

Big Society: Arts, Health and Well-Being

Planning for the *nalgao* seminar on *Arts, Health and Wellbeing* was easy; just stand there and illustrate all those exemplar arts/health projects around the UK, but then the day before the event, David Cameron announced his Big Society plans in Liverpool, and on the back of the NHS White Paper, changes to the voluntary sector and the coalition governments determination that the public should pay for the crimes of the bankers and alleged mismanagement of the previous government; my agenda seemed somehow, more difficult to pull off with any credibility.

In truth, I'd planned to discuss Big Society anyway, but with a distinctly proactive focus, because I believe with passion, that the arts and culture have a blindingly obvious place in thriving communities. So this was an opportunity, to explore how the arts might be central to this emerging agenda.

For me the arts/health agenda is way bigger than any conversation about putting pretty sticking plasters on infected wounds; our interest is firmly routed in public health and inequalities across society. But judging by the prevalence of millionaires in the current cabinet, ('...of the 29 Ministers entitled to attend Cabinet meetings, 23 have assets and investments estimated to be worth more than £1 million')¹ I'm not quite sure what the government understand by inequalities.

We're all aware of the disparities in affluent societies and how the inequality gap has widened under the market triumphalism of the last three decades. The arts might just enable us to shift the way we address inequalities across the board from a deficits model to an assets model. What we need to do, is refocus on the untapped wealth of our arts and cultural assets as part of a collective enquiry.

Whilst the government are saying that; '*We need an ambitious strategy to prevent ill-health which harnesses innovative techniques to help people take responsibility for their own health*',² there is ample evidence of the reach and impact of the arts, both instrumentally *and* intrinsically.

For me, a useful place to start is with some research we completed at Manchester Metropolitan University a few years ago. As part of our on-going partnership with Arts Council England, North West and the Department of Health, Public Health Group, North West, we undertook the Invest to Save: Arts in Health³ project to better understand *how* the arts impact on individuals and communities across the North West region.

Using a range of measurement tools and appreciative enquiry, we worked with 6 robust arts/health organisations to gather something of this impact. (Details of all these tools can be found on our website) And yes, we found significant reductions in stress, anxiety, depression and other symptoms of ill-health, but the really interesting part of our research focused on what it was about these creative and cultural activities that enhanced health and well-being; in other words, it didn't just focused on illness and morbidity, but on development and transformation.

People found that as a result of participation in arts activities they were more able to cope with life situations and have more choices. For those people coping with anxiety and depression, engagement with the arts resulted in significant reduction in symptoms along with improvements in confidence, motivation, and well being. These were important developments that strengthened a person's capacity to cope with situations in their lives or to change them. Moreover, transformational change was seen to occur not in response to information or advice, but where people are motivated and perhaps inspired to want to change for themselves. An individual is then in a better 'place' or 'state' to look at cause and consider change from a more connected and balanced perspective.

These elements of wellbeing are significant to this Big Society agenda, because marginalised people who take part in these inspirational projects are more connected, more active and critically, more able to engage with life beyond the boundaries of illness. If the Government genuinely want to engage with diverse communities across the UK and not just the articulate middle classes, grass-roots cultural engagement like this will offer genuine opportunities for dialogue; but if you ask questions, you must be prepared for unexpected answers.

Comedian and political activist Mark Thomas gives us a taste of this when he pre-empted the current Big Society agenda by creating a *People's Manifesto*⁴, where policies were suggested and voted for by members of the public who attended his stand-up performances. These included the bitterly ironic and realistic, but unpalatable (for the government at least); the introduction of a maximum wage; that party political manifestos should be legally binding; that we should build 100,000 council houses a year and there should be a public referendum before going to war.

The Invest to Save research ties into work coming out of the *new economics foundation (nef)* and their *5 Ways to Well-being*⁵, which reviews the most up-to-date evidence, suggesting that building the following five actions into our day-to-day lives is important for well-being.

nef describe the importance of *connecting* with the people around us and how investing time in building these relationships will enrich our lives. They illustrate how being *active* and discovering the importance of physical activity that we enjoy, clearly enhances health and well-being and they go on to encourage *curiosity* through taking notice of the extraordinary things in our day-to-day lives, urging us to be more aware of the world around us and what we are feeling, and learning to reflect on this. Crucially they emphasize the importance of *learning* and taking on new challenges, to improve self-confidence. Finally they stress the importance of *giving* and seeing ourselves in relationship to the wider community; being a part of civic society.

