



Holding Lightly

Restoke's approach
to co-creating performances



Cover image: You Are Here, The Wedgwood Institute, Burslem, 2016.

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The resource was designed by Nicola Winstanley, and includes photographs by Jenny Harper and promotional materials by Sarah Nadin.

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**CO—
CREATING
CHANGE**

Foreword

Restoke has been working with members of the public to create performances since 2009. We were recently given the opportunity to look back over this body of work to revisit the successes and challenges, question the decisions we've made as directors, and pinpoint what defines our core approach to making shows with professional and non-professional performers.

Thanks to a Growth & Replication commission from the Co-Creating Change Network, we were able to spend many hours talking about and interrogating our methods, reviewing evaluation reports and participant journeys, identifying fluctuating power dynamics and the importance of artistry, and collating our findings into this resource. We think that co-creation is a powerful approach to creating art, and we want to share our learning so that other practitioners may benefit from our experience.

Although much of our experience of co-creation is from within the context of performance making, we hope that our learning can offer guidance on how to foster co-creation culture, and arrive at outcomes that are truly representative of the people involved.



Holding Lightly

Restoke's approach to co-creating performances

Guide to using this resource

The graphic on the right shows our approach as a seven stage cycle, beginning at the top with initiation and progressing clockwise through to continuation, before flowing back into initiation.

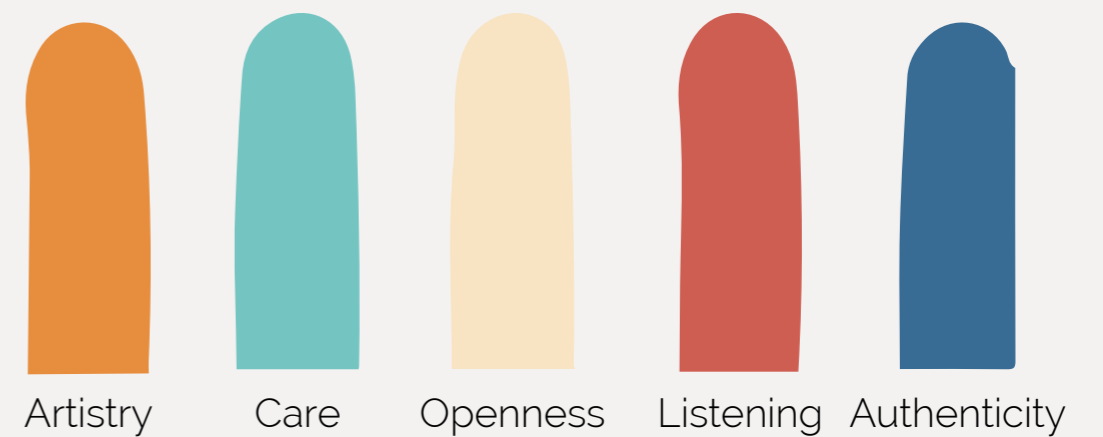
Supporting the cycle are our guiding principles, which influenced the development of the approach and which continue to guide our growth as a company.

You can read about our approach and principles from start to finish, or skip to the specific stage or principle you are interested in by clicking it on the following graphic.




Throughout the document you will see this symbol next to sections of text. Clicking it will take you to further reading, including relevant case studies, report chapters and personal accounts, as well as helpful tips and advice for practitioners, based on our learning.

Click here to begin the cycle, or skip to a specific stage or principle.



Themes 2009-2021:

Post-industry, 
homelessness, 
ageing, migration, 
masculinity and 
mental health, 
motherhood.

Initiation

Restoke makes shows about social issues that concern us and the people of Stoke-on-Trent. We build performances with the voices and perspectives of people with lived experience of these issues.

As we have grown as a company, we have increasingly chosen themes that invite the participation of marginalised communities, demographics that don't tend to engage in group creativity or performance, and those whose voices often get lost in the hum of debate.

