



# ArtWorks Cymru

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## 'Company 5' Learning Group

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## ArtWorks Cymru Learning Groups

As part of the second phase of ArtWorks Cymru five participatory arts projects were run as part of the research. Each project had four learning group meetings in which members of the creative teams explored and discussed a set of themed questions in which to explore their participatory practice. The aim was to capture the processes that the artists employed as they embarked on a project as well as to capture the learning and the development of the project. Artists were also encouraged to draw from their previous experience and share their knowledge and learning from the whole of their careers.

Members of the learning groups were selected by the organisation running each project. The sessions were all audio-recorded and transcribed for research purposes.

'Company 5' explored the theme of transformation by discussing a set of questions during the meetings. The exploration of transformation, in this context, was felt to be the opportunity for participants to find out about themselves. Artists also tried to capture the moments when the participatory arts activity had changed or impacted the participants. These questions were:

1. As a practitioner, why do you do what you do?
2. What's your additionally to the project?
3. How do you balance the vision of the project against your artistic practice?
4. What transformation happens when the work moves from the studio to the performance space? Are there other moments of transformation?
5. Was the project what you expected at the start?

[Please see appendix 1 to view the mind maps of each of the learning group conversations].

All quotations shown within this report are from the transcripts of the learning group sessions unless otherwise stated.

## **‘Company 5’ project**

The ‘Company 5’ project was developed and commissioned by Sherman Cymru and involved a team of artists working with members of the community in Cardiff.

Participants were involved in creating a performance piece inspired by Shakespeare. The creative team, chosen by Sherman Cymru, included Phil Mackenzie as director, David Britton as author, and John Rea as composer. The creative team supported the participants in the development of the project, performance and the development of participant skills. Company 5 met a minimum of once a week and performed their piece in April 2013

The project was specifically aimed at members of the community who were between eighteen and eighty years of age. The project was aimed at those who had an interest in theatre and performance whether or not they had experience on the stage.

Due to small sample within this learning group, it is not expected that these findings are representative of all artists; however, it does provide in-depth knowledge on the beliefs, approaches and values of some artists who work in participatory settings

## **Learning Group Findings**

### *Key findings*

- Artists need to be motivated to effect transformation; whilst artists recognised the artistic element, the desire to collaborate and support participants was significant for the project.
- Effecting transformation of individuals, and a group, takes time and space to explore. Artists felt that real participant impact required greater contact time.
- Transformation takes place at different points in the project; this can include transformation in the rehearsal room and when moving the project on to stage.
- Need genuine collaboration and open feedback for transformation.

- Participants need time to work on skills as well as enjoy the process of a project.

## Artist Motivation

*“I have a deep interest in people and how people behave and interact together”*

Artists on the project recognised that it was important for artists working in participatory settings to be **motivated to effect transformation**. Artists believed that it was important to ensure that participants were at the centre of the project to encourage them to produce their own material. Artists felt it was important for them to have a clear interest in the development of the participants and to establish a **safe environment** for participants to work in:

“What sustains me is the *continual* fascination of the behaviour of the people in a given set of conditions and circumstances; the conditions... that I happen to create in the rehearsal room”

“Really it’s the designing of the experience... for those participants that’s the most engaging thing for me. And to see people in the process of that really transform”

“...providing a group of people with the conditions, and the structures, and the conditions that enable them to work together as a group of people to begin to *produce* material which is above and beyond that which I might have predicted, or preconceived”

“What you’ve been giving them is exposure. Which is undoubtedly helpful to themselves and helpful to them to open some doors”

The creative team on the ‘Company 5’ project felt that they were driven by an interest in the **development of participants** both as individuals and as a group.

They also felt that they were **responsible for creating the structures** and environment to enable creative production and transformation. These environments and structures included ensuring participants were working in a suitable space (where possible), using sound to encourage immersion in the activities, and slowly building up participant skills (see below).

