

Introduction

At the age of nine my music teacher made me stand up in front of the whole class and try to whistle a short tune she first played on the piano. After the first four notes she stopped me and asked me sit down. I was not one of the lucky ones to be selected to learn a musical instrument or to sing in the school choir. This was the way in which I learned that I had no ear for music and while I might have the pleasure of listening to others make music, it was an area of artistic endeavour that would be for ever closed to me as far as the school was concerned.

Nevertheless, I clung on to the dream that one day I would sing in a band. So I got hold of a guitar and learned how to play. Later, long after I had left school, a friend showed me that if you open your mouth and listen to what comes out anybody can sing. I had found my voice, finally, by the age of twenty-three and I was singing in a band and writing my own songs. The most fulfilling activity in my life was not developed through formal education but by myself and with my friends. School had done everything it could to make me believe that music was something done only by the talented few, and that I was certainly not one of them.

Community Arts takes as its starting point that everyone is creative and, that essentially, everyone is an artist. The Community Arts movement grew up as a response to the elitist approach of schools and arts institutions, which exclude the majority from being involved in the production of art. Throughout its short history has sought to redefine the role of art and the role of the artist.

Community Arts is a way of describing creative activities that bring people together in their communities and that give people the opportunity to gain new skills and new opportunities. Community Arts works to nurture the potential that exists in all communities to be creative and to find a voice to express their concerns through and using the Arts.

This book sets out to explain the Community Arts process through the eyes of some people who work with the Arts, to

bring about positive changes in communities. All the writers are experienced practitioners who are working, or have at some time worked, to develop Community Arts in Walsall, in the West Midlands, and many of the examples draw on work there. The themes, however, are universal and the writings highlight issues in contemporary practice that will be relevant to anyone interested in the development of Community Arts.

The first chapter is intended as a brief introduction to Community Arts and the Community Arts process. Each following chapter is then dedicated to exploring a key theme. Every one of these themes is a cornerstone in Community Arts practice. Chapters are split into two parts. A *keynote*, which I have written as editor, introducing and explaining the theme, and an article by a contributor, which selects an issue and develops the theme further by rooting it in current work.

Why Walsall?

Walsall provides the focus and inspiration for this book for two reasons. Firstly, because 14 years of the practice of Community Arts activity in this one area has provided a solid body of developmental work which, both constitutes the successful outcome of a daring, unique experiment in local authority-based Community Arts work, and contributes something new to the developing history of Community Arts.

The second more important reason, is that drawing on related work provides a context for debates and arguments which have echoed through the Community Arts movement since its inception. I wanted to examine this legacy through the words and ideas of some of the people responsible for its development. Because the book is part of the Educational Heretics series, it seemed fitting to collaborate with some people who have been responsible for developing and propounding the arch heresy that everybody has the right and the ability to participate in the Arts.

The book aims to be accessible to anyone, whatever their experience of Community Arts, and, because of the way it is organised, could serve either as a general introduction to the

uninitiated, or as a provocative read for people already involved in its practice.

Chapter one

Warming Up

Definitions and core values

by Mark Webster

How many times have I heard people say "*I can't draw*"? The fact is, that most people do not think they are artistic or that the Arts have much to do with their lives. To many, it is just something that recalls unhappy memories of schooldays. Yet this is interesting, given the fact that we are surrounded by art products. Mass culture has bred a whole generation of art consumers but it has brought little by way of choice or diversity. Neither has it done anything to democratise the Arts or to give people the belief that its production is something in which they can actively participate.

This is not, of course, something peculiar to Britain. All western/northern industrialised countries have demonstrated the same tendency to lodge the power to define and to create art with an educational and economic elite, and to produce a population of art consumers.

Even so, every community has its break dancers, silk painters and poets. People get together to sing, to act and to tell stories - but this creativity tends to go unnoticed and unvalued and finds little representation in official culture. Its importance and significance is largely unrecognised and unacknowledged and, where cultural forms find popularity, they are quickly appropriated or co-opted by the arts establishment or the commercial arts sector.

