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What is our current learning about digital engagement when creating art with people of different ages?

It goes without saying that many of us have had to grapple with a whole new way of engaging digitally in 2020 and 2021. Few of us could consider ourselves 'expert' in a space which is constantly evolving. With limitless ways of connecting digitally, we can only ever achieve any kind of fluency in the platforms in which we are practiced.

We hope that this resource provides a useful reference point for anyone designing a digital engagement programme. We come to you as learners, with questions informed by our experiences and the acceptance that things will change as we enter a more hybrid way of connecting. In the words of one collaborator, 'It might take a year or two to find the right balance'.

1

Why are we here?

Sometimes a digital engagement process arises from a pre-existing community, at other times a group is brought together for a specific project. Sometimes one art work will be created, sometimes multiple and at other times it will all be about a creative process. All of these are valid, but it is important to consider how we get the invitation right.

- What are the parameters for the work?
- How much space is there to respond to participants and artists if the project shifts? For example, what happens if it becomes apparent that the artwork you had in mind isn't possible within the original timescale that you have agreed?

2

Who are we?

It's always important not to make assumptions about the people with whom we work. We should consider this in regard to participants, artists and producers. In digital spaces, it is even more essential to take the time to get to know each other due to the absence of non-verbal social cues.

- What roles and responsibilities does everyone have? How is that communicated so that it is clear?
- What is everyone's digital fluency? How can we cater for different abilities? How much is digital exclusion a factor?
- What vulnerabilities are present in the group? How can we address access? What unconscious bias might exist in the group?

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Who are the experts?

Reflective practice is important for everyone working in collaboration. In new digital spaces, it seems useful to understand that we are creating a new practice together, and to be clear about any experimentation that we are undertaking alongside other people.

- How can we test new approaches and ideas?
- How might we make time for group members to share a digital interaction that they have enjoyed?
- What's working well for everyone? And what isn't?

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How do we listen?

The artists in the session considered the importance of loose and undemanding expectations of what engagement looks like: 'acting on zoom is hard because people can't read your body language' shared one participant. A colleague reflected that in intergenerational work, young people tended to look off camera, whereas older people appeared very attentive; in reality both were fully engaged.

- What does engagement look like? How can we make space for it to change as time goes on?
- What social cues does the group start to develop?
- What are everyone's expectations around communication and which communication channels work for people? For example, if a social media channel is set up, how much contact can people expect?
- Is it all online? In our discussion we discussed social media, video platforms, mobile technologies, telephones, print, photography, online games and post.
- How and when do we evaluate how much people feel seen and heard? Do you need to schedule this with them as part of the process?

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How do we work with people holistically?

Digital participation can blur the divide between public and private spaces. We might sometimes feel like a head on a screen, but we are present with each other beyond verbal exchange. It's important that group members are connected in an appropriate way.

- How much are people willing to share of their private space? How much does the group want to share between themselves and with the wider world?
- How might physical objects support digital collaboration?
- How do we enable people to share their visual experiences?
- How do we set the tone? Does the group enjoy sharing music? What do we all like?
- How do we ensure that we remain inclusive of those who find digital spaces more accessible?

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How do we take care?

We should consider how to ensure positive experiences for participants, both from a safeguarding perspective and a broader sense of care. Further, we should consider the duty of care to the artists involved and the personal contributions of institutional staff.

- How can the group form a contract about how they want the process to work?
- Who is the key contact for each person?
- How long do we need to develop a rapport?
- What explicit check-ins are needed with everyone?
- What do we do if someone from the collaboration has a concern?
- How do we pace the project to give sufficient time for reflection?
- What level of check-in with participants is appropriate in between sessions?
- What's the appropriate balance of programmed time vs social space together?
- What are the different care requirements of different digital spaces?
- What is the appropriate relationship with participants after the project ends? How will that be negotiated?

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What does the artwork need?

Our main focus for this resource is on the people in a digital engagement process, but clearly we need to give consideration to not only the artist, but the art work too.

- What are our mutual responsibilities to produce the best art work and the best learning experience?
- How much can the process change according to how the work develops?