

Participation

David Bilton, NewcastleGateshead Initiative
Erica Campayne, Lift
Facilitated by Kate Dean, Artichoke

This session looked at some of the myths involved in participation. Kate Dean (KD) from Artichoke introduced David Bilton (DB) and Erica Campayne (EC).

EC introduced two projects she would be talking about. *Eat London* involved 200 community members who cooked and built an enormous edible model of London, which over 5000 people came to see. Lift's next project, *The Lift*, will use local artists and international artists working together and has been designed in consultation with over 200 people.

DB described his current role in the Culture 10 Programme, which happens in Newcastle, Gateshead and the whole North-East region. He develops large scale events including, most recently, La Fura dels Baus, when 80 volunteer aerialists, some of whom had never flown before, were involved. He also managed a Spencer Tunick photography project with 1700 naked people. Before Culture 10, DB worked on Ross-on-Wye International Festival, a small festival near the Welsh border. He used volunteers to manage the event and will talk about how he tried to make it a better experience for them. DB also worked with voluntary management committees in Stockton.

The panel introduced some myths and misconceptions about volunteering for discussion.

Volunteers and participants are good because they replace paid staff and reduce costs.

- DB started by saying that this is the main reason for recruiting volunteers. At Ross-on-Wye, all stewards were volunteers, ranging in age from 20 – 60 years old. The problem was that they only wanted to be there to get free tickets. When DB arrived, he tried to make it more professional by investing in their training, giving them proper roles (e.g. fire safety) and changing the nature of the relationship.
- EC wanted to clarify the difference between volunteers and participants. Participants are people who help create the artwork and take part in the project. With *Eat London*, Lift had to invest a lot in the participants; they could just have got artists to do it which would have been cheaper, but the whole point of the event was that it touched different communities and gave Londoners ownership of their city. Lift had to provide travel, translators and extra staff to support the community group leaders.
- KD asked how many people in the room have been asked by someone else to find participants.
- Delegate 1 replied that she ran the Tour de France finish line and found that volunteers' experience didn't meet their expectations.
- Delegate 2 said that difficulties arise when there are volunteers and paid people doing the same role.

- DB added that you need to be very clear about different roles. For example, at Ross-on-Wye, the paid staff were security. You also need to be clear what is expected of the volunteers. DB wanted professional paid staff doing technical jobs as it makes things like insurance more straight forward. He always, however, gave his volunteers at least four hours of basic training so they felt like they had a role. There was also a formal contract.
- EC said that for *Eat London*, the role of the volunteers was often to take care of the participants. It was a pastoral role as some of the participants had never even been to Trafalgar Square or didn't know what a big event it was going to be.
- KD reiterated the need to make a distinction between participants (creating work) and volunteers (stewarding, less artistic).
- EC added she is exploring accreditation for volunteers and wants to offer training.

Whistle and you can get committed participants and volunteers from anywhere.

- EC responded that this is definitely a myth. It is difficult to convince people to give up their time and you need to make them understand the project first. It took months to get the 14 groups on board for *Eat London*. The organisers had to envisage the project from the points of view of different groups, and work out what would interest them most. It was a difficult process.
- Delegate 3 added that every time they did a project they had to start recruiting from scratch. Now they have continuous ambassadors who work throughout the year with core volunteer groups. They do generic training all year round. It's very important to have advocates within the community.
- EC agreed saying that she is already looking at how to involve the same people next year as she is keen to keep them interested. Also, people often get involved because their friends have.
- Ali Pretty (Kinetika) said that the project often comes from outsiders inflicting ideas on the communities and just expecting that they will want to take part. The demand for the project should come from the local communities themselves. Often it's about an individual teacher who can get their whole school involved. Often they stay for the next project. It's a good idea to keep people like that involved by inviting them to a party or sending them your newsletter.
- EC agreed saying that the idea for *Eat London* came from Lift, which was the wrong way around. They have now taken their experiences of that project and are using them to develop *The Lift*. This project had a 3 month consultation process which involved talking to local communities about what they want *The Lift* to be.
- DB added that it is always about finding the friend. For the Spencer Tunick art work on NewcastleGateshead Quayside it was so unusual that it got a lot of attention and people said 'I'll do it if you do!'. This helped recruit the volunteers, but it's not normally so easy. La Fura dels Baus was much more difficult even though it was only 80 people. DB went through a local aerial company and recruited their contacts, climbers, dancers and so on. Many of the participants hadn't flown before and it was difficult finding enough people. It is important to start far in advance as it takes much longer than one would expect
- Helen Marriage (Artichoke) talked about the volunteers on *The Sultan's Elephant*. 50 volunteers were the absolute front line, the interface between the show and the crowd. It was difficult to hook people in as Royal de Luxe was virtually unknown here and Artichoke wasn't allowed to release images. A lot was asked of the volunteers - they had to commit four whole days for the

show. Artichoke didn't do the very valuable ground work that Lift does. It took months to recruit the bare minimum of 45 people. They were given as much as possible: three meals a day, travel costs, t-shirts, an elephant book and dvd etc. Although they were bemused when they first arrived, everybody found it a life changing experience. Without them the whole security and stewarding plan would not have worked, but it was quite hard to communicate the importance of the role in advance. HM added that she was interested that DB found so many people willing to take their clothes off.

