

Leaders in co-creation?

Why and how museums could develop their co-creative practice with the public, building on ideas from the performing arts and other non-museum organisations

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Introduction: co-creation, problems and key questions

It seems that the museum world has never been so interested in participation and engagement. Themes and session titles of museum and gallery conferences both in the UK and around the world are often centred on these concepts: the programmes of the UK Museums Association (MA) conferences of 2008 and 2009 are just one example. Numerous sessions on the possibilities offered by the internet, social networking sites and digital technologies also explore ways in which museums can actively include their visitors and become more 'user-led'. Some good work is being done and developments can be swift, particularly where museums already have close relationships with local communities, and where they are using digital technologies to enable their visitors to contribute their own ideas and related material in connection with museum objects and themes – see for example case studies cited by Parry (2007) and Simon (2010). Some museums are using volunteering as a way of working together with members of the public around the care and interpretation of their collections: several interesting participatory conservation projects are discussed in a recent Demos pamphlet (Jones and Holden 2008). Other museums and galleries consult widely when planning new exhibitions, work directly with specific communities on interpretation or exhibition design, or invite people to create their own displays in particular gallery spaces - many such projects are explored by Watson (2007) and Simon (2010).

Much of this work can be termed broadly as 'co-creation'. For me, this means working with our audiences (both existing and new) to create something together: it could be meaning or interpretation; a space or exhibition; an online resource or collective response – there are many possibilities. I prefer 'co-creation' to 'co-production', as the former implies slightly more openness about where the collaborative journey might take all of the participants: rather than producing something that may be relatively defined, we are creating something new, who knows exactly what?

Also for me, co-creation does not necessarily have to be largely about a community's agendas, and power shared with that community as equally as possible. For others, this is an important defining point, although there is often a lack of clarity around what we mean by co-creation (Heywood 2008). In *The Participatory Museum*, Nina Simon offers a coherent analysis, identifying four different kinds of visitor participation in museums. She uses notions borrowed from citizen science - scientific projects which involve non-professionals (Simon 2010: 185-7). These types of participation are differentiated according to where the power to define the project and make decisions resides. 'Contribution' asks visitors to provide limited and specific objects, actions or ideas to an institutionally controlled process. 'Collaboration' invites visitors to serve as active partners in the creation of a museum project which is originated by and ultimately controlled by the museum. For Simon, 'Co-creation' happens when visitors

and the institution work together from the start to define the project's goals, and generate the programme or exhibition based on the community's interests: it is about their agendas. She has added a fourth category: 'Hosting' is when the museum turns over some of its facilities and resources for external groups to use as they want, hosting programmes or events that they develop and implement themselves. It should be noted that Simon does not see these categories as progressively more valuable: she does not think that museums should aim for 'hosting' as the best result because it involves handing over substantial power. Her point (and it is a good one) is that museums should be aware of what kind of participatory work they are asking their visitors to become involved in, and what the implications are for their institution.

However, this clearer definition of co-creation is a fairly narrow one, which is firmly located within a discourse about control. This may be problematic if we wish to re-think our co-creative practice. Unlike Simon, many other museum co-creation advocates do seem to equate the greatest yielding of institutional power with the most valuable kind of participatory work (Lynch 2007, Mulhearn 2008). Yet I have a suspicion that the concern to give 'the power' to our visitors may be something of a red herring. It polarises the co-creation debate and reduces it simply to a question of democracy versus elitism, when it is more complex and nuanced than that. In reality, museums are very unlikely ever to give up all of their control, and even if we believe they should, urging them to do so has not so far proved to be a particularly effective strategy. When we stop making power hand-over a central aim of co-creation, I think we give ourselves many more possibilities to do interesting work with our audiences, which will be embraced by more of our colleagues (and will probably involve quite a significant sharing of power along the way).

I want to advance a broader working definition of 'co-creation', one which is not always anchored to the representation of community interests, or predicated upon the hand-over of power, although both of those issues might well be a part of the process. My definition straddles Simon's notions of 'contribution', 'collaboration' and 'co-creation': all involve working together with our publics to make something new. Precisely how the co-creative process will unfold can and should be left open to the participants, both museum professionals and non-professionals, to determine as they shape their projects together. This paper will explore several possibilities for what different kinds of co-creation might look like, and the wide range of benefits co-creation might offer in addition to a degree of power-sharing. For now, I suggest that we leave our definition of this term as broad and open as possible. Co-creation fundamentally means museum and gallery professionals working with our audiences (both existing and potential) to create something new together.

Many colleagues involved in co-creative work are rightly proud of what they and their audiences have achieved together. The wealth of recent case studies presented by Simon includes many positive, successful examples of everything from museums who have designed small but significant ways for visitors to contribute their ideas to exhibition spaces, to the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, where co-creation with the local community is a way of life that informs and directs everything the museum does (Simon 2010). Practitioners everywhere start to glow as they describe the moment when community participants saw their work defining the museum, or on show next to priceless historic objects. They talk with animation about what both the professionals and participants gained from the experience in terms of confidence, skills or a new perspective, or a new social network.

At the same time, co-creation is also an area of museum work that is fraught with practical and philosophical difficulties, and one where achievements in reality may fall short of ideals. Simon's book has come out of her sometimes challenging experiences as a practitioner and consultant, as well as responses to her blog (<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com>), which convinced her that there was an urgent need for a practical handbook on creating participatory museums. A central point that she makes throughout is that museums need to design for participation, arguing that asking people to start with a blank canvas may seem like the ultimate in democratic gestures, but is in fact a real barrier for most people, and may not be that helpful in the end. Her book offers many practical suggestions for ways in which museums can provide all kinds of structures which encourage visitors to participate, engaging with objects and with each other.

Simon questions how often whole organisations are committed to participatory practice, rather than just colleagues working directly in Learning, Communities and Outreach departments, and she is not alone in this concern. Bernadette Lynch, a consultant with a substantial record of participatory practice in museums, has been commissioned by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to research the extent to which participation and engagement really are at the heart of the work of twelve museums across the UK (ongoing during 2010). The project begins with an implied question that there may still be much work ahead before we can say that such aims are central to everything we do.

Lynch's previous work was one of the catalysts for this Clore research project. She curated a fascinating strand on 'Democracy and Dialogue' at the MA conference of 2008. I attended many of these sessions, and was particularly interested by those which explored what she termed 'co-production', making exhibitions and meanings in close collaboration with members of museums' communities. The case studies presented at MA 2008 and the discussion that grew around them inspired me to explore this

area further. Lynch had already shared her assessment of collaborative work within Manchester museums in a *Museums Journal* article which asked: 'As the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade draws to its end, what has been achieved in terms of new working practices?' (Lynch 2007). Her observations included noting that because several of the museums involved were risk averse, they were late in committing to projects, so that practical issues like the choice of objects had already been made; it was therefore too late for participants to have much impact or feel that they had contributed.

Some institutions were fearful of becoming involved in fully collaborative (co-productive) processes, consulting rather than really working together with their communities. They were often uncomfortable opening up space to explore difficult histories and alternative realities with the public, and were fearful of, and resistant to, being challenged themselves. Some colleagues criticised the co-productive process where it did happen as 'short term and bounded. It does not necessarily change the balance of power or decision-making process within the institution.' (Lynch 2007: 19).

These problems and other difficulties were readily acknowledged by the museum staff who generously shared both the highs and lows of their participatory practice with their colleagues at the conference. They are also apparent in the many case studies presented by Sheila Watson in her excellent reader on *Museums and their Communities* (Watson 2007). In her introductory essay, Watson notes that such efforts do not necessarily result in the shifting of power to the community in any real manner, and can mean giving power to a privileged group while still excluding or controlling others (Watson 2007: 11). The discussions of disagreements between different communities of interest over the controversial exhibition of the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC demonstrate that it is not always easy to know which voices from the community to listen to, and whether accommodating the point of view of one interest group will cause difficulties with another.

Also, museum curators may rightly feel that they have a duty to stand apart from controversial histories and try to present a balanced view, or produce an exhibition that will provoke discussion rather than promote harmony, because that is part of the museum's work. Steven C. Dubin and Robert Macdonald both defend the curator's right to make the final edit. Macdonald, Director of the Museum of the City of New York at the time of writing, argued that 'We have to listen to as many voices as we can hear. But we have to select those voices that are going to be heard in our galleries, and that's the challenge. So you have to try to be as inclusive as you can in listening. But you have to have the intellectual courage to select what goes up on your walls. Then you have the responsibility to stand by it.' (Dubin 1999, reprinted in Watson 2007: 221).

Nadine Andrews of Culture Probe (interviewed in an article for *Museums Journal* by Deborah Mulhearn), has evaluated many participatory museum projects. In her view, 'True co-production probably hasn't been attempted... the big issue is the control of meaning and how prepared museums are – or individuals within museums – to give up control... A lot of museums haven't had the internal conversation as to what co-production means to them. There may be individuals who have that aspiration but lack strategic support from the organisation as a whole.' (Mulhearn 2008: 22).

