's rationale, we wrote a response explaining that there was a legitimate need for scholars and artists to take the time to adapt the pilot methodology for local contexts. Building on over a year of proposal development through Stage 1 and Stage 2 as well as enthusiastic support letters from partners, the team secured \$2.5M CAD over the next seven years.

As the grant writer for such a project, it is a tricky thing for me to talk about what "we" did. In six years of working with public scholars who have built their research, careers, and networks on trust relationships, I have never met a team so careful to avoid grandstanding. Many academics treat collaborative grant writing as a game they can win with magic words and creative formatting. This team was the opposite: they pushed back on every impact statement, every hint of heroism, to make sure that the claims we were making were ethical and justified. This team consistently respected the difficulty and responsibility the reviewers were accepting by evaluating this particular competition, which attracts dedicated teams with excellent track records and strong partnership networks. They also acknowledged, in a way that applicants often don't, that accepting this federal grant would make them accountable to taxpayers as well as their partners and collaborators.

The crux of the project is its survivor-centered approach. I have never worked directly with the survivors who drive the work, nor am I a formal member of the team. I am a consultant who gets paid to maintain critical distance, ask questions, and write

grants that translate my clients' work for decision makers. However, working for over a year with a team that puts this much care into relationships, it was impossible not to feel included and invested. I have come to learn that collaborative grant writing can be an act of facilitation through which I get to know my clients as I provide tools and frameworks to pause, shape, and make. Reframed as co-creative storytelling, collaborative grant writing offers structured approaches to reflection and project design that guide applicants to imagine in concrete terms how to make organic projects feasible and fundable.

With gratitude to Charlotte Schallié, Andrea Webb, and the “Visual Storytelling and Graphic Art in Genocide and Human Rights Education” network for allowing us to share their story. This work is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada and other supporters. Learn more about the project at <https://visualnarratives.org>.

V. How to Leverage the Process for More Effective Collaborative Grant Writing

Our personal experiences have shown the diverse ways that collaborative teams address questions about how knowledge can be produced, consumed, gifted, and reused, especially where researchers are paired with public partners. Questions connected to authorship (Who created these ideas? What happens to those ideas that are left on the cutting-room floor?), shared authority (Who owns these ideas? How does IP impact collaborative grant writing?), and trust (How do we determine which ideas will fit? Who gets to decide?) have come up and are echoed in the narratives shared by public scholars about the nature of community engagement and working with the public as research participants (Wingo, Heppler, and Schadewald 2020; Duea et al. 2022). We propose that the collaborative grant writing process itself can help facilitate those tough conversations by creating the space and imperative to plan and communicate clearly.

Grant proposals can do strange things to relationships. In the wrong circumstances, they pressurize what might otherwise be an organic and healthy collaboration, forcing applicants and their partners to commit their time, money, and people in ways that aren't realistic. Herein lies the paradox that many applicants face when writing grants to support new and emerging research partnerships: to get the funding, you need to demonstrate that your relationship is “authentic.” Without funding, though, you lack the time and resources to build the history and trust that authenticity requires. Even collaborative teams that have been working together for decades face these challenges as they seek to engage new partners and collaborators in their work.

When the grant proposal is treated as a black box or a game to be won by the team that chooses the most enticing buzzwords, it can constrain creativity and lead to confusion and misaligned expectations within the team. Some of these risks can be mitigated and even reversed by treating collaborative grant writing as a genre of scholarly communication designed to make the project accessible and craft a plan that the team is collectively on board to implement. If you are in the early stages of a collaboration that looks promising, and in which it's clear that everyone involved generally wants the same thing, the constraints of a proposal can be a way to focus the conversation and get everyone on the same page. Just as poets writing sonnets and haikus generate creativity by operating within formal limits, collaborators can leverage application instructions to harness boundless opportunities. For teams building on previous collaborations, the grant instructions can serve as an accountability check to determine whether the collective track record holds up the ideas of the project. It can also be an opportunity to recognize better practices that have been adopted intuitively by putting language around them, gathering feedback, and making sure those practices are known, shared, and clarified as expectations for new team members.

