

Paul Hamlyn  
Foundation

**Art  
Works** | Developing  
Practice in  
Participatory  
Settings

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# Artist pathways and student careers

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ArtWorks North East  
January 2015



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## Introduction

This paper explores issues around careers in participatory arts; available advice and guidance; opportunities for developing this career in initial training; ongoing support for graduates; and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for artists who wish to embed this work into a portfolio career.

### 1 Careers advice and guidance

If, as artists and academics involved and interested in this field of work, we accept that there is an ongoing debate around definitions and understandings of what is involved in 'participatory arts practice' as a career, then we can perhaps empathise with the careers advisor who has the job of signposting and advising young people on a whole range of employment opportunities. Currently, time allocated for careers advice in schools and the availability of expertise is inconsistent and in higher education, there is fierce debate around the appropriateness of careers advice in the context of rapid change in the jobs market.

When students in schools or colleges are deciding on a progression route into further study, they will normally research on line, talk to their tutors and attend education fairs. In respect of on line research, there are issues around how students search for and interpret the content of arts based courses and how they find which courses offer experience in participatory practice.

A degree in Community Music, for example, may need more explanation than a degree in Music Performance not only for prospective students but also their parents and other influencers. Unless a prospective student has first-hand experience as a participant, they will most likely be unaware of the scope and possibilities for work offered in the field of participatory arts. They may not realise which courses offer options for work placement or which provide the chance to meet artists who have set up a portfolio career including participatory arts practice.

What does this mean for young people seeking early information on broader arts based employment, for those seeking to develop the skills needed for work in this specific sector or those entering the jobs market from an arts-based award without the necessary transferable skills?

A first trawl on the Prospects website, a reputable and well-used site for careers advice and graduate employment, doesn't offer the reader any substantial information. A closer search under types of jobs in the arts does however bring up a description of a 'Community Arts Worker', which offers this definition:

*'Community arts workers collaborate with a wide variety of local groups, encouraging the use of artistic activities to support their development and improve their quality of life. Generally, they work in areas where there are social, cultural or environmental issues to be addressed. They use a whole range of art forms to engage with these different community groups, including visual arts, theatre, dance, music, craft, creative writing, carnival arts and film.'*

On discovering this lack of information, ArtWorks contacted Prospects and offered interesting and relevant artist profiles to enhance the information already provided. There was no opportunity given to add or change the definition of the field but we did add one profile to their list of case studies.

In this profile, the artist Teresa Easton offers students advice on how to break into this field:

*'...get as much training as you possibly can – be that formal training, mentoring, shadowing or short courses. Pick up ideas, inspiration wherever you can.'*

The National Careers Service site also lists this field of work as 'Community Arts', although they inform their readers that higher education provides the theory behind this work as opposed to practical experience and placements, in this way:

*'You may find a community arts qualification useful, although this is not essential for getting work. Foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in community arts are offered by a few universities. Typically they combine the study of an art form such as painting or dance with the theory and principles of community arts.'*

This site goes on to list some of the general qualities needed to fulfil this role which would not be amiss for any graduates, such as communication skills, time, project and budget management, ability to motivate, persuade and negotiate, display patience and tolerance as well as knowledge and experience in the arts.

Surprisingly, the Creative Skillset website which has an extensive and stimulating range of 'real life' job stories across the whole creative sector has no reference at all to work in this field, even under the term 'community', and therefore no careers advice or signposting.

In reality, those students who encounter participatory arts experience or training in further or higher education will find that many universities and colleges offer much more than just the theory and principles referred to by the National Careers Service. The best experience for students is where they are involved with artists and arts organisations through talks, shadowing, placements and projects. However, as we have seen, it may be rather hit and miss as to whether students are ever signposted to, or ever find, relevant information or whether they realise at that stage the importance or relevance to their future careers.

ArtWorks North East have introduced an annual creative industry careers event 'Fast Forward Futures' which includes participatory artists actively demonstrating their skills. They have also included artist profiles on their website [www.artworks-u.org.uk](http://www.artworks-u.org.uk).

## 2 The higher education curriculum

To explore the range of curriculum offer within one region of the UK, ArtWorks North East commissioned a piece of research (Mitchell et al., 2012) exploring the perceptions of lecturers in regional universities in relation to this field of work.

Interviews with lecturers were held to gather information on participatory arts practice in their own teaching, practice and research. These interviews took place between March and April 2012, with 26 academics across all five universities and across creative writing, media, dance and drama, visual arts and music. Interviewees were drawn from all levels of staff, from Assistant Lecturer to Professor/Head of Department and included those whose teaching included or focused on participatory practice as well as those whose teaching did not cover this subject.