Community Arts grew in Britain as a movement to try to re-establish the link between people and culture, to stimulate and inspire new types of activity and to value and promote latent or hidden skills and talents in communities. It attempts to give people the tools to be active, confident participators and creators, to help

2 Definitions and core values

communities discover, develop and use their ability to express themselves through creativity, and to find their voice.

What is Community Arts?

Community Arts is a term embracing all those activities which involve groups of people doing creative things together. What differentiates Community Arts, say, from amateur arts or the professional or commercial arts, is that:

- It promotes participation, regardless of the existing level of skill or 'talent'.
- It is undertaken by a group who either have the same collective identity, or a goal greater than the art form itself, or both.
- It is developed primarily to provide opportunities for people who through economic or social circumstance have little access to the means to participate in the Arts.

The activities are often in the form of projects and (though not exclusively) consist of workshops that lead towards an end event or end product.

The activity itself could be anything from a Community Festival to a book, a video to a dance, a mosaic to a mural, or even a combination of all these and more. Community Arts is not defined by art form but by process.

The long term effect of Community Arts work may be the setting up of a self-sustaining activity or permanent group - a writing group in a library perhaps, or a community choir. It may lead a community group to see the potential of the Arts in connection with another activity - a housing campaign, health promotion or the programme of activities for an over sixties group. Alternatively, it may provide access to a field of endeavour that an individual felt was previously closed to them - someone who had always enjoyed social dancing goes on to learn Bhanghra or Jazz dance. Also, its long term effect may be simply that individuals feel more empowered and confident to go on to do other things in their lives, like taking part in more community activity or getting involved in local politics or to go into further or higher education.

When projects lead to the setting up of self-sustaining activity or to the opening of a resource, this is usually termed a 'development', and it is work to bring about these 'developments' (i.e. development work) that probably does the most to authenticate Community Arts' claims to make long lasting change, and to differentiate Community Arts from other participative arts activity.

Another feature of Community Arts activity is that at some stage in a project's lifetime it involves the involvement of an artist or an arts worker. These are a breed of people who spend their time and make a living from sharing their skills with people in order that they can participate in projects, learn skills and share ideas. Often these workers define themselves in terms of art-form specialisms, for example as visual artists, or as 'makers', or performers; or even more specifically, as say, video workers, digital media workers, dancers or textile workers.

Since the scale of much of the work often necessitates the involvement of more than one worker and a considerable number of resources, teams have grown up made up of workers with complimentary arts skills. In addition, projects do not simply spring out of thin air. They need to be administered, co-ordinated and managed. As a result, the last twenty five years has seen the rise of another breed of people called Arts Development Workers or Community Arts Development Workers. It is their job to see the potential for projects, to talk to people, to find money, to set up and manage projects and ultimately to identify potential new developments after projects have finished and to build the outcomes of projects into policies and strategies.

There are several models for the supply of these Community Arts 'services':

Freelance - Where arts workers or development workers work independently, making partnerships with community groups or other arts agencies around specific projects.

Art form agencies - Agencies who specialise in a single art form or activity such as drama, dance or video. Their activities may be linked to a particular facility such as a community dance studio or community video studio, or they may specialise in setting up

4 Definitions and core values

community-based projects within community facilities. Quite often they do both.

Arts organisations with Community Arts officers or Education officers - Within this category are all those organisations whose main activity is not participatory but who want to promote participation in the Arts or increase access to the. Such organisations include theatre groups and art galleries who often describe their work with communities and schools as *Audience Development*.

Community Arts agencies - These are organisations that exist to develop Community Arts activities in a variety of art forms based on community needs. The early model for such organisations when Community arts as a concept was still finding its feet was of small companies in the voluntary sector, funded by the then regional arts authorities, and local councils employing workers with a range of art form skills to work within a given catchment area. While such teams still exist, and in some cases have grown quite large, with attendant resource bases and arts centres, the past twenty years has also seen the growth of the local authority sector.