The creative team on the project also felt **confident with the artistic brief** that had been supplied by Sherman Cymru. Artists reported that confidence with the brief meant that they felt free to use the time on the project to explore different techniques and activities with participants. The time to explore, alongside the use of continual feedback between artist and participant, was felt to be key to the 'transformation' of participants and artists' practice.

## What is transformation?

*“We should feel incredibly grateful to have the opportunity to explore those things with each other. So it’s a lot about being truthful, a lot about being present as well as being playful, as well as being engaged.”*

The creative team on the project felt that articulating transformation on a project was particularly challenging, however, artists did feel that transformation can take place at **different stages of the project**. Artists recognised that 'transformation' had taken place as they felt there was a **“special energy”** in the room. Artists believed that when a group of participants was able to work together creatively you could feel the “buzz” in the rehearsal space:

“I always talk about the energy when you come into a room and you’ve got fifteen people in a room, at the same time, all agreeing on the same thing. That’s very powerful”

### The start of the project

Artists in the learning group expressed the transformation that took place at the start of the project as **participant expectations** were challenged and changed. Artists felt

that the transformation of participant expectations was due to the particularly physical way in which the director worked; this was a feeling that was supported during the participant interviews:

“So there really is a transformation in people’s expectations; [the director] may not have thought to say that because he’s used to working that way but actually it’s a big transformation. And [the participants]... are now, of course, absolutely in sync with that whole way.”

“We’ve tried to... give them exposure to some, less conventional approaches to Shakespearean work; partly by breaking down their perceptions of the actor’s physicality which is quite often a very literal one. Like, doing very angry acting and saying ‘I hate you’ which they can’t do. Whatever I’ve got them saying [the director] has normally got them doing something totally not related to what they’re saying, which is a very interesting discipline... That’s the biggest transformation in this project I’d say”.

Participant: “You expected to go from point A to point B, with some people you don’t know, and work towards a final performance. But how we got from A to B, and the route we took, was quite interesting.”

Participant: “...what appealed to me with this group, after I did the first one or two sessions – and what made me decide to stay- was that, it wasn’t gonna be a straight play, or a farce, or a musical... It was nice to do something that was clearly very different from that and kinda push everyone a bit more.”

Whilst participant expectations were challenged to some extent, participants were still clear that they had expected “the end result [to be]... Shakespeare”<sup>1</sup>. It is important that the **overall participant expectations are met**, even if there are challenges and transformations within some of the approaches that individual artists take.

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<sup>1</sup> Participant response

### The rehearsal space

Due to the nature of the project a lot of time was spent within the rehearsal space developing ideas. Artists felt that the **time spent** within the rehearsal space, and the **freedom** to explore techniques whilst in that space transformed the participants as both individuals and as a group. Artists within the learning group felt that it was important for **participants to explore themselves** during the participatory arts activity; the artists felt that a long period of time needed to be built into the project to ensure that there was enough time to give freedom to the participants which would enable **transformation on an individual level**:

“I’m sure there’s lots of methods of transformation but one way is when you deeply engage with something over a durational period of time [and] your mind lets go of what it thinks it should be doing, your body lets go of what it normally does, and a whole other set of impulses take over. It’s really drilling into something by giving it the proper time...”

Not only did artists in the learning group feel that participants transformed as individuals but was also transformation that took place as the participants **developed as a group**:

“[You are] providing a group of people with the conditions, and the structures, and the conditions that enable them to work together as a group of people to begin to produce material which is above and beyond that which I might have predicted, or preconceived.”

Participant: “Everyone started to get to know each other a lot better and then feeling more comfortable with each other and then doing more. And you could just see the group developing.”

Participant: “[The director] really empowered us as a group to trust our own instincts and discoveries, and to kinda learn that we could create the show ourselves from what happened in the moment and what happened spontaneously. And I think that’s a really lovely gift to discover yourself, y’



know, that you don't have to be planning everything and have years of training behind you to do a really great job.”

