

# 'Permission to Speak!'

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Those of us old enough to remember Pike's desperate attempts at being heard by his Commanding Officer, Captain Mainwaring in the BBC Series Dad's Army, will no doubt suppress a chortle at the memory of his exquisite comic frustration. Desperate to be heard, but with no realistic prospects of such, we feel sorry for his impotent inability to become a voice in his own story. And yet, it seems we too need permission to speak.

ArtWorks is highlighting the fact that, as artists, we value the opportunity for dialogue as a means of professional development. Moreover, ArtWorks has created some excellent projects for artists to do just that; to speak with each other, and have our voices heard and accounted. Yet why does it take funding to make it happen? Why aren't we doing it anyway? If we accept the centrality of having our voices heard and accounted, as a pre-requisite for the levels of reflection needed to keep our practice moving forward, why isn't dialogue a natural part of our everyday professional experience? And what can we do about it?

As sole traders in the Arts, if we belong to a community of practice, it can often be a community of one. Which isn't really a community. When I have a conversation with myself, I tend to reinforce what I already believe because there's no one to disagree with me. For our practice to thrive, and for our ideas to take flight, we need to widen the range of influences on it / them, either through collaboration, disagreement, or more simply, through dialogue.

Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin teaches us that in a dialogue, a 'third voice' is established – the 'super-addressee' – the emergent perspective in the dialogue that neither of the originating voices hold (Bakhtin 1981; Wegerif 2012). It's this 'third voice' which speaks our practice in new ways. The space that emerges between our perspectives is 'dialogic space', a liminal realm of possibilities where new ideas emerge and innovation thrives. Drawing the ideas that emerge in this 'dialogic space' back into our practice helps us to reinvigorate it.

Yes, it helps if dialogues are facilitated, but they don't *have* to be. If we've had experience of learning through dialogue, we know the kind of headspace we have to inhabit in order to feel the benefit. Curiosity, or what Richard Sennett calls the 'subjunctive mood' ('I wonder...? What if...? I would have thought that...?') prevents us from sticking rigidly to our pre-existing beliefs (Sennett 2012). Empathy, or being genuinely interested in the perspective of the other without trying to 'fix' it – or them, helps us to let go of our attachment to our own preferred outcome. So what's stopping us? What prevents us from finding others with a similar willingness to engage in dialogue – especially when they hold different opinions or perspectives to our own - and engaging them in one?

Of course, the conditions for dialogue have to be right, but we don't *have* to delegate responsibility for this to a third party. In the original spirit of Reg Revans, Action Learning (Revans 1972) (dialogics by any other name) requires no facilitator, just individuals committed to the dialogue. On Sage Gateshead's REFLECT programme (Renshaw 2008), we reduced the learning structure to simply three mutually-agreed elements: a shared focus (the 'what'); an explicit learning agreement (the

'how'); a schedule of meetings (the 'when'). In the ArtWorks Peer Artist Learning project (Camlin 2012), which ran over a shorter time, we also introduced some simple coaching tools: John Whitmore's coaching framework, GROW; ICA's 'focused conversation'. In our Music Lab project, we suggested a few simple parameters for getting a reflective dialogue going (Camlin 2014) that require little more than the space and willingness to start one.

As a community, we have a wealth of other similar tools available to us. In the most recent ArtWorks briefing - *What do you need? - Learning approaches for artists working in participatory settings* – there are six (count 'em) really good examples of different approaches developed through ArtWorks. Have a look, see what resonates. If nothing does, don't worry, invent your own! Every model has been created in different, unique situations, and there's nothing to suggest that what works in one can be transferred wholesale to another. Do what works for you, and for your community of practice / practitioners. Adapt, innovate, improvise.

'Yes, but who pays for it?' is the frequent excuse given for not engaging in CPD. When it comes to dialogue, I think there are good reasons for looking at this differently. We assume at our peril that the only person to benefit in an exchange between someone with more experience and someone with less is the latter. When it comes to CPD, and especially 'mentoring' relationships, this leads us to assume that unless there is a financial benefit for the former, it's not worth their while. However, research into peer learning in schools (Howe 2009; Webb 2009) reveals that it is, in fact, the more experienced who benefits the most in these kinds of exchanges. Transforming our tacit knowledge – what we know implicitly, or that which we take for granted – into explicit knowledge that we can communicate to others is precisely the kind of activity which brings Bakhtin's 'third voice' into existence. It gives language to what otherwise we can't – or don't - articulate about our practice, in turn helping us reflect on it and develop it. If someone wants to pay us to participate in our own learning, then great, but absence of a fee shouldn't prevent us from investing in the development of our practice, unless we're happy to watch it stagnate.

It starts with each of us; we don't have to wait to for someone else to start the dialogue. Despite the welcome opportunities that ArtWorks has brought with it for structured dialogue and reflection, we shouldn't have to wait for funding to give us permission to talk to each other. If it's so important for the development of our practice, and the development of Participatory Arts practice in general, dialogue should be our life-blood, and we should engage in it as naturally as breathing, or making Art.

Dialogue is the fuel which drives participation – we know it from our work with participants, listening to what motivates them, what they want to achieve through their participation, what resources we have to help make that happen and how we change and shape our ideas and activities to account for their perspectives and aspirations. So it makes perfect sense that dialogue should lie at the centre of our own development – as practitioners, as co-participants, as people.

As well as highlighting the rather obvious truth that we don't need permission to start talking with each other, I'd also like to offer an invitation. Forget the ice bucket challenge (hopefully people reading this will have no idea what I'm talking about), who do you know whose Arts practice is substantially different to your own? Thought of someone? Now, invite them somewhere nice for coffee. And start talking.

## Wider Reading

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