

Part Three  
**Observations, Reflections and Conclusions**

## Observations and Reflections

The content of the Table 3 is not exhaustive. The table summarises some key information across the projects encouraging comparison. However, comparison should be treated with caution as the various contexts that ground each project are different. Even where the projects are based in galleries half a mile apart there are organisational, historical and programming differences that make any comparison simply interesting at best and superficial at worst. However, it *is* interesting to see some information in parallel and to reflect on the four case studies as a whole.

Contextualising the projects are programmes of contemporary art exhibiting the work of emerging and established artists.<sup>17</sup> The artwork involves a range of media, issues and concepts of varying complexity. Project participants share a fundamental belief that while interpretation resources should offer “ways in” to the artwork, it should not reduce the complexity of the work – there should be no “dumbing-down”.

All of the projects involve artists at the interface of audience engagement and interpretation but none have included the exhibiting artists into the projects.

The research questions are all firmly grounded in issues of practice and have relevance to the generic question derived from Lynch (2006). Formulating effective research questions is a difficult and often underestimated task. Implicit in the wording of a research question is a theoretical framework or a philosophical stance that will determine the methods and forms of analysis appropriate to that theory or philosophy. In the implementation of the gallery-based projects, each research question was refined or changed. This is not an indicator that the original question was incorrect; instead it reveals a critical sensitivity and concentration of focus. Implicitly, all of the questions explore notions of shifting power relationships in gallery interpretation, where the audience is positioned as active author of interpretation rather than passive consumer.

Each project demonstrates collaborative and participative practices in the action research process and in audience activities. Often the boundary between what is the action research and what is the interpretation activity is blurred and this can create confusion in the reporting and documentation of each. However, this confusion is often symptomatic of the professional transformation that can occur when one undertakes action research. At the point of writing up the project, when trying to make sense of what happened and why, this is sometimes when the most significant learning takes place and yet the writing up usually takes place when time is running out,

“It is really hard to stop writing – there is so much to say... and of course with more time thinking develops and ideas crystallise and new ways to organise them appear”

Participant email 12/06/08

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<sup>17</sup> see Appendices 5a, 6a, 7a & 8a for externally generated interpretation material on each artist (for example, as found in *The Skinny*)

“...there are still some areas that I need and want to work on still...I’m only now beginning to get a sense of what we were doing and what the implications are.”

Participant email 24/06/08

The scale of *Interpretations* is relatively modest, certainly compared to enquire for example, but the earnest undertaking of action research of any scale is not to be considered lightly,

“Undertaking action research is not to be underestimated. Involving a wide range of staff / public in a programme of activity, remaining clear about key research questions and documenting/evaluating outcomes in a consistent manner so that results are meaningful is a big task.”

DCA Reporting Document June 2008 (Appendix 6)

Many of the methods used by the gallery teams were already familiar features of their interpretation practice: questionnaires, surveys, interviews, focus groups. The *Interpretations* framework conceptualised these tools as research methods and encouraged participants to build a research vocabulary from their existing language of practice. None of the gallery teams ventured into visual methodologies, which is surprising given the visual context of interpretation practice. Participant evaluations could explore this further.

The primary research output for each gallery team is the project report. This report is the artefact that documents the process, methods, context, findings and conclusions of the research. In practitioner research it is sometimes difficult to separate the practice from the research. More support on this aspect of action research from the *Interpretations* researcher might have been useful to the gallery teams. Perhaps one of the Cluster Events should have critiqued a completed piece of action research from a different practice-based context. If the galleries had been given the same research question would this have led to stronger peer collaboration? Again these questions are speculative but could be incorporated into the evaluation phase.

However, each of the four gallery teams have engaged with a process of action research that has generated insights into their personal practice in addition to further understandings of audience access to contemporary art.

The funding and framework of *Interpretations* secured time for gallery teams to critically reflect on practice. Allocating organisational time to such activities is an external indicator of professional values and commitments.

In terms of developing the findings of Lynch (2006) the *Interpretations* projects tackle issues of interactivity, audience generated resources, use of space, language and partnership approaches. Each project touches on all five issues but explores one or two in particular detail. The *Vocal* project at the Collective Gallery considers issues of audience-generated resources and interactivity. A panel of audience is consulted in order to generate interpretation material using the descriptive, spontaneous language of dynamic conversation. The resulting podcasts are available online for audiences to interact with. Similarly, the scripted essay guides are contextualised with other critical material offering the visitor a range of perceptions with which to consider the artwork. At DCA, *Minding The Gap* is also concerned with language, but in particular the language that staff and the organisation use to describe roles and practice. Working towards strategic change the DCA have used *Minding The Gap* to explore meaningful connections within the various functions of the organisation. The Pier

Arts Centre, through its refurbishment programme capitalises on how the physicality of the interior space can support interpretation: how work is seen through windows, around corners; how one piece relates to another through the reflection in a window. Encouraging the local audience to experience the relevance of PAC has involved the building of non-arts partnerships between the gallery and the community – a foundation for future interpretation. At the Talbot Rice Gallery, *Show Me Yours* champions the benefits of audience generated resources through interactive workshops and collaborative partnerships.

