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The voice of the Voluntary Arts

Culture makes communities

The start of something big?

In July, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation sponsored the Culture Makes Communities conference in Swansea. Broadly speaking, the theme of the conference was *the contribution of the arts to community development*.

Francois Matarasso, author of *Use or Ornament, spoke about the relationship between the two disciplines and the relations between modes of delivery within the arts sector. The following is the text version of his speech. He addresses Wales, but his words could just as easily be applied to Scotland, Northern Ireland and England.**

What is culture?

Raymond Williams described culture as one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language, but it is being used more and more in all kinds of way so it demands some explanation here. It can be thought of quite narrowly as the arts, or much more broadly as the way we live, so Welsh culture embraces everything which characterises how people conduct their lives in this part of the world.

In this definition the concept of cultural heritage includes not just the arts but man-made environments of all kinds (landscape, architecture and townscape) and the intangible heritage of memory, tradition and practice. All these, of course, are shared, common resources, so already it seems that culture may make community.

The arts, with which we are primarily concerned today, are one of the ways, perhaps the most distinctive and powerful, through which the common culture of a social group or community is expressed, questioned, rejected or celebrated.

Art may be defined as a means through which we can examine our experience of ourselves, the world around us, and the relationship between the two, and share the results with other people in a form which gives free rein to our intellectual, physical, emotional and spiritual qualities.[1]

Art as a social good?

But in enabling people to do these things, should we be thinking of the arts as a natural good? Many people, including many artists, seem to believe so, seeing the arts as like an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty whose existence of itself justifies public support, and which simply needs to be protected. I don't share this view.

We are used to seeing science as an ethically and politically neutral system whose essential value lies in the way in which it allows us to investigate our world methodically. The use to which we put the results of science may be productive or damaging: they are very often contentious.

The parallel with the arts is obvious: like science, art is a system of investigation and expression, and like science it can be put to good or bad use.

What is community?

It has become fashionable to mock the term community, but community, in the sense of people coming together in social organisation, is surely a fundamental value of human existence. What progress we have made in the past 5,000 years has come from the combination of individual insights with group organisation.

Community is undeniable. But we must understand the concept's complexity. As individuals, we have many identities. The same complex definitions, the same tensions between felt, chosen and externally applied identity, characterise us all. This is also true of our social organisations. We all belong to a number of overlapping communities defined by geography,

demography or interest. We are part of a series of geographical communities enlarging from neighbourhood, through town, district, region, country and so on.

But we also share a sense of community based on our age, gender, ability or ethnicity – our demographic characteristics. The broadest, most fluid and often most powerful area is the community of interest – the sense of sharing identity with others who share our beliefs, our social situation, our enthusiasms or our problems: there are communities of all kinds, from library members to the Kennel Club.

Community as a social good?

So community is important, and it is complex. Is it also good, in the sense that its development is necessarily positive and desirable? I think it would be wrong to see community as an inevitable social good – after all, criminal groupings, or neo-nazis also use the organisational capacity and common identity of community. Community can also encourage exclusion of those seen to be outside it: that is why French political culture resists the concept.

I think we should avoid sentimentalising community and acknowledge its contingent nature. It is more accurate, and more useful, to see it as a valuable function of human organisation which can produce positive or negative results.

Why should culture *make* communities?

There are several linked answers to this question. The first should be evident from what I've said about both culture and community: culture is a tool of expression, definition and questioning – culture makes communities because communities make culture.

This is reflected in the growing political importance and credibility of culture as a force of development. It is being recognised by international agencies such as the Council of Europe and the World Bank, major foundations with varied priorities – ECF, FRB, Wellcome and JRF – and national governments in Ireland, Holland and now the UK. In itself that is a positive move, though it has its dangers.

One of the striking characteristics of this government is the clarity with which it has presented its agenda: education and lifelong learning, healthy communities, social inclusion and urban regeneration, democratic renewal, devolution and so on. This, of course, is an essentially cultural agenda – in other words, it is about how we live, work, co-operate and communicate together.

