
Intuitive processes

The ‘workshop ecology’ and ‘practice assemblage’: presenting the core mechanisms of participatory arts practices, recognised across international and artform boundaries. Academic, former singer and community musician, **Dr Anni Raw**, explains her fascinating research

This article will outline a description and explanation of the elusive, often intuitive processes engaged by participatory artists, including dance practitioners (as well as other performing arts and music practitioners, visual, 3D and media artists, writers, hip hop or carnival arts practitioners, in fact specialists in any artform), who work in community settings using collaborative, participatory and workshop practices.

But is a common articulation of such an idea feasible, or even desirable? This article discusses the potential benefits of a unifying description, in tension with a potential suffocation of individual creative approaches, which a reductive model might suggest.

The challenge of obscurity

‘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, multifaceted 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 confirmed that it’s all a bit ‘woolly’. We’ve all been there... And the impact of repeated experiences such as these can cause a subtle erosion of a practitioner’s own grasp of their practice and its validity, or even their own professional competency. Not having a clear language, that can be understood by others, to describe the work we commit years of our lives to is a dangerous form of obscurity.

In 1984, Owen Kelly saw a fatal

weakness in the then ‘community arts movement’ in the UK, due to 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 (Owen claimed) to avoid divergent debate about practice norms; but he felt leaving the crucial detail unarticulated, based on trust and intuition – and everyone simply agreeing that they “know what they mean”(1) – stunted the development of the movement at an early stage.

The contemporary picture

Whilst, despite his gloom, the movement has managed to remain active over the subsequent 30 years, many of Owen’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, recognizable to all experienced practitioners irrespective of artform, 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 artforms, participant groups, specific project objectives and 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: a creative solution in an impossible situation... 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?

A unifying articulation, emerging from international research

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, a shared articulation might provide a stable platform, a frame. Within such a frame, practitioners’ original, individual creative expression of the particulars of the model may shine more clearly, and ultimately more effectively. 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 high quality participatory arts practice. The following description, including diagrams to help clear out some dusty corners, is offered here for community dance practitioners to contemplate: I invite readers to look for their own workshop practice in this map, and to consider how far they recognise what is depicted here as familiar territory.

Through three years of ethnographic doctoral study (accompanying over 50 British and Mexican arts practitioners in their community-based work and thinking, at project sites both in the UK and in Mexico City), I recognised a sophisticated, multi-disciplinary participatory arts 'practice assemblage'(2); a model comprising six key elements – or pillars if you prefer. Highly effective participatory arts practitioners all, I suggest, (despite immense and delicious diversity) work with these

same fundamental elements to shape a productive and creative 'workshop ecology'(3) – the place where it all happens. My research highlighted that a healthy workshop ecology is achieved by practitioners working with these six interdependent and organically interacting elements, and that in all of these fields they have (or need) significant expertise: 1) intuition (the 'glow' of acute attention, attuned to the moment, but drawing reflectively on prior experience), 2) strong commitment (to quality, to people, to persevere), 3) strong ethics: values and principles, 4) affirmative relationships, 5) spatial expertise – in several dimensions, and 6) the core mechanisms of creativity itself. These aspects of the practice (shown in the diagrams below, with practitioners as central teardrop shape), interacting together, create a collaborative environment and process capable of catalysing transformative change.

According to this 'Practice Assemblage' articulation, the 'Creative Key', shown as a dynamic pattern, embodied by the arts practitioners themselves, constitutes practitioners' skilled introduction of generic (not artform-specific) creative devices and experiences, which they use as creative strategies for catalysing possibilities of change. Using generic creativity mechanisms, such as metaphor, subversive playfulness, risk, the power of story and the suspension of disbelief, among many other devices, participatory arts facilitators open up sometimes highly charged (potent) 'liminal' spaces of creativity, in which participants can rehearse fresh ways of being themselves, and, through their creative activities, engage in transformative reflection on their everyday realities.