Mark O'Neill (Head of Arts & Museums, Glasgow) questions whether giving up curatorial or editorial control is really the issue, pointing out that projects which give space to communities to do with as they like look like great inclusion, but are actually disempowering, because such projects will never involve using core collections, and the museum is not going to be sharing its expertise or giving people more intellectual access. For him, the way forward is around the co-production of meaning within exhibitions, and asking for help from our communities to present a range of different interpretations of museum objects: '...there can be religious, emotional or nostalgic meanings, and that's the real value of involving lay people. It's supplementing the curatorial meaning' (Mulhearn 2008: 23).

Yet in her work on interpretive communities, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill notes that with the best of inclusive intentions, we now sometimes create fragmented, multi-vocal spaces in museums, and asks how we can avoid the multiplicity of meanings we encourage from becoming a cacophony? 'There are difficult issues to be resolved here about the continued responsibility of the museum for the production of knowledge, the core of its tangible and intangible collections, the need to balance opportunities to speak for all who wish to do so, and the question of when, whether and how to take a stand in relation to moral and ethical matters. There are no easy answers.' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, reprinted in Watson 2007: 82).

Indeed, colleagues have reported open anger from some visitors in response to exhibitions that have been created by staff working closely with members of the public. When the Manchester Museum displayed the ancient human remains of *Lindow Man: a bog body mystery* (19 April 2008 - 19 April 2009) with a range of interpretive labels by seven different people, some visitors were confused and irritated about which was the 'true' information, and did not want to work out their own views (experience reported during a session at the MA conference 2008). Josie Appleton is among a minority of commentators arguing that museums should not move further towards including their audiences in the making of their displays, and should stop trying so hard to engage and involve people who may well want to be left to their own devices. For her, this trend is entirely driven by central (Labour)

government agendas, and bears little relation to the real needs of museum visitors and the true value of museums. 'Museums should stick to what they do best – to preserve, display, study and where possible collect the treasures of civilisation and of nature.... It is the hard work of scholars and curators in their own areas of expertise that attracts visitors. Everybody knows that the harder you try to win friends and ingratiate yourself with people, the more you repel them. It would seem however that those running our new museums need to learn afresh this simple human lesson.' (Appleton 2001, reprinted in Watson 2007: 125).

There is perhaps more dissent around working in a more fully participative way with our publics than we may realise from what is spoken on the conference floor or what appears in print. It was interesting that the open discussion at the MA conference in 2008 differed substantially from some of what was said in private: I overheard conversations about everything from gloomy predictions that it would be impossible to get all the key staff in their museum on board with a more inclusive way of working, to muttered, defensive comments that 'we all do this enough already – why can't we just get on with our jobs, and stop having to worry about involving everyone else in them?' 'We're a national museum – just who exactly is supposed to be our 'community'?' Colleagues also expressed concern over the conservation risks of 'handing over control', and of how much time it would take to do 'what is effectively a massive outreach project.' (all comments overheard in the corridors and foyers of the conference). Simon, in a discussion of the notion of 'radical trust' (the idea that institutions must trust the users who work with their platforms to do so in a respectful and appropriate manner), notes that successful co-creative projects require organisations not only to trust the competencies and motivations of participants but also deeply to desire their input and leadership. She suspects that the reason there are so few co-created projects in museum and organizational spaces is that this trust and genuine desire for input is not there, or perhaps not consistently enough (Simon 2010: 274).

Co-creation with the public is, then, a vibrant, fascinating, difficult, sometimes disputed area of museum work, and one in which interest is growing fast. When it works well, it is fantastic. Several things became apparent as I was exploring case studies, surveying literature and having conversations about this subject with different colleagues. One is that even the most successful co-creative projects often seem relatively contained and limited in scope. They tend to involve quite tightly defined communities: geographic, ethnic, communities of interest; often in projects that focus directly on their lives, experience, history or cultural identity. More often than not, these projects work towards a finite, defined exhibition, often in a special community gallery, or a manifestation that is 'safely' (from the central organisation's point of view) kept in the virtual land of cyberspace. Superb projects can flourish

online, while changing little in the actual museum. The other constant was how often colleagues reported that this was difficult work to do and to sustain, particularly co-creation projects that involved working directly with people face to face rather than on-line, although even here, there can be problems too.

I was also particularly struck by a comment by Bernadette Lynch in *Museums Journal* that we need 'clearer definitions, commitment, and most importantly, leadership, when developing a sustainable practice of community partnerships' (Lynch 2007: 19). I had just started the Clore Leadership Programme, and was becoming increasingly aware that often when a difficult situation arises in an environment involving different people and interests, great leadership is called for – but what does leadership really mean in this context? Might it be about more than simply support from Director level, aimed at achieving substantial cultural change within individual museums, or museums overall? Finally, I became aware from the experience of working in a group with other Clore Fellows from different areas of the cultural sector that they often approached things in completely different ways to museum and gallery colleagues; some of them were rather surprised that we seemed to be finding co-creating with the public comparatively difficult.

I started to ask how we could really broaden the scope of our co-creative work with our publics – not just an exhibition with a particular community here, or a great virtual project there, but something much more ambitious, on-going, and far-reaching in terms of museums' work. Why isn't the National Gallery doing the co-created Titian show? Where is the co-created total re-hang, in the real space of the museum? Or the re-writing of every single label and piece of interpretation both in the museum and online, with or by our publics? What might be gained or lost by such ventures?

Then, how could we 'sell' this idea to colleagues who for a range of reasons (including relatively low appetite for risk) are reluctant to engage with it? How can we tackle some of the problems reported so far about doing this kind of work in practice, including managing issues of risk and control, of expectation and delivering a good final product? What can we learn about working co-creatively with our publics from non-museum contexts, including other parts of the cultural sector such as the performing arts? Lastly, threading through all of this, what do we mean, what could we mean by 'leadership' in the context of this debate?

I will briefly outline the thoughts raised by investigations in three areas outside of the usual museum sphere: business literature about harnessing the power of collective creativity; two particularly useful areas of leadership theory (on how to lead spontaneous or agile organisations, and collaborative leadership); and co-production in the public services. This paper will then explore in more detail several performing arts companies currently doing particularly innovative and ambitious co-creative work with members of the public. It ends with suggestions about what this could mean in terms of leadership and co-creation in museums and galleries, and where we might go from here.

2. Business literature about collective creativity

This is a growing body of literature. Business gurus have been watching how people have responded to the possibilities offered by the internet for mass collaboration on creative projects, particularly those involving more complex negotiations between community members, such as those required to produce collectively Wikipedia. This has intersected with research exploring how large, disparate groups make decisions, and the high quality of the ideas they can develop. Surowiecki (2005) looked at this form of collective intelligence in *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few*. Having examined a range of different 'crowds', including traffic, the scientific community, markets and democracies, he suggests that groups can produce better decisions than isolated experts or 'heroic' leaders. A diverse team draws on its variety of input and can produce common ground that is better than a mere average; collective intelligence is surprisingly effective at coming up with the 'best' answer. The smartest groups consist of diverse, independent individuals who are not easily influenced by each other. They are also large enough to avoid the particular problems of small groups, which tend to favour consensus over dissent: disagreements can be very useful for promoting a vital process of discussion out of which solutions are born.

When commentators explore how these observations might be applied in business, they notice that it can be difficult to make these kinds of 'creative crowds' within organisations, where people find it hard to throw aside notions of expertise in particular areas and to work across internal organisational boundaries. They look at ways companies can think past hierarchies and find methods to aggregate collective wisdom. Increasingly, these writers have also noticed that the conditions required for great mass creativity or collective intelligence are exactly those found in on-line groups, and have begun to look at ways that businesses and other organisations can harness the considerable power of enthusiastic on-line communities who come together to make something they all need or desire.

Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything (Tapscott and Williams 2006) and *We-think: Mass Innovation not Mass Production: the Power of Mass Creativity* (Leadbeater 2008) are leading titles in this area.

When organisations extend their collective intelligence pool to include members of the public, they potentially create new audiences or markets of deeply engaged individuals. They choose to become part of whatever creative project the community is working on, and some will be incredibly enthusiastic and dedicated. At their best, these groups work together to create something that they want, and are then a ready market for that 'product'. They will then also evangelise and spread the word to others.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is interest in this from the business community because it is an enticing thought – your market forms itself, innovates and comes up with a great idea that your own Research and Development Division probably would never have thought of; your company is able (with its production capabilities) to make that product; which its creators then both consume and publicise to others. Many businesses hope to find that they have the next runaway ‘viral’ success on their hands, the product so many people talk about that it reaches Gladwell’s famous ‘tipping point’, achieving huge success (Gladwell 2001).

