
B Arts and Staffordshire University – Social Agents

Overview

B Arts is a participatory arts organisation based in North Staffordshire for thirty years, working in many creative disciplines including theatre, visual art, music, carnival arts, film and digital media. The company has had a good relationship with Staffordshire University, whose Faculty of Arts and Creative Technology has specialist undergraduate courses in Fine Art, Film and Media Production, Drama, Music Technology and many other relevant subject areas.

B Arts worked with Staffordshire University to look at how opportunities for experience of participatory arts practice could be embedded in the curriculum content of undergraduate courses which are not primarily focussed on participatory arts.

How the work sought to address the issue

The issues of embedding opportunities for practical experience in undergraduate arts programmes are manifold. This project sought to address the particular issue of such opportunities being voluntary and not assessed. Students find it hard to commit to non-assessed work, even when they recognise its importance to their future development and careers, because of deadlines, coursework, timetables and the core teaching around their undergraduate course.

The project built on a previous pilot, Social Agents, which was funded through the University and offered a group of third year students placement opportunities. In this pilot, it had proved challenging to encourage students to complete placement opportunities when they sat outside the requirements of core courses, despite participating students reporting positive experiences.

B Arts held a number of discussions with key staff members running targeted courses at Staffordshire University and gained agreement for a small pilot to take place in Spring 2014 with students who would undertake a placement and be assessed as part of their course. The action research project explored how mainstream undergraduate modules in creative courses could be delivered through student placements with arts organisations with a socially engaged practice. Staff thought working with mainstream assessed undergraduate course modules that form part of a student's BA would support an increased commitment from students.

What it achieved

Specific interest was expressed from Visual Art, Drama and Music Technology and the pilot took place with Drama students in Spring 2014, with the Faculty as a whole keen to support this initiative. They were interested in how it could become a key way of delivering the University-wide Staffordshire Graduate programme for students on creative courses. This is a programme to ensure students have a set of generic skills, whatever their course, that support the 'Employability, Enterprise and Entrepreneurship' assessed module.

The emphasis in assessment was on a reflective journal and presentation, which was anticipated as working well with a placement route. Artists and other professionals with whom the students worked also had an input into the journal.

Lessons learned

The lessons from this pilot reflect lessons learned in other ArtWorks projects:

- There are major challenges in engaging students outside the curriculum, particularly in terms of timetabling, and realising the important potential of connecting these 'real experiences' back into course content and assessment
- There is a need for students, higher education institutions (HEIs) and arts organisations to be supported by clear guidelines and statements of expectation, to support all parties in getting the most out of a visit or student placement
- The sector itself is not closed to engaging with students, although the practicalities of engagement may be complex
- There are broader higher education agendas (such as employability) which may make it easier going forwards to argue for the value of such 'real experiences' as part of the wider student experience, learning and assessment.



Image: Staffordshire students take part in a B Arts participatory film event

The process of changing or adding to course content – through placements, visits and other 'real experience' opportunities – is something which the HEI was positive about, but the practical process of embedding these is complex and requires significant work and lead-in time.

What other stakeholders are/should be doing with the learning

The absence of 'real experiences' in HEI courses is a major issue for graduates entering the world of work and there is evidence that students both recognise the importance of such experiences and value them. The biggest potential challenge appears to be persuading and enabling HEIs to find the space to include such experiences within the curriculum so that they are assessed and not seen as an additional burden.

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This project was a collaboration between an employer and an HEI that could act as a model for similar collaborations in creating successful placement opportunities across the sector. Working together to ensure that the learning outcomes of a module and the contracts that are developed are aligned was made easier when working with one employer.

What is happening with the learning now

B Arts and the University are committed to building on the learning to date – and including courses that have shown interest, such as Music Technology, as they move into the future. Once the current Drama pilot placements have been completed, all involved (not least the students themselves) will have been through an 'end to end' process culminating in assessment. The team will then be in a better position to mainstream this approach across other courses within the Faculty.

Arising out of the partnership in this case study, a major five-year programme called *Artcity* has been created by B Arts, Staffordshire University and Stoke City Council. *Artcity* aims to attract and retain more creative graduates and artists to live and work in the city.

More information:

www.b-arts.org.uk

www.staffs.ac.uk/academic_depts/fact/

www.artcity.org.uk