

# Artists & Teachers Partnerships

A Model of Engagement  
Melanie Nock

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## The Principle and Context

The Creative Partnerships programme was established to “unlock the creativity of learners and educators and develop creative approaches to teaching all aspects of the curriculum.” (More about Creative Partnerships, Arts Council 2006). It was intended to bring about a step change in:

“The aspirations and achievements of young people  
The approaches and attitudes of teachers and schools  
The practices of creative practitioners and organisations  
that wish to work in schools”

The programme is not about teaching creativity but about creative teaching (OFSTED 2006); not focusing on achievement in the arts but on developing a range of skills including curiosity, the ability to experiment and explore, work with others, negotiate, modify and compromise, reflect and evaluate. Much of the work of Creative Partnerships is a form of action research working directly with young people. The creative practitioner models a different approach through their direct engagement with the young people and the teachers see for themselves the impact on the young people. The expectation is that teachers will draw on this experience in their future work, embedding it into their own professional practice. Typical comments after a project has finished are:

“I saw an intelligence and creativity not normally expressed.”  
*Teacher*

“This enabled them to express their ideas and actually participate.”  
*Teacher*

(Comments from the evaluation of CP projects in a North London primary schools, 2008)

These comments focus on the impact of the project on the children and their learning; it is rare to find participants reflecting on the impact of the project on adults and their teaching.

This raises the question of the potential impact of focusing the learning on the teacher rather than the young people. What would happen if the creative practitioners worked directly with teachers rather than with young people? Could a more equal learning partnership be established in which both parties (teacher and artist) explored creativity in education in the context of their own professional practice? Would this move Creative Partnerships activity away from the prevailing deficit model (ie teachers lack skills as creative professionals; artists come in to schools to support teachers in developing those skills) to the benefit of artists and teachers, contributing to the achievement of third Creative Partnership objective (developing the practices of creative practitioners and organisations)? Would it result in a more embedded understanding of creativity in those teachers who took part (and consequently in their schools or other educational settings?). And equally, would the artists' enhanced understanding of teachers' professional skills have an impact on their professional practice both as “pure” artists and as artists working in schools?

This is an approach which has already had success – but within a professional development environment. The TAPP project, for example, run by the London University Institute of Education as part of its Graduate Diploma in Professional Studies pairs artists and teachers working with all age groups. The projects described here sought to investigate the impact of the relationship operating within the teachers' normal working environment.



## The Ingredients

“The point is to be reflective about our practice, in the classroom and otherwise. The premise being that reflection is a pre-requisite for creativity. It’s also that reflection, when written, can develop deep thought... Basically, properly reflecting on professional practice is the basis for creativity (and I think, excellence) and we’re trying to provide space, time and the permission to do that.” *Teacher*

During 2007/8, Creative Partnerships London North supported two contrasting projects to investigate this question in some depth.

### Reflective Conversations

“Emotionally literate teaching; an enquiry” was set in a large secondary school with sports college status and took place between December 2007 and May 2008. This project was part of the Embedding Practice strand within the Creative Partnerships London North (CPLN) programme which had been specifically developed to explore ways of building “institutional and individual capacity” for change. It involved a team of creative practitioners working on a one to one basis with a group of six teachers led by the deputy head. Project leadership was supplied on the one hand by the school’s deputy head and by a sound artist who had already led professional development programmes entitled “Reflective Conversations” with creative practitioners with CPLN for two years.

Teachers were offered a series of four half day meetings with their creative practitioner which could involve visits to other places, together with support between meetings to assist them with a process of personal reflection. Teachers were encouraged to keep some form of reflective diary. The emphasis of the project was very much on teachers taking the initiative for their own reflection and learning, using the artist partner as a resource. The group of teachers had some whole group meetings to enable learning to be shared. Similarly the artists had a series of “mind showers” together to prepare them for their role in supporting reflection and to give the project some coherence across its full breadth. The whole group came together at the end of the project to review what had been learnt together.

Teachers undertook a variety of activities. Two teachers toured the school with their artist partner, discussing how different parts of it felt, taking the opportunity to see it through a new pair of eyes. Another teacher spent some time taking a different view of displays and considering them from the viewer’s perspective through the eyes of the artist. One went on a visit to a local gallery. The group of teachers had tried to engage with a wider group of colleagues by asking them how they would change their teaching if there were no constraints on them. Meanwhile the artists always went to see an exhibition and used their conversation about the work they had seen as

the starting point for a discussion about the project. One teacher became very committed to blogging posting virtually daily, creating an interactive account of his journey through the process.



