

Project **Developing a Learning Strategy  
for Artsadmin**

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Borough **Tower Hamlets**

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Outline **Creative Partnerships London East and Artsadmin commissioned Howard Matthew to undertake a piece of action research, gathering evidence from Artsadmin, from artists supported by Artsadmin and from schools and other education stakeholders in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. His task was to make a significant contribution to Artsadmin's aim of developing a learning policy and strategy. The project took place between February and June 2006.**

# Developing a Learning Strategy for **Artsadmin**

Creative Partnerships London East and South case study

## Project context

Artsadmin has been established for 27 years. Since 1994, it has been based at Toynbee Studios in east London, where it has established a centre for the creation, promotion and dissemination of new work. Artsadmin provides advice, management and support for artists whose work crosses the boundaries of music, dance, theatre, live art and mixed media. It aims to enable new artists to gain experience and a degree of financial stability through bursaries and mentoring, and to bring their work to wider audiences of many different kinds.

Toynbee Studios is currently undergoing an enormous scheme of renovation. The building will soon have six spaces of varying sizes for rehearsals and showcases, together with eight creative media units. There will be a new roof studio with natural light and with astonishing views across east London, and the existing 250-seat theatre will be refurbished. Artsadmin felt strongly that this exciting process of physical regeneration should be matched by a renewal of what it has to offer to schools.

The project took place within a broader organisational context. Creative Partnerships London East and Artsadmin have been collaborating since 2004 on a programme called Art for Whose Sake? This has taken several forms, including discussions and seminars for artists and local teachers and the publication of a report with some commissioned essays. The central theme of the programme has been: How can contemporary artists – especially practitioners of ‘live art’ – engage with young people and their educational needs and interests?

Creative Partnerships London East commissioned this case study as an opportunity to track and record the process an organisation undergoes to reframe and reposition its learning offer to schools. The intention is to share this information with a range of practitioners and partners experiencing similar change.

Live art is usually seen as challenging and thought provoking – indeed often avowedly provocative – and its natural place within the school curriculum is not easy to predict or define. Creative Partnerships London East and Artsadmin felt that the best way to move towards a definition that would gain broad acceptance was to appoint someone with a well-considered acquaintance of both worlds.

Howard Matthew is a young artist with an admirable breadth of experience of working with schools and with young people, commitments that he has approached with intelligence and enthusiasm. He has a sympathetic understanding of what creative practitioners and teachers hope to achieve in their separate activities. He was commissioned to foster relationships with secondary schools and post-16 colleges in the local area of Tower Hamlets. There are also about 70 primary schools in the borough but it seemed sensible not to undertake, at this stage, the perhaps unwieldy task of making links with these but to begin with older students.

A good number of Artsadmin artists have already undertaken projects with schools, both in London and elsewhere, and some of these have been widely discussed, described and admired. The organisation hopes to expand and consolidate this experience. Howard’s task was therefore not to act as a pioneer, breaking entirely new ground; it was rather one of mapping, consolidation and the articulation of a purpose and a vision.

For more than a hundred years, Toynbee Hall, of which Toynbee Studios forms a part, has endeavoured to provide transforming opportunities within one of the poorest and most socially deprived areas in the UK. Devising a practical policy for working with schools in the area committed Artsadmin to make its own contribution towards this course of change; it also committed Artsadmin to examine itself as an organisation and to consider how its own transformation might become a vital part of the process.

So far, in the words of its director Judith Knight, Artsadmin has had ‘an ad hoc involvement with education’. There is nothing reprehensible in acknowledging this fact; the artists have had many varied principles and purposes, and engaging with young people has not always been an essential component of their work. However, Toynbee Studios is intended to become – again in the director’s words – ‘a laboratory’, and local schools can contribute many of the talents and interests that will help to form new compounds there.

Some artists have already developed work with schools centred on themes such as bullying, technology and communication, race and identity, climate change, the lives of asylum seekers and mental health. These are plainly topics that engage the passion of many young people in secondary education, often because they are important in their own lives. Schools which have spent much of the past 15 years being driven through stressful and not always agreeable structural and organisational change can understand the attraction of learning new expressive skills while exploring issues of contemporary personal and social relevance.



