
Community Out of Bounds - Arts and Communities

Introduction

At the time of putting this case study together the Arts and Communities project is still active, having started with in September 2015 – and is due to run until June 2016. This case study presents work in progress. A full report of the project against the aims and outcomes will be available on the project website from July 2016.

Project aims

Project Arts and Communities (A+C) project created an artist-led, peer-education programme to:

- support artists to reflect on their practice to date
- develop skills and deepen their understanding of participatory and socially engaged art practice
- develop confident, articulate and critical practitioners working in community and participatory settings across the city of Aberdeen

The project set out to:

- explore existing knowledge and examples of good practice in Aberdeen
- open up pathways for collaboration across the city – with a particular focus on community centres
- develop a critically informed peer-support network for participatory and socially engaged art practice independent of (although gently supported and encouraged by) the Creative Learning Team (CLT), Aberdeen City Council

How the work sought to address the issue

A+C was created to address a deficit in knowledge, skills and connectivity within the field of participatory and socially engaged art practice in Aberdeen. The programme sought to explore pathways for post-academic development and, where possible, offer evidence for the need to embed more participatory and socially engaged art education within higher educational contexts across the city. Following on from ArtWorks research and events both locally and nationally, A+C aimed to provide a forum for peer-led discussion regarding participatory and socially engaged art practice and, where necessary, to challenge some of the practice in the city – and perhaps the ArtWorks programme itself – that stands in contradiction to the history and practice of innovation within the field.

What we did

CLT have worked with project lead and artist Jonathan Baxter to devise and deliver the A+C project which to date has included:

- Delivery of two public events exploring the relationship between arts and communities in Aberdeen and to promote interest, explore context and discuss content for the A+C programme. During September and November 2015, public Community Out of Bounds events took place to coincide with the promotion of the A+C programme and invitation to apply. These events were well attended by a mix of potential applicants, interested artists and representatives from arts, community and higher education organisations. At these events Jonathan set the context with reflections on what the A+C programme could look like and then facilitated group discussion by presenting a series of questions. These sessions, while not pinning down the programme content exactly, gave a flavour of the historical context the programme would explore and ways of working within groups. A+C practitioners have reflected that from these sessions it was clear that much of the programme would be shaped by the people who were on it.
- Starting conversations with seven community centres in Aberdeen who expressed an interest in supporting activity with artists and communities.
- Recruiting 11 artists to engage in a 6 month A+C programme meeting on a weekly basis. The recruitment process for the programme consisted of a written application with the strongest applications progressing to an interview/conversation with representatives from CLT and Jonathan Baxter. This process allowed the panel to make a selection based on interest and commitment to participatory and social engaged practice and on creating the right group dynamic. This process has so far born fruit and has given value to the artists who were selected.

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- Securing a shared work space through Anatomy Rooms artist studio initiative for the duration of the programme.
 - Making a group visit to Leeds to learn from experienced artists and organisations currently working in the field.
 - Building the group dynamic. The A+C six month programme to date has included weekly peer-learning with use of reflective journals, reading groups and sharing through presentations of the participant's own practice.
 - Supporting artists to deepen and reflect on their art practice to date. Support has been given for practice-based learning in a public and/or community context – including pathways for collaborating with community centres across the city.
 - Exploring the history and wider context of participatory and socially engaged art practice.

To come:

- Support practice-based learning and research through individual and collaborative projects.
- Provide three public workshops developing skills for participatory and socially engaged arts practice.
- Share artistic outcomes and knowledge generated through the programme in a public context – whether seminar or exhibition.

Achievements to date

The project is still in process so achievements are hard to measure at this stage. However, a deficit of provision has been identified within undergraduate arts programmes to equip graduating artists with sufficient art historical knowledge and practical skills to work in participatory and socially engaged art contexts. Also identified are limited opportunities to develop open-ended and financially recompensed participatory and socially engaged art practices in Aberdeen. Within the programme artists have reported an increase in confidence in their practice and how they articulate that:

“It has made me a lot more confident about my ideas, approach, and the direction of my practice, both practically and verbally, and has also had an influential impact on the theory behind what I do.” A+ C artist

“The programme has had a huge impact on my practice. It has challenged and broadened my own identity as an artist and given me much greater confidence in what I actually do.” A+ C artist

There is still some way to go to develop the group’s collective voice to a point where they feel able to present a cohesive vision collectively, although significant progress is being made on this. As a result there has been a hold on public reflections and updates on the website and the projects’ participatory and socially engaged activity is still to be fully formed and delivered.

Project outputs:

- 2 public engagement events with 50 attendees
- 11 artists recruited onto A+C programme
- 6 month A+C programme facilitated by Jonathan Baxter
- Community Out of Bounds website
- research field trip to Leeds
- a network of equipped, informed and connected artists

To come:

- 3 public workshops
- 3 projects delivered in partnership with community centres (and other public engagements yet to be specified)
- dissemination of learning and practice through the Community Out of Bounds website

Lessons learned

The full project outcomes have yet to be realised, once the project begins to deliver artist-led public facing aspects it will be more apparent how robust and sustainable these outcome are. There is a need to explore the feasibility of a sustained annual offer to students, practising artists and members of the public informed by the A+C programme. Separate to A+C, Jonathan Baxter will be developing three socially engaged art workshops for Grays School of Art’s undergraduates in April, providing links between the A+C Programme and Gray’s.

The A+C programme has seen a change in CLT staffing with the project link taking maternity leave from December 2015, as there was sufficient notice to this another member of the team shadowed elements of the planning, although as the maternity leave was not covered it has led to reduced capacity in the team to support the programme. Cover for this post has been appointed from 1 April 2016.

The project timescales stretched as it was important to give the programme enough lead in time to promote and recruit participants. The six month programme started in January 2016 and will run until June 2016. Looking ahead it is anticipated that there may be difficulties in developing the community centre links. CLT has undertaken early communication with the centres but no project activity has yet taken place and there has been little engagement from and with the community centres and the programme. This could potentially affect community expectations and continued engagement. It is important the group start making approaches out to communities, reaching beyond the comfort of sessions at the Anatomy Rooms. This link is crucial to demonstrating the project's success and sustainability.

What comes next?

Sustainability of current cohort:

- The future direction of the cohort is up to the artists themselves and will be informed by the decisions they make about their practice resulting from the A+C programme.
- Sessions within the existing programme will focus on 'what's next' exploring how an artist-led network could be sustained and what other pathways are available individually or collaboratively.

Support for other artists working in this context:

- CLT will establish discussion with FE and HE providers in the city to develop course content and pathways into participatory and socially engaged art practice for students.
- CLT and Jonathan Baxter to capitalise on sessions Jonathan will be providing with Gray School of Art.
- Developing mentoring programme for arts practitioners in the city¹.
- Theory into practice programme of presentations and workshops as part of forthcoming 'I am an artist' project through CLT².
- Recognise that artists on the programme can only commit limited time to develop their practice if they are not in receipt of finances to support them in doing so.

Pathways to work in participatory and socially engaged contexts:

- Pathways to working in such contexts locally can sometimes seem hidden. CLT will work with other key arts organisations and services in the city that are also delivering on the arts, inclusion, education, employability, health and wellbeing to promote training and employment opportunities making this work more visible.
- Develop relationships and pre-funding agreements with community centres in advance of establishing further developments within the programme.



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¹ A mentoring programme for visual arts is currently in discussion through Aberdeen City Council.

² Subject to funding.

³ Organisation could include SHMU, GHAT, APA, AAG&M

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