

SURFING THE IMAGINATION: SKILLS, LEARNING AND PARTICIPATORY ARTS

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UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATORY (COMMUNITY) ART

A character if not a definition

Participatory art is a vast and diverse fleet, sailing under many flags, but the part I'm concerned with today is what used to be called community art (and still is in many parts of the world, though not necessarily with the same sense). It does not include the outreach work of cultural institutions; nor the invitations by contemporary artists to be active in some aspect of their creative production, valid though both practices can be.

The kind of participatory community art I will focus on is characterised by:

- the creation of a new artwork that no one involved could have fully imagined before they started;
- the cooperation on equal terms of professional and non-professional artists;
- a distinctive framework of ideas and values;
- A duration in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end;
- A public presentation of the work created.

I would also say that participatory community art is generally optimistic and outward looking, less concerned by art world preoccupations than with what concerns most people in everyday life. The work produced is part of a community's story, even if – especially if – that community is small, divided, provisional, uncertain or temporary.

The art created is a chapter in their story and only part of an artist's story because they have been, fleetingly perhaps, part of the community. That is another reason why it involves professionally so many people who do not have an art school training or even describe themselves as artists. Their identity, motivation and reference points are elsewhere.

The difference of participatory community art

Participatory community art [differs from other art practices](#) because it stands to one side – and is often critical – of the art world's structures, beliefs and values. As I said, the art does not contribute to an artist's or a group's standing in the art world, but, individually and collectively, to the lives of the people involved. Consequently, the relationship between participatory art and the art world can be tense: the second is not above using its intellectual, institutional and financial resources to undermine the first if it represents a threat.

Participatory community art [differs from education and training](#) programmes – whether in the arts or another discipline – because its purpose is not personal development (though that may and usually does happen) but people's engagement with the artistic life of their society, especially by those whose voice and experience is marginalised.

It differs too in focusing on creative expression, rather than the acquisition of skills, knowledge, competences or understanding (though that also usually happens). It does not rely on the ordered accumulation of learning but, as an artistic practice, can make unexpected leaps and connections that create life changing experiences in a single afternoon. More is not intrinsically better where art is concerned.

A right or a responsibility?

Finally, in this introduction, I want to say simply and clearly that participatory art is a human right. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Britain is a signatory, states that:

[Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.](#)

It does not follow that the state must finance such activity - that's a different argument about public funding. But it *is* the state's duty to remove barriers that prevent people from exercising their rights and participatory community art is one way of working to remove the obstacles that prevent many people from participating in the cultural life of the community.

This matters because discourse about this work often turns around whether it is good for people to participate in the arts. It is good, in much the same way as access to education is good. But, like access to education, the right is a starting point: everything depends on how we understand 'good'. Not all kinds of education are equally good. Not all kinds of participation in the arts are equally good. Rights are universal. Their interpretation within actual societies is not. It cannot be separated from philosophical, political and moral beliefs.

Human rights vs. human instrumentalisation

Those who recognise that participation in art is good for us (at least potentially) are sometimes accused of 'instrumentalising' art, but that has always seemed to me a dubious idea. Human beings instrumentalise almost everything, in the sense of making it serve their purpose: the history of our relations with other animals and the natural world is defined by instrumentalisation. Visit a farm if you doubt it.

We can argue about the rights and wrongs of that – indeed, we have for millennia – but most cultures, most of the time, accept that human beings must never be instrumentalised. Making people less important than some idea or purpose is the mark of dictators and ideological terrorism: it leads, sooner or later, to death. The concept of human rights was invented precisely to resist crimes against humanity. And the definition of a crime against humanity is to instrumentalise people. People are an end in themselves: anything else is an attack on human autonomy and dignity. At its simplest, we know that using people is wrong because we don't want ourselves to be used by others.

Participation with no strings attached

For that reason, if for no other, participatory community art must never be seen as a way of changing people to make them more acceptable by whoever is organising or paying for the activity. Like education, or development work, participatory art does change people in all sorts of ways. But there is a world of difference between giving people access to the resources for personal growth and trying to change them – without their knowledge – into the kind of people you want them to be. It's the difference between what we're taught and what we learn for ourselves.

