

SHARING THE STAGE

POLICY AND PRACTICE: QUALITY



CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION

UK BRANCH



SEMINAR LEARNING REPORT

PREFACE

Sharing The Stage's initial Policy and Practice seminar on 'Quality' threw up as many questions as it sought to answer. From tangible questions around governance to intangible ones about the nature of power, this was a thought-provoking and very honest event.

It became clear as the afternoon unfolded why seminars add so much to the body of work we are trying to amass. In depth the participants talked about what quality means, not just in the final performance but in the quality of the process in terms of inclusivity, skill-building and relationships.

In this document we include Chrissie Tiller's thoughtful summary of what was debated and discussed at the seminar in June 2016. We also include her briefing note 'Some Thoughts Around Quality'

which we circulated to the participants before the seminar. This piece was a short literature review of the work on quality in the participatory arts sphere, and gave our participants a grounding in the research to read before attending.

It is clear that our partners in Sharing The Stage are a passionate group of practitioners; as keen to challenge themselves as they are the audiences who will see their shows. We are already looking forward to being together again for the next seminar.

Andrew Barnett (Director, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK Branch)

Kithmini Wimalasekera (Programme manager, Participatory Performing Arts)

Front cover: Performers taking part in a Geese Theatre project. The participants were those enrolled in Reach Out Recovery, a drug and alcohol treatment programme in Birmingham.

Right: A participant in the Falling & Flying programme by Entelechy Arts.



BRIEFING NOTE

SOME THOUGHTS
AROUND QUALITY

*“Art is anything you can do well –
anything you can do with quality –
anything where there are options for doing
it well or poorly...”*

–Robert Pirsig, philosopher

Quality is one of those things. What I enjoy about Pirsig’s definition is the notion that the ‘art’ is not in necessarily doing something ‘best’ but in the taking the care to do what we do well: in choosing that option. Because, as Nina Simon, author of ‘The Participatory Museum’ suggests, in a retort to the perpetual question around participatory arts, ‘BUT WHAT ABOUT QUALITY?’ (her caps).¹ ‘No one wants to do crappy work. Everyone wants quality, in one way or another.’

Simon’s point is part of a growing agreement that, in order to speak meaningfully about ‘quality,’ we might want to accept it takes a number of forms; dependent on the artistic, social, cultural and political context, and the resources available. The now extensive body of UK literature, from Mary Schwartz’s² Working Paper 8, and other Working Papers and Critical Conversations for the Paul Hamlyn Artworks programme, to Rachel Blanche’s in-depth study on Quality Guidance³ for Creative Scotland and Hutchings’ research for Arts Council Wales⁴ all come to similar conclusions. As Blanche notes, ‘a more holistic view of the “qualities” that make up quality, acknowledging both processes and the final product’ is needed.

Nina Simon offers ten possible ‘forms’ quality might take: Aesthetic, Technical, Innovative, Interpretative, Educational, Relevant, Participatory, Academic, Bridging, and Igniting, with the edict of no one project being expected to achieve all of them. François Matarasso’s ‘Five Phases of Participatory Arts’ offers a similarly multi-layered approach, looking at what quality might mean at each stage of the journey; from Conception through Contracting, Working and Creation towards Completion.⁵ Or what Ken Bartlett in his 2011 paper on ‘quality benchmarks’ for the Foundation for Community Dance⁶ identifies as the qualities of: Purpose, Planning and Communication, Practice and Process, Engagement and Outcomes.

‘Qualities’ will not always be of equal import to everyone

These ‘qualities’ will not always be of equal import to the participant, social partner, audience or the arts sector. The primary concern for a **participant**, or those supporting them, will almost certainly be around how they can get involved and what they can contribute. This may range from acquiring skills to sharing stories but we might also want to consider a number of other crucial questions. Are participants for example, being invited to be part of conceptualisation of a project, contributing to its development and assisting with its final evaluation? Is it being suggested, in terms of Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation,⁷ that there is a progression to be made: from ‘non-participation’ through to ‘partnership’, ‘delegated power’ and even ‘citizen control’? Or is their role mainly to add to the materiality of a performance: on stage to ‘make the numbers up’?

