

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

Paul Reeve, Director of Education, Royal Opera House, London

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Good morning. I feel honoured to have the opportunity to speak to you today. This is the farthest I've ever travelled to give a talk; it's the farthest I've ever travelled. And it got me thinking about how I came to be here. I don't mean I've forgotten the flight – the jetlag's not that bad – I mean what caused me to take the arts pathway, which has led to a career and this conference.

When I was about 9 or 10, a small-scale theatre company visited my school. They ran drama improvisation workshops and during one - I remember it vividly - I had to pretend I was Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, trying to choose the right casket out of three in order to win Portia's hand. I found that I was really feeling the emotions I was supposed to be acting, and that I was able to communicate them. I really understood what Bassanio was going through. It was the most extraordinary moment; like I'd discovered my own personal rocket fuel: theatre. Of course I didn't realise the significance at the time but that experience changed something inside me, and had an influence on future education and career choices. It's not too fanciful to suggest that Portia's caskets and that small-scale theatre company sowed the seeds that led to me being here this morning.

Now I'd like you to consider why you're sitting here this morning. Again, I don't mean the immediate - my boss told me to come! – I mean your career choices and pathways, and what led you to take them. What led you to a career in arts, museums, culture? I'll bet that most, hopefully all of you, are driven by a passion for what you do – ours is a vocational sector. So what sparked that passion? Can you identify a moment when a flame was lit? Was it an inspirational teacher? A formative participatory experience? A visit to a show, museum or gallery? I want you to remember why you're passionate about what you do.

I'm going to talk this morning about interaction between cultural institutions and schools & communities. I want to begin by considering why they might interact – what's in it for both sides? Then I'll move on to the question of how they might interact, specifically discussing partnerships.

In considering the "why" question, I want to return to passion. We may come from different institutions or art forms but that's something we all share. True passion in arts and culture means not wishing to keep it to yourself, but wanting to share it with others. When opera gets it right, when the singer and the orchestra and the words and the music and the visual design come together to convey a dramatic, emotional moment in a story, it goes straight to my soul. Something inside me shifts. And with that shift I'm not the same person; I've changed. I want others to have the chance to experience that. It won't have the same effect on everyone of course but it will on

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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some, and if they don't have the chance to try it they'll never know. Whatever medium you work in, you'll be able to say something similar. Art can have a profound effect on you, and I want to return to this theme a bit later.

How do we give others the opportunity to engage with the art we're so passionate about? Well, we open our doors and put on a good show. In the case of the Royal Opera House, isn't our job simply to put on world-class ballet and opera? Do some publicity to let people know it's happening of course, but surely that's enough. Well no, not in the case of opera and ballet, and actually not in the case of most art forms. Interestingly, at the Royal Opera House we're keen to diversify our audience, since it's predominantly ageing, white and wealthy. So we've offered special performances where the tickets are vastly discounted, and the diverse audience we were striving for still didn't come.

Opera and ballet simply aren't part of most people's lives or cultures. They assume they won't understand or enjoy them. Also, the Royal Opera House as a building is a wonderful, glittering, but imposing palace. People feel intimidated by it. They assume they won't fit in or feel welcome.

In the UK "access" has become one of the buzz words in the arts. We have to make our art forms and institutions accessible. Access is about choice: in my case ensuring that opera & ballet is a choice open to as many people as possible.

But if people know nothing about it, how can they make a choice? It's only a real choice if you know what you're choosing. You have to be able to make an informed decision. And however clever your marketing may be, I don't believe that's enough.

I'd argue that some form of education is essential. You want to show people how your art form works, what's exciting about your exhibitions. You want to deepen their understanding and appreciation; you want them to learn and you want to inspire them. Who's responsible for doing that? In the case of young people, shouldn't it be teachers and the formal education system? Well yes, partly, and there are of course many superb arts teachers, but surely it's time to move away from the old thinking that teachers are solely responsible for the development of young people.

Who is better equipped and qualified to play a role in the creative and cultural development of young people, in fact people of any age, than those who work in arts and culture: the practitioners? We have unique knowledge, skills and resources to offer, and our passion drives us to want to share them. Who is better placed to facilitate the sharing of them with schools and communities than cultural organisations and institutions?

