

Leadership 2.0

What is the leadership role in driving user-led and open innovation in the sector?

The terms *user-led* and *open innovation* are most obviously associated with the digital media realm, although their use can apply far more broadly. I am interested to explore their meaning and relevance to the live performing arts (music, dance, theatre and live arts). My own reference is particularly classical music looking for parallels across the performing arts. I am interested in the impacts these approaches have had in recent years on our practice and thinking and their potential to shape the future of our relations through the live performing arts between artists and audiences.

The use of digital content on-line proves a useful starting point in exploring how these two terms (user-led and open innovation) intersect with our live practice. In their report *Consuming digital arts: understanding of and engagement with arts in the digital arena amongst the general public*¹ for Arts Council England, Synovate note that arts companies use the web for four types of activity:

- Access (increasing the number of people who can access the art and breaking down barriers which might reduce the potential number of people who can access it)
- Information (providing up to date and widely available information about events or resources, increasing the chances that people might visit or attend)
- Experience (suggesting values, quality and associations around a piece of art, enhancing or replicating the live experience)

¹ Synovate (April 2009) *Consuming digital arts: understanding of and engagement with arts in the digital arena amongst the general public* COI REF 292968

- Participation (providing ways for users to join in through structured interactive content or an open invitation to submit content)

As the web has developed, so more closely related media such as television have developed formats that have a strong user-led input. The reality-television model that has boomed in the past fifteen years puts the audience as central both on-screen and as editors of the 'story'. This model has affected other aspects of television such as news reporting, debate and current affairs in which the 'expert' becomes only one voice in a range of different views. There are limits to the potential comparison here, since these forms of television are not intended as art – they are either intended as distraction or as information. Yet their rapid rise and popularity have created ripples through other media, including the performing arts.

The unique characteristic of the arts as opposed to any other sector is around intent. Synovate's research for Arts Council England in 2009 concludes that *'most people believe that for something to be art there has to be intent on the part of the creator.'* The central thing we are looking for is authorship, pushing the artist as creator to the fore.

Through this text I will draw on observations about current practice rather than theoretical work in this area, exploring the performing arts sector as it exists in 2010. In particular I am interested in exploring the leadership implications for performing arts organisations as their practice and landscape changes. I will explore the following areas:

- Current models and practice in the performing arts
- Ways in which we listen to our users in the performing arts
- Emerging models and practice which might signal a way forward
- Implications for leadership

I will explore the effects of moves towards user-led and open innovation practice upon a triangle which has held steady for many years: that of the links between

artists, audiences and arts institutions, constructed as a series of bi-lateral relationships.

Current models and practice

Symbolised by the early language of the Arts Council, a set of fixed, seemingly simple, roles were in place: the professional artist as expert, the audience as grateful learners, the arts organisation as mediator. Much of this prevails in the structures of the performing arts. In broad terms, artistic leadership in the performing arts comes from interpretative artists: orchestras led by conductors, theatres by directors, dance companies by choreographers for example. The artist sits at the core: intent is held closely by this individual or collective. And this flows right through the system, from live performance, through the creation of new work to the training and formation of artists. At each stage the artist as expert sits at the heart of things.

In a series of interviews with Artistic Directors and Chief Executives of arts organisations which I undertook in 2008 about leadership², everyone I spoke to referred to their knowledge of the form and the way in which work is made as the most important part of their role. Their ability to communicate with artists who are making or performing work and to understand the language of the form itself was seen to be extremely important. This went way beyond the theatre director who is also Artistic Director of a building using the same skill set in rehearsal as in leading the organisation. Even non-practitioners of music referred, for example, to their musical knowledge as the most important factor in dealing with a whole range of situations, not just the obvious programming decisions and choosing the right artists for the right pieces of work. In short I found the art-form, and

² Abigail Pogson (July 2008) *Artistic Leadership of performing arts companies– system or relationship?* Clore Leadership Programme research

specialist knowledge about it, to be central to the sector and thus those with the greatest knowledge are valued most highly.

Artistic work tends to be created through closed innovation – a process which involves one or a group of experts making a piece which is then presented to a public for the first time with great ceremony. Across the performing arts the ‘premiere’ holds great value. There are examples of evolution that disrupt this build-up to a single moment of revelation through the involvement of the audience – such as Battersea Arts Centre’s ‘Scratch Nights’³ – but largely this work happens behind closed doors. Different forms follow different processes, but across the sectors work is evolved in essentially ‘closed’ conditions.

In these circumstances, the leadership requirement is to provide a set of controlled conditions and support a group of artists to create a piece of work together which, at the appropriate moment, can be revealed to the public. At the same time, enough information and enticement must be put before the public to encourage them to attend a performance. These are essentially two separate processes and can happen in a linear manner with the creation of the work taking its place at the top of the hierarchy and the communication of it coming as secondary.