## Developing a learning strategy for Artsadmin

In five months, Howard Matthew approached the 18 institutions in Tower Hamlets that offer secondary education, taking account of their relationship with Ofsted and the Arts Council England’s Artsmark scheme and finding contacts who would consider what Artsadmin might offer. To understand what was already available in the area he had to make links with organisations like the Local Authority Arts and Music Services the Isle of Dogs Education Action Zone and the borough’s youth service and make contact with local arts providers like Spitalfields Festival, Whitechapel Art Gallery, Bow Arts Trust, Chisenhale Gallery and Dance Space, Moti Roti, Rich Mix and the Institute of International Visual Arts. He had to talk to the staff of Artsadmin and its artists to discover their views and hopes. Then he had to bring all the resulting ideas and anticipations into a coherent whole.

He reported on this in detail to three meetings of an advisory steering group, made up of representatives from Artsadmin and Creative Partnerships who helped shape the direction of the project. These meetings were spread over the time of the project, about five weeks apart.

Artists were sent a three-page questionnaire, covering topics such as educational work already undertaken, collaboration with other artists and future plans. The most illuminating questions were those that explored how artists would evaluate performance work that doesn’t have a final permanent product, how they would envisage working with teachers of different subjects, how live art might fit into an educational context and – especially telling – whether artists would describe their practice when talking to teachers and students in the same language they would use with fellow artists. This was sent to 25 artists, including recipients of Artsadmin bursaries, in mid February. It was very useful (though also very time-consuming) to follow up the questions with a telephone interview, in which brief answers like ‘not applicable’ could be fleshed out in more detail. It took until April for this audit to be completed.

While this was being done, Howard made an open and equal ‘offer’ to all the secondary



schools. Under the title ‘Itsabouttime’ – the playful ambiguity, involving an allusion to the practice of some live artists, was deliberate – he suggested that schools might like to consider three ways of engaging with Artsadmin. These were either to take part in an after-school or summer school programme, primed by workshops in school, so that students signing up would be genuinely interested; to offer a placement to an artist over the course of a term or for an intensive week of activity, perhaps at the end of year 9; or to set up a programme of continuing professional development and support for interested teachers. Once again, it took much time, telephoning and personal visits to schools to find the right person to contact and garner replies.

Howard made an exhaustive audit of other arts based educational activities in the borough, as provided by youth services, galleries, summer universities, etc. For comparative purposes, he studied the work of other live artists working in locations like Bristol and Leicester, and read widely within the literature of practical research and theory about artists in schools.

He needed to question Artsadmin itself, probing its ethos, asking staff why they thought Artsadmin would benefit as an organisation from an education policy, how their ‘offer’ might differ from others available in the area, and how they would describe the value of artists’ work with schools. To clarify these discussions Howard produced for Artsadmin a document on how secondary schools function, describing the practical and administrative constraints on their desire for a more creative curriculum. Artsadmin produced a summary of its past involvement with education, featuring examples of artists

who have worked with schools and suggesting how these might be expanded in the future. This was sent to schools in order to provide some answers to the pointed questions that Howard had received from teachers.

The final product of this lengthy and intricate set of processes was a successful and convivial half-day event called The Next Step, held at Toynbee Studios in June. Teachers from eight schools, nine artists, and representatives from the education authority and arts organisations met to tour the building and consider the opportunities that its renewal makes possible. They heard from Howard and from Artsadmin staff, before breaking into three groups to discuss the nature of artist-teacher partnerships, the ways in which cross-disciplinary arts practice might be integrated into the school curriculum, and the value and purpose of documentation – what happens to a work when a performance is finished and whether this can be used as a critical tool for teaching and learning. All these groups reported back to one another and then the artist and lecturer Joshua Sofaer presented his performance pack, giving an entertaining lecture about performance that enacted and exemplified the principles it described and analysed.

Howard also exhibited a huge and immensely informative map of Tower Hamlets on which the results of his work were displayed, showing the connections between organisations, places, artists, genres and methods that he had uncovered. This map had been customised by the contributions of many of the people whose work was represented in it.