### Creative Learning Lab

Creative Learning Lab was the second Early Years programme with CPLN, following on from Creative Beginnings. It involved the participation of six early years settings and six freelance artists in the form of continued professional development exploring the differences between teaching creatively and teaching for creativity. The CPD/action research programme was structured to allow for the development of new skills, deepening understanding of creativity and creative practice, experiential learning and wider discussion within an international forum. The programme started with all participants travelling to Newry in Ireland to take part in a festival of theatre for young children – this formed the initial inspiration. The teacher and artist pairs took part in a number of CPD days spread across three terms based on a thematic approach as the ‘inputs’ necessary for creative activity; namely ideas, language, environment, resources and qualities and values.

After the delivery of the CPD days and the action research and observations in each setting, the teacher artist pairings had the opportunity to run a more in depth piece of action research based on their findings and interest, that was then shared at the International Early Years Festival for Theatre in March 2008. Teacher/artist pairings were encouraged to select one or two of the ‘inputs’ covered and develop an activity to develop both the creativity of the children but also their own creativity. Their findings and

practice were presented in such a way as to stimulate a greater level of conversation as part of the festival programme aimed specifically at the relationship between the arts and education with an international audience.

The pairs within the Early Years project, were self selecting. The work done by each partnership was very much coloured by the personal interests of the participants. In one instance, the programme of work was inspired by the teacher's love of the sea. The teacher had taken the children on a traditional seaside outing during the summer of 2007. The pair's first piece of work had used pictures from that outing as a backdrop to recreating a seascape in the classroom. The children had been provided with shells, water and sand and the adults had introduced a short dance to give the presentation a performance element. Subsequent workshops had built on the themes of this activity. One later activity had been centred on water; the children had watched while, to the accompaniment of the signature piece of music, the adults had experimented with a variety of objects and water. The children were then invited to join the adults in their experimental play. Another pair had used interactive mime to jointly explore the potential of everyday objects – balls, boxes, pieces of paper, again with the children joining in after a short performance.

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it perhaps – rather than to get to a certain point.”**

*Teacher*

## In Practice

“And then think about the rewards! Possible engagement. Happiness. Smiles. Positivity. Enjoying your day! Your career. Your vocation! (I use the term “your” meaning “my” really). Developing skills and attributes in students that are really valued! Deep deep learning! Independent learning!” *Teacher*

At the heart of both projects were the individual partnerships. Whilst initially, the teachers saw themselves as learning from their artist partners, over time, the pairings became genuine partnerships.

“There was still a lot more to explore in our partnership.” *Teacher*

The partnerships took some time and patience to develop. The process required commitment and, at least at the beginning, some faith.

“The process with teachers is about trust.” *Artist*

“The conversations got better.” *Teacher*

There was a growing recognition that the partnerships were working because each member brought something different to it but the contributions combined into a whole, greater than the sum of the parts.

“The strength of us as a team was partly in our differences; black/white, male/female and so on. But also in our sharing and having fun together. The children gained from a process which also made us happy.” *Artist*

“In getting the performances together I could see the impact of our different ideas. I could see the importance of the partnership between artist and teacher. We have different insights into how to make a performance work with that group.” *Teacher*

Artists within both settings recognised that they had an important role in giving the teachers confidence and “permission” to take risks and experiment. They recognised that institutional factors can be very strong barriers to change and tried to help the teachers to recognise this.

“Initially there were a lot of barriers to doing anything. I have given her more of a platform to change things. Our partnership gives her the authority to challenge those barriers. In a way play has been forced on her.” *Artist*

“It shows the impact of an institution on its people.” *Artist*

“School always has a lot of ‘Stuff’. You have to spend quite a lot of time dealing with that before you can move on to anything new.” *Artist*

“She (the artist) is not confined by the constraints I have. She questioned all sorts of basic things. She gave me a new way of looking at things. Is the most important part of the lesson to enjoy it perhaps – rather than to get to a certain point.” *Teacher*

The artists were also able to encourage teachers to see the important resources in simple things, including themselves.

