

## Tuning Fork

### Collaboration in Youth Arts Practice

*In this article Mark O'Brien, Arts Development Manager at axis, Ballymun, writes about working effectively in collaborative youth arts partnerships. He draws on his experience of managing youth arts projects in Ballymun, and in particular, Invent, a hugely successful project which engaged one hundred young people in collaboration with Ballymun Regional Youth Resource, Ballymun Youthreach, Trinity Comprehensive and the wider youth sector.*



Axis, Ballymun as an organisation is based upon a collaborative model, between the arts and community, between the statutory and the voluntary, between excellence and inclusion, between professional and vocational. These intersections are where our work exists. This is the space into which we invite and engage with our many collaborators, partners and stakeholders. This place of change, of exploration, of creativity, is what drives us. Change is key. It is one of the fundamental conditions for creativity and the artistic process, and also lies at the heart of creative partnerships and collaborations. Change can also be an uncomfortable place as it may challenge our preconceptions, question what we believe and mark a point when control may be lost in order that a step is made to move things on, to shift thinking.

Young people exist in this constant state of flux, change, of exploration, and are keenly open to and indeed search out authentic collaborations and partnerships in their lives and social interactions. These same young people are highly tuned to automatically recognise where these words are lip service as opposed to reality. That is why quality youth arts not only achieves excellence in its outputs and outcomes in both a youth work and artistic context, but can also lead the way in designing and developing road maps and methods to allow us look at ways of developing partnerships and collaborations within the wider arts sector.

Aspiration is also key to work in this context. Aspiration underlies the drive to artistic practice and pursuit. It is one of the key motivators, the pursuit of excellence, of learning, of real engagement. If this aspiration is towards the creation of something new, clear, engaging and dynamic, then all the development work, rehearsals, conversations, meetings, drafts, and collaborations are the craft, the

work, that creates the roadmap for this journey. The exploration and discovery of shared aspirations is what gives our work in youth arts the excitement that charges it. The arena of youth work in collaboration with professional arts practice is kinetic and invigorating. This can be seen in the far reaching results of key projects. One which I would like to expand upon is *Invent*, which was a six month project rolled out by axis in 2008 to one hundred young people in collaboration with Ballymun Regional Youth Resource (BRYR), Ballymun Youthreach, Trinity Comprehensive and the wider youth sector.

To look at this process in more detail we must go back to 2006 when we invited Mzone, Merseyside Youth Music Action Zone from Liverpool to come over and run a music weekend in Ballymun, covering classical playing, Rap, DJ and singing in four workshops that culminated in a celebration event of the process. This partnership came from a desire to harness and explore the work that was



going on in Ballymun in all these art forms through projects such as the *Ballymun Music Programme* and BRYR's *Scratching the Surface* and offer it a space to develop outside its own environment and be influenced by each other.

The young people got to work with both local and visiting artists in their chosen art forms and performed for their peers.

On the celebration night the young people who had engaged in the rap project were to be found backstage crafting their words into poetry that they would share with their families and their peers. We then discussed with the local secondary school around developing a project that would explore the art form of rap and allow a space for young people to develop their voice, their creativity, their sense of self esteem through this context. Over this period we also consulted with the HSE Health Promotion unit about how the project should be shaped.

We applied for and received funding through a Dormant Accounts Suicide Prevention Measure to design and develop the project, and so 2007 became an amazing year of consultation towards partnerships and a collaborative space. At this time we broadened the catchment to the local youth work sector and Youthreach, and in consultation with all our potential partners facilitated a space to allow the clear aims and objectives of the project to emerge. It was key and necessary to listen, hear and allow clarity around the wishes and hopes of all prospective partners in order that we replicate the

process with the participants. This can sometimes be uncomfortable, as difficult but important questions are asked. Nevertheless, this openness must exist from the project's formation right through to the evaluation, and across all levels. This was one of the bedrocks on which *Invent* was built.

As important to this process was that there was no pressure around participation. The services and institutions were invited to take part but did not have to stay unless there was to be real engagement and real purpose for them, and not to create another layer to their work. We consulted with a lot of groups who for different reasons did not become involved, but relationships were started that have since borne fruit. A space was created to have the conversation based upon each group's current circumstances, what they wished for and would be able to give to the process. This engagement was carried out through 2007 and was a hugely invigorating time, which saw our original programme content change and develop from what we had originally designed.