Howard is now producing a blueprint for the next year, outlining routes from the action research towards new relationships between Artsadmin and its neighbouring schools.

## Impact and outcomes

The initial research showed how directness and honesty from all participants was essential. Artists are usually flexible in their dispositions and attitudes, but some of them decided, once they thought about it, that they had no wish to work with secondary schools. Others needed to know whether they would be working ‘with schools’ or ‘with teachers’ – a distinction that looms larger for those not themselves involved in the education system. Those who expressed a positive view of school-based work had to consider whether they would follow their own normal practice or whether it would be something different – parallel, perhaps, to work in which only adults would be involved, but still altered.

The questionnaire was a very useful way of exploring and discriminating among artists’ responses. Previous experiences in school can be highly informative, ‘Once they start to trust the process, they do enjoy the temporality of it.’ Or, ‘Young people do not naturally divide up their learning into subject areas... A live art session might involve anything from higher mathematics to rolling on the floor.’ There was a stimulating mixture of realism and optimism, ‘The teacher’s disbelief that what you are doing has any use to the students is a prejudice that is quite easily dispelled’. Or, ‘People worry about having a product... schools have to justify and evaluate everything. Live Art can offer a different approach to art, with improvisation skills and teamwork.’ And some artists were confident that their work has a value beyond its immediate context: ‘The way I work with movement is not about a particular style. I’m interested in them finding their own movement language... Kinaesthetic learning is underplayed in schools and should be promoted much more’. But the difficulties were not underestimated, ‘you need to have continuity throughout the project and this level of intensity and commitment would be hard when thinking about the restrictions of a school day.’ Or, ‘anyone who works with time-based media experiences problems within the limitations of a structured school day – a double lesson is still a very short time’. But, ‘the danger is if you start to talk about what it is rather than doing it, you’ll quickly lose the interest and focus of the class.’

Schools had to think about whether what Artsadmin were offering would be useful. Some teachers described themselves as already ‘overwhelmed with free offers from galleries’ or worried that this might merely mean ‘more stuff to do badly.’ Initial responses depended upon the idiosyncrasies of individual senior teachers, the specific circumstances of schools and (in at least one case) their religious affiliation. Some teachers were unsure about the definition of ‘live art’. One head of art cut short a telephone conversation with the trenchant comment: ‘I’m sorry I’ve had enough of artists, they’re dreadful, they’re fools, but thanks anyway.’ This raised the question of whether Artsadmin should work with schools where experience and familiarity mean that a project is likely to succeed or should try to persuade less confident teachers to try something new and potentially difficult.

Once Howard had met teachers in person, the main reaction was positive. Some needed to be reassured that work with unconventional artists wouldn’t create problems within the tight structure of the national curriculum, but others saw the chance of crossing curricular frontiers as a welcome challenge. One teacher confided that ‘I want to do cross-curricular work but don’t really do much’, while another described previous cross-curricular work as ‘fairly conventional’, both recognising that here was an opportunity to move away from the habitual. It was interesting that while most schools are undergoing various kinds of reorganisation, this was not necessarily seen as an inhibition on establishing a relationship with Artsadmin. Rather, the introduction of a ‘learning village’ or the setting up of a performing arts faculty were seen as reasons for welcoming new initiatives, provided that they were well planned and with clear purposes. Several teachers anticipated that work centred on live art would be good for pupils of different abilities and needs. The pupil referral unit had an especially positive attitude, as students there would be likely to embrace arts activities with a strong physical content, and those with a history of being disruptive in school might enjoy the space available at Toynbee Studios. But practical concerns were never far away. Another teacher, while generally enthusiastic, ruefully observed that ‘anything other than paper can become a missile.’ In general, it

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was thought that the heavy commitment of exam preparation at key stage 4 made work with key stage 3 pupils a more rational choice.

