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Great art for everyone? Engagement and participation policy in the arts

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Great art for everyone? Engagement and participation policy in the arts under New Labour

Abstract

New Labour began its administration with a commitment to bring democracy to culture (Smith 1998). However a decade later the Arts Council's mission statement of "great art for everyone" (Arts Council 2008) suggested a continued emphasis on access to mainstream culture rather than on cultural democracy. The argument in this paper is that Labour's vision, has resulted in little change in which arts institutions receive regular funding (Arts Council 2009) and the social composition of those who participate in the arts in Britain today, who remain predominantly white and middle class (DCMS 2011). Public consultation through The Arts Debate (Opinion Leader 2007) provides evidence that the arts are still perceived as elitist and policy too insular and self reflective. The report clearly identified the public's desire for not only greater transparency in decision-making processes but also involvement in the decisions themselves, in order to democratise the arts.

This paper draws on research investigating the extent to which participatory decision making schemes affect cultural democracy and the subsequent impact on artistic policy and practice. In addition to documentary analysis this study involved interviews with policy-makers, practitioners and the public, focusing on two projects using participatory decision making in England.

Keywords

Participation, Engagement, Participatory Budgeting, Cultural democracy, Artistic practice, Cultural policy

Great art for everyone? Engagement and participation policy in the arts under New Labour

New Labour's first Secretary of State for Culture proposed that his department would help in "bringing democracy to culture...through a process generated from the bottom rather than imposed from the top" (Smith 1998, p17). Chris Smith's 'manifesto' presented a challenge to mainstream arts practice. It broadened the definitions of what constituted arts and culture, and what role cultural policy might serve. He championed an extension beyond arts and heritage to encompass the whole of the creative industries and advocated a shift of power from the narrow band of voices that were seen to have determined cultural policy prior to New Labour (Hewison 1995). He also prioritised increasing engagement and participation in the subsidised arts from the widest possible constituency, rather than it being seen as the preserve of the middle and upper classes. Following in the same vein as the cultural policy of the previous Conservative administration, the arts were also expected to contribute to both economic development and securing a more inclusive society.

The instrumental use of the arts to secure wider social goals, target setting and partnership working became closely aligned to debates on public value which aims to improve public services through increasing the value people put on the services. Whilst growing out of a "market driven approach" in the United States engaging partner agencies and stakeholders, this was extended under New Labour to engage those who use the services (Keaney 2006 p3). Within an arts context Keaney (2006) recommended a more equal learning relationship between producers and consumers, challenging arts organisations to address how they engage with the interests of the public.

However, the New Labour vision does not appear to have delivered the desired increase in participation. Data from the Taking Part Survey (DCMS 2011) suggests that large numbers still do not participate in the kinds of cultural practice it addresses. Nor has the hoped for engagement of a broader social constituency been realised. Participation rates are clearly correlated with socio-economic position (the middle classes and more affluent being much more likely to participate).

Moreover, public consultation on the arts found that while “the public” valued the arts they largely saw what was being funded as “not for us”, and policy too insular and self referential (Opinion Leader 2007). There were calls for involvement of the public in decision making.

The Arts Council’s research into its own internal working also highlighted a crisis of confidence in its decision making processes. The review by McIntosh (2008) criticised a lack of transparency in how funding decisions were made and argued that the Arts Council was still too reliant on a small number of voices to determine policy. It recommended that peer review and wider consultation should be introduced, to inform decisions.

This paper considers why Smith’s vision for cultural change has been hard to realise. It further examines proposals to involve the public in policy making processes.

It is worth noting that Smith’s new priorities were by no means universally supported within the arts. The resistance to change started when he first set out his manifesto. He was lambasted in the press for his failure to guarantee the preservation of the established arts canon (Tusa 2000). A similar media storm followed the Arts Council’s 2008 review, significantly derived from similar quarters in the established arts institutions. This questioned the Arts Council’s competence and legitimacy in removing funding from established organisations. At the same time a report commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, (DCMS) suggested that a policy focus on access and participation jeopardised the arts and called for a focus on “excellence” to replace the focus on “democracy” (McMaster 2008).