Could this help museums to extend the ways in which we use the internet and social networking sites for co-creation? At the heart of this work is a proposition which is about far more than offering people the chance to up-load their creative responses or their own material in relation to our collections. Business literature about collective creativity is about accepting that a large group of non-experts might come up with a brilliant idea for our ‘business’ that we can’t even imagine. We would need to adjust our organisations to be able to encourage and support that process, and to find ways to harness that power to our core purpose (and sometimes just let it go wherever participants want it to go). Yet this could both really strengthen our final ‘offer’, which would perhaps include interpretation, or exhibitions, or other ‘products’ that have been collectively created by our visitors, and probably also non-visitors who have been drawn into the process on-line. This could help to develop and increase audiences, who would be more engaged, and would spread the word about our museum to others. In tough economic times, we need to be relevant for and connected to our publics: letting them contribute to our future development makes sense on many levels, economic as well as ideological.

‘User-led innovation’ in the cultural sector is just starting to be investigated in earnest. In a forthcoming publication commissioned by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), a range of authors will explore different aspects of the possibilities of user-led innovation in the visual arts, including current Clore Leadership Fellows Claire Antrobus and Michelle Knight (see <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications>). Charles Leadbeater teamed up with Tom Fleming to launch ‘The Art of With’, an ongoing piece of action research in several contemporary arts centres, including Cornerhouse in Manchester and FACT in Liverpool (<http://www.cornerhouse.org/art/ongoingproject/>). Inspired by Leadbeater’s ‘We-think’ work, this is looking at why and how arts organisations can capitalise upon the new habits and modes of engagement made possible by recently developed technologies, intersecting with new models emerging from the business world, to work collaboratively and productively with their audiences. It also urges funders and policy makers to re-think how they judge and measure the arts, and the compartmentalised approach they take to artistic forms which

seems increasingly irrelevant in today's world of inter-disciplinary, cross-cultural mash-ups. As Tom Fleming notes, 'there is no space for celebrating achievement here: the [audience's] desire lines are moving faster than our cultural venues are able. Without extensive organisational reform, the abandonment or at least realignment of comfort zones, and a willingness by funders to re-appraise the indicators of public value and the silos in which they are stored, then the renovation we require of our cultural infrastructure will be licked together as clumsily, half-heartedly and shoddily as before.' (Fleming 2009: 20).

There are clearly applications here for museums and historical galleries too, if our organisations are open and flexible enough to try out the possibilities. Simon cites 'Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition' at the Brooklyn Museum of Art as an example of a deliberate experiment to see whether a 'crowd' could curate a show collectively, drawing upon the ideas suggested by Surowiecki (2005). This did not involve core collections: it was an exhibition of participants' responses (photographs of Brooklyn) selected by other participants. It generated a fascinating range of discussions not just about the images but also how different 'crowds' had judged and selected them (Simon 2010: 115-119). Another of the many interesting case studies in this book is the Children of the Lodz Ghetto project at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, a collective, collaborative research project which asks participants who sign up to find out information about the paths taken by over 13,000 children who signed a school album in the Lodz Ghetto in 1941 (an artefact in the museum). Participants have needed to develop specific skills in order to do their work well, and early in the project this 'help' came at a considerable cost, since only 26% of the contributions were found by staff to be accurate enough to be included. However, this is improving, and the museum sees the value of the project in a range of different terms, including emotional engagement with the museum's collections rather than seeing this as a way to outsource time-consuming work more cheaply (Simon 2010: 254-257).

Simon describes in detail the benefits and difficulties of The Tech Virtual Test Zone, a project of the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California, which aimed to create collectively new exhibitions by involving participants all over the world via web-based and virtual world-based collaborative platforms. She raises interesting questions about managing and sustaining such communities, noting that the open-ended and chaotic nature of the project did not provide the foundation of a sustaining community of amateur exhibit developers: the community dissolved shortly after she left her role as its manager (Simon 2010: 245-243). Simon explores ideas that could make such communities more self-sufficient. Another possibility is to accept that these groups may always need a light-touch form of leadership, and to explore what that might look like.

3. Leadership theories

Linked to the literature around collective creativity in a business context is recent writing that explores effective leadership in today's rapidly changing consumer world, especially as behaviours, expectations and possibilities change in our current connected, digital age. Much of this concerns flexibility around leadership approaches, and paying attention to 'followers' as well as 'leaders' – why should anyone want to be led by you, and what are they looking for from the experience? In co-creative projects where we are actively considering what participants are getting out of the process as well as the museum institution, this is useful material: *Followership: How Followers are Creating Change and Changing Leaders* (Kellerman 2008) and *Tribes: We Need You to Lead Us* (Godin 2008) have interesting contributions to make here.

There are two further areas of recent leadership theory that seem especially relevant to the co-creative work under discussion here.

Leadership of agile or spontaneous organisations

Emmanuel Gobillot has written several books about how to develop leaders who can function effectively in the current context, particularly *The Connected Leader: Creating Agile Organizations for People, Performance and Profit* (2007) and *Leadershift: Reinventing Leadership for the Age of Mass Collaboration* (2009). He argues that we need a new form of leadership that is prepared to let go of the experience, expertise and control it holds precious, in order to allow collective creativity to flourish. Business is now increasingly social and communal, and leadership in communities is about narrative, task and function, not power, role and accountability. 'No longer in charge of setting a direction, the role of the leader is to help the community to find its voice. From there, communities will find their own direction and narrative as they set out to succeed.' (Gobillot 2009: 5). Leaders need to foster an environment where the conditions are right to attract a thriving community, and then earn the right to be followed by the contribution they make to that community.' They need to be self aware, and really clear about their values and what drives them and their organisation; this will give them the confidence to stand back and allow groups to form, debate and create.

Gobillot examines how a wide range of businesses with strong elements of collective creativity at their core actually work in practice, from Current (Al Gore's co-created TV channel) to Wikipedia, Club Penguin (a virtual world environment featuring penguins which is hugely popular with children), and Rabobank, a financial institution that has tried to encourage collective creativity among its employees.

He argues that the creative collectives within these ventures do still need leadership: most people have a deep-rooted fear of chaos, and communities cannot always resolve conflicts as they arise, and as they and their creations grow. Gobillot provides an interesting analysis of the battle between 'inclusionists' and 'deletionists' within the Wikipedia community, who have been torn apart by the dilemma over (for example) what to do when the community as a whole decides that under the heading of 'Barbie', they will write more about the doll than the Nazi (Gobillot 2009: 92-3). Leadership is required to help them decide what the core values of the venture are, and therefore whether they should include all of the entries about the plastic princess or delete some so that users searching the site will be aware of the war criminal too.

Gobillot found a version of this kind of leadership in Rabobank, and was impressed by how open its senior staff were, actively inviting challenging conversations with all kinds of employees. Comfortable with their own core values, these leaders were able to cope with being challenged because they did not see these as personal attacks, but rather as an important part of finding the best solution, which they did not assume they had already found themselves. 'Mass participation is not to be feared, even as it challenges the very essence of our models of value creation. It is a much more natural (and therefore energising) form of value creation than the one imposed on us by our organisational models.' (Gobillot 2009: 164).

In an article on 'spontaneous' organisations for the Ashridge Business School's Virtual Learning Resource Centre, Martyn Brown and David Beech draw on a range of theoretical models (including complexity theory in particular) and recent thinking about new organisational structures to argue that our current business and social environment is going to require a shift from formal organisations to intelligent, adaptive, spontaneous organisations, with a strong element of collective creativity at their heart (Brown and Beech, not dated). These will need a different kind of leader: instead of the charismatic top-down leaders who define a vision for their organisation, we will need leaders who can foster an environment where spontaneity, improvisation and ingenuity are likely to occur. They use a jazz analogy: the leader provides the beat around which other members of the group elaborate, their independent riffs still connected to the core of the work, and coming together with the contributions of others to create something substantial and often unexpected. The leader's role is to contain the anxiety created by being at the edge of chaos in a complex, creative system; and to articulate and reflect back new ideas as they are developed.

This kind of leadership could help to encourage and nurture innovation and collective creativity both within museum organisations (between colleagues from different departments, if that isn't already happening) and with their publics, within an environment of overall support and responsibility. We would need to be really clear about what we were aiming to do and why, and what our core values were (see the section on innovative companies working in the performing arts for more on this), in order to be able to lead while also standing back, to accept that we may well be challenged, and to see our role as providing the beat, the framework for improvisation we can't yet even imagine. But accepting and indeed welcoming a leadership role in this kind of environment means that we can provide the support that participants may need, particularly as the collective creativity process can be messy and chaotic at times, or need a boost periodically to keep the community active and engaged. The leadership role also allows us to take overall responsibility, so we can be sure that our collections are looked after; this a crucial deal-breaker for some colleagues, that may currently be the reason why they are still reluctant to advocate or become involved in co-creative work with our publics.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership is another area of leadership theory that seems to offer quite a few possibilities to colleagues working on co-creative projects in museums and galleries. This is an emerging body of theory and practice which focuses on the leadership skills and attributes needed to deliver results across organisational boundaries, or where there are no formal boundaries, for example community activists working with large, seemingly inflexible bodies such as state education systems (especially in the USA), or organisations who make or are required to make strategic alliances, for example public / private partnerships. *Collaborative Leadership: Developing Effective Partnerships for Communities and Schools* (Rubin 2009), *Collaborative Leadership: how to succeed in an interconnected world* (Archer and Cameron 2009), and *Managing to Collaborate* (Huxham and Vangen 2005) are useful texts here.