One of the factors from the research relevant to this paper is that the terms 'arts in participatory settings' and 'participatory practice' were given a wide variety of explanations,

with not all participants being familiar with, or even liking, the terms. Some academics felt very strongly that all of their art work was participatory to some degree and that trying to separate a passive involvement in art from an active one is a peculiarity of our culture. A common view was that there are few boundaries between public and individual practice, or between participatory and 'socially engaged' practice. There was a distinction drawn between collaborative practice – working with other professionals – and participatory practice – joint work between professionals and community members, as well as between participatory practice and teaching. Within some disciplines, the perception of participatory practice is of a very broad process of engagement with audiences and supporting their inclusion in participation.

For those interviewees who were involved in this work in some way, their motivation often came from a passion for involving people in the community in creative work, from a political commitment to enabling self-expression or to facilitating change for local or other communities. For them, involvement and teaching in participatory practice was seen as a natural way of life. In contrast, many people said that they had come to this way of working because they needed to earn money, often shortly after graduating. There were also some academics who saw their art as an individual activity, being more concerned about getting their work published and helping students to produce high quality work than teaching people to work in participatory settings.

The importance of art work in regeneration in the North East was seen by some as an important element influencing what is taught. However, some arts courses in the region aim to prepare students for working in mainstream parts of the industry and this means that there is little time for participatory practice. Many academics valued the fact that these skills were taught from the start, but there was a minority view that students need to be more mature before they can work within different communities.

Responses on the importance of employability in courses which focus on participatory practice varied widely. Factors influencing this were that work in participatory settings had been seen in some ways by staff and students as 'second class' and that mainstream employment was seen as much more of a goal. However, work in participative settings is a very common route for students leaving the courses in the region. It was noted that only a very small proportion of students go on to be full-time performers in the dance field, whereas both drama and music students may well already be performers whilst studying and will go on to complement performance with teaching and work in participatory settings throughout their careers. Accordingly, those students are helped to access jobs by gaining the right skills and experiences during their academic courses.

The question then remains as to whether anything will really change in the further and higher education curriculum where such different views are held even within one region and where courses have different emphases. Even when it appears that the skills and experience gained from study and practice in the field of participatory practice are relevant to employment and can open up work outside of the mainstream, it is not necessarily included in the arts curriculum.

### 3 The influence of QAA benchmark statements

A recent independent survey of almost 1,000 artists commissioned by ArtWorks (DHA, 2014) shows that a substantial proportion of them have ended up leading portfolio careers, with a large part of their income coming from work in participatory settings. Given that so many artists are working in this field, why aren't we as higher education institutions doing more to

understand how we can cater for this reality? One reason could be that, like careers officers and students, many arts departments and institutions are simply unaware of the realities of working life for many artists. However, as we've seen above, the reasons are far more complex.

If any changes were to be encouraged in the curriculum, then how could this be influenced? Curriculum design is firmly in the hands of academic leaders although admittedly there may be resourcing or other constraints.

One of the main influences on curriculum content in higher education are the subject specific benchmark statements regularly reviewed and published by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which underpin undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses. When courses are designed or reviewed, course leaders are asked to use and refer to the benchmark statements for their subject although not in a totally prescriptive way.

Each set of benchmark statements is itself regularly reviewed with panels set up who request comment and suggestions from the sector. For the review of Dance, Drama and Performing Arts in 2014, the consortium of ArtWorks pathfinders sent in their suggestions for changes, both to the narrative section of the document and the statement themselves. They felt that a suitable narrative to highlight the importance of including participatory arts in the curriculum would be:

*'Graduates from degrees in Dance, Drama and Performing Arts may wish to take up employment opportunities where they apply their subject specific skills in a range of participatory settings, for example, community; youth work; health; criminal justice and education. This kind of work involves the development of contextual understanding and a set of transferable skills all of which will be relevant to any form of employment.'*

They also suggested that the benchmark statements themselves might include developing the skills to *'plan, execute and evaluate a project which applies aspects of subject expertise in one or more participatory settings'* and the *'development of understanding the history and contexts for work in participatory settings'*.

Although the final outcome is not yet known, we have been led to believe that participatory arts and applied practices have been identified as areas for revision in the statement and that this may result in fuller articulation and representation in the document.

It will be interesting to explore responses to any changes and measure impact on curriculum design. A similar exercise will be applied to the review of the benchmark statements for Art and Design; Music; and Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies in 2015.

## 4 Continuing professional development

So far we have only focussed on formal education and as we've seen, students may enter an arts based degree course unaware of whether there will be opportunities to develop the relevant skills for working in the field of participatory arts. Even where there are these opportunities offered as options, students may not take them up and may graduate without any knowledge or experience of the field. If they then encounter employment opportunities, they will need to find further training and development for themselves, as this is rarely offered by the employer or commissioner. They will also find it useful to be part of a community of practitioners or a network.

During interviews with artists working in the field, we discovered that most had not had any training in their university course and had found their way into the work afterwards.

