
SPOKEN WORD IN THE COMMUNITY HUB (SWITCH)



"Switching up where the art happens...We wanted to just give the art to the people."

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In partnership Jemilea Wisdom of Writerz and Scribez, and Kai Rufai.

Introduction

Battersea Arts Centre (BAC)



[Agents of Creative Change](#) is a free professional development programme for artists, public and third sector professionals. In Summer 2018, BAC facilitated a collaboration with King's College London's Cultural Institute to incorporate an element of co-research into the programme. This pilot invited people working in the charitable or public sector to come forwards with a challenge related to their professional environment, their community, or both. Through collaboration with an artist and academic partner, they would tackle that challenge in a creative and playful way. The Agents of Creative Change invited everyone who took part to make new connections across sectors through a series of two workshops led by key speakers. These involved sharing the identified challenges, creating artist-academic-charitable sector teams to each address a challenge, and whole-group discussions to share practice, ideas and trial solutions to the presented challenges.

One of the collaborations led to the development of the Spoken Word in the Community Hub (**SWITCH**) project. The challenge, identified by Jemilea Wisdom of [Writerz and Scribez](#), was: *"How to reach people often marginalised as*

audiences in performance or exhibition spaces?" Jemilea was teamed up with the artist Kay Rufai and academics from the Health Inequalities Research Network (HERON) based at King's College London. The SWITCH project involved the showcase of various forms of art including spoken work by artists during the Wandsworth Fringe at various community-based locations including a barbershop and street-based work, in addition to the provision of art workshops in a local pupil referral unit.

In her own words, Jemilea summarises the purpose of SWITCH:

"SWITCH was about how could we use the places that people frequent to expose them to art and switching up where the art happens, what a traditional art space becomes, and how could that affect and impact the people that engage with that art."

SWITCH collaborators



Jemilea Wisdom

Jemilea is the CEO of [Writerz and Scribez](#), a not-for-profit creative arts company. The company and their partnering artists are committed to providing high-quality

creative experiences supported by their underlying principles to make arts accessible, reach marginalised communities, promote creativity and develop skills and talents. The company firmly believe that through using art, they can change lives. Writerz and Scribez run projects and events in various community settings across the United Kingdom often in collaboration with partnering organisations that have similar aims. These have included school festivals, homeless projects, prison performances and youth events which have resulted in exhibitions, drama productions and book publishing.

Kay Rufai



Kay Rufai is a Poet, Motivational Speaker, Photographer, Youth Worker & Creative expressionist. His ambition is to use the marriage of varying methods of self-expression to inspire, motivate, emancipate, educate and ultimately bring smiles to the people of the world I co-exist in – “Art is the only language that is truly universal in connecting to a person's soul irrespective of their background, colour, religion, ethnicity, culture, gender, ability and geographical confines, therefore I created a brand which aims to use art to UNIVERSALLY connect SOULS, hence birthing the name UNIVERSOUL BRAND”.

The Health Inequalities Research Network (HERON**)**



HERON is an international public engagement network aimed at involving people in action and research about inequalities in health and health services. It brings together people from the community, local charities, public health researchers and health practitioners with a vision of having a collaborative approach to research in the community. HERON is currently funded by the Wellcome Trust and is led by Professor Stephani Hatch, Dr Cerisse Gunasinghe and Dr Charlotte Woodhead at King's College London.

