



CHAPTER 5

Failing at the Frontline

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we considered how a legitimacy crisis in the public sector has created a participatory turn in policymaking. This has been broadly based around a cultural rights definition of participation which champions universal access to public services. There has also been a growing discourse around participation in decisions about the type of cultural services provided at a local level, which relates to broader trends within public policy. Despite this policy interest, as we showed in Chap. 2, successive initiatives have failed to address inequalities and inequities in both how funding is distributed within the cultural sector and who participates in activities subsidised by the state.

While Chap. 4 explored these failures from the perspective of those employed as policymakers involved in cultural sector, we argued in Chap. 2 that a fuller understanding of how policy operates must not only consider a top-level imposition on delivery. To do so gives too little recognition to the role that service providers, and, in the case of culture, professional cultural practitioners, play not only in delivering cultural policies but also in shaping them. We argued that policy is informed by those most able to exert power within the cultural sector, including the organisations funded by the state. As one practitioner said, “it’s like the dictum,

that if you owe the bank £100, the bank owns you. If you owe the bank £100 million, you own the bank, right? In the same in the arts world, there's a lot of people who own [policy]".

In this chapter, we examine the meanings given to cultural participation by those working at the frontlines of delivery within the cultural sector (who we will collectively refer to as practitioners) as well as their attitudes regarding failure. We do this in order to consider how the narratives they tell about their work inform or challenge both their own practices and the policies that seek to foster a more equitable cultural sector.

As in the previous chapter, we invited people to participate in workshops and interviews to self-define as practitioners, but we also asked them to state whether they were working in cultural organisations or as freelance artists. The aim of this was to examine whether attitudes differed within and outside of an organisational context. As with the policymakers in the previous chapter, we asked all those involved to define participation, locate why they believe it is important in the cultural sector, and then explore their attitudes to success and failure in relation to cultural participation projects and policies. Through these interviews, as well as through an anonymous survey, we also asked practitioners to share stories of failure and explore the extent to which such stories are not only privately acknowledged but also openly shared.

Among our sample, the theatre company Slung Low (www.slunglow.org) was repeatedly cited as an example of success in participatory arts. They were therefore selected as an illustrative example of professional practice through which we could explore the extent to which failure and success coexist, and we interviewed staff and participants involved in the company's work. These included participants in *Flood*, a large, site-specific participatory performance piece commissioned for Hull City of Culture (Culture, 2018), located about an hour from the company base. We also interviewed those who participated in community workshops at their base in Leeds. In addition, we undertook "deep hanging out" (Walmsley, 2018) at several community and cultural events and interviewed a number of people involved in the wider Hull 2017 programme to obtain external views on Slung Low's practice.

This chapter follows the same structure as Chap. 4. It begins by explaining the meanings of participation for practitioners and then considers how

these relate to the definitions used by policymakers in the previous chapter. It then explores the attitudes towards failure among practitioners before finally observing where they locate the failures of cultural participation. As in the previous chapter, key points are illustrated with reference to the example of practice, in this case *Slung Low*. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes come from the practitioners in our sample.

MEANINGS OF PARTICIPATION

While the discussion in the previous chapter concerning participation policy drew largely on definitions from public policy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the discussion within practice also draws from art theory and aesthetics. This means that although some practitioners supported policymakers who talked about cultural participation as an action or goal in which the whole cultural sector is engaged, others were more interested to talk about participatory art as a creative process. Those who defined themselves as participatory artists, as well as some of those who worked for participatory arts organisations (rather than arts organisations with a participation department), tended to support the view that participation is an art form in its own right, delivered by professional participatory artists. Many, however, also supported the concept from relational aesthetics that all art is participatory as it only exists when an audience engages with it (Bourriaud et al., 2002).

We argue, however, that if any act of engagement is participation, the word takes on a symbolic function, providing a flexible ambiguity which allows much of the cultural sector to rebrand their normal practices as participatory without challenging the structural inequalities acknowledged by policymakers. As a result, while most practitioners felt participation was a useful umbrella term, some reject the word in favour of what they see as more specific terms such as socially engaged practice, public art, and community arts. Broadly, the practitioners in our sample adopted one of three positions regarding participatory practice described in our illustrative example of *Slung Low* and discussed below: participants as the material of the artwork, as audiences for an artwork, or as producers of their own culture.

Forms of Participation

Slung Low are a professional theatre company funded by Arts Council England (ACE) to create participatory performance work. They also receive funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to provide a community resource and cultural skills programme in the local community that surrounds their base at the Holbeck, Leeds.

