

# The Art of Participation

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**‘Extending the concept of participation to one of citizenship also recasts participation as a right, not simply an invitation offered to the beneficiaries of development.’**

John Gaventa, *Towards Participatory Governance*<sup>34</sup>

Debates about the arts and their place in our lives are as old as our civilisation: Plato and Aristotle established theories that still circulate today, over 2,000 years later. In recent years, as both national and local government have become more involved in culture, the question of what value is produced by that involvement has become sharper.

At one level, policymakers, planners and managers just need reliable evidence on which to base decisions, whether they are spending arts budgets or funds intended for regeneration, health promotion, education or youth programmes; at another are complex arguments about the nature of evidence and the purpose of art. Confusion of those different needs, and between pragmatic and theoretical interests, has been one cause of misunderstandings and controversy about culture and its effects.

But our experience of talking to people involved in the arts – the people who, through their taxes and lottery tickets, pay for much of what happens and are supposed to benefit from it – tells a different story: one that is both simpler and more complex. It’s simpler insofar as people who participate in the arts mostly have no problem with questions of value. They take part because they enjoy it. It gives them pleasure, enriches their everyday lives and they feel better, in most ordinary senses of the term, for it. If that weren’t the case, they would find other things to do with their free time.

The excerpts from interviews above show how taking part in creative arts practice can contribute to the five ways to wellbeing identified in recent research. Some of those benefits – social ties and friendships, being physically and mentally active, giving something to others and being recognised for what you have to offer – are not unique to the arts. They may be experienced, albeit in different ways, by people who take part in any kind of community life, including sport, religion, voluntary work, local politics and so on. The arts provide a route to those benefits that attracts people who, for whatever reason, have often not chosen to take part in other available activities.

People’s stories also show the arts’ distinctive offer, and its unique opportunities and benefits. They can enable people to reflect on, interpret, recreate and share their experiences in deeply meaningful ways. They touch on identity and history, individual and collective values, symbols, images and metaphors. They tell stories, create images and explore ideas. They are how a community talks to itself and to others – and communities or people who are silenced do not participate.

The roots of society, big or small, start here. However, the story told through these interview excerpts is also more complex than is often perceived by politicians, planners and even academics. It is a story that challenges the notion of ‘impact’, at least in the sense that policy initiatives, in this case arts programmes, are supposed to have an impact on people.

The use of this word, imported from the field of mechanics, suggests, in the language of Wikipedia, ‘a high force or shock applied over a short time period when two or more bodies collide’ When policy concerns itself with the impact of its interventions, or the impact on the groups targeted, the use of this word in social contexts strongly implies a one-sided process, comparable perhaps to the stamp of a metal die on a blank. An intervention is made that creates an impression on a passive or inert object.

The voices reported in here show that this is an inaccurate representation of what actually happens when people participate in the arts. Whether they engage in an artistic opportunity created by others for that purpose, or whether they are themselves the instigators of a project and the creators of the work, people bring their own experience to bear on it. They respond to, interpret and ascribe meaning to artistic experience on their own terms and in ways that can be neither predicted nor guaranteed.

This is not a merely theoretical issue: it has fundamental consequences for policy, planning and evaluation of arts programmes intended to have some kind of public value.

If people are autonomous subjects who derive meaning and benefit from their experiences in ways that cannot be foreseen or individually assured, we need different approaches to understanding the outcomes of their participation in the arts. Rather than simplistic ideas of cause and effect, we need an understanding of the processes at work in people's involvement in the arts, for example by asking how do certain types of activity produce different results? Similarly, rather than expecting specifiable outcomes (or 'impacts') we need to develop an understanding of the probability that different types of change may occur as a result of different interventions.

Policy, in short, must recognise the agency of those whom it sets out to benefit – and nowhere is this clearer than in socially engaged arts practice. There are many qualities that characterise a good society in which people are able to fulfil their individual and collective potential, but the ability to participate is certainly fundamental. In an imperfect world, that ability is unevenly distributed. Personal, social, economic and political factors determine the extent to which each person can take up the opportunities they nominally have as citizens of a democratic society. Art has neither the responsibility nor the capacity alone to address all the deficits that may exist.

The voices reported in this booklet here are eloquent in their conviction that participating in the arts can be a route to participation in the local

community and in the society to which people belong. They speak of the benefits they feel they have gained: new and stronger friendships, better skills and confidence, recognition, empathy, understanding of themselves and others, new interests and opportunities.

They also speak about how being involved has enabled them to give time, support, care and knowledge to others, to make a contribution and be valued for it. And they speak of intangible things like satisfaction, pride, pleasure and energy – of being well and the role that art and creative activity plays in sustaining it.

Being connected with others, being active and taking notice, learning and giving are all fundamental to people's daily experience of life. They are also fundamental to being a true participant in society, big or small, in a neighbourhood, a city or a country. The arts in all their forms, at voluntary, amateur and professional level, are one of the richest routes people take to find themselves and to find others, telling stories of their experience as they go.

But that doesn't make them simply tools that support participation and wellbeing. As the American academic Joli Jensen has written, 'The arts aren't good **for** us: they **are** us – expressions of us'.<sup>35</sup> Participation in art is participation in life.