So a clear reason for connecting with communities is a desire to reach out to new audiences, enabling them to engage with our art, deepen their understanding of it, and therefore be able to make informed decisions as to whether it's for them or not.

This isn't merely about putting bums on seats to keep the box office looking healthy. There are equally important issues of inclusion and diversity. London is a multi-cultural community. Over 300 languages are spoken in its streets and schools, and the

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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last census (in 2001) shows that 29% of London's population belongs to a minority ethnic group.

The Royal Opera House is bang in the middle of that city, we're part of that community, we're partly funded by that community. But do our audiences reflect that diversity? Do they hell. There's a major question of entitlement here, and we have a huge responsibility to address it.

One way is education work, through which we seek to connect proactively with communities. One example is our Chance to Dance scheme. This operates in 3 London Boroughs which have a high percentage of inhabitants from ethnic minority backgrounds, and score heavily when it comes to social and economic disadvantage. Nearly 2,000 children from nearly 50 schools get the chance to experience ballet every year: seeing Royal Ballet dancers dance in their schools and subsequently participating in a dance workshop. Those who show particular aptitude are invited to join a scholarship programme, which involves free weekly ballet classes, and free ballet kit, for four years. We currently have 250 children on the programme. Over the 14 years it's been running over 2,000 have participated. There's a roll call of ex Chance to Dancers who've gone onto one of the vocational dance schools. Last year we had our first graduate from the Royal Ballet Upper School, who's now dancing with English National Ballet. He's from an Afro-Caribbean family in Brixton. A mum of one of our current children said to a colleague the other day that everyone in Brixton knows someone who's done Chance to Dance. That may be an exaggeration but there was some truth in it. If you've ever been to Brixton, you'd agree that you wouldn't immediately identify it as a ballet hotbed. But 14 years of connecting with that community has enabled us to achieve reach and depth. By the way, I mentioned our cheap ticket schemes earlier. Just before Christmas we ran one for two ballet performances and focused it partly on our Chance to Dance communities, via schools. 1,700 people from those communities bought tickets – most of them family groups, virtually all of them first time attenders.

I should stress though that getting people to see shows isn't why we do most of our education work. Some people we work with don't ever come to see a show, but I still see them as being part of our audience. At the Royal Opera House the tendency among colleagues has been to see our audience as those who come to see the performances at 7.30. We need to redefine our audience as everyone who engages with ROH's work – whether seeing *Tosca* or participating in a community singing project. This wider definition has implications for the quality of what we deliver. As far as I'm concerned, the school project we're running this week is as important and integral a Royal Opera House event as Placido Domingo's performance on the main stage this evening. So our delivery must reflect the same world-class standards.

So far I've perhaps focused mainly on cultural institutions pursuing their own aims and agendas: social responsibility, trying to create a wider, more diverse and better informed audience. But what about the communities? What's in it for them? Why on earth would communities *want* to connect with opera and ballet?

I'm not going to give you a blow by blow account of how we seek to engage groups ranging in age from 7 to 90-odd in what are considered difficult art forms. Suffice to

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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say that the emphasis is usually on participatory, experiential work. We also promote the idea that people can learn *through* opera and ballet, as well as in and about them. For example, we place a great emphasis in many projects on developing participants' creative responses to our art forms and repertoire, and through that their creativity more generally.

Creativity is a huge agenda in the UK and a central theme is the need to develop a creative workforce for the 21st century. The cultural industries are the second-fastest growing sector in the UK economy, after financial services. You may have read books by people like Richard Florida, arguing that the economies with the most creative workforces are going to hold the competitive edge in the future. The arts are of course extremely well placed to make a central contribution to people's creative development, in schools and beyond. One example of the work going on in the UK is a programme called Creative Partnerships, running in 36 regions across the country, most of them disadvantaged. There's over £100m of government investment. Creative Partnerships is basically about collaborations between schools and creative organisations or individuals – many of them from the arts and cultural sector, with the aim of developing creativity in learning, in order to make a lasting change to the way teachers teach and children learn. But creativity, as you know, is just one agenda that the arts serve.