So participatory community art is a human right and no compensating responsibility can be placed on anyone who is given access to it. They do not have to demonstrate some personal improvement as a result of their participation in order to justify the costs involved. A participant in a community art project is under no more obligation than an audience member at the Royal Opera House to account for their attendance. If we trust the wealthy to make their own judgments about what is good for them, we must equally trust the poor – unless our vaunted commitment to democracy is a fraud.

WHAT SKILLS DO PEOPLE GAIN?

These principles notwithstanding, participating in the arts is an important route towards personal change. I've learned that from different perspectives in my work as a community art worker, a researcher and a consultant working with community art projects. I've also seen it in many different countries and cultures, in every art form and in projects with widely differing visions and purposes. What people gain and how they change from participating in art is enormously complex and equally fascinating. But the concern today is about skills, and particularly the kind of skills that might help someone find work or more rewarding work. So I will focus on that, drawing on experience of projects I've worked on or researched, and I'll group these skills into five broad categories:

- Competences and crafts
- Organising and managing
- Working with and without others
- Imagination and creativity
- Life skills

Competences and crafts

The first and most obvious category of skills are the technical ones associated with working in the arts; they might include:

- Artistic craft and technical skills, such as those relating to performing or visual art; memorisation, movement, vocal projection, rhythm, the use of materials, playing an instrument and so on
- Skills associated with the vocabulary and language of art, such as choreography, lighting design, exhibition curating, constructing narrative, critical thinking etc.
- Skills associated with materials and equipment used in arts work, but not only in the arts: computers, sewing, electrical equipment, driving, construction, cooking etc.

Organising and managing

Secondly, there is a series of organisational skills, such as:

- Organising and managing your own time: getting to the venue, knowing when and where things are happening, making and keeping agreements, being on time, etc.;
- Organising activities so that necessary facilities, materials, equipment or support are all available and appropriate to everyone's needs;
- Managing projects and events: even a simple street theatre performance might involve transport, insurance, official permissions, organising food and access to toilets, marketing and more.

Working with and without others

Participatory art is collaborative by definition. Working with others means learning about yourself in relation to other people, group dynamics, cooperation, sharing resources and attention, negotiation, what matters to you and what doesn't, how to ask and how to give. All this complicated knowledge of self and others is sometimes summed up as teamwork but that small word covers a wealth of essential skills for the social workplace.

Imagination and creativity

The business of art is to create art work. That work may take many forms – a play, a video, a public sculpture, an evening of storytelling, a textile piece for a school – it doesn't matter. In every case, at least in well-conceived and executed projects, the process is creative. It brings something into existence. It makes something visible and tangible from resources that are invisible and intangible: the imaginations and creativity of its makers.

Imagination and creativity are vital human capacities. They allow us to discover feelings and ideas in ourselves of which we were unaware. They allow us to reach beyond our selves, to think and feel how things are for others. They allow us to escape our assumptions about how things are to discover how things could be. And they allow us to do that individually or together, to find our unique sensibility and to find what we share with others.

Participatory art projects – perhaps more than anything else they do – enable us to use the complex resources of imagination and creativity in our lives. These are not technical skills like using a spreadsheet or craft skills like learning to paint. It's more like learning to surf or sail, comfortable with the unpredictable currents of our own minds because, even if we've learned to ride them, we never lose respect for their power. Like arts practice itself, it's also inexhaustible, a lifelong process of exploration and discovery, experimentation and learning, in which falling often teaches us most.

Life skills

The many and varied technical, organisational, people and creative skills require the development of human competencies *and* support us in developing them. By human competencies, I mean some of those fundamental capacities that help us grow, flourish and fulfil our potential as people, not just as effective or bankable workers. Again, the range of this is huge, but I would include:

- **Courage**: to meet strangers, to speak, to share an idea, to express yourself in a new way, to accept other people's responses to your work and ideas.
- **Trust**: Participatory art is always about being and working with other people: in President Obama's words, it '*isn't about 'yes he will', it's about 'yes we can'*'. That sense of working together, sharing space, ideas, feelings is integral to the practice and it both depends on and builds trust: by practicing it we can learn when and how far to trust others, and why. And, in passing, let me say that this is more important than ever: research in the US by the Pew Centre shows that only 19% of Millennials believe people can be trusted – less than half the figure for the Baby Boomers.
- And with trust comes **friendship**. Artistic projects can be intense moments: people get to know one another quickly, they form strong bonds in common vulnerability and shared experience. This is one time when we really are all in this together. The success of all depends on each. But not everything works, even in professional art companies.
- So we learn about **failure**, and that it is not as bad as we fear. It's survivable, often interesting, and it can open unexpected pathways, help us reassess what we want and how we define achievement as well as giving us the motivation to go on.
- But actually most participatory arts leads to some kind of **success**, and that also has many lessons. We might discover that what we thought was success is not so important or that it's a platform on which to build because we can see further now. We might have to adjust our story of ourselves because it can be destabilising to be admired or congratulated when you've mostly thought you're not as good as other people.

Safety

These skills and others, like the other things people gain from being involved in participatory arts, are gained when good practice opens up safe routes for personal development. It's a safe space because the things you are asked to do are within your reach; because you've

made friends and you're working together; because, in the end, though this work can be life changing it cannot in normal circumstances be life threatening; because you're always in charge of yourself, how you take part, the paths you go down and the risks you take.

PLANNING FOR GOOD OUTCOMES

So, to recap, participatory art offers a huge range of learning opportunities, including craft and technical skills, organisational and management skills, working with other people and using our own imagination and creativity. Some of those skills are broad and can be acquired equally well through other activities: joining a sports club, an environmental campaign or a religious group can all be good ways of learning work and social skills.

But others – the craft and expressive skills associated with arts practice and the more complex area of imagination and creativity – are either specific to arts practice or take on a unique and different aspect when explored through arts practice.

The nature of art practice

The nature of art practice, with its surprises, its openness, its flexibility and its responsiveness makes it an ideal playground in which to explore oneself, other people and the world in which we meet. Because that playground is generally safe and yet challenging it allows us to learn in our own way and at our own pace.

Sometimes people participating in an arts project are conscious that they are learning, because an artist or a workshop leader or another participant is showing them how to do something. But mostly they are learning without thinking about it, because they are caught up in the moment, focused on the creative work and its ideas, concerned with the story they are telling or the feelings they're exploring, or concentrating on doing something difficult because it is needed for the project.

A space for learning

For those reasons, participatory art is a very effective space for learning. Since there's no programme or curriculum, people make their own course, led by their interest and enthusiasm. They learn better by following their interests, curiosity and being in charge of their journey rather than being instructed or taught. We forget most of what we're taught. We remember what we've learned.

In any event, the learning outcomes of participatory art projects cannot be controlled or guaranteed. Trying to plan an educational journey through art is like trying to push a piece of string. It won't go where you want. Artistic experiences are subjective and personal so it is impossible to know what another person will take from them. What the artist can control is the quality of what is on offer and trust that people will find how to use that in the ways that are most meaningful and productive to them.

The challenge for funders

In recent years, funders and policymakers have increasingly sought to control the effects of their interventions in the hope of guaranteeing good outcomes and value for money. I'm not an educationalist and I cannot say how effective that is in mainstream education services. But I do know that it is ineffective in participatory community arts work – the results cannot be engineered by ever more detailed planning. Worse, that approach destroys what is actually valuable in community art: its rare and precious space for learning.

It is sensible to invest in community art programmes as a way of supporting development and social change but it is not sensible to make those programmes like every other intervention. The whole point of investing in them is that they work differently and therefore reach places and people that more conventional approaches fail to engage.

Funders need to trust that good outcomes will result: there is plenty of evidence to show that is the case. They need to trust in the people who imagine, develop and deliver this work and who need relatively small amounts of funding to make it happen. They need to ask good questions about their proposals and practice. Having done all that, they need to accept that learning and other positive outcomes will follow, even if they are not always those that are expected or planned for.

The 19th century debate about universal education has ended: now we talk about how, not whether to offer all children education. The same will happen to participation in art: the important questions are not about whether it can support learning outcomes – but how.