By choosing a show theme that requires the knowledge and participation of those who have experienced it, we initiate a process of co-creation.



Open call-out flyer for Man Up
2017

Invitation

Conversations: An invitation to explore the theme

To make sure we reach the people we want to work with, we take a tandem approach to our initial invitation stage.

Open call-out

We produce high quality visual and written call-outs which we share across social media, local traditional media and as posters and flyers. These call-outs are aimed at the general population in Stoke-on-Trent, and ask to meet with people who have something to say about the project theme.

Targeted groups

We make targeted efforts to connect with people that we think will not see or naturally respond to open call-outs, visiting relevant groups and spending time getting to know them, building trust and having conversations in places where they feel comfortable, safe and supported.

With this approach we invite participation from a more diverse range of people than an open call-out alone, taking into account barriers of access, culture and confidence within the diverse communities of the city.

Meeting people

One-to-one conversations

These often long and in-depth conversations help to form the basis of future group discussions, and in some cases are carried through to the final performance itself. We enter into these conversations with very few set questions and never encourage people to reveal uncomfortable or traumatic experiences. We follow their lead, reassuring them of their right to withdraw anything they tell us from the process at any time.

Group conversations



The people who respond to the call-out are invited to meet with us, in groups, to hear about our processes and motivations for the project. They are given opportunities to verbally share as much as they want about their experience of the theme, and to tell us how they would like to be involved. These sessions often involve a presentation of past work, perhaps an advocate from a previous project, and simple creative ways to register interest and begin to share thoughts.

Taster Sessions: An invitation to explore the art forms

After the initial conversations have happened, we invite those who are curious to events and workshops for more conversations, but also to share skills and learn new ones. There's always dancing and singing involved - we have learned how powerful these art forms are for bonding groups of people who may not have met each other or taken part in a creative project before, but they are also the key art forms that people who wish to continue can expect to be doing more of.

Ways in

It is important to offer comfortable 'ways in' to performance, which can be a huge leap for some people. Alternative art forms are often utilised to provide gentler routes in, creative writing being one which some may feel more comfortable with as a first activity, and this also offers pathways into storytelling and sharing.

Introductions

Taster sessions are an opportunity to introduce not only the art forms, but also the artists and facilitators who will join participants on their journey. This also gives us, as directors, the opportunity to step back from delivery at the earliest stages, allowing us to assume the 'light touch' role that we maintain throughout the process.

Man Up Taster Session
New Vic Theatre
2017



Blog post: Personal account of attending taster sessions

We see just how quickly barriers are broken down and how keenly trust is earned in these sessions. This is a gentle invitation; There is no expectation of commitment and no obligation to continue. Sessions are short, lasting a maximum of two hours.



Commitment case study: Click and skip to p.48 for Up Man 'H': Reflections



Exploration

In the exploration stage we begin to combine stories shared in the conversations with art forms from the taster sessions, and provide a focused environment in which to explore them. This may include explorations of a space, emergent themes, or a specific story.

MAN UP MISSION STATEMENT

We are here to share the diverse and unique experiences of people in this room.

We share our experiences and reserve our opinions.

We seek out collective experiences, but also individual stories which may challenge stereotypes and stigma around mental health and masculinity.

We are co-creators of this. We collaborate and support each others' creative journeys.

We are not here to create one vision of, or future for, maleness. We listen without judgement and we keep an open mind.

We ask questions, but we don't always need answers - we're not trying to solve anything.

This is not therapy, but feel free to have a therapeutic experience.

We make art, wholeheartedly.

To create a safe and supportive environment, we reiterate our approach and clarify the responsibilities and expectations of everyone involved. With our collective mission and conduct agreed, we use creative methods to engage all the senses, from which new ideas, deeper knowledge, kinship and commitment emerge.

Man Up Mission Statement, Man Up, 2018.

When designing a shared experience, we seek out the collective themes but also the storytellers and individual stories that might challenge the norm, or be lesser heard in public arenas.

