

DARE

A collaborative partnership between
Opera North and the University of Leeds

Eleanor Ford and Lesley Patrick
A Mission Models Money case study
www.missionmodelsmoney.org.uk



Introduction: The Importance of Collaborative Partnerships

Despite current ads and slogans, the world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what's possible

Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, The Berkana Institute¹

What is *DARE*?

DARE is an ambitious partnership between Opera North and the University of Leeds, and it is believed that it is the first collaboration of its kind in the country. Launched in March 2007, these creative-thinking organisations, both leaders in their fields, saw the potential for a new and mutually beneficial collaboration – *a new vision of what was possible*. Coming together to motivate and catalyse a new type of organisation and joint activity, Opera North and the University of Leeds have made remarkable progress in the first three years of the collaboration's life, and have already captured the interest and commendation of key stakeholders at a national level. Although too early to draw final conclusions, this case study (told from the perspective of the arts partner, Opera North), is the story of that collaboration and journey so far - mapping where the partners have been and looking to the horizon.

DARE is at a landmark moment in its development. It is over halfway through a four-year agreement and strategic plan and there lies great potential for growth. Both partners wish to continue and develop the collaboration, with *DARE* 'Phase Two' currently being discussed. An ambitious strategy is being worked upon for future years, building on the foundations laid over the past three years and with stronger external influence.

Why is *DARE* important?

Still we lag betwixt and between, providing today's value with yesterday's industrial solution

Karen Stephenson 2004²

Our current world demands new ways of working. New structures must be imagined and created which build upon networked models and deliver relevance, value and change. *DARE* is a great example of shifting the balance of traditional organisational

¹ Wheatley, M & D. Frieze 'Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale' *The Berkana Institute*

² Stephenson, K 2004 'Space: A Dialectic Frontier' in *Reveal*

apparatus to form new working patterns – ones that are fit for purpose as we move forwards. DARE speaks to the demand for innovative partnerships that respond to the climate of the 21st Century, maximising potential and building new value, in new, 'Third' organisational forms. It demonstrates how organisations must respond and redefine their purpose, in relation to these changing patterns of allegiance, underlined by new modes of connection, collaboration and engagement. As Collaboration Manager, Lesley Patrick, says, DARE aims:

to create a third space through a collaborative value: we have a vision for DARE as being a defined and recognised brand in its own right, which draws on, and nourishes, partner organisations as a source of information, expertise and comment. We have had three years of learning our respective languages and cultures and building mutual trust to appreciate this potential.

How do we reach a collaborative partnership?

To take us from standard and existing organisational models to where we need to be is a journey. And the journey of transformation and innovation is often framed in three phases of development – broad-brush strokes to describe the type of engagement and activity demanded. In this framing early initial inspiration leads to a secondary formalisation and operation stage, and finally results in either institutionalisation or termination.

[NESTA Connect](#) talk of these three phases as 'Explore/Extract/Exploit' in relation to idea generation, filtering and operation; Karen Stephenson (the leading anthropologist of networks and organisational change) talks of 'chaos' when networks for change emerge; coalescence, as clusters of meaning around purpose begin to form and produce; and leadership, when those early networks and disparate activity is driven to scale through strong leadership and incorporation within a wider structure.

A recent approach by the Berkana Institute, defines these three stages of "taking change to scale" in relation to the lifecycle of **Emergence**, which Lesley Patrick believes is 'a brilliant fit for the way Dare has developed'. It defines these three stages as: 1) Networks; 2) Communities of Practice; and 3) Systems of Influence. It is this interpretation of the transformational journey that will house the DARE activity and provide the structure for this case study.

The Partners

Opera North is England's award-winning national opera company in the north. Recognised as innovative and pioneering, Opera North presents in excess of one hundred main stage performances over three seasons each year, has a broad

independent programme of symphonic concerts, and a strong educational programme. A limited company and a registered charity, with an annual turnover of approximately £15m, the Company receives the largest Arts Council England grant of any organisation outside London. Income is also raised through tickets sales, sponsorship, trusts and foundations and individual philanthropists. Opera North employs about 170 permanent and significantly more freelance staff, and attracts a main-stage audience of about 100,000 people annually.