The collaborations they describe, whether business to business or community to big government are not easy, even when all parties have chosen to work together: they all have quite firm agendas, and it can be hard to move forward. This literature explores the most common pitfalls of collaborative projects, and offers practical suggestions for how you can lead such work in a way that does not mean you are directing or dictating everything, but does ensure that the process is as smooth as possible and high quality results are delivered in the end. Key observations are that collaborative leaders need to develop great emotional intelligence about both themselves and others; have to work out strategies to build trust rather than assuming it is there; and develop more strategies to deal with frustration and

anxiety. They will probably need to make frequent injections of enthusiasm and passion to keep everyone engaged, and give careful thought to how they manage the tension between taking time to build relationships and delivering on time in a way that works for everyone's agendas.

Archer and Cameron reiterate that collaborative processes are about getting value from difference, and that this process will not always be easy, so you need to prepare well in advance for handling the conflict that will probably arise at some point. All of the authors writing on this subject argue that the best collaborative work happens within a framework, and that it does need management and leadership. In this case, just standing respectfully back often does not deliver the results you all want: you need to plan, design and reflect for effective collaboration.

Again, I can see this being of real practical use for museums, especially in the co-creative projects which we do seem to be doing most, where we form partnerships with particular communities to work collaboratively on a project about their history, their identity or their creative responses to our collections. These are just the kinds of projects where colleagues do sometimes currently report some difficulties in dealing with different agendas and getting the work done to the satisfaction of all parties. Taking some of the highly practical examples of processes through which collaborative partners can work to make sure they know what they're aiming for and why, perhaps using some of the tips for how to gain quick wins in building trust, and ensuring that communication channels are set up and being used, may help these projects to progress more smoothly.

4. Co-production in the public services

Discussions about co-creation in museums and galleries are of course part of a much bigger discourse around talking to, including and working more closely with people who use all sorts of public services, from government and the police to health care and schools. Within this, there is a specific co-production movement which is lobbying for and effecting radical change in public services. Advocates argue that conventional public service reform is failing, and that we need a completely different approach, one which fully involves people in creating and delivering the services they need.

This means 'increasingly looking outwards to local neighbourhoods to create supportive social networks, seeking out local energy where it exists to help deliver and broaden services, and seeing clients for what they can do, not just what they need. The idea is that, by working alongside the people they are supporting, public services can dramatically increase their resources, extend their reach, radically transform the way they operate, and be much more effective. Co-production makes strengthening the core economy of neighbourhood and family the central task of all public services. This means recognising people as assets' (Boyle and Harris 2009: 14).

So, this approach understands that the best people to design and deliver support for people who have had a hip operation are other people who have had the same operation and recovered, who know what it's like and what is needed ('expert patients'). Co-production builds 'social capital', networks of social relationships that deliver and support a huge amount of unseen 'value', improving society on the ground. Edgar Cahn, an early exponent of co-produced public services, developed the concept of the 'time bank', so that people can both give and receive help in a form which logs it, makes it visible and values it (Cahn 2004).

Co-produced public services are encouraged not just for the support services and social capital generated as a result, but also because this process puts great emphasis on the huge benefits for people of being involved in doing this work and in giving to others, in terms of self esteem and a sense of being useful and productive. They are also valued by professionals as part of this process too. A key part of co-production in public services is that it is about equal participation: it's not consultation, it's not co-design. It means recognising that a doctor and an expert patient have different knowledge and skills, and affording equal value to all of those skills, acknowledging that everyone has something to contribute, and that they should continue to be involved in the delivery of those services after they

have been created. (See Boyle and Harris 2009: 16 for a useful summary of what co-production is and is not, in terms of both user and professional roles in the design and delivery of services).

There is much in this approach that is appealing, particularly from a philosophical point of view. Museums can and do build social capital in communities, and could do this even more. It is also refreshing to read so much about valuing all sorts of people's skills, and assuming that everyone has something worthwhile to contribute. The contexts of healthcare, policing and justice are however different from those of museums and the services we provide, particularly because co-produced public services such as health care have as one of their primary aims the reduction of need or demand upon costly services. They call for an end to the current narrow focus on efficiency within existing services, and argue instead for 'radical innovation so that public services can make real inroads into tackling prevention, reducing demand for expensive critical services [because] it is here that substantial future savings will be found.' (Boyle and Harris 2009: 9). Museums are not looking to reduce demand for what they offer (and therefore the cost of providing their services) by involving our audiences – quite the opposite.

Even if governments in the future should seek such a thing, it is hard to see how a direct translation is possible: co-creation with our publics is not going to remove the necessity for expensive re-hangs or development of new exhibitions. We seek instead to make our services more relevant through co-creation, to learn from our visitors both existing and new, and to offer the potential for people to build skills and self-esteem through creating with us. So we are looking to see our participants as assets with valuable contributions to make, and we understand a broad notion of value that can be generated through co-creation both for museums and individuals, and indeed other visitors who may then find that the museum is more relevant for them too. We may also want to partner actively with emerging co-produced public services in areas such as health care, social care and justice, just as we are increasingly teaming up with providers of education services far beyond school visits, and explore ways in which we can work together to achieve mutually compatible aims. Our existing outreach work in many ways already creates 'extended museums', like the 'extended schools' that are enlivening communities around the country, and no doubt we could achieve even more through co-creative projects. Museums are not, however, fundamentally aiming to 'prevent' the need for costly cultural services in the future.

I think too that we have to be careful about some of the assumptions we might make in seeking to translate co-production in public services such as healthcare and justice to museum work. Co-produced public services often draw directly upon participants' lived experience, locating their 'expertise' directly in what they have done so far in life. The examples of services discussed in the New Economic Foundation's manifesto for co-production value bear this out: for example, the Citizen's Advice Bureau's ROTA scheme which sees prisoners supporting other prisoners, because they understand better than anyone what they are going through, or the KeyRing scheme, where networks of young people with disabilities help each other (Stephens, Ryan-Collins and Boyle 2008).

Yet this focus on life and lived experience can limit our work in museums if we interpret 'lived experience' too narrowly. In my view, we already focus far too much on co-creating only with our audiences around their lives and identities, or their direct creative responses: the exhibition on the experiences of an immigrant community in the 1950s, for example, or different groups encouraged to explore their lives through making art as they react to objects in the museum's collection. People can, however, contribute to any exhibition on any subject: they will still be bringing their unique take on it to the creative process. Why could they not be involved in researching and developing an exhibition on Venetian Renaissance painters, or kinetic sculpture of the twentieth century, or eighteenth-century ceramics, bringing their own wisdom and experience to a topic not closely related to their lives, yet still contributing 'in ways that can broaden and strengthen services and make them more effective'? (Boyle and Harris 2009: 8). We need to be careful that taking inspiration from co-produced public services does not narrow further the already relatively limited scope of our co-creative work.

I also have a concern that museum colleagues could look at co-produced public services and assume that equal participation means no leadership, or that their own views are not also important. Yet doctors are not ignored in co-produced healthcare services; it is simply that 'expert patients' have a strong and valued voice which is also heard. Co-production 'can mean delivering other aspects of services – not those which require professional skills, but the aspects of services dependent on broader human capacities.' (Boyle and Harris 2009: 14). While the implicit shift in the balance of power from professionals to individuals may appeal to museum colleagues who are anxious no longer to appear elitist, we should acknowledge that, as in the co-created public service model, there are some areas where our professional skills and opinions are needed. The contribution of museum colleagues to any co-creative process may be critical in terms of conservation issues, looking after historical objects around which we want to make museum environments with our publics.

If we ignore this fact, we either really risk our collections, or, more likely, will never engage other colleagues who fear losing control over the care of their objects because they (perhaps rightly) are anxious. Another likely outcome is that co-creative work will rarely involve core collections if there is a possibility that they might be at risk. Museum staff do have expert knowledge about what you can and can't do with an early Renaissance panel painting or piece of seventeenth-century cloth so that it doesn't get damaged, or how to create an enticing and engaging exhibition. They have interesting information to share: not to present it as the only meaning, but to add in to the interpretive mix. In my experience, our publics often want us to share that knowledge, and to take that responsibility to care for and present our collections, even as we invite their input too because we do not assume that we have all the answers.

But what else might we be able to contribute as professionals to a co-creative process? Are we thinking enough, and on an ambitious enough scale, about how we could build participants' skills and confidence so that we perhaps enable them to co-create something truly amazing with us in our museums and galleries? It is here that some examples from a few innovative companies in the performing arts might be able to inspire us, at least to open up our thoughts about what we do, why we do it, and what other possibilities there might be.