The Arts Debate further identified differences between those who believed that cultural policy needed to directly consider the needs of its public and those who championed the need for artistic independence, to work outside the constraints of such accountability (Opinion Leader 2007). This division presents one of the significant barriers to bringing about cultural change within the existing arts structures.

Despite talk of change, in reality funding was largely directed to the same institutions that had been in receipt of it before New Labour’s tenure. In 2005 85% of money for regularly

funded organisations went to the same organisations as before Labour came to power (Frayling 2005). In 2008, after the Arts Council's review of the entire regularly funded portfolio, 76% of those previously in receipt of funding gained an increase in their funding (Arts Council 2009). That is not to say that within existing organisations much work was not undertaken to increase participation and engagement. This was commonly positioned within marketing and education departments, or audience development agencies with a focus on increasing the regularity of arts attendance or bringing new audiences into mainstream arts. DCMS also developed a voluntary performance indicator (NI11) for local authorities to measure the impact of cultural investment based on monitoring the numbers of those engaged in the Arts (DCMS 2008). But audience development and engagement targets assume a consumer deficit model, which sees the problem to be addressed as people's lack of engagement in art rather than the type of art being offered to engage with. These perspectives may be in keeping with the top down approach of "Great art for everyone", espoused by the Arts Council, which presumes an agreed definition of how to define both quality and art. It is at odds however with the established concept of cultural democracy which has been championed since the 1960s and 70s by community artists and academics, (e.g. Braden 1978, Kelly 1984). Cultural democracy presents as valid the public's chosen forms of cultural expression and engagement, rather than promoting a prescribed definition of what is included in "the arts". More recently research into the impact of new technology focuses on creative participation and co-creation between artist and viewer through user generated content, which encourages "the art of with" (Leadbeater's 2009) and blurs distinctions between professional and amateur arts.

The Arts Council's analysis of the findings from the Taking Part survey mentioned above, highlights that the barriers to engagement are psychological, not practical (Bunting et al 2008), based often on an aversion to art that is not seen as relevant to the people's lives. If participation and engagement are to be broadened therefore the focus on "great art" and "excellence" may in fact reinforce what the arts debate identified as the self referential tendency in the arts. Conversely the Taking Part survey (DCMS 2011) highlights that nearly 80% of those who participate in creative activity, also attend arts events. Engagement in art of any kind may therefore lead to more willingness to engage with other arts in future. The

challenge therefore is not the quality of what is engaged with, but the act of engagement itself.

It would be untrue to say that innovation in practice and cultural change has not been encouraged alongside audience development strategies, successfully generating new definitions of art for new audiences. Where such development is most visible, in terms of Arts Council funding has been through their project funding scheme, Grants for the Arts. “New voices” have been prioritised, resulting in 50% of expenditure going to first time applicants in its first year of operation (Jackson and Devlin 2005). New artists and new art forms have been brought into the fold, some of which are bringing new audiences with them. However Grants for the Arts offers short term project funding, which makes up only 25% of the total Arts Council funding, in contrast to the regularly funded organisations that make up 60% (Arts Council 2009).

The proposals from public value research (Keaney 2006) and the Arts Debate (Opinion Leader 2007) for increased engagement with the public on decision making has been slow to develop however. When the “wider range of voices” programme (Hatzihrysidis and Bunting 2009) proposed three strategies for the Arts Council to consider in broadening the people involved in consultation and decision making, the one involving the public was not adopted, although greater engagement with “arts experts” was.

