Book review for cultural trends

Developing a foundation for quality guidance for arts organisations and artists in Scotland working in participatory settings – a report commissioned by Creative Scotland written by Rachel Blanche, of Blanche Policy Solutions, September 2014 available at http://www.creativescotland.com/resources/professional-resources/research/creative-scotland-research/developing-a-foundation-for-quality-guidance

Issues of quality in the arts have seen a considerable resurgence in cultural policy discourse in the UK over the last ten years, since the McMaster report criticised the instrumentalisation of cultural policy and called for a return to judgement and excellence in decision making (McMaster, 2008). Even more recently, in Scotland an attempt by Creative Scotland to create goals based assessment criteria met with opposition from the arts sector, which also saw renewed calls for artistic quality criteria (Stevenson, 2014).

Within Arts Council England, despite artistic quality having always been an assessment criteria, a new assessment regime has been set up to peer assess regularly funded organisations (Arts Council England, 2014), a new quality metrics has been designed to define agreed features of quality (Knell and Bunting, 2014) and a framework has been created for use in education settings (Lord et al., 2012). In the field of participatory arts, research on quality has come both from the arts sector itself through the Artworks programme funded by the Paul Halmyn Foundation (http://www.artworksphf.org.uk) and now through this report commissioned by Creative Scotland.

The report states that it aims to "rationalise, synthesis, create and condense learning [and] provide a foundation for the development of a quality framework [and] development of a guidance toolkits framework" for participatory arts in Scotland (Blanche, 2014 pg188). As such it does not pretend to present new research, but provides a useful contribution as a literature review of the research mentioned above, alongside quality research from outside of the arts. This includes the British Chartered Quality Institute, who significantly are cited as saying that quality should be defined by the recipient (ie the public) and not the producer. This is at odds with calls from the Scottish (and English) arts sector to focus on self and peer assessment which are inherent in much of the quality debate. Although it should be noted that Arts Council England's new quality metrics pilot did include the public for the first time, which this report wisely advises Creative Scotland to take heed of.

There is useful discussion here, about the difference between notions of "quality" as a value judgement and notions of "qualities" as descriptive features of an activity. But the attempt to find "agreed principles" of which features are most important ends up reverting to a single notion of quality assessment. Furthermore the principles in Arts Council England's metrics and the Creative Scotland report both include value laden terms such as "excellence" "authenticity" that I find unhelpful and unmeasurable. While the report calls for more focus on learning and improvement than measurement, I would question whether anyone sets out not to be excellent and if everyone's view of it is different how useful a concept it is? Likewise what feels authentic to one may not to another.

I have heard too often in arts debates that we know artistic quality when we see it and yet sitting around the same table no one has been able to agree on the work they have seen that is high quality. And therein lays the rub. Quality criteria have always been self-perpetuating. Those that

are better resourced commonly seen as better quality than those who are not and therefore able to attract further resourcing. There is the useful acknowledgement in this report that what is missing in the English research is an understanding of the importance of context and resources which are thankfully added to the Scottish framework. But despite recognition that "each project has a unique set of requirements context and content" (Blanche, 2014 pg51) it is the very act of creating a framework of agreed principles, whether for assessment or to improve practice, that persists with the assumption that there are objective qualities to identify and agree. Such an assumption may obscure, rather than illuminate the fact that different practices have different aims and partners may have different (and conflicting) interests.

There is also a tension in the report between the need to "focus on continuous quality improvement" (Blanche, 2014 pg119), which requires the sector to take ownership of it and the need for funders to quality assess. Despite the proliferation of literature on the subject the report suggests that there is no evidence of an appetite for the implementation of these frameworks as "while several of these conditions may seem plainly obvious [there is evidence] that these preconditions for quality are not always in place" (Blanche, 2014 pg14). There is an irony therefore that while the focus on artistic quality was an attempt by some in the arts sector to see a retrenchment from top down instrumentalism, the improvement agenda is being imposed as top down direction from Creative Scotland (albeit allowing for a period of consultation).

The Artworks research for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (which the author of this report was also a part of) came from a concern that unless the arts sector define the metrics "we can't assert the value of participatory arts on its own terms, and will always be judged by other people's standards – whether those standards are from other areas of the arts, or from the social policy contexts in which much of participatory arts occurs" (Toby Lowe, quoted in Blanche, 2014 pg36). However this is at odds with the report commissioned by Creative Scotland. Learning requires an open and honest dialogue about failure as well as advocacy of success but allied to funding streams it automatically leads to the same defensive instrumentalism (Belfiore, 2012) that means that people try and justify they are quality rather than improve what they do.

The suggested framework in this report therefore run the risks of reinforcing the very problem it seeks to resolve. It may distort the nature of the work through measurement, or merely become another advocacy tool to justify what people already do, without learning or reflection that might improve it. Furthermore while I would like to applaud any report that calls for more learning and reflection in the art sector, I am concerned, by focusing the debate entirely within the participatory arts context, that this report suggests that the lack of funding (which is acknowledged) is due to lack of professional development within the sector rather than on the funding choices of its policy makes. It is strange that while the report recognises this problem it sticks with the received wisdom that " a quality framework is needed" (Blanche, 2014 pg90) without ever really addressing why, except that that is why the report has been commissioned.

As such while an interesting read and useful literature review it persists with a never ending search for agreed principles which, like loch ness monster, do not exist. By doing so it ignores an alternative view of funding distribution which might be based on filling gaps in provision and addressing need rather than responding to the demands of suppliers to justify the status quo.

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