5. Innovative co-creation in the performing arts

There are many theatre, dance and opera companies who produce work of varying standards in largely traditional ways, developing new productions as professional ensembles before presenting largely finished pieces to their audiences. By focusing in this section on the performing arts, I do not wish to suggest that across the board, cultural producers working in this area are 'better' at co-creation than colleagues from museums and galleries, although there are long and strong traditions for participatory theatre, dance and music. Instead, I want to explore in some detail several companies who are doing particularly ambitious and innovative co-creative work in different ways with members of the public, whose work and methods I have found inspiring and / or thought-provoking. Their art forms are of course radically different from what we do in museums and galleries, and the ways in which people can become involved in creating and performing are again different in both contexts. However, I think there is much to be gained from looking outwards and starting to think about what resonates with us around particular practices in other art forms, and what equivalents might look like in our professional world. Examining what some performing arts companies are doing, why and how they are achieving it could open up some interesting debates for museums about the kinds of co-creative work we might want to do in the future, and what kinds of leadership we may need to offer in order to achieve them.

Case studies and key informants

For this short research project, I focused on three main case studies. The key informants I talked to are identified in brackets below; unless otherwise noted, the evidence is from interviews, conversations and in the case of Birmingham Opera Company, contributions made at the seminar 'The Elephant in the Room', 14-15 December 2009.

Case Study 1 - Dance United (Artistic Director Tara-Jane Herbert) and Sadler's Wells (Artistic Director and CEO Alistair Spalding)

Dance United only make outstanding dance with non-professionals. Their core work is with young offenders and young people who are marginalised in society, with whom they run twelve-week full-time Academy programmes. Dance United sometimes also work with much larger numbers and a wider range of people on specific projects: ambitious, high quality work which is demanding for participants. One such recent project was 'Full Circle', a major piece of dance co-created with and performed by more than 120 non-professional dancers who ranged from people aged nine to eighty nine. This was the finale of a professional programme entitled *Destino*, which premiered at Sadler's Wells in March 2009. The programme overall also starred two professional dancers who had first worked with Dance

United's Executive Producer Andrew Coggins eight years previously when they were street kids in Ethiopia: now, Junaid Jemal Sendi and Addisu Demissie are rising talents on the international dance stage. *Destino* was also a co-production with Sadler's Wells, who produce, present and receive dance shows in their London theatres and studios, and on tour. Sadler's Wells took the bold step of presenting and marketing *Destino* as if it were a fully professional show, to great acclaim.

Case Study 2 - Birmingham Opera Company (Artistic Director Graham Vick; Associate Director for *Othello* Iqbal Khan; non-professional participant in *Othello* Eileen Eveson)

Birmingham Opera Company also now only produces work that has been co-created with members of the public, in this case the people of Birmingham. They present one major piece each year in a different unlikely setting; they are also involved in preparatory creative work in the community all year round. I saw Verdi's *Othello* in the Argyle Works (a disused factory) in December 2009, which was an amazing experience. It involved 250 non-professional chorus members and dancers, working with eight professional soloists, five of whom were black - several had trained after first singing in Birmingham Opera Company's non-professional chorus. The roles of both *Othello* and *Iago* were sung by black singers, unprecedented in opera history. There was a great deal of interest in this production from other opera companies, many of whom sent representatives to the seminar which I also attended, 'The Elephant in the Room' (14 and 15 December 2009). Again, this was a very ambitious production, which deeply involved all sorts of people from the community in a high quality, co-created art production: it genuinely was great art that was both relevant for and made by all sorts of (extra)ordinary people.

Case Study 3 - The Theatre Royal Stratford East (Kerry Michael, Artistic Director)

Theatre Royal Stratford East are planning an ambitious hand-over of all commissioning and programming control to their community for six months leading up to the Olympics and Paralympics in London in 2012, called 'Open Stage'. Theatre staff will be on hand, ready to make the work for (and sometimes with) the community, but the aim is for creative control genuinely to pass to the people of Stratford in East London. If they want six months of non-stop *High School Musical*, then that is what the staff will make: it will be a valid choice, in itself an expression of the community's (political) will. Kerry and the new manager of Open Stage, Charlotte Handel, are currently talking to different members of the community (with whom there are already very strong links) to plan exactly how they will enable their audiences to make those creative decisions.

In addition to these three main areas of focus, I also talked to Theatre Royal York (Artistic Director Damian Cruden), who after a four month shadowing and planning period handed over the entire

running of their theatre to a company of young people for a three-week festival, 'Takeover '09', in September 2009. Further insights came from Graham Devlin, who led the theatre company Major Road for many years, and was responsible for many pioneering projects that were co-created with members of the public. I had informal conversations with many more people, who confirmed much of the central evidence gathered from the key informants.

Why do you co-create with members of the public or 'non-professionals'?

I was really struck by the wide range of reasons the key informants had for why they chose to co-create with the public. Social inclusion is certainly there: Sadler's Wells has a long tradition of wanting to involve people from every kind of background in dance that dates back to their founder, Lillian Baylis. Tara from Dance United really believes in the transformative power of dance, and is certain that it can change lives for the better and really open up new avenues for people. A recent report by New Philanthropy Capital has highlighted the work of Dance United in stopping young people from re-offending and reducing the severity of any re-offences (see http://www.philanthropycapital.org/publications/community/prisoners%20and%20exoffenders/young_offenders.aspx for the full report). Social inclusion and transformation is not, however, Tara's primary aim for the work she does, and she regularly tells choreographers and other professionals who are interested in being part of her co-creative work 'if you want to save people, then this is not the company for you.'

Audience development was an overt aim for many, for financial as well as social reasons. Sadler's Wells only receives public funding for around 11% of its budget, and is clear that growing their audiences beyond the most dedicated dance enthusiasts is crucial to the organisation's continued success. Graham Vick wants to build (and indeed has built) an audience for opera in Birmingham, but is convinced that marketing alone will never work. His firm belief is that to develop a solid audience, you need to really engage people; the best way to do that is to connect them intimately with something they want. His aim is to make opera something that they want, because they have been involved in creating it, and have had an overall experience that was amazing and fulfilling. Damian Cruden wanted to develop his audiences of young people at the Theatre Royal York, not by giving them free tickets (the funded proposal offered to him), but instead by letting them 'wield the power of theatre, so that perhaps it will have a value for them too.'

Anger about lack of diversity was another reason for co-creation. Graham Vick is adamant that the diversity of the audience needs to be reflected on stage: 'otherwise why would they feel any connection

to it?' For him, this has extended beyond actively encouraging all sorts of people to become part of his non-professional choruses; he has also mentored black singers, and provided coaches, dieticians and other support services so that they are now semi- or fully professional. Kerry Michael goes much further; indeed, anger over what he sees as institutional racism, sexism and a complete lack of consideration for the diversity of our communities and how they make and use culture is at the heart of the Open Stage project. He rails at the lack of diversity in the management and decision-making levels of cultural organisations in Britain, particularly in large cities such as London where the population is now so ethnically and culturally diverse. 'These organisations are completely unrepresentative of their constituencies, and impose their taste and values at will on people who use art and culture in really different ways. For example, using art for 'self-exploration' is a very Western approach – actually, South Indians would do that kind of contemplation and exploration within a religious context. They use art for celebration. It's all about us and not enough about our users, so let's really let them take some decisions.'

For Michael, this is also different from 'inclusion', because it is not about including the community in our vision, but is instead about letting them shape the vision for themselves. He is particularly frustrated that his local community in Stratford in East London have been told for years that the 2012 Olympics will be 'their' games, but that there is as yet little evidence that they are or will be able to influence or shape the developments in their neighbourhood in significant ways. He wants to give his community the power to make the kind of theatre that they genuinely want, not what a group of white, middle class people decide might be best for them. His ambition is that this project will have impact at political and policy levels: 'Through Open Stage we will be able to explore the bigger picture within our own theatre and of the arts sector as a whole and, with a range of partners, look at themes of citizenship and engagement that may influence policy makers and politicians.' (interview with *The Stage*, 16 November 2009).

Opportunism and entrepreneurialism were factors in several cases: both Damian Cruden and Graham Devlin in part moved further into co-creation because they saw a chance to do something a bit more creative with some space, some money, or a resource of some kind. Devlin's company Major Road was originally a touring group who were very interested in working participatively with their audiences, but were becoming frustrated because their projects were short-term, and there was little opportunity to develop closer relationships with communities. One of their regular venues told them that they were dark over the summer, and were conscious that they were the only entertainment venue in the area: could Major Road use the space to do something in which the community could become involved? They

went there for a month to develop a show with 13-19-year-olds; over the next fifteen years they would co-create around thirty productions all round the country. Central to Birmingham Opera's shift into total co-creation was a response to the Arts Council's withdrawal of their funding: Vick appealed and won, on condition that the company broaden their work to have a year-round presence in Birmingham. They moved from being a touring opera company to one which is totally committed to making great opera with and for the people of Birmingham, and now seem completely to be behind this idea philosophically.

