



Sharing the Learning: Arts Engagement with Older People and Families

21st April 2011

Transcript from our group discussion at this event

This is a transcript of the discussion that took place, as the final activity, at our *Sharing the Learning: Arts Engagement with Older People and Families* event at Cafe Gallery on 21st April. Facilitated by Paul Margrave, Director of the Capital Age Festival, people in the room were asked to share reflections, ask questions or discuss opportunities and issues affecting their own future work to engage older people and families with and through the arts.

The conversation reflects and builds on issues explored earlier in the day and makes particular reference to the following areas:

- The role of the process – outcomes and outputs
- Measuring impact – the role of evaluation and monitoring
- The concept of risk
- Legacy – how is work sustainable?
- Where next? Leading the debate

Alongside Paul, named speakers are Helen Ball, Audiences London's Head of Engagement Services, and David Slater, Artistic Director of Entelechy Arts. In most cases other speakers' contributions are intelligible without reference to their names or organisations, and these have therefore been left out.

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PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): OK, what we're going to do for the next 20 minutes or so is, I will open up the floor to you guys, and just facilitate a chat. If there's anything you wanted to feedback from your small groups it's an opportunity. If there are any burning questions you wanted to put to the group, if there's any challenges or opportunities or anything that you are burning to say in front of everyone this is your opportunity, and also... and about we'd really like to talk about is what's next, where we as a group of people in this room can go next after what we have learnt today. That's it really! If anyone wants to kick us off and offer up comments from your group or anything you would like to get off your chest now is your chance...!

And I did notice going round that the bits of yellow paper [containing selected quotations from the twelve featured projects, which delegates used as prompts for earlier group discussion] - some were holding them seriously, and some people just put it to one side; what kind of things came up?

HELEN BALL (AUDIENCES LONDON): I was with a group talking about the BAC (Battersea Arts Centre) quote about - I can't remember in its entirety - but about seeing older people as artists and the process. It came up in another group too. There's the question with a lot of kind of engagement about, you have the idea and participants and a slight sense they are being done to and there's art here, and you are bringing them together. I think some of these projects have kind of really challenged that and changed that. That I found exciting... I don't know if anyone has anything to add on that?

NEW SPEAKER: We talked about that a lot the whole idea that in fact if you say to people "you can't really do that", they will go "OK, I won't do that". In fact if you say "we are doing this, and I hope you are up for it, that's what it's going to be", they say well "no, no... well OK yes... yes OK". And there's just the gradual process, the most exciting thing about this kind of art I reckon, and it's the kind of slowly slowly catchy monkey job, which is basically you are saying "you can do it. I see in you every day more excitement and enthusiasm" and you can't wait to see how much... it can be.

NEW SPEAKER: It's about creating a dialogue, and creating a creative dialogue with someone; you're not saying "yes you know this is what we are doing", but saying "shall we do a bit of this?" and you get something back and you give something back and it becomes a work in progress between two people rather than one person being the artist and the other one not.

NEW SPEAKER: Or just do it! And just find out what the response is.

NEW SPEAKER: Yes exactly keeping things as open as possible and open to their ideas as much as you are promoting your ideas onto them I think and working with what they are giving you as well.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): And when I was floating around there was a lot of talk about labels and who is the professional artist and who is the participant and what expectations that puts on people. And it seems to come up in different ways with different groups as well?

NEW SPEAKER: Yes... it's definitely... about working with what they are giving you, and keeping an open mind and creating a creative dialogue, yes.

NEW SPEAKER: We also discussed slightly the reverse side of the argument, and I think that's valuable and there's a place for what skills the professional brings to the project to be acknowledged. For example there's been painting groups that we are teaching that are desperate, and they have been self-running and then they want a tutor because they sort of run out of things... their own resources in a way. So there's a value-added thing of bringing a professional artist in as well.

PAUL: About identifying what different people are bringing in different roles I guess...

