

Moving Upstage

A performing arts project for young people, working towards a Bronze Arts Award



Report prepared by Katherine Anderson, December 2014

Introduction

In October and November 2014, ARC ran Moving Upstage, a project designed to engage 10 young people aged 16 – 19 who are Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) in a creative project based at ARC.

The aim of the project was to offer young people in the Stockton area and who are NEET the opportunity to further their career and education chances, whilst learning about drama skills and performing and finding out about the arts industry.

The aim of the project was to help the young people to:

- achieve a Bronze Arts Award
- improve their employability skills with focus on teamwork, communication, administration and solo working
- identify courses or job opportunities that they could move onto, with 50% of participants taking their next steps into Education, Employment or Training (EET)
- build a portfolio of their work and have additional experience in creative industries

The project was run in partnership with the Youth Engagement and Support (YES) team at Youth Direction in Stockton and was funded through the European Social Fund (ESF). ARC worked closely with Youth Direction to promote the offer to young people in the target groups.

What we did

The project was split into two main elements

- An intensive 3-week period of work with professional theatre company Oscar Mike, with this residency completing the 'Take Part' element of the Arts Award¹
- Ongoing work over a period of weeks with a professional creative drama practitioner and Arts Award Advisor, including completing the four elements of the Bronze Arts Award

ARC engaged freelance drama practitioner Ree Collins to act as Lead Creative Practitioner on the project. A qualified Arts Award Advisor and Trainer, Ree's significant experience of working creatively with young people in the target age group and her professional background in devised theatre meant that she was ideally placed to lead the groups creative drama activity, to mentor them through their Arts Award and to support them during the Oscar Mike residency.

Oscar Mike is an exciting young theatre company, who use game techniques to develop interactive performance and participation projects². The Directors, James Blakey and

¹ For more information about the elements of the Bronze Arts Award, see pages 4&5

² <http://www.oscarmike.org.uk/wordpress/>

Tom Mansfield, have significant experience of working with young people and with non-professional performers, through their work at high profile theatres, including West Yorkshire Playhouse and Birmingham Rep.

In practice, the project differed from the original plan, in response to recruitment levels and changes to available funding. Outlined below are the changes which were agreed during the early stages of the activity.

Original plan

The project was originally planned to run for 12 weeks, from mid-September to mid-December 2014, with Youth Direction recruiting 10 young people to the programme, supported by ARC's promotion of the opportunity through its own communication channels.

To promote the opportunity, a piece of professionally designed marketing print was created, which Youth Direction circulated to each of its local offices. Young people interested in the project were invited to attend an open workshop and informal chats with the practitioner and ARC, before joining the project for the following three months.

Rescheduled Plan

Unfortunately, despite both organisations' best endeavours to promote the project, there was a low level of take-up for the introductory workshops and meetings. In response, ARC reworked the timetable for the first few sessions and commissioned a second version of the marketing materials. In addition to the face-to-face work by the Youth Direction staff, ARC also promoted the opportunity directly through a range of its networks, including Synergy members, The Prince's Trust, Strong Voices and via individuals with a track record of working with young people in the North East. After this second promotional push, 6 young people had expressed an interest in the project, of whom 4 were directly engaged in introductory sessions.

Though the level of uptake was lower than had been hoped, both Youth Direction and ARC were keen to continue with the project, as the young people who had attended early sessions had demonstrated a clear commitment to the project. Within this, it was considered important that the Arts Award element was retained, as the group had been particularly enthused by the possibility of achieving a national qualification.

It was therefore agreed that the project could continue to run in a scaled-back form. This would include the initial full-time residency with Oscar Mike, but would involve a reduced timescale for the ongoing work with the Lead Creative Practitioner.

Residency with Oscar Mike

The Moving Upstage participants formed the core group for Oscar Mike's three-week residency at ARC. The purpose of the residency was for Oscar Mike to work together with a range of community groups to gather ideas for their next theatre show, with the working title *A Day in the Life of Someone Else*. The ideas driving the research for the piece were individuals' sense of personal identity, and how people do or don't connect with those around them.