If the government wants more self-reliant, cohesive, healthy and happy communities, if it wants to regenerate our cities and strengthen local economies, then it will need to involve the cultural sector in that agenda.

How do we know?

But we still live in a culture-sceptic society, where the role of culture is not well understood or appreciated. If the door is ajar, the cultural sector cannot expect to engage in discussions with government without effective evidence.

Research is starting to be done. *Use or Ornament?* showed that it was quite possible, and not even difficult, to build effective evaluation systems into community-based arts development initiatives.[2] And it showed that there were significant benefits in terms of personal and community development. Since then we've done other work on many areas.

So there is a growing body of evidence but the real issue is that artists and arts organisations need to get to grips with doing their own evaluation. Unless the sector takes this on, nothing will change: there's only a limited value in external reports: the key issue is what you can say about your own work. This raises important issues to which I shall return later.

But that means that we have to address another important problem: what are we trying to do?

What is the goal of culture and development?

You can have activities which produce more than one result: schools are for education, but they are powerful elements of social cohesion & community development. That isn't the issue. But the point is that their purpose is education; community development is a by-product.

You can only have one goal: you may produce other benefits as a result of your efforts to reach that goal, but if you're confused about where you are going, you end up in trouble: a parent giving and then taking back control from a child over making a miniature garden – what was the goal? A nice garden or enabling the child to do something they owned and cared for?

Different rules

There's a deeper problem though. Different activities have different rules. For example, theatre has one set of rules which people sign up to when they agree to take part. Community development work has another set of rules and ethical standards. In one, manipulation is fundamental; in the other it's rejected on ethical grounds and because it doesn't work.

So we have to be absolutely clear what the purpose of this work is. Are we trying to promote the arts, to extend the amount, nature and accessibility of arts activity? Or are we trying to work with communities to produce positive change?

Both are valid aspirations, and will produce positive outcomes for both culture and communities: but they are different, and that difference must be reflected in how the work happens.

What are the risks and dangers?

It's important not to be swept along on a tide of simple enthusiasm: there are risks and dangers involved in promoting arts and community development work.

Mediocre work

There is bad, or more commonly mediocre work, though we currently find it hard to admit, because we've spent so long trying to persuade people that it's good. We need a firmer underpinning in terms of good practice – the Department for Culture, Media and Sport review should help – but also a clearer understanding of motivation and terms of engagement.

Sustaining success

Good results go bad if they are not nurtured, if what comes after isn't good. Not everything needs to go on for ever – but its terms, promises and outcomes need to be planned. We talk these days of exit strategies; it's an improvement on previous approaches, but it's still the wrong concept. People don't have exit strategies from poor estates, or from unemployment, or from disability.

We can't offer solutions, delivered within a three or five year timescale. We (and particularly local authorities) who have lasting responsibility for geographic areas and, through them, government which has lasting responsibilities for the kind of society in which we live – should recognise that development is a process not a result and be prepared to make ongoing commitments to areas, based on needs. Responses should be flexible, changing, perhaps expressed as a series of short- to medium-term goals, but we must move on from the concept of exit strategies.

The costs of change

Development is about producing change if it is about anything, but change can impose costs on individuals, their friends, families and on wider society. Let me give you a concrete example to illustrate what I mean.

Some years ago, an arts worker of my acquaintance was running a women's writing group in a rural part of the UK. It was a popular and well received activity and, after about six months she needed to present a report to her funders – in this case I think the local authority and the Arts Council. Casting about for evidence of the impact of her work, she noticed that about half the women participants had left their partners or were experiencing serious difficulties with their relationships. What are we to make of this fact?

Is it a positive sign of the personal growth which participants had experienced and which had led them to re-consider their personal situations? Or does it reflect a series of personal and social disasters especially for any children who might be involved – which shows that cultural activists should be more careful about how they raise people's expectations? Or is it a mixed blessing, perhaps a difficult phase on the way to something better? Who knows? Everything depends on your personal perspective, on your values and political beliefs, on where you stand in the complex web of social power relationships.

