

Generating audiences, regenerating organisations

Audiences London's *Generate* project is supporting Community Engagement, a group of friends who enable cultural organisations to invest in their local community while working towards audience development objectives, to mutual benefit

A new generation of specialist practitioners seems to be emerging. They draw on a varied knowledge base and skills set, but have in common the capacity to build bridges between cultural organisations and their local communities, referencing the practice of 'Community Engagement' (CE) in the public sector.

Audiences London (AL) hosts an informal network of practitioners based in arts and heritage organisations who prompted our research documenting what workers do and what makes them tick. The study has inspired a range of activities supporting their transformative work.

'Community Engagement' in the public sector is often driven by a reforming government agenda and is recognised as a particular process:

'involving [local communities] in major decisions that will improve their quality of life. This is

meant to be a two-way process, with organisations benefiting from the imagination and energy of local citizens ... [it] can involve individuals, voluntary and community organisations and public sector bodies working together to address local issues' – The Improvement Network (for Public Services)

The extra dimension we have in the cultural sector is that what we have to offer is personally fulfilling and, frankly, more fun. It is about people's creativity and learning, not just their involvement as well-behaved citizens.

While town planners, health administrators etcetera may be relatively new to such concepts, we have of course been doing this stuff for a long time. The new generation of workers is building on the legacy of Community Arts and educational outreach in terms of values and approach. Where their work differs, perhaps, is that it provides routes into a wider range of participatory and partnership opportunities. At its best, it forges relationships that are long term and have a transformative effect on the host institution. Typically, CE workers may be leading consultation exercises, neighbourhood networking, partnership development and ticket and local advocacy schemes linked to targeted participatory programmes. Bespoke activities are most successful where they grow out of a long



getting-to-know period and are co-designed, so workers spend a lot of time researching, networking, and brokering: all critical skills.

CE allows organisations to manage global peer relationships alongside local neighbourhood ones, to find a valued role at the centre of the social life of their local community. CE often opens conversations with a less culturally confident public than we are used to, with the people we find it 'harder to reach'. So CE is also a mechanism by which we can develop our awareness of public expectations and a more inclusive outlook.

'Arts organisations are going to come under increasing pressure to become responsive, customer focused organisations, which seek to engage customers in more dialogue and collaboration' – John Knell: *Whose Art is it Anyway (Personalisation in the Arts)*¹

CE is one way of addressing these challenges, but as the *Generate* study reveals, workers could be better supported. In particular, they need colleagues to understand more about their work, to recognise specialist skills, the sensitivities of the process, and the time (years) and resources needed to make a real impact. Workers do not fit neatly into institutional departments (marketing, education, front-of-house, etc.) – or skill sets – and so traditional 'silo' ways

of working frustrate the process. Organisations need to have a strategic framework for CE too. This is an intensive process which raises multiple expectations. To reap the benefits, organisations need to be clear about objectives, but open to the changes it will inevitably invite.

AL's *Generate* study has resulted in a professional development programme, designed – naturally – with and for CE workers (we are now recruiting for new intake). The network also continues, as do *Generate* debates and seminars.

To find out more about *Generate*, contact Helen Ball, Community Engagement Coordinator at Audiences London on **020 7407 4625** helen@audienceslondon.org ■

1. Arts Council England 2006; available from www.artscouncil.co.uk



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