

# **An exploration into how artist residencies serve as a training tool for civic engagement**

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**Insights and Tools for Managing Arts Projects with Societal  
Impact**

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The question of how to 'train' people to use creativity for civic engagement purposes has been widely debated in the UK. The emerging findings on the training experiences of participatory artists (Schwarz, 2013) have identified that many artists feel they lack training and tend to learn on the job. In this paper, Residency<sup>1</sup> - an EU Lifelong Learning funded project will be used to explore the training needs for artists and communities working in this context. The paper considers how residencies concerned with civic objectives, can also serve as a training tool.

### Context

In the UK, not only are we aware that artists working in socially engaged work feel deprived of training opportunities, but there is also evidence that formal learning opportunities are declining (Consillium, 2012; Louise, 2013). In sectors such as health, education and community work, untrained workers are often referred to as a risk (Glasper, 2011; Orr et al, 2013) and yet, artists working in these sectors have no obvious training pathways. The lack of professional accountability and their freelance status arguably makes it difficult for them to receive the appropriate guidance.

For those using the arts for civic engagement purposes, this lack of training can be problematic. In the UK, community and participatory arts work has delivered community regeneration and community engagement activities (Matarasso, 1997). In addition, Government Policy frequently refers to the use of creativity for issues associated with civic engagement (Cabinet Office, 2010; South, 2015). Policy associated with civic engagement rarely refers to the need to train and support the workforce which is delivering the work (including artists), and yet those engaged in civic engagement work stress the importance of understanding the principles underpinning civic engagement as well as having the practical knowledge of how to implement it (Locality, 2015).

[www.residencyproject.eu](http://www.residencyproject.eu)



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Residencies have a long tradition of offering artists an opportunity to escape their normal work environment and immerse themselves in new cultures (Lydiate, 2009). The Residency project, involving the University of Staffordshire, the University of Warsaw and the University of Barcelona consists of an action research programme involving artist mobility between the three countries to deliver three residencies. The purpose of these residencies is to use participatory appraisal techniques to develop projects, which tackle issues associated with civic engagement, and to examine how this serves as a learning process for artists and communities engaged in civic engagement work.

In this paper we will be concentrating on the findings from the UK residency, which took place in two residential and nursing care settings for older people in North Staffordshire. A recent study identified that people in Stoke-on-Trent felt they had limited influence in local decision making processes (Westco, 2013). Spanish artist, Almudena Caso was appointed by care staff and was assisted by a local artist, Cathie Powell-Davies and Rebecca Owen from Creative Health CIC as the Community Practitioner. It took place September – December 2014. The artists both have a degree in an art specialism and post graduate qualifications in socially engaged arts practice. This level of education was not a prerequisite for the posts, but the commissioning team felt their educational journey mirrored that of many artists dealing with civic engagement issues.

Whilst this paper is concerned with the learning, which took place within the context of the residency, the residency itself was concerned with using creativity to engage older people living in residential settings in local community life- as well as change perceptions about the profile of the people living in the settings. For further information about the creative work undertaken during the residency please refer to the project website.

## **An analysis of our learning**

**I will begin by briefly analysing some of the findings concerned with the learning experiences that emerged during the residency. I will then consider these in relation to educational theory and then I will review them in terms of their impact on learning pedagogies associated with participatory creative work dealing with civic engagement issues.**

**From a methodological position, the Residency project has been conducted using participatory appraisal to enable the research team—including participants, artists, staff and academics to guide, manage and reflect upon the project. This process has been documented in the form of blogs, reflective diaries, community meetings and interviews. This dialectical practice enabled the team to analyse the full residency experience and community partners have already identified that the research process alone raised their awareness regarding the need to train and support artists and communities undertaking this work. The findings have then been categorised using the ‘golden thread’ conceptual framework (Gregory, 2015), which provides an enabling framework to develop learning and professional pathways for participatory artists.**

### **Providing opportunities to create experienced and skilled artists**

**The residency began with an unexpected learning opportunity. Care workers, activity coordinators, and manager’s liaised with potential participants and the project team to co- create the artist brief. “ It was an interesting process. I am glad I took part. I was concerned with some of the practicalities and the art form, but the interview process made me realise what it was about ”, reflected one manager. They initially sought specific creative skills but the interview process had led to them thinking more about the competencies required to for civic engagement work. Being aware of the learning process was also a new experience**

for the artists. The artists reflected that they were also not accustomed to receive learning experiences, support and professional development in the context of delivering civic engagement work, “ I normally have to do everything myself. I am not used to having resources and help”. They reflected that an important part of their early journey was about understanding everyone’s roles and influence in the wider project team (including participants), and the influence this has on establishing the civic objectives for the work.