### Transformation from the rehearsal room to the stage

Not only did artists feel that transformation took place in the rehearsal room, during the development of the project, but artists also explained that transformation took place when participants “go from the wings to on stage”:

“That’s a really exciting transition. If you’ve done your homework, it’s great but if you haven’t done your homework that’s the moment that it’s gonna come and bite you. And you have to go through it with the taste of fear and terror at the back of your throat! ... As a practitioner...it makes the nerves go up... It heightens ones nervous system. Yeah, it’s good, absolutely.”

“There were notes taken after each performance and things were refined further, y’ know, ‘cause of showing it to the audience. I have found levels where certain things worked and something’s didn’t and it’s always been a process of refining. And that was the good thing about this project; it was fluid and open to a certain amount of improvisation and input.”

Participants reported that moving from the rehearsal room to the stage, even before a performance, also helped their **transformation in to character**. Costume, lighting, and other effects were felt to be particularly helpful when preparing for the performance:

Participant: “Whenever I do any kind of show, or anything, the sooner I can get in to a costume then the sooner I can get in to character... It helps the transformation for me, y’ know.”

### **Structures to effect transformation**

*“You’re in a safe arena, by your choice, with a group of like-minded people, for an agreed period of time, with which to explore and uncover your own creativity in relation to other people’s creativity, in pursuit of this outcome that we call a performance”*

As well as discussing what transformation may look like, the creative team also discussed the structures that could be put in place. Artists were keen to point out that such approaches helped enable transformation, but transformation was also dependent on the personality and approach of the artists, as well as the relationships that the artists were able to build with participants. Such structures included:

- Using a **suitable space** to undertake work.

Artists explained that the space in which artists and participants were working had to be physically suitable. Artists also felt responsible for creating a safe environment for participants to explore creatively:

“Space is really important, and what that space is. So if you lead people into a room which has got great tubes of fluorescent lighting, it’s not really properly clean... that’s very different to if you lead people into a room and it’s got a single theatre light in it, which is spotless, which is clean.”

Participant: “[The space] was like another character I think.”

“The [participants] can embrace the unexpected and the unpredictable, the unknowing; we’ve created an arena for safe play for that to happen. A bi-product of all that... is confidence, self-esteem, self-image”

- **Using sound** in the rehearsal space to encourage immersion in activities.

As well as considering the physical space the creative team also considered the “sound that you put into” that space to impact on the participants transformation. Music, or sound, was considered helpful in encouraging immersion in activities, the development of character, and supporting the participants’ ability to feel free to explore creatively:

“I work with beats a lot; I work with ambient sounds, because... certain sounds can just help people get in there because we’re very susceptible to sound.”

“I think it created a kind of an abstract sound world for the drama to unfold... y’ know, to create mood... more about creating musical environments for them to exist within.”

“I had some feedback from the actors afterwards and they said that [the music] allowed them to inhabit the characters... Those sequences had a particular tone and colour and the colours that I created helped them in that way get into character. And that’s all you try to do to help them really.”

- **Ensuring suitable contact time.**

Artists within the learning group felt that a long project enabled the artists and participants to develop stronger relationships of trust. The trust that participants felt within the project was considered vital to the success of the project, and the transformation of the participants. Participants also reported the benefits of undertaking a longer term participatory project:

Participant: “It’s been one of those things where you get to know people a bit more, how they work. And you could just see the group developing.”

Participant: “By the time we got into the main theatre at the end we were so geared up physically and mentally that – we didn’t really know what was gonna happen but – we trusted [the director], we trusted us, and there was hardly any criticism at the end. Y’ know, he trusted our judgement as well.”

- **Freedom to explore**

Artists in the learning group agreed that participant freedom to “explore” themselves creatively, without imposition from the creative team, was

important to ensure transformation. Participants enjoyed the freedom to develop their own ideas together and reported that the approach was a “very interesting learning experience”:

“This is the other mistake you can make which is like, okay, I’ve got the vision, but I haven’t got the context right, but by god am I gonna put my vision on the place regardless. And guess what we’re all gonna have an absolutely miserable time whilst I put my vision in place... And they will resist you. They might not be showing their resistance, but they are [whispers] they are!