The interest in public involvement in decision making has been developed in other areas of public policy however. The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) aimed to increase public participation through introduction of the “duty to involve” (DCLG 2008) people in decision making for all public services. The strategy was developed in response to a growing interest across Europe in participatory budgeting, which had grown out of community activism and grassroots pressure groups in Brazil in the 1980s (Community Pride Initiative 2003). Central to the Brazilian model, and distinct from more traditional consultation, is the proposition that the public should participate at every stage of the process defined by DCLG as “engaging (public) to discuss spending priorities, make spending proposals, and vote on them...(as well as having a) role in the scrutiny and monitoring of the process” (DCLG 2008 p1). Such a process poses a challenge to the role of the expert in

determining policy and indeed of the practitioner in proposing solutions, as the participatory group engages with both policy and practice.

The model has been contested for making claims of democracy without addressing whose voices are represented (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Whilst participatory budgeting might include numerically more voices, it could easily be hijacked by pressure groups that could dominate meetings, increasing disengagement from the less vociferous. But within Brazil there is evidence to suggest that public response has been positive and levels of engagement continue to increase. In Porto Alegre, where participatory budgeting is claimed to have originated, public involvement increased over twelve years from 100 to 26,000 people, albeit still only representing 2% of the local population (Community Pride Initiative 2003). More significant than the percentage perhaps is the evidence, from the same report, that engagement has included a broad cross section of participants from different backgrounds. This has resulted in significant redistribution of funding away from the richer communities, who traditionally soaked up the majority of public expenditure. Funding is now being concentrated in poorer areas. Blakey (2009) argues that rather than the levels of representation it is the process of knowledge exchange between public agents and the community that has value, promoting change.

Cooke and Kothari (2001) also criticise participatory decision making for offering little more than a means to justify unpopular funding cuts, within a context of limited financial resources, as there is no evidence that the process leads to an increase in resources themselves. In contrast to its community roots, in Brazil the English model has been initiated by governments and local authorities rather than grassroots activity. It largely responds to a need to make decision making processes transparent within a context where there is seen to be a “crisis in legitimacy” (Holden 2006). Government reports on participatory budgeting shows repeated reference to the aim of increasing “legitimacy”, and “consensus”, and only rare references to change (Lent 2006, DCLG 2008). Participatory budgeting may therefore be used for what Fairclough (2000) defined as New Labour’s concentration on finding a language of consensus and PR rather than allowing for disagreement. It is doubtful in such circumstances whether participatory budgeting effects change or merely legitimises the status quo.

The following investigation into alternative forms of decision-making was conducted through analysis of grey literature and interviews with policy makers, arts organisations and the public engaged in participatory programmes. Semi structured interviews were held with Arts Council staff, including four with participation and engagement in their job title, plus three senior managers. These were set alongside the written statements of policies and priorities to clarify definitions of terminology, key issues and implementation of Arts Council strategies. In addition interviews were conducted with three local authority officers to gain an understanding of how their priorities compared with those of the Arts Council. They were also asked about the way the “duty to involve” was being implemented and what impact this might already be having on arts funding. There was also an interview with an independent consultant on participatory budgeting who advises government and local authorities.

To get closer to practice, two projects were selected to examine the operation of participatory decision making. *The Castleford Project* was chosen as an example of a local authority led initiative and *Contact* in Manchester was chosen as an initiative led by an arts organisation. The research in Castleford was conducted through interviews with two local authority officers, the Arts Council representative on the steering committee, one local artist and three local people involved in the project, all of whom defined themselves as having limited or no arts engagement. In addition two evaluation reports and a four part TV series on the project, entitled *Kevin McCloud and the Big Town Plan* were examined.

At *Contact* interviews were held with one previous and two current members of staff, an Arts Council staff member with lengthy involvement in the venue and three young people involved in decision making panels, who in contrast with Castleford, all defined themselves as “engaged with the arts”. The business plan and policy papers were also examined.

The Castleford Project developed as a three way partnership between the local authority, Channel 4 TV and local community activists, all of whom stake a claim to originating the idea. The aim was to develop a regeneration plan based on participatory commissioning (Lewis 2009). This resulted in eleven public art commissions, costing over £9million.

Community champions were involved in the selection of most of the artists/architects, working alongside them from design to delivery.

