

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice

Strategic Options – how arts marketing is changing

Introduction

Mark Robinson is the founder and Director of Thinking Practice, a consultancy dedicated to increasing the impact and resilience of the arts and cultural sector through the creative use of analysis, planning, facilitation and coaching. Mark was previously Executive Director of Arts Council England, North East, where he worked for ten years. He was heavily involved in the cultural growth in the North East, and named as one of the North East's Most Influential People. Among his national roles for Arts Council England, he chaired Art Co Limited, the trading company which oversaw the phenomenal growth of Own Art and Take It Away.

Prior to that, Mark worked in community and adult education, literature and arts development, most notably as Director of Cleveland Arts. His first career was as a chef in vegetarian restaurants. He is also a widely published and award-winning poet, editor and critic, with several collections published and anthologised. New poems appeared in bi-lingual English/Bulgarian versions in 2010 as part of an ongoing collaboration with leading Bulgarian poets. He founded and edited Scratch poetry magazine and press for nine years and is the chair of the Swallows Foundation UK and a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts.

Learning how to roar

A literary boy like myself could interpret the title of this year's AMA conference in one of two ways: either down the Shakespearian route in which you wonder which great people will inhabit this brave new world we find ourselves in since May 2010 with the new government, or since late 2008 when all the banks went 'pop', or since 7/7, or since 9/11, or the miners' strike, or *Look Back in Anger*, all sorts of things have created 'brave new worlds'. Or you can go back as far as the 1930s and the other *Brave New World* route of Aldous Huxley and his dystopian novel which imagines the stand of an individual against a rising tide of conformity: pleasure and mindlessness set alongside toil. In the novel, they have 'the feelies' (like the movies but with an extra sensory element). We now have *The Apprentice* to keep us occupied and 'happy'.

I have lived (and now work) in Stockton, Teeside, a few miles north of Billingham which is allegedly where Aldous Huxley got much of the inspiration for *Brave New World*. It was once home to ICI, and twice a 'brave new town': once in the 1960s when it was rebuilt and once in the 1930s when Huxley visited it. Aldous Huxley loved Billingham – he called it 'a magnificent kind of poem', whereas he described Middlesbrough, just a few miles down the river, as 'growing like a fungus, like staphylococcus in a test tube of chicken broth'.

Billingham was a model of town planning – homes, shops, cultural facilities were all planned together in the 1960s. There was an integrated cultural facility, The Forum, which had a theatre alongside an ice rink and a swimming pool and other sporting facilities. The Forum has just been refurbished; if you search 'Billingham Forum' on YouTube, you can see a fantastic video of the Queen opening it in 1960. They also had heated pavements, heated by the by-products of the chemical works which Billingham was built to support – so the snow melted as soon as it arrived. Here is a photo of a band playing in the main shopping area:



Billingham is also home to the international folklore festival which began in the 1960s and is still going today, bringing bemused Estonians to Teeside. Billingham was originally designed as a company town for ICI and it was based on the stability that words like 'imperial' and 'chemical' and 'industries' were supposed to bring.

But about three years ago, the last ICI logo in Billingham disappeared. What remains of the industry has been carved up, history has moved on. Billingham has a 'post' feeling about it. It is persistent, has lots of spirit, but only a kind of dogged resilience, like many damaged communities across the country.

The challenge for the cultural sector is firstly to make sure that the arts don't become a kind of Billingham town centre over the next few years, as Arts Council, local authority and other logos disappear from funding acknowledgements and that we don't find ourselves left with a proud but paranoid nostalgia about what we used to have and some underused skills and the remnants of an infrastructure. We have to build something positive. To help us think about how we address these challenges, I will focus on three things in this keynote speech:

1. There are four things about the current context that we need to understand if we are going to be leaders in our sector (we all need to take on a leadership role if we are going to raise the sector and make it as resilient as possible)
2. There are three possible responses to that context
3. A few practical things that you can do to increase your resilience

The Context

'Community, identity, stability' is one of the more Orwellian quotes from *Brave New World*. The society it proposes is one in which people lead contented lives, with no shocks and no economic bombshells. The dystopia comes because of the downside of living in that world: a

life of consumption and pleasure with no shocks or surprises turns out to be hardly a life at all. It is better to live adventurously. Running risks is part of being fully alive. The pensions and the drugs that pacify the population in Huxley's novel are an attempt to avoid the turbulence of real life.

We no longer live in that sort of world. Stability is a thing of the past and it may not return. A politician a few years ago said that arts funding would 'flat reel for ever' – i.e. that there would never again be any increases in arts funding, even allowing for inflation. Now, even this view seems optimistic. And there is instability in the world: the population is changing – by 2035 almost a quarter of the UK population will be over 65 and less than 20% will be under 16. There will be climate change. Energy prices are going to rise. We have to respond to these changes, or we will go the way of Billingham's shops.