The list of others is long. Fostering self-confidence & self-esteem, raising aspiration, developing collaborative skills, communication skills, the ability to develop and express one's sense of identity, social and cultural cohesion – understanding your own cultural values & those of others, and so on. In the UK the arts are achieving a higher profile than at any time in my working life. This is partly because of their perceived ability to contribute positively to a wide range of social agendas. In a speech a while back our Deputy Prime Minister – not a man noted for his love of the arts – spent ten minutes talking about the role of culture in community regeneration. The Government also recently published a new framework for children's services called "Every Child Matters". It sets out five outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, making a positive contribution, achieving economic well-being, and enjoying and achieving. Our own Arts Council's new strategy for children and the arts states a belief that the arts can contribute to achieving all five outcomes, particularly if it works in partnership with other sectors such as health, youth justice and education.

So there are plenty of potential reasons for communities and schools to connect with arts organisations, in order to pursue a range of goals. As a starting point for considering how to connect, I want to share with you a phone conversation between a well-known opera house and an unnamed school. Some artistic licence has been used.

Hello, Royal Opera House here. I wish to speak with Mr Jackson. He's doing what? Teaching? Well could you please go and fetch him, I'm very busy. Of course it's important. I'm from the Royal Opera House.

Hello Mr Jackson, Royal Opera House here. We've decided to go out into the provinces and alleviate cultural deprivation. We know your kids get absolutely no artistic or creative opportunities and we're prepared to come out and bestow some.

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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We require a working space 15 by 20 metres - that's the size of the Royal Opera House's stage you see and we want to create an authentic experience. Plus wing space naturally.

What musical instruments do we need? Grand piano of course: Bechstein's preferable but a Steinway will do if pushed. Otherwise, the music work's very much based on using the contents of an average school instrument cupboard. Full gamelan set-up, three sets of timpanis, two double basses, a harp and a kazoo. What have the workshops got to do with what? The curriculum? This is art, not arithmetic.

Hello, Mr Jackson here. Royal Opera House? That over-subsidised, elitist seething pit of irrelevant art forms providing social titillation and corporate entertainment for the metropolitan bourgeoisie? Well a project with you might get us a nice picture in the local paper so go on.

What do you need? The school hall for a dance workshop? No chance – it's fully booked until 2010. We've got a science lab free. If we clear the chairs there's a deceptive amount of space between the work benches. And anyway, you can use those for all that namby pamby ballet stuff you do holding onto banisters. Now, we want to target the pupils with behavioural difficulties on this project because frankly they're unteachable and two hours of ballet could transform their attitudes to the whole curriculum.

They won't like all that poncey tutu stuff though. I tell you what. We had a street dance group in last year and they loved that: can't you base it on street dance? Oh. Well in that case, we'll not tell them in advance it's about ballet. They'll not turn up otherwise. And it'll be a nice surprise for them.

That last bit is absolutely true by the way. Despite the exaggeration you may have recognised one or two pertinent issues if you've ever dealt with schools. The point is that establishing an effective dialogue with a world you're unfamiliar with can be very challenging. You may well be dealing with an arts teacher, so you'll have some things in common. But you may also have lots of differences: in the way you approach and deliver work, in your priorities, in the way you measure what you consider to be good work. Most of these stem from the fact that you have very different starting points. Put simply, arts organisations start with the art and schools start with the education. At least, I believe that arts organisation *should* start with the art.

Not so long ago, at a meeting to plan an opera project, one of the artists leading it began immediately to talk about how we could tie in with specific attainment targets within our National Curriculum. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't consider these things: if we choose to work within the formal education system of course we should. But here we were sitting in the Royal Opera House, with the sound of singers rehearsing on a tannoy in the background, and it seemed to me that the initial discussions might focus on the opera that the project was going to be based on: what excited us about it, what we thought might excite and engage the students and teachers we'd be working with. By beginning with the art we can bring something vibrant and perhaps different to schools. And thinking about the Curriculum, I don't

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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believe it's an arts organisation's job is simply to serve it. To support and complement it yes, but also sometimes to challenge it.