NEW SPEAKER: And just talking to Ashley from South London Gallery, and we were talking about process being a different thing, it's the process that matters, and the knowledge and the job, and it's the job facilitating the process, and the process facilitating the relationship and the conversation and from that, the things that came out of it. What was interesting is the extent to which we do or don't now need to set up the production of physical outcomes, such as a dvd or a book, to get funding. Do we feel we're able to

communicate the genuine outcomes and is the environment you are working in sympathetic to that? Is there a bigger focus on relationships and are there lower expectations of outputs now? I don't know... I'll put that question to the room: whether we are working in an environment that understands that the process is the prize?

NEW SPEAKER: Just to come back on that, it is quite difficult for commissioners of arts projects to explain to the panel higher up exactly what the project is about; whilst we might recognise that the process is the thing that's really supporting people, they still want to see the outputs as well as outcomes and you know, we have to find unusual ways to describe the work that's going on from day-to-day. The word that I use is often "therapeutic" - that seems to guarantee more!

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Is there stuff artists and coordinators can do to help you make a case higher up?

NEW SPEAKER: Yes obviously I do work with coordinators of the projects to look at those outcomes, but it is about working out for the year if you like, and that's how you fund projects [on an annual basis], even if there are just a few things we can point to and just say well yes that's a partnership. So if we can do that it does help to guarantee the money will be there.

NEW SPEAKER: We were starting to work with the university that do a dance in the community degree, and there do seem to be academics and researchers out there that would be really interested in having students working with them or organisations working with them, so students have the chance to be on live projects and take case studies. That could be really valuable for really helping us to know how to evaluate and manage research-based projects, and also really shouting out about the benefits that are coming from the project as well.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Something about evaluation and how it happens?

NEW SPEAKER: Yes, and being able to work on an academic level talking about the work to the medical professions, and really looking at the possible benefits and mental health benefits, and helping to map that.

NEW SPEAKER: I work for Lewisham Council, and for the health agenda. What I'm trying to do is make relationships with people in the health sector to talk about the health benefits of the arts and try to encourage more funding. And I think the difference is for health care professionals, they want to see the numbers and how does this improve the health of someone specifically in concrete evidence, which is a little bit of game I think, and there are some simple monitoring and evaluation tools that can be used. I know it can be resource intensive but that will become more and more important in terms of applying for funding, certainly from the health sector.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Where do we get hold of those tools?

NEW SPEAKER: I will talk to anybody who wants to talk to me about that, and I have put together research and evaluation on a shoestring pack and I'm Joseph Badman on the contacts list - if you want to talk

to me about that later please do.

NEW SPEAKER: We have also got a very basic top tips that University Campus Suffolk have put together if anyone wants that as well.

HELEN BALL (AUDIENCES LONDON): If people have specific tools you want to share then please e-mail them to me, Audiences London have got some as well and can disseminate everything together to everyone that's here if you can send them to me at helen@audienceslondon.org. We have worked with a lot of cultural organisations to support more effective evaluation; we generally find that it's important to have a plan and set of objectives from the beginning, to help you not to miss bits. There's also the issue of an over-collection of stuff and not then having the time or the expertise to analyse it.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Thanks - that's a lot about the process, and the benefits of that. So what is on the other side of that, when you do have the product, and the performance or exhibition or whatever, how does that fit into this conversation? How important is that?

Was there a project someone is doing about cocktails? Do you want to say about that?

NEW SPEAKER: Yes I work for Magic Me, we run intergenerational projects based in Tower Hamlets. We have been running cocktail parties, and in the evenings we go in [to care homes] for an hour with a load of adult volunteers, and basically we mix drinks for people and chat to them.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): And that led to a conversation I was hearing about work with older people and it's interesting to see how it works with families as well, about "you can't have cocktails, and wine, and you can't have a three course meal with wine cos that would be awful!" [to have alcohol with children around]. I don't know where that conversation goes...?

DAVID SLATER (ENTELECHY ARTS): It's about risk. Probably my favourite story involved our sister company in southern Brazil: they did a project and they bolted chairs three stories high on the outside of a school, and these 80-year-olds then were hoisted into these chairs outside the school, and the grandchildren didn't know, they came out and... [LAUGHTER]... and looked up to see their grandparents were three storeys up!