The artists participated in an in house induction programme including training in health and safety including risk assessments, ethics, infection control and safeguarding. “In Spain there is a lot less regulation. It makes it easier....the police checks, for example. You think you understand the system- and then it changes”, reflected the artist. However, dealing with some of the practical issues, which are related to some of these procedures in a real life context helped validate the need for the training. For example, one care setting had to stop all activity in the early weeks of the residency due to sickness in the care home and the project team also had to negotiate issues regarding photographic consent in the context of communicating with participants with limited communication and their families.

Artists reported the residency process helped them develop financial skills – beyond budget management. For example, the artists had expected to get a certain level of professional support from the settings and the university. However, in project and workshop work they said they had limited experiences to fully understand what each partner was contributing. “You might go in and get to know people. But you don’t get a chance to really get to know staff and you don’t know what else is going on. Nobody tells you. During Residency we saw what people had to do each day. People work really hard and they were really supportive of the project. Even on a bad day they were there for us”.

- **Developing a portfolio of roles**

**As the residency progressed, the group began to question who was identifying themselves as learners and educators in the process. Roles such as project manager, creative facilitator, cultural producer, and artist were adopted by everyone involved and people adopted a range of roles. This helped aid the understanding between new partners,” It’s amazing what they already do”, said the trainee artist,” they spend a lot of time preparing activities and they are really good at getting everyone to participate”. Care staff, on the other hand remarked, “ it’s amazing how much you have to think about”, and identified that the process made them more aware of the skills they required from artists. Initially, the research was framed around a more traditional educational hierarchy- whereby the university, as the academic partner, helped shape and negotiates the learning experiences. The research demonstrated that this role was more fluid, and in the case of civic engagement work the project management itself had to be critiqued in terms of identifying who was ultimately influencing how and what learning was delivered in the context of the residency.**

**A praxis began to emerge whereby the residency as a learning environment enabled people to adopt different professional roles at different stages in the project, and within each of these roles they had the option of being a learner and/or an educator. Artists said this flexibility in status helped them address issues whereby they can often feel pressurised to ‘over deliver’ in terms of demonstrating that a project is value for money and can achieve significant civic engagement outcomes. The collaborative way of working during residency helped artists work alongside participants and the project team to develop a business model for their work and develop skills to assist with the budget negotiations and time management.**



## **The reflective practitioner**

**The artists reflected on their own experiences of having to navigate the civic functions associated with living in a new place, and the impact this has on learning and implementing civic engagement objectives. Our initial research with artist focus groups had found that artists were aware that their work could contribute towards civic engagement but many felt they didn't have the language or knowledge of the civic sector to confidently express their ideas. The Artist identified that the process of temporarily living in another county required her to personally engage with civic life and notably, she identified the inter relationship between civic and the social opportunities- which she later tried to incorporate in her work. For example, early in the Residency she saw an opportunity to take part in an Artist Soup Kitchen- an art and debate event hosted by a local independent art gallery, which is involved in socially engaged art initiatives. She reflected upon her uncertainty about where to go and who she might meet, but the event led to her developing new perceptions about the city, as well as gaining useful professional contacts and friendships. This experience of becoming a citizen in a new place gave her a heightened sense of not only the civic opportunities that were available but also an understanding to possible barriers to participation. Hosting a Spanish artist required everyone to think about civic opportunities from a personal perspective. The process of thinking about civic functions including housing, social opportunities, health, council services- and just talking about the community helped people develop a shared language, "it's hard to know what to tell someone. I've never really thought about it before", reflected one member of staff.**

