

# Giving More Than You Take: a conversation about the ethics, responsibilities and practicalities of facilitating student participation in community-based projects

Dr Loraine Leeson in conversation with Marianne Springham

Marianne: What sort of things do your students do when they finish? What do they go into doing?

Loraine: I lead modules in Art Practice and the Community as part of the Fine Art BA at Middlesex University. Some of last year's graduates formed a collective called The Common and have continued to do community based projects while finding various ways to earn their living. Another student who was doing interactive work around writing is still running these workshops. It is fantastic to see how these students are finding ways to continue their work, as it can't be underestimated how hard that is. Second years sometimes come into the module thinking they will find a future in art therapy or similar, though that's as difficult to get into as any other art job and they would also need re-training. Others see it as a good introduction to teaching. This year some of the second years running projects at Great Ormond Street Hospital school have made a great impression there and would like to carry on doing hospital based creative work.

Marianne: I think your students are more focused towards that area than ours since this is more of a multi-discipline design course. This community project is only a twenty-credit module but though the projects are relatively small in relation to wider course, they make a huge impact on the students. They all get something completely different from it. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. The first question I have is, who benefits? One of our students at the moment is writing about films that were made last year to work out whether they've been used by the community groups and whether they've actually gained from it rather than it being just a student project. If you are putting on projects with students to work with groups in the real world, who does it benefit? Can it be mutually beneficial and if so, how do you make that happen?

Loraine: That's the difficulty, isn't it? Before I talk about community impact however I'd like to mention benefits to students. John Cockram, who has run placement modules at University of East London for some time, studied the effects of community placement on students' own art practice as part of his PhD research. He discovered that those who had done placements also did better in their studio practice. It seemed that working in the 'real world' encouraged them to put together skills and knowledge that they have developed elsewhere and

combine these with their art practice, which may not otherwise happen, and helped to mature them as people, as students and as artists. However, on the other side of things, I am always concerned that what is done with community groups is needed and useful to them. Students like the rest of us need to learn to give more than they take. It should never be the student just going and getting something from a community.

It seems to work best if we support students to develop their own placement or collaborative project, building on their experience and interests. Some don't do placements as such. One student this year is doing a roving swap shop. Others who choose to work in an institution or with an existing group will go and help out first in order to gain some understanding of the context. Then they have to develop an idea for a creative project that will bring their own artistic skills into play while offering something of benefit. It can be tricky because their role can be perceived by their hosts as work experience and this sometimes requires students to be quite assertive. We are there to help them with that and they also take a letter with them that explains that they will eventually be developing a creative project based on participant needs and through negotiated with the institution. This is generally welcomed, though it can take a while to get there. It helps that these are year long modules, since the negotiation and preliminary work can take half of the time, but that side of it is also highly educational.

Marianne: What do you think the value is of these being real and not manufactured projects? Do students actually collaborate with groups sometimes or are they working for the groups?

Loraine: It depends on the situation. Sometimes students collaborate with each other. One is currently collaborating with a fashion student and another last year worked with a European human rights institute in the university. The students can choose to work in either a collaborative or participatory way - projects can be both or either.

Marianne: We have small student groups collaborating together and working in participation with the group or organization. We will have already set up the basic structure of the project and the group they will be working with. One problem that arises is that, although we put students together based on their interests and practices, a lot of groups don't get on. You then get difficulties within the group itself.

Loraine: Collaboration as an approach has been popular over recent decades, particularly with commissioners of public art where artists and architects have frequently been put together without consultation. That can be very hit and miss since that relationship has to support the project. People don't always get on and it can undermine everything to work with the wrong person.

Marianne: How do you decide who to work with? Maybe you can talk in terms of your own practice as well, and also how things cross over with your teaching and cSPACE. You kind of have these two hats. Do they merge?

