

WELL

Project aims

WELL was a participatory site-specific journey around the empty former Sanofi pharmaceuticals factory in Dagenham East in September 2015 by Geraldine Pilgrim Performance Company. It was an ACE Creative People and Places Creative Barking and Dagenham Landmark Commission and involved 127 volunteer participants and 39 emerging artist placements. These 39 emerging artists were paired with 7 professional mentors to complete both formal and informal on-the-job training.

At the heart of the project was the importance of collaborative, practical learning that enables emerging artists to work towards gaps that ArtWorks had identified in Higher Education learning provision.

The pairing of small groups of emerging artists with established artist freelancers was based upon the principles of ArtWorks North East's Peer Artist Learning model, but extending it to inclusion in a real world setting that received national attention. The multidisciplinary professional team included an Artistic Director/Designer, Lighting Designer, Construction Manager, Costume Designer, Sound Designer, Stage Manager and Production Manager.



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For over 20 years, Geraldine Pilgrim has been placing the progression and support of artists at the centre of her work, recognizing the importance of emerging artists' place in shaping the artistic landscape of the future. It is for this reason that throughout the project the emerging artists were addressed as that rather than students to reflect the professionalism required from their position during the project. The aim of "Learning by doing in a supportive environment" have been inspired by the Artistic Director's membership of the Oval House Arts Centre as a teenager. Through personal experience, she understands the importance of being in a multi-cultural, cross-generational supportive structure that inspires emerging artists working alongside professional practitioners to develop their confidence no matter what their economic and personal situation. Therefore the company seeks to offer learning experiences to emerging artists who:

- are in further and higher education and want to develop the skills they are already learning
- have recently left further or higher education and need the support to take their first steps into the professional world

As outlined in the ArtWorks' call to action, quality needed to be a vital part of every stage of production development, not only for the experience of the emerging artists but importantly for the Barking and Dagenham based participants.

What we did

WELL recruited emerging artists from Wimbledon College of Arts, Central St Martins, Goldsmiths, Central School of Speech and Drama, Mountview Academy and Barking and Dagenham College through a series of inspirational talks and site tours conducted by Geraldine Pilgrim. Each emerging artist was either studying at foundation degree level, BTEC or undergraduate degree level. 48 artists were initially recruited, but 9 were resultantly unable to commit to the project before it had started, in 7 instances due to the fact that artists had to complete paid work throughout their summer break and were unable to commit to further training.

They were invited to consider their interest in participatory work and the field within which they would like to focus from 7 areas in relation to the multidisciplinary professional team. Each professional freelance artist met with their teams of emerging artists at the beginning of the project, where this was possible. It was clear straight away that finding a mutually convenient time for even 4 artists to meet with the Lighting Designer

was difficult, and had to be conducted over more than one meeting period. This, of course, impacted on the amount of time the professional artists spent meeting with their artist teams. The Construction Manager, Richard Rudniki, had 6 separate meetings with artists in his workshop to introduce them to the ideas that had been developed for the project, and to ascertain the skill levels of the students. As the construction of the sets and installations for the project required using dangerous tools at times, it was vitally important for Richard to spend time getting to know the starting skill level of his artist team so that he could distribute tasks with this in mind. He was then required to assist the emerging artists on a task-by-task basis to ensure the health and safety of the artists was ensured. This resulted in working with the emerging artists forming a significant part of Richard's time on the project.

Barbra Egervary, WELL's Stage Manager and Logistics Coordinator chose to hold morning meetings with her artist team rather than workshop days at the beginning of the project. She shaped her offering in this way because the nature of their work required them to be reactionary and respond to issues as they arose, and therefore it requires a much more reactive, on-the-job approach to both the formal and informal elements of the training. The Artistic Director, Geraldine Pilgrim and Sound Designer, Connor Mott found this to be a more appropriate method too:

“Because we were reacting to the actual project we would need to change things as they needed to be done. They [emerging artists] already had some idea about the practicalities of the technology, it was mostly about them learning how to respond and problem-solve quickly. That couldn't be done in a classroom.”

Connor Mott, Sound Designer

At the end of the project the emerging artists were surveyed to get some understanding of their experience. The creative team have also kept in touch with the emerging artists in various ways, including informal emails and contact via social media, to continued mentoring and assistance with employment.