Annie Rigby, a Cambridge English graduate *'discovered this work by accident'*. She had *'never thought about this sort of work nor really knew about it'* and feels that there is no formal route. Having now enjoyed working on a wide variety of projects for a few years, she would encourage others to go into the work.

Tommy Anderson, a Graphic Design graduate, was working as a designer when he was offered some work on a community based arts project which he said really opened his eyes to a different use of his skills. His work has now grown from these projects being an *'add on'* to be *'more facilitation than design'*.

Effie Burns, a Glass graduate, became aware that this was the sort of work for her while she was being mentored as part of her MA. She had never really considered or looked at this practice before. She thinks that there is no clear career path and no training, so has essentially learned on the job:

*'People are starting to see this participatory work as a valid option, as interesting work...I don't think it's being offered as a course....it's just developing. Artists working in participatory settings are the knowledge holders so they need to spread their knowledge in more seminars and conferences.'*

Teresa Easton, a Fine Art graduate, first got into the work when she was *'parachuted in'* to help on a project. However Pady O'Connor, a Drama graduate, knew what sort of work he wanted to do early on and his degree really helped, providing work experience and placements which were useful when finding work on graduation.

From this small number of artists in one area of the UK, we can see that a whole range of training is needed at different stages of careers. ArtWorks has identified a range of learning approaches as a result of its action based research. One of these was reflected in the North East in response to focus groups exploring what practising artists identified as their development needs. A number of pilot short courses were offered which were co-taught by teams of artists and lecturers. They combined practice, theory, debate and reflection, supported by online learning resources. Independent evaluation showed these were valued by both students and deliverers as rare opportunities to learn and discuss alternative approaches. Other approaches include peer learning and sharing of practice through a series of *'Critical Conversations'*.

In another ArtWorks project, the University of Hull built a creatively-led postgraduate and CPD programme. Six local artists acted as *'associate artists of the University'* and were supported to develop and lead a two-hour workshop where ideas and skills could be shared with peers.

One of the most exciting discussion points was around ideas and methodologies that are transferable between disciplines. As one of the associate artists said: *'Though each associate artist came from a different discipline, there was a clear affinity in issues and discussion that rose in each session.'* This confirmed that there are common skills and learning across the enormous range of settings and artistic disciplines that can – and should – be taught. The University of Hull has decided to pilot a modular, part-time professional doctorate in arts and society, directly aimed at artists in participatory settings.

Meanwhile, as part of the ArtWorks London work, the Barbican and Guildhall School have responded to demand from the professional arts sector and developed a cross-arts BA to prepare artists for work in participatory settings. This will include 'real world' apprenticeship placements and off-site learning experiences, as well as unique models for training and reflection.

Universities could grasp the opportunity to meet the demand for a whole range of courses that reflect the realities of working life for artists. These could be BA and MA courses but also in the form of professional development in collaboration with artists and arts organisations for their mutual benefit and ultimately the benefit of the participants themselves. Our way forward in the North East will be to embed these development opportunities into the three regional Arts Council England 'Creative people and places' projects which are providing arts experiences in communities with low arts engagement and which are involving both experienced and less experienced artists, early career graduates and students.

## Conclusions

There are on-going concerns about the lack of knowledge and understanding of participatory arts practice and the recognition that it can provide a career or be included in a portfolio career. Careers advice is inconsistent, as is any provision within further and higher education. Graduates and other artists still struggle to find long term networks or a coherent CPD offer. However, the ArtWorks project has already done much to address this and find solutions to some key issues.

From a 17 year old seeking a suitable arts based course with employment prospects to an artist realising that they need some training or opportunities for structured reflection, these issues are to do with the status of the work; the funding and provision of relevant and appropriate education and training; and the communication of both initial and ongoing developmental and networking opportunities. Students and artists will choose their own quite different pathways – as long as these pathways are available and clearly signposted.

The answer lies in whether careers, educational and arts organisations can work together on a coherent, affordable and well publicised offer, so that students realise the significance of the work to their future employment prospects and seek relevant courses, and that artists working in the field can advance their skills through reflection and training.

## References

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# Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Paul Hamlyn (1926–2001) was a publisher, businessman and philanthropist who was concerned about social injustice and disadvantage – particularly as it affected children and young people, and those ‘outsiders’ seeking to integrate into British society. In 1987 he set up the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for general charitable purposes, and on his death he bequeathed the majority of his estate to the Foundation, making it one of the UK’s largest independent grant-making organisations.

The mission of the Foundation is to maximise opportunities for individuals to realise their potential and to experience and enjoy a better quality of life.

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## ArtWorks

ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings is a PHF Special Initiative working to improve participatory practice in the arts. It focuses on workforce development, seeking to improve training and development infrastructure for artists at different stages of their careers. The initiative began in 2010/11 and continues to the end of 2014/15.

[www.artworksphf.org.uk](http://www.artworksphf.org.uk)  
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