Since 2000, they have created “epic productions in non-theatre spaces, often with large community performance companies at their heart” (<https://www.slunglow.org/slung-low/>). In 2020, they moved into the Holbeck, which they claim is the oldest working men’s club in Britain and which they run as a community asset with a bar, food bank and room hire. They also run workshops as well as provide a theatre production space and performance venue for touring theatre companies.

Their activities therefore straddle the three different forms of participation most discussed by practitioners in our sample: engaging participants as the material of the artwork in their own theatre productions; increasing audiences for the arts through the programme of visiting artists they show in their venue; and providing a cultural resource for the community’s own activities. For the staff at Slung Low, it was argued that “cultural participation is but one of the agendas we’re fighting” to obtain funding. They believe that their core purpose, as a professional theatre company, is to make great art, albeit by challenging the definitions of what great art looks like. As a result, there was some resentment from the Artistic Director that the company weren’t recognised as much for their artistic successes as for their “good works” in participation. He stated that it hurt, for example, when another cultural professional said to him that “you work in the bits of industry no one cares about mate”.

The variety of approaches Slung Low employ may therefore be argued to either demonstrate the success that might be achieved by engaging with participation in all its forms or the failures inherent in having to constantly shift artistic and/or business models to obtain funding or recognition from organisations with other agendas, which many of our sample acknowledge is prevalent in the arts.

The idea of participation that “involves people as the medium or material” for an artwork was employed by many artists in our sample. From this perspective, the participant contributes to the creation of a work of art,

but the artists retain their autonomy and authorship of the work. Many of the artists we spoke to claimed this was necessary in order for them to take an “agonistic” approach (Miller, 2016) to challenging social norms, rather than being a tool of social policy. The participatory process for some artists was therefore more important than the outcome of increasing participation in culture, which, as we saw in Chap. 4, was the aim for policymakers. For other artists, however, the focus on process in participatory art was seen to undermine the quality of the artistic product. Some artists and most representatives from arts organisations shared the perspective that “too many participatory projects do not have a high-quality outcome [...] without powerful art, projects may disappoint participants”.

The critique about a perceived lack of quality within participatory arts has come from within the art world and is based on aesthetic judgements that place more importance on product than process (Bishop, 2012). As a result, product-based participatory work, particularly of the kind that involves large numbers of volunteers like Slung Low’s site-specific work, has become increasingly popular with policymakers as well as established cultural institutions and city event programmes. An example was used to introduce Arts Council England’s ten-year strategy, where Jeremy Deller’s “We’re Here Because We’re Here” was described as “crowds of volunteers [...] standing as one of the tremendous achievements supported by the Arts Council’s last 10-year Strategy, under which we were able to invest in two exceptional artists to create a work of scale and ambition” (Arts Council England, 2020).

Many of the representatives from organisations in our sample claimed that such work met two criteria of participation: involving the participants as the material of the artwork and increasing audiences for the arts. This approach has since been criticised by art theorists and practitioners alike for being little more than hollow spectacle (Lawrence et al., 2020) and reducing participants to the role of unpaid labour for the artist’s vision (Miller, 2016). Among our sample, some argued that in such work “participants are used as commodities” or that the artists “never [think] how do we support these people/projects but [rather] how do these people support our project”. It was further argued by one practitioner that there is little evidence to suggest that such work attracts new audiences and that it may in fact perpetuate inequality by “allowing privileged access to the elite space of a professional production” for those taking part. The reason “the art of spectacle” has become so popular with practitioners and policymakers may not be because it addresses inequality, but instead because it legitimises professional practice.

Participation as Spectacle

Slung Low's production *Flood* (<https://www.slunglow.org/flood/>) was a large-scale, site-specific performance commissioned as part of Hull City of Culture which involved hundreds of participants in its staging and as audience members. The company acknowledge that the script writer determined the narrative, and the director instructed the participants on what to do. As a result, a staff member said that "the failure [was in not giving participants] any ownership over the creative process". They argued, however, that as a professional theatre company first and foremost, its success was providing space for "the exceptionality of the artist".

Many of our wider sample also cited *Flood* as a successful participation project, but when asked about the nature of this success many acknowledged that they had not been involved in the process or seen the finished product. "They seem successful" and "I've heard good stories about them" were recurring responses. This suggests that, for these individuals, it was the profile of the work and the company that marked it out as a success rather than anything about either the process or the product.