“These”, he said gravely, “are unpleasant facts; I know it. But then most historical facts are unpleasant.” Brave New World

Now, in 2011, money is increasingly a factor in people's ability to engage with the arts. The Asda income tracker suggested last month that household disposable income has gone down by 8% in a year. That's £14 per week, or a ticket every week that someone can't buy. Even people who earn more than £100,000 are saving and spending less.

Another unpleasant fact is that there are people out there who think that the arts and arts marketers are dispensable. Eric Pickles thinks arts marketers don't have proper jobs. The Tax Payers' Alliance agrees with him.

“To have great poets there must be great audiences too.” Walt Whitman

One of the things I like about this quote is that it suggests art is a collaboration between the great poets and the great audiences. This is important for all arts. Lots of art theory puts forward the idea that art doesn't begin until an audience gets involved in it.

We have an opportunity to think differently about the assets of an arts organisation. Lots of your activities, the way you communicate with audiences, as well as physical spaces, can be turned into assets which you can capitalise upon. The audience can be a key asset. Kerry Michael, Artistic Director at Theatre Royal Stratford East, explained how he 'cast' the audience when thinking about putting on a show – a great example of integrating a sense of the audience into artistic planning, building them into the work in a collaborative way.

“The more diverse a network, the greater its ability to respond to change” The Law of Requisite Variety

We know that society is becoming increasingly diverse. There is a need to diversify our cultural offer. The totality of the art is not yet representative enough of the diversity we have in the UK. Environmental awareness is important too. The sector is not responding urgently enough. In some recent research, I interviewed the HR director of a major law firm, seemingly a bastion of conservatism and power. He spoke with a greater focus about the need to diversify the talent in his business than I could ever remember hearing from anyone in a similar position in the arts sector. The diversity of what we do is an integral part of how strong we are.

We need to draw on our existing skills and resources and develop new ones. About a year ago, the Arts Council published a paper I'd written, *Making Adaptive Resilience Real*. It looked at how organisations can build and develop their resilience while remaining true to purpose. It's not just about being strong; it's about being productive too. After doing lots of research and speaking with lots of people in arts organisations, I identified eight characteristics of resilient organisations. I've developed this thinking over the last year and have come to think that the 'Culture of Shared Purpose' (see diagram) is the most central one; without it, you are vulnerable, no matter how strong your other assets are. It is central, but not enough by itself – you need the other elements too:



There are three key areas which arts marketers have a particular role in developing.

Networks (relationships)

Arts marketers play a vital role in building relationships with audiences and other people. Collaboration and trust are an important part of this. People need to know who you are in order to connect with you. You also need to be clear about who you are, if you are to have an authentic relationship with your audience.

“Promiscuity is a citizen's duty. Everyone belongs to everyone else.” Brave New World

The power of storytelling

We need to focus on the power of storytelling in relation to the power of art, the power of artists and the power of audiences. We need to find ways of describing the value to audiences, the return on the investment they are making, the return on investment of the organisation's management and trustees, based on great data and stories. Contact Theatre has explained how a sold-out show will enable them to pay for a number of community projects so that audiences can see just what their ticket is buying. They have also opened up

their commissioning process to involve audiences, so audiences are let into the story of how a piece of work gets made. The power has shifted from the literary manager's role – now people can understand the narrative of a piece of work and feel more of a stake in it.

In many ways, you are what you own in terms of resilience. This includes the stories you can tell. You, as arts marketers, understand your audiences and you should tell their stories within your organisation because it is these stories that create the centre of resilience.

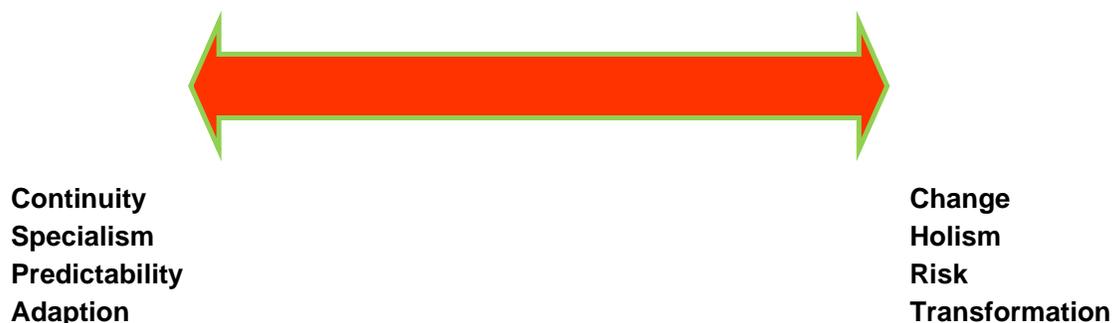
Arts marketers need to step up to the leadership plate.

Arts marketers should not allow themselves to be kept from the responsibility of shaping the course of an organisation. I challenge you – in as much as you are able – to act and think like an artistic director. See yourselves as producing cultural value, not deriving an audience for someone else's cultural value, whilst balancing the books. It's not necessarily about the seniority of your position, but about how you influence the organisation. It's possible to exercise leadership throughout an organisation.

