

# Connected Communities

## The role of grassroots arts activities in communities

A scoping study

Angus McCabe, Jenny Phillimore and Hilary Ramsden



# Background

## Executive Summary

---

**Research undertaken by the Third Sector Research Centre (McCabe, Phillimore and Mayblin: 2010) identified the lack of knowledge about the impact of amateur or grassroots arts activity on individuals and communities. This report sets out the findings of a scoping study which assessed the learning about the impacts of the amateur arts from the academic and grey literature across a range of disciplines. It also includes a brief discussion of findings from a day conference held with amateur arts organisations in October 2011.**

The study identified a range of impacts and outcomes. For individuals, participation in amateur arts could promote their mental health and wellbeing. Some involved, particularly young people, made the transition from amateur arts to paid employment in the creative industries. Improvements in educational attainment and functioning in the work-place were also reported as positive outcomes. Claims were made about the economic role arts activities play in communities: through the hire of village halls, the management of local assets, equipment hire or the employment of professional artists in, for example, preparing for performances. However in this, and other areas, there was a lack of empirical evidence exploring or quantifying the exact nature of impact.

## Researchers and Project Partners

---

**Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore**  
TSRC, University of Birmingham

**Jane Milling and Hilary Ramsden**  
University of Exeter

**Hamish Fyfe**  
University of Glamorgan

**Robin Simpson**  
Voluntary Arts

## Key words

---

Amateur arts  
Grassroots arts  
Impact  
Communities  
Civil society

# The role of grassroots arts activities in communities

## Introduction

This study of the role of grassroots arts activities in communities offers an overview and analysis of available policy, academic and 'grey' literature in this field. The study flags up gaps in the existing evidence-base and indicates areas where new research and empirical investigations might be undertaken in the future. The study focused predominantly on literature from 2005 onwards, referring to some earlier key texts in order to give the fullest contemporary picture of the state of research into amateur arts. A wide range of academic literature from different disciplines such as ethnography, mathematics, music and the visual arts was combined with the social policy literature and grassroots arts groups' membership publications and newsletters. We looked specifically at voluntary and amateur arts and did not focus on professionally facilitated community arts or art as therapy, although we have included cases where there are direct parallels. In addition we ran workshops with 31 individual amateur artists or amateur arts networking organisations to explore their perspectives on impact.

Sustainable grassroots, amateur arts activities were found to be thriving with participation on the increase. While there was a limited amount of research examining the function and role of grassroots arts activities on a systematic basis, much evidence was focused upon small scale, single case study evaluations. The lack of wider scale research made it problematic to extend claims to inform a bigger national picture of arts activities. Larger-scale, empirically-based research is necessary to develop to a more robust evidence base on grassroots arts activities and their impact within communities.

Such studies would help broaden debate and discussion on the role of arts activities in civil society, personal and community economic development.

## Background to the study

There are currently more than 49,000 amateur arts groups in England with an estimated 5.9 million members, in addition 3.5 million people volunteer as extras or helpers making a total of 9.4 million participants in activities. However, until recently most policy literature, with notable exceptions, (Gieseckam, 2000, Dodd et al., 2008, Simpson, 2010, Lowe, 2010) paid scant attention to a sector which is diverse in scope and activity. Even less attention has been paid to the growth and development of relationships between people and groups in communities who would not normally, in their everyday lives, meet 'others', with whom they develop friendships, on an international as well as national level, through shared interest in arts activity.

As Lowe and Simpson (2010) have reported, *'since the publication of Our Creative Talent in 2008 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and ACE, there has been an acknowledgement of the important contribution of amateur arts to the participatory arts and crafts scene in England'*. Yet little is known about the impact of the amateur arts on individuals or communities. A body of research has explored facilitated and centrally-funded community arts projects which have the specific aims of building skills or confidence within a designated community (van Erven, 2001; Haedicke and Nellhaus, 2001) with a view to evaluating the efficacy of community arts projects. Attention has also been paid

to mainstream or professional arts. For example Matarasso's (1997) *Use or Ornament*, stimulated the emergence of research examining the importance of mainstream arts to the wellbeing, personal growth and social development of the individual within civil society. A growing body of academic literature attests to the blurring of boundaries between audience and spectator (Bourriaud, 2004), professional and amateur arts (Gablik, 1991, 1995) and continuing debates as to the role of the artist and authorship (Bishop, 2006, Kester, 2004). However, very little has been explored concerning the effect of amateur arts activities, on the individual and on the communities within which the activities take place.

## Definitions of key research terms

---

**Role:** The term 'role' was understood to mean the 'impact' of arts activities in communities. By impact we include outcomes or outputs as well as the creation and development of processes involved in, or participating in, the different arts activities that create impact. We looked at the variety of impacts of arts activities on communities: including social; educational; economic impact; aesthetic and health.