SWITCH aims

SWITCH had four aims, to:

- 1) IMPROVE AND INCREASE THE INVOLVEMENT AND ENGAGEMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN ART AND CULTURE**
- 2) DEVELOP COMMUNITY SPACES AS VENUES FOR SHOWCASING ART**
- 3) FACILITATE A DIALOGUE AROUND BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT**
- 4) PILOT (PROOF OF CONCEPT) FOR FURTHER FUNDING TO ENABLE EXPANSION OF THE SWITCH PROGRAMME.**

SWITCH activities

Between May 3 and 18th 2019, photographers, artists, poets and performers took part in a series of performances and workshops. Recognising and celebrating the intimacy of getting your hair done, artists were placed in London Barberhood, Clean Cuts and Trinity Barbers in Tooting. Workshops were held at a pupil referral unit and at the Battersea Arts Centre and spoken word street performances were also held. A showcase and exhibition of work was hosted at Fresh Ground. Jemilea and Kay commissioned artists to draw images of barbershops/hairdressers which were exhibited at the Showcase and also at Tooting Market, alongside photography and spoken word. Evens were free for under 18s.

Evaluation

The researcher contribution to SWITCH addressed the third and fourth SWITCH aims. Through a focus group held after the final showcase event, HERON researchers aimed to understand how artists involved in SWITCH perceived the project. This explored their experiences of and thoughts about performing in non-conventional spaces, their ideas about existing barriers to engaging with art and how they thought the SWITCH project overcomes these barriers.

Focus group

Five people took part in a focus group discussion, including artists that had partnered with Writerz and Scribez on the SWITCH programme, a Writerz and Scribez representative and community members interested in attending and/or who had referred others to the programme.

Through a series of open-ended questions and prompts, researchers heard about the experiences and thoughts of the participants through their own discussion. With consent, this discussion was recorded and written up so the researchers could explore their thoughts in more depth to better understand what it was about SWITCH that influenced their goals.

Participants provided informed written consent for the data collected to be used as part of an evaluation of the SWITCH project, their individual identity has been protected in writing up their discussion.

Results

"Although we wanted to reach the most marginalised groups, often we weren't getting those people as audiences, erm, because as they weren't coming into the spaces, that art was happening."R1

Not for people like me

The overarching goal and purpose of the SWITCH project was described as increasing access to art for people marginalised from traditional arts spaces. The reasons behind the need for such an initiative, and how and why it is hoped to work, were highlighted by discussions reflecting the broader socio-cultural context and prior lived experience of those leading the project. Perceptions of exclusion from conventional arts spaces or performances enhanced feelings that such places are 'not for people like me'. This was exacerbated by a lack of diversity of both performers and audiences, as well as interactions participants had had with others. Such actual and anticipated exclusion is a manifest barrier to accessing arts. It elicits feelings of difference and self-consciousness, that others are suspicious of one's presence, and it also exposes people to prejudice.

"I didn't know what to wear, I knew that jeans weren't gonna cut it and I was really pressurised about how do I fit into this place because the people that go to the opera don't look like me... but when we got there I felt out of place, not because I don't enjoy the opera because I thought it was amazing, but, because even when we were just standing in the foyer, like people were

looking at us like we didn't have tickets – like we were lost, like we were in the wrong place." R1

"When you say 'theatre' to someone, they think of like 'Wicked', and they wouldn't necessarily think of the spoken word play that was happening at BAC, um, so it's like the perception of what that means and who it's for is limited because when the school takes you to the theatre, you're not going to see people that look like you on the stage most of the time." R1

Exclusion appeared to be based on race/ethnicity, social class and differences in culture and preferences. Not only did discussants describe feeling excluded for looking different, but they also mentioned class-based norms and social schemas associated with conventional arts spaces which consolidate the unspoken exclusion; preconceived norms about what it is to dress "smartly", drinking wine, overpriced ice-cream and nuts, seat quality and location organised by price. These experiences are so powerful because they mirror broader structural barriers of discrimination and classism in daily life.

"When you go the theatre there's the £15 pound seats where you can barely see and then there's the £75 front row seats, and you can already see

like from where people are sitting where they belong." R1

"There's still a taboo about you, know getting into those places, to feel that [in] spaces it's normal because it's - out of the context of art that's how a lot of us feel in the country anyway, so being in arts spaces is just another version of that, I guess it's just a more creative version of feeling that way." R4

In addition to experienced and anticipated exclusion linked to class and ethnicity, discussants described a lack of awareness and opportunity to access art for young people more generally, and that due to lack of exposure there are negative perceptions associated with different forms of art and performance which are not challenged.

