'Compassion over competition'

Exploring professional development needs for collaborative and social arts in 2022

A report commissioned by Heart of Glass / Co-produced by Learning Producer Emma Curd

Researched by Amanda Smethurst and Sarah Boiling, November 2022

hello@amandasmethurst.com / sarah@sarahboilingassociates.com

1. Introduction

Earlier this year, Heart of Glass (HoG) commissioned consultants Amanda Smethurst and Sarah Boiling to explore what a professional development offer might look like for practitioners and commissioners working in social and collaborative arts practice[1]. This piece of research was funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and took place at a significant moment for social arts practice and co-creation; with the launch of Arts Council England's 'Let's Create' 2020-30 strategy to dissolve 'barriers between artists and audiences' (Serota, 2021).

In this report, we focus on the headlines from the 'roundtable' conversations with practitioners and survey responses with commissioners in October 2022 to support professional development across the sector.

2. What did we hear?

Connection with others

There is an urgent need for a generous space where practitioners can connect in non-hierarchical and non-competitive ways. Practitioners described their desire to learn with and from each other within a community of connected practitioners where peer-to-peer support is highly valued.

> *Build compassion not competition.* (Practitioner)

> *(I) want to be part of something that goes beyond locality, artform and practice, that gives me a sense of community.* (Practitioner)

---

[1] For the purposes of this report, social and collaborative arts practices refer to practitioners, artists and communities working together on creative projects.

We also heard that building connection through relational work is essential. Suggestions of how this could be done included mentoring; practice circles; critical friends; and informal peer to peer sessions. Fundamentally, practitioners are calling out for longitudinal relationships to develop confidence and practice:

Feels like an organisation in mentoring you. (Practitioner)

Connection and reassurance, to learn from each other preferably in person. I really appreciate the impromptu moments of gathering. (Practitioner)

Emotional support from mentoring or supervision when working in socially engaged projects. (Practitioner)

Professional Development Training

The breadth of practitioner experience led to a broad range of suggestions in terms of support and training, including:

- Practical training - budgeting, fundraising, marketing, first aid, mental health first aid etc
- The basics of social and collaborative arts practice - how to deliver workshops, how to work with communities, safeguarding etc
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training and support
- Long term training and associated residencies, based on an alternative art school model (such as Faculty North[2]) - working with a group of peers to expand practice, and explore different pedagogies.
- Specialist training - working with people in specific contexts (i.e., women in domestic services, children and schools, men in prisons etc) and developing practice.

---

[2] Faculty North was a yearly, short term alternative learning programme for practitioners working at the intersection of arts and social transformation led by Chrissie Tiller (Power Up) and Kerry Morrison (In-Situ co-founder and artist).

Specific training and support for artists working with various kinds of vulnerable people. I worry freelance artists can end up carrying responsibility for situations they are not equipped for, without the specific professional education, institutional support, or guidance that public servants (e.g., social workers) or employees of large organisations have. (Survey Respondent)

Practical services and resources

Practitioners were keen to see a practical service model which would offer access to services including marketing support, financial/ budgeting advice, project producers, as well as access to digital resources, desk and studio space. There was also a call for consistency about rates of pay and transparency around this. This model replicates pre-existing project producer model seen in companies such as 'Fuel' and would be extremely resource heavy. It's also noted that other companies such as Artist's Union England, AXIS Web and Engage also offer access to insurance, DBS checks, and legal advice, for their members through a paid membership model.

Better evidence of the impacts and benefits of this work

Practitioners and commissioners were keen to boost the value of social and collaborative practices through influencing and advocating for the sector. To make the case for the value of this work commissioners told us that they need more effective tools:

Better understanding of the long-term impacts, evaluation that highlights how socially-engaged arts can widen our understanding of the role "arts" can play in communities but that does not gloss over the real and systemic challenges, a focus on participation when it comes to funding, advocacy, and policy work. (Survey Respondent)

Commissioners and practitioners also identified the need for an alliance of sector leaders to influence and create system change to affect the ways that social and collaborative practices are perceived and embedded at policy level. Many practitioners viewed HoG as a potential 'convener' to take a role in this, both to champion and model the values that underpin this work.

