

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

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Changing the Conversation: A Provocation

Creative & Cultural Skills is a sector skills council, set up with support from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES), along with some eighteen other equivalent organisations in sectors like construction, manufacturing and hospitality. Our remit is to identify sector-specific approaches to supporting growth in the UK economy. Our focus is, therefore, different from many arts organisations and arts funders whose primary purpose is to make and promote the arts. Working with agencies like UKCES and indeed funders like the Skills Funding Agency provides different sorts of challenges to those I've been used to in the subsidised arts sector.

One of the most important things we do at Creative & Cultural Skills is to produce labour market intelligence (LMI) and research. We work to an agreed methodology that is common to all the sector skills councils and so it's relatively easy to compare how our 'sector' fares in comparison to others. We produce what we call 'Creative Blueprints'¹ covering craft, cultural heritage, design, literature, music, the performing and visual arts in the UK and we can also segment the information by UK nation. This research and LMI enables us to analyse how our sector is doing economically and helps us to identify what we call 'sector specific solutions' to improve productivity and ensure that investment from, for example, the skills funders or indeed the education sector is deployed effectively.

Most post-16 education is funded against student numbers: so if Further and Higher Education Institutions put on courses that students want to take then they are rewarded with student income either through government funding, or increasingly student fees. Students don't tend to make a connection between the courses they apply for and the available and potential jobs, leading to a huge take-up of performing arts courses whereas we know that the actual job vacancies are more likely to be off-stage, front of house, in business or finance roles, not for artists where there's an over-supply. Artists like those working in participatory settings have

¹ <http://creative-blueprint.co.uk>

identified professional development opportunities that are not available through colleges and universities. The reason for this is not, as is often implied, because these training institutions don't want to offer this provision, but because their business development teams cannot identify a 'market' for such courses.

In the skills policy world there is an assumption that investment in skills and training within formal education will lead to economic growth i.e. jobs or better productivity.

In this context Creative & Cultural Skills' specific interest in artists in participatory settings is around this area of practice in the context of creating new jobs and economic growth. I should say at this point that I take for granted the intrinsic value of the work - or rather leave that aspect of the debate for others to argue. One area of growth in the sector is arts education more generally. Over the last thirty years or so we've seen a huge growth in numbers of individuals who make a living from working in arts education: as amateurs, gallery or theatre educators, arts therapists, education managers and indeed artists working in participatory settings. Most of these jobs weren't there in the late 1970s. We don't have a lot of quantitative research on the arts education workforce but a recent, admittedly small, survey suggests that around 25% of creative sector workers engage in some way with young people.² Most of these are working in cultural heritage, music and the performing arts.

If we consider the key findings of the ArtWorks programme one year in there are some interesting themes to reflect upon. In a working paper published in December 2012³ which drew on the range of first year research and audit activities taking place under the auspices of ArtWorks, Sue Kay notes the following:

Postgraduate study was seen as an ideal opportunity for more experienced artists to reflect on their practice and experience to date and yet it was acknowledged that many have neither the inclination nor the resources to take it up. (Buttrick et al., 2012: 55). The research found little added value from the Creative & Cultural Skills Founder Colleges or from the current frameworks for Creative Apprenticeships in supporting artists to work in participatory settings. There was also very little partnership working between HE and FE, despite the recognition of value in combining academic and vocational pedagogies more effectively (op cit. 63-64).

In the same paper, Kay draws on audit work from the North East to set out potential gaps in professional development provision:

Artworks North East's audit of arts in participatory settings (Lowe, 2011: 56) highlighted the 'wide variation...of training and development that organisations are able to offer artists to develop their participatory practice' and many felt hampered by lack of money to resource this area. CPD support for freelancers was seen as a priority, yet organisations were reluctant to support the training costs of artists who weren't 'theirs' and

² *Audit of Training Available for Artists working with Children and Young People*, Creative and Cultural Skills, 2011 (<http://creative-blueprint.co.uk/library/item/audit-of-training-available-for-artists-working-with-children-and-young-peo>)

³ Kay, S, *Artworks Working Paper 1: learning from the research*. Paul Hamlyn Foundation, December 2012

practitioners found it difficult to pay for themselves. This was referred to a 'collective action problem' for organisations delivering arts in participatory settings.

A possible paradox emerges around the questions of quality practice and skills development. On the one hand there is an acknowledgement that no consistent standard around quality exists. On the other there seems to be a built-in preference across the sector for mentoring and peer learning as a mechanism for improvement. The possible assumption here is that quality practice can readily be found and shared 'peer-to-peer' as it were, but within a sphere of practice that cannot settle on what quality actually looks like. As Kay notes in her trawl of year one research when summing up this important point:

Artists find it difficult to communicate what 'quality' is [and]...reactions to a kite mark are mixed. Whilst some artists were not against the development of a kite mark, there is unease about how this would be implemented, and who would be implementing it (Sellers, 2012a: 2).

...any shared...framework for understanding excellent practice needs to understand that there is a broad spectrum of participatory practice, encompassing different intentions, motivations and roles. Any common understanding must not conflate different practices and needs to be able to differentiate between different aspects of the work (Lowe, 2011: 44).

