

Arts Research Seminar Report

No 2: The Impact of Education Work on Artists' Practice

Phyllida Shaw reviews the Arts Research Seminar held at Tate Britain in London in May 2001.

The second Arts Research Seminar, which took place on May 24th at Tate Britain - with funding from the Arts Council of England - highlighted the extent to which artists are excluded from the research process. The theme of the seminar was the impact of education work on artists' practice. The organisers, Arts Research Limited, anticipated a lively debate about the reasons for the lack of research in this area and a discussion about the best methods for measuring such an impact.

From the outset, it was clear that the 70 or so participants, drawn from all corners of the cultural sector - artists, arts managers, marketing personnel, arts education specialists, local authority art officers, policy makers, funders, lecturers, researchers and students - had a number of different ideas about what "the impact of education work on artists' practice" might mean. Was the practice in question the artists' primary creative practice or their practice as amateurs, facilitators or project leaders? A significant number of contributors thought it unacceptable to draw such a distinction and argued that artists committed to working in education settings see this work as an integral part of their practice.

Literature Review Findings

Papers by Jennifer Williams, Eileen Adams and Cristina Losito were circulated beforehand, and a paper by Colin Grigg was made available on the day. The aim of these papers was to provide information and to stimulate discussion. For the first time, we commissioned a literature review to provide participants with some idea of the volume and nature of research that has been undertaken on the subject, in this country and abroad. The review confirmed that while the impact of education work on artists' practice is alluded to in many studies, it has rarely been the sole focus. The discussion groups concluded that one of the reasons for this is that those who commission research are frequently policy-making and funding bodies whose primary concern is to demonstrate the impact of the arts on the participants, eg school pupils, adults returning to learning, or a specific interest group or community. In this context, the artist is seen as the provider of a service, a facilitator, and not as a beneficiary.

The possible benefits to artists identified by the literature review included new perspectives on the creative process; inspiration; heightened skills (for example, musical improvisation, verbal communication and interpretation of participants' ideas); and, more prosaically, access to facilities, networks, new contacts and further employment. A reduction in isolation, particularly for artists who work alone, has also been suggested as a possible benefit. These are typical of the sorts of findings highlighted in the literature review. In a study of orchestral education programmes, Pauline Tambling and John Harland found that the

majority of orchestral players participating in such programmes thought that the experience had enhanced their performance skills and their communication abilities. In the United States, composers taking part in a programme of community-based commissions and residencies felt that they had grown both aesthetically and technically and one of them identified new professional opportunities that had emerged as a result of participating in the project.

Of course, impacts are not always positive. In her study of the work of writers in education for London Arts Board, Maura Dooley found that many writers had an ambiguous attitude towards working in schools. They felt that the experience had a minimal impact on the development of their own work and also that school work took time away from their own writing.

Taking this kind of evidence as their starting point, participants spent the morning session exchanging information about their own experience of the impact of education work on artists' practice. The focus of the afternoon was the research methodologies that might be used to measure the impact of education work on artists' practice, although the discussion ranged much more widely than this.

The Role of Artists in Research

The single shared conclusion of every discussion group was that if we are to learn more about what working in educational settings means for artists, then we have to ask the artists. The small number of artists taking part in the seminar was pointed out by several people, suggesting that few artists think that this kind of event has any relevance to them or, more seriously, that they are not part of the information networks that would inform them of such opportunities. Every discussion group agreed that it is not sufficient simply to ask artists about their experience; they need to be involved in the design of research, including the setting of objectives and the choice of methodologies, as well as being asked to provide evidence.

Some participants argued that research of this kind should always be "artist-led" and that artists should be considered legitimate recipients of research funds from academic and funding bodies. It was suggested that artists are being let down by a research community that has failed to engage them in impact studies of any kind, except as interviewees. It was, however, pointed out that there are now more studies under way in which artists are designing and participating fully in the research process.

A key observation made towards the end of the day was that questions about the impact of education work on artists' practice are perhaps disguising a much larger question about the impact of the working environment on artists' practice - educational or not.

Seminar Evaluation

The post-seminar evaluation raised a number of useful points about the way Arts Research seminars are structured. One third

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of participants returned an evaluation form, of which 83% found the day quite useful (50%) or very useful (33%). Needless to say, there were questions about what "useful" meant. For one participant, it was "useful in clarifying my thoughts" although she was uncertain that there would be useful practical outcomes. The lack of "practical outcomes" was a concern for several participants - even for an action plan. Given that the seminars are billed as opportunities for discussion and the exchange of information, this desire for something practical, for a next step at the end of the day, is particularly interesting.

The main point of difficulty and delight is the discussion group format. A small number of participants would prefer the traditional lecture/audience format, followed by discussion, but most find the discussion group format a refreshing change and a much more egalitarian approach to debate. While relishing being able to spend up to four hours in facilitated discussion, most participants also find the size of the groups - 15-18 - too large for comfort. This has been a consequence of trying to find appropriate venues, with sufficient breakout rooms at an affordable price. We have decided that, in future, groups will have no more than 12 participants, even if this means using venues with no association with the arts.

We are also reviewing the role of facilitators and the types of skills they need. We have tended to choose facilitators with some knowledge of the subject under discussion but the most recent seminar on action research - to be reviewed in the Spring 2002 issue of Arts Research Digest - demonstrated that skilled facilitators do not need a detailed knowledge of the subject.

The response to the briefing papers has been very positive. Participants clearly appreciate the opportunity to think about the subject beforehand but responses to them vary. At this seminar, 25% of participants found the papers "very useful", 38% found them "quite useful" and 17% found "some more useful than others". One person found one of the papers "very stimulating", while another thought the same paper "too blooming up-beat". There is a debate to be had about the extent to which papers are used on the day and we may, in future, produce a more structured list of questions for participants to consider.

As we approach our fourth seminar, on the uses and abuses of international comparisons, we welcome feedback - even months after the event. If you have ideas about how the seminars might be even more productive, please let us know.