

the value of mentoring

Daniel Jewesbury

All art-making proceeds by questions. And each attempt at an answer brings more questions: it's a dialectical process, always unfinished, always leading to some other consideration, some new problem that can enrich the understanding of a situation, not necessarily by being 'answered' definitively, but by suggesting yet more questions, more problems and concerns and new approaches.

Dr Daniel Jewesbury is a visual artist based in Northern Ireland.

The exploratory journey from arts student to professional arts practitioner entails learning to develop self motivated processes of research and enquiry. The professional artist is therefore expected to generate their own questions.

Collaborative or community-led art processes have often suffered in the past from short-termist or over-prescriptive agendas that set out what the project should 'do'. For example that the project should raise the participants' self-esteem, should empower the participants, should make the participants more employable, respectable, happier with their lot. Too often in the past art was a short-cut to some other desirable end and the artist was expected simply to deliver some predetermined 'benefits' through whatever medium happened to have been chosen by the commissioning agency. Too often, they were expected not to ask questions.

What questions might you ask yourself if you were a professional artist approaching a long-term collaborative project with a group of individuals you'd never met before?

And how might you try and prepare yourself for the questions that would suggest themselves as the project progressed? Questions whose very nature it would be entirely impossible to predict in advance.

Perhaps the most important quality in an artist wanting to work in a collaborative context is their openness to questions – to having their own outlook, their cultural and class assumptions, their prejudices and preconceptions challenged by others who, though they may not have a training in art, still know how to ask questions.

Over the last fifteen years collaborative art practices have moved increasingly away from a static model of the 'wise artist dispensing knowledge to a grateful community'.

Many collaborative, inquisitive artists, and many involved in developing commissioning guidelines, have discovered that there is no definitive template to fall back on, no formalised store of knowledge that can be replicated wholesale irrespective of the specifics of context and community.

The Connect mentoring programme developed by Create and Common Ground provides accounts of collaborative artists engaged in mentoring relationships with experienced practitioners outside of their particular projects. The programme is designed as an implementable and practical methodology to assist mentees and mentors in formalising and structuring a shared learning development.

A mentoring process can address many of the gaps in knowledge and experience. It makes available to the mentee, on their own terms, the guidance of an experienced artist acquainted with some of the pitfalls and problems associated with genuinely engaged practice.

It also aims to ensure that the mentor has no direct involvement in the project itself. For the mentee there is an external outlet for them to turn to which provides a space where the mentor can speak with candour. Crucially the Connect Mentoring Programme is neither a business model of inculcation into an approved way of working, nor a directive pedagogic model.



Image: Anna Berndston. Performance: Earth Rubbish. Photo: Iris Selke. Anna Berndston was awarded the Firestation Artists' Studios/Arts and Disability Ireland Studio Award 2010. Anna is mentor to artist Amanda Elena Conrad.

This is in fact, a central feature of the mentoring process. The artist-mentor is not viewed as one who can reveal any 'right' answers, or chart a safe path through dangerous territory. Indeed, s/he may not attempt to answer any of the questions that the mentee faces at all. Rather, through discussion and enquiry, the relationship can help the mentee to look afresh, to explore different contexts, and to find entirely new questions.

If this is a pedagogical situation, it is one of the oldest that we have, bearing as it does a striking resemblance to the Socratic questioning method described by Plato, where through continual refinement of successive contradictory questions, both parties end up with a greater understanding of the matter in hand. The mentor, then, is simply someone who can *understand* the nature of the questions being faced, and who can perhaps foresee what other, associated problems could arise. The mentor is someone who knows what question might be useful to ask next.

The importance of such a supportive mentoring process cannot be overstated in situations where an artist comes to collaborate from outside the community, and brings with them cultural or political values that may diverge greatly from those of the participants.

Increasingly, the lack of political will to develop or promote opportunities for meaningful intercultural dialogue means that there is precious little guidance that the collaborative artist can seek in interrogating their own preconceived ideas, or indeed challenging (constructively) those of the participants in the project. This is not simply about constructing 'difference' as somehow only of relevance to essentialised racial, ethnic or national groups. Income and social-class disparities present just as challenging problems for the collaborative artist to negotiate, and of course the traditional markers of exclusion and inequality – race, class and gender – will often be found to go hand in hand.

Connect provides a blueprint that can be used by artists and communities, but more importantly it is itself something that can be questioned and refined. Perhaps the single most important question that the mentoring process can instil in the mentee is "What questions can I encourage others to ask of me?"

The Connect Mentoring Programme is an Arts Council funded initiative. Copies of the *Connect Mentoring Programme* (Booklet and DVD) are available from **Create**. Call the **Create** office (01-473-6600) or email info@create-ireland.ie to request a copy.

For information on Common Ground visit www.commonground.ie

To read comments by mentors and mentees using the Connect Mentoring Programme visit the Connect blog: <http://connectprogramme.wordpress.com/>

For information on the Artist in the Community Scheme Research and Development with Mentoring Award visit www.create-ireland.ie.