Institute of Policy Studies

The Elusive "Community" in Community Arts

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It was recently announced that voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) can tap governmental funding to conduct arts programmes for their beneficiaries. While the National Arts Council (NAC) scheme should be applauded for making arts accessible to disadvantaged groups, some arts practitioners and VWOs have highlighted the challenges in running such programmes. These include some VWOs' unfamiliarity towards this emerging field and certain arts groups' apprehension over being typecast as community arts practitioners.

Such concerns are valid but two fundamental questions are seemingly missing from the discussion so far: First, what does "community" refer to in an increasingly diverse Singapore society? Second, what constitutes community arts?

How "community" and community arts are defined have direct implications on the goals, scope and direction of an arts programme. Discussions about "community" in the context of community arts also raise important questions pertaining to the relationship between the artist and the non-artist participants, which in turn could promote or prevent meaningful participation.

Difficulty in Defining Community

Mention "community" and the bonds of friendship and solidarity come to mind. Yet, sociologists and anthropologists have reminded us about the difficulty — if not futility — of identifying the distinguishing traits of a community. While we usually associate a community with people embodying shared characteristics, values and experiences, sometimes their only common link could be the physical and social space they inhabit.

Differences, meanwhile, exist in social groups and relationships. Such differences include ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender and socio-economic status. Such differences could also create fault lines in a "community".

We should likewise recognise the possible existence of unequal relationships in a collaborative arts project. The artist is a knowledge expert while most participants are arts novices receiving knowledge and skills from the former. Given this disparity, would non-artists become intimidated by their lack of artistic exposure and end up suppressing their inner creative voices? Would artists be open to the participants' suggestions, however

amateurish their ideas may be? If the participants are satisfied with the final artwork but it does not meet certain artistic standards, should the artist intervene or resist touching it up?

An artist friend actively involved in community arts described his role as a "quality controller" — dispensing instructions to the seniors and public housing residents participating in his projects, and guiding them in producing artworks that met the vision he had conceptualised.

Often, these community members are scouted by the organisations funding the arts projects and their participation is largely confined to helping him create the artwork. Unfortunately, such an arrangement precludes the participants from being involved in the creative brainstorming stage of the project.

When asked if he would be receptive to brainstorming the project's vision with the participants, he suggested that time is of the essence. Rapport between the artist and the community must be cultivated before any dialogue can ensue.

The unequal interpersonal dynamics might be more palpable in situations where arts novices come from disadvantaged backgrounds, marked by daily challenges such as chronic health conditions, economic deprivation or social stigma.

Hence, administrators who run community arts programmes should be mindful of how social inequalities might be reproduced in arts programmes and mar the meaningful participation and enjoyment of their beneficiaries.

Understanding Community Arts

The NAC adopts a broad, if literal, definition of community arts — that it is an activity for people to come together to participate and enjoy the arts in their neighbourhood.

Globally though, interpretations of community arts vary among practitioners, researchers and policymakers, illustrating that community arts similarly defy straightforward definition. To the Edmonton Small Press Association, a non-profit arts society in Canada that champions independent small press initiatives, community arts is a process whereby arts practitioners deliver cultural programmes to the communities they are based in.

Others, however, treat community arts as a means to a greater end. Author Owen Kelly, who has documented the history of community arts in a book titled *Community, Arts and the State*, considers it as a platform to "effect social change and affect social policies and encompasses the expression of political action".

These definitions appear to place an undue emphasis on arts programmes taking place within the community. In fact, greater attention should be devoted to the community's level of ownership and involvement in such programmes, including whether the programmes have been envisioned, executed and enjoyed by members of the community. After all, as the term implies, community arts should be produced in the community and by the community.

Involving the Community Early

Another friend who has worked with non-actors in playback theatre described her role in a more egalitarian term: "co-teaching". This is related to the improvisational nature of playback

theatre, which thrives on actors and the audience sharing their personal stories and incorporating them into the performances. While part of the intensive 10-week training was instructional and required her to teach "basic drama stuff" to the participants, the requirements of playback theatre allowed for "two-way listening, learning from each other, and responding to each other". Hence, such a process demands greater participation from community members.

To realise meaningful participation, the community should be involved from the onset of a project. Instead of identifying the artist for collaboration or the art form to be introduced to beneficiaries, VWOs should first engage in conversations with their beneficiaries and listen to their biographies, dreams, passions, needs and difficulties. Perhaps through dialogue, a gap to their needs and interests might surface and a relevant arts project could be identified.

Meaningful participation should entail community members working alongside the artist in conceptualising and steering the project. It should not be about the mere creation of an artwork under the supervision of the artist or the VWO administrator.

Of course, there would be individuals who prefer a more passive role. Their wishes should be respected.

After all, a community's needs, experiences and aspirations are less uniform than imagined.

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