Contact started life as a traditional repertory theatre, prioritising work for a younger audience. In interview an Arts Council said it was seen as popular with schools and family audiences but did little to attract youth audiences of their own volition. Under the Artistic Directorship of John McGrath (1999-2008) Contact embedded participation in decision making in the management of the venue. This was derived, according to McGrath, from a “creative drive to make sense through art of the life that you are in”. His belief that it “isn’t just about audience development its about the range of work you are putting out there” has, according to the Arts Council officer, transformed the venue from a mediocre provincial rep into an internationally recognised venue, supporting new work, from established and emerging artists.

To date, the research for this paper has not considered why people may or may not choose to engage in these projects, focussing instead on the different interests of different constituents, and the successes and challenges of participatory decision making perceived by those actively involved. Further interviews with those not engaged might prove fruitful

The aims and issues of implementing participatory decision making in the arts

In interviews with Arts Council and local authority staff the most common words used regarding participatory decision making were “legitimacy” and “raising awareness”, with common references to the importance of “educating” participants rather than the deliverers. The facilitator was described as the expert, educating their constituents. The exceptions to this were one Arts Council officer with a community arts background and the local authority officer who worked on the Castleford Project. In Contact and Castleford, the staff interviewed believed that deliberation with users not only allowed two way learning to take place but also changed practice and changed it for the better. In Castleford change was focussed on rebuilding community trust, after the local authority was given a “failing” designation from government. Local residents interviewed all felt that the process had been successful, in developing trust, but more importantly had changed policy, making the council invest in a neglected part of the borough. Contact was interested in the impact of

participatory decision making on artistic practice. There was no sense from anyone interviewed that the organisation needed to increase its legitimacy. Rather, the current Director described their role as a “bridge” to the arts, providing pathways for young people wanting to work in or access a range of art forms. Contact’s decision making processes were seen as the process to achieve this whilst also helping the organisation understand what young people value in the arts. For the young people interviewed it provided a strong sense of ownership in the building alongside a learning experience.

As mentioned above one of the criticisms of participatory decision making is that it fails to represent the whole community. This point was reiterated during interviews for this research with local authority officers, who identified resistance from councillors who felt that their representative mandate through the ballot box could never be matched through an open meeting or citizens’ panel. This was countered by the participatory budgeting consultant interviewed, who argued that the very concept of representative democracy was undermined by the low level of political engagement and low turn outs at elections. He claimed that public participation is increasing whether policy makers like it or not, and on line communication is already influencing decision making. He argued the challenge for public bodies was to harness this engagement, rather than resist it.

The local authority officers interviewed in Castleford argued that the project’s success lay in the partnership between the creativity of the artists, the accountability of Council officers in controlling contracts and budgets, set against the local knowledge and the vested interest of the community champions in improving their town. Apart from these “champions” wider engagement was encouraged through regular open meetings. Where local people were happy with the outcomes they praised the process, but where they were less happy they blamed councillor interference or artists who wouldn’t listen to them. Two of the three local people interviewed further suggested the council were very selective in the schemes they allowed residents to be involved in. While the public were consulted on schemes already selected to be part of the Castleford Project they were not allowed to set the agenda. Likewise, while the community was involved in choosing artists, they did so from a pre-defined list. The local artist complained that the local arts community were not invited to pitch, or to be involved in the participatory process. Similarly the new Library and Museum called for by the

community was not built for lack of funds, yet at the same time the local authority invested in a new flagship gallery in Wakefield without community consultation.

The findings from the Castleford Project therefore suggest a broad consensus about the value of engagement where the partnership is of an equal nature, but the dangers of increasing disengagement where that equality is called into question.

