

Working in Partnership

The first series of articles in this year's IN2 will explore the area of partnership in youth arts. Partnerships between organisations working in this sector are becoming increasingly common. The opportunity to share expertise, skills and resources is one of the most significant reasons for the development of partnerships. By planning, organising and collaborating together, partners can develop successful youth arts projects and programmes, which might not happen if organisations worked separately. Partnerships can also allow for new ideas and skills to be shared and for new avenues for arts participation to be discovered. Whether a large number of organisations come together to coordinate a youth arts festival, or as few as two organisations collaborate together on a project, there are key characteristics, which will underpin all successful partnerships. This introductory article will explore some of the ingredients for developing a successful youth arts partnership. Over the next three articles, NYCI will invite experienced youth arts practitioners/coordinators to share their knowledge and insights into developing successful youth arts partnerships.



So, what is a partnership?

A partnership is formed when a number of people or organisations come together to work toward a particular aim. Depending on the context and aims of the partnership, these can be short or long term initiatives. Organisations in a partnership will have a common interest in working together, but the skills, expertise and mission of each organisation might be different. In the youth arts sector, we often find



youth work organisations working in partnership with arts organisations to deliver projects and programmes for young people. While the priority of the youth work organisation will usually be to support the personal and social development of the participants, the arts organisation's priority will usually be to support the artistic development and experience of the young people. However, in coming together, a shared vision can emerge between partners. For this shared vision to be realised however, there must be openness, trust and agreed objectives between the partners.

"You need to trust each other and be willing to go with new approaches to your own work methods." – Majella Perry, Creating Magic (NYCI)

Characteristics of successful partnerships

The success of a youth arts partnership will be based on a number of different factors. Particular individuals often play important roles in maintaining effective partnerships. The level of resources available can also contribute to the success or failure of a partnership initiative. Of course, these factors will differ from partnership to partnership, but there are certain characteristics, which permeate all successful and sustainable partnerships. These characteristics are: planning, communication, a young person centred approach, and monitoring and evaluating.



Planning

Before anything else should be done, the aims and objectives of the initiative should be agreed between all partners. These should be realistic and achievable, and in line with the time and resources available. It's important that everyone has the same expectations of what can be achieved. The planning period is the time when roles and responsibilities are agreed,

and these should reflect the skills and expertise of each partner. Ensuring that everyone knows who is responsible for what, is one of the most important aspects of planning in a partnership. Effective planning will allow for flexibility in the event of any issues arising during the project's life cycle. Having a sound plan and structure in place will help ensure that there is enough time and space for the developmental and artistic objectives of a project to be realised.

"The project has strengthened the position of youth dance within both counties, through capacity building and the formation of partnerships with other organisations. The flexible approach allowed each stakeholder reap the inherent benefits for its own organisation, while also working to mutual advantage"
 – Catherine Kelly, Good Vibrations, the Roscommon and Westmeath Dancer in Residence Programme and the Vibrate Dance Festival, *Work in Progress: Case Studies in Participatory Arts with Young People (NYCI)*

Communication

Ongoing communication between partners is essential for any effective partnership, and will help facilitate positive working relationships between everyone involved. However, getting the communication balance right can sometimes be difficult. Excessive amounts of meetings can slow things down and become frustrating, particularly if no points of action are agreed. On the other hand, too little communication can result in misunderstandings between partners. Keeping communication focused will help ensure an effective relationship between partners. Having a designated contact person in each organisation is important.

Using on-line applications, such as Google Groups, can be a way of building networks of communication. These can reduce the need for partners to meet face-to-face, which will help limit the amount of travel and costs for organisations. However, any engagement with on-line technology for this purpose needs to be effective. There's no point setting up an on-line network if nobody uses it.

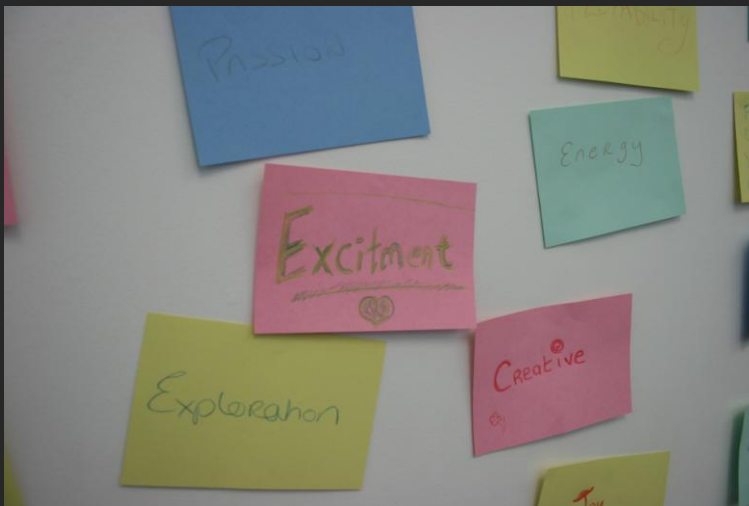
"Partnerships have always been an element of our festival. We have a very supportive network of youth workers in the north east inner city. This network predates our festival and provided a very good base for us to start from. When Liz Burns of the Fire Station Artist's Studios contacted our network, she and a small voluntary group had some funding



they wanted to use to engage young people in the arts. This was what instigated our annual event and was the beginning of a most productive partnership, with Liz and me sharing the role of festival coordinator over the years” – Eileen Vaughan, Let’s Do It!: A Guide to Planning a Youth Arts Festival (East Wall Youth)

