

SPACIOUS PROJECT DESIGN: A PATHWAY

Hello, welcome to Easeful DYCP: ways towards spacious project design and gentle application submission.

In this audio visual guide I'll take you through the steps I'd recommend to my clients who are embarking on their own dycp project design and application. Things I've noticed or learnt as we've worked together, things I think might be helpful to others. This is one pathway available; my intention here is not to be prescriptive and tell you what you should do, merely to offer a map along this way in case it feels resonant for you.

So before we begin talking about ways towards spacious project design, I'm going to introduce myself as you may not know much about me.

Intro to me & my practice/dycp work

I'm Melody and I use they/them pronouns.

I'm committed to working with professional artists, designers & contemporary craft makers who want to build ethical and sustainable creative practices full of care. Care for themselves, care for other people and care for the planet.

I take a trauma-informed, holistic, person-centred approach to my mentoring practice. Which is underpinned by a commitment to social and climate justice, informed by ongoing engagement with intersectional feminism, decolonial shadow work, radical imagination and post-capitalist futures.

As a queer person myself I offer an LGBTQIA+ affirming space.

I have many clients who are neurodiverse as well as people living with chronic illness or other physical and mental health issues. I have chronic health issues – migraines and long covid – and I want the work I do to tend to cultures of care for everyone within structures that are not built to care for us.

This work is conducted with an awareness of how everything we do with our creative practices is situated within the wider context of our lives and the world – so everything that is relevant to you as a human living through the polycrisis is welcomed and honoured with me.

In my work I regularly support people with their dycp applications, at all stages in the process. Sometimes I work with people on just completing the application form, offering more of a writing, proof reading/editing service, although I don't find this as satisfying. I prefer to be involved in the project design process. In an ideal world I come onboard quite early on, while the ideas are still forming and the project is yet to take shape, while there is still so much possibility and potential for things to be honed exactly the way it needs for the client. In the past 5 years I've been fortunate enough to have my mentoring be included in 5 successful applications which means that we've been able to continue the work together beyond the application, having the expanse of a full year to explore and reflect on how the work is developing. This is the work I love. Getting to know a client and their practice in depth, walking with them on this journey.

Sometimes in the past people would include me in their dycp applications without my knowledge or would email to ask for my fee details because they wanted to put mentoring in the budget. But they would not ask to work on the project design or application with me. And this always felt strange. I think it's going to be a much better working relationship where we've been in it together from the start. And so from now on I won't say yes to being included in someone's project unless we have worked together on the project development.

You don't need to include mentoring or coaching in your dycp project but I do think it's a great idea for many reasons. The obvious one is that you have a companion in your journey who is solely focused on your experience and facilitating you achieving everything you set out to do. The mentoring can be used as a project management tool – a regular check in or accountability for keeping things moving along, but it works best when it offers you a regular space for reflection about how things are going, how you feel about what is

happening. It enables you to respond to changes and adapt, it provides a structure of support when sometimes things may feel in flux. And, it's helpful from an evaluation point of view which makes writing your project report at the end easier.

So although this isn't a hard sell on my services, I would say that it's worth considering including mentoring or coaching in your project, and talking to that person as early as possible so that you have time to decide if it's a good fit and the right kind of support. I like to think that the work we might do together, in the process of applying and then in the heart of the project, allows for and promotes a sense of ease which can often be hard to achieve alone.

The reality of dycp

When dycp was launched in 2018 it was such a welcome addition to the funding landscape – offering people support for intensive focus on their practices which didn't have restrictions like other funding sources (ie weren't restricted by discipline, material, outcome etc) and which gave them the financial security to take risks. But unsurprisingly it's been incredibly popular and as the rounds have gone by the chances of success have decreased. (Now at around 20%).

Getting dycp funding is obviously a fantastic thing, but being unsuccessful does not, I believe, say anything about you as a person or as an artist. It isn't a reflection on the quality of your work or your ideas, merely that the competition is fierce and the selection process is opaque and hard to predict.