As an arts organisation, there is no expectation for Contact to have a representative mandate, but as one Arts Council senior manager said “(it is) OK for individual artists to be insular but not for organisations...the bigger the organisation the bigger responsibility to engage” though it is not specified who an arts organisation should engage with. Contact chooses to engage with a diverse range of young people across the city through outreach programmes. The focus is on providing opportunities to engage young people who are either disenfranchised from mainstream arts practice or are seen as unlikely arts attenders. They are interested in the process of engagement rather than levels of representation. This process involves not only opportunities to develop the young people’s own creative voice and see work at Contact, as is common in many arts organisations, but in addition there are opportunities to join a number of decision making panels to influence the content of the work presented and the direction of the organisation’s development. From the interviews with the young people it was clear that this resulted in involvement from a particular kind of young person. Whilst from different social and cultural backgrounds, and with different educational histories, all those on the programming panel were either graduates or university students. However, staff claim the demographic of the audiences at Contact has changed markedly. Approximately 50% of those engaged were said to come from ethnic minorities or lower socio-economic groups, in stark contrast to many arts venues. This was attributed both to the way young people were treated as “collaborators” and to the nature of the programme offered.

Risk taking in the arts

A common perception, expressed in reports (Fennel et al 2009, Opinion Leader 2007) and by some of the Arts Council staff interviewed, is that the public are risk averse so public

engagement may lead to selection of very safe work. Many of the Arts Council staff highlighted the importance of their role in addressing market failure, and encouraging innovation and risk taking, which might be put at risk by relying on people seeing the value in experimental work. The Arts Council staff member on the steering group for Castleford argued that without their involvement Castleford would have commissioned “a series of bronze statues” rather than “work of design excellence”.

However, everyone interviewed for the Castleford Project felt that the most successful artworks, both in terms of artistic quality and audience engagement, were those with the greatest public involvement. *The Footbridge* not only physically reunited two communities, but won international awards for its design quality and innovation. There was consensus in the interviews that this was due to the way the deliberation had taken place, and confidence had been developed amongst participants, allowing people to become increasingly willing and able to address more risky work. In Fryston Green in contrast, despite the artist’s international reputation, the design was described by the local authority officer as “dropped in and looking like it’s been dropped in”. It has not attracted interest from local people or investors.

The staff interviewed at Contact challenged the perceived wisdom that regular arts audiences were more open to risk than non arts audiences. One argued that in fact the reverse was true, that those new to the arts were more open to risk taking and new ideas, precisely because they were less conditioned in their responses and did not have preconceptions. One of the young people interviewed supported this viewpoint, and went on to say that they felt that much practice in mainstream arts organisations was conservative and formulaic. They did not understand how the Arts Council described such work as either innovative or risk taking. While nobody interviewed at Contact wanted to see all artists being forced to work collaboratively, there was a sense that organisations should, not only as recipients of public money but because of the benefits it offered for truly innovative practice.

Two senior managers at the Arts Council, who sympathised with these views, nevertheless argued that a key barrier to change within other arts organisations was that the democratic and consultative leadership evident at Contact was not suited to the classic arts model of the

artistic director or curator with their own singular vision. While one was disappointed in how resistant many arts organisations were to such approaches the other felt that this shift in leadership style was happening elsewhere, and that coupled with greater democracy in other public bodies would inevitably lead to greater cultural democracy. But other Arts Council and local authority officers interviewed were concerned that within the current climate deliberation and consultation were costs that could be ill afforded.

Threat to funding

Perhaps one of the greatest concerns expressed in the interviews with Arts Council staff was that if local authorities increased use of participatory decision making in non statutory areas of funding, it would be damaging to the arts. It was felt that the arts might not be able to compete well with other public services, resulting in reduced budgets for the sector. This perception was also highlighted in the Arts Council's research into participatory budgeting by Fennel et al (2009). However evidence considered in the same report showed this not to be the case. In some cases they found that where participatory budgeting had been used, it had seen increased funding for the arts. This was supported through the interviews with local authority officers for this research. In their experience arts projects had not lost out in decision making processes. They also pointed out that there was no reason to assume that established decision making would protect arts funding as councillors might see the arts as an easy target for cuts. In some cases engagement with local people had been crucial in drawing down additional money from different funding streams, 21 different pots in Castleford's case. Contact staff likewise highlighted that their strategy helped them access funding from different sources.