Taking 'role' to imply 'impact' it is useful to draw on Guetzkow's work the 'Mechanisms of Arts Impact' to define some categories. We consider this useful since he makes a distinction between impact on the individual and impact on the community.

**Grassroots, amateur:** the term 'grassroots' is often used to encompass more than 'amateur'. Although amateur may have connotations of being less than 'professional', grassroots denotes a more activist, broader remit, also including 'community' arts. For the purposes of this study we take grassroots activity to mean any self-governed, amateur, arts based activity undertaken by formal or informal groups or organisations undertaking activity on a regular (rather than one-off) basis. We understand grassroots arts activities to include, for example, amateur group based music activities that go on in peoples' living rooms, though finding evidence for such activities goes beyond the scope of this study.

**Arts:** by arts we mean shared, socially, and self-expressive creative activity in the fields of visual arts, dance, storytelling, music, theatre, craft, film-making and new technology. We have not made a separation between arts and crafts although we recognise that within the art world and for other purposes this distinction has become necessary. Thus, arts activities can include a collection of knitters meeting to knit and amateur choirs hired by professional orchestras to perform with them.

**Communities:** while recognising the contentiousness of the term community we adopt the Research Councils United Kingdom definition of community as '*cooperative or interactive groups sharing a virtual or physical environment and aspects of identity (such as location, race, ethnicity, age, history, occupation), culture, belief or other common bonds and/or a shared interest in particular issues or outcomes*'<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Connected Communities Briefing Document

Initial investigations of grassroots arts activities for this study note the following impacts:

### Social and health impacts

Participation in arts activities has been shown to have a number of beneficial effects:

#### For an individual's personal development:

- enhanced health and wellbeing;
- increased self esteem and self confidence;
- improved communication and social skills;
- development of leadership skills.

#### For groups:

Furthermore participation develops social networks contributing to:

- a sense of identity and belonging;
- social capital, social and community cohesion;
- increased intergenerational contact;
- for migrant groups the opportunity to maintain links to their country and culture of origin in addition to developing hybrid traditions and customs occurring as part of a process of living in the host country;
- improved community image and identity, with increased visibility within a town or even country. This in turn can contribute to a sense of pride for residents;
- increased desirability of an area.

### Educational impact

There is evidence that participation in arts activities:

- develops learning performance in formal settings with participants demonstrating an increase in literacy, verbal and communication skills;
- leads to the development and creation of knowledge and technical skills specific to

activities and also to transferable skills in other fields and potentially employment;

- can contribute to understandings of contemporary issues which may be related, but tangential, to the art form itself that emerge from discussion and debate within their specific field or arts group;
- develops an awareness of the international scope of the specific field, leading to the building of international social networks and sometimes to travel abroad, extending participants' experience of other cultures and customs;
- develops literacy skills among those who are outside of formal learning settings;
- develops opinions and skills in argument and debate.

### Economic impact

Grassroots arts activities generate a considerable amount of economic activity and value in a number of ways:

- unpaid labour of participants and volunteers in the activities;
- purchase of materials and equipment – nationally and locally;
- donated goods and services;
- revenue from membership subscriptions to groups and organisations;
- revenue from advertising in magazines and newsletters;
- revenue for local and regional services and organisations where meetings, exhibitions, classes and festivals are held (such as church, village and community halls);
- revenue from fundraising through an arts activity for other charitable purposes including international causes beyond the immediate community;

- increased employment opportunities through skills development and networking of individual participants;
- increased revenue for advertisers from purchases by members;
- a potential decrease in the use of the health service due to enhanced health and wellbeing;
- establishing arts activities in an area increases its desirability, attracting potential residents and tourists.

### Aesthetic impact

Aesthetic impacts from participatory amateur arts include:

- creates things and moments of beauty that are life enhancing
- encouraging a passion for the art – participants consider their art activity more than a 'hobby;'
- fosters creativity and risk taking
- nurtures improvisation and experimentation frequently resulting in new discoveries and innovation
- provides spectacle, beauty and opportunities for adornment that promote feeling good and bring people together
- rendering a community more aesthetically pleasing – for example through public artwork, murals & mosaics and beautified community gathering places;
- promoting and enhancing an individual's and community's sense of 'beauty' and/or aesthetics;
- encouraging more people to become involved in arts activities that exist within a community.

### Conclusions and potential research agendas

The study revealed that although grassroots or voluntary arts activities are thriving, there is limited empirical research on their impact on individuals and communities. Whilst professional, and to a certain extent, community arts, enjoy a recognition that reaches a wider public, voluntary arts activities tend to be visible predominantly to their members and participants.