Can we encourage more organisations to be like Heart of Glass? How can they promote and share their values?

3. Survey Findings

The survey was created to understand how commissioners and associated networks deliver collaborative and social arts across the field. Primarily, those that responded to the survey either already deliver social and collaborative work themselves, or support artists who work in this way. Just over a third of commissioners work with other organisations to deliver social projects and residencies on their behalf, whilst another third support organisations practicing the values and activities of social and collaborative arts. Below are some graphics that illustrate the findings around need and support across the sector (Figure 1.) and the cultural and social value of collaborative and social arts (Figure 2.).
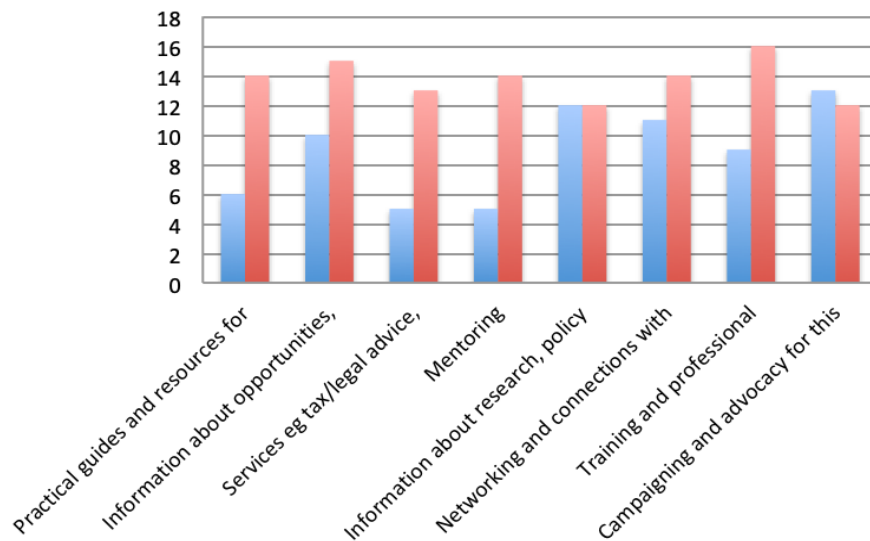

Figure 1. What support is needed for commissioners of social arts practices (blue) and what support is needed for practitioners of social arts practices (red)?
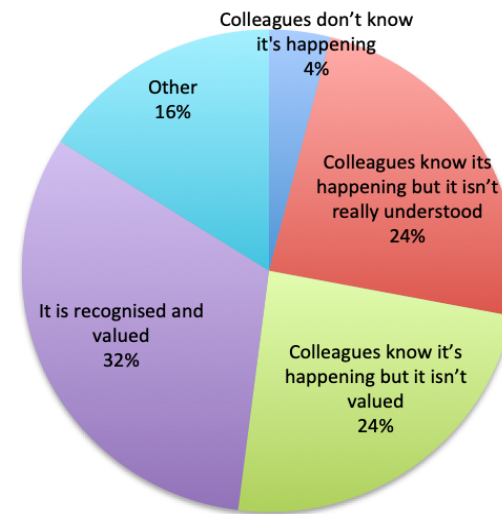

Figure 2. How much is this type of work valued in your organisation/art form/sector?

4. What we're going to do next

We want to work collaboratively to support practitioners and commissioners in some of the areas identified through this research. Due to the wide range of the support discussed we are not able to do this alone and nor would we want to. We want to resist the norm to 'compete' with related organisations and instead, work strategically with others to do the following:

- Co-create a professional development offer that reflects need for a range of practitioners and commissioners
- Focus on specialist practices within the HoG team (i.e., mental health, bereavement, LGBTQIA+, children and schools etc)
- Signpost to organisations/networks already delivering high quality work
- Share our practice and the practice of others more widely through the creation of and sharing of resources

At a strategic level there may be a place for HoG to act as a convenor by working in collaboration with other member bodies or networks. Not only will this support professional development for practitioners but also improve gathering of quality evidence.