For **arts organisations** the shift towards ‘partnership’ and ‘delegated power’ might mean buildings and structures becoming more porous as participants take on other forms of ownership. In terms of legacy and embedding our cultural institutions in their communities this is crucial. Suggesting organisations might need to involve participants right from the beginning, in ‘defining the criteria’ of a project’s ‘success’ Matarasso reminds us there is little value in getting stuck at what Arnstein defines as ‘tokenism’.

For the **artists** engaged in this practice, quality often begins with a consideration of aesthetics. As Arts Council England’s review of ‘Adult Participatory Arts’⁸ suggests, one of the most difficult tasks is to, ‘address the need for a high-value aesthetic as expected by their peers and funders’. Although the review goes on to speak of the high quality of much of the work, it doesn’t go on to define what ‘high-value’ or ‘aesthetic’ might mean in a participatory context. In the absence of this discussion in a performance context many artists have found it useful to reference recent debates on the visual arts.

“It is this sense of authenticity that audiences are often seeking in participatory performance, through engaging with the telling or re-telling of participants’ stories and experiencing the affect of watching and listening to ‘real people’ on stage.”

Bourriaud’s use of the term ‘relational aesthetics’ to describe work ‘inspired by human relationships and their social context’⁹ provides one starting point, especially when working closely with story often means, ‘the social exchange in and around the art work becomes the theme of the art work.’¹⁰ Grant Kester’s emphasis on the importance of the ‘quality’ of this exchange in his writings on ‘dialogical aesthetics’ underlines the importance of the process. Both social and aesthetic innovation, Kester suggests, come from this ‘dynamic interaction’ of artist and co-participants. By bringing their experiences and skills together, we create exciting, ‘new and unanticipated forms of collaborative knowledge’.¹¹ This reciprocal exchange in the rehearsal room is what Suzanne Lacey believes makes space for the aesthetics of ‘authenticity of process, empathy (and) relationship’:¹² equally as important as the aesthetics of the final performative stage.

It is this sense of authenticity that **audiences** are often seeking in participatory performance, through engaging with the telling or re-telling of participants’ stories and experiencing the affect of watching and listening to ‘real people’ on stage: taking all the risks that live performance involves. A growing trend for immersive and more ‘participatory’ main stage theatre means the lines between audience and participant are progressively blurred as, ‘we (the audience) are increasingly asked to be participants or collaborators; to take part, sometimes to follow instructions, and occasionally even to have agency’ (Lyn Gardner). Despite the number of studies on this shifting sense of what we now mean by ‘audience’, from Brown’s spectrum for the James Irving Foundation¹³ to my own adaptation for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation’s UK Branch, in participatoryartsalphabet,¹⁴ this is the group whose experience is least written about.

A sense of authenticity

Might it be that, as Gareth White proposes in the initial chapter of ‘Applied Theatre: Aesthetics’,¹⁵ the existing ‘bias’ towards the subjective judgment of the audience is less relevant in participatory settings? Or that audiences/participants themselves are increasingly working as ‘artist, audience and art

work’, simultaneously, within any one piece? Artists working with communities frequently speak about the need to set up a ‘dialogue’ with the audience; enabling them to ‘make meaning’ through greater understanding of the experiences of those on stage. It might be that audience development, in this context, takes on new implications. And that artists, instilled with what Trueman, in *The Stage*, calls ‘a wider sense of purpose’¹⁶ begin to recognise the creative possibilities of focusing equally on process and product.

Enabling participants to ask questions

The aesthetics of a production, except perhaps in a technical sense, are rarely the main focus of the **social partners** who are increasingly funding participatory arts work. Matarasso notes the tensions that can be involved in meeting both the ‘social change’ outcomes of funders and the creative focus of artist(s) and participants. This is particularly true, he moots, where social partners may be awarding funding ‘in return for a change in lifestyle’, or a reduction in something they have identified as ‘antisocial behaviour’ which arts partners may not feel able to deliver.