The **University of Leeds**, founded in 1904, is the second largest university in the country and amongst the top ten research universities. It is internationally acknowledged as a centre of excellence in a wide range of academic and professional disciplines. Ambitious and visionary, the University of Leeds aims to join the top fifty universities in the world by 2015, and collaboration is a key part of the university's strategy. With 8,800 staff the University is the third largest employer in the city, contributing £860m a year to the local economy, including £190m from students. The University has an annual turnover of £422m, including £145m Funding Council, almost £100m in research grants and £95m in tuition fees.

[Mission Models Money](#) sees the collaborative partnership between Opera North and the University of Leeds as a leading example of alternative ways of working which could give courage to other emerging networks that are forming in response to the rapidly changing external operating environment. MMM's role is to encourage, amplify and support stories of innovation within the arts and cultural sector (such as DARE) and is delighted to be offered the opportunity by Opera North to showcase their partnership through this case study as a promising and **resilient** model which responds to current societal needs and trends.

Phase One: Networks

From an initial need grew mutual respect, common ambition and a shared commitment to make a positive difference to learning and practice in the arts

Dominic Gray, Projects Director, Opera North

Discovering Shared Meaning and Purpose

At the beginning of the collaborative process it is vital to form a network, which has, at its centre, a common purpose. Indeed, these two elements of networked relationships and shared purpose must always be the foundations for the ambition to partner. On purpose, Mourkogiannis writes: “What I have found during a professional life of 30 years, is that what matters most to enduring advantage is what people are inspired to do, and this depends on the ideas that drive them. The critical success factor, and the starting point of great companies, is Purpose.”³

The DARE purpose, as articulated above, became an early driver to its future success. On the role of the network of relationships that created this vision, DARE was the result of key individual influencers, forging important ties. As the network theorist Ron Burt states: “Better connected people enjoy higher returns”.⁴ Networks are essential in finding like-minded people; they allow for innovation within organisational structure and ultimately lead to new value creation. Networks can side step the standard operating frameworks of established companies and organisations and reach a ‘new kind of collectivism’, promising new tools and new ways of working.

DARE: Developing a Common Purpose

For Opera North, who made the initial proposition to the University, collaboration has always been an integral part of how the organisation operates. It recognises that it energises and helps keep the art form alive and is a route through which to broaden audience reach and engagement. This approach is shared by the University of Leeds, and collaboration has become a fundamental element of both organisation’s business development plan. Collaboration is seen by the partners as a route through which to grow and become stronger within existing spheres and to explore (and become active within) new sectors. It is understood to be a way of developing new initiatives and products whilst minimising the impact on resources. And it is seen by both organisations as a means by which to reinforce their reputation for innovation

³ Mourkogiannis, N 2006 *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies* Palgrave Macmillan

⁴ Burt, R 2000 ‘The Network Structure of Social Capital’ in *Research in Organizational Behaviour* Vol. 22

and creativity. In the case of DARE, this has meant developing a business model that uses resources differently, helping to equip Opera North with the capacity to continuously innovate and grow artistically in an environment of huge opportunity and a climate of economic uncertainty.

Opera North saw that a partnership with the University of Leeds would raise the organisation's awareness amongst key funders, stakeholders and decision-makers, and see them profiled as responding strategically to economic and operational challenges rather than expecting traditional funding and delivery frameworks to give ongoing support. Alongside strategic business and operational gains, Opera North, like the University, also sought intellectual value through the collaboration – the credibility of association with a renowned academic institution and engagement with a robust intellectual resource to inform artistic planning and programming. A renowned higher education institution would allow and enable Opera North to take its responsibility to the art form more seriously.

