Approaches to leading community-based theatre with the aim of wider and more diverse engagement

Abstract:

This paper explores leadership and theories around the engagement of diverse communities in community-based theatre concluding with the proposal of a series of prevocational interrogative questions. Articulating these questions and the reasoning for them through documented UK based participatory community-centric projects, with requisite theoretical frameworks, suggestions are made with regards to leadership and planning strategies in order to engage participants in projects that have meaning and purpose. In thinking about process over product it is argued that the strategic thinking needed for successful engagement must be interrogative and reflexive and take account of all stakeholders and the wider context of the project itself.

Keywords: community engagement; creativity; incentivisation; process; arts; widening participation

Introduction

Community-based arts and theatre has a rich history in the UK. The UK community arts movement between the late 1960's and early 1980's had the aim of 'giving people access to the production of all forms of creative expression' (Jeffers 2017: 1) - a commonality in the form that is discernible in its augmented form now. 'The work was often grounded in grass-roots community and political campaigns' (Jeffers 2017: 3) and it is from this founding ethos that the current work, regarded widely as part of this movement, resides. Community Arts is distinct from Community Theatre as it focusses on 'innovative combinations of performance

and visual arts, including photography, printing, video' (Jeffers 2017: 23) whereas theatre can be said to 'construct productions which allow […] audiences to experience and re-imagine complex situations in ways that require a complex response' (Moriarty, 2017: 127). This paper takes the definition of Community Theatre to comprise of 'projects that bring theatre-makers and community groups together as genuine co-creators' (Jeffers & Moriarty, 2017: 249-250); a definition that is guided and informed by my practise and work.

With the potential for Community-based theatre to be a way in which non (or pre) professional actors and storytellers can enter the world of theatre, it is important to understand how to engage a wider and more diverse group of people to the sector if there are to be stories and ways of telling those stories that are novel, different, and truly reflective of the participants, audiences and wider world.

My creative work transects performative (and genre specific) boundaries, but is broadly rooted in the disciplines of directing, acting and dramaturgy. My theatre practice has facilitated the ability for me to 'apply' theatre in the communities that I tend to work with across the UK, ones that can mostly, in some way, be seen, or defined, as marginalised. By way of a non-exhaustive list, this practice can see me work with young people in various youth theatre (and adjacent) projects and processes; with new and established writers, sometimes in tandem, sometimes not (this dramaturgical work can occur with broader teams or in individual and one-to-one settings); or with citizen actors in community-based theatrical experiences and endeavours. In all of these settings, there are personal and very tangible barriers that some of the participants may (and do) face. Of course, there are intersections which can, and rightly do, frustrate the notion of a homogenous community, and it is understood cogently that one person can be seen as a member of many communities without any sense of transgressive identity shifting.

Questioning

In order to widen participation, creating a framework based around explicit questioning has served as a guide. The questions of 'why', 'what' and 'who' can be made specific to the broad or narrowed context of the project at hand, giving rise to understanding and specifying why participants will want to be engaged; what will attract those participants with what is being offered; and who is it for. A questioning framework allows for interrogation of a project, providing consistency of thought, planning and therefore leadership. It could offer a key indicator of the success and meaningfulness of a project, as well as providing an evaluative structure. Indeed, Arts Council England (ACE) require answers to variations of these questions on their application forms for project grants. The guidance (Arts Council England 2021) clearly states that a condition of funding is that the project can be understood through the metrics of what it intends to do, for who and for what reason. If that framework is a condition of funding, a version of that same framework which is not solely focussed on financial return and/or impact will lead to the (often intangible) rewards that only the making of art can offer.

Diverse engagement

Diverse is defined as 'of a society, community, organization, etc.: including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds, and (more recently) different genders, sexual orientations, etc' (Simpson et al. 1989), with the word itself having an etymologically diverse history - coming to the English via Middle English (*divers*), Old French (*divertere*) and Latin (*diversus*). All communities are rich in difference and intersection and any engagement must take this into account.

