

WDDM: LESSONS LEARNED

Ten things we learned from the 'What Difference Does Difference Make' pilot project

40 years on from the publication of Naseem Khan's *The Arts That Britain Ignores*, we sought artists, arts professionals and commentators from minority ethnic backgrounds to share their perceptions on ethnic difference, the politics of race, exclusion, integration, art and culture. *What Difference Does Difference Make?* asks how cultural policy and practice has responded to the changing ethnic diversity of Britain over the past generation. Sharing the voices of pioneers and innovators, we wanted to create insights into the challenges and opportunities of making art in a society yet to live up to its aspirations for racial equality.

In *The Arts That Britain Ignores*, Khan set out to map ethnic minority led arts in the UK in order to understand the 'assets of immigration'. 40 years on, this project seeks to

- understand how far we have come,
- take a longer view on the contours of debates about inclusive arts and multicultures,
- build intergenerational understandings of the journey,
- engage new audiences in discussion,
- and set agendas for the future of arts policy and practice in the UK

From October 2015 – Feb 2016 we initiated a development and piloting phase of the project to elicit 10 testimonies reflecting on how ethnic difference has made a difference, from those who have engaged with arts policy and practice over the past 40 years.

These testimonies were shared online and used as the basis for a public debate at Rivington Place in London, and a pilot intergenerational artists' salon at Contact Theatre, Manchester, and to develop a social media presence as a basis for ongoing discussions and movement-building.

At the end of the pilot phase this report reflects on what we have learned and what this

will mean for the next phase of this intervention.

1. *Inter-Generational Conversation:* Our approach sought to encourage conversation across the generations of minority ethnic artists, policymakers and commentators. It became clear that there are currently only limited spaces for similar conversations to happen and that the participants appreciated the opportunity to hear from each other across generations. Younger participants reflected on the levels of embedded knowledge that older participants shared which they had previously not had access to. Older participants were keen to share their experiences and often felt as if this was part of their professional responsibility in the development of younger artists. Further, the models that we used allowed the conversation to be two-way with older participants learning from and being inspired by younger participants. Maintaining a focus on intergenerational dialogue should be a key feature of the next phase of this intervention.
2. *Open Space for Dialogue:* In asking an open question, 'What Difference Does Difference Make?' we were able to free the discussion from policy/academic language and make the discussion intelligible to a wider audience. There was room for disagreement that was prized as a learning opportunity rather than a means of exclusion. Discussions ranged across class, gender, faith, art practice, and region, as well as ethnicity, with sophisticated insights being generated. In the next phase we should remain mindful of the need to retain this openness and ensure that we offer multiple ways to engage with this core question.
3. *Honest Brokers:* The advisory group and delivery partners for the pilot project were instrumental in helping a broad range of people to engage. It is significant that while all involved have 'skin in the game', we do not represent a single institution or interest group, but are honest brokers in seeking progress. This independence made it possible to collaborate (for example shaping our Manchester programme around the staging of a play written and directed by artists from minority ethnic backgrounds). This independent and collaborative approach should be built on in the next phase to ensure that the products and outcomes feel co-owned rather than imposed remotely.

4. *Timing*: One of our initial concerns in looking back over the past 40 years was that participants would feel a sense of fatigue in re-engaging on issues of ethnic diversity and access to justice that many may feel has not in the past been a particularly productive use of their time. However, both the events and testimonies showed that enough had changed in the political and social environment to make this conversation newly relevant. Further, others commented that we should take the opportunity to document, evaluate and reflect on more of those conversations that we may have engaged with in the past. The pilot has made us more confident that both the topic and the timing show great potential for productive outcomes.
5. *New Power*: The pilot also highlighted that while there has been much more public discussion and response to the use of new media technologies in terms of artistic practice, the possibilities of new media for thinking about policy development and relationships between institutions, artists and communities was less well developed. This was a live issue for many participants from across the generations who have been inspired by #BlackLivesMatter and the progress typified by #OscarsSoWhite to consider how new forms of social media could create new ways of engaging with each other and broader social movements for

¹ social justice in the arts/media. The pilot took a 'new power' model as its basis - defined in the Harvard Business Review as: 'New power operates differently. It is made by many. It is open, participatory, and peer-driven. It uploads, and it distributes. Like water or electricity, it's most forceful when it surges. The goal with new power is not to hoard it but to channel it.' This approach will be valuable in shaping the next phase by choosing to remain open to distributed forms of leadership and embracing a broader set of outcomes as a reflection of the nascent power, access to knowledge, resources, and influence that artists from minority ethnic backgrounds have built and will continue to build over generations.

¹ <https://hbr.org/2014/12/understanding-new-power>

6. *Locality*: The pilot activities showed that just as all politics is ultimately local, the experiences of the participants is grounded in their local environment and in the various arts sectors in which they work. Our approach of working with local

partners and encouraging narratives based on experience rather than theory is a key part in recognizing the specificity of the local as well as building solidarities across local, ethnic and artistic boundaries. The next phase of this intervention must consider how to ensure that this diversity of experience is central to its design and our developing understanding of policy and practice.

7. *Legacy and Learning*: Participants expressed a desire to understand the legacy of the past generation and how it can be used to build future action. It was particularly heartening to meet participants who no longer work in the arts sector return to share their insights, and to hear dialogue across generations about both successes and failures. The next phase of the project should explore different ways of bringing these conversations to the fore and of capitalizing on their potential for learning. The salons offer a potential starting point but more personalized approaches may also be appropriate, for example reverse mentoring, or 'speed-dating', or intergenerational commissions, that enable professional relationship-building and support to be shared, and joint work to be undertaken.
8. *Impact*: While the funding relationships with state sponsored organisations and philanthropists was an important part of the discussions in Manchester and London, they were not the only relationships that were seen as important in addressing how to make art in a racially unjust society. There was a key focus in all the discussions and in many of the testimonies about the kind of long-term investments and partnerships which would lead to sustainable change and a desire to shape the funding landscape differently. The next phase of this intervention should include means of engaging other stakeholders in discussion of justice in the arts while celebrating and learning from the many successes that we have enjoyed. Finding means of distilling the messages from the discussion more broadly with communities, and sharing them with those who in positions of influence will be important in embedding the new understandings developed through this process.
9. *What Will be The Difference*? In concluding the public event in London the participants challenged us to be clearer about our hopes and expectations for an intervention of this kind. While the aims are clearly set out above, the challenge is a valid one. What will be different after this effort? In reflecting on the pilot,

what may be missing from the project aims is the building of an intergenerational movement of arts professionals who are seeking to reframe the narrative about racial justice in the arts collaboratively. This missing part of the ecology of arts policy making may have contributed to the sense of initiative-itis; a feeling of being 'done to' rather than 'with', and undue 'burden of representation' pressures felt by those who are publicly acclaimed to solve the broader societal challenge of racial injustice. In framing this next phase of the intervention, being clearer about what is at stake will be a necessary part of building momentum and using the learning from the past generation of activity much more effectively.

10. *A Resilient Sector:* Finally, the pilot has reminded us of the immense talent, tenacity, and generosity of spirit that is present in the arts sector and among minority ethnic communities in our society, and how often these gifts are wasted. If we can marshal the will, effort and the support of each other, we have it within our power to ensure that this is no longer the case.

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