Local authorities

Most of the larger local councils now either have a Community Arts team, a Community Arts Officer, or an Arts Development Officer who, as part of their brief, have the job of developing Community Arts. While some local authorities actually employ their own art form staff, more usually local authority officers act as brokers between local community needs and the arts organisations, or arts workers within their area. There is no set model for delivery. Sometimes local authorities are direct providers of projects and programmes of activity while in others seek a more developmental approach encouraging partnership working cross service area within the council or in partnership with other organisations. With the large number of funding sources now available through regeneration frameworks and of course through the National Lottery, most local authorities have both an advisory and advocacy role in supporting voluntary and community groups in applying for funds to support community arts work at a local level. Some local authorities even administer their own grants fund

from which it is possible to apply to set up Community Arts activity to local arts organisations. Increasingly the pressure is on local authorities to think regionally and to work at a strategic level and many have argued that this will have the effect of reducing their role as direct service delivers in the long term. This diversity of practice has led to a wide variance in philosophy, method and approach between local authorities to the point which it is possible to say that there is no universally understood definition of what the term Community Arts actually means.

Walsall Community Arts Team

Walsall Community Arts Team is a local authority team that, while not unique, represents an important development in the way Community Arts is developed within a geographical area. It was set up in 1989, as part of a new Arts And Cultural Services Division within the brand new Leisure Services Department of Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council. Within the division, alongside the Community Arts Team, was brought the Walsall Art Gallery, the Museums section and, the then, yet to be completed, Walsall Garage, Arts and Media Centre.

Walsall is a large urban conurbation to the north west of Birmingham, consisting of four distinct towns and something around 265,000 people. To the north of the Borough is a large expanse of 1950's council housing where the population is largely white and working class. To the south and west is an area of mixed housing ranging from high rise blocks, to back to back terraces, home to a rich mixture of communities and cultures. All the indicators show Walsall to be a place that is economically and socially disadvantaged. By common agreement, it was also a place that in 1989 was starved of resources for the Arts.

The whole arts and cultural development, which emerged out of a process which included a cultural audit and years of planning and negotiating, had a strong community bias, and in this reflected the history and commitment of Walsall Council to producing accessible, relevant, community-focused services. The Community Arts Team, therefore, had the advantage of existing within a framework which, in theory at least, valued community focused

6 Definitions and core values

work, and put Community Arts work alongside its mainstream services. It was also building on a history of Community Arts provision in the Borough which had been sporadic and piecemeal but which had made some real achievements and demonstrated the potential for development.

In its first incarnation, the Team had four full-time development workers, of which I was one, and a budget to employ freelance arts workers. It was then also part of an agreement with West Midlands Arts, The Regional Arts Board, which would bring extra money into the Borough over the next three years to finance Community Arts developments.

The approach we took from the start was that of active initiators. We did not just want to wait until groups came to us, we believed that the only way we would have an effect was if we went out and found projects to get going. It was also important to us that the service was actually based on people's needs and that we were not simply parachuting in 'arty' projects which we thought would be good for people.

Early attempts to set up projects which reflected people's needs included a Banner Festival on one council estate, which was designed to bring groups together to celebrate their hopes for the future. In another area, we brought in video workers to work with several groups as part of a project to document housing problems, while another community organisation worked on a photographic project which tied into the opening of their community centre and documented their aspirations for the centre.

As our experience grew so did that of the groups we worked with, and soon people came to us to start developing their ideas. While we continued to develop new projects with new groups, there was now also need to set up a support structure which could help groups to develop and manage their own projects.

In the fifteen years of its existence, the Community Arts Team in Walsall has developed a strong philosophy for the provision of this support, or 'development service', and a structure for its delivery. Today the team offers a complex programme of development work, advocacy, advice and project delivery across a whole range

of agendas. The key to its strength as it has grown is that although it now works at a strategic level within the council and across the region it has not lost its personable hands on approach. A member of the team could equally find themselves being called to London to advise a government committee one day, be asked to sit in for the council's chief executive on a regional regenerational panel the following day and then find themselves humping equipment for a community event on the next. That it's annual turnover as a team is now well in excess of one million pounds has not meant it has lost any of its grass roots support, and this has been built on the very simple philosophy of agreeing what they are going to do with communities and then delivering it, exactly when and how they said they were going to deliver it.

