

Creative Retreat

Overview

Creative Retreat was a space for artists working in participatory settings to have an intense and inspiring experience, sharing practice across art forms and at differing career stages.

The three day retreat took place at Crear in Argyll & Bute in October 2013. Participants had the opportunity to spend time reflecting on and developing their practice alongside provocations from practitioners and commissioners.

Caroline Thompson, previously based at Royal Scottish National Orchestra, worked with Lindsey Fryer of Tate Liverpool and Chrissie Tiller to develop the project. Six artist participants, two facilitators and three practitioners/commissioners took part in a process using Open Space Technology methods with provocations at key points. Areas of 'enquiry' for the retreat included looking at different practices and different contexts, the ethics and politics of practice, the role of participants and collaborators, and the development of artistic practice. The artists were required to apply to be part of the retreat and their place on the retreat was funded through a small development grant from PHF.

The retreat focused on:

- exploring diverse artistic practices within different social contexts
- the ethics and politics within socially engaged practice and within a range of participatory settings
- the role and position of participants/collaborators
- the value of multi-disciplinary/collaborative work in participatory settings
- how working in a participatory setting contributes to the development of individual artistic practice

By working with participants across art forms and at differing career stages, the retreat also provided the opportunity for the creation of peer-to-peer networks and mentoring.



Image by Laurence Payot

How the work sought to address the issue

The impetus for the project was a perception that there did not appear to be an existing CPD model available that provided an opportunity for working across different art forms and which was, at the same time, open to artists at different stages in their career as well as representatives from cultural organisations, higher education and other practitioners. The opportunity to work together and explore issues from the different perspectives of different roles was central to the project.

The Retreat set out to:

- explore a new model for professional development of artists and commissioners working together
- create a peer-to-peer network of artists and commissioners working in participatory settings

...using self-organising and collaborative approaches to create the agenda, the Retreat allowed all participants to contribute equally to the conversation...

The retreat comprised both directed and non-directed activity, with participants able to choose where and how to direct their engagement in each of the four areas of enquiry. It was facilitated through a creative form of the Open Space process. By focusing on a common question but using self-organising and collaborative approaches to create the agenda, the Retreat allowed all participants to contribute equally to the conversation.

The Retreat followed the Five Principles in Open Space:

- Whoever comes are the right people
- Wherever it happens is the right place
- Whatever happens is the only thing that could have
- When it starts, is the right time
- When it's over, it's over

and the One Law: The Law of Two Feet or the Law of Mobility. This means that if anyone feels they are not learning or contributing where they are, they can take themselves to where they feel they can learn or contribute more usefully.

What was different from many traditional Open Space sessions was the expectation that people might want to capture their conversations through a creative process. A range of materials was provided to facilitate this.

The first day focused on what we want to learn/share; the second focused on how we would like to learn it/share it; and the third day focused on practical ways forward.

What it achieved

The delivery model of Creative Retreat is precise and, in some ways, is the primary output of the project. The physical location and distancing of the learning experience from the workplace were felt to be critical to success as was the use of Open Space Technology.

The project enabled the coming together of six artist participants in an intensive examination of their practice; three experienced facilitators led provocations and encouraged debate and reflection; and three co-ordinators with a range of expertise jointly planned and evaluated the project.

Artists really valued the full involvement of the organisers and facilitators in the discussions and reflections on practice and this created new connections and understanding.

Lessons learned

There were a number of learning points which are useful to others.

The sharing of knowledge and skills between employers, commissioners, artists and educators in the field of arts in participatory settings was highly valued. This project highlights the value of the conversations that can deepen and enrich understanding from multiple perspectives. Participants noted an increase in confidence across the board and specifically in developing new skills in managing professional relationships and commissions as a result of this sharing.

The Retreat appears to have provided an energising and inspiring experience to participants directly connected with it being distanced from the workplace. Some participants noted that the format and location enabled a level of openness and trust.

Like other ArtWorks programmes developed to provide professional development opportunities, the Retreat highlighted the importance of cross art form and cross role learning as well as the importance of experiential learning. In particular it highlighted the importance of time away from organisations, providing the opportunity to reflect on individual practice.

What other stakeholders are/should be doing with the learning

The value of open dialogue between artists/practitioners and commissioners is highlighted by this model and the opportunity to share experiences from the artist/practitioner and employer/commissioner side seem to be particularly valuable. Potentially, such approaches benefit both sides and may affect both individual professional development as well as policy development within organisations.

There is a benefit in this approach for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to develop CPD and formal provision at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

There is also great potential for employers like the RSNO and Tate who piloted this idea to develop bespoke training models that bring their project managers together with artists in settings that allow conversations and dialogue and that could push forward their practice.

What is happening with the learning now

The dialogue between the original participants is ongoing. They would like to extend and scale up the model. They are assessing the feasibility of an annual Retreat; exploring the possibility of extending Retreats to other parts of the UK and internationally to enable more artists to participate; and continuing a dialogue about how they can generate partnerships and funding to allow this to happen.

More information: Lindsey Fryer,
Tate Liverpool, Albert Dock, Liverpool Waterfront, Liverpool L3 4BB
Lindsey.Fryer@tate.org.uk