Arts organisations and schools are different worlds, different cultures: with their own values, codes of behaviour, languages, needs and targets. And the same applies to many of the other groups or organisations you may seek to connect with.

Naturally, we need to establish mutual respect for each other's worlds and the way they work, along with a degree of co-operation and trust. Beyond that, I think the extent to which you need to understand each other's cultures depends on the level of engagement. If you're an arts organisation delivering an off-the-shelf "package", with the school or community group being a client that buys it in, then basic mutual respect for fellow professionals doing their jobs is probably enough. If you're interested in developing deeper relationships and partnerships, you'll need to develop a correspondingly deeper understanding of the different culture and context that you wish to engage with.

This is what we wanted to do three years ago at ROH with our schools work: to move away from that client/provider relationship I just mentioned, and develop an approach based on genuine partnership. We worked initially with four Secondary schools in different UK regions, since we have a national remit. Three are still continuing to flourish three years on. We've learnt a great deal during that time. We've encountered many of the challenges, made most of the mistakes, and also achieved many of the benefits and successes that partnership working can bring.

Partnership is of course an increasingly common word in arts education, and I feel there's a danger that its currency can become devalued. First and foremost, I think through our projects with those four schools, we've learnt what true partnership actually means. It's a particular kind of relationship, requiring a particular way of thinking and working, and a particular level of commitment. It can reap significant benefits, but also make significant demands. Each partnership will have unique features of course but it's likely to involve these characteristics.

- An exchange of skills, resources and ideas between two (or more) parties.
- Work tailored to a specific set of circumstances, taking into account the needs, agendas, priorities and values of all parties.
- Collaboration and a sense of collective responsibility in all aspects of a project, from planning through to evaluation.
- Measurable benefit for all partners.

A key factor in achieving these things is planning. The aphorism "if we fail to plan, we plan to fail" may be so well worn because it's so true. The success of partnership projects depends on collaboration and shared responsibility, which are shaped to a great extent by the thoroughness and effectiveness of the planning process. You have to agree a set of shared aims, success and evaluation criteria and projected outcomes, all of which take into account the different values, needs, agendas and priorities of the partner organisations. I've learnt that this is a far from straightforward thing to achieve.

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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Basically there are a lot of needs, agendas and priorities to bring to the equation. In schools there are those of the government and the curriculum, those of the school as a whole (often represented by the head), those of teachers.

There's a parallel model for arts organisations. Publicly funded ones also have the government and the Arts Council to consider. Then there's the organisation as a whole, and the artists who are delivering the work. And somewhere in that mix are the students themselves, who are the most important part of the equation.

Just to complicate things still further, when we get down to individuals involved - teachers, artists - their agendas, priorities and needs can be sub-divided into professional and personal ones.

So how do you achieve a shared vision and project plan amidst all that? Well basically, you talk. That the only effective way of getting to know and understand each other. I think we underestimated the investment of time – the number of meetings - that would be necessary at the start of our partnerships, before any actual practical work happened. I mentioned that three of our original four partnerships are still flourishing. A major reason why the fourth floundered is that we didn't spend enough time up-front getting to know each other, and we weren't thorough enough in our joint planning.

Another key requirement of partnership working is the need to be flexible. It's not about simply pursuing one's own goals but seeking to marry the aims and needs of the different parties, to enable everyone to derive positive benefits. Embracing this approach means also embracing the need for negotiation and compromise.

My education team at the Royal Opera House has discovered that a partnership approach demands much greater commitment and flexibility than the client/provider relationship we were more used to. But we've also discovered that the benefits are far greater. I want to highlight two this morning. The first may appear to contradict some of what I've just said. Some of the most valuable things achieved by the partnerships I've been involved with have been the unexpected outcomes; things that had not originally been anticipated or planned for. It's a common experience that those involved have at some point stepped back from an extraordinary project or piece of work taking place, and marveled at just how they managed to get there. A former education secretary in the UK, Estelle Morris, said at an arts symposium that if one could predict at the outset where a partnership would ultimately lead, and what it would produce, she would be disappointed.