Among those we spoke to who had seen or been involved in *Flood*, the reception was mixed. While one reviewer said "there aren't enough superlatives" to describe their work, one practitioner in our sample described it as "boring [...] pretentious [...] cliché". One of the participants who took part in *Flood* also questioned whether "anybody watching it [...] would have a clue what was going on [...] even though I was in it I was thinking I'm not following this". This negative response, however, did not necessarily undermine the success of the project in their eyes. The reception of the finished work is "a quality issue, not so much a participation issue", and as such one participant challenged what they saw as the cultural sector's notion of quality, feeling that "the failure is that people in the professional world [...] didn't value [the participation] enough".

But, what all these different perspectives fail to consider is who gets to participate in their creative works, which is central to the policy aim of increasing equity in the cultural sector. The company acknowledge that the opportunity to take part was only offered to

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those who were already part of the volunteer programme of Hull 2017, which one participant described as “retired, rich guys who have made it in life”. Therefore, while the experience might be deemed a success for those who took part, it cannot be seen as contributing to the policy goal of increasing equity.

This demonstrates that success and failure can occur simultaneously across different facets of a policy or project. Thus, for example, the relative success or failure in terms of process, practice, and profile of the work must be considered separately from the purpose or level of participation that has occurred.

Many of those who worked for cultural organisations did say that, like the policymakers in the previous chapter, the purpose of participation was, for them, to combat social and cultural inequities by diversifying audiences. One artist even suggested that “the definition of participation [...] is working with people who are not [like you] [...]; that’s almost the methodology of participation”. Despite this view, there was little consideration among any of our sample of how practitioners attracted diverse participants. There was also little support for measuring success or failure in relation to who participates, rather than what they participate in. Most of our practitioners opposed definitions of participation focused on “the numbers game” of how many and how diverse participants are and instead defined it in relation to the benefits for individuals who had taken part, using words such as “empowerment”, “transformation”, “confidence”, and “well-being”.

We argue that the use of such words describes individualised benefits which support the neoliberal personalisation of success or blame (McGuigan, 2014), whereby lack of power, confidence, and well-being are the result of personal choices about what to participate in rather than the result of inequitable structures and the distribution of resources. This evokes a hierarchical approach to participation in which the artist has the skill and capacity, while the participant must be “fixed” or granted agency in some way. This in turn perpetuates the idea that professionally mediated cultural activities are of greater value than other forms of cultural participation. As one practitioner acknowledged, “to empower and to enable is

really assuming that [participants] don't have that power or they don't have the ability". For one practitioner, defining participation as something "coming out of artists' practice is at the route of the historic failure of cultural participation".

Particularly for those who located their practice in relation to the community arts tradition, participation was not defined only in relation to professional practice, but as a collaborative process in which the participant co-authors the work (Matarasso, 2019). This often, but not always, relates to the theories of participatory decision making discussed in Chap. 4. From this perspective, the purpose of participation becomes about hearing the voices of communities with different cultural traditions, not only to value their everyday cultural participation but also to provide resources for participants to produce their own culture.

Valuing Everyday Cultural Participation

The purpose of the work Slung Low do at the Holbeck was said to recognise the value of everyday participation. The ethos and atmosphere of the place was described as somewhere you can "come in, get a burger [...] come and see [what's going on]". As a result, people use the space as a bar without having to engage in the arts, they come to see shows without having to be a participant in the artwork, and they attend workshops on topics ranging "from stargazing to south Indian cooking, from carpentry to singing in a choir" (<https://www.slunglow.org/slung-low/>) according to their own personal interests. This approach defines participation as an act based on the participant finding "resonance" (Burns, 2007) or an interest in participating, rather than the policy approach which persuades people to participate in activities that policymakers have deemed to be of value for them.

The staff members we spoke to, however, said that they did not define their approach in line with theories of participatory decision making, which we suggested in Chap. 4 are being adopted in public policy to allow for a broader understanding of participant needs. One member of staff questioned the idea that decisions can be reached by rational consent, pointing to the complexity of managing different local interests when the company are located "within six or seven communities [of interest] some of which are racist, some of which are homophobic, some of which are all sorts of unpleasant

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things—and all of whom have been ignored and all of whom have been delegitimised [...which means] sometimes in order to stand here and make sure everybody gets what they want and nobody is without you have to be in meetings that are really unpleasant”.