The young people worked from 10am-3pm each weekday with the company. In the first week, they learned a series of warm-ups and drama games and began working on ideas

of story and performance. Alongside their work with this group, Oscar Mike also went to some of ARC's Silver programme sessions and visited The Moses Project in Stockton, running separate workshops for individuals from those groups who were interested in engaging with the project.



In the second week, the Moving Upstage participants took part in joint workshop sessions with people from the Silver programme and took the lead in explaining and running a series of drama games. Building on the Moving Upstage group's interest in urban myths (and prompted in part by the residency coinciding with Hallowe'en), Oscar Mike began to work with the groups on improvising and capturing individual and shared mythic narratives. The professional

writer in the company then began to turn these into text and speeches for performance.

In the final week, Oscar Mike's work with the young people concentrated on developing performance techniques, including line-running and learning, voice control and projection, characterisation and engaging with the audience. On Friday 31 October, the group took part in an informal sharing, for an audience of family, friends and people who had taken part in workshops across the three weeks.

Work with the Creative Practitioner



As a result of the scaling back of the project timetable, the Moving Upstage group's work with the Creative Practitioner was more specifically focussed on completing the four elements of the Arts Award and producing evidence of that work for the young people's Arts Award logbooks.

For the four elements of the Bronze Arts Award, the group were involved in the following:

- **Part A: Take Part**

This element was completed through the work with Oscar Mike. As well as devising and rehearsing for the final sharing, the young people learned a series of drama games, led workshop activities with other groups and researched and interviewed Oscar Mike personnel.

- **Part B: Be the Audience**

The young people attended two performances during the project. The Lead Creative Practitioner took them to see Fuel's *Phenomenal People*, at ARC and, after discussion, the group chose to see *Gatecrash* at Middlesbrough Town Hall. For their Arts Award logbooks, the group researched the theatre companies and filmed and wrote about their responses to the shows

"I learnt more about acting and how they stayed in character. I learned that acting is a real skill. It taught me that staying in character is hard. Also I thought theatre can happen in many ways and doesn't have to be on stage" Moving Upstage participant's response to Gatecrash

- **Part C: Arts Inspiration**

For this element, each of the young people chose a person or company involved in the creative arts who inspired them. They researched their choices and gathered this material for their logbooks, explaining why they were inspired by their choice



- **Part D: Skills Share**

As well as leading games with participants from the Silver Programme during the Oscar Mike residency, each member of the group led a drama exercise for an invited audience of ARC staff. They then each gave a presentation about their Arts Inspiration choice, and took part in a Q&A about their involvement in the project

Completed Arts Award journals contained written, photographic and filmed evidence of the young people's individual journeys through the project, their research into the creative industries and their own reflections on their experience and personal development.



Successes

Though the enrolment levels on the project as a whole were lower than we would have wished, the level of commitment to the programme shown by the students who did engage was positive. One of the students had a 100% record of attendance, with other students missing only 2 -3 regular sessions throughout the project.

We received a significant amount of positive feedback from the students about the whole experience, and about their work with Oscar Mike in particular.

“My favourite part when we first came was working with Oscar Mike, because we got to know each other pretty well in the first two days we were here and we all got to really trust each other” *Moving Upstage* participant



Participants also highlighted the relationship they built with the Lead Creative Practitioner as a positive outcome of the project, mentioning the sessions as being a supportive creative space.

All students showed a positive attitude towards the completion of their Arts Awards. From the very beginning of the project, they were excited about being given the opportunity to create their own Arts Journals, which reflected their own particular styles of work and interests. All of the participants who completed the course went on to pass the moderation and achieve their Bronze Arts Award.

