'Sell[ing] what hasn't got a name': An exploration of the different understandings and definitions of 'community engagement' work in the performing arts

*Keywords***:** terminology; top-down; jargon; collaboration; participation; education; learning; outreach; audience

Daniel H. Mutibwa, University of Nottigham, U.K Campus

Abstract

Widely known to promote broader involvement in the processes which define the arts and culture (Webster, 1997), community engagement work in the performing arts — despite employing a set of commonly recognised norms — has tended to be conceptualised differently both historically and contemporarily. Drawing on ethnographic research — particularly semi-structured qualitative interview accounts of numerous British practitioners with a track record of work in the sector, the article explores these different conceptualisations. The article finds that it is the actual 'work that matters' and not what it is named, and that the diversity of understandings and definitions among sectoral practitioners is reflective of evolving thinking, values and practice, something that may be destabilising for better or worse.

A history of community engagement work in the performing arts

Community engagement work in the arts in Britain has a long and rich history that dates from the countercultural era in the 1960s and 1970s. As such, what follows is a treatment of selected historically significant developments pertinent to the performing arts[1] and by no means exhaustive. Deriving from slightly different but interrelated ideological principles, visions and practices that incorporated 'radical' and 'alternative' approaches to cultural production, the sector engaged in 'bringing art *to* the community, promoting art *in* and *by* communities, and *representing* communities ignored by the dominant culture' (Lewis, 1990: 113, *italics* in original). In doing so, the sector clearly positioned itself in opposition to perceived 'structures of power and privilege' that were seen to 'permeate everyday life, limiting and curtailing opportunities for self-realisation and social change' (Murdoch, 1980: 151).

This led scholars to observe that much of the work produced grew out of the general militancy of this era (Lacy, 1995) or what Kershaw (1992: 170) termed the period of 'theatricalisation of protest and resistance'. Such resistance manifested itself at various levels in the questioning and rejection of local, regional and national dominant values, in the dissent on social issues such as abortion and drugs and in the treatment of international themes around war and social justice movements among many others (DiCenzo, 1996; Rawlence, 1979; Van Erven, 1988; 2001).

Following significant changes in the social, economic and political circumstances in British society by the late 1970s — coupled with the waning influence of the countercultural era, community engagement work in the performing arts underwent a two-fold transformation from the 1980s onwards. First, demands were placed on the arts Establishment to open up and become more accessible and responsive to the needs of diverse communities (Kelly, 1984; Mulgan & Worpole, 1986). To this end, the Regional Arts Associations (RAA) and local arts authorities — on behalf of the Arts Council — were charged with the responsibility to support

and promote arts and cultural projects at community and regional levels for which they received extra funding (Prentki & Selman, 2000). Subsequently, conventional theatres, museums, galleries and opera houses developed new approaches to promoting arts and cultural projects within communities in a bid to attract new and diverse audiences through education and outreach work (Harding, 1998; Lewis, 1990). To critics, however, the aim of such work was not so much to offer individuals and communities an opportunity to use the arts for their personal and/or collective expression than to 'colonise' them, to turn them into arts Establishment consumers and to 'blunt social criticism' through appropriating the sector's oppositional ideologies altogether (Kelly, 1984; McGrath, 1996; Van Erven, 1988).

Second, fears of being co-opted into the arts Establishment — coupled with successive cuts in subsidy for the arts typical of the wider Thatcherite political economy — gradually led to the emergence of a new breed of arts practitioners that fitted the following organisational typology: they either operated on a freelance basis in project-based work arrangements, worked in community arts and education and learning departments housed in traditional arts institutions or organised in diverse, independent arts groups and companies (Harding, 1998; Herbert, 1997; Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999; Mulgan & Worpole, 1986; Webster, 1997). Working at the intersection between the arts Establishment, the commercial arts sector and the so-called community arts (Harding, 1998; Matarraso, 2000; Shaw, 2001), many of these practitioners relied on a newly established series of funding schemes characterised by 'the kind of "entrepreneurial action" preferred by neo-conservatism' (Kershaw, 1992: 172), something that has since significantly influenced the setting of objectives and the use of language in — alongside particular understandings and definitions of — the sector as we shall see later.

