

— CO-PRODUCING —
**COMMUNITY
ARTS**

**HOW TO DESIGN
COMMUNITY ARTS**

WITH THE COMMUNITY
FOR THE COMMUNITY



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This guide for community arts workers offers a step-by-step method for co-producing successful community arts projects.



It reflects the experience we have accrued over the course of many projects, the last in collaboration with Artworks Cymru.

We are convinced that if you begin with what community members want, it is possible to co-devise and run classes, projects and workshops that are enthusiastically received by the community - whilst still fulfilling the requirements of funding bodies.

Our philosophy is to start with what community members want, rather than involving them in working to an agenda set by policy makers.

This is called Co-Design and Co-Creation

**We used it in all our projects.
This guide is designed to help you use it.**

Our approach to co-production starts from a few simple principles about community involvement.

Community is basically the actions of being together.

It happens everywhere, everyday in one way or another

People want to be together!

By designing courses that speak for the community artists, we can enhance communal being-ness, communal resilience and solidarity

It is absolutely crucial that community members feel ownership and self-determination.

If they help design the things that they want, the arts will work for them and for you.

This is not the same as an organization believing it - and it alone - knows what this community needs.

The emphasis in this approach is upon the word 'community' rather than the word 'artist'.

People have to be actively involved in decisions about the project at every stage, and in helping to run and produce the eventual outcomes.

Dawns Powys Dance had a problem.

They felt that their classes were not reaching all parts of their town, especially the estates, and they felt challenged by their new status and remit as a community organization.

As a means of seeking information about what people in the target areas wanted, they staged a quiz night at the local workers club and made it free of charge.

During the evening they handed out questionnaires and talked to the people who attended.

Through this method they understood that free family dance sessions would be welcome.

Dawns Powys Dance then organized a season of free Sunday sessions for all the family, which proved to be very popular within the community.



This provided the community artists with re-assurance that they were reaching more of the town, and were building the possibility of wider engagement between the town and the organisation.

"Taking this step has completely changed our practice for the better. We're excited and motivated by the entire process."



**Meanwhile, in a market town in south Wales,
community workers had a problem with what they called:**

*'apathy and lack in participation in the
government anti-poverty agenda.'*

What our listening methods uncovered was not so much apathy as a sense of exclusion felt by people on the estate, and generated by the move of working class people from the town centre to an estate on the edge of town.

*They decided that they wanted to tell that story,
and we provided the means for them to do so.*

After auditions, a community artist was hired by the steering committee. They then organised brain-storming sessions where hilarious stories were told and recorded, and subsequently constructed an entire musical using their words and stories.

This resulted in a packed performance at the local theatre, and for once the estate took centre-stage in the town.

*Now, it may not seem as though putting on
a musical about the history of a housing estate
would directly affect employment and
education goals set by the government*

But it was the confidence, enthusiasm
and desire for something else generated by
the process that could then lead to addressing
further courses and demands from the community.

Meaning their goals were then achieved on their own terms

In a nutshell

**For us, community is communal being-ness -
created by people acting in common
to create and maintain shared meanings**

If we increase actions and meanings in common,
we will increase a sense of being in common,
thus strengthening communal being-ness and cohesions:



The enhancing of meanings in common can only be done
by the community members - in doing that, they are
creating communal being-ness in their own actions.

In this way of thinking, the task
of the community artist is to:

DISCOVER

ENHANCE

and

VALIDATE

not just the meanings-in-common, but to validate and
assist communities in expressing a communal being-ness -
utilising whatever methods and settings they choose.

In this guide we present a number of examples of this process.
The enthusiasm of the community artists is palpable and plain to see.

For this to be successful we need to give up any hint of an agenda.
As we explain a framework is fine, eg 'we have x amount of money'

We need to be willing to facilitate the search for commonality -
and to find ways of expressing togetherness and belonging.

In this process, all participants are
understood as equal partners.

This perspective is illustrated in the approach taken by Dawns Powys Dance in their Llandrindance project.

They used dance to support community cohesion in three different ways.