What the project achieved

The project brought together emerging artists from across six London colleges, in both FE and HE, giving them the opportunity to meet people outside of their specific course or discipline. While it is still too soon to consider measuring the impact meeting this diverse range of people might have on their ongoing practice, it was clearly an important aspect of the project for many emerging artists:

“I thoroughly enjoyed my time working on this project and really loved meeting some new friends and have even had work offers from people I met during my time working with WELL.” Emerging Artist Participant

In the post-production questionnaire 22 out of 25 respondents said they had ‘Gained confidence in interacting with other professionals and peers’, while 20 said they had ‘Gained confidence in engaging with members of the public/participants’, suggesting how important the role of confidence building through responsibility is to emerging artists through an on-the-job experience such as this. The emerging artists worked on the project whenever required in discussion with their freelance professional and in response to their own availability. However, we found that mostly the emerging artists were keen to work more days than they had initially suggested, requested responsibility, and were willing to work to the extra time commitments that came with this.

Two Barking and Dagenham College students who worked under the professional freelance Sound Designer have gone on to secure paid work at project partner Broadway Barking, the flagship cultural venue in the area.

Of course, the major outcome of the project was that the emerging artists successfully participated in the creation of a beautiful production, and were able to see the tangible results of their hard work.

Lessons learned

Primarily we have learnt that students value the opportunity to be given responsibility in a professional environment:

“It was interesting to see how I work under this kind of pressure, I don’t know how else I would of learned about that” Emerging Artist Participant

It is also clear that they see the value in accessing multiple opportunities like this, as 23 out of 25 questionnaire respondents said they would ‘Look for more placement opportunities like this one’.

We have also importantly learnt that two days of added time for the freelance team is inconsequential to the hours that goes into the planning and delivery of mentoring activities, and the added time throughout the project to facilitate the emerging artists in safely commencing each task:

“Having students there can slow your work rate down, because you have to spend time over each point because making them feel confident is what its all about. But the project isn’t going to wait so you work harder to find a balance. I was lucky to have a good team [of emerging artists] on WELL and most of the time they dealt with the stress and the responsibility like pros.” Barbra Egervary, Stage Manager/Logistic Coordinator

The hours each professional realistically spent with the emerging artists was immeasurable. Many of the professional team were experienced in mentoring emerging artists during projects anyway, on a purely unrecognized basis. I feel that this highlights the way in which professional projects are supporting the education system in a way that is often unrecognized and leaves its professionals often underpaid. By highlighting the key role these projects can play in the development of artists, it might be useful to consider how Higher Education systems might better support these project and recognise the vital role they play in offering practical education opportunities.

Barbra Egervary suggested if she'd have had more time to offer learning opportunities to the emerging artists it would most likely have taken the form of building time and space around the required work to offer:

“The creative industries are inherently social, and so an awful lot of the mentoring happens when you stop for lunch or go for a drink after work [...] They ask about career progression and work etiquette, mostly things it would be inappropriate to ask during the working day, and so having the space to ask about things like that is important. How you ensure that happens is another question though, because it could easily just become more time spent on the specifics of the project, because of course we always need more time!”

Barbra Egervary, Stage Manager/Logistic Coordinator

This idea was reflected in the post-production feedback from the emerging artists also:

“Most often it was when talking to professionals I learnt about their roles and insights in the industry and this was the most useful part for me.” Emerging Artist Participant

Respondents to the survey identified the main barriers and challenges encountered in their position on the project was ‘Having the confidence to take work on’ (21 out of 25) and ‘Balancing this with other time commitments’ (19 out of 25). As identified elsewhere confidence is an issue that the mentors highlight as key to the experience, but navigating other time commitments is something the mentors are less able to assist with. Many of the emerging artists were working on WELL alongside paid work commitments during their summer break from University, some putting in shifts before and after their time on site for WELL. This highlights the importance of the project to the students, but an unsustainable way of working for them.

What is happening next

Geraldine Pilgrim Performance, Creative Barking and Dagenham and Broadway Barking have already held a celebratory reunion, talk and Christmas celebration that brought together both local participants and emerging artists. In doing this the artists have continued opportunities to meet and network with one another.

The barriers to conducting this sort of training with emerging artists will continue to be the time constraints associated with any project, which inevitably either limits the amount of time the freelance professionals can offer for training and mentoring, or it results in the professionals working longer hours with no further recognition to ensure that both mentoring and delivery of the project can be completed and to a quality standard.

Although WELL is finished, Geraldine Pilgrim Performance Company continues to be committed to educating emerging artists through learning by doing.

More Information:

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