This is a complex area and one we have hardly begun to discuss: we need a much more grown-up debate about the costs of development and how they can be offset. But it underlines the crucial importance of working with people who are supposed to benefit from an activity to define the aspirations, outcomes, benefits and so on, and to secure informed consent.

Who defines success?

And it leads me to one of the most important questions in relation to all these issues: who decides what a successful project is? In addressing this, I offer you some principles which I first set out when I began looking at how arts projects might be evaluated.

- **Projects intended to produce social benefits should address stated needs or aspirations.**[3]
- **It is unethical to seek to produce change without the informed consent of those involved.**
- **The needs and aspirations of individuals or communities are best identified by them, often in partnership with others, such as local authorities, public agencies and arts bodies.**
- **Partnership requires the agreement of common objectives and commitments (though not all goals need be shared by all partners).**
- **Those who have identified a goal are best placed to ascertain when it has been met.**
- **An arts project may not be the most appropriate means of achieving a given goal.**

Are there factors in success?

What works? We have a pragmatic government; so, if we accept that we are working in a very complex area, but one with real and rich rewards, what guidance can we find?

- **We need to ensure that projects are controlled by the communities they are supposed to benefit – at least with a 50% stake.**
- **Be clear about our aims and motivations; we have to ensure that we have been honest and clear about our objectives.**
- **We need to connect action to local needs and opportunities, not simply transplant things which work in one place in the expectation they'll work anywhere.**
- **We have to work with the grain: identify responses which fit with what people want to do, and support their voluntary commitment.**
- **We need to value diversity, genuinely and with feeling, because diversity is both fundamental to a democratic government and because it is vital to a living and developing cultural tradition. Artists cannot expect people outside the cultural sector to take their work seriously when they themselves do not value the work done by others in different traditions. Believing in yourself does not mean that you have to attack what others believe in. Debates are vital, especially about issues of meaning and value: they are the essence of democracy. But they can be undertaken in very different ways than are now common.**
- **We need to pursue effective partnerships.**
- **We have to connect this work to the mainstream of community life, of the arts and of local development work, regeneration initiatives and public life. Otherwise we just make ghettos which are bit less unpleasant.**
- **Finally we have to promote excellence – we have to aspire to the best, we have to believe in our vision.**

Is this the start of something big?

There's an opportunity here to develop serious, culturally-based responses to the big issues faced by Wales today. That's true about estates and villages; but it's also true about cities, regions and the country as a whole. It's true about all the big themes – schools, lifelong learning, health, social inclusion, the economy, democratic renewal, urban regeneration and so on. It's true because development cannot be given – it gets done.

That opportunity is also an opportunity to create new, specifically Welsh responses to problems which, if they are pretty much universal, are still experienced in specifically Welsh contexts and ways. There is an opportunity to be distinctive, different and to show how culture can make communities. For example, why should communities not be given resources to assume responsibility for their own cultural activity, so that they can commission artists on their own terms? It might require support and training, but that would simply be good community development.

All this is true – but it's not a dream: don't get carried away by the rhetoric. Never forget that culture is a tool and as such can be used well or badly, and used for good purposes or bad. It's a serious issue. It is true, but it will demand courage, honesty, imagination and integrity to deliver: it is not inevitable.

So I leave you with my final question: is this a passing fashion expressed in the form of an enthusiastic conference, or is it the start of something big?

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1 Matarasso François (1994) *Regular Marvels*, Leicester: CDMF

2 Matarasso François (1997) *Use or Ornament?*, Stroud: Comedia

3 Matarasso François (1996) *Defining Values*, Stroud: Comedia

François Matarasso is a highly respected researcher and writer. He has done a great deal of work with Comedia, an independent research group working on cultural and urban policy.

**Use or Ornament - the Social Impact of Participation in the Arts* gives detailed case studies, is easy to digest and is highly recommended. Contact ECO Distribution for these books, and a publications list. Tel: 01509 890 068.

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