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Festivals as Communities of Practice: Learning by doing and knowledge networks amongst artists

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Introduction

Much research and debate on the impact and roles played by arts festivals in regional development concentrates on their external impacts and on two aspects in particular. One is the economic impact of festivals and their potential to attract tourism and therefore benefit the local economy; second is the role they can play in rebranding or regenerating a locality, specifically looking at people's pride in place, social cohesion and the participation of specific social groups. However, instead of looking at the external impacts of festivals on communities and economies, this chapter will examine the impact of festivals on one of their core stakeholders: participating artists (Glow and Caust, 2010).¹ The research takes theoretical approaches from the regional and organisational studies field, such as 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998), 'learning by doing' (Arrow, 1962), learning-by-interacting (Lundvall, 1992) and 'temporary clusters' (Bathelt and Schuldt, 2008) to explore the creative practice of artists involved in an emerging UK arts festival (*Fuse Medway Festival*, Kent). It discusses the role of the festival on artists' careers, their creative practice and their ability to learn and connect with other creative producers and asks: 'are festivals also knowledge communities?'

Researching festivals and impact

While the research looking at external impacts is rich and diverse, there is almost no research available which examines the impact of festivals on one of their core stakeholders: the participating artists. Glow and Caust (2010) have explored the benefits artists participating in the *Adelaide Fringe Festival*

thought they gained from taking part. They identified a series of activities and services that the festival provided to artists, such as newsletters, making the most of media coverage, free listing in the festival guide, etc. They also considered the importance that the *Fringe* played through inviting producers who might recruit new acts to add to their own programmes for touring and commissions. Their research also examined the significance of local artists in the programme; more than half of the participating artists were originally from Adelaide itself and a high number seem to have returned just to take part in the *Fringe* – which shows that they expect to derive benefit from participation.

The main benefits experienced by artists were summarised as:

- ◆ **Entrepreneurialism:** ‘the festival encouraged an entrepreneurial approach to the task of producing and presenting work.’
- ◆ **Branding:** allowed artists to increase their visibility and credibility amongst producers and audiences.
- ◆ **Practising the craft:** helped ‘to build the respondents’ sense of purpose and identity as artists.’
- ◆ **A launching pad:** gave an opportunity to artists to test work and develop their craft and career.
- ◆ **Diverse programming:** linked to the ability of the festival to attract national and international work, commercial and non-commercial work and to create a balanced and varied programme (Glow and Caust, 2010: 419).

Learning, knowledge communities and creative work

The literature on learning and knowledge communities is broad and has been a topic of extensive research across economic geography and organisational studies. Here we are specifically interested in the economic geography perspective as it focuses on place and shared-spaces where learning and knowledge exchange happen. The literature acknowledges the strong relationship between individual and collective learning in the work context. Following Fenwick (2008) we highlight these important dynamics:

- ◆ **Individual knowledge acquisition:** in particular linked to the idea that alongside codified knowledge (which is easily transferable) there are sets of practice and knowledge that are tacit and hard to teach and transfer.
- ◆ **Sense-making and reflective dialogue:** this seems particularly relevant for artists. Many consider feedback from peers as pivotal to their development. The ‘collective is viewed as prompt for individual critical

reflection, a forum for sharing meaning and working through conflicting meanings among individuals to create new knowledge' (Fenwick, 2008: 232).

- ◆ **Communities of practice (CoP):** As Wenger explains, 'communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly'. This broad and fluid definition can be applied to groups that evolve and change both within and outside organisations. The focus is on the members' shared interest, their common ground and reason for engagement and exchange. Although the communities of practice approach has many limits – specifically in relation to the role played by trust, power and structures – it remains a useful framework for understanding motivations and engagement amongst practitioners.
- ◆ **Co-participation or co-emergence:** embedded in the complexity theory thinking, here the focus is on 'mutual interactions and modification between individual actors, their histories, motivations and perspectives and the collective' (Fenwick, 2008, p.236). The focus here is on micro-interactions and their connections/relationship with macro-level outcomes.

Networks and shared connections are cornerstones of learning and knowledge communities. In particular, it is important to consider the main distinction drawn by Granovetter (1973) that individuals have both strong and weak ties and that these have distinct values and functions in learning processes. While strong ties are based on shared experiences and values developed over time, weak ties are more temporary, requiring less investment and commitment. The role of networks and knowledge exchange has also been a focus in the literature that looks at the nature of creative work where temporary, project-based structures are common across different creative sectors. In these sectors multiple roles and job handling are the norm, with people defining themselves with multiple professional identities.

One important dimension of the way knowledge and expertise is developed is related to 'tacit knowledge'. Tacit knowledge is sticky (often linked to a person or a place/organisation) and learning cannot happen in a codified way (through a manual or an explanation), needing to be transferred through practice, observation, doing or sharing. There is a wealth of literature considering the role of these important dynamics and time and space play a key role as they often imply a co-presence and co-location. The concept of 'learning-by-doing' highlights the need for demonstration and practice to be shared and the concept of 'learning-by-interacting' underlines the role played by exchange and feedback. In particular we see short-term interactions (which are