

A NEW DIRECTION CULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRESSION GROUP

CROSS SECTOR LEARNING EVALUATION REPORT

*“The power of the set has been extraordinary –
at the beginning I didn't think I'd stay”*

INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND

A New Direction, the Arts Council England's lead bridge organisation for London, initiated the Cultural Education Progression Group in January 2013. The group consisted of four Action Learning sets, each with seven or eight participants selected from the wider cultural sector areas including libraries, museums, arts, heritage, film and archives. Each set met on four occasions between January and July 2013: sets met for full day sessions with the aim of giving maximum opportunity for successful reflective peer learning and actions that could be taken back into participants' organisations.

The Context

The context in which arts and cultural organisations operate is changing rapidly. The recession has created a period of extraordinary challenge and uncertainty for arts and cultural education, both in terms of funding priorities and policy changes. There are widespread cuts to public sector funding that affect Local Authority spending on arts and culture for young people, alongside curricular reform and changes in the status of arts in school. The concept of a national curriculum is changing, alongside significant diversification of school management and delivery. To prepare for this changing landscape, A New Direction proposed a solution-focussed approach to new ways of working that involved cross-sector collaboration and learning.

Rationale

A New Direction identified the need to develop networking opportunities through consultation with the sector to develop the capacity to engage with schools, teachers and young people. A longer- term objective was to develop leadership within the wider cultural sector with a focus on emerging leaders in learning and education roles. Action Learning was chosen as a highly effective development tool that offers collaborative learning, peer networking, exchange of best practice and new ways of working.

THE PROGRAMME

1. Cross-sector recruitment

Organisations were recruited through an expression of interest process from across the different sectors and included representatives from **circus/ archive/ film/ literature/ theatre/ combined arts/ visual arts/ heritage/ library/ music**.

2. Action Learning

Action Learning is a process that involves working on real challenges, using the knowledge and skills of a small group of people combined with skilled questioning, to re-interpret old and familiar concepts and produce fresh ideas. It was invented by Reg Revans who suggested: *"For an organisation to survive, its rate of learning must be at least equal to the rate of change in its external environment."* It was chosen as a simple yet powerful way to find solutions in a rapidly changing external environment. It was also a way of developing new ideas and new ways of thinking and a method of providing a space for reflective learning away from the workplace in a sector where such opportunities are rare.

The programme was led by experienced Action Learning facilitators Di Bligh and Katie Venner from Action Learning Associates. The programme consisted of an introductory day for all 29 participants at which they were grouped into four cross-sector sets who then met four times; a plenary day concluded the programme for all the participants.

3. The Introductory Day

The day was introduced by Steve Moffit, CEO of A New Direction, and Di and Katie led a number of practical exercises that generated questions identifying shared need.

The cross sector nature of the work was a key element and participants were allocated to sets so that each one contained participants from different sectors in order to maximise the learning from different sectors, for example:

- **Music/ library/ literature/ youth theatre/ museum/ circus/ theatre touring**
- **circus/ archive/ film/ literature/ visual arts/ theatre/ combined arts**

At the end of the introductory day, each set wrote personal development objectives.

4. Action Learning Sets

The four sets ran from February through to June 2013. The sessions each ran for a full day and allowed time for three or four participants to present a specific professional challenge on each of the days. The day began with a 'report back' on actions resulting from the learning from the previous session and ended with time for reflection.

5. Plenary Day

This final day took place in July 2013 and allowed participants to meet colleagues from the other sets whom they had not met since January. It offered a chance to hear evaluative comments from the forms they had completed. There was also an opportunity for those sets

who wanted to continue as self-sustaining sets to get together and plan how and when they would meet.

THE EVALUATION

One of the key indicators of success was the fact that participants continued to attend throughout the sessions, even though they are all working in highly pressurized environments.

One participant commented: *“I used to think I was too busy for Action Learning, now I realise I am too busy not to [do it].”*

Whilst the confidentiality around the transactions that took place in the sets precludes a full documentation of some of the learning, AND’s Programme Associate (Culture), Michael Judge, visited all of the sets and observed at first hand the value of some of the transformational learning that took place as well as the trust and level of emotional engagement in the groups.