As the exploration stage approaches its end there are a number of things that we look for to prepare the ground for the formation stage. We consider potential gaps in the narrative, such as key stories and voices that may be missing from the mix, and identify emerging skills and talents that could be allowed to shine through. We then consider how developing narratives could be produced to authentically reflect the stories, skills and abilities of the group.



Helpful questions for moving forward

Photo:
SEAMS
Keele Chapel
2018



At this stage, we are acutely conscious of balancing artistic vision with participants' experience. Unbridled creative exploration is joyful and productive, but without the parameters of artistic direction to contain the discoveries, the outcome could never be realised to the level of quality that we demand for our participants and audiences.

Formation

The formation stage is where we consolidate ideas, understand who's doing what and create a structure. This involves making practical, logistical decisions about the overall 'shape' of the performance: how the stories will unfold and intertwine, which order they'll work best in to create an overall narrative, and how performers, set-pieces and props will occupy and move around the performance space(s).

These decisions are not the sole responsibility of us as directors, nor the professional facilitators. In fact, the cast are the real experts in these matters; they are the ones who have been on the most extraordinary journey, had the most intense experiences, and so will have the most acute sense of what feels authentic. For this reason, we leave plenty of space in this part of the process to listen deeply and let new ideas emerge. We build-in time at the beginning and end of every session to sit together and discuss progress.



Determining Authenticity



Collaboration Case Study: Click and skip to p.30

At this stage, we are relying on months of bonding, trust and shared experiences to give people the confidence to challenge decisions and speak freely as equal collaborators.

Man Up formation
Goldenhill Working Men's Club
2018



This is the time that the ownership of the performance shifts largely to the cast. It is they who will be in front of audiences in a short time, and so our role shifts once more, to support the cast to find their collective, creative voice. The transfer of ownership at this stage is, in many ways, a natural progression, but it is also a choice that we make based on the guiding principles of our organisation.



Dynamics of holding

Realisation

Promotions

The essence of the realisation stage is sharing the ideas, stories and actions of the co-creators with audiences. For us, this is the performance.

Our process naturally presents opportunities to promote the final product. We work with a photographer to capture the journey of those involved, and a videographer to create promotional films.

It is vital that our promotional materials maintain the high standards we set out with, and that the performance itself lives up to our ambitions. The quality of the work is what attracts new audiences, and attracts new participants to subsequent projects.

To entice audiences, we put the people involved at the forefront of promotions, showcasing what they believe is the defining character of the work.

Exposing potential audiences to the people involved makes it clear that, whatever issues a performance promises to explore, they will be explored from deeply personal and collective perspectives of those who have experienced them.

Poster for The Voyagers
2015



Watch a show:
You Are Here- The Film
2016

Increasingly, we use blogging as a means to introduce cast members and their experiences of the project to potential audiences in the run up to the performance. Cast members are encouraged to write about the development of the show in their own words, which are released as blog posts on the Restoke website.

Feedback



You Are Here
The Wedgwood Institute
2016

The giving and receiving of the work opens up new realms of understanding of the theme. As audience members experience the performance in the light of their own life experiences, they give new and personal meanings to the work.



We give a lot of thought to how these accounts will be sensitively captured in the immediate aftermath of the performance, when emotions and thoughts about what they have witnessed are at their most vivid.

In recognition of this important role, we make sure the experience of giving feedback feels like an integrated participatory element of the performance itself. This helps to hold the energy in the room for longer, and tacitly invites audiences to 'leave their mark' on the performance.



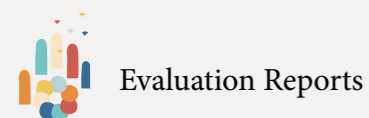
Details of audience feedback tools
You Are Here
The Wedgwood Institute, Burslem
2016

Reflection

In the reflection stage, we reflect, evaluate, analyse and report on what happened, what went well, what was difficult, and what could be done better. We work with an associate evaluator to help us to do this, and we invite the participants to be part of this process.