The company therefore describe their approach as providing a resource to their geographic community based on “a policy of saying yes you get what you want [but] you don’t get to decide what other people don’t get”. This relates to the idea of a “do-ocracy” (as opposed to democracy) (Verhoeven et al., 2014) where participation is defined by active citizens “doing” rather than through a deliberative process of discussion, which underpins participatory decision-making processes (Newman et al., 2004). Ostensibly, this means that Slung Low allow participants to use the building for whatever they want so long as they do not make others feel excluded. But, as the staff we spoke to acknowledge, such an approach risks legitimising some voices over others, either by only engaging those who have the loudest voices or share the interests and values of those organising the project. Such processes may therefore replicate inequality in who accesses and make use of the resources as easily as eradicate it. This raises questions about how the participants, rather than participation, are defined, which will be explored in more detail in Chap. 6.

While there were differences of opinion among our sample about which definition of participation exerts the largest influence on policy and practice, there was a consensus that the policy context of the past ten years has given participatory work an increased profile in the cultural sector, higher than it has had for several decades. It was said it has even become the “flavour of the month” in certain areas, though this was not always seen as being good for practice. Both artists and those working for arts organisations acknowledged that the focus on participation meant that many practitioners working in this area now saw it as “what you’re doing until you get a proper job”. Coupled with the precarity of being an artist, this meant many felt that a lot of artists and organisations are “prepared to call [their work] anything to get funding”, thus claiming themselves to be participatory artists or undertaking participatory work without having an

understanding of participation as a methodology or specific form of creative practice. Perhaps unsurprisingly, among those who self-defined an interest in participation, none of our sample recognised themselves in this description, but many expressed strong antipathy towards those cultural practitioners who they felt didn't "give a flying fuck about participation". In particular, cultural organisations with participation departments were accused of being "[...] in direct competition for resources with smaller grass roots community arts organisations [...despite] the work that the community engagement departments do usually having no impact on the main programmes of the large art organisations, they just use it as a tick box exercise".

This distrust, bordering on antagonism, between practitioners working in different contexts is neither conducive to acknowledging failure nor to sharing learning across the sector in a manner that will engender change. The following section therefore explores the attitudes to failure expressed by practitioners before considering where they see it occurring within the cultural sector.

ATTITUDES TO FAILURE

While policymakers, as we discussed in Chap. 4, claimed that they were personally comfortable talking about failure but were constrained by the context in which they work, when we asked practitioners to consider both the meaning of failure and their attitudes towards it, their initial reactions were largely defensive. Failure was seen in pejorative terms, linked to ideas of judgement and punishment rather than learning and improvement. As a result, many felt that discussing or exploring the concept of failure made them experience discomfort "like trauma". Some thought that this was particularly the case for freelance artists, who occupy the most vulnerable or precarious positions in the sector. Others, however, felt that funded organisations stood to lose the most from acknowledging failure in terms of "reputational damage" that risked "toppling the whole a deck of cards" on which the cultural sector was based.

While the literature discussed in Chap. 3 suggests that a resistance to talking about failure is prevalent across public policy, it was seen by some of our sample as particularly acute among cultural practitioners who "can get carried away with their own narrative of success, which is actually a narrative they have manufactured themselves". This was seen by some to discourage innovation and create a "dangerous delusion" that ultimately

leads to overstating the impact and importance of the arts. For others, however, this defensiveness was described as “basic psychology in that we want to please, and we want to be pleased”, which affects everyone and is built in from childhood. Or, as one practitioner said, “[...] it’s a morale thing [...] I don’t want to write what I thought was wrong—I just don’t want to—and I don’t know if that’s just a very British thing and about being polite and all of that”.

Some therefore questioned the value of thinking about failure at all, suggesting that it can “make you more cautious” and thereby inhibit risk taking and experimentation, which are seen as a necessary part of the creative process. This tension between whether discussing failure facilitates or hinders both policymaking and practice are central to the focus of our research, and we therefore encouraged practitioners to discuss failure even where it created some discomfort.

Conflicted About the Value of Talking About Failure

Despite being cited as a success story among our sample, Slung Low acknowledge that their success is “not because we’re better [but because] we play the game better”. This “playing the game” includes blog posts and social media interventions by the Artistic Director which have championed both “relevance” and a “belief in service” since their inception in 2010 (<http://alanlaneblog.wordpress.com>).

These blog posts position the company in relation to the current dominant discourse within the cultural sector which foregrounds the importance of more participatory ways of practising art. Their presence has helped the company generate a powerful profile. It is not possible to determine to what extent the company’s interventions have influenced cultural policy or been influenced by it, but what is clear is that their success is strongly related to their ability to maintain control over a positive narrative about their work. It was perhaps for this reason that, when asked to speak about the failures in their practice, some members of the company to whom we spoke were conflicted.