The questions generated during the introductory day identified shared needs, for example, *“What do we do when learning is not prioritised in our organisation?”* The value of the programme is that it offered a support network to address these questions through using Action Learning as a way of creating specific solutions to specific challenges.

How data was gathered

Data was gathered through an evaluation form co-designed with the sets. Participants commented and measured their progress against each of AND’s three aims for the programme. In addition, Di Bligh and Katie Venner fed back from the reflective learning at the end of each set.



THE FINDINGS

Personal Professional Development Objectives

AND's aims and the personal objectives set by participants were measured through a 10-point scale before and after the programme. The measurements gave evidence of the way the programme made positive change happen.

Comments indicated that taking part in the programme would make fundamental changes to how participants approached the way they worked. It is clear that there is a strong need for leadership development opportunities in the cultural education sector. One participant commented: *"The value of this network should not be underestimated. We are mainly mid-career professionals and finding professional development opportunities is very difficult, a number of us have applied to programmes such as Step Change or Clore and been refused because we were deemed to have too much experience, however we as individuals feel we are hitting a glass ceiling in our careers."*

Another stated:

"It has helped contextualise the perception that I have of my own work and career path in more broad terms."

During the programme one participant applied to be CEO of her organisation and was successful. The participant noted the use of a presentation to her Action Learning set as a factor in her interview success and subsequent career progression.

A NEW DIRECTION AIMS FOR THE CULTURAL EDUCATION PROGRESSION PROGRAMME

A New Direction had three aims for the work.

1. Having ideas, seeing connections and sharing experiences with peers

This was the aim against which the programme had the greatest impact, with some participants moving eight points on a 10-point scale, and over 90% of participants noting progress made. The cross-sector nature of the sets and the open questions of Action Learning generated an ideas-rich environment. One participant commented: *"Every meeting I have come out full of ideas and feeling refreshed and energised to go back into work – it's as good as a rest if not better."*

2. Building sustainable networks and partnerships across different sectors

This was the aim against which the programme had the strongest outcomes with at least three of the four sets becoming self-sustaining.

The findings noted that education managers/departments can often feel isolated within larger organisations with different priorities. The coming together of peers from different sectors not only created a peer support network but also created a cross-fertilisation of knowledge and the possibility for partnerships. One participant gave this picture of the change provoked by

participation in the sets: *“Taking part in this programme has felt like going from one small room where I feel a bit alone with my joys and frustrations to an opulent hall, where they are many other people doing the same thing and we can all feel free to share our triumphs and concerns; laughing, crying and talking all the while. In this hall, there are corridors leading to other halls, where other people from different fields are discussing their challenges and achievements and there is much swapping between rooms and halls and corridors. The doors are all open and the exchanges are ripe for the picking.”*

3. Engaging with schools, teachers and young people

Many of the participants already had strong skills, ideas and practice in this area. It presented a rich opportunity for sharing and exploring the best way to engage with schools and teachers. In the words of one participant: *“through the work of the group, many underlying principles to successful relationships were uncovered, including the establishment of strong channels of communication, setting up projects that have specific curriculum links or can play a special role in the life of the school, a willingness to take on board the needs of the young people of the school and a capacity for change.”*

There were many examples of how the cross sector exchange helped participants and their organisations to programme work according to need, for example:

“It was interesting to learn more about how other organisations engage with schools and teachers, and the process they go through. Having someone in the set who had previously been a teacher was really useful as they really made me consider how the teacher is involved in designing and delivering projects, and their viewpoint on our work.”

Other examples of shared learning include the uses of digital engagement for schools and the use of partner schools to disseminate and promote the work of arts organisations.

The feedback indicated that further engagement with AND around this aim would be beneficial.

- *“We need to know which schools, teachers and young people other arts organisations are working with so we don’t work with the same people”*
- *“We need up to date information on changes to the schooling system, including the curriculum and the way schools are managed”*
- *“We need to share marketing, communication strategies and forums to meet with groups”*

One of the participants noted how the technique of open questions was particularly useful as a way of having conversations with young people and getting them thinking.

Whilst participants generally agreed that teachers and young people would not have been appropriate to include in the set, there is evidence that AND does have a role in brokering a discussion around a specific and relevant issue which may include representatives from these groups.