Conceptualising contemporary community engagement in the performing arts

In terms of objectives, contemporary community engagement work in the performing arts — to varying degrees — draws inspiration from the ideals of the countercultural period to

facilitate both individual and collective development in a number of contexts: environmental, social, rehabilitative, and health and well-being among many others. At the individual level, it acts as a conduit for the expression of the relationship between the self and one's physical environment (McWilliam, 2008; Verschelden, Van Eeghem, Steel, De Visscher & Dekeyrel, 2012). Socially, not only do individuals gain 'self-confidence', resulting from 'real achievement and the acquisition of actual skills' but they might benefit from 'the extension of social networks, personal control [and] empowerment' (Matarasso, 2000: 15). From a rehabilitative vantage point, Walshe (2012) found that individuals tend to 'have better social and communication skills, are more likely to go on to pursue higher education, and are less likely to re-offend'. At the collective level, work in the sector is seen to mitigate social exclusion (Landy & Montgomery, 2012) and to contribute to sustained community health and well-being (Billington, Fyfe, Milling, & Schaefer, 2012; Putland, 2008).

In essence, the sector seeks to 'break down barriers between artist and [community members] and include[s] everyone, no matter the skill level, in creating and presenting the arts [and in doing so, forging] a collaboration […] that addresses — through the arts — issues central to local community, with a goal of improving local conditions' (Hager, 2008: 160). Hager asserts that the sector is known to facilitate 'civic engagement', to promote 'community connections and social reform', to 'emphasize *participation*, challenge assumptions that arts creation is only for professional artists, and [to] stress that all community members are considered equal contributors' (2008: 165, *italics* in original). This conceptualisation of the sector highlights its distinctiveness as reflected in resilience, vibrancy and diversity.

Paradoxically, diversity in the form of what appears to be a splendid array of principles, objectives and a set of sometimes slightly varying but nonetheless widely recognised practices is precisely what has fostered the different understandings and definitions of community engagement work in the performing arts. This has been further reinforced by key scholarship,

practitioner debates, and policy discourses that have covered virtually all aspects of the sector at different junctures over time in the process of articulating what the sector is not and why it matters (Billington *et al.*, 2012; Carpenter, 2008; Coutts & Jokela, 2008; Hager, 2008; Kershaw, 1992; Kelly, 1984; Lewis, 1990; Landy & Montgomery, 2012; McGrath, 1996; Murdoch, 1980; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Rawlence, 1979; Tiller, 2014; Van Evren, 1988; 2001; Webster, 1997). And although the aforementioned debates and discourses rage on, the diverse understandings and definitions have tended to be treated tentatively, heuristically and unsystematically, and without much consideration for the constantly evolving context around sectoral values and practice.

More recently, scholars and practitioners have systematically focused their attention on understandings and associated terminology. Lowe (2011: 54) — in his capacity as an academic and a practitioner — interviewed a range of practitioners in the north east of England about the language they use to define their work and found that:

> [w]e face a challenge with language. If we do not have a common language to describe the work, then we cannot advocate for it effectively to raise the values and perception of the practice (we cannot sell what hasn't got a name) and it also suggests that there is confusion or disagreement within the sector about what practice is.

To give a taste of the kind of challenge Lowe refers to, Tiller (2012: 8) asks whether 'we call [the sector] socially engaged art, art for social change, social art, community arts, dialogical art, inclusive art, relational art or arts in educational contexts?' In his research, Lowe (2011) himself alluded to the sector as 'arts in participatory settings'. Tiller notes that the term 'participatory art' is more widely used in Britain but that other terms tend to be prioritised outside Britain. In Australia, for example, the Australia Council for the Arts (2016) talks about 'community arts and cultural development practice', the Canada Council for the Arts (2016) speaks of 'artists and community collaboration' while in the U.S, 'the terms *community cultural development*, *community-based art*, *arts-based civic dialogue*, and *community youth arts* [are

lumped] together under the rubric community arts' (Hager 2008: 160, *italics* in original). Whereas this wide diversity of understanding and terminology might suggest an impressive richness of practice and values, it also raises a key question about the extent to which identification with these is consensual across the sector. Before engaging with this question, it is fruitful to discuss the methodological approach employed to gather the required data first.

Methodology

In a quest to build on Lowe's (2011) and Tiller's (2012) work, the author followed up on further practitioners' perspectives on the question of terminology through research[2] conducted in 2013 that drew on ethnographic fieldwork (i.e., semi-structured qualitative interviews, partial observation and the study of documentary evidence) for data collection at twenty-two arts organisations across England. The selection of these organisations was based on balancing three key aspects: (a) a demonstrable commitment to and a strong track record of engaging with a range of communities around the arts and culture, (b) a good fit with the organisational typology specified earlier, and (c) a reasonably wide geographical spread insofar as possible – comprising Birmingham, Bristol, Eastbourne, Gateshead, Leeds, Lichfield, Liverpool, London, Sheffield, Ulverston (Cumbria) and York.