The need for rigorous planning and the desire to embrace the unexpected are not contradictory. It is one thing for opportunities to arise; it is another for them to be identified and fully exploited. That's far more likely to happen if solid foundations and frameworks have been put in place, and when resources and expertise can be pooled in order to seize the day. Here's an example. With one of our partner schools, we're about to embark on an opera project that will bring together community groups – both adults and children – from across their region. They're going to form an opera chorus and perform some of *La Traviata* alongside professional singers from The Royal Opera.

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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A group of middle managers from the local power station is coming to film a documentary about it as part of a training programme focused on creativity. These things did not feature in our original vision for the partnership, but how exciting that they've emerged.

The second major benefit of partnership working is, for me, the most important of all. And that's the effect that the projects have on the art itself. Partnerships with schools enable our artists to collaborate with young people and their teachers, to engage with them in creative exploration and experimentation. To have the chance to gain new perspectives on what you do and how you do it, and to be reinvigorated by the energy and ideas of young people, can be invaluable; it can develop you personally and professionally, and impact on your practice. For instance, John Browne, a composer who's had an opera performed at the Royal Opera House but also leads education projects for us, talks about the way that his work with young people has impacted on the way he composes and tells a story musically.

Finally, there's the art that's created through partnerships. Some of the art produced as a result of collaborations between professional artists and school students or community participants is not just excellent by the standards of an education project; it's excellent by any standards. I honestly believe that some of the most exciting work that's happened in my own art forms of opera and dance in recent years, has emerged from community and education work. An ambition and desire to create unique, high quality art is perhaps the most important reason of all to seek to work in partnership.

Before drawing my conclusion I'd like to show you a short 5 minute film. It's an outcome from an ongoing partnership, not with a school but with a community dance agency in East London. A partnership approach is increasingly common across all areas of our work. I touched on cultural diversity earlier, when discussing audiences. We all talk a lot about developing audiences for our art forms, but it's equally important surely to be developing art forms for our audience. A lot of opera and ballet's problems with accusations of elitism and irrelevance stem I believe from their failure to connect with the wider world around them. London and the UK's cultural diversity is a wonderful artistic opportunity. The melting pot of different artistic and cultural traditions can inform and challenge my art forms, enrich and help to evolve them. The project that this film is part of was an artistic collaboration between opera and hip-hop. The young participants engaged with Puccini's *La Boheme*. This is their creative response to it. A great deal of the music and lyrics are their own; they were also closely involved in the film making. If you know *Boheme*, you may spot some familiar characters, narrative elements and tunes.

As well as sharing the passion I mentioned at the start, I imagine we also share a central belief. We are dealing in arts and culture with something powerful, inspirational and capable of effecting deep and positive change in people and places; they have the power to transform individuals and communities. If we don't believe that we might as well all go home. It's why the arts serve so many educational and social agendas. There's a fair bit of debate in the UK at present about whether the serving of these agendas is undermining the case for art for art's sake; whether there's too much emphasis on the instrumental rather than the intrinsic benefits of engagement with art. I'm not that bothered how you categorise the benefits, although I am bothered about how you

"What's that got to do with me?" The benefits and challenges of partnering a world class cultural organisation with schools and community groups'

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measure them, in order to demonstrate them to others. I'm also not overly bothered about why art happens, as long as it happens. The belief, the knowledge, that art changes people's lives is what drives me and my career. Actually, no. Art doesn't cause change; good art does. As cultural institutions connecting with schools and communities, let's always keep that at the forefront of our minds. Amidst all the educational and social values, the need to understand each other's agendas and be flexible, let's make sure we never lose sight of our artistic values. Indeed, let's make sure those artistic values drive our work.

Whether they're in an opera house, a classroom, a gallery or a church hall, people deserve to engage with good art. It enables us to understand ourselves, each other and the world around us better. As Andre Gide said: "there is no prejudice that the work of art does not eventually overcome". And as Daniel Pinkwater said: "I believe it is impossible to make sense of life in this world except through art". In challenging, confusing times there can be no greater reasons for us all to seek to connect with our communities, and enable them to engage with our work.

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