It is clear that further research is required in order to fully comprehend and document the extent to which grassroots arts activities are integral to many individual lives and communities. This is particularly pertinent given the increasing awareness of the significance of the multiple and diverse heritages and cultures in the UK today and the role that voluntary arts activities play in connecting disparate communities.

Involving grassroots arts organisations themselves in a wider investigation of the scope and reach of their activities might subsequently produce findings that would be useful in arts policy provision and development at a regional and national government level. Furthermore, it would provide potentially interesting and useful information for the organisations and participants themselves. As well as the need for robust evidence about the impact of grassroots arts other areas emerged with research potential. These include the relationship between amateur and professional, self-governance and sharing in amateur arts, unpaid labour and volunteering, the role and efficacy of informal learning, role and function of digital media and the Internet, self-identity and identity (re)-construction and amateur arts as communication.

## Additional Outputs

---

- A summary briefing paper and full literature review are available on the Third Sector Research Centre website [www.tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Gtk3z5X%2f690%3d&tabid=500](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Gtk3z5X%2f690%3d&tabid=500)
- A conference report on the 'Growing the Grassroots' event at Cecil Sharp House in October 2011, opened by Ed Vaizey MP (Minister for Culture, Communications and the Creative Industries)
- Media coverage – Robin's article and any coverage from the January Press Release.
  - » E-Gov monitor 9th January 2012
  - » Grassroots Arts Activity Makes 'Significant Contribution' To Civil Society, Says Research  
[www.egovmonitor.com/node/45205](http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/45205)
  - » Charity Times 10th January 2012 Arts activity makes 'significant contribution' to society, says research  
[www.charitytimes.com/ct/arts\\_activity\\_civil\\_society\\_says\\_research.php](http://www.charitytimes.com/ct/arts_activity_civil_society_says_research.php)
  - » Guardian Voluntary Sector network, Community Action Hub 17th January: The importance of community arts groups in Big Society  
[www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/community-action-blog/2012/jan/17/grassroots-community-arts-groups](http://www.guardian.co.uk/voluntary-sector-network/community-action-blog/2012/jan/17/grassroots-community-arts-groups)
  - » Simpson, R. More than a hobby: how research findings are helping to develop a true understanding of the impact of grassroots, amateur arts activities' *Arts Professional magazine*, Issue 245, published Monday 21 November 2011  
[www.artsprofessional.co.uk/Magazine/view.cfm?id=6041&issue=245](http://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/Magazine/view.cfm?id=6041&issue=245)

Three journal articles are also in draft:

- Amateur arts, civil society and community: an analytical framework for researching the impact of amateur arts based group actions on communities.
- Grassroots or Community Arts? A comparative study.
- 'For the love of it': Amateur Arts and Affect.

# References and external links

- Bishop, C.** (2006) *The Social Turn: Collaboration and its discontents* [www.artforum.com/inprint/id=10274](http://www.artforum.com/inprint/id=10274) accessed 18 September 2007
- Bourriaud, N.** (2004) *Relational Aesthetics*, France: Les Presses du reel
- Dodd, F, Graves, A, Taws, K,** (2008) *Our Creative Talent: the voluntary and amateur arts in England*. Department for Culture, Media and Sport/Arts Council England (DCMS/ACE).
- Gablik, S.** (1995) *Conversations before the end of time. Dialogues on art, life and spiritual renewal*, New York: Thames & Hudson
- Gablik, S.** (1991) *The Reenchantment of Art*, New York: Thames and Hudson
- Gieseckam, G.,** (2000). *Amateur and Community Theatre in Scotland. Scotland: Scottish Arts Council*. Community Arts Network.
- Guetzkow, J.** (2002) *How the Arts Impact Communities: An introduction to the literature on arts impact studies*. Working Paper Series 20, prepared for the *Taking Measure of Culture Conference*, Princeton, 2002
- Haedicke, S. and Nellhaus, T.,** (2001). *Performing democracy: international perspectives on urban community-based performance*. Ann Arbor; Great Britain: University of Michigan Press.
- Kester, G.** (2004) *Conversation Pieces, Community & Communication in Modern Art*, USA: University of California Press
- Matarasso, F.,** (1997). *Use or Ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts*. Comedia.
- Lowe, M. and Simpson, R.** (2010) *Achieving great art for everyone: Voluntary Arts England response to Achieving great art for everyone*, UK: Voluntary Arts, p. 2
- McCabe, A., Phillimore, J. and Mayblin, L.** (2010) *'Below the radar' activities and organisations in the third sector: a summary review of the literature* (Working Paper 29). Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre
- Simpson, R.,** 2010. The role and potential of amateur arts groups in building an empowered, participative, fulfilled and healthy civil society. *Taking Part Conference*, October 2010.
- van Erven, Eugene** (2000) *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives*, Routledge, London and New York





[www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk](http://www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk)