

CHAPTER 11

THE ROLE OF THE ARTS INTERMEDIARY

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ARTSWOK COLLABORATIVE AS ARTS INTERMEDIARY

Our work at ArtsWok Collaborative¹ lies at the intersection of arts and community, in the field of arts-based community development. Our vision is to see communities thrive, and we believe that what lies at the heart of many challenges we face as a society is the poverty of relationship. This deprives individuals of access to resources — economic, social, cultural, environmental and political. As such, the focus of what we do is in connecting communities by harnessing the power of the arts to create dialogue, invite social participation and build bridges across difference.

¹ ArtsWok Collaborative connects communities by harnessing the power of the arts to create dialogue, invite social participation and build bridges across difference. We work with multidisciplinary teams to design and implement community-based arts projects, facilitate learning and exchanges through a community of practice, build capacity of practitioners through an action learning-incubator programme as well as conduct research and advocacy in the field of arts-based community development. ArtsWok Collaborative is a recipient of the National Arts Councils Seed Grant for the period from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2018.



As connectors, or bridge-builders, a significant aspect of our work is in facilitating relationships involving individuals, organisations, institutions, and so on. The Greenhouse Series, which we convene, consists primarily of a community of practice and action-learning lab for practitioners and stakeholders invested in the area of arts and culture, community-building and development work. This work is supported by the National Arts Council, which views our role as contributing towards strengthening the ecosystem of arts-based community development by building the capacity and connecting the work of important actors in the field, as well as making recommendations to the Council and other stakeholders on how to further develop the field.

Our bridge-building work can also be seen in the community projects that we spearhead. In our “Arts and Health” work, we partner with artists, senior centres and nursing homes, hospitals, foundations, community groups and government agencies, to conduct arts programmes for specific communities such as seniors as well as public education for a wider community demographic. Bridging these fields means that health and wellness-based outcomes are also important, apart from aesthetic and community development ones.

As such, because we are often found supporting artists in their work with communities and stakeholders, and across fields of practice and disciplines, we call ourselves intermediaries, enabling partnerships and collaborations to occur meaningfully, where the arts is the primary

medium and process through which communities benefit, and change occurs.

Arts Intermediaries are relatively new in arts practice in Singapore. In international arts practice, “arts intermediaries” are usually associated with and used within the context of funding and philanthropy, and the development of an artist or art form.

The role of the intermediary has been described as being fundamentally liminal — occupying a position on both sides of a boundary or threshold, a place where relationships with both funders and artists must be continuously navigated with balance and grace

— Claudia Bach (2014, p. 2)

ArtsWok Collaborative has, over the past few years, been inhabiting this “fundamentally liminal” space, with not many fully understanding the value of the work, and having scant pre-existing vocabulary to draw upon. We believe the role and its meaning is still evolving.

At this point in time, as intermediaries in the field of arts-based community development, we see our work as involving the creative producing of innovative programmes and projects that benefit communities in order to demonstrate value, training and building the capacity of arts practitioners to do community-based arts work, as well as research to better articulate and advocate for the field of arts-based



community development, contributing towards its legitimacy as a practice.

Even as the arts community and its various stakeholders here continue to unpack the role of intermediaries and understand our value, some arts practitioners have already started to articulate the need for more intermediaries when it comes to arts and working with communities. This was one of the findings that emerged from the community of practice we convene, mentioned earlier, and included in a report as a recommendation to the National Arts Council (Ko & Ngiam, 2014, p. 18):

The work of intermediaries would contribute to the emergence of mutual vocabularies amongst stakeholders in the field, the building of relationship and trust that enables sustainable and innovative work, helping artists with administrative tasks that frees them to focus on practice, and also contributing towards advocacy of the field and increasing its legitimacy.

For these arts practitioners, a significant contribution of intermediaries like ArtsWok Collaborative is to help bridge the work they do with various stakeholders which then contributes towards facilitating more meaningful collaborations and programme outcomes through the unlocking of resources, more effective communication, beneficial processes and constructive evaluation.



Co-Founder Ngiam Su-Lin facilitating a discussion among practitioners during The Greenhouse Sessions.
Photo credit: ArtsWok Collaborative

CULTURE AS A PILLAR OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR SOCIETIES

We believe our real value lies in being intermediaries across different fields of practice and disciplines, and creating collaborations amongst stakeholders that results in innovative work with impactful outcomes, and change for communities. This means artists collaborating with health, social services, community workers, educators, urban planners, futurists, etc. As societies become more complex, and the world and our needs become more interconnected, these collaborations are increasingly the way forward. We need to find better solutions for our challenges where previous approaches working in



silos and domain-specific knowledge and practices have been less successful.

The arts, with its processes and forms, has the ability to bring together different communities and challenges in creative and imaginative ways, to then offer responses and expression of solutions from participants. This is because the arts operate in the powerful sphere of culture, which cuts across the realms of the personal to the communal, the societal and the national. It also affords deep participation, drawing on the cognitive, emotional, sensory and imaginative.

In *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*, Jon Hawkes advocates that culture is the fourth pillar (the other three being economic, social and environmental) that governments cannot afford to ignore, and is integral to the governance process for the sustainable development and flourishing of a society. He defines culture as “the inherent values and the means and the results of social expression” and “enfolds every aspect of human intercourse” (Hawkes, 2001).

Furthermore, he goes on to explain:

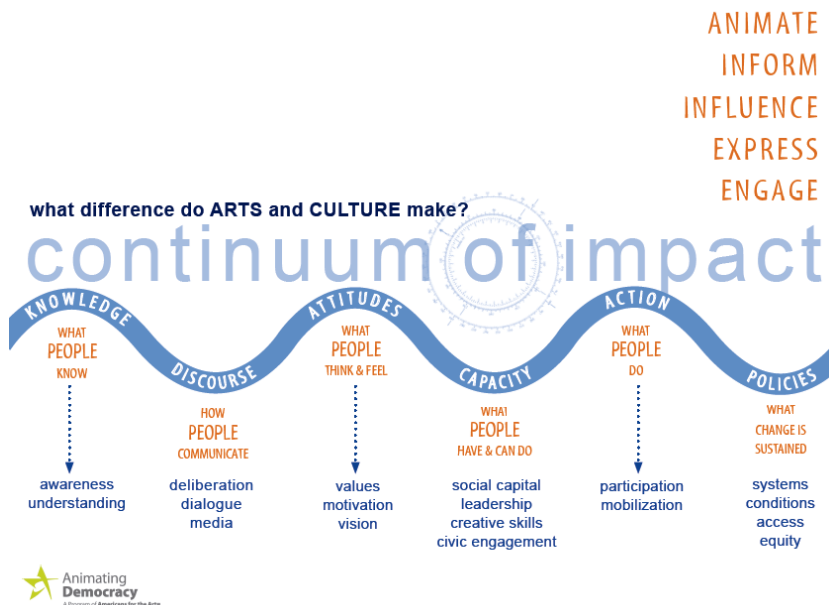
If culture describes how we make sense, and the results of that sense, then art describes that aspect of cultural action in which creativity and imagination are the key drivers, where we discover meaning and community in ways that are intuitive, non-lateral and unpredictable. With the arts, we can imagine

the future, unpack the past, confront the present. We can predict change, focus our visions and face our fears (Hawkes, 2003).

Artists and the arts are then central to cultural action, and can therefore be powerful agents of change driving social transformation.

Animating Democracy, an organisation in the United States that does research and advocacy work in the area of arts and culture and communities, developed a framework to help explain the difference arts and culture makes to communities, framed as a continuum of impact (Figure 11.1):

Figure 11.1: The continuum of impact of arts and culture



Source: Animating Democracy (2012)



Collaborating with the arts can result in manifold outcomes and impact over time, depending on stakeholders' objectives and subsequent programme design. As intermediaries, we are interested in collaborations and work within each impact area, as well as work that spans across the continuum of impact.

COLLABORATING WITH AN INTERMEDIARY

Many of our collaborations involve us in the role of creative producer for projects and programmes. Over the years, we have produced projects such as *Both Sides, Now* (2013–2016 and ongoing), a multi-disciplinary arts engagement project co-produced with theatre company Drama Box and largely funded by Lien Foundation, Ang Chin Moh Foundation, the Tote Board Community Healthcare Fund and the Ministry of Health. Focusing on end-of-life issues, this public engagement work has been staged in a hospital, reached out to heartland spaces, and has toured senior centres all across Singapore. From 2013 to 2014, we have reached out to about 12,000 members of the public through our immersive arts experiences in community spaces, as well as 1,800 seniors through our puppetry engagement programme over 50 senior centres in 2014 and 2016. It also involved working with more than 150 volunteers over the years.



ArtsWok Collaborative collaborates with arts groups like Drama Box to implement innovative community-based arts projects that benefit communities in order to demonstrate value.

Photo credit: ArtsWok Collaborative



Both Sides, Now is an arts-based civic engagement project that goes out into community spaces and seeks to normalise conversations about end-of-life care.