Participant: “[The directors] approach is not about telling you what to do, or what formations we should make, or what kind of physicality we should have. It was about allowing you the freedom to do certain exercises, and letting those improvisations go on quite long, sometimes for an hour, sometimes for a couple of hours... That was his approach basically; he wanted us to come up with it and come up with this physical grammar, as it were.”

- **Ownership**

The creative team felt that participant ownership of the project was an important factor in ensuring transformation. The development of trusting relationships, as well as the time and freedom to explore were considered important structures for creating participant ownership:

“...you hold off actually making the show until the last possible moment but the technique that you use is so the people have ownership of the space. You just let them play around with the space and then gradually they add the text”

Artists in the learning group explained that the approach taken throughout the project led to a sense of participant ownership as well as developing a sense of shared responsibility within the group:

“Why I say ensemble is because ensemble comes from the Latin word meaning ‘accomplices’; it means we’re all accomplices together, and we’re all in this together, and if you start finding it difficult you don’t worry about yourself you just take care of each other. An ensemble is also interesting ‘cause an ensemble is about what you do in response to what else has gone on; so you don’t have to be clever. And... everyone’s got equal responsibility.”

The creative team also felt that projects had to be fun and discussed the “**pleasure principle**”. The need for participants to enjoy the project was particularly important in a long term community project where the participant group could be fluid and changing:

“I only have one rule and this is a really important one. And the rule is that you are to get as much pleasure as you possibly can from what you do. And you get the pleasure from the simple decision of – or a simple statement - you tell your brain “I really want to be here”; from that comes presence, and from that comes pleasure. Okay. So that’s it in a nutshell. It sort of summarises everything I believe in.”

## **Contact time to support transformation**

*Participant “We’ve had much longer on this than what I would be used to on other projects that I’ve done, but then saying that, it’s been a great experience”*

The creative team felt that the yearlong project was beneficial for their own development and the development of the participants involved. Artists in the learning group expressed the need to adapt to the participant group, and the need to be flexible when editing or “refining” material:

“You actually adapt to use the strengths of, and extend, the group of people that you’ve got; and that’s a good thing, [pause], and I think that’s honouring those people. And of course in a community group people come [pause] and

go [pause] with a result that something you designed in one way now has to be shaped in another way.”

The longevity of the project aided a natural **learning process** and the **development of artistic skills** of the participants involved:

“I’m training them in [pause] hard skills, as it were. It’s the practice of being together. That’s the training I’m giving them.”

Participant: “It was good to do movement every single week, especially to [the] scores... ‘cause by the time you added the text to it, it was just like a natural progression...”

Participant: “[It] was an enjoyable learning experience. Y’ know, I learnt a lot about how to deliver lines, how to move around, y’ know. There was a lot of choreography involved in it and it was a very interesting learning experience, definitely”

Participants also reported that they enjoyed the **gradual development** of the project and the approach that was taken to build up the performance:

Participant: “All the little games and exercises... [It] was like a jigsaw puzzle and each session was a different part of the puzzle... we’ve used basically everything that we have done

## **Genuine collaboration and feedback**

*“It was an experiment and there was feedback. That’s what collaboration is. And then you develop it and refine it further”*

Due to the nature of the project – participants developing a performance piece alongside artists – collaboration and feedback was felt to be important within this project. Artists in the learning group explained that they needed to be able to

collaborate not only with the participants but also with each other. The creative team felt it was important to **embrace different artistic approaches** and to be willing to compromise, change material, and edit regularly:

“It’s quite liberating to work with somebody who works in a different style as long as you’re prepared to make the compromises”

“It started as a simple idea and from collaboration then it was refined and added”.

In this case [it’s]...is a different kind of writing for me in that, er, this precise project the script has changed enormously. It’s a piece that’s been written in stages.”

Participant: “It was quite interesting having a writer sit down with us and go, y’ know, this is what I was meaning. And we could go; I’m not sure about this bit, it doesn’t make sense.... [The writer] would very much embrace things you’d add in, language you’d add in.”