They worked with a group of children new to the town and school who were labelled 'difficult', and created 'their Llandrindod' by encouraging the sharing of stories, movements and sounds.

In doing so they created a vocabulary of meanings that wove the children into the communal through their own creative actions together.

With a group of older children, the children devised these meanings using stories or songs that they wanted to dance to - thus creating being in common.

They invited local people to post their own versions and videos of the Llandrindance, and created family dance events at which multiple activities across generations were carried out - sharing stories of dance memories, decorating the room to become a disco, and then dancing in it.



The creative actions of decorating the space created both meanings and being in common.

This created the communal and was enhanced by layers of memory shared and created together.

In this way we can say that actions together create being and meaning together - the creation of a common world, all contributing well to the enhancement of 'cohesion'.



LISTEN!

Some of you may remember the film 'Erin Brockovich'

You may recall that over the course of the film, Erin made more progress with the local community residents than with the fancy high-paid lawyers, and even had cause to tell her boss Ed to accept cups of coffee and cake from the residents, which he viewed as a waste of time.

Like Erin, we found that listening and building trust were absolutely essential to the process, and far from a waste of time or resources.

What she did was listen and what she built up was trust. Without that trust, nothing could have happened. With it, everything did.

People have to feel they're being heard!

You need to listen to them with an open mind & heart - this way, dialogue can open.

You need to think about how to best listen. You could arrange meetings, focus groups, interviews - or simply chat over a cup of tea! All methods work so long as you are open to hearing what the community is saying.

Whichever method you choose - and it could be a combination of them - try to make sure that you hear the most reticent and not simply the most vocal members of the group. If you record the conversations and listen to them again afterwards, this could allow you the time to think carefully about what is being

*What are the common themes and emotions?
The differences expressed? The 'us and them' talk?
What makes them happy, and what angers or upsets them?*

Once communal meanings have been established, take the information and opinions that you think you have heard - and share it back with a few people gathered together.

Watch their reactions, suggest what you could do - give them permission to discuss and express it.

Then, when you think you are all on the same page, you can begin to set up your steering group -

You can then design what you will do together, and come up with a concrete plan.

Our approach puts the community before the artist, so that they can work together to use art to address community issues.



**We might call this Bare-Foot artists,
serving the community.**

Now we hear you say:

*'That's all very well but I haven't the money to run quiz nights,
or to hire workers clubs to find this sort of information'.*

Of course not every community artist has access to sufficient resources for free events.

However, attaching yourself to events that are happening in your community, and talking to people at these events will often begin the process of understanding what it is that binds people together.

Be bold - talk to people, ask them about their community and what they like about it. Pay attention to what they remember and what they feel has been lost. Raise these points with other people watch their reactions.

These are initial steps but they begin to allow you to discover what binds the community together and what they want as a community.

Case Study: 'Picnic at the Pool'

Market Town, the site of a recent research project, has a population of 13,000.

The town has a strong cross section of incomes and classes. The middle class and commuter belt house owners live in the south, while a working class estate sits on a windy hill at the town's north.

As part of the trialing of the analytic, a series of one-to-one interviews were conducted across the town about people's memories and communal being-ness

*Their knowledge of the town's common world,
Their knowledge of where things are, or were, in the town;
Their relationship with their neighbors and so on.*

We discovered a series of meanings-in-common centred round an open air swimming pool, built and opened in 1938 and closed in 1996. This pool came up as a constant topic throughout the interviews.

What fascinated us was the nature of responses: people immediately became animated, began swapping personal experiences, telling stories about the pool and responding using action and speech which was happy and joyful and full of movement. These responses were especially marked when the topic was raised in groups, whether formal groups like focus groups, or in public conversations.

The main meanings in common were:

**FAMILY
PICNICS**

**THE JOY OF
SWIMMING**

**HAPPY
TIMES**

**A CHEAP
DAY OUT**

*and the community coming together
because of meeting so many people there,
and subsequently having time to chat with
them while their children played safely.*

*Clearly the meanings attached
to this pool were held in common.*

At this time, sixteen years after the pool closed, it was no longer the topic of any current action - rather it was shared among family and friends as a complaint with the council and as a happy memory.