"There's so much variety going on in art right now but the perception is still the same, so like we'll meet people all the time to do workshops with them and we say we are going to do poetry and immediately they have the same idea of poetry for like the first 50 years[...]and you meet a young person and they think the same thing and you think, 'why is that perception still the same? It's definitely about the access, having access and I

think nowadays what's important is, for young people that don't have that access to know about what's happening right now, it's important for them to know that there's so much that they can do." R4

Performer experience and 'inconsiderate organisers'

The barriers identified influencing peoples' access to art were paralleled by their descriptions of their own experiences of discomfort as performers. This extended not just to the audience but to the organisers as well. Inconsiderate organisers created uncomfortable spaces to perform. This was not just about the exclusionary practices of 'conventional spaces' experienced by actual or potential audiences, but also about how they were treated by organisers of events at which they were performing.

Inconsiderate organisers were those that did not support the artists on arrival, did not think to tell them about the wider context of the event, and basis and/or courteous information about who the audience would be, when the artist is scheduled to perform or where they could put their coat. They were the organisers that put constraints and parameters on what the artist could or could not perform, how they performed it, and what expectations they had for how the performance would be received.

Such neglects had an impact on the performers in terms of how welcome they felt, their readiness and ability to perform, and the feeling that their performances were merely 'slot filling', fulfilling others idea(l)s, and meeting 'objectives'. This stifled both their sense of identity as creatives and capacity to be creative. Moreover, such slot-filling could result in a felt 'disconnect' between audience and performer.

"A lot of the time it does feel like you're there as an after-thought and when they contact you - they being the organiser - or...you know, they may sound like they've had this sort of thing in mind since the beginning and they like, yeah, you know, we want blah, blah, blah, and you think how YOU, do that certain thing. Then a lot of the time, it feels, you get there and realise, OK, they don't really have much faith in their affair... They try to deflect to an artist, be like, give this event some jazz, give it some zhush, give it some va-va-voom and they're thinking of that one time they went to a wedding and they were going, yeah that was really nice for that environment. Whereas in this one, it might not really work, and now you're there feeling awkward because realise, I don't really fit, but, I have to perform and, it's like this

whole, sort of like, zoo-act sort of like, rah, people are like, people are just watching something weird happen and don't really feel as valued, it's kind of... it's disheartening." R3

How and why does SWITCH increase access?

Such experiences contrasted with the way they described their performances as part of the SWITCH project and other past work with the project lead. The next section first describes what it was about SWITCH that was perceived to reduce barriers to accessing art, and then describes how this also influenced the performers' experience.

Challenging constraints: Circumventing exclusion

SWITCH is all about getting around those deeply embedded unspoken constraints, as well as those described above, to accessing art.

"Because a lot of the barriers to access about not feeling welcome, not feeling accepted or belonging in a space, if we can come and create that in a space um that people already access, then they feel welcome to the art, they already feel welcome because it's a place that they go to and the art becomes welcoming to them." R1

To do this, SWITCH delivered free performances at local barbershops. Not only does this remove the cost barrier, a barbershop does not trigger the same social expectations or anticipated reactions from others associated with conventional arts spaces. This circumventing of expectations is characteristic of other non-traditional spaces:

“There’s definitely a difference to like going to a small theatre in Hackney than going to like the National Theatre and how people treat you and how they look at you, how they um, perceive you – whereas if I went to a coffee shop, and they were having an immersive theatre experience, those expectations are gone because we’re just here to drink coffee.” R1

