

SNAP PRACTICE

Project aims

Sheffield Network of Arts Providers working with children and young people (SNAP) received funding to run a series of collaborative enquiry days, bringing together artists from different career stages and art forms with employers and commissioners from key organisations in the city, to generate new ideas for innovative approaches to participatory practice with children and young people (CYP).

The SNAP Network has 122 members (38 freelancers, 84 organisations). In 2014, SNAP encouraged members to work in new areas and in new ways, but only one project materialised, so SNAP realised the idea of changing commissioning habits required a different sort of support. This project provided the opportunity to focus on new types of quality delivery approaches.

Additionally, SNAP put up £2000 match funding as a micro-grant to pilot/test some of the models developed.



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What we did

The recruitment of the Project Co-ordinator/Evaluator (who was also on the SNAP Steering Group), and Facilitator preceded the recruitment of participants.

23 participant applications were received. We chose 14 from a range of art forms and practice: emerging artists; established artists (involved in participatory practice for more than 5 years); and commissioners/employers:

		Prior relationship with SNAP?
5 Commissioners/ Employers (from 4 organisations)	NPO Theatre /SNAP Steering group member; Independent cinema; Primary school; Secondary school	1 person
6 Established artists	2 from Visual arts company; Outdoor theatre maker; Outdoor visual arts practitioner; Photographer; artist/ facilitator	2 people
3 Emerging artists	Musician; Film maker; Drama practitioner	none

We chose based on the strength of participants' applications, their interest in the idea and in being part of an 'open space'. Two of the commissioners also applied as artists: this added richness to discussions and complexities to the commissioning of the micro-projects!

- The 3 non-arts commissioners that applied pulled out due to funding cuts or availability.
- We increased group size to 14 so that two organisations could bring 2 members of staff.

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- 6 of the group were familiar with collective enquiry.
 - All but one person had had prior engagement with other sectors.

The programme ran over 3 days, each session one month apart. The sessions were designed to be spaces for peer learning, genuine negotiation, emerging ideas, and ongoing reflection, and were fun, relaxed and creative, with plenty of time for discussion and sharing:

“The sessions were planned and guided brilliantly with a great mix of practical and visual. I liked how such big tasks were broken down over three sessions.” EC – artist

“I felt safe to express my ideas. The space enhanced creative thinking, as did the activities. Lots of time for talk.” NW – commissioner

Five elements ran through all sessions:

1. The ground rules for the programme, established in Session One (and added to each session) were important for the group’s sense of safety and trust.
2. All sessions focussed on learning and exploring.
3. Each session began with playful warm up games to promote relationship building.
4. To encourage self-reflection and capture insights (which fed into programme design and evaluation), we asked the group to place their thoughts on Post-Its on our ‘Wonderwall’ space, in 3 sections:
 - what I now know
 - questions raised
 - ideas
5. The Project Coordinator’s presence at all 3 sessions and all planning meetings ensured that SNAP’s aims, and the evaluation of participants’ learning were built into sessions and helped us pick up on unexpected outcomes.

The sessions were framed clearly as part of ArtWorks and it was useful to be able to signpost both artists and commissioners to the wealth of research that exists. However, both Facilitator and Co-ordinator felt that the quantity of information on the website had the potential to be overwhelming, so we did the reading and created documents based on the research for participants to read between sessions.

Session One:

This session introduced systems thinking as a way to explore and reveal the inter-dependence between artists, companies and commissioners in Sheffield. Participants developed a shared understanding of the current operating environment through creating a co-designed space using physical objects.

“A very useful insight into how the system works or doesn’t work. I understand where the voids are between different individuals, and understand the necessity of building relationships.” EC (artist)

“Enhanced my sense of responsibility working within a large organisation to find a way of initiating positive changes in this system.” EH (commissioner)

Session Two:

The group discussed the importance of relationships and quality. Then, thinking about the problems identified during Session One, used the Wonderwall 3-step process worked well as a sequence in eliciting understanding and prompting project ideas. Participants had space to imagine, ‘build’ and then share physical representations of their solution/project idea.

Session three:

The focus of this session was to work in common interest groups to flesh out a handful of the ideas from Session Two to become ‘micro-grant’ projects for SNAP. Three clear groups emerged which then went through a ‘Co-star’ innovation process to develop project specifications. These were pitched to the rest of the group, and to a visiting SNAP Steering Group member.

What the project achieved:

The 3 enquiry days proved valuable for the 14 participants:

“An amazing opportunity to meet and think creatively and build relationships.” RN artist

“As a young practitioner there are so many insights into the market/ practice/ routes in, that you’d find hard to get anywhere else.” EW new artist

“An inspiring, creative one-off opportunity to develop yourself and your practice.” EH commissioner

“It was good to come together with others who share interests in process-led, emergent working. It was also good to read the ArtWorks research to get a feel for a wider context around participatory arts.” LC artist

Participants had insights into their own and others’ practice, new understandings of the ecology within which their work takes place, and explored new opportunities for participatory work with CYP.

