

Meaningful audience engagement and evaluation workshop

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This workshop explored different types of audience engagement, focusing particularly on strategies for building meaningful two-way interaction with your audience. The main aims of the workshop were to support critical reflection of current practices, learn from others about a variety of approaches and develop plans for future residency projects. The workshop also offered a series of practical toolkits for evaluating audience engagement.

We started the workshop with a quick show of hands to see the types of residencies in the room and it turns out that:

- For 13 running residencies is 1 strand of their organisation's work
- 3 focus on residencies as their main activity
- 18 also show performances
- 17 actively encourage experimental residency projects (with no fixed need for an outcome)
- 12 support artists to get work ready to tour (both nationally and internationally)
- 16 focus on building an ongoing relationship with their audience(s)
- 15 already ask their audience(s) about their experiences (in a variety of ways)

We also each shared a strength and a challenge currently being faced in relation to audience engagement. A few of the strengths shared included:

- To take care of artists, visitors, residencies, contexts
- Sharing the artistic direction with a small group of audiences
- Interacting
- Mediating the connection between the artist and the company
- Building up a tribe

And some of the identified challenges were:

- Create new audiences
- Motivating artists to help with building and engaging audiences
- Convincing my colleagues of the importance of this project of audience engagement
- To engage with young audiences
- Communicating that dance does not necessarily have to make 'sense'

Meaningful engagement

The first half of the workshop considered what meaningful engagement is and how we can develop such a relationship with our varying audiences and participants. I discussed the different ways in which audience engagement can be understood, including working together to develop new projects, discussing work-in-progress performances with an audience, co-creating a project with a group of participants and consulting with your local community on the types of work they want to see in their local arts centre. It is helpful to consider our aims for audience engagement in a wider cultural context too: we now live in an experience economy where (in the Western world) the largest economic expansion can be seen in the marketing of experiences, either as an end product in itself or as a strategy to sell you something else. This means that your audiences will be navigating a wide offer of

experiences that each tries to present itself as 'authentic'. So it is important that you are clear on what type of engagement you are offering to your audience and what you are hoping to get out of this engagement.

To support the development of meaningful engagement I introduced a couple of concepts from my research on participatory performance: participatory meaning-making and agency. Participatory meaning-making highlights that when we make sense of the world around us we do so in a dynamic two-way process. So we do not simply interpret a predetermined meaning, rather this meaning is co-constructed through your engagement within the situation. This is particularly the case when the engagement is with other people; together we create meanings that neither of us would have been able to create alone. This perspective is useful when it comes to performance and other arts as the traditional view has been that a work of art communicates its meaning to the audience and so creates a limited range of meanings. However, when we consider that the audience is also involved in the meaning-making process then we start valuing what they bring to our events and organisations. The important question is not just *what will your audience take away from this?* but also *what can you learn from your audience?*

Agency describes a person's ability to take decisions that affect the context that they find themselves in. This ranges from physical actions (I'm going to go stand over there) to more complex behaviour (I'm going to try to convince you that my plan is the best and get you to help me carry it out). Your agency is also constrained by the context you find yourself in (no funding means that even if I convince you we still cannot carry out my plans). The reason that agency is important to understand in the context of audience engagement is that often people assume that just because you offer people a choice that this will feel like agency to them. However, there is a significant gap between acts of agency (where you can observe someone else making a choice to do something) and experienced agency (where you can explain to someone else your intentions behind your actions and whether they had the result you were hoping for). And this difference is important because agency has to be experienced to become meaningful to an audience member.

Taken together, these two concepts point towards a couple of practical strategies that you can employ to develop meaningful engagement with your audience:

- Experiencing agency as part of a cultural project will enable your audience to feel a sense of ownership (which is more likely to get them to continue to engage with your projects).
- If you are transparent with an audience on the connection between their actions (perhaps you asked them for feedback) and the decisions you take, they are more likely to experience meaningful agency.
- If you are genuine in wanting to learn about your audience's experiences then it will be easier for you to set up a meaningful two-way exchange with them (extend an open invitation and make it clear that you want to hear what they think).
- Be specific when planning the type of audience engagement you are after and set up events appropriately. If possible, offer a range of ways for people to get involved.

- If you are hoping to engage with very specific audiences (young people or refugees, for instance) then consider the barriers they might face to participation (these can be time, money, transport etc). Remember to make your events accessible to people.
- Once you have created relationships, remember to maintain these! For audiences it may feel like you have lost interest if they do not hear from you for 6 months, whilst for you this is just the time it takes to set up the next project that they can come to.

Meaningful evaluation

The second half of the workshop focused on how you know whether your approach is working and what you should keep doing (and what you can stop). It is important to evaluate your projects (how else can you know whether you're achieving your aims?), but it is equally essential that your evaluation is appropriate for the event or project. We are asked to complete so many questionnaires these days that you want to aim for the evaluation to feel like it extends the conversation about the event or project. It is also important to be clear with your audience on what you will do with their responses and how you will store any information (particularly if you are asking them for any personal details or experiences). Evaluation is also not something you only do after a project has finished; it may work best for you to ask for responses before you even start to help shape your project or to get feedback halfway through a project to make sure that it is working as you planned. We also had a very important discussion about the difference between evaluation that helps you to articulate the significance and meaning of the project and the types of data that you may have to collect for funders and other stakeholders. In these situations it is important to be clear about why you are providing particular types of evaluative information and what this allows you to say about the value of the work you are doing (audience numbers by themselves do not tell you anything about how well a project went).

I shared some practical tips to support evaluation as well as a range of resources:

- Evaluation works best if you are trying to answer a specific question (Is the audience you aimed for actually attending? Is the experience of the project meaningful in the way that you had hoped?).
- There is a difference between being anonymous and identifiable (your personal experiences can make it obvious to those who know you that it is you). If you are asking people about very personal experiences it is best to explain this difference to them so that they can decide what they want to share.
- Evaluation is best planned into a project at the development stage, particularly if you are doing a project specifically aimed at creating a particular outcome or to solve a problem. If this is the case you will need to make sure that you have considered how your project might create an impact and what you would need to document to know whether you have made the difference you aimed for. Creating a logic model can help with this.
- Remember that the outcomes of evaluation are only as good as the strategy you used: think about who is answering your questions and whether they may be telling you what you think you want to hear (having a neutral person ask questions may get you more balanced responses).
- The stronger your relationship with your audience the more likely you are to get a meaningful (and useful) response.

At the end of the workshop we spent some time thinking about how some of the ideas discussed could be implemented by everyone present.

Reflection

It was really exciting to discover more about the inspiring work of the attendees, which cover a wide range of approaches and types of residency projects. For me what connected all the work was the real care shown towards creating a balance between protecting the artists' work and processes whilst also opening these up to audiences. In each of the projects there is also a sensitivity to the context that the organisation and artists are working within, which is evident in the variety of ways they are involving audiences and participants in their work. All the organisations put a lot of effort into creating both temporary and permanent communities and demonstrate resilience and generosity in their work. The spirit of experimentation as well as care within the projects I encountered left me with renewed energy and inspiration to keep developing ways to engage meaningfully with audiences through participation.