

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

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Changing the Conversation: A Provocation

Context

Writing a provocation about artists working in participatory settings and the contribution to be made across sectors, including universities, FE, and other institutes and organisations in developing this practice, has been complicated. It seems that I have a lot of questions to ask.

For example, I am drawn to first principles and want to ask why it is that we do any work with the arts in participatory settings. Why are artists compelled to go into (often) complex situations and make, create and form experiences? Are they? Does this have an inherent or assumed value that cannot be gained from any other kind of experience or activity in any other form? If we can locate this value and imperative, and identify whose values and imperatives these belong to, then one may ask what artists need (or want), that they don't already have, to best work in these situations. Situations that can range so wildly that to imagine any single kind of 'training' or one stop shop for becoming 'qualified', seems almost impossible to imagine.

To respond to some of these questions it might be useful to reflect on Eric Booth's observations from the World's First Teaching Artist Conference (Oslo 2012). He suggests that the imperative for such work comes from a drive to

'imagine new possibilities: "To imagine the world as if it were otherwise," as John Dewey states.'¹ It would seem, from this perspective, that the values underpinning this work are concerned with change, and those that undertake this work are applying a set of values based on a need for change; for imagining things differently. It could be argued that frequently this is on behalf of those whom the current 'world' serves least well and, as Helen Nicholson comments, 'participatory practice' usually refers to creative activities undertaken with people in community or institutional settings, and often with those deemed 'marginalised' in some way. But, as she also makes evident, the changing attitudes and practices over time means that this need not necessarily be the case.² Whatever the imperative, we need to recognize that such work (all work) comes with a set of ideological values that will play themselves out in the practice of the artists, the content they select, the settings they choose and the approaches they take over time with a variety of participants.

So there's already quite a lot to consider here, since any overarching or single conversation must cover a range of aspects that take us from ideological positions to the ways in which they are made manifest in practice. This implies that artists who work in such settings require knowledge and skills that include the subject at hand, the selection of appropriate content, an understanding of their own values as well as a capacity and an awareness of, how they deploy these amongst a range of participants and contexts that may have extremely specific and particular needs. What exactly is required to support and develop this activity?

¹ Eric Booth, 'The Universal Elements of Teaching Artistry: Take Aways from the World's First International Teaching Artist Conference', October 2012, <http://ericbooth.net>

² Helen Nicholson, <http://www.artworksphf.org.uk/page/provocations>

Eric Booth uses a quote from David Bohm, the 20th Century physicist who says 'Any time you see seeming polarities, look for the greater truth that contains them both.'³ In doing so, Booth looks beyond the divergent content and contexts in participatory practices and instead to the key features that can be observed - features that belong to those he terms 'teaching artists'. He cites 13 recurrent features which include: The capacity to listen acutely to the voices of others, an intrinsic motivation to 'make stuff they care about', using active participation as the main tool for learning, an assumed innate competence of participants and the construction of experiential activities that intentionally tap those competence, reflection, using a variety of roles in leading a group, including facilitator of group process, as well as the roles of designer, leader, colleague, teacher, and witness as well as a long view, to change cultures and lastly the Law of 80%—80% of what a TA teaches is who she/he is as an artist/person/learner/citizen.

Let us assume for now, that we recognise these features, or some of these features, in the roles of artists in participatory settings, and that these are based on the values and imperatives of the artists and indeed those who commission them. Let us then assume that the social, emotional and intellectual aspects of the arts are generative of imagining difference and are therefore highly pertinent, effective (and different from any other activity in this way) in developing these aspects for individuals in participatory settings. Lastly, let us assume that all artists engaged in this endeavour seek to work to achieve the best quality of experience, as well as creative output, for everyone involved, at all times.

It's a lot of assumptions, but ones that frequently get made in debates around participatory practices.

From Practitioner to Commissioner

I began my working life as a practitioner in participatory settings and probably, like many, I wasn't particularly well prepared, let alone well-versed in asking these kinds of questions or even understanding the kinds of assumptions one might make as outlined above. I had finished HE with subject knowledge and some transferable skills in communication as well as having run workshops and made work with others. But it wasn't until I found myself in a series of complicated and messy situations where what I had imagined my purpose to be and what those who had employed me had imagined my purpose to be was not aligned, that I stopped in my tracks. Not only did this provoke me to look at what I was doing, how I was doing it and why I was doing it (not to mention if I was any good at it and if there was any quality and value to be had in what I was doing), I had to get clarity on what was actually being asked of me. I'd like to think that all of this made me better at the work I undertook; it certainly made me ask better questions of myself (and others) and of the practice more generally. It also motivated me to seek out ways in which I could improve what I was doing, however, I had a bumpy journey in finding support that really met my needs in relation to those of the commissioners and, if Booth's features outlined above are reflective of the practice, how exactly does one learn how to develop such qualities? Can you realistically train for the 80% law?

Fast-forward 20 years. In 2002, I became the director of Creative Partnerships in Kent and was now in the position of commissioning large numbers of artists to work in participatory settings; in particular, but not exclusively, in schools. Given my own experience, I had learned that commissioning needed to begin with a conversation, and this is what I undertook with artists and companies, designers and facilitators. It was clear from day one, that when I presented the purpose of the project and outlined the participants we would work with, almost every artist wanted or needed more of 'something' to help them develop and prepare for this project. In the first year in Kent, this is what we invested in, very few programmes of work and instead, professional development to set up the best conditions for the work in hand. There were some artists who had thought very deeply about their work and practice including their own motivations, however, many, if not most, had not asked themselves yet, what the purpose was of their work and why they did it, nor why they used a particular approach.