Whilst the variation in social capital between all 'communities' is as wide and varied as their internal intra relationships, it has been observed that communities are 'united by ties which extend deeper and far beyond the short moments during which exchange is made' (Durkheim 1933: 226). Unengaged communities, most often, are those that are excluded from

cultural education, life, and production and subsequently labelled 'disengaged communities', further entrenching the engagement gap. The synonym 'hard to reach' is also used and is cogently rejected by Haleema Ali, a youth worker and self-professed 'artivist' who suggests that the phrase 'implies blame on the communities themselves, rather than questioning why the organisation isn't easily accessible' (Ali, 2020) thus laying clear the power differential and the need for that power, and the impact(s) that it has on relationships, to be understood and challenged; essentially, breaking the chain. If those with the power conclude that those without are disengaged and 'hard to reach', the logical conclusion is permanent exclusion and a tightening of the structures that created that exclusion in the first place, no matter how many public efforts in pronouncing the opposite. Greater representation in performative theatrical art is already a subject for study, debate and enaction, geared to better understanding and including audiences' disparate experiences and outlooks, in order to engage 'the energy, commitment and experience of people from a wide range of different backgrounds and cultures [encouraging] more people to engage, enjoy and have ownership of theatre' (Schaefer et al. 2020: 343). The Royal National Theatre which receives £16.1 million of public money (3.5 per cent of the entire budget for the cross disciplinary National Portfolio) asserts that in order for it 'to be the place where the best artists come to make their best work, […] these artists should be a reflection of the diversity of this country' (National Theatre 2021). At the crux, there is recognition – that is becoming more widely voiced – that evident disparities should, and need to, be redressed and this needs to be enacted by those with the power; exercised with care and will.

In their work analysing a participatory theatre project which took place on a council housing estate in the English midlands, Jones et al. describe and analyse how their work which 'involved residents in every stage of the production' (Jones et al. 2013 :124) allowed those residents to 'engage with their lived space and begin to re-appropriate the place from the deficit discourses which define it' (Jones et al. 2013 :120). The 'product' was to be a

performed narrative of the history of the estate, the aim was to counter narratives of that particular council estate community being comprised of 'deficient, depressed and powerless people lacking in motivation, aspirations and skills' (Jones et al. 2013 :120). To do this they built 'a web of connections across the community' (Jones et al. 2013 :120) which included residents 'who may have felt uncomfortable with the idea of standing on stage in front of an audience' (Jones et al. 2013 :126), thus creating the conditions for meaningful engagement and diverse stories. If history is written by the victor, the nature of what victory looks and feels like is to be challenged. It culminated in a performance in which 'over 100 participants performed to over 300 people, a fact which surprised many involved in community work in the area' (Jones et al. 2013: 127). This engagement helped to empower that particular community, facilitating a level of agency that previous efforts by the local authority were not demonstrably able to.

Achebe reminds us that there is a 'danger of not having your own stories', that 'until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter' (Brooks, 1994). In this aphorism we can contend that the diversification of the sources of those stories will begin to nullify the power of the controlling 'lions', the very thing that Jones et al., sought to do. Working *with* as opposed to *at*, *for* or *to* the community (as elucidated by McCold and Wachtel (2016) in relation to restorative justice) reminds and reaffirms that '[i]t's not one man's job. It's not one person's job' (Brooks, 1994). If there is to be justice, then all have rights and all have responsibilities to uphold and guard those rights.

Leeds Playhouse's 'participatory programme started in 1990, and was designed to ensure older members of the community found a sense of belonging and purpose at their newly-built producing theatre' (Taylor 2019: 90). It is important to note here the use of the third person possessive determiner when talking about participants' relationship to this building-based theatre company. In this subtle, but important, linguistic idiosyncrasy, there is a sense of devolution of ownership. The active centring of the participants is brought to the

fore – very much working *with*. This programme has evolved into a weekly, dementia friendly gathering called *Heydays*, in which 'inviting people with dementia to guide our work has been integral to its development' (Taylor 2019: 93). Much like Jones et al. (2013), Taylor describes how 'long-term collaboration, innovative approaches to making programming decisions, and responding to the strengths and talents of the curators' (Taylor 2019: 94) has allowed for the group to expand their agency. The aim 'to connect people, to help them feel safe, valued and able to respond, confident that opinions and imagination carried no rights and wrongs' (Taylor 2019: 91) allows for, and engenders, a sense of agency. In challenging the fact that '[f]ew people with dementia are asked about their experience of the condition. Instead, we rely on testimony of those supporting them' (Taylor 2019: 93), the project creates a space where this underrepresented group with talk 'with' and not 'to'.