CHALLENGES

1. Expectations of Action Learning

Not all participants fully grasped the nature of Action Learning at the outset of the programme and therefore did not necessarily set the most relevant personal learning objectives for themselves. In future Action Learning programmes, it may be better to set these objectives after the first set has taken place. It may be possible to give a clearer expectation of what Action Learning involves before the programme, though one participant commented, *"It's nice to be dubious about something (Action Learning) and come away feeling successful (i.e. it's worked!)."*



2. Time

The full extent of the impact of the programme is not yet visible. The enhanced skills of listening, asking open questions and thinking differently about challenges will impact on the individuals and their organisations over a much longer period than this report can measure. The deeper cross sectoral connections may gestate into projects that impact on the lives of young Londoners in two or three years' time.



FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

1. Cross-sector

The cross sector nature of the groups was a central element of the programme and was a factor for the relevance, range and depth of the learning that took place cited by many of the participants. One participant gave this specific example of the relevance of the learning:

"I now have an insight into Children's Services within public libraries, which is directly helpful to my line of work."

Another participant gave an indication of the range and depth of the learning:

"Whilst I might be aware that the Arts Council has different kinds of arts organisations - galleries, museums, libraries - within its remit, this would be purely academic and meaningless if I didn't have the chance to meet, talk and interrogate our roles, projects and company infrastructures. Through doing this, I have developed not only an understanding of what these different cultural bodies set out to do, how some of them are organised and how they function within their respective areas - but also I have begun to learn about what we can take from each other's practice."

There was initial apprehension from a few participants about how working with people from beyond their sector could be useful and relevant, though this was not an issue as the groups began the process of Action Learning. For some, the opportunity to work with colleagues who are outside of their usual network was seen as a major factor for success. As well as increased opportunity for shared learning, it may be that working with colleagues from outside one's usual network allows participants to show vulnerability more easily. It is clear that all the sets successfully established an atmosphere of trust that enabled the cross-sector learning to be fully explored.

2. A Reflective Space

The sets took place in a neutral environment away from the participants' usual work-space. The effect of this allowed opportunities to discover new ways of thinking. The majority of participants cited this as a key factor for success. This was the way one participant described the space;

"The space to deal with problems that are constantly in the back of your mind at work but never make it to the front is invaluable as it frees up that space in the mind and has jumped projects ahead of where they would be otherwise".

3. A United Voice

Bringing cultural education professionals together in a collaborative venture such as this allowed participants to discover their commonalities. The support available from new colleagues created a sense of the wider cultural sector working together. The sense of this bonding was clearly apparent at the plenary day and was articulated well by one of the participants:

"If anything I think we need to stop narrowing our sector definitions and look at ourselves as a bigger more powerful movement under the same umbrella."

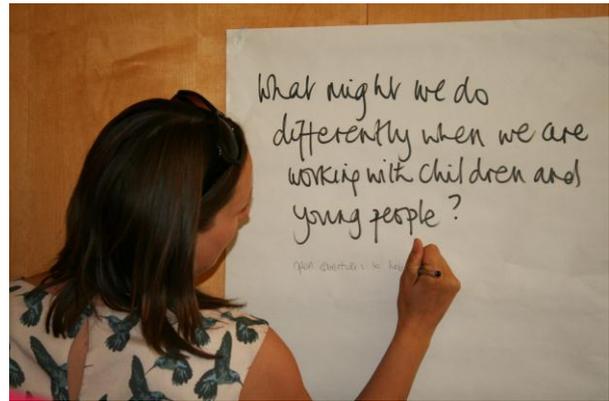
4. Organisational/Sector Development

There was clear evidence that the personal learning within the sets could be taken back to their organisations by the majority of participants. One participant cited that the learning and in particular the open questions helped his organisation in terms of succession planning. Several participants stated that they would introduce an Action Learning methodology to their staff team and that their management style felt empowered. The wider sector will benefit from the professional development of these individuals as cultural education leaders and from the way they work collaboratively across the sector. It is the confidence, resilience and openness of professionals such as these who will ensure that cultural organisations are responsive to change and continue to engage with each other, schools and young Londoners in a way that is thoughtful, reflective and empathetic to the true needs of young people.