As we developed our approach we chose to have an evaluator as a near constant presence in our projects, to provide an extra level of focused observation and reflection at each stage. Our evaluator involves participants in documenting the effects of the project as it unfolds, charting personal and collective experiences, and how they influence the development of the next stage. This provides an extra level of accountability that helps us to reflect and adapt both during and after a project.

At the end of the project our evaluator produces a narrative report, which is beautifully designed and written in plain English, so that anyone can read and understand more about the journeys in our projects.



Man Up Exhibition
Keele University
2018

Continuation

For projects that have made significant impacts, an urgency for continuation comes from participants, audiences or both. There is a desire to continue the conversations, continue the creativity, continue to hold space for the new community created, and to open up that community to involve more people.

The people are the legacy

We recognise when our responsibility for participants' journeys should come to an end, and we don't want to undermine the natural connections between participants by micro-managing the legacy. We maintain a light touch approach to allow participants to assume greater agency and leadership of the legacy if they wish to.

For us this stage brings another opportunity for listening and giving time to let things unfold organically. We find that participants need time to transition back into their routines without the regular meetings and the adrenaline 'highs' of making and performing a show. Therefore we don't rush into a formalised legacy programme too hastily.

Up Men website,
A legacy project



Formal continuation

We believe that for formal continuation to happen with integrity it needs to be co-led with those who experienced it.

Some activities born of projects have become part of our core delivery, if the need to continue them is deemed too great to stop. The people who continue into these legacy programmes become advocates for them, and welcome new people with open hearts and an understanding that creative adventures can often feel scary at first.

Between the conclusion of a project and acquiring new funding, we keep people engaged by scheduling meet-ups, events or inviting them to share in opportunities with Restoke and other organisations. However, we find that when there is a shared urgency to continue, the participants keep themselves together.

Up Men Sing
Breaking the Mould Awards
2019



Co-creators have gone on to become trustees, steering group members or associate artists, and therefore affect real change within the governance of our organisation, and the planning and delivery of new projects.

Completing the cycle

As an organisation we are changed by each project, by each iteration of the process, by the people we've met, the places we've worked, the stories we've heard and the impact we see. We think our responsibility, as a community arts organisation, is to respond to all the challenges and celebrations of our work, to adapt to change and not get complacent. Therefore, although our next project may not be a direct continuation from the last, the knowledge, experiences and learning do continue, helping us develop more informed and refined processes.



Appendix

Guiding Principles

- Artistry
- Care
- Openness
- Listening
- Authenticity

Dynamics of Holding

Tips and Advice for Practitioners

- 3 tips for designing an open call-out
- Facilitating group conversations
- Performance: Helpful questions for moving forward
- Some questions to determine authenticity

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Guiding Principles



Artistry
Care
Openness
Listening
Authenticity

Artistry

Artistry as quality

Artistry is where we come from and what we strive to bring to all aspects of our projects. From the initial call-out flyer to the performance promotions, we lead with high artistic standards and work hard to ensure that the performance itself lives up to our ambitions.

The quality of the work is what attracts new participants and audiences, particularly from outside the area. Restoke feels strongly that Stoke-on-Trent should be renowned for ambitious and high quality art, as part of alleviating the negative stigma surrounding our city.

Within our Guiding Principles, there is a balance to be struck between artistry and authenticity. We want people to feel comfortable sharing their authentic selves, and to feel confident to hold the process with us. At the same time, participants need to trust that Restoke have the expertise and experience to present them and their stories in the best possible light. They deserve and should expect to make and engage in good art, considering the huge personal investment they make in our projects. To achieve this balance we have a small number of artistic parameters that we set to ensure we work to our strengths, maintain high standards, and retain our own authenticity as artists.

