

**Inspiration:**

# Working in Partnerships

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**Courage, tenacity and patience key to partnerships involving young people and the arts**

## Introduction

Seeking out partnerships can be enormously helpful to youth work and artistic programmes alike. It has the potential to create new relationships and networks and to access different cultural spaces, realities and venues. It also has the capacity to increase resources – not just through increased or diversified funding sources, but also through access to human knowledge, skills and time. Partnerships can also help build participation (numbers, breadth, diversity) and increase the information available to all different



Stakeholders involved. Partnerships can also offer increased administrative and organisational support with access to volunteers, media or public positioning. It can also provide access to new or bigger audiences, and much more.

Crucially, partnerships can help engage more people, and types of people, in different arts and cultural activities. This can deepen the experiences of those already engaged and help to involve people in different forms and roles. These roles could include a process to becoming creators of culture, artefacts and traditions, as well as

being production assistants, designers, media contacts, audience members, funders, or volunteers. Historically, in St Michael's Youth Project, Inchicore (which has now evolved into Core Youth Service), our interest in developing partnerships stemmed from our particular early experiences with the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and grew from there. IMMA plays a very important part in our story and how we evolved – including but not just in relation to the arts.

### Exploring Partnership Experiences

IMMA opened in the former Royal Hospital Kilmainham, in the heart of Dublin 8, in May 1991 in what was a completely different time for Ireland, economically and artistically. Certainly, most of what we now know in our community, such as Common Ground (which initiates and supports various art enterprises within the Canal Communities of Dublin), the Canals Community Partnership and National Youth Arts Programme, did not exist.

There was no model or roadmap when IMMA opened and sought to engage with local communities – so we all took a leap of faith. That's how the relationship between St Michael's and IMMA began. A group of youth workers, artists, curators, a museum, a youth project and, of course, young people got together and started to have conversations.

Helen O'Donoghue, Senior Curator of the Education and Community Department at IMMA, spoke to me in 2008 about those early years, while I was researching community arts and exploring its impact. She spoke of going into communities and having frank and honest conversations with the people of Inchicore, Rialto and Drimnagh. Somehow the conversation resonated in Inchicore and

St Michael's, people seemed to be interested and a fire was lit, so to speak. That was the beginning of our relationship. The world has changed in many ways but our relationship or partnership with any organisation begins in the same way now as it did back then. There are initial conversations to see if there is something workable in a proposition from one side, or just mutual interest. But even if these confirm a mutual interest and certain sympathy, at some point you have to trust in things and take a chance.

Not everything works out – and you need to be aware of that going in. There are no guarantees: it happens that young people lose interest, people leave their jobs, funding gets pulled, things do not work out. But if you do not have trust and do not even try, then things certainly are not going to work. This is the foundation of all our relationships with arts organisations.

Relationships are not without difficulty and, while our young people enjoyed their engagement with IMMA on the whole, there was always the undertone of *not feeling they belonged* when you teased out their experiences. In fact, perceived class divide was a topic for much discussion between artists, youth workers and the young people involved.

This is not an issue easily resolved. How do you make a place like IMMA more accessible to young people, particularly young people from disadvantaged communities? This was a question we repeatedly asked ourselves as partners, but to which we never found an easy or complete answer. Our relationship with IMMA is not as strong and dynamic now as it has been at times in the past, but we are keen to reignite it and try again.

Making the arts accessible and offering quality arts programmes to disadvantaged young people, some of whom may be at risk, is a



real challenge but also very important. When it comes to the arts at St Michaels, youth projects are about creativity, challenge, protest, fulfilment, enjoyment and fun.

While we, at St Michael's, certainly appreciate our engagement with the arts, it has experienced a lull throughout the time of this current government and austerity in general as our youth service went into survival mode, glad to be able to keep the doors open at all. This sometimes starves the morale and resources to push the boundaries, let alone be part of effective partnerships. Things might not be as dire just now as they have been in recent years, but neither are we back to where we were before in terms of resources, energy and creative synapses. Entering 2018, we just want to reignite our passion for creative partnerships, since our history shows that our young people have benefitted greatly from the arts. Working with young people through the arts is a big part our past – and we hope our future.

### **Stand out collaborations**

Partnership between a cohort of artists, community workers, youth workers, young people and volunteers have supported initiatives that engaged young people, brought them to reflect on their lives and community, celebrate or challenge experiences in their lives and the life of their community, and of course to express themselves in different ways, forms and mediums.

Over the years, St. Michaels made a huge commitment and gave a lot of our time to bring young people through the process of being involved in large exhibitions and installations. Tales of the Promised Land, held in 2008, was a site-specific exhibition that publicly celebrated and shared a range of diverse and creative art work

created against the backdrop of the proposed and failed urban regeneration programme in the community of St. Michaels. Individual exhibitions that came together to create Tales of the Promised Land, involving diverse groups in the community engaging with different artists, collaborators and forms of artistic expression, included:

- Pimp my Irish Banger
- No Ordinary Lives
- Children of Lir
- Where old blocks go
- The hoarding project
- Recycled teenagers
- Create the frame
- That I might never get used to this

The entire exhibition involved intense collaboration with young people from 8 years old to people of pension age. We covered many acres. We used the grass where the old blocks were, the newly converted Richmond Barracks, the local sports hall, block 4 no. 118 as a process room that showcased the process of each individual exhibition, St. Michaels Church, bus shelters, the historic McDowell's pub and the offices of Common Ground.

The site was huge, the engagement and outcomes were rich, emotional and very real. Young people were interviewed, made newspaper headlines and enjoyed a very difficult process, which culminated in a night where they were the centre of attention for their hard work and creativity.