However there remained a question mark over how sustainable participatory decision making was in a time of cuts, due to the high costs of the necessary deliberative processes. While the consultant interviewed said that the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government (hereafter called the coalition) have been quick to propose piloting "participatory budgeting" in 10 local authorities he acknowledged a trend towards "budget simulators" and consultation rather than decision making. This suggests a move towards a quick internet straw poll of opinion, rather than a detailed process of deliberation and decision which is at

odds with the core principles of participatory budgeting. Consultation without power over decision making may reinforce disengagement. Furthermore, participation in a context where there is the need to reduce spending rather than implement new initiatives, may in fact disempower, rather than empower, those taking part.

Further research is needed over the next few years as the cuts hit all areas of public funding, to see whether the arts fare better or worse in local authorities or arts organisations where the public have a say in where the cuts fall.

Transferability of projects

The Castleford Project and Contact are not proposed as models to be copied, but are offered as examples through which to examine some of the issues pertaining to participatory decision making.

Many of those interviewed in Castleford argued that the success of the project was in part due to the nature of the town with its strong community education tradition. Although the community champions did not define themselves as arts attenders, they all talked about the workers' education classes run when the mines were still open and the creative tradition of the potteries that used to employ many workers in Castleford. Some of those interviewed questioned whether such a process would work in a location without such traditions, or where a more diverse or disparate group of people existed. However one of the local residents refuted this, arguing that while it may take longer to build trust in such communities it was no less possible and maybe more valuable.

The young people at Contact were aware that as a young people's venue it was easier to engage their users. They had both the time and the vested interest in terms of their own career development to relish the opportunities offered. It was acknowledged by the staff interviewed that just as audience levels are affected by age so the ability to engage people might be. However the previous director argued that volunteering in other sectors, was more commonly done by older people and therefore other arts organisations should not assume a barrier to engaging people from different audience segments. In his new job as Artistic

Director of the National Theatre of Wales he is attempting participatory dialogue using new technology and social networking to engage with a potential audience across a whole country, which may be a model worth future study.

However as mentioned neither Contact nor National Theatre of Wales offer a mechanism for engaging people who are not already engaged with the Arts, which may call into question whether they will be any more successful in reaching new audiences than previous audience development strategies. But defining users as “collaborators not beneficiaries” and offering a programme informed by consultation, the current Artistic Director of Contact believes new audiences do come.

Conclusions

This paper has explored some of the challenges of implementing the ambitions of New Labour to “democratise” cultural policy while participation rates in the arts have essentially remained the same throughout this period. But across the public sector the shift in thinking and in recognising the need to engage with a wider range of voices has had an impact within cultural policy. Although much of this has been “top down”, based on a requirement to increase the legitimacy of public policy the projects researched for this paper challenge some deep-rooted thinking about the risks to artistic development and innovation of making the arts accountable. The projects discussed not only identify the artistic benefits of engaging with the world in which the work is created, but many of those interviewed also clearly differentiate between the perceived need for the autonomy of the individual artist with the accountability of the arts organisations within which they might operate.

While the different interests of those within the Arts Council, local authorities and the arts sector may be themselves a barrier to change, there was an overwhelming sense that greater public participation and engagement is taking place through new technology and social networking. Finding better ways to engage with the public is necessary, not only to increase the legitimacy of decision making but to ensure that artistic practice is less self referential. The focus on a narrow band of voices militates against change and innovation.

However for participatory decision making to play a developmental role, it is vital that the processes for engagement are fully understood by those implementing them. The depth and breadth of engagement as defined by participatory budgeting, involving discussion, decisions and monitoring is not a cheap or quick process. But if it is reduced to the tick box version of “budget simulators” which are being implemented by the coalition, this may in fact damage both artistic development and disempower those engaged in the process.

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