Artistry as creativity

There's always dancing and singing in our projects. These are our art forms, and we trust in their power to bond groups of people who may not have met each other or taken part in a creative project before. Experimenting with art forms presents people with novel opportunities for expression and collaboration, and creates a nurturing safe space for them to learn about themselves and each other, from which understanding and kinship develops.

We acknowledge that we develop, artistically, from every performance project we do, and adapt and grow as artists from each experience.

Care

Care as respect

People often reach beyond their comfort zones and take big emotional risks to tell their stories in our shows. This is what makes them so special. But we know that the emotional journey can be very powerful and sometimes overwhelming. We are careful to ensure that the right balance of care is offered throughout our projects, in recognition of peoples' own agency and their generous personal contributions.

Depending on the sensitivities associated with a show theme and the people affected by it, we take on expertise and training to make sure the right support is in place for participants, should they need it. As temporary custodians of their stories, we ensure their early accounts are captured sensitively and are protected. We always allow people to withdraw from the process at any time, and will only include their contributions with their informed consent.

An open dialogue is key to reassuring people of their own agency within a project. We don't want to infantilise participants by attempting to assume responsibility for their emotional wellbeing. We take responsibility for the quality of the offer, and respect peoples' processes as responsible adults. We hold realistic expectations of the group, and make sure that they know what to expect from us.

Care as culture

When we reach a stage where the people involved are committed and invested in the project, we rely on the 'safe space' created by months of bonding to allow us to have open conversations about how group members are feeling. The ritual of checking in and out at the beginning and end of each session helps us to understand the energy levels of the group. This means that we can plan responsively, programming activities that support wellbeing, in balance with what we need to achieve.

Holding space for personal emotional journeys and producing a show at the same time can prove a difficult balance, but the bonds that have formed in the group mean that people increasingly take care of each other. These bonds, in the immediate aftermath of a project, also help to support their transition out of it. We encourage people to think of the safe space as an ongoing situation, not just a temporary mechanism for developing a performance.

The culmination of an intense project can be emotionally exhausting for Restoke and associate artists too, especially if a project has tackled a particularly heavy subject. We recognise that support may be needed for facilitators to transition out of the project.

Openness

Openness as integrity

We choose themes to target the engagement of marginalised communities, people who may face barriers to engaging in group creativity, and people who are less likely to see the opportunity in the first place. We want to include lesser heard voices and spotlight perspectives that can only be found in the lived experience of those affected by the issues being explored. Therefore, openness is incredibly important to the integrity of our invitation to participants, and remains vital to building respectful and trusting relationships as a project progresses.

We make targeted efforts to connect with people we think will not see or naturally respond to call outs, visiting relevant community groups and spending time getting to know people, building trust and having conversations in places where people feel safe and supported. This extra effort helps to cultivate a group that is more representative of a diverse range of lived experience of the theme, which enriches the sharing and learning experience for everyone and enhances the performance itself.

When we begin to explore ideas together, we come with no set agenda. We are open to pursuing whichever stories and perspectives emerge from the group, being mindful to ensure everyone feels heard and represented.

Openness as flexibility

It is fair to say that our approach keeps us on our toes as we strive to work as flexibly as possible to make space for the emerging skills and talents in the group to shine through, stepping back and adjusting our roles in response to developments in the project. By keeping expectations of commitment as flexible as possible, we have been able to keep people on-board who might otherwise have had to withdraw. We find that it is better to be less certain about commitment than risk losing people, and to be clear and open about what we can and can't accommodate.

We acknowledge that our role is to respond flexibly to all the challenges and celebrations of the work, to not get complacent, and adapt to change.

Openness as sharing

It could be said that our entire approach is about sharing. From initiation to the reflection, we try to be as open and inclusive as possible, because it is in the sharing of the creative process and product that we think the magic lies.



Listening

Listening as leadership

Apart from a small number of artistic parameters that help us create a high quality art experience, our light touch approach to leadership is informed by listening, actively and deeply, to everyone involved in a project. We listen for individual and collective stories that need to be told, for emotional wellbeing, and for leadership itself emerging in the group. Listening guides our decisions about how we move creative processes forward with sensitivity and integrity. To allow us capacity to assume this role, we employ facilitators to lead creative sessions so that we can stand back, observe, and respond to the challenges and opportunities emerging.