Engaging with diverse communities, and widening participation, allows, at a general level, greater cohesion, as the resultant societal story that is told on stages, and other forms of art, will include more stories and therefore give greater ownership to a larger number of people. A power of culture is to dispel disparity and heighten inclusion. On an individual level, the ability to self-verify through expressing oneself can lead to improved feelings of self-worth and self-esteem as 'self-esteem can be thought of as a direct outcome of successful self-verification' (Cast et al. 2002: 1046) – ultimately emboldening and strengthening the generalised benefits, as evinced by Jones et al.. Representation allows people to be, and feel, 'seen' and therefore part of the whole, bringing about tangential benefits for wider society.

> Through the experience of art, people from all cultures can more easily and more
> deeply become aware of a superordinate identity they belong to, which is constituted
> by their common fate as human beings and by the common core of their psyche. This
> includes such universal feelings as hope, love, hate, suffering, fear, regret, and

peacefulness, while at the same time preserving the awareness of the salience of their

specific (e.g. cultural and psychological) subgroup identity (Pagani 2014: 308).

The groups described by Jones et al. and Taylor were able to engender these feelings, partly

through the decentering of the power bases inherent in leadership and very much in line with

the common aims of this type of theatre work.

      These considerations can also aid transgression across socio-economic boundaries,

facilitating an awareness of the whole person. The ability to tell, understand, and engage with

stories is what 'makes us human' (Storr 2019: 2) and this is exemplified clearly in Jones et

al.'s work which took place in an area with 'high levels of deprivation and unemployment'

(Jones et al. 2013: 120). To this end, engaging with all communities is of paramount

importance, but pre-eminent here, are those that are not routinely engaged. Whilst this paper

examines modes of leadership in community-based theatre performance in the United

Kingdom specifically, the arguments made, it is argued, can be applicable across the

international community-based arts sector.

      Using a framework centred on questioning gives the unique ability to '[…] open lines

of communications; give us information; improve interactions, facilitate analysis and

diagnostics of a situation; allow us to propose our own ideas; help to understand the priorities

of others; stimulate motivation to learn; motivate creativity' (Neirotti 2021: I), this

information can only be gathered if centres of power and hierarchical orthodoxy are

challenged and changed, creating a broader space for plurality of voice and thought.

Engagement

      The reasons why those to be engaged are sought after should be as clear as possible.

They could be underrepresented communities - identified via sector-wide data such as that

collated by Arts Council (2020) or specific company/local data; and/or 'communities of

interest' - the designation of which could be guided and determined by the strategic aims of the offer which are established through the asking. Jones et al. wanted to 'establish a relationship in which local people could have a say in the services they were offered' (2013: 120), Taylor aimed to show 'older people they mattered' and that their talents, experiences and stories were valued (2019: 91).

If we think of participatory engagement as a transactional model which 'generally requires lower investment in finding the opportunity' (Vanasupa et al. 2014), there is a necessity to think about why engagement will happen and what the 'meaning making processes, which generate growth' (Walmsley 2019: 231) are. These may be because 'participants might share a desire to complete a shared task of social value' (Vanasupa et al. 2014) thus underscoring mutual benefit(s) for both sides. The act of diversifying the communities that are interacted with will result in the stories told and heard being diversified. In doing this, participants get to see themselves and their stories outside of their own social or familial circles, broadening the ability for 'self-verification' (Cast et al. 2002) increasing mental well-being. Through this transactional genesis a relational model can be grown as those engaged and those doing the engaging will 'share a large scope of societal aspirations, putting a priority on the social needs and overall well-being within […] the relationships between the participants' (Vanasupa et al. 2014) with the benefits to the stories that are then told emboldened, rooted, sustained and more importantly, shared.

In analysing inclusion at the Cardiff based Odyssey Theatre, 'a group of learning-disabled and non-learning-disabled performers' (Wooster 2009: 79) - who could be categorised as an under-represented community - the benefits for 'both sides' and the potential for broader societal enrichment are clear.

The purpose [of the company] is not to allow disabled people to 'join in as well as they can', but to respect the fact that society consists of individuals with different abilities and to create work that is a product of this unified whole (Wooster 2009: 82).

