

Creative Exchange Peer Leadership Network

PRODUCT 3: A DOCUMENT TO ILLUSTRATE OUR ETHICS & PURPOSE

TASK 1: INDIVIDUAL FEEDBACK ON QUESTIONS (extracted from the work prepared by Janna, Jennifer & Emily from the Working Group on Ethics & Purpose)

- What is ethical practice with/in refugees and the Arts?

This is a huge question, but to respond from Sound It Out's perspective – ethical practise is carefully planned, responds to clear needs, and is well supported, flexible to participant need, artistically strong and well evaluated.

We focus on skill building initiatives for exiled artists, intercultural project work and building bridges between communities. We also commit to long-term development of this area of work which includes building long term relationships with both artists and communities. It is important that participants, especially exiled participants have a choice in what gets represented and how.

- Where does use of stories play a part of cause difficulties?

We do not have much experience of using personal stories as this is an area that we do not feel comfortable with. The only time that we have used a refugee theme for participatory work in schools (this being around newcomers arriving in Birmingham) we de-personalised the theme by making the subject of our story a meercat and his journey after being separated from his country and family. This gave all children involved (refugee and host) a chance to contribute equally without personalising the experience.

- What is the purpose of the work that we do?

Obviously work has a range of purposes depending on the context. Some of our work is around investing in skills of exiled artists, both for their own personal professional development and where appropriate, to assist in our Inclusion and general participatory work. Sometimes the purposes are more cohesion based; building intercultural understanding, respect and tolerance between diverse groups, or representing, recognising and respecting the new cultural diversity within the city.

- Who is it for?

Again subject to the projects overall aims, work can be for exiled artists, excluded groups, exiled communities, host community, newly arrived children in school, host community children in school, the wider public. Most often it is a combination of 2 or more of the above groups.

The WK on E & P decided that there were two useful strands of ethical practice and purpose to discuss:

- *Use of personal stories and traumatic/past experiences as inspiration for work*

- *The question of sharing cultural and multi cultural art forms*

Within this, three pointed questions help us to challenge these strands:

- *Who is the work for?*
- *When is it right to draw on personal experience? Is it ever right?*
- *Linguistic definitions and uses, in particular definition and self-definition of 'refugee'*

1. Who is it for? **We do not have the experience to comment on this section as we do not use personal stories or past experiences of participants in our work (which is music based)**

Personal stories/past experiences

- Why do we ask people to tell stories?
- Why do we make the professional decision to avoid telling stories?
- What purpose to artistic recreations of true stories have?
- When does someone have the responsibility to decide when and how stories are told?
- Is the cathartic/emotional experience of stories for someone other than the teller's gratification?
- Is there ever justification for telling stories as release/political statements/social justice tools. Who should make this decision?
- Are there different rules for work with young people?

Sharing cultural art forms

- Who is receiving the artistic experience (is it for the 'refugees' themselves or for the host community to feel better about 'an active demonstration of multiculturalism'?)

Our most obvious manifestation of the sharing of cultural art forms is the Infusion Ensemble which is a cross cultural ensemble of exiled artists (which includes R/AS and migrant musicians). I would say that the ensemble was created both for the exiled musicians involved (as a means of meeting with, sharing, dialoguing with other artists and hopefully drawing support from that process) and for the wider community (including but not exclusively the host community). For our audiences we feel that the ensemble is a means of sharing the cultural capital that migration brings to Britain and of recognising the skills and talents of newcomers. Yes, it is also an active demonstration of positive interculturalism as well.

- Whose *need* is it? (box ticking/feeling better/relieving suffering?)

In terms of the above, there are several needs; a need to break down isolation, encourage artistic collaboration, recognise and share the skills of newcomer artists, positive imaging, challenging preconceptions and prejudices.

In terms of whose need it is, it depends on the participants, the community and the audience on a project by project basis. We always strive to make the work relevant and useful to everyone involved, thereby it general serves the need of a number of people, organisations, agencies and communities.

- Is it ever done in the name of ‘duty’? Is this a bad thing?
Duty doesn’t really come into our work except under the over arching aims of our organisation which is to provide creative opportunities to excluded groups.
- Do people really want to ‘mix up’?

Obviously this depends. In our experience, exiled artists often do want to mix with other artists because more often than not, this is a positive experience both creatively and personally. Obviously, this is not for everyone and some people feel more comfortable working within their own cultural form or in a solo capacity. In the case of the “so called” host community of course often people do not want to mix up but in some ways our work is challenging this belief which is often based on fear, ignorance or lack of interaction rather than real knowledge or understanding.

Some of our community work is open access in which case people have a choice as to whether they want to be involved in this deliberate mixing or not. Our schools work may be more provocative and manufacture a mixing that would otherwise not happen but this often gives young people a chance to challenge their own preconceptions.

- What is the value of providing culturally specific work?

There is a value of providing culturally specific work as well as intercultural work. For many exiled communities, maintenance of their culture and heritage is key to their sense of identity in a new place. Perpetuating the skills and knowledge of a specific culture is also important to the integrity of the different cultures representative in the UK, and to the sharing of skills and artforms with others.

- How well attended are mixed cultural events for ‘refugees’?

Our only experience is through the Infusion Ensemble performances which have been in both professional and community venues and have been largely well attended, and in some unexpected places, exceptionally well attended.