On the one hand, they were happy to participate in our research to explore their failures, but on the other, they expressed a desire to keep “control of the narrative so that our failures are not the reason why we become defunded”. As they explained, this was also why they did not normally share their failures with others outside of the organisation. This defensiveness about failure is born out of a precarity

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which Slung Low believe is a larger concern since becoming more established and securing increased levels of funding. Put simply, they stated that the more they had, the more they had to lose, and therefore the more important it became to differentiate between the stories they tell internally and those they share externally. They acknowledged, however, that this can limit their own learning, the extent to which others in the sector can learn from their experiences, and the extent to which the cultural sector addresses the repeated failures that sustain its structural inequity.

As with policymakers in the previous chapter, when practitioners did talk about failure, there was often a reticence to take responsibility for failures in which they had been involved, and many exhibited a tendency to pass on responsibility to another artist, organisation, or funder for both the cause of the failure and preventing it reoccurring in the future. It was not an uncommon response when asking practitioners to share a story of failure for them to explain that “that was absolutely nothing to do with me and everything to do with [someone else]”. In some cases, “someone else” was the commissioner who was often presented as failing to understand how creative projects operated “on the ground” for artists delivering projects. In others, organisations blamed the fact that “there are very few artists who can really work in this way”, suggesting a lack of competence on the part of the artists delivering this type of work. It was also not uncommon for artists and organisations to blame the participant, who was presented as failing to understand how to “properly” take part in this type of work. One interviewee who had worked in community development before coming into the arts, however, questioned the reticence to take personal responsibility for failures. They told us that in their previous role, they would regularly focus “on what didn’t work and how [they could] do it better next time”. They believed that talking openly about failures “normalised the discussion” and helped to avoid repetition of past mistakes, a perspective that aligns with the literature on policy learning discussed in Chap. 3.

Many practitioners did agree that a lack of open discussion about failure was part of what made it difficult to take responsibility and supported the

view that having more frequent discussions about failure would make it a productive experience. This was also shown to be the case through our research: many who took part in our workshops and interviews described the process as cathartic. Despite feeling discomfort at the beginning, many practitioners grew increasingly comfortable talking about their failures at the end of our session with them. There was a sense of relief in thinking about the ways in which they could discuss failures and have difficult but necessary conversations both within their organisations and with their partners and funders. Interviewees began to challenge their own initial reactions to failure as being “too absolute” and “too final” by differentiating between failing others, for which they took personal responsibility, and being failed, which often related to systemic or structural problems within the cultural sector. Similarly, people began to differentiate between failures from which they could learn something and those that caused harm but often could not be rectified.

It also became easier to talk about failure when differentiating between various criteria or facets of success and failure, while also acknowledging that failure in one area could coexist with success in another. In the example provided by Slung Low described above, for instance, staff said they felt able to admit that they had failed to provide agency to participants in *Flood* because a partnership with the BBC meant that they still succeeded in gaining profile for both the company and the city. In another example, a practitioner described “[...] a project which was great in its conception and its delivery and got loads of coverage on national media but didn’t really engage with the communities at all [...] it was a great project from an artistic perspective, it was a great project from a media perspective. In terms of the actual fundamental idea that sat behind it, which was about participation and engagement of communities, then it failed”.

It is the coexistence of success and failure that leads us to argue that rather than creating “a definite shared understanding of what success and failure is all the time”, it is important to consider the different facets of any project or policy. This then encourages asking questions such as success and failure to achieve what? Failing to deliver the intended objectives outlined in a funding application does not necessarily mean the project itself failed to raise the organisation’s profile. Likewise, a policy that failed to increase rates of cultural participation need not necessarily have failed to develop the artform that was involved.

Yet, most practitioners still said they felt more comfortable discussing the value of their work rather than the extent to which it was succeeding

or failing against any set of criteria. Some made the case that all work has some inherent value, and, as one person said, “what’s wrong with good enough?” We argue, however, that just as success and failure can coexist across different facets, they also need to be understood as existing to different degrees, with “good enough” being one stage on a continuum from outright success to outright failure.

Central to the premise of this book and the perspective on participation that informs it is that success and failure, in any element of a project or policy, is more often than not perceived differently by different people. As one consultant acknowledged: “the artists will be looking at things very differently to the way the participant will be, and you have to look at it through both lenses and all of the others, the lenses outside the room as well”.