This ethos is attributable to a recognition that stories should not be stratified by who is telling them but by what is being told. Facilitating an environment where story is integral creates integration of people.

This engagement goes further, 'there have also been examples of both non-learning-disabled and learning- disabled Odyssey members going on to pursue careers as actors and arts workers' (Wooster 2009: 86). The transactional act here is that of skill sharing and building, alongside the fermentation of aspiration. Through this, participation (and therefore representation) has been widened. The normalisation of a truly diverse storytelling fraternity is enlivened.

It is important to determine why participants would be interested and what the transaction is. Understanding participant reasoning(s) for involvement could be based on a multitude of factors, but understanding the transactional value of the interaction can help to direct what the offer is at its inception. There can be a myriad of reasons for engagement, but those that are replicable, inclusive, and sustainable, are, it is argued here, the most useful. Establishing what those reasons may be, is a direct result of knowing specifically to whom the offer is being made and what it is that is being offered.

Intimately knowing what it is that is being offered – in abundant detail – allows for informed leadership as well as detailed planning (especially around anticipated engagement), outcomes and resourcing. The ability to articulate the same information in accessible formats to all interested parties is key to a successful period of engagement and also crucial to ensuring that there is parity of understanding. In this, there are also implications for accessibility in and of promotional materials. The first interactions with a project are when it

- the project - is first consciously acknowledged. With this in mind, it must be remembered that readers 'interpret later evidence in ways that render it consistent with the initial impressions they have formed' (Tetlock 1983 :286). First impressions count.

Building an engaged, but analytical and independent, team for the leadership and delivery of a project is crucial. It should be known what each member of the delivery team can and will bring to the endeavour, whether those people are 'sensitive, inquisitive artists and enabling support workers' (Taylor 2019: 91) or ensuring that 'every member of the company, and anyone else in the room, [knows that they are] expected to contribute' (Wooster 2009: 80) in the knowledge that 'each of [the team will] have a profound impact on the whole' (Lane 2022 :33). Group think which is 'a quick and easy way to refer to the mode of thinking that persons engage in when *concurrence-seeking*' (Janis 1971: 84, original emphasis) can lead to alternative ideas and nuances being lost at the planning stage, only to resurface midway through an already complicated project.

To engage the communities that have been identified, understanding how the offer will be enticing is something to consider. This could be a simple as the timing of the offer, the accessibility (in all senses of the word), the geography, the people involved, or even the outcome, but knowing where the enticement will come from will allow for engagement to be geared toward that expectation from the outset. The reason for the offer is often in the outcomes and the outcomes are not always the final product – we will discuss later how often it is the process that is more important than the resultant product.

The quality on offer is an attractive part of the activity and has intrinsic value which heightens the importance and prestige attached. A study looking to find symbiotic links between arts engagement and that of public health concluded that '[p]articipants in the arts projects cared very much about the quality of the experience they had' (Cameron et al. 2013: 56). This is mirrored by the findings from Jones et al., in which one participant said that 'the thing with, like, acting is that if you feel silly in front of someone, you can't do it, you've got

to feel really comfortable around them to be able to act with them and I got that' (Jones et al. 2013 :128). The health and wellbeing benefits of quality artistic interaction are as important as the interaction itself and, as intimated here, the quality of the interaction delineates the quality of the experience and the benefits. The study, conducted by Cameron et al., focused on an initiative called 'Be Creative Be Well' which, across 'around 100 different small participatory arts projects across London', aimed to 'animate or reanimate the relationship between private and public life, with the aim of helping people achieve greater well-being' (Cameron et al. 2013: 53). It observed that 'participants seemed to concur in what a good experience offered to them: care, attention, acknowledgment and respect' (Cameron et al. 2013: 56) and in this response we see a rationale and reasoning for working in the ways proposed. In order to create a 'good experience' there needs to be a constructive relationship – one that goes beyond the transactional. These relationships need careful cultivation and nurturing using the artistic ability to be innovative and active, to be attractive. Harden et al. in their work looking at the 'barriers and facilitators [that] affect the delivery of effective community engagement activities – particularly to people from disadvantaged groups' (2015: 9), note that:

> […] the challenges to community engagement posed by a history of poor relations
> between communities and engaging organisations and community engagement being
> perceived as a threat could be overcome by engagers ensuring that they were fully
> informed and sensitive to this context when planning community engagement (Harden
> et al. 2015: 53).