**Learning by doing- in particular by artists and project staff responding to challenges together, was an important aspect of the learning experience. For example, they began to work more closely together to explore ways to work more closely with the local community. The**

residency was designed initially to involve local groups such as schools and arts organisations – which prior to the residency commencing the artists were keen to implement. However, the challenges they faced in doing this helped them re-assess their approach. For example, they reflected after a community session was cancelled, “this has highlighted again the need for us to have a flexible approach; nothing is predictable especially when you’re working with people”. Through their enquiries to make connections with community organisations, **they became conscious of how older people in care settings were infrequently involved in other initiatives for older people living in the community- especially in terms of the arts.** The residency model offers the time to enable them to learn on the job, whereas previously they reflected they had to trust the advice of the commissioning organisation about who and how they should work- but in the case of civic engagement, they felt it was important this information could be challenged. By leading their own research, they observed how the care settings were not considered in local cultural or civic engagement decision-making processes plus there were a number of practical barriers preventing their participation. They shared their findings with the project team and it ultimately led to staff making enquiries to become part of older people’s arts events in the city and since the Residency, two more projects in the settings have emerged from the connections made during this research phase.

### **An analysis on the learning experiences**

Our initial research question was whether the Residency format created an effective training ground for artists? Following our Residency, we identified that the identity of the learner in a residency context was more fluid and the staff, artists, participants all adopted a learner and teacher identities to help them learn and share skills to achieve civic engagement objectives. The positive response to the study trips (involving people from the UK residency) to the partner countries has led us to think more about the professional development needs for



**'educators' delivering some of the in- house or academic training which people valued within the context of our residency.**

**These initial findings reveal an emergence of a social pedagogy, which is equally concerned with the learning needs of the artists and community workers as with the personal and care needs of everyone in the learning community (Cameron and Moss, 2011). In other words, for transformative learning to take place for the artist in a civic engagement context, then the learning process has to demonstrate that it will complement towards creating the appropriate caring environment within which civic engagement activities can be nurtured.**

**It also is concerned with communities reacting to political systems and oppression. Volunteering was also activated during the Residency process. Commonly seen as an essential component of civic engagement; participants, care settings and artists all engaged in a range of volunteer activities ranging from giving talks to inspired students, leading community sewing bees, photography sessions led by care staff and attendance at meetings and events beyond the scope of the project.**

**By encouraging the artist and community to create their own programme of collaborative learning in the context of a residency- enables issues such as power, economy, politics and social factors to be taken into consideration both in the context of how the Residency is delivered, but also in addressing issues regarding who and how the learning pathway is controlled. Constructionism's belief that knowledge is created between the interactions between people and that social action should form part of how we learn about the world (Burr, 2003) offers a theoretical framework to help interpret some of our observations about using residencies as a model for learning.**

The emerging curriculum from residency can be categorised within the four community organising tasks, which Wood et al (2015, p. 218) align to social constructionism- identifying communities, organising communities, planning for change and implementing change. The cognitive process for those engaged as learners in the process required them developing strategies to specific situations and then presenting the options to those it concerned- and artists and participants come to a mutual decision. It is also concerned with the situative perspective which takes the view that learning is a social participative activity, and is embedded in a community and a pre-existing dynamic of personal relationships and shared inter-subjective knowledge (Conole et al, 2005; 11). The inter relationship between the artists personal and private life in the context of residency and the necessity to develop good relationships prior to the project commencing are therefore vital in establishing a learning community between the community and the artists.

### **The way forward**

**Current analysis of artist training needs tends to focus around generic training in respect to participatory arts practice and fails to recognise some of the specific knowledge or skills required for work associated with civic engagement. Artists working in civic engagement work and collaborating organisations need to start being identified as learning partnerships- which have an equal role in promoting the values to create the right conditions for learning about civic engagement as well as sharing and reflecting upon what is influencing their learning.**

**Inevitably, at some point the issue of who takes ownership of the residency as a learning model will arise. In our case, using participatory appraisal as a project management tool with both artists, participants, partners and academia worked effectively to help monitor how and what learning took place. As the Residency project develops we aim to develop a toolkit and framework to help communities and participants to work together to monitor this process. We will endeavour to review the**

relationship of formal academic providers with the emergence of self led and community learning initiatives, and seek to ensure all interested parties have a place (but not necessarily sole ownership) of the learning process in this context.

Civic engagement is about individuals finding connections with each other and coming together to advocate for change and improvements within the society where they live. Our Residency experience has taught us that the civic aim of the project and the (formal and informal) learning opportunities are closely entwined. However, those working in the arts and community work need to speak openly about their learning needs in the context of using creativity for civic engagement purposes. Our experiences have taught us that lot assumptions are made about what professionals, artists and participants know about each other – and it is only until these assumptions are communicated that the learning can really begin.

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