Over the years the Team has developed some fundamental principles for the practice of Community Arts in Walsall. These are now woven into all of the work of the Team and provide the basis for the arts policy officially adopted by the Council:

- **Empowerment** : that work should empower communities in Walsall
- **Participation** : that work should seek and promote the active participation of communities
- **Access** : that all work promotes greater access to the Arts
- **Quality** : that people in Walsall deserve high quality service
- **Partnership** : that all work is done in partnership with local communities

These principles form the cornerstones on which all the work is now based, and the basis for the development of the Community Arts Service in Walsall. By focusing in on these principles in turn, and by exploring the issues that arise out of them, the following chapters of the book aim to explain the power of the Community Arts process to foster change, and its ability to move things on.

Chapter two

Finding a Voice

Keynote: Empowerment

The concept of empowerment seems simple, or even self evident; the idea that a person, a group of people, or a community, might in some way become powerful as the result of some action done to them or actively undertaken by them. It is, clearly, a word with political overtones and when first used within Community Arts circles it was used to describe an intention. This was, that a participatory arts activity would not only give people the understanding and knowledge to undertake arts activities, but that this process would give them insight into the nature of the oppressive ways in which society functions and give them the tools to do something about it. Many practitioners made comparisons between their work and political struggles elsewhere in the world, believing that the Arts could unleash creative energies, build solidarity within communities, and give people a voice to express their aspirations and help them to build positive strategies for change.

Perhaps because of the historically strong connection between community work and Community Arts work or because of the change in the political climate over the last 25 years, the overtly political use of the word has now been eclipsed by a more personalised use, that of describing 'personal empowerment' (a term popular in social and community work). This is seen as a process by which people gain the confidence to make decisions about their own life and act upon them, and thus discover their own power.

Increasingly the term empowerment is dropped entirely and replaced by the concept of 'building self esteem'. An altogether more passive phrase which sees the participant as someone who needs their self esteem raising rather than an active willing partner in the activity in question who is seeking to achieve something. This is unfortunate, because though now somewhat discredited, the

word 'empowerment' accurately describes what every arts worker knows to be one of the most powerful and direct aspects of their work - that through getting involved in participative arts work people gain skills, confidence, and assertiveness, far beyond the reaches of the original activity and that this has a very significant positive effect on communities.

This is partly as a result of simply doing an activity - any activity - with other people, and partly through the power of the Arts; through the realisation they can act, sing, paint or whatever, and that they do have a voice and words to express themselves. This is the power of participatory arts work.

It is through tapping this life-changing energy that Community Arts has the basis for making its most revolutionary claims. The combination of high profile activity, high community involvement, and high expectation that follows in the wake of Community Arts activity is a potent cocktail, and often brings about fundamental changes to communities.

The knock-on effects can have huge benefits for communities as people start to plan more activities. Not only do communities become more vibrant, bristling with cultural activities, but people become skilled in acquiring resources, used to being listened to, and most importantly, accustomed to using creative approaches in the solving of difficult problems.

Integral to the Community Arts process is that people are not only involved in the art form itself, but in the creative decisions, practical arrangements and the management of projects. Through being listened to, through engaging in discussion and through making decisions, they begin to become accustomed to the exercise of power and democracy

It is in the practicalities of doing projects that people often have their most empowering experiences, and it is through using these skills, and this confidence and enthusiasm in other fields, that communities begin to change. People start to take action, ranging from voicing their concerns on the parent liaison body of the local school, through to attending council consultation forums. Often people who previously did not realise they had a voice, find out that they have the power to influence real change.

The argument goes full circle. Participatory arts projects can be empowering for individuals, but the simple fact of empowerment is not enough to ensure change in communities. A rigorous, democratic and sustained approach to Community Arts activity provides the basis for a positive change to occur and the opportunity to keep things changing.

Part two of this chapter explores the empowering effect of Community Arts in one community in Walsall - on the Beechdale Estate.

Community Arts and empowerment on the Beechdale Estate

by Jonathan Herbert

"I never believed that I could sing, before somebody persuaded me to join Beechdale Gospel Choir. Now I'm singing four part harmony, it's unbelievable, I'm regularly singing in public now. I can't believe it!"

So says Liz Whitehouse, Beechdale resident, mother and member of Beechdale Arts Forum. Through the process of Community Arts, the community of Beechdale has found its voice. Many people's voices have been heard for the first time through the medium of the Arts. There is a new confidence in self, in the community, and belief in collective action.