DARE Collaboration Strategy Objectives:

1. To be a leader in the creative and intellectual life of the city, with an impact felt regionally, nationally and internationally;
2. To produce programmes, events and publications that are beyond the reach of either partner acting alone;
3. To build connections between the classical and contemporary arts, and between the arts and contemporary society;
4. To engage new participants in creativity and academic achievement.

It was interesting times for both organisations at the creation point of DARE. Opera North was experiencing the greatest period of change in its history. It was investing enormous effort and taking significant risk to create its first permanent home and new facilities in the city centre. It saw the opportunities to broaden its artistic horizons, create new work and reach new audiences as large. The University was also undergoing significant change and growth. It was building a new theatre and centre for the study of Performance and Cultural Industries on campus and was committed to developing further the quality and range of learning and teaching in the arts. Both organisations, although highly respected and acclaimed at a national level, were not necessarily considered 'number one' in their fields - but each aspired to be and saw that working together would allow for new opportunity and learning.

During early conversations at the executive level, the University shifted discussions from traditional sponsorship, to consider financial support through a mutually

beneficial collaboration, which delivered broader intellectual, academic and practical gains. A process of discussion and workshops between senior management from both organisations revealed a number of common ambitions and frustrations, which it was agreed could be realised and addressed more effectively together. **A common purpose** was reached.

Phase Two: Communities of Practice

From a shy glance across a room to a brief and intense courtship, DARE swiftly waltzed from formality to a passionate relationship. There is no such thing as 'operation' - it is an exhilarating adventure

Lesley Patrick. DARE Collaboration Manager

Developing New Practices Together

Phase Two sees the growth of activity from early connections into practice, converting vision into operation and formalising process. It sees the increased commitment and needs of the group emerging, coherently articulated. Yet, this implementation of early purpose through structure and process can be challenging – organisational barriers can threaten development and old practices can hinder and hold back new. Karen Stephenson talks about this in terms of 'Networks' and 'Hierarchies', saying that, "even when an innovation is accepted, hierarchies move at a glacial pace to incorporate it into its rules. Hierarchies work to systematically retard innovation."⁵ This reality of a new, growing purpose, adjusting to the organisational structures that surround it, is evident in Phase Two of the DARE journey.

Imagine the scenario: two very different organisations in terms of size, budget, scope and culture, relatively unfamiliar with each other, respectful and keen to make the right impression but mindful that their ways of working are not necessarily compatible. Opera North is part research and development, and part delivery organisation, for the most part deadline-led, and with a fast and relatively autonomous decision-making process. The University is a research and development organisation, and so large that structure and process is essential, with consensual and formalised decision-making. This alone brings potential benefits to each in terms of learning, but also presents challenges in terms of working with each other.

The logical approach to this difference for those initiating DARE, was to create a

⁵ Stephenson, K 1997 'Making a Virtual Organization' in *Focus* No. 21

series of frameworks to navigate the relationship: frameworks that would develop the collaboration, formalise the agreement, deliver activity and provide governance. This structure would provide terms of reference, focus and direction, and enable consultation and decision-making amongst those best suited for the job. A cascade approach was then adopted, starting at the top, with the first discussions taking place between Chief Executives.

Once the top-line potential for the collaboration was clarified, a core Project Management group was established comprising representatives from each organisation. Within this group a lead contact from each organisation was identified to steer the formalisation stage. In Opera North's case it was the Commercial Director and for the University it was the Marketing Director. From the perspective of Opera North, the skills required to energise and manage the creation of the collaboration had more to do with personal commitment and the intellectual ability to engage with the idea and with others, rather than specific professional expertise.

Opera North's Chief Executive didn't nominate participants by job description, but by those most likely to respond positively to the proposition. Opera North fielded those managers whose specialisms and experience contributed both to building a shared vision, generating ideas and inspiring others to do so, and yet also held the authority and ability to deliver initiatives within the organisation.