I have no doubt that there are many applications that are of poor quality – people applying with not enough time so the ideas haven't come together, not budgeting properly or considering the criteria that the Arts Council wants you to meet. But in my experience with my clients, even really well designed, excellently expressed applications have not secured the funding. I don't believe that an unsuccessful application was necessarily a poor one. I suspect that ACE is under an enormous amount of pressure to ensure that the public money it gives to artists meets the criteria it promises. And because of this each round is potentially different to the previous one. The selectors have to balance a diversity of practice with a range of activities that will contribute to the organisation's aims. There may also be unspoken preferences which could influence their choices.

Because of this I don't think there's any trick to a successful application. I don't think you can hack or game the system. I think the only way to get a successful application is to design the best project for you and your practice, that is relevant and necessary, that also meets the criteria and aims ACE outlines in all its guidance documents. This isn't straightforward at all. It's hard work. And it might take multiple tries.

I want to urge everyone to try really hard to uncouple feelings of self worth from the outcome of the application. I hate to see people lose confidence in themselves or their work because they didn't get dycp funding. If you can approach this with a focus on the process – what you will learn about yourself and your practice. The potential that exists there, the ways you'd like to grow, the things you'd like to explore – rather than the outcome, then there will be the possibility of this being a worthwhile and satisfying endeavour in and of itself.

Expectations and realities -how applying to dycp is like climbing a mountain

In my client work we often use metaphors to explore concepts and a metaphor of climbing a mountain expresses how I feel about the process of applying to dycp. (Forgive me, I have no experience mountain climbing so my apologies if this is not at all how it works!)

So, I don't think many people suddenly decide to climb a mountain and then just put on their walking boots and head out the door without any preparation at all. The dream to climb a mountain may arrive suddenly, and that desire may be rooted in all sorts of things – the physical and mental challenge, wanting to prove oneself, pushing your capabilities further, the pleasure of experiencing something new, exploring new terrain. But I think it's obvious that there's going to be a fair amount of work that needs to go into it: the activity of climbing a mountain (all the preparation and the doing of it) is hard work, but there will be moments that are pleasant, maybe even joyful or exhilarating, definitely satisfying. And it will take time.

Before you climb the mountain you need to survey the terrain and consider the conditions. Understanding the landscape, plotting a route, learning from the experience of others who have climbed it. Understanding yourself – what are your motivations? What skills or abilities do you have that will be useful? Are you able to make the climb as you are? Do you need to train or strengthen to do it? Do you need any accommodations to make things easier? Looking at weather forecasts – what will it be like while you're doing this? What equipment will you need, what tools or clothing will you need to take? What skills might you need to learn to support you? Is this a solo climb or do you need/enjoy some help or company? How will you care for yourself-how you are holding up physically and mentally? How will you stay connected with the rest of the world? How will you document the trip? What will you do if things don't work out?

And then, once you've done your planning, and are setting out – pacing yourself so you have energy for what's ahead. Looking around and being aware of the changing conditions, responding to them, making new plans. Experiencing different terrains – some of them might be easier, some might be challenging. At times you might be able to admire the view, at others you can only focus on what's right in front of you. There may be moments that feel like you're going backwards or down again, moments of plateau, moments that feel like lots of progress is being made. Climbing the mountain isn't linear, the rate of change of altitude isn't the same the whole way. Through the experience of the climb you will grow, learn, change as well as reach your destination and achieve that goal.

Now obviously applying for dycp isn't exactly the same as climbing a mountain, there's no potential for injury or loss of life, but I do feel that successful applications are ones where people invest similar focus and time in preparing themselves, gathering all the things they need, asking for support and expecting that things might get tricky, but also enjoying the process as much as possible and feeling that immense satisfaction at the end.

An easeful pathway

I think it's important to emphasise here at the beginning that I want you to have as much ease throughout this process as is possible and/or accessible. A lot of what I'm going to talk about here is very concrete, lots of suggestions and ideas I'd like you to know. It's all very pragmatic, but I appreciate it could feel overwhelming.

I'd love to point you in the direction of my audio guide 'what does ease feel like for you?' where we explore how it might be possible for you to infuse the process of applying for dycp with more ease, so that things feel manageable. I think it's a good companion to this guide as it will root all the practical tasks into a more gentle and somatic landscape.

This pathway emerged because my version of easeful involves having ample time to digest all the information and allow space for ideas to emerge, and details to be honed, without rushing towards filling in the form. This way of working suits my brain and seems to work for many of my clients. However, your version of easeful and what works for your brain may require something else. Please take what you need and discard the rest.