As we developed our approach, we had an evaluator as a near constant presence in our projects, providing an extra level of focused listening. Having someone around to observe and consult with participants, stakeholders and audiences from an outside perspective provides us with an extra level of observation and reflection at each stage, and helps us reflect, adapt and grow both during and after a project.

Listening as culture

Because our approach uses conversation and knowledge exchange between people from diverse backgrounds as the driving force for creative exploration and bonding, instilling a culture of listening is key to avoiding unnecessary conflict.

We lead with the promise of non-judgmental listening, and ask participants to speak from their experience and reserve their opinions. This creates a dynamic in which participants can feel secure in their personal understanding of a theme while exploring other peoples' lived experiences as part of the wider web of complexity inherent in the issues being explored.

Our projects are not necessarily about reaching consensus, but we often find that, despite the personal intricacies of individual experience, commonalities emerge that transcend these differences.



Authenticity

Authenticity as respect

We are careful to balance our artistic vision with the collective vision of the people we're working with. As a performance takes shape, the question 'does this feel authentic?' is the most important benchmark for assessing progress. For Restoke, producing an authentic performance is a specific thing- something that co-creation is both the guide and the mechanism for. To achieve authenticity, the outcome must faithfully represent the shared experience of the people involved; the stories, the relationships, the learning, the emotions, and the atmospheres created.

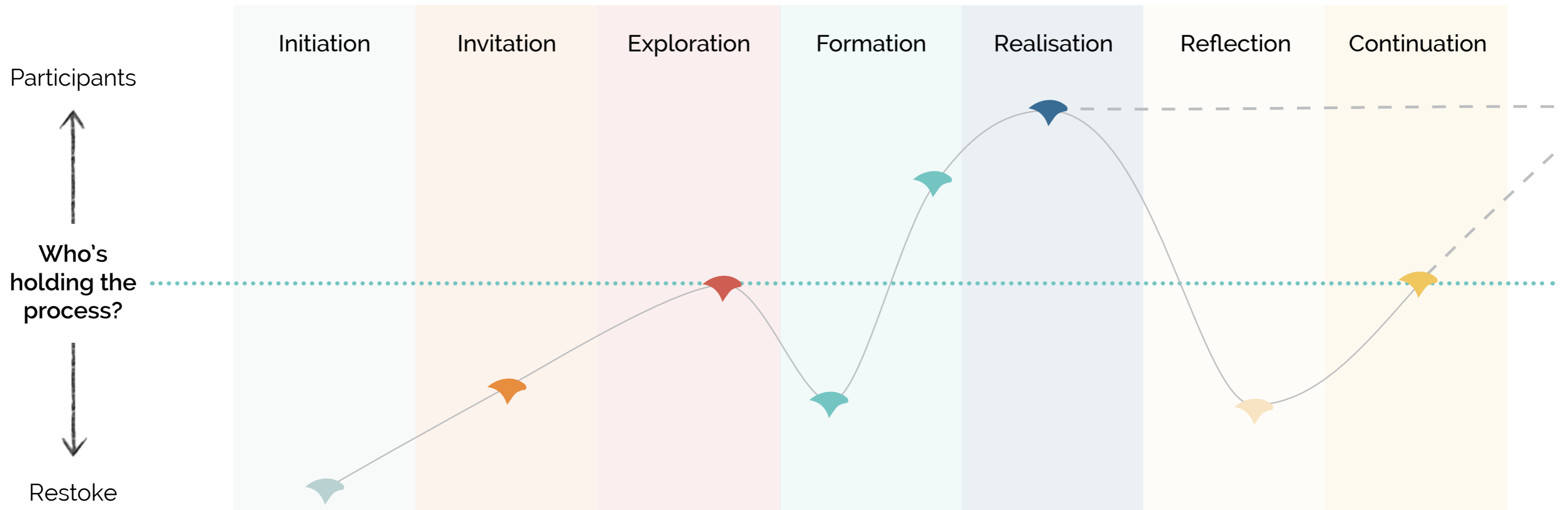
We favour straight storytelling, and take great care to frame stories in ways that celebrate and enrich them, rather than dilute them with unnecessary spectacle or overproduction. Maintaining a culture of care and listening helps to keep our artistic contributions in balance with the participants' vision. The safe space created during the project acts as a forum for collectively assessing the quality and authenticity of the performance as it develops.