Simultaneously we sought to discover the history of its closure as well as the council's response, and to speak to them concerning the communal anger at what had occurred around the pool, and the feeling of disempowerment regarding council decisions in general that it had fed.

Based on these interviews, the project steering group, composed of local people & researchers, proposed to hold a day-long festival on the site of the pool as a form of commemoration and arts based research.

On the basis of this gathered evidence, the steering group penciled in a 'Picnic at the Pool' commemoration for the following June.

The closer to the occasion we came, the more enthusiasm grew among the entire community - from council to small business, people donated their time and materials, and even the fire brigade wanted to be involved.

The steering group themselves did almost all the work, and their enthusiasm was all over the event, which was a fantastic success.

The steering group then began planning it as a yearly event.

From the perspective of the community artists, all of this came out of an understanding of what communal meanings are, and how to use them as the basis for co-designing the project.

In turn these communal meanings emerged during our interaction with the community, and as an outcome of our refusal to impose our ideas upon the community.



Co-Production

So, you've found what you think will work, people are enthusiastic and the funding has arrived -

What now?

Have a plan that allows everyone to hit the ground running



If you have gathered an enthusiastic group, don't let that enthusiasm dribble away - Have proposals for a path that everyone can immediately put into action

Co-production doesn't mean you are never allowed to contribute or have suggestions yourself - it's more about sharing the decisions so that everyone feels ownership



Using social media such as Facebook and establishing a website is a great way to kick off a project and capture enthusiasm,

It helps to have something positive and easy to show from the start, and is a great way to help focus the project in its early stages.

It is also easy for people to contribute, which in turn strengthens a sense of ownership

For us, the single most important thing you can possibly do to ensure a great project is to:



Trust the steering group and allow all of you to make joint decisions reached through consensus



There are lots of reasons for this:

If the steering group trust you, so will the people they find for you

They can help stop you wasting money

They know the area and the people -you may not

It's the fastest way to reach people

They know the facilities and possibilities that you may not

They come up with stuff and ideas you haven't thought of

Once you've established what people want, ask them the best way to achieve it together.

Be organized, make sure people know what they're doing, and consider suggestions that you may not have thought of.

We have spent a lot of time discussing how to establish and sustain support with a steering group.

Some people might wonder why we have neglected issues such as publicity.

The truth is that if one has a good relationship with others, answers to these issues and many more will occur as an outcome of discussion



Remember to raise the issues and then the suggestions will flow thick and fast!



Stories from the field - Up the estate

The play devised in Market Town was a massive success, but as you can see from the field notes it didn't appear to be heading that way two days before the performance.

The gym is bare. Parents are gathered in little groups.
Children are running everywhere, screaming and sliding round in their socks.
One of the volunteers introduces me and everyone has to shout.

I stare round the gym; in one corner three boys are pushing and shoving each other,
yelling at the top of their voices; girls are practising their singing;
two long haired youths are strumming electric guitars through a beaten amp.

On the piano in the corner between the stacked chairs,
the play's director is bashing out a tune while someone sings their lines -
children rush in and out, and parents in groups chat and stare blankly at the chaos.

From the middle of one group of women, K, the director screams:

"Line up, line up - all the singers, line up here, come on!"

The volunteers rush off herding the kids into the middle of the hall where they then assemble into a ragged line, pushing and easing each other aside.

"Dave, have we got CRB's?"

"Line-up, line-up - here Joe, you're in the front!"

Pushing shoving kicking wrestling Joe goes to the front.
A ragged singing noise fills the gym, rising and falling.
The long haired youth crosses the floor, strums a couple of amplified chords.
K comes over when they've practised for ten minutes to tell you where it's at,
how it's going, breaking off now and then to scream instructions.

"Bobby's pulled out!"

Spontaneous conference. His mum's told him he has to do homework.
The kid's distraught. He had a big role. On and on its goes.


The play's in two days.



The steering group hired K after an interview.

Other people who they interviewed included various agit prop collectives, but there were logistical reasons against them and in any case the steering group disliked their agenda - in fact they resolutely opposed any agenda coming in, as it were, from the outside.