Also – there is a pdf transcript of this audio on my website, and a document with the links to the resources I mention if you'd like to find the information again.

This is also a really brief overview of the process – there is so much more to say on each of these steps, and is the kind of thing I explore more deeply with my clients when we do this work together.

understanding the funding landscape & timeframes

This initial step is quite admin and reading focused but will give you a really solid starting point. I've created a checklist of the things you shouldn't forget to do:

checklist

1. read all the info on ACE website and get clear on what the fund supports and how much you can apply for
2. check you are eligible
3. identify key dates & timeline of the process
4. identify what info you will need to gather for the application (nb your support document)
5. consider your access needs before/after the application (you will be asked about your Personal Access costs when you submit your eligibility questionnaire)
6. register with Grantium – the online application portal
7. understand what ACE does: its aims and objectives, funding strategy
8. get familiar with the questions on the application form and what they mean/are asking

4 things I'd like to highlight at this stage:

1. there is money available to pay for **Access Support** before the project and your **Personal Access costs** if you need them during the project. These things are available to anyone who is Deaf or disabled, neurodiverse or has mental or physical health issues. You do not need to be diagnosed or disclose information to ACE around this.

ACE can connect you to an Access Worker from their growing database but you may prefer to find someone yourself who is a good fit. There is up to £600 available to cover their fees. You work out what you want to do with the Access Support worker and once the work is done they invoice ACE to be paid.

You can also include Personal Access costs for your project and these costs sit outside your budget. You will need to indicate these costs when you complete your eligibility questionnaire so best to think about it early on. (I think you can amend these later but I'm not entirely sure).

For clarity, I do not consider the mentoring I do to support people with their applications Access Support. There are quite strict guidelines about what access support is/isn't allowed to do and also it's advised that you don't include your Access Support worker in your project application, and of course many of my clients do include me. So to keep things clear I do not offer Access Support services.

But there are many people who do. I've listed them in the resources document.

Organisations who might be able to point you in the direction of Access Workers or give you more help understanding Personal Access needs/costs:

Unlimited

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/contact/>

Shape Arts

<https://www.shapearts.org.uk/>

Disability Arts Online

<https://disabilityarts.online/>

2. understanding ACE

I'm not sure that enough emphasis is made about the fact that by applying for/receiving funding you will be in a reciprocal relationship with ACE and part of a wider ecosystem of the cultural sector. ACE has expectations about how the public money they are given is invested and spent. They are also responsible for ensuring it is used appropriately. It's helpful for you to understand how you and your practice contributes to the part of the ecosystem that ACE cares about and funds. They want to invest in you because they believe your work will go on to have an effect on the ecosystem that they are responsible for tending to. They are not funding artists

out of the goodness of their hearts because artists need money. They hope that the work you go on to do will contribute to the cultural landscape in England that they want to see flourish.

So, it's vital that you understand ACE's motivations. Read their 10 year strategy document Let's Create. It outlines the vision ACE has for creative engagement for the public up to 2030. In particular it's worth getting familiar with their 3 outcomes and 4 investment principles as these are the criteria they use to award funding.

Now, strictly speaking dycp does not require you to demonstrate that your project meets these criteria however, with the competition being so high for the money and with ACE having to make difficult decisions, I suspect that any projects that demonstrate quite clear links to the objectives and investment principles are likely to be given priority. It makes sense from the funder's point of view.

Things I think you should pay attention to:

- ACE has responsibility for Museums Libraries and Archives and believes that these routes to connecting with the public are vital. This may offer you ideas for ways to make your project more appealing to them.
- ACE cares about environmental responsibility so worth highlighting work/methods etc that meet these criteria
- ACE has parts of the country it particularly wants to see supported. These Priority Places are given preference for Project Grant apps and National Portfolio Organisations but is it possible they also use this when looking at dycp? Who knows.
- there's lots of useful info in the DYCP evaluation document on the ACE website

3. getting familiar with the application form questions

At this early stage it's definitely worth getting familiar with the application form questions. Not to get worried about what you're going to write, but to understand what they mean and what ACE is asking for.