The processes involved in creating the interpretive material within each project are such that they do not reduce the complexity or challenge of the artwork. The resources and processes appeal to a spectrum of literacies: visual, aural, oral and tactile – facilitating aesthetic experiences in preference to a didactic delivery of information. A characteristic common to all four projects is that of participatory partnership. Within such an ethos project teams have brokered new relationships within and beyond their organisations.

So then, to what extent do the four action research projects bring insight to the generic research question,

How can we use interpretation to increase access to contemporary art, and to address perceived barriers to intellectual access?

With the notion of “increase” there are assumptions about measurability and base-line data that none of the gallery projects have addressed. However, what *Interpretations* has encouraged is that practitioners see the activities of their practice as possible methods of action research, and that these methods can be used to explore issues of access and barriers relevant to their context. Diligently applied, practitioner research through action inquiry is a powerful means of capturing the imagination of practitioner and audience alike.

*Interpretations* is an example of situated learning where each of the partner projects take place entirely within the social and cultural norms of their practice community. Participants bring prior experience to the project and they engage with the social and material contexts that the project offers. Because of this it is more likely that the participants will be able to apply what they have learned to other contexts, other projects. The conditions of their learning have not been remote from the situations in which what is learned can be applied (Eisner 2002:95).

## Conclusions

Conclusions at this pre-evaluation stage would be premature in terms of assessing impact and legacy. What can be drawn from this report is the significant challenge faced by all the participants in the documentation, presentation and evaluation of projects. As previously mentioned, the point of writing up, of re-presenting months of collaboration in an accessible, usually written format is a pivotal point in personal and organisational learning. Rather than marking the end of a project, the final report signposts the direction for evaluation. In support of an evaluation of *Interpretations* aims and objectives, the following five issues and related questions offer areas for further inquiry.

### 1. Research and Practice

*Interpretations* has grappled with the dualities inherent to action research and its focus on participant’s practice. The participants have had to design and

implement different interpretation tools and strategies, whilst at the same time reflect critically upon the nature of their practice. Research and practice are not opposites, they are powerful partners in affecting personal and organisational change.

To what extent do participants consider the integration of research and practice useful?

## **2. Visual Literacy and Image-Based Methods in Research**

Image-based methods such as photography, drawing, mind-mapping etc were not used by participants in the interrogation of research questions. Given the high level of visual literacy possessed by practitioners in this field, what could be done to encourage image-based methods in action research?

## **3. Learning and Teaching about Action Research**

The pedagogical intention of *Interpretations* was to facilitate learning about action research through doing action research. The method was less didactic, more exploratory, respecting and reflecting the types of experiences valued for visitors.

To what extent, now, do participants feel confident with action research as a process of affecting change?

On reflection, what could be improved upon to support practitioner-learning in action research?

## **4. Interpretation and Education**

The project outputs of *Vocal*, *Minding The Gap*, *Reach Out* and *Show Me Yours*, offer audiences of contemporary art ways of seeing derived not from the curatorial team but from other audience members. The participative and practical processes employed by the gallery teams demonstrate value placed on partnerships with audiences and peers. Education and interpretation are entwined towards enhancing both the visitor experience and the professional development of participants.

With regard to audience “intellectual access to contemporary art”, what do participants perceive as the benefit of participatory approaches in generating interpretive resources?

## **5. Funding and Audience Development**

The funding and development framework of *Interpretations* has created opportunities for innovative interventions to the practice of interpretation for contemporary art. These interventions tackle issues of access through the areas of interactivity, audience-generated resources, space, language and partnership approaches. Aspirations for audience development are often in tension with the competition for funding.

How has the financial support of *Interpretations* supported audience development and professional development opportunities?

## Recommendations

The core recommendation is towards the formal evaluation of *Interpretations* focusing on the experiences of the practitioner-researchers and innovations in interpretive strategies and tools. Following this process more robust recommendations can be formulated. The following two points are for immediate action:

The engage Scotland Conference (September 2008) should be used as a forum for sharing and exploring the project outputs, and the action research processes with the peer community of practice. A two-page summary should be prepared for delegates in advance of the conference.

The gallery-based projects should be foregrounded through the dissemination of project reports on the engage website. Permissions should be sought for this purpose ensuring proper consent for the use of participant images in the public domain.