In attempting to support these artists' practices in a coherent and organised manner, and wishing to avoid my own ad hoc and bumpy journey, we asked if there was some training that could usefully be provided that helped develop core skills and knowledge for them working with school children. Some of this was obvious, such as information and guidance on child protection, information on curriculum changes; schools' requirements, child development and learning theory etc., but we were able to do more than this. We chose to take the individual needs of artists and support them to gain specific and particular skills and knowledge; this

³ Eric Booth, 'The Universal Elements of Teaching Artistry: Take Aways from the World's First International Teaching Artist Conference', October 2012, <http://ericbooth.net>

took many forms, from attending courses, to working with specialists, to visiting sites of expertise, but mostly those involved chose to practice-share amongst themselves, experimenting and feeding back to each other. We also held 'creative gatherings' in which we had a meta-conversation about the purpose of the work and how to go about it; attempting to bridge the commissioner-practitioner divide.

In my current role at Tate, we work with many artists and often in participatory settings. This is with all programmes and across demographics; as artistic practice, attitudes and approaches have changed, so too have the number, range and type of participants with whom we engage. In all instances, it seems important that we communicate our values so that artists and participants can choose to work with us, or not. These values are about creating agency for all of us (including artists, participants and the institution), to learn, opening up a wide and divergent understanding of art that participants are supported to construct for themselves. I expect artists and the public we work with to generate and imagine divergent views of the world. Indeed this is why we want to work with artists - to bring in new perspectives - but we do seek to share values in doing so, which is why the commissioner's responsibility to make them explicit seems essential. With such an approach, we have to respect that artists and participants might not end up sharing our perspectives or understandings and I believe this to be healthy and a way of informing the institution and our own practice. We do not seek to train artists to develop a singular approach but we do look for those who have the capacities and behaviours as outlined earlier to be able to most effectively work with a wide range of publics.

The Trouble with Training

In a recent call for papers for a special issue of *Theatre Dance and Performance Training* journal they express it thus:

'In recent years there has been a proliferation of studies (Pitches 2006, Murray 2007, Evans 2009, Camilleri 2009, Margolis & Renaud 2010, Matthews 2011) which focus either on the historical and ideological components and framings of different training regimes, or on the concepts that define the notion and activity of training as a distinct enterprise. In fact, it has been argued that 'training in itself is not the end; rather, it is the means to produce and propagate an aesthetic and an ideology' (Chandradasan, 2010: 46). Moreover, the arts and higher education sector have become embroiled in fiercely contested debates on their purpose and social impact as at the same time increasingly driven by the forces of neo-liberalism and instrumentalism...' ⁴

In many of my conversations with artists over the years, the suggestion of training per se, has been immediately problematic, for all the reasons outlined here. The concept of training can imply a regime and potential ideological 'fix' that the very nature of being an artist and the kinds of work they undertake (if we accept that change is central to their values) sets out to challenge. Indeed they ask whom exactly the concept and practice of training serves? Of all the conversations I have had with artists who work in participatory settings, the key skill or capacity they seek, is to learn how to enable participants to think and act for themselves; how to create habits of mind for individuals that are about questioning, challenging perceived assumptions and creating an individual 'voice', not about creating a single habit of mind or similarity, but difference; enabling the many views, perspectives and understandings that art itself provokes and that making art explores. How do we best support this development for any artist? In Creative Partnerships Kent, much of this was through conversation itself and the sharing of what I now call reflective practice. I always felt a responsibility as a commissioner to be clear about purpose but also to learn from the practice itself both of which needed to be aligned to the needs, wants and desires of the participants involved.

And herein lies the problem, or rather the sets of problems that impact on conversation and the kinds of conversation across disciplines and fields of knowledge about supporting the diverse practice of participatory arts through training, courses, apprenticeships and much else besides, and that is that arts practice often invites contingency not fixity. It seeks to challenge, not demur, to promote difference and alternative worlds, not similarity or the same world-view. This, for me, is why the conversation needs changing. That we need to recognise and articulate the contingent nature of practice, that we shift from the refrain that implies a singular (or oppositional) conversation and embrace the greater and more complicated truth, which is that we require a different kind of conversation altogether that looks more like the practice it accounts for.

⁴ <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/cfp/rtdpcfp.pdf>

It's not possible to go into too much detail here; however, in an elegant essay 'Of the Refrain'⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari suggest a different kind of conversation. They talk of 'the song', indeed of the many songs that create refrains that we have come to sing, ideologically constructed and reiterated into repeated attitudes and behaviours. Participatory practice is one such song, or series of songs that we are currently singing that has generated the conversation in which we find ourselves. The authors take us on a journey from recognising how the songs are created (and why), to how we may break open the songs and in doing so move into other songs being sung differently. What this amounts to is a move away from concepts of 'top-down, skilling-up', or 'different training regimes' to the processes of learning itself. This may sound obvious, but what this kind of shift in tone brings about is an understanding of the landscape as something that exists to be navigated, to be taken advantage of and given agency to, rather than opposed or seen as a series of obstacles to be 'got over'. This is about all of us understanding each other's songs and the ecology of singing. Changing the refrain/conversation demands that we learn each other's songs adequately enough to be able to change our own, changing the conversation becomes the enterprise of sharing what we sing, in essence it's about a will to learn rather than to regulate one another's learning. I don't doubt that many institutions or agencies involved in supporting artists are already doing this – but it is not the dominant refrain, as the call for papers makes only too clear, to make it so demands that we sing a different song.

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⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* vol.2, London 1987, p.311.