There is guidance online which offers additional information for each of the questions – to help you answer them. There are resources online which explain the questions more fully too, and looking at these can be helpful.

What's important here is that you appreciate what each of the 3 main questions is looking for, what you are going to have to explain to ACE later on once you've designed your project. I'm not saying you should tailor your project directly to the questions, but it's good to have them in your mind so that you're making relevant choices.

There are also quite a few places where you can read successful applications (I've included these in the resources document) and this can be really helpful with understanding the scope of successful projects and the kind of language people use.

4. support documents

Don't overlook how important this one is. People sometimes ask me to write this letter because I know a lot about their practice, what work they've been doing and their plans for developing their practice further. However, I'm relatively unknown to the Arts Council (despite receiving a Project Grant in 2019) and am not a well-known figure in the sector. If you're able try to ask someone who knows your work in a professional capacity – ideally a curator, gallerist or other artist – but who themselves is also respected within the sector. If they have ties to ACE funded organisations or projects even better. Don't be afraid to give them the information you want included – this could be highlights of your work, key events, the things that demonstrate the quality of your work. And don't be afraid to expect to edit or tweak their letter too obviously ask their permission. This letter is an important part of the application so don't submit anything you aren't completely happy with.

dreaming the project into existence

This is the exciting part. Let yourself drift off into the clouds and really consider everything your practice has been calling out for. Gather up all the big ideas and try not to be brought down to earth with logistics or the realities of things just yet. Once you've explored all the possibilities things can be honed down later.

This is the part that I love to do with clients and which deserves ample space and time to really sink into what is calling out to you, what feels relevant, what old ways of working aren't working and what new ways feel ripe for exploration.

Questions to ask:

What do you and your practice actually need right now?

What does developing your practice look like for you?

What are some of the ways this could be tended to?

Why does this feel like the right time for this change? What has been happening within your contexts that motivates this?

Remember creative practice development can look like lots of things:

- reflecting on what has/hasn't been working in your practice and responding to that
- developing new skills (techniques, materials, business, marketing etc)
- dedicated time to explore and make new work
- a period of research
- making new connections (collaborations, networks of support, relationships with organisations)

It can be self-directed, solo, inward looking. It can be supported, collaborative, externally focused. You might need time and space to implement things you already know are the next steps. Or you might want to have time and space to work it out through the project. You might want to spend most of your time learning from others – other practitioners, mentors, experts in the field. You might want to spend time delving into personal research and being self didactic.

Aim for clarity of focus. Not too many things scattered. Something that feels cohesive and that makes sense to you/your practice. This fund aims to support people to be ambitious and to take risks, to attempt things they aren't able to do alone. So dream big!

making it tangible: budget & activity plan

After spending so much time in air with ideas and imagination, it's necessary to bring things back to earth and ground it in reality. The application needs to feel ambitious but also deliverable. Working on your budget and activity plan will help you figure that out really quickly.

Draw up your ideal project activity list. Include all the things you most want to be able to do. Order them chronologically. Don't forget to include all the project management/admin stuff too. Start to allocate figures to these things – how long will they take? How many days work? Who is involved? What are their fees/day rates? Where do you need to go? What are the costs associated with that (travel, accommodation etc). Do you need to buy equipment or other materials?

You'll quickly notice which things you need to research further, where you might need to start asking other people for details. Try to get accurate figures where possible rather than estimates.

This is the logistics stage – you'll need to approach the other people you want to work with. Check that courses etc are available when you want to do them. Make sure you give yourself lots of time for this – other people respond on their own timetables!

As you gather the figures begin to pop them in a table/spreadsheet so you can see how things are adding up.

Key things to remember:

people always forget to pay themselves enough. Make sure you know your hourly/day rate and you pay yourself adequately for the work you are actually doing. Similarly, make sure you are paying other people the appropriate amounts for their contributions.

There's information about guidance on artists' pay in the resources document.

the negotiation between the imaginal and the reality

Once you've honed in on all the activities you want to be doing as part of your project, and you've costed it all up into your budget, you may discover that they are incompatible. Usually, if people have paid themselves properly and have included lots of things like courses or working 1:1 with other artists it becomes pretty obvious quite quickly that the money doesn't go that far. It really emphasises that although it's easy to think that a year long project with a budget of £12k seems big and feels like it might be something you work on full time, it really isn't.