LAUGHTER

And it led to some really complex conversations about the meaning of art between the 10-year-olds: "granny what are you doing up there, come down!". "No, I'm doing art!"

LAUGHTER

And it's about risk, and energy...

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Brilliant

DAVID SLATER (ENTELECHY ARTS): Living dangerously!

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Anyone encountered anything similar to that in the UK? Would that happen? I don't know...!

LAUGHTER

No! No!

NEW SPEAKER: Well, we didn't come up with anything like that I must say, and I will make a note of that next time, and coming back to something about you know, the outputs - is it important to have an exhibition, performance? [For participants] process is humungously important, but they wanted an outcome and they were specific... they had an idea and they wanted to work towards it, and make it happen. And what they eventually made happen, the whole thing was around energy resources, exploring alternative energy which is something they felt strongly about, and it was their idea. They made wind turbines which we took on top of the Age Concern building where they met and at night it spun round and there were lights which lit up. And they were very political about it, and it was very socially engaging project, and working with an artist Loraine Leeson whose work is that sort of work, they had a message they wanted to give out. They said we haven't got much time left really to live, and to make changes but we want to get the message out to younger people where we live about alternative energy. One of the things is it's nearly on the edge of the Olympic site and they couldn't understand why..., we had a long discussion about why there were wind turbines on the Olympic site when there was the Thames which they felt we could harness tidal power from, and that started it going and now they are halfway through. The next phase they wanted to do is to build a water turbine, they have got the ideas and found a barge which is opposite the Houses of Parliament, and they want to send the message to the Houses of Parliament.

And this comes into another thing we all touched on really which is about funders, and expectations, and about where do projects go after the funding? And after funding then what? I have been involved in various projects which have had a tremendous energy, and life, and they have gone beyond the funding period, and we have bought into them already, and kept it all going, the idea being to take things on themselves, and then it gradually fizzles out, not always but we have got those stories, and I suppose one of our questions is: where does it go? What do funders want in those sorts of situations? It was fantastic getting that money from the Arts Council and it really enhanced a project we were delivering up to a certain point about you know, what next? Is there a strategy for working with older people in the arts, are we are going to suddenly get a lovely message about lots of funding available? That's a rhetorical question obviously.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): What next? For when the funding runs out and in a strategic way? What do we think?

HELEN BALL (AUDIENCES LONDON): I think it's also, you know, there's massive shifts socially with the numbers of older people and that's really changing. It's not just that we have got to this stage in the arts but that the whole world is changing and relationships are changing and economic times are impacting on the way people work and on interactions. The new economics foundation have brought stuff out about how lots of social problems would be reduced if we were all working shorter hours, which of course has financial implications for

most of us. I think perhaps we are seeing more organisations teaming up in different ways, and NESTA has launched something recently about collaborative communities. And then there's connecting the issues that arise for these groups with the projects and departments outside of the arts and connecting with the conversations happening there. I know when we ran our [Bolder and Wiser symposium](#) in 2009 about older people as audiences and participants in the arts, I linked up with the Department of Work and Pensions and they were so interested in some of the projects and I sent them lots of information about arts projects for their consultation at that time and have stayed in touch with them. They come to some of the things we do. But there needs to be a lot more of that - that's just one, and there are a lot of organisations out there that are involved with the groups we're talking about today.

NEW SPEAKER: I think the joining-up is incredible.

NEW SPEAKER: It's fantastic to hear all the work you have been doing, and you might not have worked on the particular projects we [ACE] have funded but the idea is we are trying to share some of that fantastic practice that's out there and spread that out and share it with other organisations and ideally not really have fund-specific work for older people in future but really invent that, so those approaches are things that people have been mentioning and different organisations will do as much as well, and in the meantime we have the grants for the arts funding stream, and so hopefully we can use that as well to carry on great practice that a lot of people are doing with older people.

It's great to have this kind of document (the resource book available [here](#)) that Audiences London and their partners have prepared for us and hopefully we can use that again to share the fantastic learning that a lot of the projects have come up with.