“So, producing contextually appropriate material; that’s an on-going conversation, so that’s great”

Regular, open, **communication** was vital throughout the project and had to be sustained over the course of the year to ensure the success of the overall performance and to ensure that all those involved in the collaboration felt involved.

## **Conclusions**

Artists within the learning group felt that describing transformation, and how it was achieved, was a complex and challenging task. The artists in the learning group recognised transformation as having taken place when they felt a ‘special energy’ in

the room as participants worked together on the creative work. Bi-products of transformation were felt to be increased confidence and self-esteem.

The creative team believed that artists working in participatory settings needed to be motivated to bring about transformation with participants as well as create meaningful creative work. Artists working on the 'Company 5' project supported the longer term participatory arts project in effecting the transformation of participants. The artists believed that greater contact time led to stronger feelings of trust amongst those involved in the project, allowed time for meaningful exploration, and, enabled gradual skills development.

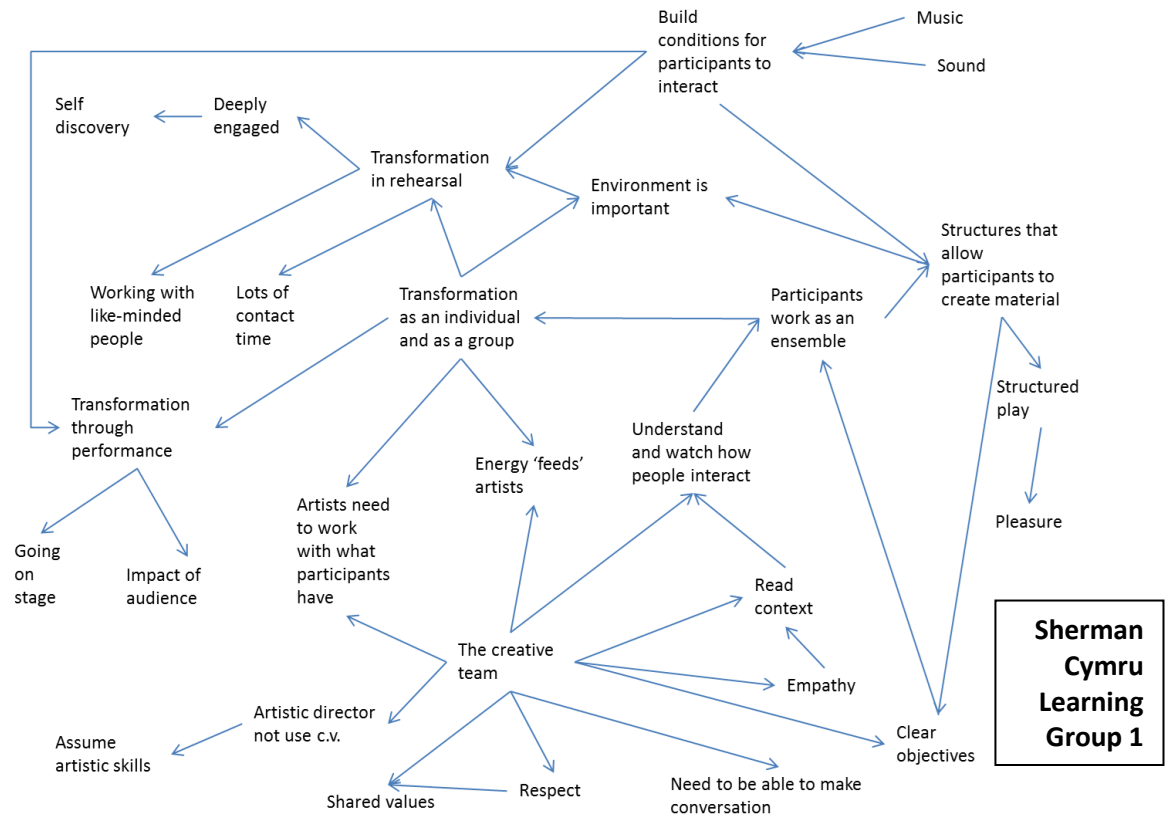
Artists also recognised that transformation of participants could take place at different stages within the project whether that was transforming expectations, transforming how participants see themselves, or supporting participant transformation during performances.