And this is where the negotiation between the imaginal and the reality starts to begin. This is where choices have to be made and sometimes compromises. If you find yourself over budget I would caution against simply cutting corners – especially reducing the amount you pay yourself. If you can't afford to pay yourself properly is this even something you should be doing?

It might be that you just need to tighten things up a little here and there, or lose one or two activities. However, if the numbers aren't working it could be time to re-assess the content of the project itself and possibly go back to the dreaming stage, but this time with a more realistic view.

If you've given yourself ample time in the process then reassessing things and possibly reworking things should be possible. And it's worth taking the time to create a project that feels coherent and whose budget makes sense.

writing the application

This is the part of the process that people rush into, I have observed. People often come up with their project plan and the activities they want to do, begin to write the questions and then move onto the budget and realise that the budget isn't working. And of course if your budget isn't working and you have to change parts of your project plan, then the answers to the questions will need adjusting too.

It saves a lot of hassle leaving writing the application until you've done all the work of dreaming, budgeting and negotiating, to the point where you have a project outline with costs and timings that you are happy with and is unlikely to change.

This is the part where it's good to refamiliarise yourself with the application form questions and to re-read the ACE guidance document so you know exactly what marks you are trying to hit with each response. Make sure you note the character limits as these are tight and it's so much harder to edit down a long response into a short one than it is to write something shorter.

Tips:

- don't be afraid of lists and bullet points. They make reading the response easier, it clarifies important information and it saves on characters. (Especially for the question about you and your work)
- if you are over the limit by a few characters you can always replace some ands with & or contract words, don't over do this but don't be afraid to be a bit cheeky

What I notice with clients is that people write responses that are too narrative. ACE doesn't need all the context or backstory for this application. Keep things direct and to the point. Use active rather than passive language – I will rather than I intend to.

Another issue is that people repeat themselves in questions 2 & 3. But these two questions are asking different things.

There are quite a few helpful resources that can help with writing your application, I've included a few in the resources document. But a quick internet search will bring up so many people out there offering advice or support with this. Don't be afraid to get a fresh pair of eyes on it. If you're not able to access support from a mentor or coach with this ask trusted peers or colleagues, people who know you and your practice.

What is important is that your answers to the questions are alive with your unique enthusiasm for your work, that they outline how your project meets the demands ACE asks of you, and they convey the activities you're intending to do clearly, so that it makes sense.

I would caution against using generative AI to write your application. It may feel like a helpful tool, but (aside from the huge ethical and environmental issues) it won't create an application that stands out from the others. What is needed here is your voice. ACE wants to hear from you, the human in your practice, how this opportunity will change you and change your practice. No AI could ever convey that with the emotion that you could. (I would also like to add that I have had conversations with a couple of people recently, who work for arts organisations and who receive applications for projects, jobs, funding etc and they are saying that they increasingly see applications they suspect use AI and it is disappointing for them as the text has lost something in the process, it often feels disconnected or doesn't make sense.) I understand why people may feel compelled to do this, but I'd like to advocate for us holding onto what makes creative work so dynamic and necessary – the human component. If you're concerned you aren't able to write well enough to have a successful application I'd love to point you towards the examples online of successful dycp applications. It's heartening to read other people's responses, to see that they aren't necessarily outstanding examples of writing, but they are heartfelt and genuine.

End

The dycp is a big undertaking. I sometimes think that the fact that the application form only has a few questions (with low word count) lulls people into thinking it's simple. It's not. My personal opinion is that you need to give yourself ample time for this. Not just gathering all the information for the form, the logistics side, but the dreaming, the imagining what lies ahead.

dycp isn't any old funding. It's designed to push your practice into new places, the 'step change' they talk about so much. This suggests, to me, that the work you outline in your application isn't a 'would be nice to do' it's an essential thing. It's what you would be trying to do even if the money didn't exist. It's what you are compelled to work towards, it's what is most needed at this point in your career. And as such it deserves better than a hastily designed project and rushed application form. I hope the pathway that I've mapped out here, rooted as it is in giving yourself space and time to fully immerse yourself in all that you need to learn, dream and write, offers that spacious and gentle approach that is often missing.