Artsadmin had to go through a sometimes difficult, even painful, process of self-assessment. Their involvement with their artists is not like that of a conventional gallery, in that they seek long-term relationships and act as advocates for work that is frequently misunderstood. This responsive ‘organic’ connection does not adapt easily to work with schools. Artsadmin is ‘going to be in the area for 25 years and doesn’t see itself as just an enclave’, but to reach out to schools is not a wish that translates easily into fact. Teachers work under immense pressures of time and need clear planning; their central question was usually ‘what do Artsadmin actually want to do with us?’ followed by either ‘when?’ or ‘how soon?’ or ‘who with?’ Howard Matthew could pass on these abrupt questions but the suggested answer – that the first thing was to establish a relationship and then to foster its growth in whatever ways seemed feasible and desirable – was initially too indefinite to be useful to schools. Broad idealism had to transmute into clear offers. Formulating more specific suggestions meant that Artsadmin had to ask itself exactly why it wanted an education programme and what its true motives were. It was unclear at first that these questions would find an answer in time. It was sometimes tempting for Artsadmin to see Howard’s work with the emphasis more on the ‘research’ than the ‘action’. It tends to operate in a ‘layered’ way, with many things happening at any one time; there was no obvious way of deciding that any one artist’s work could be seen as exemplary or as an appropriate model for fellow practitioners. To translate individual programmes into a coherent policy was always going to be a challenge.

It’s a tribute to the parties involved that, despite some unavoidable strains, the questions are beginning to be answered. Artsadmin has had to re-define its role as being more than curatorial to see that it can be a resource as well as a provider, and recognise that it will need to negotiate directly with schools and may act best by helping teachers refresh their own practice. It has also had to ensure that the flexibility on which it rightly prides itself doesn’t become a liability – to make tough decisions about how many schools to work with and for what periods of time. It has had to understand ‘where the gaps are’ and offer something unique to schools rather than overlap with existing kinds of provision.

These themes were covered positively during the discussions at The Next Step. The three breakout groups came up with thoughts that overlapped and supported one another in an encouraging way. Participants agreed on what does genuinely work in artist-teacher partnerships: when the project is planned to allow teachers to use their own creativity and bring their own passion to the work, when artists are given freedom to enhance the educational ‘model’ and where the imaginative use of space encourages students ‘to raise their game’ and they are motivated to move beyond passivity by seeing their teachers become learners. There was also agreement about what to avoid, such as the feeling that an artist takes over the project or simply pulls out ‘a bag of tricks’, or when teachers act over-protectively or ‘territorially’ about their pupils and their classrooms, conveying a sense of affront about the artist’s disturbing presence.

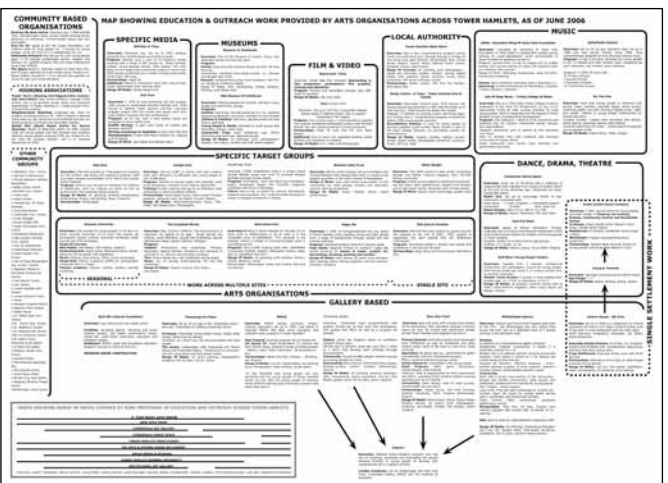
The discussion on cross-disciplinary work raised the same ideas of collaboration and mutual learning. Artists enjoy ‘rubbing up against real life rather than rubbing shoulders



with other artists’ was one comment. Themes such as identity and sense of place are central to the work of live artists and the daily lives of London teenagers. They should find a place within work in school, whatever the bureaucratic restraints of timetables and schools have shown that it is possible to make this happen. Though 14 year olds can be very conservative, provided they are not merely bewildered by what’s on offer they are willing to take part in and help to shape projects whose outlines are well planned but whose outcomes are unknown. The precise application of terminology like ‘cross-curricular’ or ‘cross-disciplinary’ is less important to students than the varied experiences such work offers.

