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HE OPEN LAB REFLECTIVE REPORT

Reflective Evaluation Report: Higher Education Lab

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ARTWORKS LONDON

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Context

The aim of this Lab was:

'To enable postgraduate students from Goldsmiths University, Trinity Laban, Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Guildhall School of Music and Drama to experiment, interrogate and explore the creative and artistic seeds of their practice, as well as encouraging 'blue sky thinking' with the aim of strengthening the critical framework for participatory practice.'

Artworks London also hoped that 'it would be able to assess the LAB environment as an effective cross art and cross institution learning structure for participatory practice, with the view to thereafter test the transferability of this model to partner institutions and any undergraduate and postgraduate courses they run that are concerned with participatory practice.'

Structure of the LAB

I'd like to give a very brief out-line of what happened during the four days, as it is helpful to illustrate a key point I'd like to make in this evaluation about the time post-graduate students have to collaborate and to develop their own practice.

Day 1

I planned a light touch structure for Day 1, mainly to help the students get to know each other better (as individuals, in terms of their previous educational or professional experiences, and in terms of the way in which they worked in a collaborative environment). I used some basic warm-up introductory exercises and then two lengthy group exercises – one asked for an artistic, creative response to a piece of text drawing attention to the power of myth and the other asked for an imaginative response to an actual tender for a piece of participatory work. I also time-tabled two sessions for individual reflection with the aim of foregrounding reflection as an important element of the LAB.

The students responded very well to the structure of the day and it was clear that they were enthusiastic, talented and very prepared to enter into the spirit of the LAB.

Two other factors emerged. Firstly, there was an initial resistance to exploring through doing (moving, improvising, creating); exploration through discussion felt like the most comfortable place for most, although not all, of the students. I did nudge groups gently towards developing an active response¹ and drew attention to this in our feedback at the end of the first session. This links for me with conversations I had with the group later in the week about the relative lack of time they have as part of their course to work on developing their own practice (as opposed to undertaking more

¹ Whilst of course making it clear that if they really wanted to stay discussing things as a means of exploration, that was fine

academic research and exploring the work of other practitioners). I think this leads inevitably to a degree of nervousness, even fear, of exposing oneself through active creation – discussion feels ‘known’ and therefore safer.

Secondly, there was a marked similarity in the responses of different small groups to the real-life tender; this made me think about how far a brief can condition a predictable, even stereo-typical response or, alternatively, encourage an artist/s to respond with new kinds of approaches and responses. An important reflection point for me!

At the end of Day 1, I asked the students to come in on Day 2 with a proposition – a question or a theme that they thought they would like to explore during the course of the LAB.

Day 2

On Day 2, we used an adapted version of Open Space Technology to enable everyone in the group to tell us a little about their question or theme and then to cluster in groups to consider those questions/themes that interested them or where they could see a connection to their own proposition. Two of the students who teamed up to talk about their ideas (a dance student and a drama student) intend to meet after the LAB to explore their ideas further, which is great. I hope others may also find ways to continue with their creative dialogue.

One important issue which began to emerge on Day 2 was the differences in the students’ levels of previous experience and the kinds of methodologies they were accustomed to using in their practice. So for example, a dance student cannot be expected to know a great deal about Forum Theatre and a drama student may have no knowledge of the principles of authentic movement. An interesting and ongoing challenge, therefore, was how to identify the kinds of building blocks that would help the ‘other’ art form practitioner to have sufficient understanding and fluency to help make collaborative creative work, whilst not expecting them to become experts in the techniques of another art form in a day or two.

Previous professional experience in the group was also very mixed – for example, one student was a theatre director, another had worked at a high level in policy research and policy making, another had been an actor – this made both for rich and stimulating encounters and also required flexibility and stretch from the group. One person’s way of interrogating an issue creatively was not necessarily the same as another’s.

We also tried out Liz Lerman’s methodology for Artists’ Critical Feedback. I thought it was important to raise the question of how to ask for and how to give critical feedback as an artist and to other artists effectively. One of the students felt this was arguably the most important of the sessions of those she was able to attend, as she had experienced difficulties on her course with an unstructured session of peer feedback on creative work.

I felt that the group's confidence in collaborating with each other had grown during this second day and that it was important to continue to emphasise the importance of them having agency over the direction of our time together. We talked about the many different ways in which we could use the remaining 2 days and I asked each member of the group to come in on the following day with a proposal to either continue exploring the question/theme they had begun on Day 2 or a new question/theme which had started to emerge for them during Day 2 and a way of working either with the whole group, or with a small group.

Days 3 and 4

Given the numbers in the group and the fact that some of the students wanted to team up to explore an issue together, it was possible for every-one in the group to effectively lead a session (lasting between an hour and ninety minutes, including some feedback).

