

Parameters for participation

At the heart of participatory practice
are partnerships where community partners
have real agency and share
the decision-making and power.

Starting out with set parameters
already in place might appear
to limit that sharing of power.

We spoke to three practitioners
about their approaches.

Steve, you're the co-artistic director
at Black Country Touring.

How do you set up creative projects
with your participants?

Taking the show we're working on
presently, which is called Eat,
as an example of the way we work
the start of that process
starts with Black Country Touring
training up community researchers
in interviewing techniques
and they went out and they interviewed
their family and friends
about their food experiences,
which we then used as the basis for the show.

You actually make clear parameters
about what you're asking the people

because sometimes you can terrify people
by asking for too much.
But actually by saying to people,
"we expect you to come back with two interviews,
that's your full commitment to the process",
so that each time the offer
is very clear and very tangible
you're not giving people
open-ended commitments
that then just seem more and more
draining and demanding.
And the one thing that is consistently true
is that if you tell people
what you're expecting from them
and make that stretching for them
but achievable, you will get lots out of them.
In fact, they may well be able
to go beyond where you set
their high point, even though
you think that's a stretch for them.
And that then becomes
a really exciting prospect for both of you.
If you actually set the threshold too low,
it becomes a very dull and boring process.
If you don't set any thresholds,
people just feel like they're floundering.
So you need clarity

and consistency about things.

Lyndsey, you've recently worked

on participatory projects

like the Curious project and many more

for Open Museum Glasgow.

Do you think we have to initiate

work with these pre-set boundaries?

Isn't it better to let

the community partners set the agenda?

I think in an ideal world, it's great to be able

to start and design with a group,

but I think that's further down the line.

I think there needs to be

more participation with people

before we can reach that point

and I'm just not sure

that everyone is comfortable with that.

Certainly I would say with the Curious project

that there are people that got involved

that I don't necessarily think

would have been involved

if they had just been told,

"you can do anything you want".

Because right at the beginning

there were a lot of consultation days.

I don't think people could grasp

what it was meant to be.

So very few people were committed at that point,
and the people who were, were people who were
very confident, frequent museum-goers,
which wasn't really what the project was about.

So I think there's a bit of a danger
in privileging people who are comfortable
with working that way.

I try and think of it from my own point of view.

I think, if somebody came
from the sports centre and said to me,
"I want you to design
a sports programme with me".

I would really want some guidelines there.

I'm thinking of sectors where
I'm less comfortable, but I'm trying to think of it
from the point of view of someone
that's maybe not a frequent museum-goer
that we would love to work with us
so that we can build our audiences
and build our understanding
of different groups.

I don't want to underestimate people
but in different situations,
if I was given a blank sheet
and just told to go with it,
I'm not sure I would know where to start.

I think we have a duty

to give people structure within which they
can work with us, I suppose.

Maybe that is skilling people up
in the way we work in museums
so that they've got that kind of information
to be able to challenge us more.

In their social justice programming,

Glasgow Museum of Modern Art

took a different approach,

sitting down with partners

from third-sector organisations,

artists and individuals

at the beginning of a partnership

to develop ideas together.

Victoria, how much control

did partners have in shaping

those three-year programmes of work?

The idea was not to go in saying, right,

this is what we're going to do,

this is the idea that we've got,

this is what we want

to come out with at the end

and it's going to take this set time frame."

Of course, we didn't get all this

right to start with;

we had to do it through trial and error

but we always went in

with our artists, our support workers,
our staff in a way that was entirely open-ended
and the work — I don't mean
the product necessarily,
but I mean the way that that time was spent
and that relationship was developed
and that process negotiated,
was absolutely negotiated.

So for instance, it would just be
about starting conversations
and finding where the areas
of mutual curiosity might develop
and how those participants and people
would shape themselves together
and what they wanted to take further.

It wasn't the usual routine of collection work,
temporary displays, installation,
de-installation, research, all of that.

That you get into a rhythm to,
you can get into a rhythm with
in a gallery or a museum
and that pace of programme
and change and whatnot.

This was something very different.

It meant that we were learning
something new and learning
how to do something new

and not just doing something differently
but doing something
completely different in a sense,
morphing our existing skills
and expertise with completely new ones
from different sectors.