



Supporting Improved Learning Opportunities for Hard-to-Reach Groups through the Use of Participatory Arts (SILO)

Artist Baseline Report

Institute of Cultural Capital

Sue Potts

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



1. Introduction

The SILO Literature review demonstrates the many impacts that participatory arts achieves for improving life chances for socially excluded adults. The review enabled the SILO partnership to understand how artists use art making across many genres to develop skills and employability competencies. In order to enhance our understanding of the methods used by artists to capture evidence supporting skill and competency development, the SILO partnership conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with artists and practitioners who work in socially engaged practice using participatory methods. This small scale study informs our project by understanding the methods employed by artists when working with socially excluded adults. Furthermore, it tells us how artists currently capture, measure and validate skills and competencies gained by their participants

Artists are concerned with arts practice and art making, often these reflexive and informal approaches can be in contradiction to strict validation procedures and/or organisational policies. In order for the SILO partnership to design pedagogy which is suitable for use by artists and is also robust enough for thorough validation purposes, we also sought to explore existing tensions for artists who practice within organisational frameworks and policies.

2. Method

Semi structured interviews were conducted in partnership countries based around the following themes:

- Programme and project design
- Working as an artist in non-arts settings
- Validating skills and competencies

3. Artists and Arts Practitioners

Approximately 75 artists and participatory arts practitioners took part in semi-structured interviews. All worked with socially excluded groups in the following contexts:

- **Bulgaria** - artists and arts educators working mainly with socially excluded women
- **Greece** – respondents worked with adults with mental illness and mental health needs, migrants and female victims of violence
- **Poland** – respondents were mainly working in adult education using creative and artistic methods
- **Spain** – practitioners worked with a range of adults, mainly dealing with addiction recovery
- **UK** – artists working in a range of community settings

4. Designing Methods

All respondents confirmed that they did not use systematic approaches, methods or models when embarking on a new participatory project. The majority highlighted the need to be flexible and responsive to participants needs:

*“It depends upon ‘the participant’s attitude in the moment (Respondent Bulgaria)
Work needs to be guided by an intuitive grasp of the issue faced by participants”
(Respondents Greece)*

*“My way of planning activities cannot be labelled as a method. I can just point out some key points which roughly delineate the steps to be taken in the workshops. Having understood the specific needs/problems of the participants I think out a scenario of the emerging performance. It strategically sets a framework for theatrical activities and involvement of the participant”
(Respondent Greece)*

“We take into account the issues of the participants, or just universal human problems. Then we think together on how to elaborate them. A performance emerges as the final result” (Respondent Greece)

“My ten years’ experience points out the need to elaborate individual programmes even in the case of group work. Observing the participants and their individual abilities underpins my method of designing programmes” (Respondent Poland)

“We use a methodology based on two approaches: one is formed by the work developed with different artistic methods, for example, the main extended are the painting, sculpture, puppets, but also dancing, theatre performances, creative script, music or some work with the voice. The other is one which is made from the work with the transparency and the creation of a new therapeutic link between the practitioner and the person who is responsible for the accompaniment” (Respondent Spain)

“Finding out an individual’s specific interest and encouraging them to set their own targets really plants the seed of engagement and it is my job to nurture that and watch it grow” (Respondent Spain)

*“creating learning structures with space to breathe, to experiment, to participate - such methods place a concentration upon curiosity and collaborative practice as well as energy and engagement”
(Respondent Spain)*

“I regularly find my approach and delivery alters as I gain more in depth knowledge of the individuals participating; my predominant aim is always to allow them the time and freedom to explore their ideas and take ownership of their concepts, and as such my teaching methodology is constantly evolving” (Respondent UK)

4.1

Table 1. Participatory Arts Design

A Typology of Formal and Informal Methods used by artists to understand participant need, methods and tools used in practice and ways to evaluate impact and results.