At the selected organisations, the author interviewed twenty-eight prominent practitioners about how they define their work when engaging either with non-arts community members or, generally, with people from non-arts backgrounds. The interviews were complemented by the study of accessible documentary evidence encompassing annual company reports, research project reports, executive memos, newspaper articles, output reviews, websites, blogs, DVDs, photographs, *YouTube* videos, brochures and leaflets. The author asked: *Do you find the term 'community engagement' appropriate for describing the work you do? If not, can you suggest a better term?*

Discussion and Analysis: Practitioners have their say

What follows is a presentation of practitioners' responses[3], starting with a large majority that said the term was inappropriate through to those who identified with it out of pragmatism, and then to those who said the term was appropriate followed by the preferred and/or alternative terms mentioned.

The notion of 'community': Its ambiguity and stigmatized connotations

Although virtually all practitioner accounts indicate an engagement with diverse communities in the sense conceptualised earlier and widely understood in the sector, a large majority said that the term was inappropriate:

> Unfortunately, I think [community engagement] still, for some people, implies something that is second-rate and amateurish, even though it's moved on. So I think it is not the right term […] I'm not sure I know what the right one would be (David Pickard, *Glyndebourne Productions*).

> We don't really use [community engagement] […] I hate jargon and I hate terms that label. I hate the phrase 'target groups' […] We never use the word 'outreach' — ever. It's banned from all of our literature because we are not reaching out to anybody. We are working with communities […] Our job is to work with people. So for me talking about 'community engagement' almost ghettoises it because it is our job to engage with communities. If that wasn't our job, then what would have been the point in investing in us in the first place? We'd have no right to be here! […] So I think I find those terms a bit unhelpful, generally (Katherine Zeserson, *The Sage Gateshead*).

> Now, I thought that you might ask something like that, because I was thinking, is that what we do? I like it: I do use it quite a lot. I think maybe 'participation' is better. I think there's something faintly patronising about it, if I'm truthful — 'community engagement'. It feels like: 'I can go in and "engage" people', and really I'm not sure if it's like that. You know, there's something wrong with every term […] I don't know, maybe it's the best we've got, until someone comes up with something better (Nicky Webb, *Artichoke*).

> It is a very professional term, is it not? Which is a problem. Because it means that if you have a phrase 'community engagement', you could not go to a mother and toddlers' group, and say: 'Who would like to be involved in some "community engagement"?'

So the very way that the phrase is used, suggests a group of experts, who are setting about to do something for some other people […] So I do not think it is a great term (Jude Kelly, *Southbank Centre*).

I don't think it's a term that people who get involved with us would ever use. It's the wrong term […] They would never discuss the fact that: 'I'm part of a community engagement project'. I think it's a top-down delivery mechanism which allows [elitist] arts people to say: 'Yes, we understand what we mean internally between ourselves' […] For [people], they're just getting involved with each other [...] But just that term 'community' or 'community engagement'; I don't think those words are common parlance with people (Marcus Romer, *Pilot Theatre*).

Practitioners attribute the inappropriacy of the term 'community engagement' to the ambiguity of the concept of 'community' and the associated, stigmatized connotations attached to it — and by extension to community engagement work more generally as we shall see below. Indeed, the term 'community' appears to mean different things to different people in different settings as some scholalrly accounts have shown. Already in the 1970s, Raymond Plant shared the view that the term encompasses 'so many meanings as to be meaningless [the main problem being that it] is meant to cover all persons and interests, but is not defined [thereby] remain[ing] vague and indefinite' (1978: 79-80). Although it is mostly used to refer to contexts in which there is a coming together of groups of people and/or individuals around commonalities such as identity, interest or practice (Banks & Manners, 2012), it may not always be clear whether such groups come together as a 'community' or perhaps form one as a result of coming together (Wenger, 1998). Similarly unclear may be whether communities exist physically or virtually or both of these things (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). Of this vagueness, practitioners noted:

['Community'] means lots and lots of different things. You can't say just because you live in that postcode you are a community, because people might never speak to each other in that neighbourhood. But they might be part of six other different communities, because of their religion, or because of their whatever […] But communities are strange things, because it could be a community of two… (Sam Perkins, *West Yorkshire Playhouse*).

[T]he word 'community' is difficult, because it presupposes there is a group in people's heads. Let us just take the audience. They go to *Mahler's Fourth* [Symphony]. Are they a community, if you engage with them on a Saturday? Or are we talking about class engagement? (Jude Kelly, *Southbank Centre*).

[T]he hesitation comes in headlining with ['community'], because of the connotations it brings with it (Tom Bowtell, *Coney*).

I think there is too much stigma attached to the word 'community' (David Pickard, *Glyndebourne Productions*).

