



Where are we now? The journey so far - Speech by Angus McLewin, March 2002

Seminar chaired by Deborah Bull CBE, as part of her programme for the Royal Opera House Artists' Development Initiative in the Clore Studio Upstairs, Royal Opera House, London.

Transcript of speech

The arts in relation to the Criminal Justice System has made quite a journey over the last ten years. To arrive here at prestigious venues like the Royal Opera house, and earlier today at the Tate Modern, it has been a fascinating and perilous journey. From the work pioneered by people such as Anne Peaker and Jill Vincent, who documented and fought for the arts in prisons to where we are today, it has been a journey of opportunities, dangers and partnerships. I'd like to talk a little about where that journey has brought us.

Opportunities

Over 400 arts organisations and individual practitioners are creating opportunities for people to actively take part in the arts across the whole spectrum of crime prevention and crime reduction strategies and programmes. From prevention to resettlement programmes; from custody to community settings, engaging with issues such as reparation and victim awareness.

What we are seeing now is: the consolidation of drama, the resurgence of dance, the use of new technologies to create exciting new work in film animation, video production and music making new writing and ways of communicating through the spoken and written word, over 4000 submissions for the annual 'arts from prisons' exhibition in London. We are now at a point where the arts has the opportunity to be permanently woven into the multi-agency provision of these strategies.

Let's talk about the Dangers

Arts in Prisons has always been seen as dangerous. Historically it been perceived at times as a threat and a disruption, and at others as a distraction. As a threat to security, to notions of punishment, as a disruption of regimes and routines and as a distraction from programmes addressing offending behaviour and educational needs and indeed, sometimes this has been true.

The other dangers for anyone creating arts with people in the Criminal Justice System has been that it will be unseen and unsung. That is changing. From peer education projects such as young people making a drugs awareness campaign involving in one case 250,000 postcards distributed in the community; a giant billboard in a city centre and a cinema ad played before the mainstream film; from writers in residence projects where fathers are writing stories for the children on the outside; and in theatre projects where in a two and a half hour workshop people are writing and performing their own sonnets. The emergence of Circus and Comedy, both providing an exciting, high-risk and challenge factors for those who take part, there is rightly a higher profile of what an important role the arts can play.

But now there is the biggest danger of all, and that is that the arts can be successful! This has two implications.

First, having been sometimes ignored and unnoticed, having to make the arts work, no matter how difficult the circumstances, the arts sector may be made to perform against targets that even the Criminal Justice System may find difficult to achieve. There is a danger of ignoring the cultural and citizenship issues in the pressure to achieve performance targets. There is danger of the arts just being used as a tool and its other qualities being unrecognised and worst of all, in our current climate of measuring everything, of not being measured! Prisons are now seen as 'societal communities'. Can the rights of access to library books be extended to access to participating in the arts? The 'Nothing Works' philosophy of the seventies has given way to the pragmatic 'What Works' approaches of today. The arts is engaged in working with raising literacy standards, with delivering offending behaviour programmes and, what is exciting, is that positive questions are now being asked about exactly how does the arts work? How does it engage people? How does it motivate people? There are beginning to be informed discussions about how the arts can be a more permanent part of the provision within the Criminal Justice System.

Second, there is the danger of supply and demand. As more and more people experience the arts as value to them in their lives, can we answer their questions of: How can I do more of this? What can I do when I get out? How can I train to do video editing? Where can I join a drama group or a dance group? How can I join a writers group?

Partnerships

Some of the answers to these pertinent questions are coming through the third element of this journey – through the range of partnerships that are being developed.

Much of the pioneering work is still initially funded by charitable trusts and foundations, or commercial sponsors, but there are strong partnerships being built with the Prison Service, the Youth Offending Teams and the large voluntary sector organisations. At a national level, the Arts Council of England has today announced a partnership with the YJB, Prison Education is now located within the Department for Education and Skills with the Prisoners Learning and Skills Unit working with the Unit for the Arts and Offenders to maintain and develop the role of the arts, with for example, ways of delivering and developing IT skills. On a local and regional level Youth offending Teams are turning to arts organisations to help deliver their programmes with, for example, a drama project taking referrals to deal with violent young offenders.

To sum up

There is a journey being made from not just talking about ‘transferable skills’ around education, training and employment, but to talk about how the arts can develop ‘sustainable qualities’ – qualities that empower people to make their own journey in their own way.

The predominant model in the Criminal Justice System centres around believing that in order for someone to behave differently they have to think differently. Artists working in this area agree with this but believe that in order for someone to sustain how they think differently, believe they have to feel differently – feel differently about themselves and others. Artists then take this one step further. In order to feel differently you have to experience something differently. Experiencing and taking part in an arts project that stretches you and challenges you on the limits of what you thought you could achieve can be a first and vital step on that journey.

If we truly believe in a responsible society: if we truly believe in citizenship, then we cannot deny anyone access to the means of making their own journey from being a disempowered recipient of punishment to an active participant as citizen. Participating in the arts is one way of providing these opportunities, of providing these fundamental rights for all our citizens.

Angus McLewin, March 2002.