Loraine: They overlap frequently and I am wearing three hats currently with two different academic roles. Nevertheless, in my experience projects tend to emerge rather than being dreamed up out of the blue. Ailbhe Murphy, an artist based in Ireland once said that the quality of a project is as good as the invitation that initiates it. I thought that was a very good way of putting it. If there is a need, there's energy to make change and a chance to engage in work that might make a difference. Sometimes that can be a direct invitation. For example the Docklands Community Poster Project in the 80s commenced with a request by the East London trades councils for a poster about the redevelopment about to take place, and evolved into ten years of work as the cultural arm of a campaigning community. Projects can also start with the germ of an idea that comes about through familiarity with a situation, which is why we ask students on placement to help out first before coming up with their creative idea. The VOLCO project for instance came out of my experience as a parent, school governor and working in schools as an artist. At that time in the late 90s creativity was disappearing from the curriculum, yet new technology was coming in. I began to feel that a creative approach was called for that would address both, and the project gradually took shape through ongoing dialogue with others involved in education and the delivery of art and the technology in the curriculum. Other projects have started as commissions and developed from there. *Active Energy* was a six-week project, commissioned by SPACE in 2008 and is still going.

Marianne: When starting the projects we talk to students about the specialized knowledge that people have within the community, that we don't have, and how they can learn so much from working with them. I also think about how community practice, community art is valued and how students value these different experiences. If the project works really well, then that maybe changes the way they value their own practice and the way they view success. Do you find that as well? Do you think about how it's valued?

Loraine: It has been different over the years. I was around when community arts were very much valued in the 70s and 80s. Then in the 90s, after ten years of Thatcherism, there was a swing to the right and nobody wanted to know. I'd get invited elsewhere in the world to talk about community arts and would say 'we don't mention the 'c-word' in the UK any more, since community art as a term had come to have such negative connotations in the art world. These names are nevertheless all just labels, useful at the time, but things move on. I believe that what matters is the intention of the work, whatever it is called. Now social practice and socially engaged art have rather become buzz words. It can be useful to ride on that wave but you've got to be careful of the undertow.

Nicholas Bourriaud coined the phrase 'relational aesthetics' in the late 90s. He saw work with people as new form, akin to using paint. He was very influential for a while when there wasn't much written about this field. However in the last ten years there's been a plethora of publications and more understanding and knowledge about this kind of work in the public domain, so it should be easier for emerging artists to carve out a route that is about supporting social change if that is what they want to do.

Marianne: How do you assess these kinds of projects? When you have students working outside of the studio, university, how do you get them to capture their experience and what they're doing?

Loraine: What we've done with the second year module is to change the means of assessment to presentation. It's a much better way to do it and I'd do that in the third year as well if that were possible. It is after all how this sort of work is generally disseminated. You don't often find out about community-based practice in a gallery but rather by going to conferences, events, presentations or through networking. However this does mean that students have to learn how to document their work well. I am struggling a bit with that. Some students do great projects, but their documentation does not do it justice.

Marianne: Once in the thick of a project you are not really thinking about documentation. The students experience new things and it's hard to be engaged in a situation and think at the same time, oh I need to take photo, or I need to remember what this person said to me. It's just completely different isn't it?

Loraine: Absolutely. Another issue is that photography is becoming commonplace with the use of phones and consideration of the quality of the image can easily get lost. These images really matter however, since they might be all you see of a project, and I feel a need to address this more with the students. When working with teenagers in the making of *The Young Person's Guide to East London* I was able in a couple of hours to enable young people to take a good enough set of photographs to be featured on a web site that was also a public resource - not by teaching photography as such, more using a camera to see with. They took some fantastic photos, much better than I've seen by a lot of undergraduates. It's not a difficult task, but needs addressing. It's also important to come up with creative ways of showing documentation. There are many other means of demonstrating process than through documentary photos or video.

Marianne: How do you think we should equip students to work in a community and what kind of practical skills are going to help them and visually represent what they've been doing? What do you do in terms of preparing students to work with people?