For most artists, participatory practice is less about solving social issues than using the creative process to enable participants to ask questions. While a social partner might well be seeking ‘inclusion’, ‘amelioration’, ‘individual progress’ or even ‘distraction’, artists and participants may find themselves moving towards dissent or dissonance. There is a sense in which the space for what Simon calls ‘Igniting’ and inspiring people to action, whether this be to occupy the local library threatened by closure, demand different conditions in a hostel for the homeless, or insisting a space for skateboarding needs to be honoured. As Bartlett notes, speaking about the Planning and Communication, there needs to be ‘a common agreement about values and purposes between stakeholders’, along with ‘realism about the scale of the intervention and its achievability’. Bartlett also says ongoing ‘opportunities for negotiation’ are an essential part of the exchange.

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If we accept then that quality takes many forms, how are we to know when they are being achieved?

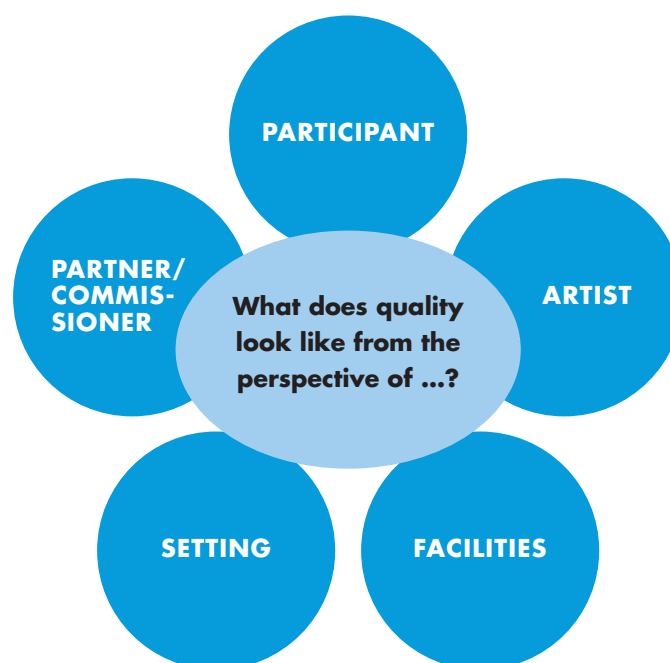
If we accept then that quality takes many forms, how are we to know when they are being achieved? Arts Council England’s seven Quality Principles,¹⁷ for those working with young people, offer possible guidelines: qualifying them by suggesting they are outcomes organisations are being encouraged to *strive* towards rather than always expected to achieve. The peer review involved in the ‘Quality Metrics’ project suggests some professionals in the field have already found them useful in enabling ‘everyone to talk about quality in a more consistent and confident way.’¹⁸

These same principles are at the heart of Rachel Blanche’s proposal for ‘Developing a Foundation for Quality Guidance for arts organisations and artists in Scotland’ that the ACE principles, along with the NFER research¹⁹ from which they are adopted, require

‘only minimal nuancing’ to fit them to participatory arts. Blanche makes some small edits, exchanging ‘striving for excellence’ with ‘artistic distinction and professionalism’, ‘emphasising authenticity’ for ‘authenticity and social relevance’, while replacing ‘actively involving’ with ‘purposeful’ and losing a ‘sense of belonging’ from the notion of ‘ownership’. Having synthesised over 30 studies and frameworks, she goes on to identify two additional considerations, ‘Suitably situated and resourced’ and ‘Properly planned, evaluated and safe’.

Rejecting any ‘formulaic approach to establishing quality’ as ‘counterproductive’, Blanche eventually settles on the notion of using the ‘different lenses’ principle Seidel²⁰ and Bamford²¹ have separately identified in an arts educational context. Asking what quality might look like from the perspective of the participant, partner/commissioner or artist, she also takes into consideration the setting and facilities but not the audience. In offering equal import (see figure 1 below) to her three groups of ‘stakeholders’

Fig. 1. Quality Lenses in Participatory Arts (Blanche)



“...participatory arts practice has become increasingly de-politicised over the past 40 years.”

she does not reflect on the power and authority dynamics involved: participants are still spoken about having an ‘experience’, while the artist, commissioners and partners have ‘intentions’.