Organisational development was sometimes part of the impetus behind this work, as leaders sought to bind their organisations together more closely: it has certainly proved to be a beneficial result. Fiona Ross is Sadler's Wells' Head of Connect (their learning and communities department); she was the one to suggest and push for a major project with Dance United. Before the project, Spalding felt that Connect's work was rather apart from the rest of the company; now, he finds that the entire organisation is thinking and acting together with far greater unity: 'everyone is thinking about how we make things flow from the stage to people's involvement and back again, the whole organisation is thinking about what we all do together'. Damian Cruden reported that before Takeover '09, he had been leading on the focus on young people; now, this is completely embedded across the every department in the theatre: 'everyone's on board, there is no question of not doing this.'

There were however three overwhelming reasons why all of the professional informants really wanted to co-create with non-professionals:

(i) Personal and artistic stimulus or challenge:

Graham Devlin recalls that he and his colleagues were drawn to working with their audiences because 'We wanted a creative stimulus, as artists'. Iqbal Khan of Birmingham Opera Company said of working on *Othello*: 'the whole process was completely inspiring!' 'Your whole philosophy of engagement is completely wrong if it's only about 'what can I teach you?' It has to be also about asking 'how can your life experience enrich mine?' I definitely grew as an artist during this process, as I worked out how to communicate better, how to work with different people... and I have to do this. If I don't grow, then I shrivel up inside.' Graham Vick said: 'I do this for what I get out of it personally and creatively – it's a challenge, a chance to realise my ambitions, to push further, to be surprised.' Tara from Dance United in part does this kind of work for the sheer variety of people with whom you end up working with creatively: it's more interesting for her, and offers a much wider range of possibilities than professional dancers. 'If you're going to work with people, why limit yourself?' Kerry Michael wants to challenge

both himself and his company: '[Theatre Royal Stratford East] is renowned for being 'engaged'; I want to examine what that really means, and I'm hoping it will change us.' Damian Cruden noted that 'You learn an enormous amount and it re-charges the batteries. I would absolutely recommend this to anyone.'

(ii) A genuine appreciation for what non-professionals bring to the creative process:

Graham Vick: 'By involving ourselves in local communities and making local people the focus of what we do, not only do we offer the opportunity to engage with opera at first hand, but also, in return, [we] have the chance for our productions to be enriched by a wealth of human experience. Our choice of work, preparation and presentation are governed entirely by this commitment.' (programme notes to *Othello*). Iqbal Khan added that 'you're giving them discipline and craft; they bring themselves, their bodies and experiences to the production. Their presence transforms the way that the professional singers work too: they have to be sure that their words are clear, that the other singers are getting the point and understanding the story'. Vick: 'It's an open-ended discussion, a really rich way for singers to understand the essential nature of their role as communicators.'

Alistair Spalding referred to a broader movement in dance which is interested in looking at the qualities that non-professionals bring to dance, other ingredients that have been lost as bodies have been trained to move and act in particular ways. Tara-Jane Herbert spoke at length about the opening solo of 'Full Circle' and how unique it was in each performance: the same moves were performed by a different elderly woman, each one of whom had a completely different physicality, size and approach to dance, and each of whom made it completely her own.

It is interesting however that Tara does not do 'issues-based' work that draws directly on the life stories of her non-professional participants. For her, this is too unsubtle, and not the point of what they are trying to do. Instead, she asks participants to think about their experience as they are working out a move, so it adds an extra level or nuance without making the narrative of the entire piece overtly about life as a young offender, or an elderly woman. This brings me back to the point I made earlier about how often museums' co-created projects are directly about participants' lives: this is often seen as being the locus of the value that they have to contribute, or is an obvious way in for museums who are often working on histories and identities.

Yet this is also an approach which actively leads to problems, for example if there is a tension between how people want to present their own lives and a museum's interest or duty to present other views or

contextual information. I do not propose that we never do this kind of work: it can be of great interest and value. However, perhaps we could make it only part of our co-creative practice rather than a central feature of it – let's see the value that non-professional participants have as being much broader, and involve them in a wider range of co-creative work that may have nothing obviously to do with their own life story, apart from the fact that they are human beings interacting with wonderful, interesting objects.

(iii) 'To make great art!'

This was overwhelmingly the most important reason and aim for co-creation, one that was repeated over and over again. Graham Devlin said that 'We made very little distinction intellectually between our work with professionals and with non-professionals. We were always just trying to make the best show possible, to push things as far as we could and create the highest level of product'. Tara-Jane Herbert: 'It's all about the work – it's got to be about the work. That's what inspires the group, that's what makes them respect you and what you're all doing.' Alistair Spalding was clear that if you're going to co-create with your audiences, you must give that work the same care, attention and status that you give to your work with professionals; that is what makes it a high quality experience for everyone, including the final audience for the finished production. 'The end result was terrific, inspiring – and it became one of the highlights of the season.'

Critical reaction to *Destino* was indeed generally very positive; while there are some references to 'charm' and 'naivety' in pieces by Graham Watts in *Ballet Magazine* and Judith Mackrell in *The Guardian*, most critics followed Mackrell's reaction that 'it is impossible not to warm to it – a crowd this size, all dancing' (Mackrell 2009). For Donald Hutera in *The Times*, this 'half-hour epic' 'was definitely the highlight of the whole programme' (Hutera 2009). Luke Jennings was full of praise in *The Observer*, noting that 'Arts access initiatives can look calculating and insincere, exercises in box-ticking to satisfy funding bodies. But you never get that feeling with Sadler's Wells, which constantly restates its belief in the power of dance to change lives. Programmes like *Destino*...take us to the places where that change is actually occurring, demonstrating that it's the attention you pay to human values that keeps you ahead of the curve.' (Jennings 2009).

Graham Vick puts his basic aim bluntly: 'We're an opera company that does operas – that's the fundamental thing.' He wants to build outwards from the work into the community, to create ripples in the pool, 'but there needs to be a great work of art at the centre, whose content is palpably immediate to the audience we're seeking.' 'People join up to do important work... the artistic achievement is essential to the pride and identification of everyone in this production'. He hates it if anyone describes what they are doing as 'community opera': 'we are doing performances of great operas to the highest level we can, involving everyone in working at that high level. They go through a serious, demanding level of training – but we're not imposing rules on those people, it's about sharing that desire, so that everyone gets involved in finding their own way of contact with this great work.'

Controversially, Vick is critical of much education and outreach work because at one level, it is always an add-on event. 'I'm not interested in doing education and outreach work – it's not opera!' His point is that if you care about involving people in your art form, then that's exactly what you should do: get them making opera (or dance, or theatre – or museums?), and put all of your resources into that.

Again, opera critics felt that this work was of high quality. Interestingly, Rhian Evans in *The Guardian* (who gave it five stars out of five) was so taken with the impact of this production that there is no mention at all in the review of the fact that it was created with and performed by non-professionals. 'This is an Othello which gets you in the hearts and the guts... Shelving its shoes as if visiting a mosque, the audience makes its way into an industrial cathedral of a performance space, carpeted in blood red... From the moment the orchestra, under conductor Stephen Barlow, unleashes Verdi's raging storm, we are buffeted by the waves of this opera, side by side with the cast, marshalled along with the action from place to place, yet sometimes, like tormented Desdemona, becalmed in terrifying isolation... This is totally compelling theatre. It is fitting that the company has the same acronym as the British Oxygen Company: this is fuel for the brain as well as to the lungs of opera.' (Evans 2009).

Only Kerry Michael qualified the aim for great quality art by saying that the judgement of what constitutes 'great' needs to be the audience's idea of great art, not his; he is concerned that the definition of excellence should not be white, Western and male.

The universal citation of an ambition to make great work was really striking, however, and provocative: how often do we hear colleagues from museums and galleries stating as their fundamental reason for working co-creatively with audiences that they want to make a great piece of museum work, rather than primarily for reasons of social inclusion or democracy? They are certainly not setting out to do

something that is mediocre, but often the quality of the process is placed above the standard of the final outcome, the manifestation of that work which is presented to other audiences. I will return to this point later; for now, we may note just how much importance is placed by these key informants from the performing arts on their bottom-line aim of making great quality art.

How do you co-create with members of the public: how do you lead, enable, and manage issues such as risk and control?

When it came to discussing how the respondents actually did this co-creative work, there was an interesting range of replies. All agreed that the impetus to co-create has to come from the top: staff (and boards) often need a great deal of support both fully to sign up to the idea and to work out how to do it, so directors (both artistic and executive) have to lead from the front and keep championing co-creation, driving it forward. Kerry Michael, with help from Clore Fellow Joe Hallgarten (who spent a secondment at Theatre Royal Stratford East scoping out possibilities for the Open Stage project), has worked to get his theatre staff on board, including away days where they all agreed some ground rules. 'Everyone has been very clear about the amount of resources we're allocating to this, and we've agreed that we will not let it bankrupt the company. We will also intervene if the works commissioned are likely to incite hatred. Otherwise, everything else is up for grabs.'