Understanding Need	Methods/Tools	Evaluation
Interviews	Art Therapy	Interviews
Questionnaire	Drama	Questionnaires
Group discussions	Guiding/Encouragement	One to One interviews
Conversations	Creative Environment	Conversations
Observations	Group Work	Observations
Individual plans	Collaborative Learning	Self Assessment Tools
Drama Techniques	Experiential techniques	Performance
Dance/Movement	Self directed learning	Artistic Product
Drawing	Gradual increase of challenge,	
Writing/Narrative activities	learning objective, difficulty of	
Analysis of personal data	task	
Physical exercises	Connecting theory and practice	
Initial assignments to establish	Drawing on participant's	
skill base and abilities	experience, interests and	
Creative problems solving	preferences	
Games	Creating space and environment	
Discussions/Dialogue with	of social learning	
participant's support networks	Individual target setting	
Research mission, aims and	Emphasis on curiosity and	
purpose of host organisation	collaboration	
	Flexible delivery using different	
	learning approaches e.g. audio,	
	visual, kinaesthetic	

5. Developing Insight

Our respondents work across many different settings and with individuals and groups with differing needs. In order to develop their awareness and understanding of both individual and collective need, practitioners use a number of formative methods, underpinned by their sensibilities as an artist whilst aligning with procedural requirements of host organisations.

Feedback included:

The method (Observation) is distinctive because the researcher approaches participants in their own environment rather than having the participants come to the researcher. Some respondents shared the fact that they make careful, objective notes about what they see, recording all accounts and observations in a special notebook. (Summary from Bulgaria)

*Most of the respondents acknowledged the fact that they have to change the approach as they gain more detailed information and deep knowledge of the individuality of the participant. It often occurs as a result of both participant observation and collaborative dialogue with the participants
(Summary from Bulgaria)*

“By using this method, (Questionnaires) it is expected that participants will reveal their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs” (Summary from Greece)

Artists working in clinical settings need to adopt more formal methods of collecting data. For example, practitioners interviewed in Greece who work in mental health settings reported that they develop personalised action plans, set training goals, collect formative evaluation reports, provide monthly progress reports, alongside more informal methods of understanding need.

This approach differs from practitioners working in Poland who reported that when gathering information concerning issues and need it is rarely written down or documented in a formal manner. Respondents described using both sensitivity and flexibility to be responsive to participant need. They highlighted the subjectivity of the use participatory observation to assess need but did not see this as a disadvantage to their practice. They argued that practitioner’s assessments provide valuable insights which are then verified to be robust conclusions or untrue as the project progresses. Respondents felt that the sharing of information was essential for ‘fostering a culture of mutual understanding, trust and impartiality in the institutions supporting socially excluded people through participatory art projects’.

Practitioners in Spain who provide what they describe as ‘therapeutic support ‘to people with mental issues or physical disabilities assert the need to gather information about participants using a formal process. Alongside taking baseline interviews practitioners often have access to the files of participants which include data gathered by psychologists, therapists or social workers. They will also consult with families of participants where possible. Freelance artists do not have the same level of access to data and information as practitioners employed directly by an organisation. In these circumstances respondents reported that they use a number of techniques to assess participant need. Responses from artists included:

- “Art therapy works from the interests and abilities of each person within a professional and welcoming setting. This careful and subtle accompaniment, during the helping process of people in difficulty, allows them to find themselves their own resources. That means knowing developing projects with people and not to people”.

“They are users of the centre where I work, so I have already known their situation before starting the sessions. It is true that in other external experiences did not know much about the situation of people which gave me the opportunity to discover for myself and make a much needed exercise to practice art therapy observation”.

“70% of the participants of the workshops are users of the entities or care services in which I work. In open workshops to the rest of the population, I coordinate from the institutions, youth information points, deriving social services or other services”.

“The diagnosis of the patient or group must be provided by the entity from which it collaborates. The situation of the person is not the most important for an art therapy session but it is required to know the difficulties which the professional can find due to disease, pathology, status of the person, etc ... and thus facilitate a better art therapy accompaniment for the benefit of the patient”.

Practitioners interviewed in the UK highlighted the need to hold an understanding of the issues faced by participants whilst also maintaining a conducive atmosphere for art making.

“there are a plethora of issues to consider with every vulnerable group and not being an expert, it is essential to ask the right questions of the right people, not least the participants themselves.”