Noting that ‘conversations about quality in participatory art have been more difficult than ever in the past few years’, Toby Lowe draws attention to the corner cutting the ‘do more for less’ austerity agenda has led to: mirrored in a greater pressure for arts organisations to focus on social outcomes. What neither Lowe nor any of the other recent documents on ‘quality’ touch upon is the ways in which participatory arts practice has become increasingly de-politicised over the past 40 years (Matarasso 2013). The ability to frame politically aware and ethical work within its own aesthetics is one of the important qualities of this work. Otherwise it may be in danger of becoming little more than a ‘cooptation of artists and communities’ to support other agendas.²²

Chrissie Tiller, June 2016



Contact Theatre and partners pilot an initiative for Sharing the Stage that will bring together young participants from an underserved area of North Manchester to create a spectacular production combining aerial performance and digital arts. *Escape 2015*, photo: Junior Akinola.

NOTES

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3. <https://goo.gl/IJeHym>
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6. https://mesh.tghn.org/site_media/media/medialibrary/2016/04/KenBartlett_CommunityDance_Report_2016.pdf
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21. <https://parliamentofdreams.com/2013/01/31/all-in-this-together/>
22. *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, Michael Kelly, Editor-in-Chief (Oxford University Press, 2014)

SEMINAR REPORT

SHARING THE STAGE: POLICY AND PRACTICE

Sharing the Stage is an initiative that aims to make participatory performing arts mainstream, as a way to give a platform for the most vulnerable people to participate in society and be heard.

The initial 'Policy and Practice' seminar for Sharing the Stage brought together a wide range of organisations from across the UK to explore the question of 'Quality'. In a rich afternoon of presentations, questions and debate, co-facilitated by François Matarasso and Nick Nuttgens, attendees looked at what Quality might mean in terms of four main groups: project participants, social partners, audiences and the arts organisations themselves.

As the afternoon discussions progressed, a number of key themes began to emerge. The need to:

- Engage in more 'meaningful', 'open' and 'honest' conversations
- Encourage ongoing reflection
- Address questions of power
- Explore relationships with the mainstream
- Re-visit arts leadership and governance
- Examine possible progression routes and legacy.

Underlining all of these was the importance of being responsive and flexible in planning and delivery: safeguarding the space to:

- Develop processes that include the possibility to take risks, make mistakes, reflect on them and fail - 'in the right way'
- Invest in building relationships with social partners based on trust and shared values.
- Engage with the very real challenges and barriers to participation facing different communities; especially those in one's 'own backyard'.
- Build reciprocal and, most importantly, equal relationships with participants; in order to create powerful and affective experiences for audiences.

PRESENTATIONS

The seminar opened with presentations from Walled City Music (participants' perspective), Sage Gateshead (arts organisations) and Geese Theatre (social partners). These were followed by an on-screen extract from 'The Passion' by Streetwise Opera.

Participants

Led by partners Frank Lyons, Denise White and participant John Lynch, Walled City focused its presentation on 'Inclusive Creativity' and ways in which non-professional musicians might become part of an ensemble such as Acoustronic. The three presenters talked about including innovative approaches to teaching conducting and composing. The questions that followed focused on what a complex partnership project like this might mean in terms of long-term involvement, the relationship between participatory work, touring and mainstream programming, how we can convey the quality of the experience in the room and the role of high quality technology in facilitating inclusive performance.

Social partners

Andy Watson from Geese Theatre looked at our relationships with social partners from the company's own experience of working with prisons. In particular, he highlighted the importance of:

- Finding partners who shared your ethics and values
- Negotiating the tensions between social and artistic outcomes especially when the funding and the power was often in the hands of commissioners
- Managing language (ours and our partners) in order to create a shared understanding of the work.