This makes plain that engagement breeds engagement. There needs to be commitment to creating an engaging participatory environment in what is being offered from a hierarchically debased position. All human interaction relies on relationships. Where relationships exist,

knowing the history with those communities is important, if they do not, knowing *how* they can be built, is crucial – part of the offer is therefore innately human.

Understanding what may destroy the relationships is intrinsic in the setting up and pursuance. In knowing, or at the very least, theorising, what might be destructive, the ability to manage or mitigate that risk becomes tangible and visible. Collaboration, Consultation and Communication – the three 'C's' (Nyirenda et al. 2019) can strengthen and offer challenge in order to establish fruitful and productive engagement.

What creates and maintains attraction are the benefits that can be gained by those who have most to lose – the participants. Engaging, as Taylor (2019) did, and facilitating conversations which offer ownership and steerage to participants will allow them to be meaningful stakeholders and not simply participants. Ensuring that the cost (financial, emotional or physical) is well spent is paramount. If you are to put in large, dedicated and committed amounts of effort to engage with an identified community which will dissipate afterwards, is that 'cost' really worth it?

In theatre it can be argued that to make a show there are only three things that you have: time, people and money. Often you will only have two of those three. More often than not, the one thing that there is never enough of is money – this is particularly true of participatory community-based theatre. Effectively using the (brilliant) people attached to the project and the inevitable limited time can negate the impact of a lack of money.

Relationship building

We readily receive knowledge from people that we trust. We receive knowledge from people who have seen 'over the wall' that we wish to see over. We receive knowledge from people who we relate to. This is because 'it is only through a sense of trust that [the] empowering experience of freedom' (Curzon-Hobson 2002: 266) is embraced. The complexity of the relationship between the person/entity that is offering, and the person to

whom it is being offered, must be layered and nuanced, especially if we are to acknowledge that 'accepting or trusting in the authority of others is itself a complex matter' (Kleinig 2016: 140). It does not take a world expert to offer all the answers, what is needed is a relationship, and humility.

Ensuring the right tools for the right people, are offered at the right time, builds trust and strengthens relationships. In their findings, Harden et al. report that '[t]here is evidence […] that training and capacity building for both the community and the engaging organisations is an important end goal in itself which can subsequently support community engagement to feed into decision-making in the longer term' (2015: 84). The offer must be predicated on the participants and partnership, not the ego of the leader(s). Setting up a process doomed to failure through poor support and/or structure will be detrimental to any relationship or trust previously built. If there has been no thought about why people will be interested, there will be little thought about the relationships needed to engender the engagement which will bring about the desired outcomes.

Process over product

It is posited that it is 'a human capacity to produce products, ideas, or solutions that are both novel and appropriate' (Tang et al. 2021: 2); this production being the direct result of the process of imaginative work. It can therefore be argued that everybody is a potential creator and with a little work, it is possible to successfully shepherd that imagination into some tangible sense of creation – a product.

Often, when success is thought about, it is thought of as a straight line; something was decided, and in a certain amount of time, that thing happened. That is invariably not the case. Success, very often, is a series of dead ends, a series of trying, a series of failing; 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better' (Beckett 1983). With the knowledge that mental and physical health are important for a sense of wholeness and self – a 'central

topic' (Baumann and Ruch 2022: 1) in the field of positive psychology – allowing for those areas of our humanity to be nourished, found and engaged with should be a priority in order to enable these additional benefits and this can be found through play. Doing so will ultimately allow that needed level of resilience to be engendered in the society in which we live, by, and for, those who live and comprise it.

Young children learn through play (Smith et al. 2008) because playing has no end goal, playing is all about process, as opposed to product. If the pressure to create a product is removed it opens a space in which joy is engendered in moving towards an end goal. In these community theatre settings we should strive to make 'play(s)' and not 'work(s)' because if 'we become absorbed in the goal [we] regard the means of achieving it merely as obstructions […] But if the process by which such [goals] are realized is itself absorbing, the time has not been wasted' (Sartwell 1992: 315).