Each element represented here is of course complex and multifaceted. The 'spatial framework', for example, encompasses skilled work with physical space, as well as with 'affective' space (atmospheres, ambiance), and in enabling participants to access the creative space of the imagination – regular territory for artists, but for many people a dimension seldom visited, and very rarely extensively explored. Then the complex and elusive use of 'intuition' is conceptualised as a sophisticated workshop mode: a particular facilitation capacity, which results from a highly flexible and responsive imagination (artists are athletes of the imagination), in combination with a reflective ability to draw creatively on previous experience, and a freedom and skill in improvising. This invaluable ability was referred to by several practitioners in my study simply as 'busking it', or even 'blagging', apparently undervaluing a significant element of their expertise, perhaps because its mechanisms were too vague to grasp. The diagrams (3 and 4) seek to lay out the workings of this complex mode, which in reality happen in split seconds in the workshop process. The effect of this sequence of steps (a choreography of the mind) is to open up new or different possibilities, for example to move something on, or to tackle a destructive dynamic.

The linear sequence outlined in

1) The basic, universal participatory arts workshop (space, participants and arts practitioner/s), without any specifics in artform or situation, and without 'assemblage' elements depicted



Using this basic depiction as the universal starting point, with external aspects of project, setting, and contextual conditions shown as pressures impinging on the workshop to differing degrees (dents and bulges), diagram 2 below shows the six elements added in to create the 'Workshop Ecology'.

2) The Participatory arts 'Practice Assemblage'

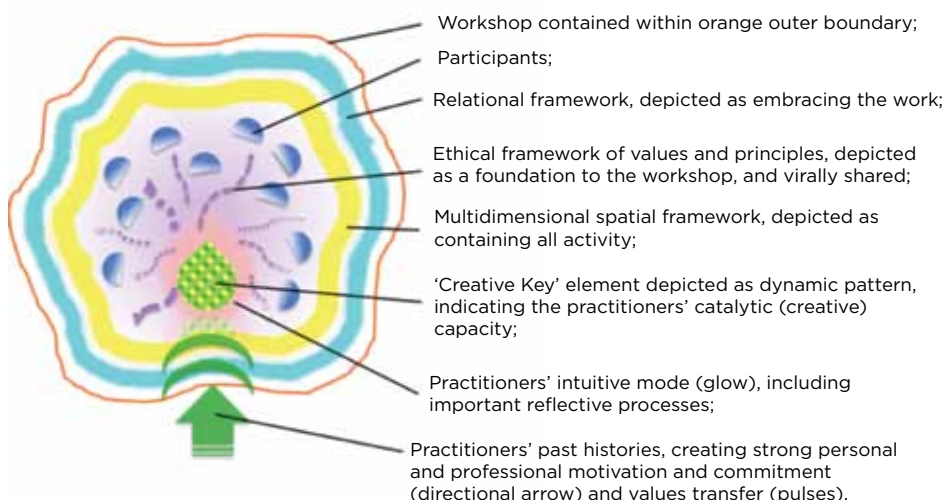
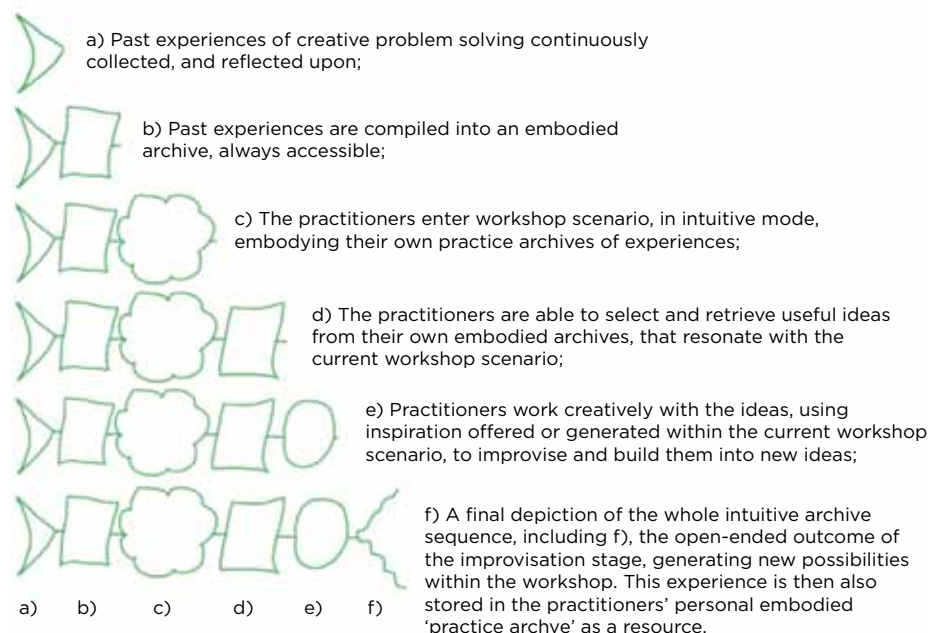