During the co-creative process itself, some of the key informants try to be as democratic as possible, but said they did bring in their own expertise when it was wanted or needed. Graham Devlin noted: 'We did reserve the right to say sometimes, 'look, that's not going to work', but you hope by that point that you've earned the right to speak and so what you say will be respected'. Others offered support in the background, for example Damian Cruden: participants in Takeover '09 said they really learned from just to do the work themselves, but had had several months shadowing to learn what to do, and liked knowing the support was there if needed.

Kerry Michael says he will hand over artistic control completely, but having done some skills-building first. 'We will give up power, but in an educated way. We have to empower people, explain to them what we do and why we do it so that they can do it too.' It is interesting that this does not feel risky for him. 'The risk is not doing it – we'll stagnate if we don't do this.' Alistair Spalding would never do what Michael is doing: it feels too risky commercially, and he personally believes that the 'expert' does have a role to play, particularly in terms of serving up something unexpected that might broaden the horizons of their audiences, and give them something that they might not be comfortable with, that they may not have chosen themselves. Also, Sadler's Wells is at a point in its development where it wants to

move into producing more of the work presented there, and so is interested in extending its creative input overall rather than giving that up.

Neither Tara-Jane Herbert nor Graham Vick would ever give up control – both feel it is their responsibility to offer a strong creative lead. Tara is unapologetic about this, because ‘I will not set my participants up to fail’. Both she and Graham want their participants to know that they’re going to be part of something of amazing quality, and feel that you cannot achieve that by simply asking them to work it all out on their own. You have to build their skills and confidence, and partly you do that by giving them a strong lead, and guiding them towards producing extraordinary work. For Tara, taking a firm creative lead is also a crucial part of the maintenance of Dance United’s reputation, which is what helps them to persuade other partners like Sadler’s Wells to take a risk on partnering with them, and programming them on their main stage. She is also determined to challenge her participants, and give them access to things that many of them do not currently have in their lives, whether that is the experience of sitting down with others to eat food together, experiencing silence and calm, or listening to classical music (or indeed, any other music apart from their usual choices). ‘When I first started out, I just asked them what do you want to do, but the work was rubbish, and the kids knew that – they don’t have the vocabulary to do this on their own, it’s MTV or nothing. This work is about giving them a different vocabulary, and some skills.’

Both also said offering a strong creative lead was vital for giving non-professional participants the confidence to try things: Tara was clear that ‘they need to feel I know what I’m doing.’ She and Vick still feel that this work is co-creation, which involves a huge amount of creative input from community participants; however, the process and end result is shaped by their expertise. Iqbal Khan reiterated this: ‘Graham and I were the creative leads, but it absolutely was co-created, we really respected what [the non-professional participants] had to offer... You have to trust them – they came for a reason, you just need to find out what it is.’ The participants I spoke to in Birmingham did not mind at all that their creative input was part of a larger framework led by Graham and Iqbal; overwhelmingly, they seemed genuinely thrilled to be part of such an event. For example, Eileen Eveson, who is in her late 70s and was in the chorus of *Othello*, said ‘Graham usually takes the final decisions, but you want him to – he’s the one that knows what he’s doing!’

I was really struck by how self-aware all of these performing arts directors were: they know what they want to do and why; what they have to offer; what they're hoping to get from participants; what their appetite is for risk and control. This understanding of themselves does seem to have helped them to take decisions about when to be flexible and to stand firm; when to be quiet and when to speak up. This goes for the co-creative relationships they have with other organisations as well as members of the public: for example the partnership between Dance United and Sadler's Wells, or the close working relationships Tara forms with organisations such as the Hackney Youth Offending Team. Damian Cruden summed it up: 'If you're a confident artist, none of this is about control, it's about liberation.'

Key informants' explanations of how they co-create included a range of interesting techniques. It is important here to say that I do not suggest that we can necessarily import these into museum work: we are of course dealing with quite different art forms and creative processes. When you make a piece of dance, for example, both devising the choreography and performing it are parts of the creative process, so there are multiple opportunities for participants to 'create', without necessarily imagining the entire performance themselves from scratch. My point in drawing this comparison is to invite colleagues to think about both the differences and similarities, and to start thinking about what our equivalent(s) might be in museums and galleries.

An overall observation is how many of the key informants design structures and frameworks that build confidence, skills and technical vocabulary; that encourage, nurture and make possible participants' creativity. Birmingham Opera Company forms a new open company every year: around half are 'returners', half new participants. They use workshops as ways into creation, both central workshops for the full company and secondary collectives working all over the city, often pre-existing community groups who create their own interlude under Birmingham Opera Company's overall artistic guidance. Graham Vick looks for pieces that he thinks will both speak to his local audience, and which offer opportunities for them to contribute. For example, this production of Verdi's *Othello* includes some ballet music that is often disparaged by opera critics, because it is felt that it was only written by Verdi for the Paris première of the opera because the French liked extra dance music; it is rarely included in performances of the opera today. Vick saw it however as an opportunity to work with a wide range of dance groups in Birmingham, each of whom created their version of the 'ballet' for the restored music, and performed side by side in a vast, eclectic piece of movement.

Iqbal Khan talked about the workshops and rehearsals with the full company in Birmingham as being ‘wonderfully chaotic’, and said how struck he was by the sense of both potential and responsibility shared by the 250 people in the room at their first full rehearsal. He deliberately avoided finding out who was playing Desdemona, so he started off almost completely unaware of which cast members were the professionals and which were not. They began with small exercises to build skills and confidence, working with movement exercises which everyone did, and built up from there. They used improvisation techniques, giving participants creative briefs and seeing what they came up with, often asking them to work out how to communicate the central thing they really felt needed to be said, in ways that the audience were likely to understand – ‘and of course, they know when they’ve got it right, because they are that audience.’ Khan agreed that the directors did have the ultimate creative edit, but ‘there was so much that was allowed to be in the room. What people did really shaped how this piece works as a drama as well as a piece of music.’

Tara-Jane Herbert is rigorous in her design of the structures that will enable her participants to contribute in a creative way to the collective work. She goes as far as devising the choreography of the whole piece overall on student dancers and checking that it works first, and then pulls it apart and builds in creative elements where her future non-professional participants will be able to make significant contributions. The process of co-creation is very gradual, beginning with very simple exercises that everyone can do, and moving onto more difficult movements, but always with lots of praise, encouragement and also the clearly articulated belief that they can do this work. She uses BTEC dance students as plants sometimes: ‘they are just starting out, so they’re not brilliant yet, but they’re great at modelling key behaviour such as standing still and listening to each other. And to start off with, they’re doing things the other participants can’t do. But pretty soon, one of them will find that they can actually lift their leg higher than the students, and suddenly they’re thinking, hey, I can do this, I’m actually better than them at this particular thing. So you’re building skills and confidence in small ways, you’re not expecting them to be a choreographer or a dancer right away.’

Once they have been dancing together as a group for a while, she starts asking them to work in pairs or small groups and find perhaps two ways to get round each other, and one way to hold each other’s weight: an achievable piece of choreography. She keeps extending this, challenging them to come up with more until they have created a range of moves which can take their place in the overall piece.

Kerry Michael and his colleagues are devising quite a complex design for helping ‘the community’ to decide what it wants, and for the theatre to understand what that is. ‘At the moment, it’s looking like we’ll use a combination of qualitative and quantitative interventions. We’ll have forms, workshops, questionnaires, away days – all sorts of things. We’re thinking we might give different sorts of credit or value for different levels of engagement and time commitment – so if you fill in a five minute form, your voice counts for one credit; if you come on a three week residential course, it’s three hundred, or something like that.’ Michael sounds a word of caution however about the notion of ‘building vocabularies’ rather than skills. ‘If you’re ‘building’ someone’s vocabulary, are you teaching them to talk like you? What effect does that have, and is that really what you want to do or what you should be doing?’ He thinks we need to be careful and aware of the language we do and don’t use: ‘it’s a tricky area, and I don’t have all the answers, but we assume so much with the words we use, and it has an effect on people.’

Consciously designing for co-creation, starting small, building skills, being careful about language – while the artistic processes are perhaps very different from what we do in museums and galleries, these are all points that we could take on board in our own co-creative work with members of the public.

6. Conclusion: leadership and co-creation in museums and galleries

I want to end by returning to the over-arching question about leadership and co-creation in museums and galleries, and sharing my thoughts now that I have been on this particular journey of exploration and discovery.

At a fundamental level, we are of course talking about whole organisation leadership: there needs to be a commitment to co-creation with the public from the top of the organisation, or it simply will not happen. However, for me, the leadership question is more complex than this.

