



Proposing a universal 'model' of the inner workings of participatory arts practice..

Posted by Molly Courtice on October 7, 2013 at 9:42

Anni Raw writes...

Is an articulation of such an idea feasible, or even desirable? This piece discusses the potential benefits of a unifying description, in tension with potential suffocation by a reductive model.

'So, *what* is it that you do, and *how*, exactly, do you do it??' Once again, that exasperating moment of hesitation, and bracing yourself to deliver the long, and sometimes stumbling, explanation of a practice so subtle, multi-faceted and built on intuition that, no matter how many years on the clock, you can barely fathom it yourself; and knowing that your questioner (already decidedly sceptical) will inevitably give up listening and glaze over, suspicions apparently confirmed that it's all rather woolly. We've all been there...

In 1984 Owen Kelly blamed a fatal weakness in the then 'community arts movement' in the UK, on its refusal to construct any theoretical framework for its work. In *'Community, Art and the State: Storming the Citadels'* he wrote: 'The movement has staggered drunkenly from one direction to another', resulting in its ultimate lack of self-determination and control. He saw a movement – though made up of many highly principled practitioners – allowing definitions and perceptions of 'community arts' to be governed by funding agencies and policy streams, rather than by the sector's own discourses. Practitioners preferred (Kelly claimed) to avoid divergent debate about practice norms; and leaving the crucial detail unarticulated, based on trust and intuition, stunted the development of the movement at an early stage.

Whilst, despite his gloom, the movement has managed to remain active over the subsequent 30 years, many of Kelly's concerns can still be seen as highly current. 'Socially engaged' or 'participatory' arts as a sector today is splintered into multiple strands with different labels, arguably created in response to funding and policy agendas rather than reflecting clear differences in practice. Indeed many participatory arts practitioners today work in several of such strands (youth arts, arts and health, arts for inclusion, arts and regeneration, arts and ageing, arts in prisons etc.) while their practice itself – the approach, skills and resources they use – does not, according to my recent research, differ very much from setting to setting.

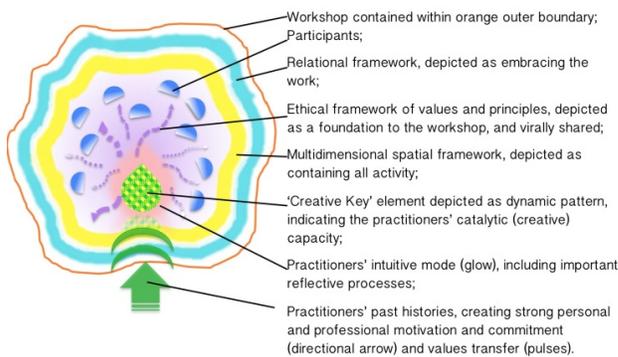
What if it were possible to agree on a single clear, underpinning description of what is happening in participatory arts practice, recognisable to all experienced practitioners irrespective of art form, and which practitioners were happy to accept as representative of the core of their approach?

I am fully aware of how provocative it is to propose a single practice model, which claims to unify practitioners across a diverse sector, and suggests similar creative impulses despite different art forms and different participant groups, different specific project objectives and different settings. After all, the creative practice field (whether participatory or mainstream arts) encourages practitioners to gauge their own value and reputation in relation to creative originality – the unique idea, the cutting edge approach, the excitement of the new. This is what gives us our kicks! Ideas that are original – the very signifier of creativity itself. So would recognising a single, common model render our practice invalid – and each project narrative devoid of creative originality?

I propose that such an articulation *is* possible, and that rather than deprive the participatory arts sector of its creative lifeblood, or trap it within a reductive and limiting cage, it might provide a stable platform, a frame, within which original, individual creative expression of the particulars of the model can shine more clearly. In my work researching the practice of a wide range of practitioners, I have located underlying practice patterns and approaches, which recur as hallmarks of participatory arts practice. See what you think!!

I propose an articulation of a sophisticated, multi-disciplinary participatory arts 'practice assemblage' or model, comprising six key elements. Highly effective participatory arts practitioners all, I argue, work (despite immense diversity) with these same fundamental elements to shape a productive and creative 'workshop ecology' – the place where it all happens.

A healthy workshop ecology is achieved by practitioners working with 6 interdependent and organically interacting elements, in which fields they are experts: 1) intuition, 2) commitment, 3) ethics: values and principles, 4) relationships, 5) spaces – in several dimensions, and 6) creativity. These (shown in the diagram below, with practitioners as central teardrop shape) together create a collaborative environment for change:



'Participatory arts practice assemblage' (Anni Raw)

According to this articulation, the 'Creative Key' constitutes practitioners' skilled introduction of generic (not artform-specific) creative devices and experiences, which express their intuitive, creative strategies for catalysing possibilities of change. Using mechanisms including metaphor, subversive playfulness, risk, and suspension of disbelief among many others, participatory arts facilitators open up 'liminal' spaces in which participants can rehearse fresh ways of being themselves, and, through their creative activities, engage in transformative reflection on their everyday realities.

Of course, there is much more to it all than a six-point summary, or a single, two-dimensional diagram. The assemblage comes alive when populated with practitioners' individual ways of realising these core elements collaboratively with project participants, and each of these elements comprises further layers of detail. However, this model constitutes an example of what Pauline Tambling in her April provocation piece calls the essential step of 'codifying' the work.

In my view, seeing so many wildly different and exciting expressions of this same model in action, there is a tightrope here that is well worth treading: risking on the one hand simply erecting a vacuous, meaninglessly universal and draughty tent, and on the other building an uncomfortably constricting and reductive edifice that thwarts individual creativity, I am venturing out onto that high wire. In this endeavour I am inspired by the possibility of finding and articulating a set of simple truths, which unite participatory arts practitioners as a single 'community of practice' (Wenger), that reaches far and wide internationally, eschewing linguistic, cultural and national differences. So, who's up for calling to action the full potential agency of a united, transnational community of participatory arts practitioners?

Kelly, O. (1984). *Community, art and the state: storming the citadels*. London: Comedia.

Raw, A. (2013). *A model and theory of community-based arts and health practice*. (Doctoral Thesis), Durham University, Durham. Retrieved from <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/7774/>

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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