The positives of such collaboration are not limited to that of the immediate stakeholders. The feedback afterwards was this this venture was a very positive, emotional and learning experience for the whole community. It was a massive amount of work over a period of years that ended with a village full of different and exciting exhibitions that were all rooted in the past, present and future of St. Michaels.

Dr Declan McGonagle, director of National College of Art and Design (NCAD) picked up the Pimp My Irish Banger installation for the opening of the college's new exhibition space in Thomas Street, Dublin. The project itself was about challenging joyriding culture, claiming their space in the community and having fun doing it. Young people from our youth project worked closely with artist Terry Blake, youth worker Carol Byrne and Siobhan Geoghegan of Common Ground to produce this piece. This was a really empowering experience for our young people that pushed them into the spotlight, where they had no option but to accept the praise they were given. It might sound strange to say that, but the ability to take a compliment is a learned behaviour we have to actively cultivate in many of the young people in St Michael's, who often suffer from low self-esteem.

The limelight associated with the process and exhibition made the young people involved a little uncomfortable at times, but they also benefited by learning that they belong in any company.

I have regularly felt inspired when working in partnerships (that the whole really was greater than the sum of its parts) and have really valued seeing how experienced operators, such as Rialto and Bluebell Youth projects, interact with artists, agencies and

institutions – and, most importantly, how they transfer this ownership and way of being to project participants.

We all met monthly in IMMA for 'Spaces' meeting, as we called them while working on 'The Mapping Project'. These meetings involved an independent facilitator, curators and representatives from IMMA, youth workers and team leaders from all three youth projects, artists assigned to the individual projects, and Common Ground. This was a space where we met consistently and spoke about our experiences, challenges and successes. We also got to see and hear about the differences in the approaches being used across projects in the different areas.

What stood out for me was the total investment and belief in the process that Rialto and Bluebell youth projects brought, even as I was still finding my way to seeing the place of arts engagement in youth work and was a little sceptical. The sheer commitment of all involved to the process and tackling each individual issue through the arts was a real eye-opener. To give that much time and manpower to an arts project took a bit of getting used to. On a monthly basis at these meetings we heard how young people were developing through their relationships with artists, youth workers and curators. The resulting publication mapping lives, exploring futures became an important record, catalogue and manual for a new model of visual arts practice that enabled young people to map their own lives and curate their own culture.

### **Use your judgement and learn the lessons**

One of the most intriguing lessons I have picked up in working with young people in the youth project and then engaging more widely



in partnerships concerns the importance and dangers of self-expression. We encourage young people to be expressive in the youth work setting, and that can come easier to them when working with an artist or youth worker in a safe place – so safe in fact that they push the boundaries of what they should share. Youth work professionals have a duty to young people like that to protect them from themselves at times since putting that work out into a public space when it is completed might leave them exposed. Young people allowing themselves to feel vulnerable with a youth worker shows positive relationship building and is good practice, but putting aspects of that out there in society for all to see is not always good for the young person. Protection of the young person should always be paramount.

### **Getting out if a partnership is not working**

It's also important to mention initiatives, ideas that we thought would succeed, some we were sure would succeed, but that did not click, for one reason or another.

One that strikes me was an initiative came up to explore daily life and fictional stories through the design and publication of comic books. The process was too long for the young people and the artist so it faded out, but the process was enjoyable for the first three months and important relationships were formed.

We also tried to use arts in our group contracts with young people, by depicting the guidelines proposed for the partnership of young people and youth workers. This failed spectacularly because young people felt we took too long to get past that process to the actual group work. They were not taken in by how we tried to make it fun to speak about timekeeping, bad language and intimidating

behaviour through pictures and a comic book format. It's fair to say that comic book initiatives were rejected overwhelmingly by the young people.

That doesn't mean we didn't learn from these initiatives. The process is always rich in data and, when you evaluate initiatives, you can see why things didn't work and why the process had value in itself. What's often important is to give it a go. This process, in particular, taught us not to 'push' a concept on young people (no matter how much we might like it and thing they will get it) because young people will push back. It's sometimes hard to transfer decision-making power, but youth workers have to allow a power-sharing mechanism in any process.

### **Conclusion: when partnerships work, they can be great**

It can be difficult to work in partnerships, and with professionals from different sectors who think differently, who don't have the experience and sensitivities of youth workers but have their own ideas, practice and considerations to bring to the table.

You have to be aware that everybody is entering into this process with their own ideas. These may include different views and values so sometimes you have to challenge or argue (and concede) if it's the right thing for the young people that you are engaged with. At St Michael's Youth Project (now Core Youth Service), our early partnerships, whether small or large, failed or successful, served to show us that a lot can be achieved through working with others – and that it's worth working at.

We probably thought of arts partnerships as *necessary* in the beginning, because we needed someone to direct and support us



while entering into this world. Now, even though we have the capacity to run arts programmes, we believe it is *important* to have a partner to help us to go against basic youth work instinct, to challenge and bring us into conflict in creative and constructive ways, in order for us to emerge with a better programme for the young people.

Our current partnerships with NYCI and our resident artist will help us to celebrate 30 years of history through our archives. Common Ground continues to support us when navigating uncharted waters, and we also have two other irons in the fire that will see us work in partnership with the community of St. Michaels and the wider Canal Communities.

But there's no avoiding the need for hard work and plenty of tolerance when working in partnership. These qualities can – with the right pinches of time and personality, and moments of magic – create excellent artistic work and most importantly, growth and empowerment opportunities for young people.