V.1 The Participatory Grant Cycle

To ease the flow of collaborative grant writing, establish mutually beneficial conditions for your process, and ensure that shared values are deeply embedded, we offer a deliberative rubric informed by our own participatory experiences. Scholarly communications organizations have crafted a rubric for authors to use when considering their publication options. Think. Check. Submit. (n.d.) supports effective publication practices and guides authors to making considered decisions about where to place their work. Inspired by this framework for research publication, we propose the Participatory Grants Crafting Cycle of PSM as a similar model for collaborative grant writing. A model that is infused with principles of participation and collective flourishing and in echoing Think. Check. Submit. points to the necessity of giving greater recognition to the *process* of collaborative grant writing as a form of scholarly communication. The rubric can be activated at any time before, during, and after writing a grant and is centered on three defined phases of activity: *pausing*: to notice what's already present; *shaping*: to repurpose what we know and learn socially from one another; and *making*: gathering all the knowledge gifted to pull the work together. We have crafted PSM as an explicitly experiential tool for assessing intentions, progress, and outcomes based on our experiences and grounded in PAR and storytelling techniques. As such, PSM can be used in a variety of settings, not least in the production of effective collaborative grant writing but also for communicating

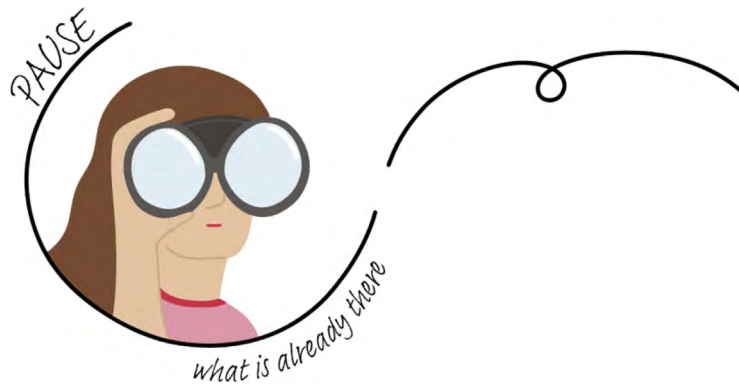


Figure 2. *Pause:* taking the time to notice what is already there.

public scholarship more generally that has a wider application and audience beyond the academy.

PSM is not an alternative to existing methodologies but rather a way to lace them into the grant development process with partners. In keeping with PAR principles and other forms of participatory, engaged and public scholarship, the first step in PSM channels energies toward noticing and recording everything. A project's goals may not eventually include every angle considered at the outset, but it is essential to gather all inputs and consider anything that might be possible, as well as to ask all the *questions*.

When building new partnerships, the questions we ask matter more than the answers we give. Generative questions can transform promising connections into lasting partnerships, and they are key to writing feasible and authentic grant proposals. Public scholars know better than anyone the power of empathy and curiosity to help us navigate ambiguity and find common ground. Generative questions enable us to build trust with collaborators, discover points of intersection, and lay the groundwork for mutually compelling and feasible projects.

Generative questions are rooted in the assumption that we and our collaborators bring complementary strengths to the table. They are designed to identify existing needs, challenges, and opportunities and to surface potential connections that may not otherwise be visible or intuitive. The following three questions are non-exhaustive and selected to indicate the different types of knowledge that we can access to demonstrate respect, discover intersections, and quickly identify logistical considerations: (1) What are your current priorities? (2) What have you already tried? and (3) What is your timeline? While these questions are straightforward, they signal underlying values, knowledges, and practical insights that build trust and save time.¹¹

11. These questions are adapted from Machulak (2023c).

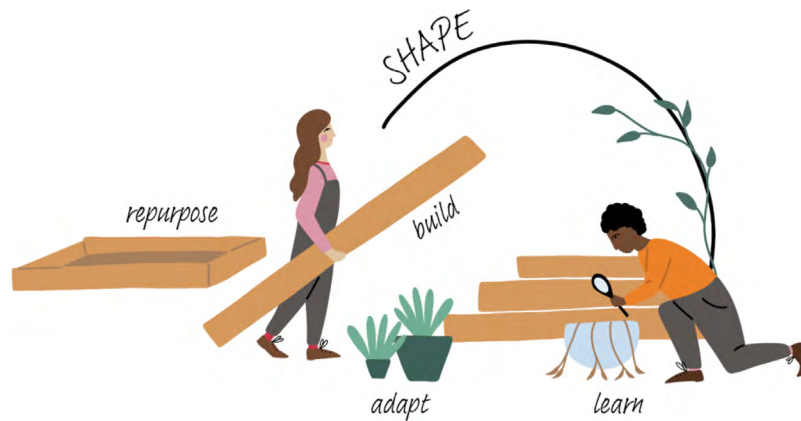


Figure 3. *Shape*: repurposing what we know and learning from one another.

Questions like these are essential to effective planning and implementation of collaborative projects. Crucial to our storytelling model, they also surface individual stories about the past and present that enable all participants to find points of connection between their perspectives and experiences. These stories facilitate collective shaping of the project's future possibilities.