It's about the loaded-ness of the word 'community'. That's the problem because actually; yes we do stuff for the community. We're not ashamed of it. But people tend to see it in the wrong context (Sally Goldsmith, *Theatre Royal Stratford East*).

The 'wrong context' can be explained in two ways. First, Billingham (2002: 91) observed that 'community' in relation to the arts and associative political and cultural contexts 'has become a much used and misused contemporary term [employed] in liberal contexts such as Community Arts [with an] implicit meaning [connoting] an uncritical, even nostaligic idealisation of working-class or ethnic communities' in Britain. To Lewis, 'community' in cultural production 'suggests simplistic, low budget, and low […] production — an approach which can seem, on occasion, to imply a lowering of expectation and standards' (1990: 112). This is substantiated by Hiltunen's (2008) observation that because working with communities tends to prioritise a casual and non-threatening process of engagement over everything else, this fuels perceptions of a lack of professionalism which, in turn, may negatively impact on associated outputs. It is, therefore, not surprising that this negative connotation renders some practitioners to dissociate themselves from what generally tends to be viewed as 'amateurish' and 'second-rate' work, or, from what tends to evoke a 'ghettoising' or 'patronising' sentiment — perhaps one that is even seen to perpetuate perceived 'class engagment' as we have seen.

Second, the 'wrong context' can be attributed to jargon dictated by a 'group of experts' or a 'top-down delivery mechanism' that — perhaps inadvertently — often contributes to the patronisation of work in the sector. This emanates from two aspects: (a) the perceived

ideological leanings of the sector, and (b) its over-reliance on subsidy. Firstly, as outlined earlier, because a significant part of the sector has historically tended to position itself in opposition to the conventional arts, the quality and/or aesthetic value of its work was often judged to lie outside the norms of what was generally seen as acceptable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, such work has since tended to be devalued in elitist arts circles as 'damn', 'crap art', 'unimaginative' and 'passé' (Gant & Morris, 1997; Lacy, 1995; Slade & Dunne, 1997), an understanding that reverberates to this day across parts of the sector as some practitioner accounts have shown.

Secondly, excessive dependence on public funding and the associated language used explain the patronising attitude towards community engagement work in the performing arts. Harding (1998: 12) — drawing on the seminal work of Owen Kelly, the author of the book *Community, art and the state* — argues persuasively that the sector has become 'the victim of "grant addiction", whereby funding bodies determine target groups and funding priorities'. Consequently, Harding asserts, the sector has become 'funding-led, rather than artistically-led, underpinned by a notion of "welfare arts" through which socially, disadvantaged groups are prioritised over artistic' values. I return to these issues in detail below. For now, the discussion shifts to the practitioner accounts that find the term 'community engagement' rather narrow in its depiction of the sector.

The term 'community engagement' in the performing arts tells only half the story

Some practitioners found 'community engagement' as a term inappropriate — or perhaps problematic — because they felt it did not paint an accurate and full picture of what sectoral practice and work truly entail:

> I think, the way we would go about it is to say that there is our work, and then there are our objectives or outcomes of our work which do change, based on a lot of different criteria, and engaging community as working with non-professional artists, will be part

of the process and part of the outcome and just ties into a project […] I think it's about how [community engagement is] deployed and it's about giving the context around [it], so that 'it's not just community engagement here, there is real art here'. I think that's the problem (Tom Bowtell, *Coney*).

['Community engagement' is not only about] giving people a voice and showing that they actually know they are contributing to the making of a piece of work [but it is also about recognising] the role of the artist that we are working with, to give them a really good experience as part of their professional development and their human development as well. It has got to work on lots of different layers really (Ian Brownbill, *Metal Culture*).

I don't think 'community engagement' best describes our work […] 'Community engagement' — I think suggests working purely with community groups and maybe not necessarily with professional artists, as we do, but still through an educational and developmental route (Clare Cody—Richardson, *Shobana Jeyansingh Dance Company*).

I doubt that I would use [community engagement] outside of the context of this conversation. I certainly haven't used it before (David Harradine, *Fevered Sleep*).

[T]he value that one hopes the community derives, is reflected back into the organisation. So it's not just about engaging the community, but we're engaging with our own organisation in a different way. So in some ways 'community engagement' doesn't tell you the whole picture, does it? Because it's about engagement, more broadly. Those people who work on very regular work patterns in this organisation — for them to work with new communities — helps them develop new skills and can re-invigorate their practice. Sending a stage carpenter or a stage technician into a school can give them renewed vigour for their work, because they understand that it's of interest to other people (Matt Lane, *Royal Opera House-Thurrock*).