“It made me think about myself as a resource. What you do doesn't have to be that elaborate. You can just sit with a group of kids and make music. It made me realise how much your example is so important to children.” *Teacher*

“It encourages her to find new, playful ways to use ordinary resources like balls and paint.” *Artist*

“I became aware of how we need to talk to students and find out what they are thinking.” *Teacher*

“She (artist) made me realise I'm quite a creative person really. She made me think about all the things I do as a teacher and I realised I'm quite creative.” *Teacher*

An important aspect was the playful approach to learning which was a hallmark of many of these partnerships. Teachers started to see what they were doing through the eyes of the children.

“Going through the process allowed her to experience a bit of what the kids were experiencing.” *Artist*

“I’ve had to lose my teacher head!” *Teacher*

“It was inspiring to listen to the kids. It was a risk. I came to realise that I can follow a point and not always be structured.” *Teacher*

Teachers in both projects saw for themselves the educational value of consulting and involving the children. In the early years project this was through the medium of performance. In the secondary project this was simply through being encouraged to talk to the students.

“We used the idea that there is a performance and an audience and then we fused the two... building some flexibility into what we do gives the children a role in shaping the idea... if they have an input into what we are doing then they have ownership of what is created.” *Teacher*

“The brilliant bit is the inclusivity of it. We’re building a community.” *Teacher*

Although the artists clearly brought a specific skill set with them, one of their most important contributions was bringing an understanding of the reflective process and of producing creative work within a theoretical framework. For many of the teachers the discipline of reflection was unfamiliar and difficult.

“I could interpret stuff for her. It’s an experiential thing. I understood the whole reflective practice thing. But it helped that she was so committed!” *Artist.*

“I found it hard to find a way to reflect on my own practice which is helpful, am I ready for it? The discipline was quite hard ” *Teacher*

“I didn’t do much blogging, it wasn’t natural or useful.” *Teacher*

It was not only the teachers who gained from this experience in terms of their professional development.

“It’s re-engaged me and reinforced my ideas. You don’t need to spend 4 weeks in a rehearsal room to create theatre. What you really need as an artist is another creative mind – not all that funding and other constraints. We could tour this quite easily. You need someone to challenge your creativity with practicality – and a space.” *Artist*

“It was good having space to create and devise with another person and to have the experience of working non verbally with very young children.” *Artist*

For the creative practitioners working in the secondary school, there were significant benefits in working with a group of artists from a range of contrasting disciplines. They had started each of their group sessions by visiting an exhibition and discussing the work they had seen.

“Suddenly we saw they (the pictures) were all the same in terms of structure It was really interesting to be pulling stuff from another source.” *Artist*

And these conversations had led to other insights.

“How to look at things differently; how different artists approach things; how to ask questions.” *Artist*

**An important aspect was the playful approach to learning which was a hallmark of many of these partnerships. Teachers started to see what they were doing through the eyes of the children.**

## Reflections on Process

From these two contrasting projects have come a number of shared learning points. Firstly, it is important to recognise that a partnership of this kind is first and foremost a relationship. There has to be some level of connection between the two partners before the relationship starts – some element of mutual respect and mutual values allowing engagement to take place. At a personal level, it helps if the partners enjoy each other’s company and find each other interesting. The partnership must be underpinned by trust. This means that enough time needs to be allowed for trust to develop. All participants felt that around a year was the optimum time for a partnership project.

For the Early Years project the visit to Ireland was very useful in helping the participants forge their partnerships – also – it was an environment that did not belong to any one group. It was not so much the international element of the visit which was important here (although the inherent stimulus supported an excitement and an enthusiasm for the project and the potential learning) but the opportunity to spend time with the whole group away from the day to day environment. In this setting, participants had an opportunity to get to know each other. The secondary project was launched in a more modest way with an awayday at a local hotel but that too engendered an excitement and enthusiasm.

“The day was superb. We went on for more than an hour longer than we intended because of the energy in the room.” *Teacher*



Many of the participants felt that a particular strength of the Early Years project lay in the fact that there was a pre determined structure. This meant that they focused on how they were going to interpret the themes rather than having also to address what themes they would investigate. In addition, the Early Years project required partners to work together to achieve a joint objective – a presentational workshop at an international conference in Italy. This gave focus and purpose to their work but also made them mutually dependent, thus strengthening the partnership. The existence of a deadline may have been helpful in ensuring the project maintained momentum. This framework contrasted with the more open structure of the secondary project which could result in reflective learning being deprioritised by other pressures because it did not have an imperative of its own.

