



Community groups in context

Local activities and actions

Edited by Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore



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t: +44 (0)117 954 5940
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Understanding grassroots arts groups and practices in communities

Hilary Ramsden, Jane Milling and Robin Simpson

Chapter aims

This chapter aims to:

- consider the distinctive elements of the amateur and grassroots arts sector;
 - assess current understandings of the impacts and experiences of grassroots arts groups in communities;
 - question the current critical framing of amateur and grassroots arts activities and groups;
 - reflect on the direction of future research in amateur and grassroots arts in communities.
-

The amateur and grassroots arts sector

The most recent assessment of the scale of amateur arts participation in England came in the study *Our creative talent*, commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Arts Council England in 2008. The report judged that:

[T]here are 49,140 groups across the country with a total of 5.9 million members. An additional 3.5 million people volunteer as extras or helpers – a total of 9.4 million people taking part. (Dodd et al, 2008, p 10)¹

Given this scale of informal arts participation and activity at grassroots level within communities, it is surprising how little research there has been on the sector.² Cultural policy, and arts and cultural scholarship,

has been primarily focused on formal, subsidised arts provision, artists and facilitators, while amateur arts groups and arts participation have been little considered in voluntary and community studies literature. The amateur and grassroots arts sector is diverse, rich in passion, knowledge and skills. While there is much actual crossover between amateur and commercial or state-subsidised culture in terms of shared aesthetic pleasure and social benefit, the amateur sector tends to be defined as a distinct sphere on the economic basis of its activities: that makers and participants are not paid for their creative labour. Holden's useful report *The ecology of culture* (2015) is a recent illustration of this distinction. In charting the wider cultural landscape in Britain, Holden identifies three spheres of culture: the publicly funded, commercially funded and 'homemade' cultural activities (2015, p 2).³ We should be cautious of accepting this distinction too readily. While the amateur and grassroots arts sector frequently has a different economic underpinning, this is not an absolute or clear-cut distinction, as we shall see, and the idea of its economic difference by no means fully characterises or describes activity in the sector. Rather the challenge, as Edensor and colleagues have suggested, is to come to 'an understanding of vernacular and everyday landscapes of creativity [that] honours the non-economic values and outcomes produced by alternative, marginal, and quotidian creative practices' (Edensor et al, 2010, p 1). In other words, the challenge is to understand grassroots arts practices, and the sector, in ways that extend usefully beyond a definition or evaluation simply in economic terms.

One of the main ways in which this is occurring, as Robin Simpson, Chief Executive of Voluntary Arts observes, is that amateur arts activity is being recognised as an integral part of civil society that brings benefits to communities and individuals. Research from sociology, cultural studies and social policy has tended to cluster analysis around questions of community formation and social efficacy. In particular, research has asked questions about the development of relationships between people and groups within communities who would not normally, in the round of their everyday lives, meet 'different others', international as well as national, through a shared interest in an arts activity. Thus, the lens through which amateur, informal or 'homemade' arts are viewed has been focused on evaluation and assessment of social impacts and public good, such as health and wellbeing benefits, social cohesion, individual and community empowerment, and increased social capital. We suggest in this chapter that, while these areas of focus are useful for understanding some of the possible relationships between grassroots arts practices and communities, such a framework does not capture

the extent and intricacies of grassroots arts activities and the sector as a whole.

Evidence in this chapter arises from desk-based research that was carried out in partnership with the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham, the University of Exeter and the University of South Wales, and supported by Voluntary Arts, funded under the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities programme.⁴ The study examined literature from 2005 onwards, with some additional reference to earlier key texts, in order to develop a contemporary picture of the state of research into amateur and voluntary arts in the UK. In addition to a wide range of academic literature from different disciplines such as ethnography, music and the visual arts, the study drew on policy documents, voluntary arts literature, and grassroots arts groups' membership publications and newsletters. We were explicitly looking at voluntary and amateur arts, where groups self-organise and are participant initiated and governed, and therefore we did not focus on community arts or art as therapy where groups are initiated or facilitated by professional artists. In this chapter, we set out to examine the way in which the informal arts sector has been defined and valued in these studies and policy documents, and to question some of the ways in which the arts practices within the sector have been framed.