A part of me can't help feeling a little nervous, as it seems we're being told something blindingly obvious, particularly when many of our target populations may experience resistance and apathy in relation to the all the strategies and initiatives pitched at them. This has led to what has been described as a 'poverty of aspiration' where many people have little motivation, desire or opportunity to aspire to anything beyond current circumstances or health status. So these *5 Ways to Well-being*, might be obvious to those of us involved in arts/health, but like the *five a-day* approach to healthy eating, it's a useful vehicle for wider understanding.

nef acknowledge there is little epidemiological evidence examining measures and determinants of well-being. But they do note, that more recent studies have begun to look at the effectiveness of specific interventions on the promotion of well-being. Just looking at these themes around social relationships, activity, awareness, learning, and giving; one can quite clearly see the role of arts and culture.

The recent *Demos* report, *Civic Streets: the big society in action*⁶, explores how the government needs to ensure that its investment in communities is attached to, and reflective of, the long-term nature of community regeneration. The report illustrates that democracy works, when communities establish a plan of action and consult the wider community, but that too often the attitudes and approaches of primary care trusts, local authorities and other state actors get in the way of communities.

This *Demos* report makes clear that people *feel* a positive change but cannot *prove* it and suggests that there has to be real, swift progress in this area to enable communities to understand the scale of their deprivation and to measure the success in tackling it.

In his Reith Lectures for the *BBC* in 2009 Michael Sandel, Harvard Professor of Government, echoes this theme and invites us to think of ourselves, less as consumers and more as citizens, and argues for '*politics of the common good*' where commodities of community, solidarity and trust are not commodities that deplete with use, like our finite environmental or economic resources, but are more like muscles, that grow stronger with exercise.⁷

The late Brazilian cultural activist Augusto Boal might teach us a thing or two about *this through his revolutionary* approach to the arts, and not explicitly focused on health, but passionate about equity. In his seminal book, *Theatre of the Oppressed*⁸, Boal argued that mainstream theatre was an instrument of ruling-class control, aimed at sedating the audience, but which also showed how the dramatic arts could be used as a weapon, turning the spectator into an actor, the oppressed into revolutionaries.

Tortured, imprisoned and exiled for his work by a military dictatorship, when he returned to Brazil after their downfall, he was elected to Rio's city council and turned some of the techniques he'd devised to encourage audience participation, into a way of making popular laws. He called this *legislative theatre* and unlike the dogmatic political theatre of the 1960s, which told people what to do, this new approach asked people what they wanted and encouraged them to exercise their communal and civic muscles.

Organisations like *Cardboard Citizens* that have empowered homeless people through the arts, have clearly learnt a great deal from the philosophy of Boal and illustrate that the arts and cultural agenda can offer so much more to democracy and civic engagement than the government is aware of. However, our window of opportunity to persuade them of this value may be short-lived and we should bang this drum as loudly as possible *right now*.

However, the poverty of aspiration I eluded to earlier isn't just about health and social choices, but cultural ones too. Many of the communities we aspire to work with instinctively feel that the arts aren't relevant to them, and there are still great divisions between what is seen as high and popular art. I'd like to think that our agenda on one hand might be about the instrumental benefits of the arts, but equally be about their intrinsic value.

There are some powerful examples out there too. Although critics like Brian Sewell resist the notion of popularism at all, the reach of Banksy in Bristol last year was huge with the Bristol Museum having seen the highest number of visitors it had ever achieved matching the museum's annual turnover in just 12 weeks. Voluntary donations were in excess of £45,000 – nearly four times the annual amount; the museum employed an extra 30 temporary members of staff. But, more than that, the effect of people coming into the city brought an extra £15 million into the local economy⁹.

In their drive to attract new audiences, galleries and museums are having quite an impact on people who are normally excluded by ill-health and isolation. I read an article recently in the *Guardian* about the trauma of caring for someone with dementia and the impact it has on the family, and with our growing aging population and increase in this disease, it's a real concern for the future.