"Beechdale is a large post-war council estate on the outskirts of Walsall, with high rates of unemployment, with most working people on low wages, a high incidence of one parent families and much vandalism and juvenile crime".

This introduces many of the Beechdale Arts Forum's applications to funders. The estate presents itself to the visitor as grey and colourless, with many boarded up houses and shops, together with numerous public buildings covered in graffiti and racist slogans. The estate is geographically on an island boxed in to the West by the M6, East by the A34, North by a canal and the South by the derelict site of an old power station. This leads to a sense of isolation from the town of Walsall and from the world as a whole. For many years the estate has been portrayed by the media as bleak and socially deprived - 'a sink estate' or the 'troubled Beechdale Estate'.

One of the aims of the Beechdale Arts Forum (B.A.F.) has been to challenge the negative media stereotype and allow the creative voice of the people of Beechdale to be heard. *"To celebrate all*

that is good and positive about life on the Beechdale Estate." (The aims of B.A.F.)

Through participation in arts projects, numerous people have been forced to challenge their own often negative self image and sometimes low self esteem, and also the way, locally, that people are written off as useless because they happen to live on Beechdale.

The Arts Forum has enjoyed huge success in discovering and showcasing latent local talent, lurking below the surface on Beechdale. Now, the papers are full of stories and photographs about Beechdale, all celebrating the Forum's latest success, be it a show, a mosaic or a carnival.

In 1990 a local M.P. laughed in disbelief when he heard about a proposed Arts Festival on the Beechdale Estate. *"What, on Beechdale? Never"*, he said. We proved him wrong. Six years on, another M.P. is issuing press releases, keen to endorse and support Beechdale Arts Forum's £250,000 bid to the National Lottery. We proved the first M.P. wrong, and we did it ourselves.

Over the past six years numerous projects have happened - all planned and managed by local people with support and supervision from the Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council Community Arts Team. These include five week-long Arts Festivals, three major Community Plays, three Winter Lantern Processions, a Youth Theatre, a Gospel Choir, numerous Variety Shows, a Writers' Workshop, Banner Making, Mosaic Work, Video work, Music workshops and others. On Beechdale there is now an annual calendar of events, which people look forward to and which continues to involve new participants.

The power of creativity

"Why has the Arts Forum been so successful?", we are sometimes asked, and the answer lies both in the power of the Arts to bring about change, harnessed to the principles of empowerment of local people and their complete ownership of projects. Undoubtedly for many individuals, the Arts have also been transformative. The power of creativity has opened up new possibilities for people and has greatly extended their vision of themselves and the world they live in.

"I felt prouder when they clapped", said a small ten-year-old boy. To be clapped by two hundred people at the end of the show, by members of your own community, is a highly charged and powerful affirming experience. To grow in confidence, to get up on stage after weeks of painstaking, painful, doubt-ridden rehearsal is a powerful achievement. To be told that you are a success and be really praised has been a new experience for many in our Forum. People have physically glowed while on stage and have come alive in new and exiting ways. To hear a sixty-eight-year-old man read his own work in public for the first time is powerful, inspiring and dynamic for both the author and the audience. To have taken part in sewing a banner or creating a mosaic, is for many their way of contributing and participating in something original and new. It is in stark contrast to sitting on a production line being told what to do, doing the same job every day. Life changing decisions have been made sitting round and chatting, sewing up a costume or creating a set. A woman decides to leave her violent partner, somebody else is encouraged to apply to go to college, whilst another gains the confidence to go out and get a job.

"Loads of people have been involved ... It's something new and worthwhile and is a central topic of conversation on the estate. It's bringing us together and is giving us something to think about for ourselves, rather than having other people think for us".

Underlying the Arts Forum's work is the principle of local planning, control, management and evaluation of projects. This has meant that only projects and art forms which are appropriate are used on the estate, and also that employed arts workers receive a lot of support, encouragement and direction. Work is always evaluated, and above all, when a piece of work finishes, it is celebrated. Built into the Code of Practice of the Beechdale Arts Forum is the method 'evaluate, celebrate, plan next project!' To be part of a purposeful enthusiastic planning group has also been empowering for individuals - learning new skills in documentation, liaising with the media (*"I've been on the radio - I'm famous!"*) budgeting, planning, evaluating ...

Vital to Beechdale's success has been the partnership with Walsall M.B.C. Community Arts Team who have provided training and

consultation in managing projects and workers in a way that has empowered local people. This has meant that freelance arts workers of the highest calibre, highly committed to empowerment, have been employed. Where arts workers have been too dictatorial or have been lacking in 'people skills', they have soon been discarded. Thus local control has meant appropriate artists being chosen, alongside appropriate art forms and visions, and the dreams and aspirations of local people being acted out. People begin to use voices they never had before.

Above all, to have control over things happening locally, rather than 'them' doing it for us, has been a transformative and highly politicising experience for many. Making history rather than letting the world go by. As Gary Preston says:

"It's the first time I've done anything like this and I'm over the moon. It beats sitting in front of the telly and falling asleep by 10 every night. I've learnt about expressing myself and joining in with everyone, about being a doer rather than a watcher. It's given me a purpose in life, made me part of something special and given me something to look forward to."

The Forum has also begun to open people's eyes to the wider world. Last year fifty people from Beechdale visited the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, to see Verdi's *'Otello'* and this year a Gospel Choir from Beechdale has sung in Lichfield Cathedral.

"Hey look, the mosaic's up, I made that!", shouted eleven-year-old Carry. It had been the culmination of four months' work, designed and installed by local people with expertise and skills passed on by two local arts workers. The project had involved over one hundred and fifty local residents of all ages. A central principle of Community Arts is access to all, and part of Beechdale's success has been in encouraging a broad cross section of people of different ages and abilities to work together. On an estate where young and old are pitted against each other, where the elderly live in fear of gangs of youths, and young people are verbally abused and denied access to public buildings and play areas, the Forum has sought to break down these barriers. The new pride which people feel in Beechdale and its artistic achievements, is shared amongst young and old alike. Through learning to trust and work

together, young and old alike have gained a new respect for one another.

Beechdale now has an annual timetable of artistic events throughout the year, and plays, festivals, processions and projects have become both a focus for community and celebrations of a new positive sense of identity and belonging. The Winter Lantern procession last December involved over two hundred lanterns, and the streets which people were afraid to walk at night, were reclaimed as hundreds of people came out of their houses to watch and applaud the procession.

As well as celebrating and encouraging community, the Arts on Beechdale have allowed people to explore many issues. Racism has been confronted and challenged through our working practices; through drama, writing, work in schools and by employing a number of black workers on an estate with traditional support for the National Front. Domestic violence has been confronted again in drama and through 'making' projects, which have allowed women to begin to talk of their experiences for the first time. Bullying has also been a constantly recurring theme, as has vandalism, juvenile crime and anti-social behaviour. The Arts Forum has run projects with young people at risk, and those who have participated have begun to feel less isolated and that they belong somewhere.

But why has Beechdale Arts Forum worked? Why has it become so successful when so many other projects over the years sponsored by Walsall City Challenge, by Central Government and by local authority initiatives, have failed? B.A.F. has succeeded, I believe, for two main reasons. Firstly, because arts projects are fun, and secondly, because of the principles of Community Arts - of access to all, local control, empowerment, participation and of partnership.

Because projects are fun, people participate and are not scared to have a go. Many of our participants try something as a 'one-off' and are hooked, something captures their imagination. The Arts also provide people with new confidence, a vision of something new. To dress up is to be taken out of yourself, and opens up new windows of consciousness. To make and create something with a group, gives you an enormous sense of achievement and can change how you look at things.

It is very hard to quantify community spirit and how the Arts build this and empower a whole estate, but to see the colours, lights, costumes, to hear the beat and voices of the procession, is to experience a very powerful sense of common identity. The procession is soon gone, the carnival over, but the shared collective memories live on in the conscious and unconscious mind.

"We've found a world where we can live together, We've found a world that was here all the time.

"When we cleared the soil so it could breathe, and dug away the grime, We found a whole new world called common ground".

(Don't make me Loff, Beechdale Summer Panto, 1996)