Framing informal arts practices

The broader context for considering amateur and grassroots arts activities might be found in the remarkable recent increase in user-generated content and the evolution of the creative commons in social media and within the creative industries. Parallel to the outpouring of self-created work on social media, British television output has found repeated audience success with revamped entertainment talent contests featuring 'ordinary' people, and in programming competitions that follow individuals and their hobbies in craft arenas such as cooking, baking, sewing and pottery. This impetus has been picked up and extended through nationwide initiatives such as the BBC's Get Creative campaign and the Big Painting Challenge. Individual engagement in informal leisure, hobby and grassroots activities is highly visible in contemporary British popular culture. One of the interesting aspects of this development is the concomitant increase in awareness that cultural engagement is not just about the consumption of formal culture. Calhoun and Sennett in their collection *Practicing culture* (2007) reminded cultural sociology and cultural studies that:

The production and reproduction of culture is not confined to a specialized realm of official cultural artefacts; it is vital to all aspects of social life. [...N]ot only as an abstract system of norms or knowledge, but also as implicit, often embodied understandings of how things work ... both available in part to actors' explicit knowledge and reflection and in part disclosed only in performance. (Calhoun and Sennett, 2007, pp 5, 8)

In taking a broader canvas for thinking about cultural activity, there has been a turn from viewing cultural participation in terms of the consumption of or being an audience for public art work, and a move towards understanding arts participation as creative making by the widest range of individuals, and as an activity in itself a crucial part of all social life.

Participation in the informal, amateur and grassroots arts covers an enormously wide range of arts practices and levels of involvement. The characterisation of the sector as alternative, marginal or quotidian, as Edensor et al (2010) identify, is by no means the whole story. An important element in understanding the sector as a whole must be in judging the extent to which common characterisations hold true. For example, grassroots arts groups are often described as operating at the small or micro-scale, both in terms of group participant numbers and localised contexts. However, our research examined the grey literature from the multiple national organisational bodies that connect groups, and provide a national and international visibility and overview. In post-World War II discourses, amateur arts' perceived distance from formal and subsidised arts agendas and funding has been constructed in contrast to the rising professionalisation of the artist figure or company where expertise and talent are denoted by an emphasis on innovation and aesthetic difficulty (Hewison, 1995; Florida, 2002). Yet recent studies on the precarity of remunerative artistic labour (Taylor and Littleton, 2012), and the impetus for all workers to become 'creative' (Stebbins, 1992, 2004; Sennett, 1998), have blurred boundaries between work and leisure, professional and amateur in the aesthetic realm. Moreover, discussions of the amateur and grassroots arts sector have to grapple with the extensive range of practices and activities included in this sector. Beyond artistic practices that might connect in some way to formal or commercial culture, amateur arts participation has sometimes emerged from traditions of autonomy and resistance to commodified arts production (see the Craftivist Collective website, <https://craftivist-collective.com>; McKay, 1998; Gauntlett, 2011; Greer,

2014). Conversely, many amateur cultural practices have a strong connection with traditional or folk arts, rather than adhering to notions of aesthetic modernity, and some quotidian practices may fall outside classification as art, craft or cultural activity. So, defining the amateur and grassroots arts sector itself has thrown up some interesting critical challenges for researchers.

Beyond amateur-professional binaries

Feist and Hutchison's 1991 study of *Amateur arts in the UK* suggested that amateur and professional art activities are 'intertwined and interdependent', as a 'complex amateur-professional continuum or spectrum of ambition, accomplishment and activity' (p 294). Defining amateur participation is far more complex than the question of who is being paid: some amateurs might be paid for their services, some professionals might donate their services. Smith's (2006) study of amateur symphonic choruses problematised a simple separation of the 'amateur' and 'professional', when amateur choirs perform with professional orchestras, and *are* the equivalent and standard of a professional chorus (2006, p 299). There is evidence of an increasing connection between amateur and professional arts organisations, for example, Open Stages, a collaboration between multiple amateur theatre societies and the Royal Shakespeare Company, or Making Music initiatives that give amateur music organisations the opportunity to perform and record music as part of the BBC Radio 3 Listen Up or Play to the Nation projects. Not only may personnel mix between amateur and subsidised realms, with amateur arts groups employing professionals for specific roles, but they may also inhabit both realms at different stages of their life course, with amateurs as retired professionals themselves.