“Generating an atmosphere of trust by making a connection with each individual means that end ‘product’ of the arts session is almost incidental – for me, it is as important to map the participant’s journey towards empowerment in terms of breaking down barriers and assumptions.”

Moreover, artists emphasised the need to understand individual need and to plan to enable each person to achieve.

Even with careful planning I am constantly re-evaluating my sessions to get the best possible outcomes for each individual within the given timeframe.

“In relation to timescales in particular, my initial expectations always require some modification as every individual’s needs are unique and I have to continually adjust my session delivery to accommodate that.”

6. Delivering Participatory Arts Host Settings

6.1 Tensions and Difficulties

Artists were asked to describe any tensions or difficulties they encounter when delivering participatory arts projects on behalf of organisations. In the UK there was a consensus amongst practitioners that tensions exist when delivering participatory arts for host organisations including maintaining a flexible and responsible approach within budgetary constraints and a lack of understanding of each other's perspective:

"I often feel there is a real lack of understanding from organisations as to how I think and work as a creative individual and the amount of paperwork I need to complete can be a bureaucratic nightmare."

"the archetypal 'pull' between the designed and emergent; the strain between creating tangible outcomes alongside an experience that allows for organic, random, growth."

Another common difficulty amongst all respondents was the effect that organisational time constraints has on the creative process and stated it often worked in direct conflict with the needs of the participant. Even the most experienced practitioners found this to be one of the most difficult aspects of project delivery to overcome.

"I need to ensure there is adequate time for them to encourage every individual to practice divergent thinking skills and reflect on their work, thus allowing learning and understanding to embed"

"A session can often be shortened significantly because inadequate 'setting up' and 'settling in' time has been allowed for; participants can get frustrated by this lack of actual creative work time as can I as the practitioner."

Several respondents commented that when projects were executed within the premises of other organisations, there were sometimes spatial issues including having to work with unsuitable facilities for their art making. Those with their own facilities preferred to deliver their workshops in familiar surroundings, with one stating:

"I feel more comfortable and confident working with individuals in my own studio – when the session goes 'off-plan' which it so often does, it is much easier for me to re-evaluate and alter my approach in surroundings where I am familiar with the resources available."

Many artists were concerning with funding restraints including the short time scales given to a funded project concluding that some criteria set by funding bodies for applicable beneficiaries leaves participants with continuing need.

“It is frustrating when a project ends and as a practitioner, you have witnessed such significant initial benefits to an individual yet are unable to continue that provision”

“Continued provision through collaborative referral between practitioners can be key to individuals first steps in managing their own recovery and creating their own support system.”

To overcome such tensions, respondents in the UK suggested forming a trusting relationship with personnel to assist the process, especially those who co-ordinate the programme and/or supporting the participants. Several respondents agreed:

“Once initial expectations are established and agreed there is much less tension working within a framework – sometimes it actually helps to focus on effective planning.”

Furthermore, artists overcame tensions by remaining focussed on the ‘essence’ of the project and its potential impacts on those involved. They stated that this helped them to ensure flexibility in approach within organisational constraints.

“Designing your creative programme to accommodate mixed, irregular, outcomes whilst adhering to the traditional box ticking/form filling collection of data. Ultimately it’s about allowing participants to contribute in whichever way they feel best. It’s a densely layered approach that requires the practitioner, and organisation, to collate qualitative and quantitative data as the programme is playing out as well as creating a comprehensive review process at the end.”

The experience of UK based practitioners is mirrored across the SILO partnership. Respondents in Bulgaria stated:

“You cannot fix an exact period of time (20 or 30 min) when you work with people with special needs”

“As our work is creative so the time schedules are not always visible”.

“Sometimes timetables of the working sessions have to be changed or adjusted to the respective situation in order to meet the actual needs of the participants otherwise the risk of achieving no result is really high”

Similarly, arts therapists working in Greece concurred that time organisational time restraints can impeded the creative process which included managing expectations of participants who often impatient to share their experiences and also found it difficult to respect boundaries. They also agreed that funding issues, physical spaces and sometimes a lack of administrative support from a host organisation’s staff hampered delivery of therapeutic goals, which on some occasions resulted in disagreements between professionals.