The contract, the formalisation of the DARE collaboration, was developed somewhat 'back-to-front'. A governance and delivery structure (the DARE board and the DARE management team) was created to shape the Strategy, a four-year plan of shared objectives and collaborative activity. Once both parties were happy with the plan, the contractual process was managed by the Communications Directors of each organisation and signed by the Chief Executives. Taking less than nine months, the journey from inspiration to formalisation was swift, testament to the commitment and drive of each organisation to maximise the potential of the opportunity.

Organisational Barriers to Collaboration

Developing this community of practice was swift, but as it moved from the set-up demands to the activity and practice, the tension between a new network and the existing organisational 'hierarchies' began to emerge. The relationship hit a critical point when graduating from formalisation to the early stages of operation. The framework created with the aim of enabling joint thinking, planning and delivery, actually began to stifle and de-motivate members. The structure of DARE, which had worked well up to the point of formalising the relationship, risked being the instrument of its own demise when it came to delivery. It was at this critical point that the collaborative partnership could have broken down, when the interest of some of the network individuals began to wane.

However, because the partnership had already developed trust and common language, each organisation agreed to disband the management team and build on the foundations that were being laid beneath the radar of the formal framework. The fundamental element that sustained the collaboration and reshaped its DNA for the future was the relationships that had developed between individuals and across functions.

Once it was agreed that the management team structure was inhibiting reach and preventing the embedding of the collaboration, new life and greater fluidity was injected back into the programme. The structure is now (in line with a collaborative network model) much looser and relationships driven, with a 'hub' comprising a Project Manager who encourages and facilitates relationships, steers internal and external communication, and drives initiatives where appropriate. With a Board, DARE has a governance structure that allows room for manoeuvre, a vehicle for enabling, empowering and encouraging initiative - if an idea or an individual shows potential it is allowed to blossom unhindered by formal structure.

Considering the scenario described, it is important to recognise the role of networks and their associated agility, flexibility and the central role of trust in driving the collaboration forwards at critical pressure points. As the sociologist Marcel Mauss describes in *The Gift*: "These connections, or networks of trust, are the veins of a natural resource of knowledge, a honeycomb of collective consciousness which is mined for hidden sources of innovation".⁶ Communities of practice demand new ways of operation, as Patrick describes: "The notion that there would be aims, objectives, tactics and deadlines makes sense in the contract, but the traditional business model doesn't work effectively in the delivery of DARE – it needs room to breathe.

In essence, DARE has at its core an operational framework which supports and motivates creativity within the areas of collaborative ambition, but in no way directs or constrains it". This is something that emerged as a valuable lesson in the early stages. This new culture for collaborative engagement grew from the 'pinch point' referred to above, when it was realised that the different structures and behaviours within the two organisations could not be shoehorned into any prescribed methodology. This flexibility of operation, with the centrality of collaboration over contract, is a success factor in communities of practice - and in the creation of a 'third organisation'.

The Third Organisation

The DARE partnership is becoming embedded within each organisation and yet also growing strong roots beyond, which will sustain the relationships and deliver continuing value. The collaboration has matured over the three years, and stands as more of an equal partnership with a common language, trust and appreciation - so

⁶ Mauss, M 1922 *The Gift* London: Routledge

much so that under the DARE umbrella, both organisations are on the ‘same team’, developing into the ‘third organisation’. DARE isn’t bigger than either partner, but represents areas of common ground and through the combination of skills it equips the organisations to achieve new things, in new ways. From libretto translation to the creation of new work, from production observation to conferences, requests from either organisation for access, information and engagement are always welcomed and prioritised rather than questioned.

DARE now stands at an interesting point in its lifecycle, in terms of how this community of practice should be grown. Questions arise around how it should evolve into the next phase, as a powerful system of influence. However, the suggestion that the partnership should become more metrics driven and built around a structured framework could have both positive and negative effect for both parties. The potential downside is that the focus would be more on exploitation and results, with the danger that DARE could be reduced rather than expanded. In order to develop a long-term strategy and efficient information-flow, the need for a framework for this ‘Third organisation’ is under serious consideration. It is agreed that there needs to be a small number of clear goals – with the space around them to stimulate creative thinking and implementation.