CONCLUSION

The combination of cross sector grouping and the process of Action Learning led to an environment conducive of learning, collaboration and progression. For the participants, their organisations and the sector it has created:

- New ways of thinking; freedom from the usual structures
- Insights into the commonalities and differences of the different art/cultural sectors, at a time when they are most needed. In the words of one participant, the work was *“intimate yet relevant to the whole sector”*
- Self-sustaining cross-sector cultural education networks
- Leadership progression for mid-career cultural education professionals
- Actions that address the challenges of current cultural education challenges in London with a united voice



NEXT STEPS

- The self-sustaining sets reconvene September 2013
- AND is addressing the needs and disseminating the learning from this programme
- AND is recruiting new participants for an October 2013 start

APPENDIX

Participants

Name		Title	Organisation
Beccy	Allen	Producer (Creative Learning)	Half Moon Young People's Theatre
Kathryn	Allnutt	Programme Manager: Learning and Participation	Spitalfields Music
Vicky	Bell	Participation Manager	artsdepot
Suzie	Bryce	Administrator	Theatre-Rites
Teresa	Cisneros	Education Curator	Institute of International Visual Arts
Tara	Cleary	Education Officer	Phoenix Cinema
Sarah	Coffils	Young People's Projects Manager	South London Gallery
Ally	Davies	Education Coordinator	The Poetry Society
Kathy	Everett	Gen Manager	Oily Cart
Fiona	Fieber	Head of Learning and Participation	SPACE Studios
Samuel	Fieldhouse	Learning and Outreach Officer	The National Jazz Archive
Nick	Fuller	Children's Services Coordinator	Tri-borough libraries
Steve	Gardam	Head of Live Programmes	London Transport Museum
Eira	Gibson	Director of Participation and Outreach	Circus Space
Catherine	Greenwood	Learning Associate	Unicorn Theatre
Abigail	Hinton	Schools Learning Officer	Horniman Museum

Marigold	Hughes	Schools Producer	Theatre Centre
Dawn	Ingleson	Learning Manager	Discover
Sam	Johnson	Head of New Projects	Community Music
Kate	Laho	Learning Project Manager	English National Ballet
Samantha	Lane	Director of Projects	Almeida Theatre
Raheel	Mapara	Customer Services Officer	London Borough of Camden
Niland	Anna	Associate Director	National Youth Theatre
Victoria	Price	Creative Learning Manager	Ministry of Stories
Polly	Risbridger	Creative Producer	East London Dance
Ian	Scott Owens	Artistic Director	Albert & Friends Instant Circus
Miranda	Stearn	Arts and Heritage Development Co-ordinator	Orleans House Gallery/ Richmond Arts Service
Jai	Tyler	Education and Projects Organiser	The Photographers Gallery
Anna	Wilson	Music & Cross Arts Producer	Barbican

As leaders/ managers in the sector we've learnt:

- Action Learning should take place within our own teams/organisations
- tools for problem solving eg. 1. re-focus on the question 2. be objective 3. seek impartial advice
- the value of structured, quiet reflective conversations (as opposed to our usual diet of meetings)
- structured open conversation can lead to solutions without prescribing them
- we must always be clear (or as clear as we can be) about our aims and objectives for a project
- to think about the greater good of the team, rather than one person, or a problem within that team
- not to think in extremes – good/bad etc. – there can be a middle ground
- to ask our staff open questions

- being clear and specific leads to progress; being vague keeps you where you are
- that opportunities to network and share learning (in a meaningful way) are very valuable
- it's OK not to have the answers and to seek help in finding them
- that simply giving advice is not the best means of support (although tempting/most common)
- that the pre-occupations of people working across our sector (and sub sectors) are surprisingly similar
- a new idea of mentor – not line manager
- to take time to pause and think about both questions and answers - not rushing to fill the space and the silence
- how to ask different types of questions for ascertaining a clearer picture of a situation
- being clear about why I do the work that I do, in the way that I do will help in standing up for the arts in difficult times; but be realistic about who is or isn't persuadable
- emotion can be useful in drawing attention to what matters, but can also obscure and get in the way
- Action Learning gives us strategy, process and structure
- to recognise processes at work that aren't working

(Selected evaluative comments from the sessions)

Evaluation report by Michael Judge, Programme Associate (Culture), A New Direction
 Photos by Luis Dominguez, Communications Assistant, A New Direction