The top-down model of the Chief Executive making all the decisions is increasingly old fashioned. In this way, you can define the organisational personality and express that personality through everything you do that creates the relationship between the organisation and the audience. From the tone of your tweets, to the feel of the brochure, to the welcome people get in the bar, you can manage and make the most of your organisational personality.

As part of the preparation for this conference, the AMA organised a day with about a dozen AMA members discussing the adaptive resilience framework and seeing which bits felt most relevant. Out of that discussion, we identified a number of tensions within organisations, summarised in this diagram:

ORGANISATIONAL PERSONALITY



These tensions are usually present in most organisations, it's a question of how to manage them.

*By a show of hands, delegates showed that the vast majority felt they belonged to organisations where **change** was more characteristic than **continuity**. By another show of hands, delegates overwhelmingly identified their organisations as favouring a **holistic** approach over **specialism**. The differences were less marked, more balanced, on the axis of **predictability** and **risk** and slightly more delegates favoured **adaption** (making changes in incremental steps) than **transformation** (the 'knock it down and start again' model).*

As with personality type indicators (such as Myers-Briggs), one personality type is not inherently 'better' than another one; it's a question of understanding that they function differently. It would be useful for you to think through (either by yourself or in discussion with colleagues) what kind of organisation you are in. This might influence a new attitude to fresh marketing techniques. Could you use information about your audience better? Are you over-reliant on what you know works, rather than taking risks?

How can you manifest leadership?

You can act as a leader in your organisation and in your community, no matter what your job is. From the adaptive resilience work, four aspects of the leadership mindset were identified:

REFLECTIVE
OPEN
ADAPTIVE
RESPONSIBLE

Conveniently, this can be condensed to the acronym **ROAR**. Perhaps the time has come for the arts sector to roar; for us to be more confident and assertive about what we are doing. If we don't do this, then I suspect we will get slaughtered at the next government spending round.

Reflective

Organisations that don't reflect become more vulnerable to change over time. Leaders can encourage a reflective mindset in their teams. But reflection on its own is not enough; people must take actions. Hold post-action reviews after each activity:

- i) What did we want to happen?
- ii) What actually happened?
- iii) What was different and why?
- iv) What have we learned from it and what will we do differently next time?

This process can take five minutes, or you can take the whole day to do it for a year's activity.

Take time out to reflect on the personality of the organisation and your performance. Go back to your organisations and persuade them to take out a day or a half day over the next two months to think about these issues. You are not too busy to do this – and you need to think and reflect deeply on these issues, not superficially, for the process to be valuable.

Open

Organisations who have grasped the creativity of diversity are characterised by open, transparent and democratic management cultures. Organisations need to become more open in their approaches, their dialogues, and in their thinking. They need to avoid becoming fixed structurally, or in terms of what they are offering, and to invite in other views and voices. Do this by talking to someone you don't normally talk to, either a colleague or someone outside the organisation and having an open and honest dialogue with them. Identify a decision that you can give away (responsibly). A radical example of this is the Open Space

project at Theatre Royal Stratford East. Talk about the very thing you're most nervous to talk about (e.g. audiences, programme, marketing strategy).

Adaptive

Being adaptive is something you can take some control of. Being adaptive doesn't rule out the idea of transformation where it is necessary. DADA Fest in Liverpool had its roots in the North West Disability Arts Forum but due to changes in legislation, many of the things it was needed for when it set up in 1984 were no longer needed. It changed into a platform where disabled people could strive to achieve artistic equality.

Think about three ways in which your organisation could adapt. Try something new and review it, then change the way you work a little or a lot as necessary.

Responsible

Take responsibility for yourself and your own future and well being and also for the whole cultural ecology. There's also a responsibility to use the public investment that many arts organisations get for the broad public good, as well as organisational benefit. Do something to defy the expectations of the biggest sceptic you know. Think about what your organisation looks like to someone else. Think about your networks and how you might carry out 'strategic acts of kindness'. Collaboration is based on a certain generosity of spirit.

And finally...

I am an optimist. Arts marketers have a real and vital leadership job to do. Go back to your organisations and be ready to raise your voice, to 'ROAR'. You need to influence people around you; you need to generate loads of ideas. You have a role in energising people and being energised yourself as a result, regardless of your position in the hierarchy. As arts marketers you need to challenge received ideas, to develop audiences by breaking out of the box and influencing the core programme, communicating the sense of the organisation's shared purpose. And we need to do this to meet the challenge of shrinking resources, and demanding time and audiences.

We need to build our resilience for the things we can't predict right now. You can help, particularly in the areas of shared culture, relationships and leadership. Reflect hard and help your organisations to do that by using the combination of data and stories that you hold. Recently I came across the phrase **data = stories**². You can turn these stories into something really positive. Add to this an understanding of artistic behaviour, so that it is not separated out and a sense of responsibility for affecting change, then maybe even the biggest cynic will say of arts marketers

"Oh, brave new world that has such people in it".