Authenticity as integrity

Authenticity in our projects begins with us. We try to remain true to ourselves as artists, and as a company, embodying the guiding principles that support our approach. We set this in motion by choosing a theme that we are artistically excited about, and feel we have the skills and experience to tackle. We don't over-promise, making sure that what we say is honest and clear, and that we follow through on what we say we're going to do.

Dynamics of holding

Throughout the cycle of a project, power dynamics fluctuate in response to the needs of the group and to ensure that a performance is realised to the standard that we expect for participants and audiences. The illustration below shows some common fluctuations we've identified in each stage of our approach.



See the following pages for more details on the dynamics of holding.

Dynamics of holding Continued



Initiation

As initiators of a project, Restoke are in control at this stage. We choose the theme based on issues that interests us and what we think are important to the people of Stoke-on-Trent. We choose how the invitation to explore it with us will be extended and we know the outcome will be a performance.



Invitation

At the invitation stage we hold the process, but begin to open it up to others through conversations, creative workshops and sharings. Even at this early stage, the people we meet and the stories we hear begin to shape the direction of the project. This is also when a core group of participants begins to emerge.



Exploration

Having made a personal investment in the process and bonded as a group, the participants gain in confidence and enter into the spirit of discovery that characterises the exploration stage. This feels collaborative, utilising the creative expertise of facilitators to explore ways to express the lived experiences of the group.



Formation 1

Following the productive and broad reaching explorations of the previous stage, we find that there comes a time when participants require our support and expertise to begin to contain the discoveries and help shape them into a structure or narrative that does justice to the journey that they have been on. At this early point in the formation stage, we step in to hold the process of direction, production and promotions so that the participants can feel as comfortable and confident about performing as possible.



Formation 2

As the performance takes shape, we notice a shift in power back towards the group. They are now in a position to assess whether we have got the framing right, and suggest changes to make it more authentically express their shared vision. We are careful to listen at this stage in the cycle, and rely on the months of bonding and trust building to hold space for these conversations to happen and for adjustments to be made.



Realisation

At this stage, the performance belongs to the group. We maintain a supportive role and focus on stage management and production, so that everything runs smoothly for the performers.



Reflection

After the performance is finished, we spend time with participants reflecting together and hearing their accounts of the experience of taking part. But, as initiators of the project, we spend the majority of our reflective time considering how our approach influenced the outcome of the project, and how we can continue to grow as an organisation. We have funders to satisfy with an evaluation, but importantly for us, we want to learn from each of our projects, and share our learning with others.

Participants will have their own personal reflections that they carry with them, which may influence some continuation in their own lives or alongside us.



Continuation

For participants or audiences that want to continue the journey with us, we work directly with them to co-create a programme that draws in more people and expands on the work the group wants to pursue. This is effectively a new stage of initiation that builds on the process of co-creation that has gone before it.

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3 tips for designing an open call-out



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The art of invitation

Your first call-out for participation is setting out your stall. Make sure your printed/online call-outs are visually interesting and designed as beautifully as possible within your budget or capacity. If you begin with high standards, quality will more likely transfer through the project.

Mind your language

Make sure your call-out wording is relevant, inclusive and direct. In the past, Restoke has recruited writers with experience communicating information to our target groups. Consulting a few members of your target group on your proposed call-out before publishing can also be helpful.