Effective transformation was felt to require a set of structures that needed to be considered when developing projects. Structures to aid participant transformation included consideration of the physical space, using sound effectively, and ensuring open feedback between all those involved.

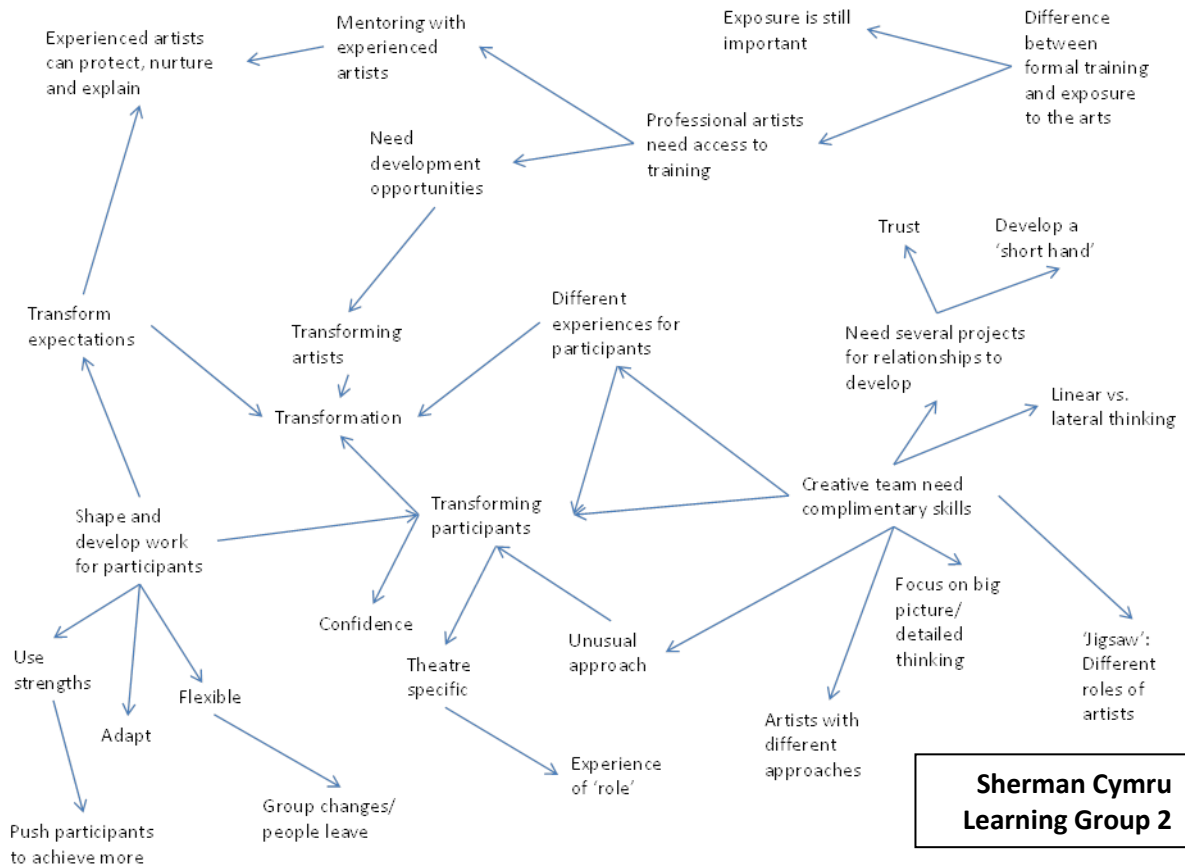
The creative team felt that genuine transformation affected not only the participants, but also affected the artist themselves in their own practice.



# Appendix 1.



**Sherman  
Cymru  
Learning  
Group 1**



**Sherman Cymru  
Learning Group 2**