Most of the articles I've read are doom laden and quite naturally dark and pessimistic. When I've come across stories about the arts and dementia, it's mostly been about memory and reminiscence and although in some cases, its been very heart warming, a lot of this work is in fact focusing on memory, the very thing being eroded by the disease; the area that causes such frustration and distress.

The work that the *Museum of Modern Art*¹⁰ in New York (*MoMA*) has been undertaking, has been based largely on the thinking and research of Professor Gene Cohen and the artist/writer Anne Basting who don't particularly focus on memory, but the fact that the resulting impact of cognitive loss reduces inhibition in people affected by the disease. This in turn, has a profound effect on individuals creative potential through imagination, which it's suggested, can thrive. This is an interesting hypothesis, born out by the remarkable work at *MoMA* and an area of current research we're developing at Arts for Health. Quite simply, educators in the gallery, introduce people to 20th Century and contemporary art in a way that works in the moment and engages people deeply in their own creative potential. The impact on individuals and carers is potent and astounding.

So both Bristol museum and MoMA are really engaging with diverse audiences, one illustrating a strong economic and popular relevance, the other a significant impact on wellbeing.

Leading up to the recent change in government, we've had an amazing few years in arts and health, with a Department of Health national prospectus¹¹; debate on arts and health in the House of Lords championed by Lord Howarth; subsequent questions in the House of Commons and public commitment from Alan Johnson when he was Secretary of State for Health. There are two new international arts/health journals, and in Mike White's exploration of *Arts Development in Community Health*¹², the first coherent account of this field of enquiry. The continued lobbying of *Breakthrough: Arts in Mental Health*¹³ ensures that this work remains politically connected, active and representative of real voices, and whilst we lost the *National Network for Arts and Health* in 2007, there has been a drive and commitment amongst regional partners to develop a *National Forum for Arts and Health*¹⁴ where the thriving regional and sub-regional networks link into a national network of networks.

This is a model that's being explored by the *London Arts and Health Forum* at the moment and a link can be found in the references below. The Department of Health Working Group for Arts and Health established by Harry Cayton and until recently led by Professor Louis Appleby, is I imagine, awaiting direction from ministers, and as Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley describes it, a new Public Health Service that will be part of a '*movement which not only transforms the way we deliver public health, but also revolutionises the way we think about it.*'¹⁵

As the *National Campaign for the Arts* and *Arts and Business* collaborate through the *Culture Forum*¹⁶ to lobby government, the pressure will be on Tim Joss, (chair) Guy Eades and Damian Hebron as three of the twenty six cultural members with interests in the health and well-being sectors, to make a strong case for the arts, and not only as a concern for the DCMS, but for inter-departmental collaboration, cross-party support and wider public awareness.

Polly Toynebee asks, '*what is the 'big society' if not arts for everyone?*'¹⁷ And it's easy to see how one or two global exemplars have shared similarities, and there are of course, many, many more. *Disability in the Arts/Disadvantage in the Arts, in Western Australia* (DADAA); the Bromley by Bow Centre in Tower Hamlets and BlueSCI in Trafford all have some key characteristics in common. They all have incredible leadership; are deeply engaged at the heart of the communities they serve; illustrate entrepreneurial zeal and philanthropy; the arts are central to their agenda; they market themselves skilfully; nurture diverse partnerships and have vision beyond stasis.

Whilst the *Voluntary Arts Network* in the UK has an impressive membership and as *Voluntary Arts England* illustrated at the *nalgao* seminar, have huge reach and impact, there's a danger that the government will suck the life out of the voluntary sector and use its successes as a justification for reducing investments in the professional art sector.

I started by suggesting that the arts have a place in this Big Society agenda and I believe this with conviction; but I also believe that the essence of what the arts are about, isn't about pacifying people and enabling them to engage in a purely benign and soporific activity; it's about giving people a real voice, and the challenge to government, local authorities and health commissioners, will be to listen, support and *respond* to communal civic voice.

As part of the *Invest to Save* research that I mentioned earlier, we not only gathered data around the impact of the arts through questionnaires, but also through extensive individual and group interviews. This provided a rich source of data to unpick and as part of the process of understanding transformation, autonomy, environmental mastery and the other components of well-being, we recruited artists, writers and filmmakers to help us make sense of these stories.

Writer David Gaffney and illustrator David Bailey worked with some of the words of Stan (not his real name), who had experienced chronic depression for over 40 years, but had found a way out of it through participation in the *Start in Salford* arts project. Stan described his experience of depression as like having a lighthouse strapped to his head 24 hours a day. And the beam of this lighthouse burned into him, focusing this cold white light on all his problems; his unemployment, his failed relationships, his lack of work. This all-absorbing depression blinded him to anything other than his ill-health.

However, he described how when he was deeply engaged in the arts, when he was challenged and pushed to succeed in this new experience that was way beyond his comfort zone, something significant happened; the beam of the light-house shifted, and for a time, possibilities of new opportunities were illuminated. He no longer looked inwards, but towards the potential and possibilities of the wider world.

This is key to my understanding of how the arts are clearly central to this bigger society and always have been. The 'space' or 'flow state' that Stan describes so lyrically, offers a real opportunity to practice being well, and from that connected place, be in the position to make changes and grow.

Whilst it would be reassuring for the sector to have a mandate from the government to pursue this agenda, the army of artists and health practitioners that are out there and are in fact already embedded in communities, galleries and health settings, will shrug their shoulders and carry on regardless.

I know artists who would loath to be 'mainstreamed' and positively relish the challenge of having a government to poke and question and throughout history art has been a powerful vehicle for voicing both outrage and vision. This arts and health movement *can* influence the Big Society debate and bring the Government to account, because health and well-being are surely less about prescribing and more about being fully engaged and *inspired* to make changes.

Clive Parkinson

www.artsforhealth.org

Notes

1. Glen Owen in the Daily Mail, 23rd May 2010

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/election/article-1280554/The-coalition-millionaires-23-29-member-new-cabinet-worth-1m--Lib-Dems-just-wealthy-Tories.html>

2. Programme for Government, May 2010

<http://programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk/files/2010/05/coalition-programme.pdf>

3. Invest to Save: Arts in Health Evaluation, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2007; ISBN 1 900756 48 X

<http://www.miriad.mmu.ac.uk/investtosave/reports/Summary%20Report%20ISP.pdf>

4. *Mark Thomas Presents the People's Manifesto*. Reading, Berkshire: Ebury Press. ISBN 987-0-09-193796-6.

5. Five Ways to Well-Being, *new economics foundation*, Jody Aked, Nic Marks, Corrina Cordon, Sam Thompson, October 2008

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/five-ways-well-being-evidence>

6. Civic Streets: the big society in action, Max Wind-Cowie, Demos, 2010, ISBN 9781 906693 459

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/civicstreets>

7. Sandel, Michael, The BBC Reith Lectures 2009

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00lb6bt

8. This is Bristol website

<http://www.thisisbristol.co.uk/homepage/Banksy-exhibition-puts-163-10m-Bristol-s-economy/article-1300048-detail/article.html>

9. Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal, Urizen, 1979

10. Meet me at MoMA, Museum of Modern Art, <http://www.moma.org/meetme>

11. A Prospectus for Arts and Health, 2007

http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/a-prospectus-for-arts-and-health

12. White, Mike; *Arts Development in Community Health, A Social Tonic*, Radcliffe Publishing, 2009, ISBN-13:978 184619 140 4

13. Breakthrough: Arts in Mental Health

<http://breakthroughmhart.com>

14. Culture and Wellbeing (National Forum)

<http://www.cultureandwellbeing.org.uk>

15. A new Approach to public health, Health Secretary Andrew Lansley speaks to the UK Faculty of Public Health Conference, 7 July 2010 http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/MediaCentre/Speeches/DH_117280

16. Culture Forum

<http://www.artsandbusiness.org.uk/Central/arts-services/Culture-Forum.aspx>

17. Polly Toynbee in the Guardian, Wednesday 28th July 2010
Arts for everyone is cheap considering its rich returns

Exemplar Links

Disability in the Arts/Disadvantage in the Arts, Western Australia

<http://www.dadaawa.org.au/front-page>

Bromley by Bow Centre

<http://www.bbhc.org.uk>

BlueSCI

<http://www.bluesci.org.uk>