Outside of their creative work, all participants also reported increased confidence during their time on the scheme. In the Q&A with ARC staff, the group mentioned the ways in which drama activities, though sometimes daunting at first, can help people to move out of their comfort zones. By playing these games, each of the participants felt that they had developed skills in interacting with other people.

This reflection on their own skills development is supported by our observations of the young people leading a series of drama games with both ARC staff and older people from the Silver Programme. Students confidently explained exercises to groups, directed games and presented their Arts Inspiration to the group. In the Q&A, the young people were generous in sharing their feedback on the project, honest about the challenges they faced and proud of their achievements.

Towards the end of the project, all of the young people visited the Stockton Riverside College shop in the centre of Stockton, to enquire about other training opportunities. Each of them has expressed an interest in enrolling for an Apprenticeship. After having

seeing *Gatecrash* at Middlesbrough Town Hall, one of the participants decided that she would definitely be interested in learning more about the performing arts and has registered her interest in a Level 2 qualification at the college. Another is keen to pursue her interest in music at college.

Immediately after the end of the *Moving Upstage* project, all of the young people who completed the course decided to sign up for another – the Star Project - working on Christmas events in the town centre, continuing to attend ARC as the training base for that course.

Challenges

There were several key challenges involved in the successful delivery of the project.

As highlighted earlier in this report, recruiting participants proved more difficult than had been anticipated. Being able to confirm funding only a short time before the start of the project may have contributed to this, as the project was tied in with the professional theatre company's residency at ARC, meaning that there was limited flexibility in terms of the start date, giving both organisations only a fixed amount of time to recruit.

Staff at Youth Direction also reported that a greater number of young people with whom they had contact had been successful in applying for places at FE colleges in summer 2014. A positive outcome of itself, this may also have meant that there were fewer young people with an interest in the performing arts who were available to join the project.

The ESF per-person financial model also presents a challenge for projects which rely on employing expert freelance practitioners to deliver creative activities, as budgets can have a significant level of fixed costs. In this particular case, having a smaller group of participants meant that it was possible to shorten the overall length of the project and still to reach the level of contact time recommended to complete a Bronze Arts Award. Though this was a necessary step to take in order to keep the project running, it was unfortunate that the project lost some of its capacity further to develop the young people's practical performance skills after the end of the Oscar Mike residency.

Within the residency element of the project itself, the professional practitioners needed to take account of the level of the group members' levels of drama experience when working with the group. By working together intensively and by providing support and positive feedback, the professional practitioners were able to build a significant level of trust with and between members of the group. Throughout the three weeks, Oscar Mike's reiteration of the group's shared watchwords 'Be kind, be brave, be yourself' helped the young people to undertake a journey towards becoming a single theatre 'company'.

"I feel privileged to have been able to work with the young people on this project" Member of *Oscar Mike* staff

What we learnt

Working on the project has given us the opportunity to learn a great deal about running similar activities in the future. Amongst the lessons learned were the following:

- Having the opportunity to achieve a goal is important to participants. The group picked out both working towards the sharing performance and completing their written work for the Bronze Arts Award as their project highlights
- Defining a set of shared ground rules in discussion with a group, and to which the group signs up, can help to define the parameters of a project and provide a means of bringing work back on track, if necessary
- Recruitment into creative projects can be challenging and lead-in times and methods for interesting young people in a project should be carefully considered and costed at the project design stage
- It is important to look at how creative projects which rely on freelance practitioners can be shaped in a way which allows for public sector financial models to be taken into account
- Though project design needs to be rigorous and achievable, it is important to retain some flexibility, to respond to changing demands. For example, this flexibility could allow for project staff to react and respond to levels of interest by altering the ways in which the opportunity is communicated to young people, or to reshape elements of the project in response to the experience and interests of the group, whilst still delivering against the initial aims and objectives
- As well as providing creative input, it is vital that practitioners remain sensitive to and flexible in their response to individuals' needs. Models for creative projects should take into account the ways in which this support can be provided and should consider the possibility of employing dedicated support staff to work alongside creative teams