- Are there times when mixing is appropriate and times when it is not?
Yes, the initial contact with groups, particularly in places or times of conflict can be good to do in “safe” groupings i.e. with people that others feel comfortable with. Boundaries can often be pushed out at a later date. This is particularly relevant with some new arrivals who may be very vulnerable and therefore not in a confident

enough place personally to attempt integration with another group who may or may not be receptive to their needs.

- Being individual rather than 'common human' can guard against stereotype? It can, but equally, a strong collective offers mutual support and a strengthening of individual cultural identity within a new and different culture which is also important.

- Being a group is supportive?

Our personal experience of bringing together a group of exiled musicians has certainly supported the view that groups can provide mutual support, inspiration and guidance. It has also led to encouragement of personal, individual confidence that leads to leadership and success within a chosen career.

2. When is it right to draw on personal experience, if ever?

We do not have any experience of working in this capacity. However, our general belief is that if personal experience is being utilised it must be on the terms and conditions, and at the pace of the individual sharing the experience. Sometimes it can be very persuasive and powerful; sometimes it's cathartic for the individual. There are many variations and a definite 'yes' or 'no' on using personal experiences is impossible. Ultimately the impetus and process must come from the individual, and be managed within a wholly supportive environment.

Personal stories/past experiences

- Should memories and work drawing on memories *a/ways* be avoided?
- What are no go territories?
- What is cathartic? Is it the same for everyone?
- Is protection the same for everyone?
- Where does the urge to tell stories come from? Should we stem the urge or encourage it?

3. Use of 'refugee'

Personal stories/past experiences **We do not have the experience to comment on this section**

- When does work with refugees promote the artist rather than the refugee?
- When does this balance change?
- Why particularly with 'refugees' do we avoid the experience of stories? Is it to do with being perceived as vulnerable, disenfranchised, 'poor'? Would we expect the same rules to be applied to other similarly labelled groups?
- How much does defining oneself as a refugee shape personal identity?

- Do my experiences define me?
- Is there any justification in using the word refugee for funding purposes?
- What is a refugee?

Sharing cultural art forms

- **When is the label in terms of publication, production and publicity actively useful?**

We do not generally use the label refugee in our publicity to the general public of our Refugee Strand work. This is because we do not want to label the people we work with or create an atmosphere or preconception before the work has been attempted as their would often preclude some of the people we are trying to reach from participating. We do use the label (although most commonly the exiled label as slightly more inclusive and representative of the people we work with) when promoting our work to funders and potential partners and where we want to make the cohesion/inclusion intention obvious. We would also use the exiled label to promote our Refugee strand work in wider publicity to the sector (such as in our recent Arts Professional article).

- **When does the label compromise quality (ie in 'refugee' literature)?**

It is a shame if the label refugee ever has to compromise quality because in the arts we should be reclaiming refugee as a positive one, and not with all the negative connotations that have come to be associated with it. However, there is also a stream of thinking amongst exiled artists around being accepted as artists first and foremost and obviously one should respect this in terms of how people wish to be represented.

Other questions to ask directly to Study Visit hosts / yourselves:

- **What do you define as a refugee/asylum seeker and how do you monitor this within your work?**

There are obviously legal definitions around these 2 terms which we are aware of. We do make a point of knowing the legal status of artists that we work with as this affects many different things, such as ability to be paid or not, their economic stability or otherwise. We do not monitor the status of our participants unless there is a funding requirement to do so (as for example in the case of HO funding)

- **What is the expressed purpose of your work?**

The purpose of our work in terms of that with Refugees and Asylum Seekers is broad. Our overall organisation mission is to offer dynamic and vibrant music opportunities by connecting people who have little opportunity to make music with musicians who want to inspire them and new audiences who want to hear them. Essentially this follows through all our work. In our Inclusion Strand we necessarily

have more of a focus on providing a supportive experience, and with refugee communities we do have a focus around social cohesion and support for individual artists to develop their practice and to break down some of the misconceptions and barriers facing this section of our community.

- Where did the need to work with 'refugees' come from that led to this project? Initially through being contacted by exiled musicians through the Midland Refugee Council (a welfare provider) and thus finding appropriate ways to engage with them. Also, a stated aim of our organisation is to work with excluded groups so the growing exiled community in Birmingham is an obvious choice of groups to find creative ways to engage with.

- **How do you define, deliver and monitor ethical practice?**

As stated initially, from Sound It Out's perspective ethical practise is carefully planned, responds to clear needs, and is well supported, flexible to participant need, artistically strong and well evaluated.

We ensure that the work we deliver is ethically sound by consulting exiled artists in the planning and creation of project ideas and involving them in the delivery of our work. We also ensure that we work with people with skills, expertise and commitment in working with exiled communities. We endeavour not to engage with funding streams that we feel will compromise our own ethos and ethics in this field of work.

We monitor our ethics mainly through feedback and detailed evaluation with the exiled artists that we work with which means that we have had to adapt our evaluation techniques to ensure that they have a voice in this process. This has involved visual exercises, drama exercises, small group work, individual feedback with translation amongst other techniques. Most of our work builds on previous projects thereby ensuring that we learn from mistakes and build on the successes of previous activity in this strand.

THANK YOU !