I think it is helpful for us to think about what kinds of leadership might be useful for working co-creatively with the public, at project level as well as overall. I also want to challenge a perhaps implicit assumption we may be making, that within this practice, we should not lead at all, as that would defeat the central (democratic) purpose of co-creativity. I disagree. As I have already noted, I think co-creation is about far more than democracy. But anyway, we do need to lead: partly because we have responsibilities (for our collections, for our commercial viability, for our participants and for our own professional reputations), and partly because we want co-created projects to be the best that they can be, for everyone involved. However, this leadership should absolutely not be a heavy-handed, top-down form of direction. Instead, we need to develop a tool-kit of different leadership approaches for different co-creative projects.

What does this mean in practice? We need to be really clear about what we're trying to do and why, and then choose different leadership tools accordingly. A crucial point is to ask ourselves why we want to co-create, and if we even want to at all. If the impulse to do this kind of work is externally imposed, perhaps coming from funders' agendas or because someone in the organisation wants to make it look as if we are 'inclusive', then we will indeed run into problems when it is put into practice: our non-professional participants will sense the deception very quickly. Equally, the project will be undermined if it is not genuinely wanted by the whole museum organisation. So, there may be a considerable amount of work to do in deciding as an institution if co-creation is what everyone wants to do, or whether it could be done in a different way, or on a different scale than currently practiced.

Then, if our answer is that we do really want to co-create with our audiences, and that we're doing it only for reasons of social inclusion or democracy, we may still have a problem. I was really struck by how many of the key informants from the performing arts were motivated above all by the desire to make great art, and that this was just as true for the work they co-created with the public as pieces they developed alone or with other professionals. If our primary aim in the work we co-create with the public is not to make great art, by which I mean high quality museum spaces which engage a wide range of people and create all sorts of different, interesting meanings, then I fear we will always limit this kind of work. Doubters will never see its potential, because the results may be a bit mediocre, and will therefore carry on being marginalised in community galleries rather than being highlighted in the central museum space. Also, it may not deliver what it might have done for participants: if our primary motivation wasn't to make something spectacularly good, they may not have been involved in creating something of amazing quality, or have really developed their skills and confidence to be a creative voice to which others listened.

Yet if we decide that our overriding aim is indeed to make great exhibitions or museum spaces, then we may have to accept that this has other implications for the way that we work. It does not mean that we cease to think about the means and focus only on the end: quite the opposite. However, when we consider the co-creative process we want to put in place, we may decide we need to lead more strongly at times, and to offer our skills and experience so that we enable members of our audiences to achieve amazing creative things. We may need to approach co-creation having designed some frameworks that will really enable non-professionals to step up and become a central part of our work, and we should not apologise for that: it is an act of enablement not oppression.

It does seem as if the time to work out this practice is right now. The 'excellence' agenda crystallised by the *McMaster Review: Supporting excellence in the arts – from measurement to judgement* (McMaster 2008) is already a big feature of our ever changing landscape, and is being embedded within funding structures, but the 'access' agenda isn't going away (nor would I want it to). We need to think about how we are going to do our museum work in ways which genuinely address both the 'excellence' and 'access' agendas. Extraordinary, ambitious, high-quality co-creation with our audiences could be one way forward.

It will of course be up to each museum or gallery to work out what being more ambitious or thinking consciously about leadership would mean for them. A recent workshop with staff at Manchester Art Gallery, exploring the ideas in this research project, has begun this process there. Colleagues are now thinking about issues of scale, asking themselves: how do we move on from doing things that are small and amazing, but which are not particularly visible to the rest of the world; what might co-creation on a more ambitious scale look like for us, and how would it work? They are also discussing issues around leadership: some of the points I made resonated with their sense that the democratic impetus behind this kind of work has indeed led to the implication that it doesn't need leadership, but that this is not the case in reality.

They are now thinking about how to negotiate leadership in these contexts, and what that might mean. Manchester Art Gallery is currently considering how they could co-create with their audiences a re-interpretation of the Mary Greg Collection of Handicrafts of Bygone Times, a quirky collection kept in store at the moment, but which offers all kinds of possibilities. Colleagues are now exploring what it means for this project if they give themselves permission both to think big, and to lead the co-creative process in some way. What is going to work best for them and their publics?

My ideal museum? Different forms of co-creation, different aims, different leadership

In my ideal museum, I think we would have a raft of different co-creative projects with the public, which have consciously different aims and to which we brought different leadership approaches. We would want some projects where we identify a particular group or community (or they come to us) and together we co-create something according to all of our agendas, not unlike many of the interesting and worthwhile projects that have been carried out already in museums and galleries. I might want to push for the scope of what we do to be bigger, or for the work not just to be about that group's most obvious cultural or historical interests. I think we could also avoid quite a lot of the problems that colleagues have reported in the past by bringing collaborative leadership approaches to this work.

In addition, I would want to have some projects where we really tested the ingenuity and collective creativity of our audiences, particularly online communities. However, we would ask them to solve all kinds of problems, to do the work that both we and they really think needs doing, make the products they want to make, rather than simply asking them to upload some user-generated content in response to our stimulus. We would need some of the attributes of 'connected' leaders of spontaneous or agile organisations for these projects: standing back, supporting, reflecting and articulating as the creative

chaos bubbles away and maybe produces something we never could have imagined, and bringing us new, deeply engaged audiences at the same time.

I would also like us to do some major work where our goal was to make truly ambitious co-created art, which enables non-professionals to be part of making something extraordinary: perhaps the beautiful co-created Titian show that is meaningful to all sorts of people, or the total museum re-hang that is a high spec, engaging, rich and stunning space in which to be. This of course is a great result for all the museum's visitors – and we should remember that ideally we want whatever we co-create to be appealing for all of our visitors, not just the participants in the co-creation project. This kind of work could also help to persuade more colleagues that co-creation can and should be an important and valuable part of the way we do museum work in the future, because it shows that this can be very high quality work, which both values the expertise and knowledge of museum specialists, and also enables lots of other non-professional people to develop skills and confidence so that they can be active voices in the creative process too. Here, I think we can learn a great deal from the strong, creative leadership that I encountered in some of the performing arts case studies. Museums colleagues who are co-creation advocates are often rather nervous about speaking out in case they appear elitist and oppressive; yet strong, visionary, creative leadership that enables non-professionals to co-create something of amazing quality can instead be seen in terms of enablement.

Ultimately I think we in the museums community do need to see ourselves as 'leaders in co-creation', to challenge ourselves to keep developing, to really engage with this debate and push the practice forward in far more ambitious ways (our colleagues from dance, opera and theatre really don't see us as leading the way here). We need to lead from the top: win over museum and gallery directors so that they champion extending and broadening this practice, convince their teams to do it and really make it happen. We need to acknowledge that museums' circumstances will probably mean that staff within the organisation will need to have a leadership role in co-creation work with our audiences: we are responsible for our collections after all. Scolding reluctant curators about democracy and telling them just to 'give up control' is not really working as an advocacy strategy – they either duck out of the debate or resist moves to work more co-creatively by citing an avalanche of practical difficulties.

I think we want great leadership anyway, because it really helps the co-creative process to work well. Different kinds of co-creative projects will require different kinds of leadership, and we can learn these. Each of us may have natural preferences, and that may suggest particular people for particular projects: a calm container of chaos here, a collaborative leader there, a strong creative lead over here. But we

can all also learn some different skills, develop a range of leadership attributes, and become more flexible and self aware so that we are able to bring the right parts of our 'leadership selves' to each situation.

I also think many museum colleagues could usefully do some work on their own sense of identity as creative producers. Not everyone sees what they do as creative production, and yet it is. When we work with contemporary artists, we often revere their creativity as if this is something we don't also have. This is not to say that museum colleagues are timid church mice, or see themselves as dull: some of this sense of identity actually comes from great practice with members of the public, particularly from learning and interpretation staff. We get so used to encouraging every green shoot of an idea that comes from non-professional participants in a project that we never venture our own opinion ('it's not about me'). Actually, though, we may have really useful things to share, that our co-creative partners would find helpful as they develop their own skills. Listening does not mean that we stop speaking ourselves.

Perhaps paradoxically, in order to co-create more effectively with our publics, we need first to focus on ourselves and our own creative identities, to spend some time thinking about our own aims and desires, our own personal satisfaction, our opinions, values and bottom lines, what our creative ideas are and what makes our hearts sing. Once we feel comfortable and confident about that, we are then freed up to balance risk and responsibility, to try new things, to ask our audiences in to co-create in a whole range of different ways, and to lead everyone wherever we all want to go.

'You learn that you can change if you want to. You can do something to make a difference. Don't keep explaining why you can't do it – if you're not happy about what you're doing, do something about it.'

Graham Vick, Artistic Director, Birmingham Opera Company, spoken at the seminar 'The Elephant in the Room', 15 December 2009

'If artists can work in the right way with these communities, they will find new, more collaborative and participatory ways to make good art. Engaging with the art of *with* is inescapable and unavoidable. But it needs to be done well, intelligently, thoughtfully, testing the limits of collaboration rather than simply celebrating it. Better get on with it.'

Charles Leadbeater, 'The Art of With: an Original Essay for Cornerhouse, Manchester', 2009

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