But there was little indication, based on our conversations with practitioners, of how actively or how often they sought and shared narratives of success or failure that differed from their own about the projects on which they worked. Most of those who were willing to reflect on failure still claimed that the process of reflection was something they did on their own or with those closely involved in their work. There was little evidence of inviting those who might hold a markedly different perspective to take part in these processes and even less evidence that these alternative narratives about failure appeared in official evaluations. This relates to the observation from policymakers, discussed in the previous chapter, that most feedback they received from practitioners in their evaluations was little more than “self-reporting”. The examples which provided instances of capturing alternative perspectives were largely superficial, such as mood boards where “we get participants to fill in stars and stick them on the wall [both] negatives and positives” or ubiquitous satisfaction surveys. It was acknowledged that both of these approaches encourage positive comments, because “if somebody [is] asking you very nicely if this is working, you’re going to say yes”. As a result, the cultural sector was described as “a very difficult environment for anyone to actually hold their hand up and say, ‘well actually we’ve not done this very well’”.

While some practitioners acknowledged that, when it came to evaluating their work, they needed to “try better ways to engage with people [...] and not be lazy or scared of that bit”, recognising the importance of being “prepared to be challenged”. In practice, however, many felt that most of those working in the sector consistently “don’t ask the right questions” to

foreground these kinds of alternative and potentially uncomfortable narratives about the failure.

This is why we argue that deeper conversations in which participants set the agenda rather than respond to one set by the professional is central to success in participation, but there is little evidence of it in practice. Instead, the cultural sector's focus on defining success based on benefits to the artist or organisation, whether in terms of artistic process or product, or the building of audiences or profile to increase their legitimacy, exacerbates the problem by failing to give due consideration to the inequities in determining who participates at every stage of the process from planning through to delivery and evaluation. This, in turn, fails to locate the true nature of failure in cultural participation policies.

LOCATING FAILURE AND LEARNING FROM IT

Many practitioners supported the view that the lack of cultural participation suggested in government surveys, as we discussed in Chaps. 2 and 4, has informed how the “problem” of non-participation has been constructed. This was, in their eyes, the result of a failure to recognise and record the range of things in which people did, in fact, participate. As with the policymakers in Chap. 4, however, this was as likely to mean that practitioners thought that the focus of participation was overstated as they were to think that policy must be redirected to support a wider range of practices.

Many also showed an awareness of the growing body of evidence that not only do those who participate as consumers of subsidised culture come from specific socio-economic groups, but so too do those who participate in its workforce (O'Brien et al., 2016). As a result, there was acceptance that the cultural sector and the organisations it funds fail to reflect the diversity of society without which it is difficult to justify public investment. There was therefore broad acceptance that the sector must change. Some felt that the solution was further participation within cultural institutions in order for more people to “infiltrate the industry”, while others felt that the failure was to expect change within the current system. As one practitioner said, “we cannot have a revolution of participation unless it is led by the people, it's not going to be led by a bunch of fucking artists”. This tension is central to understanding whether the failure in cultural policy will be best addressed by existing organisations or whether policymakers should change where they place their funding in the first place.

While most practitioners blamed policymakers for not making the case for increased funding to support both professional and amateur practices, several said that it is the vested interests among practitioners as well as the professionalisation of participatory art as a practice that meant cultural policymakers consistently fail to recognise everyday cultural participation. This ultimately holds policymakers back from changing their approach to participation and funding to include resourcing local cultural activities. We have written about this elsewhere in relation to the resistance to changing funding priorities in Scotland (Stevenson, 2014) and in the setting up of place-based funding through Creative People and Places in England (Jancovich, 2017). In both cases, existing funded organisations with most to lose from such change hindered policymakers from redistributing funding.

We argue that this vested interest explains why the practitioners in our sample were more comfortable talking about the value of their work and the benefits to themselves as artists or organisations. These benefits included developing their practice, growing their audiences, generating additional funding, or increasing their legitimacy. Concurrently, they avoided discussing its successes or failures in relation to the stated purpose of participation: to address inequality.

When asked to consider what people did see as failures in cultural participation policies, many identified specific examples where processes had failed. There were many examples, for instance, of participatory projects that they believed to be too pre-determined. It was recognised that “there’s value to approaching projects without knowing what the outcomes are going to be”. Rather than seeing this as a failure worth reflecting on in order to make processes more open-ended, many saw this as a reason to resist any criteria whatsoever for judging success and failure. Some expressed a concern that although the sector is increasingly “talking about co-creation, or shifting the power, or shifting agency”, this was not evident in practice.