Despite the differences between the two projects, the outcomes for the teachers had an additional resonance; putting young people at the heart of what was being done. The artists encouraged the teachers to see everyday things through a fresh pair of eyes – in this case the eyes of children/young people. In the early years setting this was achieved by performing for them; in the secondary school it was achieved by listening to young people, starting to see them as “real people, allowing them to follow their ideas and interests in lessons, abandoning very rigid lesson structures.” This was as liberating for the teachers as for the young people.

It was also seen by a number of the teachers as being quite “risky” for them.

Developing the habit of reflection is not easy and requires practice and support. The artists had an important role in modelling reflective practice for the teachers and in helping them understand how to incorporate it into their practice as a normal activity. But some of the teachers flinched from it initially – projects need to last long enough to enable participants to develop those habits. They may need to be ready to offer significant proactive support to help teachers acquire the discipline. Once acquired the evidence is that it becomes a way of life – with lasting benefits to the practitioner and to their colleagues and students.

For the artists, the projects also provided an opportunity to review their own practice through the process of collaborating with an unfamiliar partner. This was strongest in the Early Years project where the partnership was producing a joint piece of work. This experience gave the artists an opportunity to learn about performance to an unfamiliar age group; with few resources or time; and moving away from a reliance on familiar tools (such as words).

## Further Questions

Participants and writers were invited to consider ways in which learning from the work could be applied elsewhere and to consider which questions, with the benefit of hindsight, might be useful for others embarking on similar initiatives. The intention with the following questions is to provoke thought and help convey how engagement itself can become a catalyst to create change and impact on our creative learning practice.

- How much time do we have to give to this both in terms of an overall commitment (such as a year) and on an ongoing basis?
- Can we make the commitment to it in the face of all the institutional pressures?
- Can we plan in time to make the initial partnerships – at least a day and preferably longer away from the normal working environment?
- What will we all contribute – and what will we all gain? A partnership based on a mutual flow of learning is likely to be more energised and important to all participants. Encouraging a mutual dependency through a joint piece of work can be very useful.
- How supportive is the institution – will it positively encourage participants to experiment, take risks, try new things, move away from established processes?
- What learning style will work? Is there flexibility in this?



**Melanie Nock** is a freelance evaluator and researcher. After a career in the civil service, she joined the voluntary sector as the Chief Executive of a South London Council for Voluntary Service. For the last ten years she has worked as an independent consultant undertaking projects in the arts, community development, public health, and voluntary sector organisations. She is also the development director for a theatre company with a particular interest in international work.

In October 2008, the three London Creative Partnerships teams (London East and South, London North and London West) joined together to become **A New Direction**, a new independent organisation delivering Creative Partnerships' three new programme strands (Enquiry Schools, Change Schools and Schools of Creativity) in schools across the capital, and extending its reach to 21 London boroughs. The organisation is also looking to developing other strands of work outside of the Creative Partnerships programme. For more information about A New Direction visit the website – [www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)

**Creative Partnerships London North** has worked with the London boroughs of Enfield, Haringey and Waltham Forest since 2004, collaborating with over 70 schools. Creative Partnerships London North joins Creative Partnerships areas across the UK to explore the impact of creative learning on whole school change. We have focussed on the creation of a climate for sustainable and creative change exploring the development of ideas with participants at the centre of their own learning; in other words, that the whole school community, young people, teachers, support staff, headteachers, families and communities in partnership with creative individuals and creative and cultural organisations would be doing this for themselves.

Like many communities across the UK, there is an exciting wealth of diversity as well as dizzying change. A defining feature of Creative Partnerships London North over the last 4 years has been to ensure a wide range of different voices in the programme – of mixing roles and sectors, those who might not normally work or learn together and trying to be sure we could hear the weaker voices. In strengthening these 'partnerships in learning', we will eventually make our own organisation unnecessary. These case studies attempt to analyze some of the many emerging models with engagement at their core that we hope will provide the basis for lasting and meaningful change.

**Jocelyn Cunningham**  
**Creative Director**

## **A New Direction**

Discover, 1 Bridge Terrace,  
Stratford, London E15 4BG

[info@anewdirection.org.uk](mailto:info@anewdirection.org.uk)  
[www.anewdirection.org.uk](http://www.anewdirection.org.uk)

Photography:  
CPLN