Photo credit: ArtsWok Collaborative



We have also produced a creative movement programme, *Everyday Waltzes for Active Ageing*, for seniors at nursing homes and senior centres together with The Arts Fission Company, in partnership with the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) and the National Arts Council. The programme involved piloting curriculum that was researched from the perspective of health and well-being outcomes, and subsequently developed into a training programme under the auspices of the AIC Wellness Programme. Through training, healthcare staff were equipped with skills to facilitate the programme for seniors in Community Care facilities. As at July 2016, 102 community care staff from 43 facilities have been trained through this programme.

For these projects, we adopt a DIME (design, implement, monitor, evaluate) model, which involves the following steps:

- Researching an issue and doing needs analysis
- Locating collaborators — artists and other stakeholders such as educators, social workers, healthcare workers, etc.
- Discovering common goals and aligning interests of stakeholders
- Designing a framework and the processes for realising outcomes
- Mobilising necessary resources such as financial and in-kind contributions from various sources
- Managing stakeholders and partnerships and handling negotiations

- Ensuring smooth implementation, sometimes working with a full production team to implement projects of a larger scale
- Overseeing marketing and communications/public relations
- Monitoring project to ensure adherence to plan and adapting when necessary
- Evaluating process and result — articulating value of the work to increase legitimacy and distilling lessons learned which can feed into the next design cycle

As an intermediary between different disciplines and fostering collaborations in creative producing work², close and deep listening of various stakeholders' needs and interests, including the communities involved takes place throughout the process. As with all collaborations, it starts off with building relationship, and we are continually cultivating the right constellation of partners that can result in innovative work with real impact for communities.

CHALLENGES ARTS INTERMEDIARIES FACE AND MOVING AHEAD

One of our bigger challenges is to communicate the value of our work as intermediaries. As not all aspects of the work are tied to projects, sometimes it is difficult to quantify and make visible the outputs of our processes which are often dialogic, and relational. A significant amount of time can be spent in meetings, doing presentations, writing

² For details, see ArtsWork website: For details, see ArtsWok Website: <http://artswok.org/our-work/creative-producing/>



proposals and in conversations educating stakeholders on the value of working with the arts and its unique processes, how to measure value and from whose perspective, and so on. Oftentimes this work is not compensated, especially if it does not result in a project or programme.

This liminal space that intermediaries occupy means that sometimes the role is less visible or not fully acknowledged. While one can draw the link between the work of an artist and their creative output, it is not immediately obvious the backend work that goes into creating the enabling environment for a successful arts-based intervention to happen. Ultimately, the creative process is a collaborative endeavour. The failure to acknowledge that creates a cyclical problem where the work of intermediaries is then not sufficiently valued or legitimised.

Yet another challenge of being bridge-builders and working in spaces between fields and disciplines is locating vocabulary that would be meaningful for all involved. Certain terms and theories that might be familiar to artists, for example, could sound alien to healthcare workers, and vice versa. This sometimes leads to a misunderstanding of expectations and deliverables, and the intermediary needs to spend more time unpacking concepts and ideas and communicating them with stakeholders. Time and patience are key ingredients in these collaborations and parties must really understand the value of a mutual partnership where the sum is larger than the parts.

Moving ahead, we need to surface strong case studies and highlight the impactful outcomes of intermediary work seen in projects and programmes that create positive change in communities. To that end, we have presented the *Both Sides, Now* project at multiple platforms to different stakeholders in social services, health, education, civil service and arts fields to positive reception and interest.

Meaningful platforms need to be provided where artists and a range of stakeholders invested in particular social issues can be brought together to dialogue and explore the possibilities of collaborating with each other, leveraging resources and possibilities to create change. In this area, the National Arts Council has been an effective intermediary, as seen in their interventions to bridge the arts and social services (seniors, at-risk youth, children and youth with special needs and disabilities). However, how can more of these opportunities be passed on to intermediaries on the ground, and equip them with sufficient resources to do the work?

This then points to the larger challenge of identifying more arts intermediaries who are interested in community-based work. More needs to be done to identify, train and support arts intermediaries if indeed our work is to gain more legitimacy here. Perhaps arts administrators and creative producers need to be engaged more concertedly to consider focusing on community-based work, and even social workers who are open to a broadening of their range of modalities can explore expanding their skill set and experience by collaborating and working closely with artists.



CO-CREATING SOCIETY

People are the backbone of any society, and as ours grow more and more complex and diverse, and as we develop as a nation existing in an international arena with smaller and smaller boundaries, we need strong and resilient communities able to engage across difference not just tolerating it but to co-create meaningfully. Collaborating with artists to collectively imagine and create possibilities with, and between communities becomes all the more urgent and necessary. It is the role of the arts intermediary to facilitate the process of transforming ideal into reality.

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