Students’ capacity for active participation was stressed in the discussion on documentation. There was agreement on the essential ideas about documentation – the need for a considered process of selection to develop an editorial voice; the hope that audiences who haven’t seen a performance can still be enlightened by ‘the democracy of the document’; the recognition that what’s not recorded can be as interesting as what is. Above all it was agreed that the process is more fruitful when undertaken within a discursive framework in which students consider how they would like to engage with the process. Many of them are already familiar with digital documentary technologies. Arriving at a common language in this area will perhaps be harder for teachers and artists than for students and artists.

What’s to happen next is still undecided. Several schools, stimulated by The Next Step, already eagerly want to make links with artists. Artsadmin are planning to contact them, to visit the teachers in their schools and to show film clips of the kind of work they might



like to try with their students. Pupils from the pupil referral unit will spend time at Toynbee Studios, seeing what’s what with their own eyes. Howard’s work is drawing to an end, and his blueprint for the next 12 months will not involve his acting as a dating agency, bringing together new partners. But the work he has done so conscientiously and indefatigably, and the commitments given by Artsadmin suggest that an education policy will be more than a mere document.

There will undoubtedly be difficulties, because so many different people and expectations are involved. It took time for schools to understand what Artsadmin has to offer, and it will take time for Artsadmin to maintain the connections Howard has forged. Many pupils will need to be convinced that art that doesn’t look like conventional art has the right to be called art at all. Artsadmin will need to continue to reflect on what an education policy means for them as well as for the schools. It will be necessary to get some pilot projects working quickly, long before the proposed appointment of a dedicated education worker in 2007-08, if the current momentum is to be sustained.

Building Schools for the Future is a slogan that refers to the government investment behind the physical transformation of students’ surroundings. It might equally point towards a change in how and what they learn inside and outside those buildings. If Artsadmin is prepared to seize the day, the question Art for Whose Sake? will produce some absorbing and exciting answers.

**Tom Deveson**

## Artsadmin

Artsadmin provides a comprehensive management service and unique national resource for contemporary artists who cross the spectrum of new theatre, dance, music, live art and mixed media work. With consistent and supportive administration it develops and promotes artists' work, from the initial stages of a project through to its final presentation. Seeking to establish partnerships with producers, promoters and relevant arts organisations in Britain and abroad, it endeavours to bring the new and challenging work of its artists to an ever increasing audience.

[www.artsadmin.co.uk](http://www.artsadmin.co.uk)

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## Howard Matthew

Howard Matthew is a London based artist who works with performance, film and video. His work has been supported and endorsed through numerous fellowships and bursaries in addition to being purchased for private collections. He has a highly flexible approach to his practice and has successfully collaborated with poets and architects amongst others professions. His work also extends to teaching and outreach programmes where he has taught in a broad range contexts from primary education to adults with learning disabilities. He is currently working on a number of education based projects with Creative Partnerships in London, Thames Gateway and Birmingham.

[www.howardmatthew.co.uk](http://www.howardmatthew.co.uk)

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## Writer

Tom Deveson was a full-time teacher in inner London schools for 30 years. He now gives in-service training courses for teachers, runs drama and music projects for children, and writes on literature, the arts and education for a variety of national newspapers and magazines. He also enjoys being a grandparent.

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## Creative Partnerships

Creative Partnerships is a programme managed by Arts Council England, the national development agency for the arts in England. It gives young people in 36 disadvantaged areas across England the opportunity to develop their creativity and their ambition by building partnerships between schools and creative organisations, businesses and individuals. Creative Partnerships aims to demonstrate the pivotal role creativity and creative people can play in transforming education in every curriculum subject for children of all ages and abilities.

London East and London South were established as two of the first sixteen Creative Partnerships areas in 2002, delivering programmes with schools in Hackney, Islington, Newham and Tower Hamlets and Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham and Southwark over a four year period.

In April 2006 the two areas merged to form one Creative Partnerships area delivering a joint creative programme in eight boroughs. Creative Partnerships London East and South is now based at Discover in Stratford.

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This case study is available to download on the Creative Partnerships website. To view this, and to view the other case studies in this series please visit **[www.creative-partnerships.com](http://www.creative-partnerships.com)** and go to the **London East and South homepage**.

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