However, for young men in particular, as described by the male discussants, the barbershop as a familiar space experienced from when they were young; they know what happens there, how to behave, and how to interact. Moreover, it was described powerfully as an intimate space, albeit subversively or unconsciously intimate. This unspoken characteristic of the barbershop is what provides the way in to reach young black men without them having to leave their comfort zone. One discussant also described how this would be less intimidating and more accessible for her teenage son, and for other young people for whom there are other barriers

to leaving their locality. The following quote sums up why such a space is so important to those the SWITCH project aims to reach:

“Barbershop is such an intimate space -so intimate - it's the only place a man can have his hand on my ear, ever, and me allow it, ever, it's the only time a man can touch my head. It's the only time I have someone's voice this close to me...and I look good when I come out, are you mad! You know it's like it's the only place like it, and, young black men don't see intimacy - if I'm in a classroom, and I'm saying, “what is intimacy?, How can we explain what intimacy is?”, if I say “getting your haircut” they'd be “oh yeah slightly” but they wouldn't think it, they wouldn't say that themselves , it doesn't occur to them that this is an intimate moment right now, and, your barber is, is, a lot to you, like, is a lot to you, and that area of your heart that your barber occupies, it may seem superficial but when you bring the art into the space I can imagine, some sort of tying up of a bunch of loose strands happening in your life, rah, like this is the space where I'm actually changed. And, like I'm allowed to talk to my barber about things, I'm allowed to

be the man that nobody thinks that I am, and I realise rah that every man just wants to talk, we all just wanna, you know – yeah, like we crave it - we crave it. You don't realise we crave that sort of emotional intimate thing with the mandem. Outside, “yeah cool you're ugly I hate you innit” it's fine, but inside there that's the area that we know that and I think what I imagine when I see [person] come in and he starts playing and everybody treats it like its fine, like its normal, like it's OK, I'm then like, “OK, alright, it's cool” - like so, me already being levelled like coming in, cos it's a barbershop, like with that added it cements that as a space that I can go to both physically and within myself, which, you know, yeah they get. I can imagine it meaning a lot to some young black kids in there, and them not knowing why, but, yeah, they carry that with them, and they might not see why did that affect me so much, you know.” R3

Opportunities for enablement: overcoming the barrier of the first

Enablers to accessing art – or reasons why they were involved in arts and performance despite such socio-cultural constraints - were described in relation to the performers' own

experiences. These related to childhood exposure to art/performance and being encouraged to perform even if sometimes this was remembered as being difficult or embarrassing.

“Our parents used to force us to try things, you know, there was no kind of 'ah yeah I don't wanna go that, you know', they are like how are you gonna learn if you never go, you know - I mean we'd end up horse riding you know, we'd end up singing in a cathedral you know we'd end up, doing song writing workshops, graphic design and all sorts but it only happened because we overcame that barrier of, 'the first'.” R2

“My mum's been a teacher... erm, my... whole life. So... erm. And I was very emotional as a kid. I didn't really know how to handle my emotions, so...erm... I think she [mum] was always pushing towards doing something like, creative anyway. Like, “Oh, so you can't to me how you feel, well the draw it” [...] So, I realised growing up on my estate, I was one of the only ones that had encouragement in the home around those kind of things.” R3

In addition to their own support to access the arts, the artists also described their actions to mentor other aspiring or 'early career' performers. This included supporting them to go to conventional arts events and passing on opportunities to perform in non-traditional spaces – enabling them to experience their own 'first times'. SWITCH was therefore an opportunity for them to support other artists as well.

"It, was, something that I enjoyed and on top of that, I get a chance to bring one of my musicians that I work with. I like, I spend a lot of time encouraging the people I do look after, and be like, you can go into this industry, you can be a creative, you can be out there and be different [...] You can find spaces to enjoy yourselves." R2

For one discussant, it had not been until they had been involved with workshops with the organiser behind the SWITCH project that they started to perceive themselves as being 'an artist'. This opportunity and encouragement therefore worked both ways, for them as artists and as audience members.