We have seen that much of the focus on community engagement work in the performing arts has been placed on how such work has served individuals and communities as a conduit for artistic expression and as a form of social intervention that aims to address what Lacy called 'a litany of social ills' (1995: 32). It seems that the role that practitioners play in enabling this work is not given as much credit and recognition as it deserves. Instead, some observers have offered implicit criticism of the way practitioners are perceived to feature in such work and the attitude they may bring to it.

An illustrative example is what Harding refers to as a persistent 'myth perpetuated by art schools that working with people somehow dilutes art' (1998: 14). Lewis — drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'cultural capital' which explores how aesthetic values work amongst different social classes in society — cements this line of argument by noting that practitioners 'use their skill to maximise the complexity of codes involved in [art work], making it more difficult to understand'. Consequently, 'the level of cultural competence required to unravel these codes becomes more and more exclusive' (1990: 8–9), a reason often presented as one of the key justifications for promoting community engagement work in the performing arts with a view to making the arts and culture as widely accessible as possible.

It goes without saying that the practitioners under study would dismiss this critique. To them — as we have seen, the reason the term 'community engagement' does not 'tell the whole picture' is simply because it neither takes into account how practitioners may work with peers in an 'educational and developmental' context as Clare Cody—Richardson (*Shobana Jeyansingh Dance Company*) remarks nor the different ways in which practitioners and their organisations are themselves engaged in the process as Matt Lane (*Royal Opera House-Thurrock*) points up. Moreover, the term is not seen to effectively capture the dynamic process that unfolds when members of a community and practitioners engage in the co-production of art and cultural work as Lowe's (2014: 17–20) recent research has shown. Working with communities not only allows for the making of good and creative work that is characterised by diversity and may generate broad and enormous enjoyment as Jonathan Petherbridge (*London Bubble*) notes below, but such work also gives practitioners' work a sense of purpose and in doing so, helps them 'develop new skills' and 're-invigorate their practice'as Matt Lane further intimates.

The idea that practitioners draw inspiration from 'community engagement' work in the performing arts is an extremely important one because this is rarely (if at all) subject of

discussion, perhaps owing to the fact that it is invisible and may concern practitioners at an individual level as opposed to a collective one. What is visible and collectively acknowledged though is the contribution that practitioners make to community engagement work with many seeing themselves in the role of 'an enabler, half catalyst and half facilitator, mak[ing] things happen […] bring[ing] a sense of poetry to the process and enabl[ing] people to see things from a different perspective' (Gant & Morris, 1997: 38–39).

To Shaw, this role generates 'the conditions in which people might begin to make the necessary connections between their personal experience and the wider context' (2011, p. 16), something that is in stark contrast to the aforementioned critique on the complex codes that practitioners are perceived to enshrine in art and cultural work. Considering that practitioners may even have their names and involvement played down under given circumstances (Harding 1998: 12) or are compelled to 'hide' or to practise self-censorship (Lowe, 2014: 21–22), Schwarz adds a vital dimension of co-authorship to the crucial, facilitative role that practitioners play which:

> [i]nvolves an artist working with participants to undertake a shared creative journey, for which the artist provides initial inspiration, and acts as a facilitator to enable participants to explore their own creative ideas and life experiences. The artist works with participants to develop a shared creative vision and outcomes, which is co-authored by artists and participants together (2013: 12).

One might argue then that painting a more accurate and fuller picture of community engagement work in the performing arts — that may contribute to a more inclusive understanding of the sector — requires not a focus on communities alone but a consideration of the pivotal role that practitioners and arts organisations play. Of particular importance here are the motivations and visions that practitioners and organisations bring to this engagement; an understanding of the socio-political context of their engagement, and the reflexive positions they hold towards this engagement (Coutts & Jokela, 2008; Verschelden, Van Eeghem, Steel,

De Visscher & Dekeyrel, 2012). This effectively captures the 'lots of different layers' in place that Ian Brownbill (*Metal Culture*) alludes to above. We now look at the instances in which the deployment of 'community engagement' as a term to describe practice and work is shaped by strategic considerations and decisions.

Identifying with 'community engagement' out of pragmatism

Some practitioners felt compelled to take a pragmatic approach as to why and when they opt to identify with and/or use the term 'community engagement' owing primarily to the aforementioned issues of aesthetics, forms of measurement and funding, and the associative terminology deployed to frame and conceptualise the sector:

> It's an on-going debate within the sector about what we call ourselves and actually it's the work that matters. So it depends, and we also often define our work by different terms that funders use because you need to describe your work in so many different ways, depending on who's asking about it. So lots of other words come in, depending on who you're talking to and how you're talking about yourself. We are engaging our community through our work, so community engagement is as good a term as any I suppose (Lucy Lowe, *Glyndebourne Productions*).