Young person centred

There can be many different stakeholders in a youth arts partnership, not just the immediate partner organisations. Depending on the context, stakeholders may include various individuals and groups, all of whom have an interest in the partnership being a success. These can include, youth workers, artists, funders, parents, schools, Arts Offices, VEC Offices, local businesses, and many others. However, in any youth arts partnership, the experience of the young people themselves is the most important thing. While it is important to be aware of the interests of all the different stakeholders, if the young people’s quality of experience is poor, then there is cause for concern. It is important that the coordination of a partnership at an organisational level doesn’t overshadow the process of engagement with the young people. Whether an organisation is working alone or with a number of partners and stakeholders, best practice should underpin the project.



“Creativity is not accidental; it must be nurtured and developed. Bringing teachers and artists together in creative partnerships creates a dynamic exchange when children are at the core of the process” – Helen O’Donoghue, Senior Curator, Education and Community, taken from exhibition guide for Kids’ Own Multimedia Maps Exhibition at IMMA in 2003 (<http://kidsown.ie/node/84>)

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are essential in any sustainable youth arts partnership. Deciding the purpose and methods of evaluation should happen at the planning stage. The evaluation process must include all partners and participants in a project. Monitoring and documenting the project throughout its life is part of the overall evaluation process. An evaluation should measure the impact of the project, and whether the aims and objectives of the partnership have been met. Evaluations will highlight the success and failures of a partnership and should inform the development of any future initiatives. Organisations often come together in partnership to access funding for a particular project. If this is the case, the funding organisation will require an evaluation report at the end of the project.

Every partnership presents its own set of opportunities for success. There will also be unique challenges to overcome in every partnership. For a shared vision to be realised, organisations and people need to collaborate effectively. While problems and disagreements will often arise in partnerships, keeping a positive working relationship is important. Respecting each other’s working/ organisational culture and drawing on the strengths and expertise of each partner will help facilitate the realisation of a common goal. Keeping the focus on the experience of the young people is the most integral part of any project. Therefore the work of a youth arts partnership should ‘reflect the needs, abilities, interests and ambitions of the young people involved’ (NYCI’S Youth Arts Position Paper, 2009).

One to watch.....

What's the Story? Collective

The What's the Story? Collective was established in 2008 as an attempt to push the boundaries of engagement within collaborative practice in Rialto, Dublin, between artists, young people and the organisations in which they connect. This interdisciplinary collective emerged from a set of existing relationships developed through a long term collaboration between



artist Fiona Whelan and Rialto Youth Project. In November '09 NYCI brought the Certificate in Youth Arts students on a site visit to Rialto Youth Project, where artist Fiona Whelan and Jim Lawlor (Manager of Rialto Youth Project) gave a presentation on the work that they have been doing over the past number of years. Nichola Mooney (Youth Worker) and Vanessa Kenny (Volunteer) also contributed to this presentation. It was clear that a positive working relationship and mutual respect had developed between all stakeholders in the project, and that everyone understood their individual roles and responsibilities. What's the Story? Collective will have a 6 week exhibition in The Lab on Foley Street, Dublin from Sep - Oct 2010.

"This is both encouraging and a challenge because it shows what is possible with excellent project management from the start." – Nicky Peacock (Certificate in Youth Arts student), reflecting on the site visit to Rialto Youth Project.

Useful resources.....

Creating Magic (NYCI)

This publication describes the processes and realities of developing an arts project with young people and looks at the financial and practical realities of funding such projects. In order to illustrate the key characteristics of arts work with young people and to illuminate the process involved, this document focuses on one particular type of project – when an artist and a youth worker collaborate together. Download at <http://www.youtharts.ie/content/publications>

Work in Progress: Case Studies in Participatory Arts with Young People (NYCI)

In the contributions to this book the concept of 'participation' itself is absolutely central. Drawing on the work both of students on the NUI Certificate in Youth Arts and of other artists, educators and youth workers engaged in arts work with young people, they highlight the value of arts experiences which are not only enjoyable and relevant to young people's own lives, needs and circumstances but which are developmental in design and which purposefully engage the young people as critical, active participants at all stages of the process. Enquire with NYCI's Arts Programme about receiving a copy 014784122

Partnerships for Learning: A Guide to Evaluating Arts Education Projects (Arts Council of England)

This publication aims to help everyone involved in arts education projects to understand evaluation clearly and to evaluate effectively, according to their particular needs. Download at http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/partnerships-for-learning-a-guide-to-evaluating-arts-education-projects

Let's Do It: A Guide to Planning a Youth Arts Festival (East Wall Youth)

Commissioned by East Wall Youth and the Fire Station Artists' Studios and funded by the Dublin Docklands Development Authority, Let's Do It! is a practical planning tool for those engaged in running a youth arts festival in Ireland. Download at <http://www.youtharts.ie/content/publications>

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