In focusing on process, it is inevitable that the final product will be something to be truly proud of because it is a product of the process and not an end in itself. Holding to a sole purpose as an end goal is immaterial if the process to get there is not fully understood. In the context of community theatre, the questions raised in the process are often more edifying than the product that arises from it. It could be argued that the meaning of the word 'applied' in title 'Applied Theatre' is in fact, process. The application of the process of inquiry inherent in the making makes clear and challenges the themes that are engaged with. From an artistic standpoint – given that theatre makers and storytellers (if we are to broaden the definition) are problem solvers, the nub of a problem is often revealed in the questioning and not always in the solution or product.

Getting involved in creative activities in communities reduces loneliness, supports physical and mental health and wellbeing, sustains older people and helps to build and strengthen social ties. People everywhere tell us how much they value opportunities to

develop and express their creativity both on their own and with others but they also

described difficulties in finding activities for themselves or their children to take part

in as well as barriers to becoming and then staying involved and in many places the

libraries and community spaces that play a vital role in organising such activities are

under pressure (Arts Council England 2020: n.pag.).

Nowhere here is product mentioned. Getting involved is process; reducing loneliness,

supporting physical and mental health, and wellbeing is process; strengthening social ties is

process – processes evident, for example, in the work described by Taylor (2019). Valuing

the opportunities to engage and explore one's own creativity suggests that this is something

that is craved, as it 'is part of what makes us human' (Sawyer 2006: 3).

Bringing it together

If there is a clear need to engage in creative activity, provide creative activity. If there

are markers of loneliness and disengagement, provide a space where people can be together

in order to create, and engender that creative activity. People wish to be together. Indeed, this

is an idea that was put to the test by the Yorkshire based Theatre Company Slung Low during

the initial, and most severe, Covid restrictions in the UK in the summer of 2020. Slung Low

is based in an area of Leeds called Holbeck, which is in the top 10 per cent of the most

deprived areas – across several metrics – in the UK (*English indices of deprivation 2019*

2019) and therefore one of the worst affected when measures to curb the pandemic took

effect. Noting that members of their local community were 'retreating from the world in all

sorts of mental and emotional ways as well as physical ones' (Lane 2022: 120), it was

decided to create an art gallery on the lampposts in the community so that art could be made,

displayed, and enjoyed by the community on their daily walks - 'people were over the moon

to have some way of connecting with others' (Lane 2022: 121). These galleries were so

successful that 'quite often the [artworks] would go missing' (Lane 2022: 123) but would not, as expected, be found discarded - Lane suggests that '[p]eople were stealing the art […] because they wanted to look at it more often' (Lane 2022: 123). A sense of relationship, commonality, inclusion and it being *for them* could be the drivers behind this behavioural shift.

It is really important when we think about the moral and ethical considerations in working with different communities that we think about mental and physical safety. Much has been spoken about moving from 'safe' to 'brave' spaces (Arao et al. 2013) and we should culture a preference to work in such ways. Courage, through bravery, with its attendant honesty and openness, is something that can be engendered and worked toward.

Conclusion

Thinking about what we have, and what we want to have, is the way that we move forward. Working with process instead of aiming for product; working within the constraints to engender the desired results; working morally and ethically; and listening, truly listening, ultimately, is a path to success.

Through several key questions – to be used as a guide but not an unbending maxim – enacting thorough, meaningful and successful engagement can be solicited.

- Why are the participants being engaged?

'Why', as an interrogative adverb can be employed to offer exploratory space to identify the reasoning for what it is that is being done. It can help lay clear the outcomes and intended goal but knowing why participants are being engaged in the first place is key.

- What is being offered that will attract the participants?

Each stage of an offer needs to be understood and examined; having worked through 'why are the participants being engaged?' this understanding and mastery should be moderately easy to grasp.

- Who is it (really) for?

Knowing whether the project is *for* participants, *about* participants or *because* it is to address a specific challenge will make clear who it is for. It can be a mistake to assume that because it can be done that it should be done if the results and gains are only one sided and thus entrenching hierarchical and unequal power relations(hips).

Lane offers a three-phrase motto: 'Be kind. Be useful. We go again tomorrow pals' (2022: 199). He explains how these values have become a rallying cry for the work of Slung Low. It could also be seen as the beating heart of the ambitions elucidated above.

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