

Morvern Cunningham - Applying Principles in Context

Morvern Cunningham: I do describe myself as a freelance creative, which in some ways means nothing at all. So, I work in the creative industries as a freelancer, I have done for over ten years. And now, as I say, since the pandemic and the onset of the pandemic, and starting to think about ways to improve the cultural sector, and working in these kinds of networks, working with Culture Collective and with the Creative Communities Hubs project. I feel it's now just kind of thinking about ways that we can do things better.

So, yeah, I think that an empathetic approach in general and work is important. But there is something about putting people at the centre of things and, again, thinking about the cultural sector and sometimes how outcomes cannot be based on people. It can maybe be based on economic aspirations or, you know, tick-box exercises, which do still happen in the cultural sector.

But, actually, just thinking about how things could be shaped differently if we put people at the centre of things. And actually if we are doing a project or doing anything that is involving people, then why not put those people at the centre of it, both in the designing of a project but also at the end of a project to see actually how successful it was for them.

I mean, I think, again questions around being extractive is something that comes up quite a lot in my work in general, because a lot of the work that I do, especially with Culture Collective, is working with organisations that are working with others in participatory settings. So, in terms of the practice, I think it's important for the practice not to be extractive in exactly the same way, any evaluation that comes behind that or around that.

But, I suppose being in that FailSpace experience of as well. So, FailSpace; it's a project that looks at ways that the cultural sector in general can learn to speak about failure but also learn from failure. And, I think, that's a really important thing. And, also, maybe trying to

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strip some of the shame and guilt—another kind of negative associations with failure. I think is a huge thing, isn't it? Because even in just doing some of the training with FailSpace and talking a bit more openly about failure and talking about failure that I and the rest of the champions can live and experience in their own projects.

Often, we judge ourselves first, so we're judging ourselves really negatively, perhaps, and then we're fearful of others' negative judgement of ourselves. And I was also thinking about the element of time, and maybe that is that thing about churning out projects, is that if you don't have a lot of time to dedicate to evaluation or evaluation as a thing that kind of maybe gets sidelined or dropped off because capacity in time is difficult for you or your organisation. I think not having, or trying as little as possible, to have preconceived ideas and notions of how it might turn out at the end when you've put these unknowns together, trying to kind of put that aside, trying to listen as much to the different participants within that and maybe what they're looking for and also just like taking that time and taking the time to see how something develops. To have those conversations, about how it was developing, whilst it was developing, and also and in retrospect and reflection as well.

I think it is just having that kind of range of tools and again, just asking participants what would be useful, what would be most useful for them, because evaluation is just storytelling. It's someone telling the story of that experience and then you kind of accumulating these stories into a larger narrative. So, how do you gather stories? There's a whole range of methods. Sometimes, it's just easiest over a cup of tea. But yeah, I think it is just being open, flexible, having a range of approaches, and understanding that it's a means to generate a conversation.

That's what toolkits and tools all are. It's a way to generate conversation between people on a particular subject so you don't have to kind of mystify it, or lean on it, or use it too actively as long as you're generating those stories somehow.