

Finding Voices, Creating Change: Community Arts as a Model of Co-operative Learning

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Community Arts grew in Britain as a movement to try and re-establish the links between people and culture, to stimulate and inspire new types of activity and to value and promote latent or hidden skills and talents within communities. It attempts to give people the tools to be active, confident participators and creators, to help communities discover, develop and use their abilities to express themselves through creativity, and to find their voice.

I got involved in Community Arts after being excluded from music classes at school on the grounds that I was tone deaf. By the time I was in my 20s I had learned how to play guitar, to sing and was the vocalist in a band. I did this through my own endeavour and with the help and encouragement of friends. I came to realise that the way standard hierarchical arts education works in this country is to systematically exclude people who do not conform to a very narrow view of what art is. Worse still, it undermines people's confidence and leaves them with a lack of belief in their own worth. I wanted to do something to change this fundamentally unjust cycle and, as a result of my own experiences of becoming a musician, was inspired to get involved in Community Arts and the community arts movement.

Community artists use the creative process to help communities gain the confidence to have their say in a way that is direct and empowering. Projects are a group affair, and it is the project which creates the co-operative environment where ideas are shared, experimented with and worked on until they are ready to be shared with a wider public. The process is egalitarian and seeks to value everyone's voice equally. The professional artist may bring skills to the group and lead and support activities, and will often be the unsung agent of change, but their voice has no more weight than any other member of the group. It is by its nature a process that is co-operative and reflective. Participants agree the parameters of the project at the outset and agree to work together in a supportive way and are challenged to find solutions by exploring issues together.

Community Arts activities sometimes occur spontaneously but more often they emerge out of dialogues and conversations instigated by an artist. At its heart it is a process that is co-operative, democratic and transformative. The medium of a project creates an environment where artist and participant work together as collaborator and co-producer, identifying and defining issues that need exploring through creative and joint endeavour. I have witnessed groups and individuals gain insights into creative worlds through their involvement in Community Arts projects. For example, in three years of involvement in the Caldmore Village Festival in Walsall I have seen a fundamental shift in the way local people perceive the arts. From being something that does not involve them and has nothing to do with their lives to being something they can enjoy and have opinions about, to something they can participate in and make choices about, and more importantly, to something that can help them obtain more resources to improve and regenerate their community. By working in a way that is mutually supportive and non-hierarchical, participants gain insight into the value and importance of co-operative approaches.

The Author

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Reference

Webster, M and Buglass, G (2005) *Finding Voices, Making Choices*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.