Those practitioners with the longest track record in participatory work argued that power was increasingly vested in what one person described as a “Clare Mafia [of] very nice middle-class women often [...] very nice leaders who want to work with their community very nicely”. As a result, many practitioners discussed community and participation as uncontested

sites. For some, this was seen as leading to a kind of “happy clappy” activity which appeals to audiences but which “squeezes out dissent and the opportunity for learning”. This is counter to the stated aims of participatory work which uses agonism to challenge social norms, for example, in Slung Low’s recognition of the tensions within their community and the need to work differently with different groups.

Practitioners also referred to the failure of short-term projects that raise the profile for the artist or organisation, but which appear “project-led instead of mission-led”. It was widely acknowledged that work could only be “transformational” if it was carried out in the long term, yet many felt that the nature of funding arrangements forced them to suggest that short-term work was delivering equivalent results. This then perpetuates a lack of honesty throughout the system. There were differences of opinion, however, about the source of this dishonesty. For some, the policy focus on participation led to inauthentic practitioners seeking access to ring-fenced funds. For others, the pressure to deliver impact and a lack of time and space to reflect before moving on to subsequent projects, made worse by the precarious lives that many in the cultural sector experienced, has “forced them into a crisis mindset”. It was also acknowledged that a further difficulty in considering failure was identifying at which stage this should be carried, as what might be a success on the day might leave no impact, while what might feel like a failure at the time can develop significance further down the line. It is therefore necessary to consider success and failure across different time scales.

Some also argued that there was a creative drive to move on to the next project, meaning that practitioners were simply not critically reflective people when it came to thinking about the outcomes of their work. We argue that this is not suited to long-term interventions seeking to address social inequality and bring about social change. This was countered by others who claimed that “creative people are good at self-reflection” and that the creative process inherently involves “reflect[ion] on what didn’t work [and] how we can change it”. This reflection, however, was described as personal and private rather than something done collaboratively with participants in which differing narratives about what is and is not working, and what changes are necessary, are seen as equally valid.

The Limitations of the Project Mentality and Personal Reflection

As a company, Slung Low have been creating short-term, project-based work for twenty years, and their commissions or collaborations with larger arts organisations (e.g., the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Barbican, and Opera North) have contributed to their profile. The company, however, also take pride in setting themselves apart from these collaborators.

The members of staff we spoke to said that it was a recognition of the limited impact they could achieve from short-term, site-specific interventions that led to them take a more embedded approach by moving into the Holbeck in Leeds and making a long-term commitment to producing work there.

When asked how and with whom they reflect on the long-term successes and failures in order to learn and develop their practice, however, one member of staff said that as artists “the way we learn is just by doing”. Although they added that “I guess it wouldn’t hurt to sit down and look at how that’s happened”, they did not suggest a real desire to do so in the company.

Evaluation was described as a monitoring requirement rather than as something from which they or their funders might learn, and despite having a long-term commitment to working in the area, the work itself was still described in project terms as a list of activities rather than a joined-up strategy. It was therefore acknowledged that despite the company wanting to be seen as a learning organisation, demonstrated by their commitment to organising conferences for participatory organisations to share practice, “we’re just not very good at capturing feedback” from others. Any reflection which does occur is most likely to be done individually, and any sharing is based on the company’s own self-reporting of their successes or failures.

This is not to suggest that learning does not take place within the organisation, but that this is limited by a desire to move on to subsequent projects, which we argue limits the ability to not only learn but also change in response to this learning.

Whatever the attitudes to or perceived causes of the resistance to critical reflection, all agreed that the project mentality and relatively introspective approach to reflection within the cultural sector was perpetuated by artists, organisations, and funders alike. This in turn meant that many accepted the view that the greatest failure in the cultural sector was a collective failure for sector-wide sharing or learning to take place. Even within contexts where people said that they were engaged in “open sharing and learning”, they also recognised that they did not “know what happens [to the learning] beyond the room” in which it takes place, which points to a disconnect between learning and informing practice.

Many felt that, as a sector, there is “little interest in learning really”, and “our evaluation system is really about showing off [...] we don’t often pause to reflect”. One practitioner even acknowledged that “I’ve never met a learning organisation, I have not met an organisation which takes seriously the process of reflecting on the information that it gathers, either at a staff or at a board level, and reflecting on that in a way that would lead to action”.

As discussed in the previous chapter, some practitioners criticised policymakers for devolving the responsibility to learn to organisations when they failed to learn themselves. One person argued that if we expect action from learning, this “only happens if it happens in a system”. Policy change, and not organisational change, were therefore seen as what could make a difference. Others claimed that this allowed organisations off the hook and that they had a responsibility to make “small change” where it could lead to better outcomes. The theory of “small change” argues that the act of participation and taking agency itself can bring about systemic change, though many felt that there was a lack of willingness from cultural practitioners to “be the change”. Furthermore, despite the prevalent discourse surrounding giving agency to participants, it seemed that cultural practitioners fail to take that agency for themselves, as demonstrated by the tendency to blame others without situating themselves as part of either the problem or the solution. As a result, some saw the failures of the cultural sector perpetuated by the way fellow practitioners talk about “this kind of, you know, amorphous system, which is somehow separate from them, or in which they are not aware of the power that they might have in terms of how they go about changing, or even a desire to do that”.

While many artists also agreed that “we have set up a system where we’re like beggars” and “as a sector it’s not a very confident sector”, others saw this as a strategy of “just not being willing to change”. This is supported by the high level of acceptance of dishonesty among practitioners. “Everyone

lies to get money” was a recurring trope across all our data. It was even seen as a virtue that “arts organisations in general are very good at bending, if not the rules, then the parameters of funding for a project to fit what they want to do”. When failures were, in fact, acknowledged, it was generally a case of “sharing the failures that we believe will help get us to the next stage of funding”. This clearly suggests a failure to learn arising from a lack of desire to change. It is indicative of what we found to be a lack of open and honest dialogue between practitioners, policymakers, and participants.

We argue that these attitudes prevent collective learning from taking place, for, as one practitioner said, “within a system that lies, talking about failure is extremely dangerous”. As we have argued throughout this book, it is only through being able to identify, acknowledge, and learn from failure that the sector will become more equitable and inclusive.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, we have demonstrated that not only do practitioners draw on different meanings of participation than the policymakers in the previous chapter, but that there are also considerable differences in perspective between the practitioners themselves. These range from those for whom participation is defined by the relationship between the professional artist and the participant to those for whom it is defined by the participants having the resources to define culture for themselves. As a result, any consideration of successes or failures in cultural participation policy must consider the different priorities, perspectives, and experiences of artists, organisations, policymakers, and participants. We have also demonstrated that an unhealthy animosity exists within the cultural sector which is sustained by a lack of trust and openness. This is compounded by a focus on generating narratives of success, as well as a creative drive to move on to subsequent projects, preventing practitioners from undertaking critical reflection that could lead to personal learning, let alone sharing what they have learnt from failures with others.

We also argued in support of the view of some of our sample that a lack of reflection on the different forms that cultural participation can take results in a policy focus that predominantly uses participation to legitimise rather than challenge the status quo. This is also demonstrated in the previous chapter by the tendency for policymakers to ask existing funded organisations to take on increasing cultural participation as one of their objectives, rather than addressing it through a redistribution of funding to

alternative organisations and different communities. This is also evident among the practitioners in this chapter who spoke of creating opportunities for participants to infiltrate the system rather than change it. While many practitioners describe a feeling of being beholden to funders, we contend that, based on the findings in both this and the previous chapter, practitioners influence policymaking as much as they are influenced by it. Despite this, we encountered a lack of confidence among practitioners in their own agency in making change. This is in part a result of a personalised fear of failure. We further found that where failures were acknowledged by practitioners, just as with the policymakers in the previous chapter, blame was often devolved to others, further reducing the likelihood that they will actively avoid repeating the same mistakes in future. We argue that this could be addressed if the cultural sector accepted a collective responsibility to learn.

Through our research, we demonstrated that the process of talking about failure increased a willingness to undertake critical reflection, a process which was described as cathartic by many of our sample. We therefore argue that continuing such conversations about failure may reduce the fear factor and normalise a critically informed learning approach in the cultural sector, but this can only happen if practitioners are willing to do the hard work of seeking out alternative narratives rather than self-report feel-good narratives of their own making. We further challenge practitioners to see that agonism only has meaning if the artist is willing to be challenged as well as to challenge.

As we have stated in previous chapters, this requires a different approach to identifying success and failure in cultural participation projects and policies, one that considers the relative success and failure in different facets of the work and continually reflects on whose perspective is informing the judgements made. It is this approach that informs our framework of failure discussed in Chap. 7.

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