Loraine: One workshop I do is on listening skills. I trained as a mediator many years ago and some of those approaches are very useful here. Active listening helps you draw out what people think and listen for what's underneath the answer to identify what somebody might really want out of a project. If you are doing any sort of collaborative or participative project, you need to be able to gain this understanding and negotiate sometimes apparently conflicting ideas. Every party in a project should get what they need out of it and projects can be structured to allow that to happen. Sometimes however I think students need to start a project in order to gain a sense what they're doing before they learn more skills, so that they can understand what they're for. I also feel that students need some historical background for this area of practice. Grant Kester has outlined a very useful historical trajectory in his publication *Conversation Pieces*, and I often start the year with a presentation on artists who have used their work for change, though what I am offering is really just a smattering. It's still popularly assumed that artists work as individuals in studios producing work that is sold on the art market. However that has been the case for less than five hundred years in the west and is tied in with economics and the development of capitalism. Even in the Renaissance artists used to work in teams. Across the world and throughout history, artists have worked in different ways that relate much more directly with the people around them. I would like students to be able to understand that, though have not yet found out a way to integrate that knowledge into an undergraduate course except in the most sketchy way. It would be good to tie this in more closely with the theoretical part of the curriculum.

Marianne: Do you think academic institutions are able to appreciate and fully support community engaged projects. For our project I've had to find external funding, which has made it really hard.

Loraine: Integrating it into the regular degree programme is probably the best approach. In that way extra costs are only required for special activities. One thing we have begun doing that has required funding is a virtual symposium, in collaboration with University of Highlands and Islands. It links up students around the country who are doing community-based practice. There were five partners this year and keynotes from the UK and US. More institutions both here and internationally want to join and I'd like to see it become an annual event as part of an expanding forum for debate and sharing of practice amongst students, staff and practitioners. The costs involved are really only to pay speakers. I am thinking that one way to address the finances would be for a different institution to host it each year, since the relatively small amount of money required may not be too difficult for each to raise as a one-off.

Marianne: I was also wondering how you see the difference between working on community-engaged projects as an academic compared to a practitioner

Loraine: As an academic, you have to be very aware of the power of the institution behind you. It's no use pretending not to have money, or plundering the assets of groups which already have next to nothing. You may know that your own institution is strapped for cash, but I see it as important to get the resources from the institution out. These don't have to be financial, but can also be knowledge, ideas and/or facilities that can support social need. I've witnessed too many instances where universities have taken from communities rather than the other way round and salaried academics regularly ask people in the community to do things for nothing to support their own research. It seems important to find a way to make sure that the university is giving and not taking. Most universities like to see themselves as part of a wider community, and this should also be how they conduct themselves in practice. This is a reciprocal process since the institution gets what it needs in terms of research, profile and support for teaching, but as the more powerful partner it should ensure that the benefits are also flowing the other way.

Coming back to your question about different roles, one way that I've managed to run projects across both communities and institutions is through employing parallel narratives. For example, finding funds to continue work with the Geezers on the *Active Energy* project by doing the next phase in the Lea Valley where Middlesex University is running a project, is a win/win situation. The project is still as devised with the Geezers and combining this with the research enables continuation of the work. At the same time it brings the benefits of a project developed over a long term into a research project of much shorter duration. It also does not detract from the project to describe it in different ways. There is the discussion within the group itself centred on the Geezers' concerns. It is also frequently presented as an art project, sometimes in terms of its replicable technology, and also with sociological framing in terms of citizen-led innovation. For the geographers it is as a dynamic relationship between people and water. I've also just written a chapter for the *Oxford Textbook of Creativity Health and Wellbeing* describing the project as a model for empowering and stimulating older people's active creativity. At the centre of it all however is the respectful relationship I share with this group, the precious core that supports everything else.

Marianne: How important do you think it is that this kind of practice continues with students? Can you see a future to it?

Loraine: I do indeed. It's important to be offering young artists the option of working in a socially engaged way. The alternative is to have them graduate with little experience beyond their specialist area of production, then finding that they want to work with people at a later date. The least we can do is to equip them to do that while as part of their education.