Think practically

Make it as easy as possible for people to 'give it a go' by providing clear practical information about how to participate. This could include parking facilities and bus routes to access a meet-up, or named individuals to contact for further information.

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Facilitating group conversations



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Some people are naturally more talkative, confident or articulate than others. Therefore, facilitating a balanced group discussion that gives everyone the opportunity to contribute is important.

For large groups, try breaking the conversation down into smaller group chats or two-person exercises before feeding back to the whole group. This allows for relationships to begin to form within the wider group dynamic, as well as making sure everyone feels heard if they want to be.

Remember that talking is just one of many ways to explore a theme and one of many ways to communicate. Some people may be able to express themselves more faithfully or confidently in writing, movement, drawing or sound etc. Leave the door open for these kind of contributions.

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Performance: Helpful questions for moving forward



Consider the gaps

What's missing from the story?

Whose stories are missing? You will not be able to speak from every perspective on a theme, but is there a key voice missing from the mix so far?

Does everyone feel included and represented within what is being made?

Are there additional skills that need to be brought in for the next stage?

Think about the hidden skills and talents emerging in the group

Where can you/your organisation step aside to allow those skills to shine through?

Are there opportunities for people within the group to lead on parts of the process?

How can your team help to present participants' stories, skills and abilities in the most authentic way?

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Some questions to determine authenticity



For Restoke, to achieve authenticity the outcome must faithfully represent the shared experience of the people involved. To determine authenticity we ask ourselves...

Does this represent these people we have got to know?

Does this represent the relationships that have been made?

Does this represent how the performers feel about themselves, each other and the theme?

Does this represent the experience of being part of the project?

Do the performers feel and look comfortable?

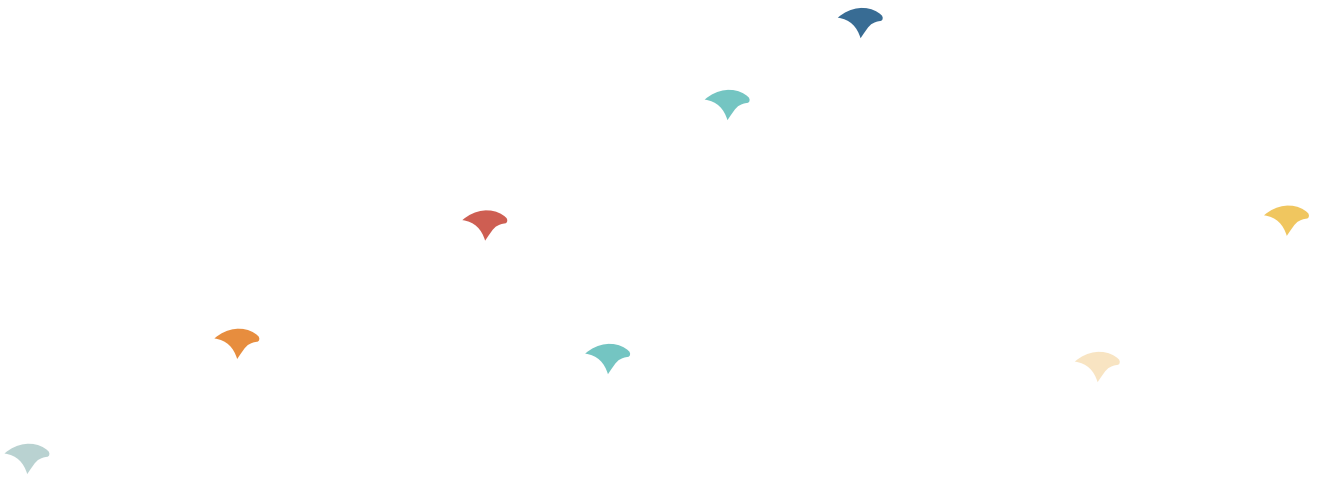
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