Above all, the sessions highlighted the importance of building relationships between commissioners and artists, and how difficult this is to do when time and money are short. Yet it is clear that without this trust relationship, it is unlikely that the commissioners will take the risk of bringing in new artists or new ways of working.

“Building relationships before you know what you are going to do has been amazing.” TO – artist/commissioner

The sessions also enabled both artists and commissioners to articulate:

- The high value they place on having a practical CPD space to take risks, and what a rare opportunity this is.
- That both sides are operating within a commercial market, so risk taking is even harder. As a result, making the case for quality participatory work, and championing good practice is vital.
- It was useful to articulate and notice that artist and commissioner have a shared bond of quality and expectation, and both have had poor experiences of commissioning.
- The relationship should go two ways, and it is important to articulate what each partner can offer into the mix.

Nine of the participants are involved in creating the micro-grant projects in April/May 2016 (details available on request). These aim to build relationships between young people, artists and commissioners.

Lessons learned

Programme timing:

- Following feedback from artists early on about giving up time without being paid, we reduced the 3 full days to two (long) half days and one full day. This was a mistake, as it meant that the final day was rushed, and as a result much of the Project Co-ordinator's time has been spent following up micro-grants since December. As we went through the process, it became clear that participants valued the space enough to give up their time.
- The ideal would have been two 4-hour days followed by a 7-hour day, and potentially another half day 4-6 weeks later.
- Also, programme the sessions closer together to minimise time taken in getting back to where we were: once per week over three weeks.

Programme design and content:

- The project facilitated useful and meaningful conversations that wouldn't have happened in any other way, and it would be a useful programme to repeat.
- Feedback from participants indicated they would have liked to have space to explain/share their practice to others.

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- Using a disciplined idea specification process (Co-star) was very useful for participants who have a preference to stay at the divergent end of the innovation process.
 - Emerging artists had less to contribute to Session One, which relied on prior knowledge of the sector. Find a way to include their voices if the programme was repeated.
 - Having the micro-grant pot was a mixed blessing: it meant that theory moved to action at the end of the project, but also meant that a small number of ideas got fixed and lots were thrown out.
 - There were more ideas generated than micro projects, all of them valuable. Finding ways to share (and ideally develop) these with the SNAP membership/steering group is important.
 - The project was as much about programme design as facilitation. Facilitator felt that *“The process of working closely with the Evaluator from the beginning, between and in session was significant to the project’s success.”* However, this meant that the Co-ordinator put in twice as many days as she was paid for, but as she is the only link between the sessions and SNAP this extra time has felt vital. Another route would be to increase the number of SNAP steering group members in the sessions.
 - Inviting a SNAP steering group member into the final session validated the process and the ending. This person was also linked to the Arts Council Bridge Organisation, and may be able to support some of the ongoing development work with CYP.

Programme participants

- The programme was clearly shaped by the interests and ideas of the participants in the room, and usefully opened up questions about working with non-arts commissioners in the future.
- Having a participant from outside Sheffield added a useful additional layer of knowledge/expertise.

Session location

- Having space that is set in a different environment with easy access to inspirational natural surroundings had a significant impact on the quality of the relationships and depth of engagement.

What is happening next?

The participants remain connected through a Ning group and plan to meet again in 12 months. We hope the micro-grants will build trust between commissioners and artists, and gather the evidence needed to apply for funds to continue on to scaled-up projects.

The programme generated valuable strategic information that will be fed into SNAP's development process. SNAP Steering Group meets in April, when insights from all 3 sessions will inform future direction of the Network. Additionally, at the open meeting for members in May there will be a presentation about the project, and information will be put on SNAP's new website when it is launched.

One of the requests from both commissioners and artists was for a trusted, quality assured online platform where artists who work with CYP can share their practice, and commissioners can find these artists. As a result of this programme, CapeUK have agreed to support the expansion of such a platform into Sheffield: breezeculturenetwork.org.

This project indicated a clear role for an umbrella organisation in Sheffield to support and champion the participatory arts sector in a strategic way. This was indicated in conversations, during the mapping session, and was a topic often returned to by the participants. There are opportunities for linking artists with both arts and non-arts commissioners, championing and making the case for participatory arts to the city council. However, this project took place amidst changing times in Sheffield. SNAP is in the process of re-positioning itself within a new arts landscape, and it is not clear whether SNAP will be this umbrella organisation, but it will be part of the discussions, so we very much hope that findings from this report will feed into exciting new developments in Sheffield.



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