> Of course, there are particular conversations and contexts in which I will use any jargon going to do the deal — you know (Katherine Zeserson, *The Sage Gateshead*).

> I don't mind the term when we're doing evaluations and we're doing internal assessments, and we're writing applications for funding that we understand what that means (Marcus Romer, *Pilot Theatre*).

> Probably [between] 2002 to 2006, 2007, I think we probably would have called it 'community engagement'. [When] we started to call ourselves an applied theatre company, we would think about a range of theatre applications that can be applied in all sorts of non-theatre contexts. At that point, the use of language changes then, because of who's the audience you are trying to find. I'd say, when we were talking about touring and the work that we did to develop our touring and to support audience development, then I think that we would say 'community engagement'. Partly because that would have been the language that the Arts Council would have recognised (Ashley Barnes, Formerly of *Dead Earnest*).

So I think it's, if you're funding a bid or if you're the Arts Council, it's fine to have [community engagement] which show[s] the work exists (Tom Bowtell, *Coney*).

Identification with 'community engagement' as a term is clearly discernible when writing funding proposals in tune with the kind of rhetoric in favour with funders. Perhaps inevitably, the power dynamics inherent in funding provision mean practitioners are compelled to use 'buzzwords around which policy [and sector discourse are] framed' (Shaw, 2011, p. 15). Not only does this appear to vindicate the worrying perception that the sector has been gradually misappropriated for primarily welfare purposes at the expense of artistic ones, but it also raises serious questions about how it is understood.

The notion that the sector is associated more with a welfare function rather than arts practice has been hotly debated over the decades — not least because it has significantly contributed to problematic understandings of values and related practice and terminology. Gant & Morris, for instance, note that emerging work is 'simply viewed as some kind of arts-based social work that occasionally throws up the odd talented individual who may be allowed access into the [arts Establishment]' (1997: 43). To Jacob, the status of the sector fluctuates between two levels. At the one level, practitioners celebrate such work as innovative, experimental and engaging in reflecting real, lived experiences meaningfully. At the other, critics view the concentration of such work on predominantly social issues as rendering it 'socially concerned but aesthetically insignificant' (1995: 55).

The author takes issue with this generalisation because it does not appear to appreciate fully the distinctiveness of the arts and related cultural activities in connecting communities 'with broader socio-political questions and links with topics from other fields, which gives opportunity to combine different perspectives on social reality' (Bradt, 2009, cited in Verschelden, Van Eeghem, Steel, De Visscher & Dekeyrel, 2012: 288) in imaginative and creative ways. Moreover, practitioners make very clear that 'it's not just [about] community

engagement here, [but that] there is real art here' as remarked earlier (Tom Bowtell, *Coney*).

Moreover, as observed below, 'get[ting] the community engaged in making [art] happen, and

performing it, and coming to see it [tends to generate] good [art]' (Jonathan Petherbridge,

London Bubble). These constitutive elements of sectoral practice are reminiscent of the idea of

'dialogical aesthetics'.[4]

Indeed, most of the artistic outputs and cultural activities the author either watched as

a participant observer or reviewed in the form of documentary evidence underlined this

distinctive engagement with social and political reality in inventive ways — albeit to varying

degrees. It is not hard to see why many practitioners understandably harbour deep reservations

about the term 'community engagement', particularly where associatve work is seen to

foreground 'social concern' at the expense of artistic work and where the role that practitioners

play may not always be appreciated as we have seen. The discussion now turns to the context

in which the term 'community engagement'is deemed appropriate to describe practice followed

by an exploration of some key preferred and/or alternative terms.

Embracing the term 'community engagement' and other preferred terms in use

Where practitioners embraced the term 'community engagement', this was in the (genuine)

belief that it best captures how people make use of the arts and related cultural activities to

express themselves creatively:

> I think community engagement is what the whole company should be — That's what
> we aspire to do. So whenever we do anything, we try to get the community engaged in
> making it happen, and performing it, and coming to see it […] But the objective is to
> make theatre, we see theatre as being a very social art form. For theatre to be good, you
> need as diverse an age group and community as you can to come together to make it
> and enjoy it. Then you tend to get good theatre (Jonathan Petherbridge, *London
> Bubble*).