So for a framework to be accepted by artists it should be as inclusive as possible. Yet for it to be rigorous to the eyes of the wider world it must resist treating every type of practice as if it were de facto high quality. The soundings that come back from practitioners on this issue seem to conflate two things – a description of *forms* of practice, a codified version of what they do, with the implicit need to *value* each form, as if variety were itself a mark of high quality. However, any notion of *low* quality is conspicuously absent from the discourse. Rendering the creation of a threshold that isn't simply remade subjectively each time it is applied extremely challenging.

So why is it that there seems to be an identified need for training, mentoring and development for artists working in participatory settings but no enthusiasm to pay for it, or indeed even give time to it? And why are mainstream training providers ignoring this apparent need?

A long time ago a headteacher friend of mine, commenting on the plethora of education initiatives and specifically on Education Action Zones, said 'It's really not that difficult to find some inspirational individuals to lead the first 12 special initiatives but after them you wouldn't employ the ones that come after as head of anything'. Harsh perhaps! My analysis of where we are with artists in participatory setting is that we're still operating with the equivalent of the twelve inspirational individuals and not taking this work 'to scale'.

If we limit the availability to participatory arts practice by the current number of good (we assume) practitioners then we really don't need to bother with qualifications or standards. We know who is doing the work – we could

name them - and they do the work because they are hugely committed to it and aspire to excellence as a key value. I realise that some of the controversy that Creative & Cultural Skills has recently attracted in being up for developing a qualification for artists working with children and young people in response to the Henley report is based on a fundamental misunderstanding about what qualifications are designed to do. Qualifications exist to indicate an agreed standard at the point when we've moved beyond knowing all of the names of a cohort of pioneer practitioners and being able to agree some standards amongst ourselves. Qualifications are there for when we take our work 'to scale' and when we can imagine a world where everyone in every community might feel they have an 'entitlement' to some of this work. In my mind we should be brave enough to believe that more people of all ages might benefit from this practice. And if we believe this we'll need to think about how we can expand the practitioner base – the 'workforce' in skills speak - to create many more practitioners operating within a sound economic model.

So my challenge to those artists working in participatory settings is this: to find a way to take the work 'to scale'. In mainstream arts organisations' education programmes we've struggled a lot with this concept. Back in 2000 when I was at Arts Council England our then chairman, Gerry Robinson, made the case for translating what he called 'occasional magical experiences' for children engaging in the arts into an entitlement for all young people to engage with the arts. This is a significant challenge and one that the arts sector finds very difficult to address. What do we think about making a quality arts entitlement available to every one of the 600,000 or so children and young people in each year group across 28,000 schools across the UK? I know enough about this work to note that the first challenge we'd face as a sector if we were genuinely to set about this task would be to agree amongst ourselves on what we mean by 'arts' and 'quality' and 'entitlement'. As a sector we just do not get 'coverage' but we are very good indeed at the one-off fantastic projects that can change people's lives. I use schools here as they are easy to quantify – but how much more challenging to reach everyone with the potential to participate in arts practice.

Some level of agreed classification and descriptions of quality thresholds, sensitively derived from literature and practice will certainly be key. This probably needs to shift from being a possibility to a top priority as ArtWorks continues to progress. But arriving at some agreement on 'what good looks like' is only a beginning. When we recognise excellent practice how do we then grow the artist community so that we have the arts in participatory settings workforce to deliver a national programme?

So what would it mean to take participatory arts practice 'to scale'? It would mean:

- That we cannot rely on specific individuals with extraordinary artistic talent and natural interpersonal skills to do the work: we'll need to find ways to empower many more artists to deliver the work
- That we'll need to codify what we do so that we can impart the knowledge and skills to the next generation of practitioners to some agreed standards

- That we'll also need to work with those people who are in a position to 'buy' the practice: those in the youth offending teams, the care homes and the youth groups, for example will need to know what good looks like too
- That we'd need to put in place some training programmes for arts in participatory settings in mainstream artist training but also for ongoing professional development
- And we'll need some qualifications in place so people's 'investment' in training can be recognised and perhaps rewarded financially
- And that we may need – anathema I know to many arts practitioners - to engage Ofsted to inspect the work

At the moment there is a fairly small body of practitioners and we can, to a certain extent, assume that this is a passionate and pioneering group of people who are doing a pretty good job. If we take the work 'to scale' it's going to throw up many more issues ranging from quality of the arts practice itself, to child protection and business skills. And we need to recognise that it's possible that most of the impact this work has could be because of the quality of the practitioners and possibly not quite so much in the body of work itself.

In any economic environment it would be a tough ask to fund an 'entitlement agenda' for arts in participatory settings through arts subsidy. We'll need as a sector to get our heads into an education and skills funding model where there's a buyer and a seller. In other words we'll need to drive up demand for this work to such an extent that those running schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons will allocate their budgets to buying this work. We'll need to move away from a model where we believe that our practice is so good that we fund-raise in order to give it away to a privileged few (albeit probably identified because they have most need) rather than developing a genuinely sustainable business model for what we do. And then the business teams in mainstream education would be prepared to invest in developing modules and courses to fulfil the new demand.

The prize would be that there would be much more ongoing work for artists if we could, together, drive take-up, and the work would get to far more people in many more settings. And then we'd be speaking 'skills talk'. We'll be creating jobs for artists and contributing to economic growth. And along the way a lot more people will get to benefit from engaging with the arts. Could be a winner?

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