Most arts organisations have an artist or a producer (i.e. someone with a strong affinity with artists) as their senior leader. It is rare to find as leader a communicator with specialist knowledge in how to put forward the proposition to an audience, although in the past twenty years many artistic leaders have been exceptionally strong and natural communicators - a sign of an increasing need for leaders to be communicators as well.

³ Showings of work in progress for audiences, asking them to comment and influence the way in which a new piece of work develops. This model has proved very successful and its most famous product was Richard Thomas and Stewart Lee’s *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.

Listening to our audiences

In the past thirty years two factors have changed this basic model. Firstly the need to communicate has risen up the agenda, driven by the need to get better at earning income and at fundraising. New functions have been required by arts organisations in the form of marketing and fundraising departments and new skills have been required of artistic leaders. Secondly the creation of education departments moved from a small additional activity to something that is now central to any arts organisation's agenda. This has had an even more profound impact upon the basic model – requiring new skills of artists, opening up questions about ways of presenting work and how work is commissioned, challenging financial models and creating a whole new group of practitioners and managers.

What these new functions have in common is that they bring the user into the frame as an active party rather than as a passive, but presumably grateful, receiver. The greatest changes have happened in the past ten years, occurring at the same time as massive advances in digital technology and in the way other sectors relate to their users.

Traditionally a relationship between artist and audience (apart from at the moment of live performance) is mediated entirely through a cultural institution. A bi-lateral relationship between the arts institution and audience is the route through which communications happen. Also traditionally this has tended to be a one-way communication route – from arts organisation to audience (usually about the artist). Yet there are means to feedback: clearly whether or not tickets are bought is one way of sending a message, planned audience surveys and unsolicited letters and feedback also give organisations a sense of the audiences' view. And in a much more complex and indirect way, whether grants or subsidy is forthcoming is also a form of feedback to an organisation. Audience research like that undertaken by the commercial retail sector for example is rare

– expensive and long-term. In many organisations the internal voices are therefore far louder than those external voices – both in terms of the value given to the views and the weighting of the two different kinds of feedback.

John Holden’s Demos pamphlet *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy*⁴ explores this change through the prism of value. His thesis explores the implications of letting the public into the conversation (or rather not letting them in) in a way that does not write out the specialist but creates space for the view of the audience. “My argument is that such legitimacy is a precondition for securing a larger, and more secure, place for culture in our wider public life, and therefore in the priorities of democratically elected governments. Creating such legitimacy will depend on institutional innovation that engages the public in understanding and contributing to the creation of cultural value. Encouraging such innovation by the full range of institutions and practitioners should be the principal aim of any structural reform of arts funding and policy.” (Demos 2007). Holding this balance between the work and the experience might be the core of the role of artistic leadership of an organisation. Web 2.0 is quite radically influencing this leadership requirement and forcing this question of value as cited by Holden.

Arts Council England’s survey of Regularly Funded Organisations’ on-line content⁵ suggests that the majority of those surveyed still use their sites primarily in the same way as non-digital media. Yet in the area of participation (least a feature of the sites), in particular, the door is opening to a genuine two-way dialogue with the audience having a say both in the arts organisation’s product

⁴ John Holden (2006) “Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy” Demos

⁵ MTM London (May 2009) Arts Council England – Digital Content Snapshot -- *A detailed mapping of online presences maintained by Arts Council England’s regularly funded organisations*

and influencing its brand. Organisations are hearing much more from their audiences through these means and web-based practice is influencing, even forcing, other practice.

Emerging models of practice

Web activity is in turn influencing the different roles which a user might take – a kind of ‘User 2.0’. It is early days and arts organisations are still dipping toes in the water, but there is evidence that users are being invited to take on the roles of artists and organisers as well as audience members:

As artists, audiences are being offered:

- Participatory groups profiling alongside professional artists (choirs, allcomers events for example)
- On-line tools to enable people to create their own music or programmes (the Philharmonia’s on-line composing tool)
- Space to put forward their own work both on-line and in person (e.g. East End Academy)
- Time-limited invitations to contribute to material (e.g. ROH’s Twitter Opera)

As organisers, audiences are acting as

- Programming groups, for families and young people in particular (e.g. ranging from Contact in Manchester or Discover in East London where the whole ethos looks to users for programming, through to ring-fenced but longer term initiatives such as Roundhouse’s regular youth festival, and Spitalfields Music’s Young Programmers group Circulate.
- Volunteer groups (for many festivals and venues)

With the exception of those organisations that were founded on these principles (such as Contact and Discover⁶), these are ring-fenced initiatives which do not yet sit at the core of organisations' artistic life. Yet such initiatives are increasing in number and they are having implications for leadership.

Leadership 2.0

The key area where these initiatives will eventually require and provoke fundamental change is in relations between the organisation and artists – this will not continue as a steady bi-lateral relationship. Moreover, whilst for the past decade it has been possible to retain a relatively steady core product, it is now becoming apparent that this core will be changed if the real implications of user-led and open innovation approaches are embraced.