> Do you know what — over the years terms come and go, whatever's in fashion. I think
> community engagement is a very good one. For the moment I think that's fine […] We

are in communities. Opera houses are part of their community […] I think Jonathan Dove[5], and I hope he won't mind me talking about him, is very keen on being part of his community. He's written operas for *the Hackney Music Development Trust* because he lives in Hackney, and he wants to be working as part of his community. So he is engaged in his community as an artist. But I don't think, in any of these projects, it's 'them and us' (Katie Tearle, Formerly of *Glyndebourne Productions*).

I do think it's one of the terms we use. I think it depends who you're talking to and who you're describing the work to. So yes, it's perfectly appropriate for many audiences […] But […] our aim really is to engage people and awaken a desire for people to engage creatively with the world around them. So yes, engagement is a good word (Beccy Thomas, *Bristol Old Vic*).

For these practitioners, the term 'community engagement' best captures their work based on the understanding that it favours agency and wider involvement in engaging with real-life experiences in imaginative and creative ways. In doing so, not only does this understanding seek to challenge the often unhelpful binary division between practitioners and 'non-arts' people as often reflected in the 'them and us', but it also values and foregrounds collaboration between practitioners and people from non-arts backgrounds and/or local communities geared towards responding to emergent issues of interest, concern and relevance to all stakeholders. When asked to suggest a better term, practitioners mentioned a range of preferred and/or alternative terms — the most recurrent of which are captured as follows:

[W]e talk about 'outreach'; we talk about 'partnership work' (Beccy Thomas, *Bristol Old Vic*).

[W]e talk about working with young people, working with communities, and we talk about engagement. So you know, they're the right words… (Tom Bowtell, *Coney*).

We prefer to talk about 'inclusive engagement'. We talk about 'working with communities' a lot. We talk about 'participation' a lot. We talk about 'social engagement'. We talk about 'social pedagogy' (Katherine Zeserson, *The Sage Gateshead*).

I probably would tend to use the word 'participation'. We'd certainly use the word 'collaboration' but we would also talk about inviting a professional scientist to participate in a project, to collaborate on a project. We would talk about an artist

participating in a project or collaborating on a project (David Harradine, *Fevered Sleep*).

There's participation, there's learning, all these different things […] Or it could just be 'people', or 'audiences'. But I think 'audiences' has a slightly different connotation, and it seems more passive to me than community engagement (Katie Tearle, Formerly of *Glyndebourne Productions*).

It is evident that the most recurrent and preferred and/or alternative terms to 'community engagement' are 'participation', 'education', 'learning', 'outreach', 'audience', 'collaboration', 'involvement', and 'working with people and/or communities'. Whilst the last three terms are fairly self-explanatory, it is helpful to explore the preference for the others. 'Outreach' and 'audience' seem problematic because they tend to be associated with an attempt to broaden the clientele of the arts Establishment through 'colonisation' (Lewis, 1990), something that is seen to stifle the engagement with the arts and culture on the terms of local communities (Adams, 2008; Jacob, 1995). Katherine Zeserson's (*The Sage Gateshead*) critique of the term 'outreach' is particularly telling because it tends to be perceived as 'parachuting' into communities, gaining peoples' trust and confidence, involving them in some arts and cultural activities for a little while before then 'parachuting' out — leaving behind communities feeling abandoned and disenchanted (Carey & Sutton, 2004; McGrath, 1996). As such, this way of 'bringing art *to* the community' (Lewis, 1990: 113) à la 'outreach' may no longer effectively capture as it once did what some practitioners think they do, but others still use it to mean approaching communities about potential future collaborations or simply to publicise their work.

The term 'audience' — to Katie Tearle (Formerly of *Glyndebourne Productions*) — connotes passivity which is viewed to deny communities the incentive to actively input into the planning, design and execution of arts and cultural work (Knight & Schwarzman, 2005), especially where this addresses their lived experiences and realities (Landy & Montgomery,

2012). For Tiller (2014, n.p) , the term 'participation' does this more effectively by capturing how participants:

> work with the artist/s to devise something that reflects their own concerns and issues (inventive) or take a work in the existing canon and making it relevant to their own experience (interpretive) — [the understanding being that] '[t]he expressive and creative nature of the contribution is accepted as what makes [such work] participatory.

Drawing on Kester's (2004) work, Hiltunen (2008: 102) bolsters this view by observing that inherent in 'participatory' is [l]istening to the participants, recognising their wishes to do things differently and, even if necessary, recognising their refusal to act…'. Indeed, as some practitioner accounts have shown, 'community engagement' as a term may not always be seen to capture these nuances in the quality of engagement as effectively as participation does. Crucially though, 'what remains constant [about many of the terms used to describe work in the sector] is the notion of *bringing together professional artist/artists with non-professional artists/audience* to collaborate and produce something *with* each other' (Tiller, 2014, *italics* in original) in ways and with a regularity that established arts houses may not be able or willing to. This, the author argues, speaks to a central understanding of practice in the sector reflected in 'promoting art *in* and *by* communities, and *representing* communities ignored by the dominant culture' (Lewis, 1990: 113).