Underlining the need for open, honest dialogue and developing a shared approach to problem solving, Andy emphasised the importance of engaging in ongoing reflection. Follow up questions centred on how we might go beyond the 'easy wins' (partners who were already supportive of this work) to reach those in

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most need, how we develop strategies for making art even when there is a clear social agenda (balancing the exploratory with the directed), how ‘clear contracting’ might help ensure clarity of outcome and the possibility of considering disengagement when we discover a partner doesn’t share our ethics and values.

Arts organisations

Focusing on a project in Elswick, an isolated estate where 40% of children and 47% of adults live in poverty, Wendy Smith told attendees how Sage Gateshead is consciously exploring ways in which its participatory work can move from the periphery to the centre of its practice. Part of which has been to take projects out of the institution and work closely with partners such as the local football club. Sharing the story of a participant who felt confounded not only by the building but even the kind of artisan sugar on offer, Wendy underlined the importance of examining the ‘knowing’ and ‘unknowing’ signals we give to those who are not part of our cultural community and the pressing need to strengthen our listening skills.

Questions centred on how we, as the arts community, can ensure no-one feels our buildings and institutions are ‘not for them’, how we can best include those ‘unheard’ voices and begin to co-design our vision with local people. Others wondered if we should be thinking of ways to formalise progression routes for our participants, leading to employment in the arts. And what changes in governance and funding structures might be required to ensure these things happen.

Audiences

Viewing an extract from Streetwise Opera’s *The Passion*, many felt the piece had been taken out of context by being shown on screen: particularly in terms of how we saw the non-professional performers. Feedback took the form of observations rather than questions. These included observing the challenges involved in asking non-professionals to deliver pieces from the ‘canon’ and related issues around working with art forms, like opera, where

‘perfection’ is often sought as part of the artists’ training. At the same time most felt the non-professionals were more affecting and less mannered than the professionals, admiring the mutual respect created on stage. Even though the inclusion of non-professionals meant there was a certain unevenness of performance, no-one felt it detracted from the power of the story-telling. Quality, it was suggested, is multi-layered: the impact of the whole often being as important as the quality of individual parts.

DISCUSSION

These questions then formed the focus for further, in-depth, discussions; looking at their implications for participants and communities, partners and funders, arts organisations, audiences and the mainstream. As the different groups fed back, it was clear the collaborative nature of this work makes it difficult to separate quality of experience for one group from that of another: key themes constantly overlapping and coinciding.

Meaningful conversations and ongoing reflection

In terms of social partners, maintaining honest dialogue and ongoing reflection and was considered central to ensuring the ethics and values of arts organisations and partners remained in alignment for the life of a project; especially if relationships and circumstances changed. Openness and authenticity being the bedrock of any genuine collaboration.

In the context of participants this need for transparency was considered even more crucial. If real co-creation was to take place, artists and arts organisations need to create the circumstances where ‘unheard voices’ in the room could be acknowledged and recognised as equal contributors. Some suggested this might mean re-visiting our ‘language’, and in doing so, examining our subconscious bias towards those groups already engaged: especially in the context of our buildings, which remain incredibly intimidating to many potential participants and audiences. If a genuine *two-way* exchange of ideas,

“Should we be insisting the voices of participant steering groups and freelance artists who deliver the work are listened to with the same attentiveness and consideration as the CEO of an organisation?”

thoughts and feelings is implicit in the meaning of conversation, many attendees felt there was still important work to be done to achieve true reciprocity.

Power

This inevitably meant engaging questions of ‘power’: especially in understanding our own implicit power in the room with participants. How, Matarasso asked, can we manage the paradox of needing to have a strong personal vision when conceiving a project and then taking on others’ ideas as that work develops? Might it mean consciously shifting some of that power by inviting our collaborators in much earlier in the process or challenging those organisational power structures that continue to inhibit equal exchange happening? Is the role of the lead artist, some questioned, to be the ‘controlling’ voice in the room in order to ensure the final quality of a performance or is it more important to understand how to develop a shared aesthetic through collaboration and co-creation?