The leadership requirements of these changes are something that the sector is 'feeling' its way towards. The next twenty years will be fragile times, as the arts continue to be led by a generation who are not digital natives and therefore whose approach and understanding of communication and interactivity is completely different from that of the generation that was born after 2000.

The performing arts sector is moving through change across a number of areas:

- its relationships with artists
- how it structures communications and interaction with its users
- what skill sets are required to programme and produce work
- how a brand or identity is defined and protected
- what kind of financial models will support these changes

⁶ Contact Theatre in Manchester producing theatre for and programming with young people. Discover in Stratford East London producing stories for 0-11 year olds with users.

Some early implications of these changes can already be discerned. First, a set of bi-lateral relationships have become much less clearly defined as such – artist/audience; audience/organisation; artist/organisation could be seen as three parts of a triangle with each line representing a bi-lateral relationship. Each part of the triangle's role was once clearly defined – interaction was encouraged, but movement between roles was not. As this changes, so the leadership requirement is changing to meet a need to support greater interactivity, complexity and dynamism between roles.

The second leadership implication is that many performing arts organisations are now communicating with their audiences and users in a much more dynamic way than ten years ago when communication was largely one-way, promotional and simply about selling tickets. New technology and the way it is being used in other fields has forced performing arts organisations to change the way they communicate.

Communication still has sales of tickets or other 'products' at its heart, but in order to achieve this it must now be experiential and arts organisations must be willing to build a two-way relationship with an audience member. Much web-based communication is about material that surrounds a sale and therefore requires an entirely different language and set of objectives. The leadership requirement here is to find a new way to accept, undertake, measure and value communication with an audience.

Third, beyond this question of role, brand and identity come into play. These become less about the product (usually artist or repertoire driven) and more about an experience, which lets the user in and means that the brand is not something which can be fixed, but something which is subject to influence and change. The leadership requirement is therefore to constantly negotiate and mediate a brand rather than fix or invest in a repertoire or artist. Audiences are influencing and changing the brand or identity of an arts organisation through

their participation. In 2010, the impact of this is still largely felt on-line, rather than in the live experience. This is only the beginning.

Finally in a world in which users are more active as artists, as organisers and as audience members, the role of leadership would seem to focus around questions of how quality is determined. Where there is no longer an 'expert' to lead, who defines the quality of material being offered? A leader is required to mediate a shared responsibility between artists, a set of professionals and an audience so that they can find a common consensus around quality.

In looking at those organisations that are experimenting in this area, the most obvious signs of change are in executive leadership – in the make-up and modes of operation of management teams. For example, education departments are moving into a new phase, many of them now actively involved in supporting the process of creating new work and having an increased emphasis on 'creative learning'. Marketing departments are widening their remit to a much broader understanding of 'relationship building' and 'brand management'. These areas of knowledge are being required around the senior management table and the implications are far reaching for all scales of organisation: any organisation, whatever its artistic specialism, must set this alongside a whole range of other skills and knowledge bases. It needs a much bigger knowledge base in order to operate effectively and this is challenging the very models of these organisations.

Governance 2.0

At governance level there is limited evidence of the implications of these changes towards greater interactivity and user-led approaches. However the changes in the relation of artists and arts organisations to audiences will have an impact upon the way that arts charities establish their governance in coming years. Fundamental questions will be asked by boards: where does artistic leadership come from if not a single 'expert' voice? How do we communicate our message if

it is constantly changing? What are the implications of all of this for our business model?

If the basic business model changes, then the governance model which supports this will change to one which requires the users' voice to be heard more clearly and regularly.

I am considering these changes primarily in relation to the live performing arts where work is not for profit and considered in need of public and private subsidy because it is innovative or of the quality that requires investment in order to make it available to the public. This sector will undoubtedly encounter a different set of questions from those seen by the for profit or unsubsidised parts of the sector. Nevertheless, there will increasingly be overlaps between the two as charities broaden their income bases even further and fundraising models shift. This will significantly contribute to changes in governance requirement.

Conclusion

There is evidence, then, of a move from maker-led, closed innovation approaches towards a different kind of practice in both the relation of artists, audiences and organisations to the act of live performance and to the creation of new work. The most exciting potential lies around a new role for artists. Whilst ACE's research suggests that audiences believe in the value and uniqueness of artistic intent (which can come from the artist as specialist) they also want to get into a dynamic and active relationship with artists about the meaning of the arts. A danger is that the sector creates a similar smoke-screen to that produced through reality television: the image rather than the reality of user involvement. Clearly there are challenges in making a shift in a sector where resources are under strain and practice firmly embedded: investment in the unknown and new and a view to the long-term will undoubtedly be required alongside precise analysis of evidence coupled with intuition and willingness to take risk. New

forms of leadership and governance will be required with shifting requirements for producing work, maintaining brand, building relationships and creating new financial models.

In a knowledge based economy, however, it seems implausible that the desire of more people to be involved in the arts - feeding their individual knowledge and shifting our collective knowledge - can or should be resisted.

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