Practitioners who demonstrated a preference for the terms 'education' and 'learning' did clearly identify with the conceptualisation of community engagement work in the performing arts outlined earlier but tended to foreground the aspect of acquiring knowledge of all kinds that was perceived to contribute significantly to developing and nurturing learners' 'intellectual, emotional and social development as well as their moral and cultural well-being' (Adams, 2008: 125). It may come as no surprise that such practitioners tend to work with particular demographic groups (children, young adults or the elderly, for instance) often in educative, rehabilitative, social- and healthcare settings.

For these practitioners, art and cultural work was conceived of as a space to engage collaboratively with creativity in its very diverse forms with a view to exploring, investigating and discovering opprotunities that were perceived to help develop learners' capability to respond to processes of societal change as effectively as possible (Carey & Sutton, 2004; Landy & Montgomery, 2012). In essence, 'education' and 'learning' in the aforementioned settings appear to demonstrate greater precision in highlighting how learners collectively — and in collaboration with practitioners — explore, observe, record, interpret and make sense of the surroundings and people around them (Knight & Schwarzman, 2005). Learning with and from others reflects the level of equality between learners and practitioners (Lowe, 2014) much more than 'community engagement' is perhaps considered to, something that speaks to a key understanding of the sector — the idea of removing barriers amongst various stakeholders.

Conclusion

This article has explored the different understandings and definitions of community engagement work in the performing arts, and in doing so, has highlighted the multiple terminologies used to describe practice coupled with the associated issues and problems. When Lowe (2011: 54) notes that the sector 'cannot sell what hasn't got a name', is it fair to ask whether community engagement in the performing arts is in dire need of one? Or put differently — does it matter? Schwarz (2013: 10) offers an instructive response that reflects what she terms 'adaptive resilience' whereby:

> [c]onflicting perspectives, disagreements or differences of opinion [in conceptualisation and on terminology] should not be seen as a fundamental weakness of the sector's workforce [or] as a disparate set of practices and values, but rather as celebrated as representing those differences through dialogue, listening to each other, and becoming involved in each other's artistic processes in a true spirit of collaboration

In contributing to this ongoing 'dialogue', this article sides with this sentiment by making a two-fold observation. First, the wealth of the 'set of practices and values' that the

sector is able to draw upon to fulfil its remit(s) is what makes it so distinctive. A case in point is how 'values' inform the linking of wider and pressing societal questions and issues of utmost concern, interest and relevance with local communities to gain a variety of perspectives on social, cultural and political reality as it is lived (Verschelden, Van Eeghem, Steel, De Visscher & Dekeyrel, 2012) in a way that established and commercial arts sectors may not. 'Practices' denote a willingness to 'co-author' work with communities informed by 'sharing working together in a professional' (*cf.* Lowe, 2014: 15) context whereby such work emphasises an equal contribution (Hager, 2008: 165) and is of a standard not to be 'ashamed of' (Sally Goldsmith, *Theatre Royal Stratford East*).

Second, the persistence of preferred and/or alternative terms supports Lucy Lowe's (*Glyndebourne Productions*) observation that it should not be 'about what we call ourselves [but] actually it's the work that matters'. That work — we have seen — is about 'working with communities'in a context that is constantly evolving, reflects current thinking, values and practice, and continually asks questions of these which need not be answered even if this may 'create unresolved dissonances' (*cf.* Lowe, 2014: 11), or even destabilise familiar patterns of seeing and working (Schwarz, 2013) — for better or worse.

Notes

[1] The primary focus is on the performing arts because (a) their overly socially interactive nature allows for a portrayal, examination and interpretation of personal and collective experiences and realities unlike other artforms, something that attracts far broader interest and involvement; and (b) they are the artform that the author knows best.

[2] The question of diverse understandings and associated terminology — which is the focus of this article — was one of multiple strands of enquiry of a large cultural engagement project that explored key processes in the performing arts that inform good practice for community engagement work. Key examples of the other lines of enquiry included the composition of community engagement productions, their purpose, the process behind their development, the measures used to evaluate their success, and an enhanced understanding of how artistic merit and widening participation are balanced.

[3] For practical reasons, only interview accounts of seventeen practitioners are presented.

[4] For Grant Kester's discussion of this concept, see http://www.variant.org.uk/9texts/KesterSupplement.html.

[5] Jonathan Dove is a prominent English composer of opera and choral works among other things.

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