Roles are key within and between collaborators and partners. Indeed these had to be clearly mapped out within our own structure, so the facilitators, the co-ordinator and myself (as manager) could define our roles at different stages of the project in order to work with clarity. The reviewing process that was put into place was able to track each participant in conjunction with the youth worker or teacher. (Training was also given to all leaders / artists in how to recognise any young person that may be at risk). Within the workshop setting the role of the youth worker or teacher needed to be defined so that everyone could bring their expertise to the moment. This was challenging work but if such clarity is not present at this level it would be virtually impossible that it could exist at a more macro level and would create a lack of clear direction in the project as a whole.

Time was another key factor in the success of the project development - time to develop the team and the relationships, look at expectations and explore concerns. I think there may be opportunities in this current climate for youth groups and artists /



arts organisation to collaborate on the development of project ideas, not for funding applications but based upon how best to interact. This as a learning process would be invaluable. It would, I imagine, be a resource to all involved, so that when funding opportunities or collaborations emerge that the experience is there.

The endpoint of this stage was the unveiling of the project's core values leading to the writing and signing of agreements between axis and all our partners, these based upon the agreed criteria, aims and objectives and also on shared expectations and deepened relationships. This for us in axis was mirrored by the hiring of the creative team, Emma Connors the Project Co-ordinator and Artists/ Facilitators Colm Quearney and Dean Scurry, key players in the project and the bridge to welcome the final piece of the jigsaw, the one hundred young people who were to make the work. The aesthetic of the workshop was then explored and a plan developed.



The participants were to be the key collaborators in the process. All our work to this point was in order to create a space for them to own and shape what they were engaging in as equal partners, and they were to be in charge of their own voice. If art is the aspiration or the goal of creativity then partnership and collaboration is the mechanism. This shared space is where all the groups and individuals engaged as key components,

each bringing their skills to the endeavour. When the young people opened into the process a period of great excitement, creativity and change was begun.

This type of partnership and collaboration is truly set when each of the partners has a space and ability to be clear about their own vested interests. These do not necessarily have to be shared, as disagreement can be great fuel to a project when handled well. Once you give someone a voice it is important that you are open to what they have to say. You don't have to agree with what is said but you must respect the right to say it. This validation of potential differences with the shared aspiration to work together towards common outcomes is a powerful force. One of the key factors within this project was the role of the co-ordinator within the workshop to document the process, to develop the group dynamic, the relationship with the youth worker / teacher and to create a space for the artists to push the boundaries of what was possible. The aim in all this is to facilitate a new space to allow



participants to experiment, to create, to try new things, a space that strengthens and validates each of the collaborators' experiences, knowledge and individualism. The differences between stakeholders, as much as their similarities, can drive the creativity, the exploration. How can we connect, converse and create? How would I define this space created in *Invent*? It is a space for encouragement, adventure, change, facilitation, aspiration, and agreed goals.

Each collaboration or partnership is made up of many small ones and the programme across all levels must be as a hall of mirrors, and in the artistic context replicate the relationship of the aspiring artist to the art form; which is one of curiosity, wonder, struggle, work, contemplation, study, and potential breakthrough. This artistic focus was kept to the front of all our engagements with the participants. These young people challenged all our preconceptions, their work was extraordinary, and the music, writing and poetry that emerged exceeded all expectations. *Invent* has since become for axis a methodology for our engagement within this context, while also acting as an anchor project through



which further work has developed both for the participants, artists and organisations involved.

Within our own work in axis it is easy to notice the huge growth of music participation within the sector, through the development of further projects, the influence on the programming of *Lift Ballymun* youth arts festival, the deepening of key relationships between all the stakeholders, the involvement of

young people through axis' 'panel' on programming, project development and co-ordination. This will be further enhanced this summer by the publication of a youth arts strategy for Ballymun, with support from The National Youth Council of Ireland, a process that has seen axis engage with hundreds of young people, youth workers, managers and teachers over the past nine months. This looks at how best to share what has been working within the youth arts context but also to offer templates for further development.

axis' work in arts development provides access to both participation and development in all areas of the arts to the community of Ballymun, and to all who engage with axis. Youth arts has played a key role in this over the past six years, and through all this the question of "how do we connect?", "how do we build sustainable yet changing relationships?", fires our creativity, our imagination and our work.