This model of the close connection between amateur and professional initially might seem to echo Stebbins' notion of 'serious leisure', which he designates as 'the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that is sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there in the acquisition and expression of its special skills and knowledge' (Stebbins, 1992, p 3). The idea of the amateur sector as a training ground for professional achievement is a perspective that has interested government policy, as *Our creative talent* for the DCMS notes: 'Over the last five years, 34% of amateur groups have had members who went on to become professional' (Dodd et al, 2008, p 11). However, as Smith's (2006) study of amateur choirs reveals, contrary to this sense of 'progression' from untrained amateur to highly

qualified professional, many amateur choir members do not aspire to 'professional' status, but are already achieving professional standards and for themselves value performing with professionals in their field.

A recurring trope in discourses around the informal arts is that they should aspire to standards of expertise and achievement set by the professional or publicly subsidised realm. Citing Reid, Jackson-Tretchikoff's (2008) study of amateur operatic societies in Auckland pits an evaluation of an amateur creative practice against the non-professional basis of the organisation: 'Amateurism is a very important element in our artistic heritage ... as long as it is not amateurish' (p 195). Taylor (2008) sees the professional arts sector as 'key to establishing the standards and skills that are transmitted to local neighborhoods through the efforts of amateur and semi-professional artists', although he suggests that no sector is more important than the other, both being 'elements of a more comprehensive ecology that includes both formal and informal acts of activity' (Taylor, 2008, p 11). In these accounts, there appears to be a traditional view of the separation and purpose of these two sectors of arts activities: the professionals set and preserve the standards and quality by which amateurs measure their work. Yet this separation is by no means universal in the informal arts sector. In her study of amateur tap dancers, Lawson (2009) draws on Becker's notion of art worlds and expertise to argue that 'the structural constraint of legitimacy is lessened by the special status accorded to amateurs in a consumerist society. Amateurs, being the aficionados of commercial culture, are leaders' (p 4). Likewise, as Lee (2007) identifies in his study of Chinese street opera in Singapore, amateur *xiqu* groups are bearers of cultural heritage, and 'performing *xiqu* is significant more as a celebration of social status than an achievement of technical expertise' (p 406). In the *xiqu*, scholar-amateur performers are seen as embodying higher levels of 'self-cultivation' and Confucian principles of behaviour appropriate to ideals of Singaporean culture.

Defining the amateur and grassroots arts sector is a complex undertaking but an increasingly important one, with recent cultural and social policy turning its attention to the role that participation in informal arts might make both to British cultural ecology and to broader social participation. Informal arts participation in 'homemade' culture has a key role to play in the democratisation of cultural life for Holden:

From the historic objects and activities of folk art, through to the post-modern punk garage band and the YouTube upload. Here, the definition of what counts as culture is

much broader; it is defined by an informal self-selecting peer group, and the barriers to entry are much lower. (Holden, 2008, p 11)

For Hewison, grassroots culture has an 'essentially spontaneous and democratic nature', although he goes on to suggest that much of this grassroots cultural production 'will be trivial and self-referential' (Hewison, 2014, p 221).⁵ There remains a gently pejorative romanticism lurking in Hewison's and Holden's characterisation of 'homemade' culture, which appears as less significant than subsidised and professional culture, but which is activated on behalf of funded culture as part of 'building the holistic case for arts and culture', as Chair of Arts Council England, Peter Bazalgette, suggested in his annual report *The value of arts and culture to people and society* (ACE, 2014, p 7). It is difficult to sustain a framework of values that can encompass both the justification of public subsidy for artistic excellence policed by cultural elites, and the participatory enthusiasm of a Morris side, amateur painting group or sewing bee. Indeed, Hewison's recent study of *Cultural capital* (2014) argues that the 'cultural capitalism' of recent discourses of the creative industries has done little to alter the restricted gatekeeper of official culture. The informal arts sector has tended to be seen within cultural policy as a training ground for professional practice, as audience building for publicly subsidised cultural provision, or as an echo of developments in publicly subsidised arts practice that has turned to interactional or participatory processes as examined by artist Hutchinson (2010) or curator Bourriaud (1998) and academics such as Bishop (2012) and Kester (2004; 2011). Those few social and cultural policy studies that have engaged with the informal arts sector and that have begun to examine participatory arts practices, have tended to use discourses of evaluation that consider arts practices in terms of their social impacts and benefits. This approach is not without its difficulties, as we will examine in some detail.

Social impacts and benefits: a dominant discourse

A central discourse in scholarly studies of amateur arts practices is the argument that participating in the arts leads to wider individual and social benefits and impacts. This chimes with the evolution, in cultural policy circles, of a defence of ongoing public subsidy for the arts because of the arts' instrumental benefits. Belfiore and others have argued that there are significant problems with valuing artistic activity, usually facilitated by a professional artist, predominantly as a

means of developing individual wellbeing or social cohesion (Belfiore, 2012). Beyond individual benefits, participatory arts projects led by professional artists have been framed as cultural interventions key to successful neighbourhood regeneration. Given that arts *participation* is central to these understandings of publicly funded community arts or professionally led projects, it is clear to see that similar claims might effectively be made for projects guided and initiated by amateur arts groups (Howard-Spink, 2004; Gray et al, 2010). Grassroots arts-led regeneration has been less studied, but it draws on a similar range of precepts (Wohlheim, 1998; Taylor, 2008; Dunin, 2009). Many of the studies examined followed the experience of Wali and colleagues' research, *Informal arts: Finding cohesion, capacity and other cultural benefits in unexpected places* (2002), which considered the informal arts a key part of the arts continuum and found evidence that they were 'an important reservoir of social capital, significant for life-long-learning, building civic engagement and strengthening communities' (p ix). Most recent scholarly studies of informal and grassroots arts groups examine or celebrate amateur cultural participation as contributing to community development, social cohesion and developing a sense of social belonging, whether the aim is to reinforce the norms of the given social context or to offer an alternative or radical intervention for community development (ACE, 2007; Meade and Shaw, 2007; Hui and Stickley, 2009; Burt and Atkinson, 2011).

The concentration on public good, impacts and benefits in the discourses used about informal arts groups draws on Bourdieu's framing of arts participation as producing, and produced by, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's construction – that individuals benefit socially from participating in the cultural field, acquiring social capital from demonstrations of their cultural taste – has furthered an argument that an individual might alter their relationship within a social hierarchy by leveraging their acquisition of embodied cultural capital:

The work of acquisition is work on oneself (self-improvement), an effort that presupposes a personal cost, an investment, above all of time, but also of that socially constituted form of libido, *libido sciendi*, with all the privation, renunciation, and sacrifice that it may entail... The specifically symbolic logic of distinction additionally secures material and symbolic profits for possessors of a large cultural capital. (Bourdieu, 1986, pp 243, 244)

In other words, for Bourdieu, cultural participation has an explicit utilitarian value for an individual. Putnam's interpretation of this model in *Bowling alone* (2000) suggested a decline in American associational life. He saw a concomitant reduction in Americans' participation in shared creative activities bringing about a decline in their bridging social capital, the ability of individuals to reach out to different others, and an increase in self-same, bonding social capital. Sennett's recent work, particularly *The craftsman* (2008) and *Together* (2012), has emphasised that the value and significance of culture for participants lies not in the consuming of culture but its making, doing and practising (Sennett, 2008). Sennett argues that craftsmanship offers bridging social capital, and, in *Together*, he suggests that individuals rehearse cooperation in the social and political realm in part through participating in shared creative activities; that is, creative participation is training in bridging social capital that can prepare us to embrace cooperation with different others. In part, this debate around questions of social and cultural participation and practice has drawn sociology and humanities scholars' attention back to informal, vernacular and grassroots arts participation. This is because the social capital argument has become a dominant discourse. The sense that arts intervention might facilitate enhanced social networks and enhanced social cohesion has percolated down to the previously unrecognised and unnoticed arenas of informal and grassroots arts groups.

Indeed, amateur participants in many of the studies of amateur arts practices report that they commit considerable time and energy to their activities and from which they derive 'durable benefits' such as 'self-esteem ... feelings of accomplishment ... social interaction and belongingness' (Smith, 2006, p 295). In his study of the anime music video scene, Ito (2010) examines the intricacies and nuances of grassroots arts activity:

Non-commercial, amateur, and peer-based production scenes thrive on models of open participation and access, but processes for differentiating participation, recognizing leadership, and developing status and reputation are also central to the scene.... The value people get out of participation is a complex alchemy of community participation, recognition, and the pleasures of creation and connoisseurship. (Ito, 2010, p 6)

Much of the research into grassroots arts activities in communities examined by our review followed this agenda and charted evidence

for individual wellbeing, public good and social benefit arising from participation in informal arts activities.

Understanding informal arts groups in communities

Perhaps the clearest and most significant example of the utilitarian discourse of social benefit from arts activities comes through the evolution of the notion of 'impact'. Measuring social impact has become not just part of an agenda, but the agenda itself. Not only do most scholarly studies of amateur arts participation chart the questions of impact and social outcomes, but membership organisations in the amateur arts are also frequently turning to this language in articulating their aims. Discussions of the social impacts of arts and cultural participation usefully draw on Guetzkow's work (2002) on the mechanisms of arts impact, which distinguishes between impacts on the individual and those on the community. Guetzkow highlights the shortcomings of arts impact studies that make generalisations about impact on the overall population from small sample studies. The recurring topics of interest in the scholarly and grey literature we reviewed were the impacts and outcomes from informal arts participation that result in enhancements for individual wellbeing, the evolution of beneficial social networks and the possibilities for enhancing social cohesion.

Individual wellbeing

Amateur and grassroots arts are seen as having particularly powerful impact capabilities in the areas of health and wellbeing, exploring a multitude of elements from an individual's self-confidence and self-esteem to the quality of life in a particular neighbourhood or geographical community (Hui and Stickley, 2009; Burt and Atkinson, 2011). The articulation of these wellbeing benefits is drawn from studies of professional artists' interventions. The Arts Council England report, *The arts, health and wellbeing*, recognised 'that people's health and wellbeing is influenced by a range of interconnecting factors' (ACE, 2007, p 4) and that art interventions 'produce, at their best, startling artistic, personal and social outcomes' (p 7). In other words physical, mental and social wellbeing are interlinked and art can work on all these levels. In the Arts Council England report, it is professional artists who create and facilitate the projects with participants as 'recipients'. Amateur arts activities, on the other hand, have the agency of the process firmly in the minds and bodies of the participants themselves. In

a study of Australian amateur arts groups, Bendle and Patterson (2009) found that volunteering and leisure activities have positive effects on 'people's physical and mental vitality' (p 273). A study by Burt and Atkinson (2011) argued that 'creative craft hobbies such as quilting can be a meaningful vehicle for enhancing wellbeing' (p 54) particularly for older people, with the activity helping their 'cognitive, creative and emotional well-being' (p 58). The authors went further to argue that:

Whether it is growing vegetables, knitting a jumper or discovering a new scientific formula creativity may be fundamental for wellbeing and has received little attention so far within Public Health. Exploring creativity and what people do in their everyday lives, which they deem creative, may be an important avenue for wellbeing promoters. Additionally, more consideration needs to be given to all hobbies, from reading to train-spotting, and their potential for enhancing wellbeing. (Burt and Atkinson, 2011, p 59)

Drawing on findings from professionally facilitated arts intervention, the language of wellbeing outcomes from creative participation has been extended into the amateur and informal arts fields. An increasing number of studies are using these indicators to assess ways in which hobbies such as knitting or vegetable growing produce enhanced physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing for a wide range of participants of different ages and abilities.

Studies over the past 10 years show increasing evidence testifying to the positive effects of participation in arts activities on physical health and wellbeing. A study of group singing and performance on two groups of people – one choir created for homeless men, the other for middle-class singers – showed singing had a positive physiological effect on levels of hormones that facilitate emotional balance (Bailey and Davidson, 2005, p 271). Hui and Stickley's report, *Guidelines to Art* (2009), found improvements in Alzheimer's patients' memory and independence over a number of painting sessions. There are also arts projects, such as the Tremble Clefs, an American amateur music group for Parkinson's disease sufferers, that have claimed success in countering some of the physical effects of illness (<http://endo-education.com/tremble-clefs>). Participants in Burt and Atkinson's (2011) UK study observe that quilting 'helped to maintain cognitive abilities', which is borne out by empirical research (Geda et al, 2010) showing that 'participating in hobbies ... reduced the rate of cognitive decline in older individuals' (Burt and Atkinson, 2011, p 59). Amateur participants

in a number of membership journals make the connection between physical and mental health and wellbeing, and one article focuses on the organisation Diabetes UK, which suggests that participation in dance can help prevent and educate people about diabetes (James, 2010, p 29). The editorial in *Highnotes* makes quite specific connections between improvement of the capacity of breath and lungs and wind and brass instrument playing (Cardy, 2011, p 3). Many of these studies also note that improved physical wellbeing not only benefits the individual but also arguably the rest of the community through a reduction in demand on health services.

Overall, the literature claims that participation in informal arts activities has demonstrable positive benefits for individuals in terms of their mental, emotional and social wellbeing. Unsurprisingly, these findings are supported and mirrored by the extensive user art movement, which uses art in therapeutic contexts. Bailey and Davidson (2005) found that, for the homeless men in their study group, singing 'seemed to facilitate emotional balance' (p 277). Participants overall found their self-confidence and self-esteem improved. They were able to make 'positive changes in their lives' as a result of gaining confidence from participating in the choir. Similarly, the lifestyle of ageing homeless men who formed a Musubi storytelling troupe in Osaka 'changed dramatically' (Nakagawa, 2010, p 21) through their performances two to three times per month and the media coverage they received as a result of their work. Nakagawa (2010) maintains they are now 'certain of their *raison d'être* and now possess a connection to society' (p 21). Hui and Stickley's (2009) study shows that working with the Guidelines to Art scheme created a sense of achievement and a 'huge boost to ... self esteem and confidence' (p 14). The work reinforced participants' self-worth and they appeared to 'have the confidence to carry on trying more things at home' (p 14). One of the nurse managers involved in the scheme suggested that "creativity creates confidence and with confidence comes choice" (p 14). Participants in Burt and Atkinson's (2011) study felt that 'finishing a quilt and receiving praise from others boosted confidence' (p 5). One participant observed that she felt she was 'still valuable' and that the activity of quilting "brought back confidence ... because you begin to learn new skills ... you begin to become a person rather than a machine" (p 3). Another participant felt that receiving affirmation from others was important: "to get appreciation back is good" (p 4). Individuals in Smith's study (2006) of symphonic choirs listed 'self esteem ... feelings of accomplishment' among the 'durable benefits' of participation (p 295). These individual mental and emotional benefits and outcomes were also linked to social

interaction and were formed in part through the participation in more densely configured social networks.

Relationships and social networks

Whether it is joining a dance class, a knitting group or being part of an anime music video network, the social aspect of participation figures prominently in individuals' reasons for taking up an arts activity. Lawson's study (2009) found that 'seeking a sense of community' was one of six motivations for taking up a dance class. Additionally she observed that the 'affectual element' of the activity 'develops ties amongst participants and serves social ends' (2009, p 14). Reynolds (2010) also identifies staying connected and involved as being an important motive for older women for making art. For the homeless men in Nakagawa's study (2010), their choir provided a kind of social support system. An anime music video network provides a similar social connection, one participant referring to it as a "community type effort, village minded" (Ito, 2010, p 6). A member of the Knitting and Crocheting Guild remarked that in addition to the inspiration and learning that she had received, the friendships emerging from belonging to a 'cafe knitting group' provided a 'glue' to keep the group going (O'Connell Edwards, 2007, p 7). Participants learning Celtic traditional music found that in teaching others who were less proficient players, they had to develop their people skills to communicate in constructive ways (Waldron and Veblen, 2009, p 63). Likewise, Bailey and Davidson found that performing in a choir enabled homeless men 'to connect to the larger society from which they have been estranged' (2005, p 277). Successful communication through an arts activity that may not be based on verbal or oral skills may increase an individual's confidence to subsequently communicate through those skills.

The social networks of grassroots arts organisations extend widely. In addition to the local networking opportunities offered by arts activities, there are reasonably extensive regional and national networks representing all the types of activity examined in our initial study. Newsletters and magazines issued by amateur arts groups and societies have substantial sections dedicated to lists of regional and local groups, reports from regional groups, meetings and events organised in the regions (*Slipknot*, 2007, pp 59-63; O'Neill, 2008, pp 31-5; Smith, 2008, pp 81-6;). Beyond these are the multiple and complex web-based networks that use fora such as chat rooms, etc., in addition to an increasing variety of social media that create and proliferate networks and structures for communication and exchange.

Social cohesion and place identity

Much of the literature makes an argument that participation in arts activities can lead to improved communication and social skills. A desire to engage members of an older generation in conversations about their Harlem neighbourhood enabled two young African American adults to develop their communication and social skills through an arts activity that included photography, poetry and painting (Kinloch, 2007). The young adults in Kinloch's (2007) study were developing a sense of community and cohesion through a collective process of conversation with older residents and information gathering, creating stories, poetry, documentaries and exhibitions. Kinloch suggests that these conversations resulted in a learning that 'became reciprocal, active, and transformational for both the adults and the youngsters', enriching and affirming a sense of identity and belonging in those Harlem neighbourhoods: 'Youth activism was met with adult learning' (p 46).

Residents of Ravensthorpe, Western Australia (Mayes, 2010) engaged in the production of local postcards that they sold to tourists. What began with residents' desire to put their community on the map has developed over a period of 20 years into a local small arts industry that offers individual and local views of Ravensthorpe distinct from the images on commercial postcards. In addition to creating revenues for themselves and the community, the 'lay' or amateur postcard production has contributed to the creation of a local rural place identity for residents and tourists alike. Such activities and processes can lead to improved community image and identity, with amateur creativity taking a place of increased visibility within a town. Taylor (2008) suggests that the correlation between arts activity and neighbourhood stability is evidence of magnetisation – 'an increase in the desirability, commitment, social integration, and quality of life in a community area' (p 1). He maintains that arts have the ability to create enjoyable public spaces, to create shared experience, and to encourage intergenerational activity. Further, amateur, informal arts contribute to this as well. It may be through such formal and informal networking and the development of a located identity for participants that a strong sense of independence and desire for self-governance emerges. The scholarly literature and policy documentation of informal arts groups' activities builds a picture of the social connectivity and networks that develop for participants and for the wider community, generating a sense of cohesion and an enhanced sense of place.

Conclusion

Much of the policy and scholarly literature on the informal arts sector uses an impact or benefit framework, and identifies some of the valuable and valued elements of participation in informal arts groups. However, this provides a rather limited focus on those groups, and some recent literature is seeking to explore how we might reframe our perspectives on the grassroots arts activities. Matarasso's Regular Marvels project centres on informal arts in which, following his long resistance to instrumentalist approaches to cultural development, he is looking for new modes of perceiving and valuing informal cultural activities. In his study of a West Bromwich Operatic Society production, Matarasso states:

The arts are not divided into two separate and antagonistic worlds: the amateurs and the professionals. It is better understood as a complex ecosystem in which people may play different roles at different times or in different aspects of their careers. (Matarasso, 2012, p 76)

Foreshadowing Holden, he argues that the conception of a cultural ecology has been helpful in transposing a focus from official culture and economic assessments of value. In drawing attention to the prevailing force of discourses of instrumentalism or economic benefit, Matarasso returns us to the recognition of the value of amateur arts by participants themselves:

Its value comes from doing, from understanding something from the inside, experientially, and its greatest prize is not applause, joyous as that is, but nurturing skill, ability and understanding in community. (Matarasso, 2012, p 81)