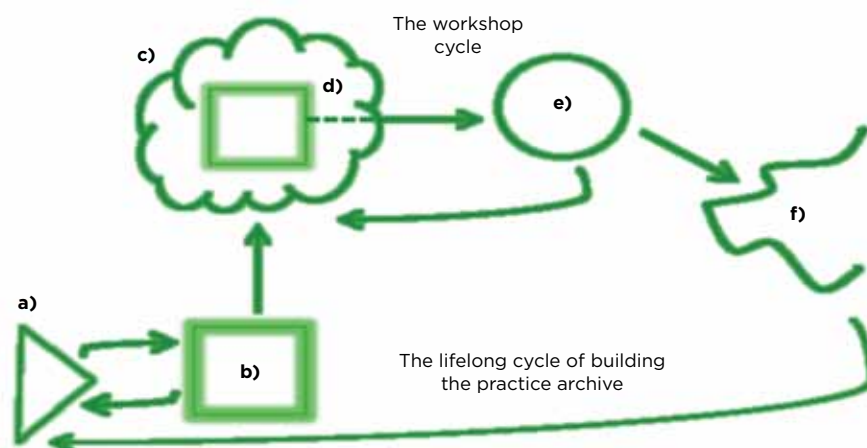
diagram 3, shown as if a simple, step-by-step chronology should, in fact, be understood more as a pair of interconnected cycles, as depicted in diagram 4. Within this cycle, stages a) and b) continue always, looping to feed the growth of the archive. Stages c) to f) constitute the use of the archive in the workshop situation.

Stages c) to e) recur and recur during the workshop process, feeding the current delivery of practice through repeatedly dipping back into the embodied archive, each time passing through intuitive processes at stages c) and e). This pattern is outlined in the following diagram:

3) Intuition as a reflective archiving process, building an embodied practice resource:



4) Intuition cycles in participatory facilitation processes



Of course, there is much more to it all than a six-point summary, or a set of two-dimensional diagrams. The assemblage in practice 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 a new 'codification' of the work, a step Pauline Tambling (CEO of Creative & Cultural Skills), for example, has called 'essential' for the sector.

In my view, seeing so many wildly different and exciting expressions of this same model in action, across different sites in two contrasting countries, using different artforms and working within different project contexts, there is a tightrope here that is well worth treading. It is suspended taught, between 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'(4), 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?

Info

anni.raw@durham.ac.uk

References

- (1) Kelly, O. (1984). Community, art and the state: storming the citadels. London: Comedia.
- (2&3) Raw, A. (2013). A model and theory of community-based arts and health practice. (Doctoral Thesis), Durham University. & Raw, A. (2014). Ethnographic evidence of an emerging transnational arts practice? Anthropology in Action. 21 (Spring).
- (4) Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.