For audience members, in addition to circumventing exclusionary constraints, SWITCH also acts to enhance factors that enable access to art. This includes increasing awareness of art and providing a gateway through which individuals and

performers may be able to go on to access other forms of art or in other – potentially even more traditional – spaces.

"Bringing art into spaces that people are already at changes it the perspective about what art is and what I've seen with some people is that when they have the art in spaces where they go to they might be more inclined to be adventurous and actually go somewhere else to experience it." R4

Performer experience of SWITCH: Performing purposively

For performers, SWITCH also overturned many of the difficulties they described in terms of the impact of inconsiderate organisers and of being employed to 'slot-fill' or meet an objective. SWITCH was fun. It permitted creativity by encouraging experimentation and improvisation, and by removing the expectations and parameters associated with performing to meet others' objectives. And, it was a reminder of their own individual creative identities.

"I'm a song writer but I even forgot to mention that because when you're there constantly helping other people, you forget, sometimes about your coping mechanisms, or what you do to process what you're going through and in that moment and I think like I did a little like freestyle song based

on the environment and it was, it felt [short pause] I dunno, it felt kinda ethereal, just being able to do it, and you're able to express yourself, you know you're like singing again the sound of a razor or you know the bus going by and you've gotta change everything, so yeah." R2

Relating to the audience

As well as enhancing enjoyment of performing, the artists described how SWITCH was a chance to connect with the audience, in contrast to the disconnect they described in other circumstances. As with some other previous experiences of non-traditional spaces (for example, working with or performing for with people who are homeless or with experience of domestic violence), SWITCH was also described as a *purposeful* performance.

"It wasn't until, when I met [name] I started doing workshops with her, is that I saw ways I can use skills that I have... And also use skills I have as a person combined together. And... there you can see that there is more of a purpose of what you can do. You don't just see what, like you're capable of doing. You see, you see, what you actually can change. Even if it's a little bit. 'Cause, that little bit of change is a lot for someone else." R4

Especially for the male discussants, the barbershop context enabled them to relate to the audience in a very particular, personal and in-depth way.

"Being able to do a broken-down version of that someone else, someone in another chair relating to that, some-someone in that chair relating to that song, someone in another chair relating to that song, it was like OK... I'm not going to tell you to shut up, which was... Kinda, unheard of, so... It's different from, for example, from when you're in a church, or, or a kind of secular environment in which there's an expectation."R2

Summary

To summarise, SWITCH aims to increase access for people marginalised or excluded from the arts. Traditional arts spaces and conventional performances invoke many implicit and explicit exclusionary experiences linked to race/ethnicity, social class and gender. These reflect broader social structural constraints which accounts for their pervasiveness and impact. Performers also suffer from inconsiderate organisers and opportunities which restrain their creative identity, impose a feeling of slot-filling, and put them in uncomfortable situations. Moreover, if they themselves reflect the very populations that are traditionally excluded from conventional

spaces, then they too may experience a disconnect between themselves and their audience. SWITCH acts to circumvent exclusionary barriers linked to cost, social structures, and inconsiderate organisers. While other non-conventional performances can also reduce barriers, the barbershop location has potential to be particularly efficacious in reaching young black men - a demographic highly underrepresented as audiences. Moreover, while enablements to accessing art include childhood encouragement, mentoring, exposure and increasing awareness, these are not available to everyone. SWITCH provides an opportunity to promote these enablements, and to influence both performers as well as potential audiences. Future work should explore in more depth the experiences of those attending SWITCH events, to see if they agree with the

performers perspective and to identify ways in which SWITCH could go further to achieve their goal.

Future directions

Next steps for SWITCH include

- A showcase of SWITCH and HERON's South East London Photography (SELPh) creative outputs at a local exhibition.
- Qualitative evaluation of audience and workshop attendees' experiences at future SWITCH events
- Integrate findings to improve and expand programme
- Application for funds to deliver further SWITCH programmes.

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