Emphasizing the importance of questions over answers in the *Pause* phase of PSM releases the need to reach a conclusion before all of the ideas have been worked through. The *Shape* phase is when your collaborative grant writing team will likely determine a shared goal that not only responds to the funding call but also is deeply embedded in the challenge emerging from a non-academic public partner. Crucially, *Shape* extends the rich interrogation of need established through the *Pause* phase and creates a pathway to making an effective *proposition*.

Come up with a shared goal.

Research grants are about questions, not answers. If you knew the solution already, you would not need the resources to go about finding it. Seasoned funders understand new partnerships can fail, and they also understand that responsive approaches can't be planned to the letter in advance. Any fundable grant proposal needs to show that the applicant can solve a complex problem and that the specific research question you have identified is one worth answering. When it comes to funding for research collaborations, you must also prove that your research question can only be answered by the exact combination of people involved in your application. If you are working in collaboration, this means that you need to start by setting a shared goal.



Figure 4. *Make*: gathering all of the knowledge gifted to draft the proposal.

The trick is to come up with a goal that is specific but not prescriptive. Funding opportunities from the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), for instance, emphasize that grants in its research partnership funding stream should address a “need, challenge or opportunity” that is driven by one or more non-academic partners. The most productive work of the application happens when all parties involved build consensus on the specific thing they want to address. This process requires intentional conversations about the context that has created your “need, challenge or opportunity.” Once the group has built consensus, you can explore how a researcher’s approach might help achieve your shared goal.

For opportunities like the SSHRC Partnership Engage Grant, the best way to develop the proposal is also the best way to develop the partnership itself: make the connection, show up, and have an open dialogue about where your needs and interests intersect with your potential partner’s. This is not easy—if you are highly skilled at thinking about a certain kind of problem in a very particular way, it can be challenging to adapt your approach to a new context. The easiest way to push through is to identify a unique and specific goal that you and your partners can tackle together.¹²

When all members of a collaboration are clear about their expertise and their limits, it becomes much easier to have a conversation about who should take the lead at which point. When talking with new or existing partners, always acknowledge both the value that you can bring and your knowledge gaps. During the *Make* phase of the PSM cycle, you’ll be drawing on the shared goals and values established during the first two phases of the PSM cycle and clarifying your *limits*. The *Make* phase is also a good time to reflect on the strengths and resources that all parties are already bringing to the table, including in-kind contributions from partners like

12. For more on this topic, see Machulak (2023b).

time, space, and marketing assets that often go unrecognized (Mizuta and Rennert 2024).¹³

Create a draft you can repurpose for future work

To get the most out of your grants crafting process, consider the value of the proposal itself as a facilitation tool and a body of content that you can recycle for future purposes. Few grant proposals get published. For the most part, they get sent in and then never shared again except, in some cases, as base text for future grant proposals. Treating your proposal as a prototype for journal articles, marketing content, policy papers, and terms of reference will make the endeavor more worthwhile for all involved. The more you invest in the discussions and planning behind the proposal, the more authentically the document you draft will support your future work.

As you draft the proposal, revisit the learnings gathered and decisions made during *Pause* and *Shape*. Is your narrative speaking directly and specifically to the consensus you have built? Does your project plan support those conversations? Integrating review steps into your process can be an effective way to make sure that all participants are on the literal same page and surface any points of confusion or potential obstacles that you can anticipate now. To save everyone involved time, consider asking key participants to hold a few days in their calendars for grant review and then circulate the draft to everyone at the same time. Follow up with individuals for quick check-ins or to indicate where their targeted feedback would be especially useful.

Establishing a baseline understanding of how the grant process will proceed enables discussions about when to connect, where more resources may be needed, and how long a particular task is likely to take. Every organization operates differently, and people within these organizations may not realize just how differently until they choose to work together. For instance, the academic system can be mystifying to non-academics, who may have no idea what a faculty member is doing when not in the classroom. On the flipside, a not-for-profit may need to report on progress or findings earlier than would ever be expected in an academic context. The in-kind contributions of public partners are present across the cycle and cannot be underestimated. It is perhaps during the *Make* phase when in-kind contributions really show up, synthesizing the problem to be solved and evidence gathered with a healthy dose of reality.

In some ways, the structure of a grant proposal, with sections focused on methods, process, governance, and budget, can provide a touchstone for clarifying conversations

13. For a guide to recognizing and communicating partners' in-kind contributions in funding proposals, see <https://www.hikma.studio/blog/InKindContributions>.

about shared and different types of inputs. While distributing tasks among the team is an efficient way to gather information, the *Make* phase of the PSM cycle is where the proposal comes together as a whole. The final document—whether wholly written or including digital elements—becomes a valuable entity in itself, recording the characters/participants, shared values, and myriad contributions.