Recent scholarship focuses on those unique elements of informal arts activities – as distinct from sports, charity or environmental volunteering – creative, imaginative and improvisatory *experience* and creative skills development. As Ito suggests, amateur arts participation offers 'a complex alchemy of community participation, recognition, and the pleasures of creation and connoisseurship' (Ito, 2010, p 14). Although it is rarely the focus of scholarly studies, the grey literature from membership groups and amateur art organisations reveals that many participants take part in arts activities for the art itself. Rather than simple assertions of the inherent aesthetic value of informal

art forms or products, the aesthetic remains a key, under-examined, element of an agreed social imaginary. For example, art work renders a community more aesthetically pleasing, through public artwork, murals and mosaics, and beautified community gathering places; it promotes and enhances an individual's and community's sense of 'beauty' and/or aesthetics; it inspires and develops individual and community openness to the usefulness of art within everyday life; it encourages more people to become involved in arts activities that exist within a community. As Ruiz (2004) eloquently suggests, further research on the 'intrinsic nature of art and its capacity to provide meaning to different individuals and different cultures' might enable us to better understand why participating in amateur and informal arts is important for individuals and communities. Extending beyond the predominant trend in scholarship that focuses on social impacts and that sets up firm distinctions between the commercial or subsidised arts sector, and the amateur, informal arts sector, further research is needed into the areas of experience, pleasure and aesthetics. Such investigations will permit a re-evaluation of the diversity of contemporary arts practices experienced in the UK, and integrate our understanding of the informal, amateur arts sector within Hewison's call for 'a more generous and open conception of culture ... [and] a reassertion of the value of the public realm' (Hewison, 2014, p 225).

Key learning

- The amateur and informal arts sector has tended to be characterised by its economic difference from the professional or subsidised art worlds.
- Hierarchical structures of cultural value continue to evolve a pejorative view of the informal arts sector.
- Much of the current discourse around the amateur arts sector is characterised by a focus on social benefits and impacts drawn from a social capital model.
- This focus overrides other, more diverse, avenues that might be explored around aesthetic participation itself: the idea of experience and questions of aesthetics.

Reflective exercises

- What are the distinctive features of informal arts activities in communities, as opposed to professionally facilitated arts projects?
 - What does participation in informal arts activities offer that is not available through other forms of participation in voluntary or charity organisations?
 - How can, or should, the value of the voluntary arts be measured?
-

Notes

¹ These figures apply to England, not the UK as a whole, thus the estimation of the scale of grassroots arts participation is larger again.

² There have been a number of commissioned surveys of amateur arts participation and policy documents surrounding the sector, for example Feist and Hutchison's (1991) *Amateur arts in the UK* for the Policy Studies Institute, Gieseckam's (2000) report for the Scottish Arts Council, *Amateur and community theatre in Scotland*, and Lowe and Simpson's (2010) *Achieving great art for everyone: Voluntary Arts England response to achieving great art for everyone*.

³ There may be a suggestion of the relative significance attributed to the sector reflected in the number of interviewees in this report: only three interviewees from the 'homemade' sector compared with 22 from the public or public-commercial sector, and 15 from the commercial or public-commercial sector.

⁴ Jenny Phillimore, Hamish Fyfe, Angus McCabe, Jane Milling, Hilary Ramsden and Robin Simpson, *The Role of Grassroots Arts Activities in Communities: A Scoping Study* (AHRC grant AH/1507590/1), see Ramsden et al, *The role of grassroots arts activity*, TSRC Working Paper 68, (Dec 2011).

⁵ This implicit value judgment chimes with Holden's *Democratic culture* report that still determines that 'popular literature, television and crossovers on the whole produce rubbish (they do, although they occasionally produce brilliance)' (2008, p 23).

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Angus McCabe is a Senior Research Fellow at the Third Sector Research Centre at the University of Birmingham. He has a background in community development practice in urban and rural settings in the UK.


Jenny Phillimore is Director of the Institute for Research into Superdiversity. During her five years at the Third Sector Research Centre her interests included small scale community action, refugee and migrant communities and community engagement.


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