- DB replied that they had originally been aiming for 8,000.
- HM added that it was interesting to think about what you can offer volunteers. They have to feel like part of the family so it's very important just to remember their names and say thank you.
- DB said that with La Fura it was wonderful to see a show where the volunteers were absolutely integral rather than just an add on.
- Delegate 4 said that it can be very risky relying so much on volunteers.
- HM replied that it is risky, but for *The Sultan's Elephant*, there were also paid security doing a slightly different job.
- KD talked about the benefit of established local networks, which can make it much easier to recruit volunteers.
- Audience member 6 added that you have to find the key individuals in your community and then use them to help recruit.
- DB reiterated this. Finding one animated person within the community who is passionate about the project is vital. Gerry Pilgrim is currently creating an animated walk and if DB can get her in front of the right people she can sell them the project and they will then enthuse about it and engage other people.
- Peta Murphy-Burke (Stoke on Trent City Council) said that she can find it hard enough to get people to come as an audience for events, let alone as volunteers.
- DB said that when he started working at Stockton, Frank Wilson was the director of a local arts centre, and he started the outdoor festival, SIRF. Stockton audiences have seen so much now that they are really sophisticated. The audience growth and greater engagement has come about through working with local community groups and offering a cultural experience which is more accessible than any of the theatres. He struggled to get an audience in Newcastle, because there was no tradition of outdoor theatre, but it is increasing now.
- HM added that, in Salisbury, she created an audience by putting shows in places that people would notice, for example, outside church on a Sunday morning. Their prejudices say 'it's nothing to do with me' but if it's unavoidable, people begin to question their assumptions.
- Bettina Reeves (Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama) said that The Abergavenny Food Festival was hugely successful after nine years, but initially was met with indifference. The change was in the communities beginning to trust the organisers.
- Ajay Chhabra (Nutmeg) said that putting shows in places where people cannot ignore it is really important, such as the High Street in Stockton.

Volunteers and participants don't want anything out of it, they just want to be there.

- DB started by saying that all volunteers have different motivations. At Ross-On -Wye, volunteers were offered free tickets and a t-shirt. For some people, however, it is about status and wanting to show the rest of the community that they are volunteers. Often many volunteers just want to put something back. Many of the younger volunteers do it for skills and career development.

- EC added that for *The Lift*, participants attended creative workshops and then the people who seemed really involved and interested were selected to do more. People wanted to be able to say 'I helped make that'. There are many reasons people participate such as to build their CV, personal connections, artistic reasons, skills and training.
- KD said that when she ran a youth theatre people would ask if they could use some of the members, but it had to be the choice of the members, not her as the leader. It is quite easy to get into the situation of being desperate to find volunteers and not thinking about the personal reasons people have for taking part or not taking part.
- Delegate 6 added that we often just think about the art and not the social aspect.
- KD pointed out the Arts Council ask for a lot of evaluation when you use volunteers, but this can be useful for the organisers too. Use people's responses and maintain a dialogue with the volunteers.

Working with volunteers is a great way of getting new audiences and ticking government boxes

- EC said that when working with disadvantaged communities it's important not to just call them 'asylum seekers' etc. when they are actually young emerging artists. She asks participants to describe themselves. It is most difficult to reach those who aren't in official community groups. In *Tower Hamlets*, for example, the most disengaged group is white working class girls.
- DB added that it is easy to put volunteers into the 'output' box and forget that they are individuals, not just a way of ticking the 'community engagement' box.
- KD asked whether anyone has been asked to increase participation in order to increase audiences? There are a lot of comparisons in strategy terms. A lot of people involved in community theatre would not go to professional theatre.
- HM said that *The Sultan's Elephant* was supposed to be participatory, but it was impossible. Integrating anyone into the process was so difficult. The Arts Council wanted people to learn from it, but when Artichoke sent two people to France to get involved, they gave up and were mentally and physically wrecked. Artichoke couldn't force the show to be something it wasn't. Sometimes participation is just not possible.
- Sarah Vasey (Liverpool Culture Company) created Art in the Parks productions for Mosely Borough Council with 60 volunteers. It was a great model for community engagement as it used local networks, introducing groups to each other.
- Holly Jones (National Youth Theatre) said that involving young people brings in great ideas. They are a great resource when engaged creatively.

KD wound the session up.