K was always on time, always organized, and spent a lot of time gathering stories for the script



Throughout the process he discussed stories and forms casually with people from the group, and stayed focused whatever the sudden catastrophes - such as the boy being withdrawn by his parents two days before the event was scheduled to take place.

He wrote the songs and rehearsed with the singers and the young people.

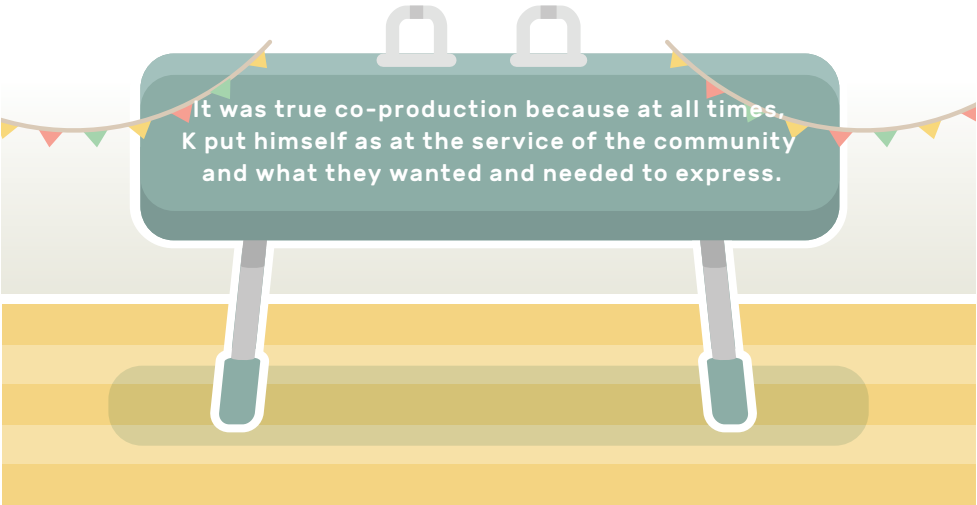
He hired other actors and gathered volunteers from various local drama groups - especially people he'd worked with before.

The final product in all its varied forms was the production of an idea and in a form suggested by the steering group.

It was a massive success and many who attended the main town theatre that night had never been before, despite living in the town for 30 years.

They loved it and there tears in the audience.

The role K played in this was indispensable



It was true co-production because at all times, K put himself as at the service of the community and what they wanted and needed to express.

Co-production stands and falls by the amount of enthusiasm you can generate, how strongly you can form a climate of trust, sharing and open co-production.

You will organize and probably carry out most of the physical tasks involved in organizing and people will help you as they are able.

Being there on the ground, putting in some yards, and using the connections your steering group gives you, are indispensable.

We did two consecutive projects in one place, and subsequently spent a lot of time putting on events and working with people from the community.

In this two and a half year period the steering group was consistent in its help with events, even though the members changed during that time.

Some people stopped coming for various life reasons, and the nature of what we were doing and organising changed, as did the physical location of the meetings.

There were also periods when we weren't doing very much and attendance was sparse.

It is crucial in periods like this, or when people leave, to trust your instinct.

The thing you are doing is more crucial to you than them and there is a balancing act to maintain for all of us between the competing demands of life.

Gently finding out why they leave may well be helpful to you for the future - If people really want to leave, let them.

**Continue to make contacts with other people
and invite them to attend meetings.**

*The process is like a snowball, where people bring
others - so that the whole thing grows and changes.*



**The most important thing is to
gently, but persistently, persevere**

This guide has described the steps in using our
co-production method as a community artworker.

What we have been describing here is the process through
which meaning is created communally by you acting together
with the members of the community.

*The meaning of the event thus belongs
to everyone involved in its creation.*

In our recent book, we call this:



The book discusses this in much greater depth than we can do here, and it
may be useful to read for the language and justification needed in applications.

*We think co-design and co-creation is a
positive way of constructing meaning in common*

**David Studdert and Valerie Walkerdine (2016)
Rethinking Community Research,**

London, Palgrave

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