

A New Direction Cultural Education Progression Group – 2013/14 Evaluation Report

Introduction/Background

A New Direction (AND), the Arts Council England's lead bridge organisation for London, initiated a second cohort of Action Learning in September 2013. This initiative followed on from a first cohort of four action learning sets. This single set consisted of eight participants selected from the wider cultural sector areas including dance, theatre, combined arts, music and heritage. Each set met on six occasions between September 2013 and July 2014: the set 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 and Rationale

The success of the first cohort of four action learning sets prompted AND to fund an additional set. The context and rationale for the work remained the same. 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. 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

Cross-Sector recruitment

Organisations were recruited through an expression of interest process from across the different sectors and included representatives from theatre/ combined arts/ dance/ heritage/music.

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 facilitator Di Bligh from Action Learning Associates.

The Evaluation

One of the key indicators of success was the fact that participants continued to attend throughout the sessions. Attendance was 95% with illness accounting for the 5% non-attendance. This demonstrates a high commitment to the work in the context of participants working in a highly pressurized environment with many demands on their time. This report offers a record and a brief evaluative summary of the 2013/2014 cohort. For a more in depth analysis of the Cultural Education Programme as a whole, please refer to the companion report for 2012/13.

How data was gathered

Data was gathered through an evaluation forms. Participants commented and measured their progress against each of AND's aims for the programme.

The Findings

A New Direction Aims for the Cultural Education Progression Programme

A New Direction had three aims for the work. Progress against each of these was measured on a ten-point scale.

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

This was the aim against which all participants noted progress. The value of sharing experiences with peers was consistently noted. One participant commented, *"Professional life is so much about people and Action Learning has developed my people skill in terms of planning, communicating and training."*

2. Building sustainable networks and partnerships across different sectors

This was the aim against which 7 out of 8 participants noted progress with some participants noting significant increases in knowledge and skill. One participant moved from a three to a nine on the ten-point scale. The work gave an insight into partnership working at a level that is much deeper in terms of trust and understanding than in other contexts. One participant commented *"the programme offers a more profound kind of experience which impacts across the individual. The ripples of which can benefit the whole organization."*

3. Engaging with schools, teachers and young people

7 out of 8 participants noted progress against this aim with fewer participants measuring significant increases in knowledge and skill than the other against the other aims. The knowledge exchange around schools was typically anecdotal. One participant commented *"I have learnt that it's possible to engage schools very quickly in project they're interested in but that your message of why it will benefit the school and the students has to be very clear."*

Summary of learning

The majority of the learning came through the benefits of a cross-sector context and the opportunity for a reflective space. Examples of what participants might do differently after the programme:

As Practitioners

- Seeing new opportunities within the sector from a greater understanding of other art forms. Noticing, in particular, more similarities than I'd previously perceived
- I am much more open to cross sector learning, ie. seeing and learning from parallels with other (initially contrasting) organisation's experiences
- I'm more reflective
- More focused/planned approach to projects (clarity of purpose)
- More time to think and reflect
- Letting go of control – trusting in other practitioners to thrive

As managers in their organization

- More active form of reflection. Used in mentoring team member and take forward in my new role
- Using elements of action learning with colleagues ie. open questions
- More structured thinking and coaching/management/communication skills
- Realising the value of 'open' questions and learning not to project my thoughts but to allow other people to come to their own conclusions
- More understanding of my team
- More conscious of my language and high support and high challenges with friends, family, colleagues

List of participants

Name		Job Title	Organisation
Zoe	Briggs	Learning and Partnerships Manager	Ambassador Theatre Group
Phil	Castang	Chief Executive Officer	Newham Music Trust
Ellie	Douglas-Allen	Creative Learning Manager	Random Dance
Hannah	Dye	Learning Manager	CandoCo
Jane	Finlay	Audience Development Manager	Kenwood
Tony	McBride	Director of Projects	Cardboard Citizens
Chloe	Osbourne	Associate Director Participation	Emergency Exit Arts
Suzy	Smith	Executive Director	Theatre Peckham

Note Phil Castang has since moved to Hub leader for Bristol Music Trust and Jane Finlay has moved to Head of Schools/Young Audiences at the British Museum.