And finally, remember there are other funds in the sea. The PSM cycle can be activated whether or not your proposal is accepted and is a rubric that can be revisited quickly before you embark on another collaborative grant writing project. Collaborations can become especially strained when you believe that the success of your project hinges on a specific grant opportunity. If you are doing good work, there are probably other ways to fund it. If it becomes clear that forcing this grant proposal will strain the partnership itself, consider waiting for the next cycle or looking elsewhere for support. While the global funding network can be hard to navigate, you may be surprised by the niche opportunities that are out there.

Invest your energy in the relationship—not the grant proposal—and you build a solid foundation for this project, the next one, and many more to come.

That deep investment in relationship building creates the conditions for authenticity to show up in your collaborative grant writing process: rich with the resonances of True Storytelling and PAR principles and founded on shared authority. As such, we think that collaborative grant writing is not only an under-recognized form of scholarly communication but deserves greater consideration in the context of complex knowledge production systems—not only to empower participatory and authenticity-building approaches to flourish but also in the increasingly valuable context of public scholarship and knowledge production.

Conclusion: Creating Value through Shared Authority

Establishing trust before, during, and after the process, by always responding to needs of those in the group, ensures that any collaborative grant writing process is firmly rooted in practices that support, nurture, and empower. As both case stories illustrate, recognizing power dynamics and seeking to flatten any hierarchies by working together to experiment and test ideas is a great opportunity to “learn socially.” In Kath’s story, this allowed the group to generate the convergence of goals and aspirations, leading to more accurate mutual expectations and the building of relations of trust and respect. It allowed participant collaborators to co-create the knowledge needed to understand the issues we were confronting and the new practices we wanted to experiment with. These were very much part of the group’s working dynamics and fit into the natural flow of our daily activities, rather than being something additional to fit in with an arbitrary timeline.

As such, the collaborative grant writing effort sought to minimize stress by valuing in-kind contributions as essential elements of project design. It allowed participants to co-create the knowledge needed to understand the issues we were confronting and the new practices we wanted to experiment with.

Creating regular space for interaction (sharing information, interpretation, mutual learning, impact assessment, proposal development) allowed us to act collectively but in different places and contexts. In Erica's story, we learned that asking better questions of ourselves and our partners (and others) about how project design responds to needs is hugely powerful in determining how to act. Having frank conversations about what individual and collective needs are being addressed throughout the process and being sure to "check your in-kind" serves to remind participants that no one contribution is greater than the other. According to the true storytelling model, these conversations facilitate continuous reflection on "what is the story now" (Larsen, Boje, and Bruun 2020, 105).

Even when proposals are not successful, something hopeful will emerge if the process has been leveraged based on these foundational principles. In Erica's story, in facing the challenge of having to revise the proposal, the foundational respect established within the group ignited the passion with which to overcome the challenge being presented by an incredibly short turnaround time.

In Kath's story, this generated not only a proposal (the "scholarly communication") which has been shared repeatedly, drawn upon and adapted, but ultimately led to some funding success. These many adaptations, and reassemblages, provide opportunities to critique and supplement the work being produced by collaborative grant writing initiatives. The "patchy assemblage" (borrowing from "patchy anthropocene"; Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019) of collaborative grant writing initiatives ensures that a wide range of voices, capabilities, and experiences are recognized in the process and gives way to a form of values-based peer review that recognizes experiential and participatory storytelling as much as empirical, evidence-based inputs.

We raise these case stories as illustrations of how creating shared authority at the outset can be both challenging and rewarding but ultimately offers a way to gather all the voices associated with public scholarship from the outset.¹⁴ By focusing on examples from public scholarship in our argument for collaborative grant writing to be recognized as a radically inclusive form of scholarly communication, we acknowledge that we have limited the discussion to only one facet of grant writing in general. Intentionally limiting our examples to public scholarship expands the already existing rubrics for scholarly communication to focus on the deliberative craft of collaborative grant writing. As

14. "Shared authority" in the context of scholarly communication requires more consideration than the framing of this article would permit. As a topic of ongoing inquiry, it has been well documented by oral historians (not least Sitzia 2003).

such, our contribution to this special issue of the *Journal of Electronic Publishing* spotlights an interpretation of that process to center on the participatory and storytelling potential of collaborative grant writing as a radically inclusive change-making craft in an imperfect scholarly communication system.

Author Biographies

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