A. Community of practice

Informed by this piece of research, we will develop a professional development model based on a 'community of practice'. A community of practice is a group of people engaging in a 'process of collective learning' (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) where practitioners share opinions, ideas, values and learning by virtue of their shared interests and practices. Communities of practice are motivated towards co-developing knowledge and understanding, enriched by bringing different voices, experiences, and intersections to the fore.

At the heart of this is a non-hierarchical area for artists, practitioners and commissioners working within collaborative and social arts. We want this network to be open to people at any point in their career; from emerging artists through to specialist practitioners working across disciplines. Cross-fertilisation across these levels of experience will be important to developing levels of peer support. This model is intended to be relational rather than service based. We want this to be a national offer, with opportunities for regular local events to bring people together in physical spaces, with potential for this to be piloted in different

areas. Involvement with the community of practice will be free and accessed via a simple sign-up process. The level of commitment and engagement is determined by the individual.

B. Strategic led for the sector

Additionally emerging through this piece of work is a growing area of practice with several organisations redefining their values, place, and ambitions. Possibly, there is a moment for HoG to step forward as a convenor to organise strategic conversations – as one of the sectors 'doers' – to advocate for social arts practice at policy level. For this to make a difference, creating a consistent way to gather evidence is important, both to advocate and influence effectively at policy level. This may range from; developing and publishing a core set of resources such as template contracts, code of ethics, guidance on 'practicing well' projects, case studies and research articles. The creation of this may contribute to a culminative 'archive of practice' to share across the sector.

5. Questions

Who is the 'community of practice' for? – During our research we heard that people's resources – time, money, and energy – are extremely limited. It is important to make the community flexible to avoid adding to cliques and competition across the sector. The community would be open to people who identify as working in the realm of social arts and collaborative practice.

How would practitioners be supported? – Providing support for practitioners is key. Bursaries could remove barriers for people to attend events and training, as well as thinking about costs incurred through activity e.g., transport, childcare costs, support worker costs etc. Available support may be offered in radically different ways, with payment to freelancers focussed on specialist training, or programmes such as Faculty North.

How do we make sure we are valuing practitioners time? – We heard requests for fees to; write applications, reflect on and evaluate practice, commit to working with communities in slower and more meaningful ways. Overwhelmingly, we heard how people felt valued and appreciated when they are paid fairly and provided with useful feedback when giving their time, expertise and experiences. We want honour these requests.

What can HoG do to ensure spaces are safe and respectful? – It is our responsibility to create spaces that are welcoming and respectful to everyone. As is already our practice, we will ensure that our Safer Spaces agreement is followed both online and offline. When practitioners join, adhering to our agreements will be a collective responsibility and everyone is individually responsible for checking their own behaviour. This will be mediated by HoG staff.

Do we all speak the same language? – How will people self-define? This area of practice is overwhelmed by conflicting definitions and therefore a shared language may need to be co-developed by those joining over time.

6. Next steps

The recommendations in this report are pragmatic and encourage us to build on our expertise and connections, rather than meeting all requests.

Fundraising/ resourcing: Running a community of practice and stepping forward as a sector lead will take additional resourcing. There is some capacity in the team for the core elements of the work, but specific offers around training courses, Faculty North and the creation of a strategic network will require additional investment.

Collaborations: As already noted, many networks and membership organisations are also reviewing their activity. Plans are in place to connect with and potentially create an alliance with programmes such as Union 23 and long-term collaborators In-Situ.

7. References

Serota, N. (2021) Introducing Our Strategy. Arts Council England. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/introduction/

Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015). Introduction to communities of practice. Wenger-Trayner. https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-ofpractice/