In terms of how we conduct negotiations with commissioners/funders, some wondered if there were ways to guarantee small arts organisations could retain their sense of artistic autonomy where the balance of power is inevitably skewed in favour of those with the funding. Thinking about how we might negotiate our way through these dilemmas brought up further questions of who should be involved in the original visioning and pitching processes. Should we be insisting the voices of participant steering groups and freelance artists who deliver the work are listened to with the same attentiveness and consideration as the CEO of an organisation?

Relationships with the mainstream

If the aim of the Sharing the Stage initiative is to bring participatory practice in to the mainstream and become mainstream rather than sit alongside the charged programme, some wondered what that might mean in terms of developing our audiences. Many felt the most exciting and thrilling aspect of the work was often the authenticity of non-professional

performers, an ‘electrical connection’ that took place in live performance; especially when participants had co-created a piece drawing on their own stories and experiences. For others the different levels of skill could sometimes be jarring: the paradigm of high art and ‘quality’ often creating an uneven playing field.

It may be that participatory work requires different ‘conversations’ with our audiences, setting up appropriate expectations and challenging preconceptions. Perhaps we need to create a genre that is considered equally for its artistic and social values: where the process becomes as important as the outcome? If we can create a space where different knowledges and experiences can be shared on an equal footing, something new, original and unexpected will almost always emerge, offering a powerful experience for any audience. At the same time many felt professional performers can be ‘enriched’ by working alongside non-professional participants: often gaining important insights into their own practice.

Re-visiting arts leadership and governance

How then do we get real buy-in for participation? Attendees felt it required a fundamental shift in terms of the status of the work. Although there were suggestions that participatory performance should find its own spaces rather than try to place itself within larger venues, it was agreed there was a need for real commitment from those running our institutions. Artistic leaders have to take ownership of the work and be prepared to advocate for it with funders and policy makers.

This change of focus means placing people at the heart of the organisation. Not only by ensuring the artists delivering the work having a seat at top table but also by inviting the vulnerable communities we are working with to be part of the conversation. It means looking at new models of governance, changing the make up of our Boards so they reflect a passion for this work. It means re-visiting the way the work is structured, programmed and announced, including the way participatory performance is dealt with in publicity and responded to by traditional and social

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media. If our communities are really to be involved in the co-designing of our programmes, it may also mean providing the training needed for them to undertake these roles.

Progression routes and legacy

A number of contributors highlighted a parallel need to think about progression routes. If we are really committed to the diverse groups we work with becoming part of the wider arts ecology, and participatory performance being a possible pathway to employment, should we be thinking about how we validate this experience and formalise the learning? Should this work be as much about developing future audiences and artists, as creating a healthy society with individuals who reach their full potential: as much about wider representation in the mainstream as developing life and work skills?

This would mean having a greater clarity of purpose and being transparent with our participants: including ‘thinking of legacy from the outset’. It would mean engaging with the ethics of not taking people on a journey that ends with the funding but framing projects so they are the start of developing agency. It might involve creating a mix of ‘off the shelf’ and more ‘bespoke’, collaborative offers so participants can make informed choices.

CONCLUSION

Key challenges

The tensions between the need for guaranteed outputs on the part of commissioners and social partners and the imperative towards more exploratory artistic processes in participatory performance is not going to disappear. How then do we begin to capture the ‘quality’ of what happens in ‘the room’? How do we begin to describe what it is about the participatory artistic process that creates the potential for empathy, encourages risk-taking, enables the making of meaning and allows space for relationships? Is it about developing different aesthetics? Looking at the work through different lenses? Or having conversations with our audiences that will enable them to engage more confidently with work where the quality of the experience is as important as quality of the performance? And exploring together what that might mean?

Perhaps it is time for participation to become the first principle of any publicly funded organisation, informing the buildings themselves as well as their programming instead of an ‘add-on’? Time, as attendees suggested in advising their former selves, to be confident in articulating our shared values and principles. Time to ‘think about the end of the project before the start’. Time to ‘Be the mainstream’.

ABOUT THE CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with branches in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK Branch, based in London, is to bring about long-term improvements in wellbeing particularly for the most vulnerable, by creating connections across boundaries (national borders, communities, disciplines and sectors) which deliver social, cultural and environmental value.