Phase Three: Systems of Influence

“DARE as a collective ‘brand’ has allowed both organisations to prioritise the development of the relationships that make a positive contribution to achieving its own ambitions”

Ric Green, Technical and Operations Director, Opera North

The signifier for the third phase – systems of influence – is when those challenging and innovative practices become the norm, a new established and effective way of doing things. Transforming from nascent collective activity, this new system has real power and penetration, and those pioneering efforts that have hovered at the periphery of the organisation, suddenly take an important role. Linked to this change, policy and funding debates now include the perspectives and experiences of these pioneers, as the collaborative partners become leaders in the field.

The DARE Return On Investment

“Through DARE, Opera North is thinking, acting and engaging in new ways, mixing in new circles, developing new business and increasing profile in a way that could not have been achieved alone. It is proving to be a good return on

Richard Mantle, General Director, Opera North

One of the criteria – the rules of engagement - agreed at the beginning of the collaboration, was that neither party would commit to a collaborative activity if they didn't think it had the potential to deliver a good return on investment. Indeed, if the result could be achieved more economically through another route, then that was accepted. Unlike many partnership initiatives, DARE doesn't have a defined project budget, and in fact it started with no dedicated financial resources at all. Instead, based on the principle that any project worth pursuing was deemed worth the investment of time and money, it has funded each activity on a case-by-case basis, either from existing budgets within the organisations or from external sources.

Over the course of the first three years of the collaboration, DARE has leveraged just short of £1m from external sources, enabling both parties to develop their business in new areas. Examples of such projects include AHRC funding for two collaborative PhDs; EU Culture Cooperation contribution for a multi-national project exploring traditions and practice of opera in Chinese and western cultures; and individual donations towards collaborative scholarships and fellowships, both domestic and international. These new initiatives have not only engaged Opera North in new sectors, but have also had a direct benefit in terms of resource. New funding has provided the Company with a 'research and development' function that could not have been financed from existing budgets.

Funding has also been allocated from budgets within both organisations for activity including conferences, performances, work-based learning and school workshops. However, after three years of operating this way, the approach is under scrutiny to identify the risk of missed opportunities. As the partnership has grown in scope, the greatest demand on Opera North resources is time, as much of the activity is accommodated by the existing workforce. Some projects have not progressed - not for a lack of ambition, but purely due to a lack of time to invest. A challenge facing Opera North is how it can manage itself, and its resources, so as to maximise the undoubted potential of DARE into the future and exploit the ROI to maximum effect.

Wider Successes and Benefits

DARE is good for Opera North. As is the case with large, relatively unique arts organisations with few comparators, there is a tendency to become insular and only engage in external relationships as a means to an end. However, with the University being so good at not being insular, DARE is a positive force driving Opera North to think and act more broadly, outside its traditional spheres. Moreover, there is an exchange of expertise and a level of cost-saving, one example being the completion of two MBA student group projects exploring the economic impact of, and the implications of, the credit crunch on Opera North. Students gained a valuable insight

into not-for-profit arts organisations, and Opera North received useful tools for which it would have otherwise had to pay.

At the outset there was some scepticism within Opera North, expressing that the benefit of the collaboration was greater for the University than for the Company, directly helping the University in the business of preparing arts students for the workplace. However the work-based learning programme created for the University has also paid dividends for Opera North. At least three former interns have become permanent members of the paid staff structure. Opera North has created a career development path that not only mentors and trains the individual, but also retains that skill and ambition within the organisation, providing the Company with a committed 'next generation'. At the most basic level, Opera North has been introduced directly to a huge potential audience, 30,000 students and 8,000 University staff. In providing students with experience of working in a vibrant arts organisation, the Company also benefits from an additional staff resource, and has access to purpose built facilities on campus for rehearsal.