NEW SPEAKER: To go back to the theme about the projects - they do live in the time and it's brilliant... and they have made conversations and nearly everything along those lines always has some kind of a legacy in as much as it raises expectations, and are you interested in putting the energy in? And I think that it's not really about the funding but about saying you know, if you are going to do this interesting project, and one thing that's going to come out of it is, I hope an expectation of those taking part, it's about where next? What happens next? We were talking about the project with South London Gallery, which is ongoing, and it's always there, and the group is managed and facilitated and it's porous and affects everyone who comes and does things in the area, and they just walk in on a spontaneous off chance, and it's open to anyone as an ongoing relationship. You know... it's a simple thing, what journeys that people might come up with. A project is always a journey, and I think they won't be funding to do another project like we have done but what there is is the legacy.

HELEN BALL (AUDIENCES LONDON): We've done events with South London Gallery before and it's often an organisation I would cite because it's all about the people there isn't it? I don't remember the names of any of your projects, I remember the names of the people. I have met them of them now a lot of times. I know some of them myself now just from coming in and doing bits for you guys, and if there's a point of recognition about why you are working with people... I think that's important too. And obviously challenging, and because you know you can't work with nothing, you need resources. I'm not saying it's easy!

NEW SPEAKER: I just wanted to bring that out a little bit more, if we are talking strategically we need

to be looking at what the Government's priorities are in the future. The Government is concerned about the cost of health care for older people. And if arts projects are going to maintain people's sense of well-being, and mobility, and all of those things that you have been talking about, then tapping into those goals that the Government has, and starting to plug away at some of that - you know unless you understand how the funding comes from the Government, then you know it's not going to reach the projects that need funding.

NEW SPEAKER: Yes I mean I think that's a really good point and perhaps I would want to challenge that further and think that what we should really be thinking about our goals and challenging the Government to make sure these goals are satisfied, and I think from what you were saying something that's key here is solidarity. And there are several projects that have happened and any of us I'm sure have said it's about the people who are participating in these projects, and the process and so on. Perhaps it's about us creating a vocabulary that the funders will then have to deal with in terms of what these outputs are. Instead of therapy it's about 'the young people I work with are now decision makers within our community' and that has value in itself; instead of making a book it's about 'I have developed authors'. That becomes a category that is funded. And these things are really important. We start thinking about funding, and funding ways, and it's true that we do have to take on board this responsibility of actually perhaps thinking about other ways of funding ourselves. I mean there's this great text that talks about a group in the States that talks about Arts Council funding which is great but they couldn't sustain the project and it became too difficult; what they did instead was they thought about ways they could sell posters and things that didn't create thousands and thousands of pounds to do this great big tickets project but did allow them to you know maintain a relationship over a certain amount of time and become sustainable, not in a 'big society' way but in a way that can be fruitful for that group.

NEW SPEAKER: It's about partnership - citizenship

NEW SPEAKER: It's also rejection I think as well. Not just for Arts Council but for any funding body - unfortunately there's the need to do outputs and other things. We do have to think about ways that we can come together within our groups and say actually you know what, we have the vocabulary that needs to be funded and we also have a set of projects and things that we think are worthy of being funded and come together in that way which is why things like this are so great in terms of building collaborations and relationships I think with people.

PAUL MARGRAVE (CHAIR): Thank you, that's nice to wrap things up. Is there any last minute that burning statement that we want to say before we go?

HELEN BALL (AUDIENCES LONDON): I want to say something - I completely agree with you, and I think being able to connect people is a big currency in itself, and that's what all these projects are able to do, and I think the more we can work together to articulate that and talk to others about that, we will be stronger.

PAUL: Brilliant. Thank you very much, and there are evaluation forms kicking around, and you know how important they are!

HELEN: I will just also say thank you so much for coming!

For more information about this event and links to related resources, including the book we produced to



accompany the event, visit the [Sharing the Learning events](#) page on the Audiences London website.

If you would like a conversation about arts engagement with older people and/or families contact Helen Ball, Head of Engagement Services at helen@audienceslondon.org or on 020 7367 0813.