I think this provided an excellent opportunity both for the students to explore their ideas through practice and for them to collaborate with and support each other in exploration. Talking informally to the group, many of them felt that although they had opportunities on their courses to learn from established practitioners (through master-classes, workshops and placements), there was little time available to develop their own work. My personal view is that this is a critical issue; it can be very difficult for an emerging practitioner to find the space, time and resource to experiment in the early years, when the priority can often be finding paid work. If he/she cannot take risks in developing their own approaches as a post-graduate student, it seems like a wasted opportunity. I had a very strong response to this, as can be seen from this evaluation, which was to seek to give the students as much agency in the four days of the LAB as possible.

Something which I thought we should have done during the four days and which I didn't have time to initiate was a list of books which people had found useful, not for academic reference, but for practical techniques, exercises and starting-points, such as Impro by Keith Johnson and Boal's Games for Actors and Non-Actors. I think it would also have been helpful to have made a list of methodologies – such as Forum Theatre, authentic movement, Verbatim Theatre, somatic practice – so that participants could have followed up on anything which they found particularly interesting

Aims

How did this LAB meet its intended aims?

1. How can the attributes of the LAB model, embodying experimentation and collaboration, with a focus on developing practice (akin to more established artists) support the learning of students and emerging artists at post graduate level in participatory practice?

I thought the LAB worked well as a way of supporting learning for students and emerging artists at post graduate level, giving time, space and a basic level of resources to explore ideas and questions that were important to each of the participants. I personally feel it was important in this context to start with the artist's creative impulse and to trust that the exploration will eventually feed into one's participatory practice rather than start with the apparent needs of the participatory practice and attempt to respond to these.² It was very clear by the end of the four days that many of the students were taking away thinking and practical ideas which they intended to use to develop their participatory practice

2. How can the cross arts, cross institution approach for this LAB improve the learning experience for single Art Form students?

I think this question would have been tested more fully if we had had post-graduate music students participating; I think it would have provided a bigger cross arts 'stretch' than the stretch between dance and drama students (although this was very valuable). It was very useful, however, that the institutions are all located in London; it means it is realistic for students to meet up after the LAB and I know that some intend to do so. This could prove very exciting, as they develop work together. I feel I should have tried to find a bit more time to discuss this aspect of the LAB with the students. I also think developing a list of approaches/techniques and useful 'practice' books during the course of the four days would have been helpful

3. How can the open and experimental experience of the LAB environments still support the attainment of the students fixed learning objectives?

I'd be very interested in the answer to this question, which I hope will emerge from the students' evaluations. I suppose my personal belief is that if you are clear about the direction of your own learning, you will use experiences like this, which may be open and experimental but also intensive and resource rich to feed that learning (sometimes in quite unexpected ways). Again, my personal belief is that intensive experiences like this unfold in your learning over time – it may be three or six months afterwards that something you experienced or reflected on suddenly assumes a much greater significance to your learning

4. How effective is the LAB environment/model as a tool for the training and development of Higher Education arts students working in participatory settings?

² See reflections on Day 1 on the tyranny of being imaginatively limited by the brief

Something I would like to reflect on in response to this question is the length of the LAB. I began the four days wondering about the length and whether, for example, this might have put off some potential participants or discouraged some who had to make practical arrangements, for example, for child care. I suspect it probably did. I also wondered whether it made for a hard sell as a tool to be used in Higher Education courses, where I know there is already a lot of pressure on the time available.

By the end of the four days, however, I had changed my view on this completely. Ironically, I think students probably need a four day period even more than practicing artists. There are three reasons for this. For many (of course not all!), the dominant forms of learning at this stage in their lives are reading, writing and discussion, not moving, creating and doing and it takes a bit of time to shift into another gear. As one student said towards the end of the four days, 'I've seen that you can explore a question through moving not talking.' Secondly, it takes time to learn about the other in a collaborative process and to learn enough about each other's forms of practice to be able to communicate effectively. And thirdly, the four day block allows time to establish reflection as an iterative practice, which I believe is hugely valuable.

Final Thoughts

There is a question of facilitating this kind of experience. ArtWorks London did spend time when briefing me to make sure I understood that my role was to facilitate and not to teach. I think this is critical; the students must have as much agency as possible in the LAB. This does require a high level of skill and an ability to resist invitations to step back into the role of teacher. I did very occasionally offer direct feedback/teaching when I felt it was absolutely required or appropriately requested, but tried to stay out of the students' creative way as much as possible.

Finally, I think I would ask this question in another way. If Higher Education courses are not offering their arts students who are interested in working participatory settings the time, space and resources to develop their own practice and to work collaboratively with other artists, are they fully contributing to the advancement of this area of work?