Respondents in Poland stated that rigid frameworks exist which restrict the eligibility of potential beneficiaries and also what programmes can achieve in respect of outcomes. They also agreed that timeframes and funding schemes are not compatible with the actual needs of the participants. Artists expressed that participant’s issues are often deeply rooted and can rarely be resolved during the project lifespan. Therefore, an excellent project in terms of outcomes may result in the frustration of both the participant’s eager to continue and the artists unable to support them in the framework of the programme.

Furthermore, artists in Spain commented that there is sometimes a need to adapt their project to the ‘political demands’ of the host organisation and this results in a negotiated agreement between the artist and host to maintain a flexible approach.

6.2 Support Mechanisms

Artists were asked to describe how their work is supported in non arts organisations and their workers. Support and their mechanisms are across the SILO membership are described in Figure 2

Figure 2 – Support Mechanisms for Participatory Artists working in Non Arts Settings

Support	Mechanism
Financial	Funding awards Fundraising Activities Philanthropy Private Organisations
Management / Administrative	Start up Recruitment Form filling Planning Logistics Marketing Co-ordination
Moral	Emotional Care Communication
Professional	Scientific Medical Expert Opinion Training Skill development

7. Validation of Non Formal Learning

SILO is concerned with the development of an efficient and effective methodology for validating non formal learning in participatory arts projects. The project proposes to 'test' a pedagogy in participatory settings within the partnership countries. In order to assume easy take up of the method, it needs to be light touch, easy to apply and fit for purpose. Our framework is based on the partnership's collective knowledge of participatory arts and also from our research with artists.

We asked artists to tell us the following:

- How do you assess the impact of your work in participatory settings?
- Do you see assessment of impact as an important part of your role?
- Do you measure learning within your participatory practice? (and how)
- Have you ever mapped learning to employability? (and how)
- As a practitioner, how would you prefer validation of learning and skills outcomes to take place within participatory settings and practice?

Our research found many different opinions and ideas concerning validation, its suitability and application within participatory arts projects. In Greece and Bulgaria artists were concerned that there appeared to be no formal policy for the recognition, accreditation and validation of the outcome of non formal learning. Artists in Poland asserted that where such systems exist they are too formal and generalised to 'grasp the real phenomena' under scrutiny. Furthermore, they felt that validation systems rarely get to the core of the real impact that participatory arts have on its beneficiaries. In terms of employability measures, artists in both Poland and Spain felt that this was not the usual focus of their work. However, all recognised the development of 'soft skills' within their programmes opposed to hard skill or training outcomes.

In the UK respondents highlighted the difficulties they faced when carrying out formal evaluations of their work, some felt it impinged the process and others stated there was a lack of time to carry it out. Moreover, most felt they had a lack of skills in evaluation methodologies. However, all respondents in the UK acknowledged the need for formalised evaluations of non-formal learning which would benefit their participants progress and to provide tangible evidence of the impact of their work.

Their many responses are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 8. Artists Responses – Validating Non Formal Learning

Assessing Impact	Measures	Employability Mapping	Preferences
Interviews pre and post delivery Observations Conversations with participants throughout the process Conversations with key workers Evaluation Self Reflection Interviews Changes in behaviour Surveys	Quality of products Setting targets by beneficiaries Changes: Behaviour Living conditions Ability to socialise Improved life skills Capacity to respond to stressful situations. Improved self-esteem confidence Improvement of family relationship Improved ability to work as a team Adherence to treatment Saleability of products Control groups	Self reflection Goal setting Recognising skills in evaluation forms Recognition of soft skill development	Formal certification Recognised achievements from institutions/government policy Setting of clear learning and evaluation goals. Setting of indicators for measuring outcomes effectively. Connecting programmes to the European credit system for Vocational Education & Training (ECVET). Deconstruct formal competencies into relevant competencies for beneficiaries. Clearly set the goal of the evaluation even if this is 'modest'. Use qualitative methods. Have time and support to learn a method – we are not social scientists. Applying the RARPA framework (UK)