The collaboration enables Opera North to strengthen its intellectual core, allowing it to be true to its artistic purpose. Historically, although working in the rarefied area of the arts, the Company, in its drive to be accessible with broad appeal, has downplayed its intellectual integrity in order to attract the widest audience. However, partnership with a university has inspired Opera North to further explore its responsibility as a 'curator' of the art form and enables it, through engagement with a leading academic resource, to strengthen its 'collection'. Collaborative PhDs for example, (of which there are two underway and several at the planning stage), not only deliver meaningful academic study, they also support Opera North in its quest to develop and enrich the art form of opera.

DARE has positively raised the profile of both Opera North and the University amongst key stakeholders in the arts and higher education nationally, including ACE and AHRC, both of whom have demonstrated interest in collaboration as a tool for sustainability and development. As well as strengthening the status of each partner in its own field, it has given both organisations a stronger sense of leadership outside their own sphere of influence, allowing them to develop in new and exciting ways. The DARE 'brand' remains essential, it plays a fundamental role in focusing and driving key ambitions whilst allowing the freedom to think, create and act beyond defined themes.

At just over the half-way point, DARE has new markers of success, of value, of ROI and of influence – and these are in the tangible form of programmes, scholarships and funding. Funds have been secured from the Opera North Future Fund to create the University of Leeds DARE Cultural Fellowship in Opera Related Arts: Composition. And the Pettman DARE International Performance Scholarship (funded through the generosity of Professor and Mrs Barrie Pettman) is an example

of DARE spreading its wings and creating new partnerships at an international level - broadening the reach of its ambition and ability to nurture and create new opportunities for the development of emerging artistic talent. Both the DARE Scholarship and Fellowship will launch publicly in Spring '10 – And will stand as a clear example of how, by collaborating closely, Opera North and the University of Leeds have created a force that is attractive to funders and are having a wider, deeper impact.

“A successful collaboration is more than a desire to work together, it drives positive business development; its grow bag is strategic planning, it thrives on common ambition, and it flourishes on a combination of complementary skills which together create a force far greater than the some of the parts”

Martin Holmes, Marketing Director, University of Leeds

MMM would like to thank Opera North and the University of Leeds for their contributions to this Case Study



Drivers for a Resilient Third Organisation: Lessons from *DARE*

- **Timing; business priorities and frameworks that enable and champion collaboration.** *Opera North and the University were each at a landmark moment in their capital and organisational lifecycle, presenting the potential for internal and external growth through partnership with complementary sectors.*
- **Areas of common ground, complementary ambition and shared purpose.** *DARE is built on a shared ambition to positively influence the external cultural and learning environment and strengthen the internal offer and resource.*
- **Defined long-term vision.** *DARE is not seen as a “quick fix” or a short-term solution, it was developed as a new way of working; a combination of skills of Opera North and the University of Leeds to create a “third organisation”.*
- **Respect, equality and ethical and professional synergies.** *Mutual trust, a common language and a shared commitment to make a positive difference to the lives of the communities within which the University and Opera North operate create a strong and robust relationship.*
- **Organisational impacts; the existence of DARE has given ‘permission to talk and do things’.** *Although certain relationships across the organisations could have, and may have, developed anyway, the formalisation of the partnership with defined ambitions has been empowering - it has provided a license to engage in, and justify, activity.*
- **Ownership; commitment and engagement of the people at the top, and a positive, pro-active relationship between staff at all levels.** *A framework which shapes and drives the delivery of key objectives from the heart of each organisation whilst embracing creativity and conversation beyond defined metrics, allows DARE to breathe and injects a spirit of adventure to think and act in new ways.*
- **Different and complementary resources, intellectual, cultural, structural and practical.** *Access to intellectual and academic specialisms and experience of different organisational scales and processes enables Opera North to strengthen its artistic product, to broaden its range and to learn new ways of doing things.*
- **Broad reach in different sectors; participants, stakeholders, audiences and influencers.** *DARE positions Opera North as an active and committed participant in the higher education sector, has raised the Company’s profile amongst stakeholders and funders, and has opened the door to a potential local audience of 8,000 academics and 30,000 students.*