

Heads Together Creative Enterprise Case Study



This case study is based on conversations between the author and Creative Director of Heads Together, Adrian Sinclair, held during November and December 2008.

Introduction

[Heads Together Productions](#) is a participatory arts company based in Huddersfield, UK. Now over 20 years old, it is a creative enterprise that through its lifetime has been through many changes whilst pursuing central themes of communication, identity and participatory democracy. The artefacts that Heads have produced over their career include performance, creative writing, films, websites, books, events, and a community radio station. Through these diverse projects run common themes that are about enabling learning and development of people and communities through creative processes.

The company has become known for its approach of 'Creativity with Purpose', and is regularly commissioned by local authorities, charitable trusts and government funded organisations to carry out projects. It also receives funding from the [Arts Council](#).

[Adrian Sinclair](#) and [Linda Strudwick](#) formed and have led the company throughout the evolution of its creative practices. The company has always been small, ranging from two to eight members at any one time, but it has been able to achieve big things by recognising the importance of working in partnership, both with other organisations and with the people that the projects are engaging and supporting as participants. They work with other [freelance artists](#) where needed.

[The Centre for Creative Communities](#) (Williams 2004) describe Heads Together as an example of a new breed of hybrid workers, using what they call 'creative community visioning' where multiple sectors work together to solve complex social problems.

The history of Heads Together

The history of Heads Together goes back to 1985, when Adrian began collaborative performance work in Leeds. Until 1991 the company was predominantly a full time touring performance company, supported through Arts Council funding. In 1991, the Arts Council withdrew funding, and the company had to re-think how it might support its creative practice.

Moving on from being a performance company, Heads chose to focus on educational and training work. This opened up different creative opportunities and sources of funding, built upon the company's areas of success, and enabled them to develop what has become the Heads Together core idea of 'Creativity with Purpose'. More can be read about Heads Together's values in their manifesto, available at <http://headstogether.org/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>.

Building on their background in performance, film and video became key media with which Heads worked. Heads have always responded well to developments in technology, incorporating them into their creative practices. They have always had a strong visual identity, and maintained a high standard of artistic integrity in their work.

More can be read about the history of Heads Together at <http://www.headstogether.org/history.html>.

For current projects visit

<http://headstogether.org/work.html>

What makes Heads Together different?

What makes Heads Together stand out from other participatory or educational arts organisations is that they put the communities that they are working with and the issues faced by those communities at the centre of their creative practices.

This is illustrated by the diversity of outputs that they produce. Whilst they do have specialist skills and experience in certain media such as film, this expertise does not seem to limit the scope of their work. Projects begin with people and the issues that those people face, and the themes and concepts that shape the creative work follow on. This is different to the more conventional approach of companies that use a particular creative practice to address a range of issues. What is interesting about this is that despite producing diverse work, Heads Together maintains a very strong identity or brand throughout its work. The Heads Together 'brand' is characterised by a distinctive process and approach to people rather than by particular outputs. They also maintain a strong visual identity throughout different media which helps to identify a project as a 'Heads Together' project. Most comparable organisations tend to focus on a specific media or creative process, such as drama or film or photography, whereas Heads incorporates whatever creative processes are appropriate for that project and seem to constantly seek and experiment with new media and skills.

The other distinctive theme across the diversity of Heads Together work is the high level of artistic integrity and quality of production. Often in participatory or community based projects there seems to be a tension between the quality of creative outputs and the involvement of non-professional participants in the production of those outputs. Heads seems to manage this balance well, producing delightful and beautiful artefacts through participatory processes. This

could be attributed to the emphasis on learning, and the way that much of their work is about building the creative skills of participants. This investment in genuine creative development of the participants' skills is worth it. Funding bodies recognise that the work produced by Heads is of high quality. The ownership and engagement of communities in work that they co-produce continues long after Heads have left the project. For example, Heads received an email in October 2008 (published on their website) about a book that they had co-produced in 2004 (Two Villages, Heads Together Productions 2004) with positive feedback on how the book is still being shared with family members.

Key issues for development

In the context of creative enterprise it is appropriate to think about the key issues for development in relation to sustainability and Heads Together as an ongoing business.

The history of Heads Together is characterised by change. Over a long period of time the creative practices of the organisation have changed in response to the environment in which it finds itself. There have been many critical moments that have affected the way that Heads works, such as the withdrawal of Arts Council funding in 1991. Because the work of Heads Together is shaped by its core values and a process oriented way of working, it has always been able to adapt to a changing environment, and has been able to survive. Heads Together are enterprising in their adaptability to what can be a very volatile and precarious funding environment.

Recently Heads have been through a reflective period of development. In 2006 they commissioned Bert Mulder of The Hague University and The Informatie Werkplaats (Information Workplace), to come and work with them on thinking about their own practices in the context of a growing sector of participatory arts. In conversation, Adrian said that 'for 10 years we have been in a position of being regularly offered work, now we need to think about what we really want to do'. At the same time the company has reduced from 8 members to 2, and is beginning to grow again. This period of reflection and change once again offers Heads the opportunity to reinvent itself in a period of wider economic and social change. It seems that Heads is well placed to find its own opportunities in new environments.

The combination of reflective practice, and of listening to what other people (particularly their funders) are saying about them has lead Heads to make decisions about the direction that they will go in. For example, the shift from performance company to the focus on learning was in response to positive feedback from funders as well as their own recognition of their strengths. By their own admission, their most successful projects have been self led – particularly East Leeds FM (<http://www.elfm.co.uk/>) and The Methleys Home Zones (http://headstogether.org/home_zones.html). Heads seems to be very self aware and also seems to actively encourage people to comment on their work through

their website and feedback on their projects (for example, everyone that takes part in ELFM is asked to give feedback, and feedback is regularly published on the website <http://headstogether.org/pdf/What%20do%20people%20think.pdf>). This process offers opportunities to develop what works well and continually build on their strengths, as well as building evidence of success for funding applications.

In conversation with Heads, it also becomes clear that as Heads have grown and become more recognised, there has been a shift in the ambition for their work from small interventions to leadership and political influence. There are opportunities there to take a role in shaping their sector, fostering new practices and developing new creative practitioners. For example, they have many informal links with higher education, and are looking at ways to develop these.

As with many small creative businesses, one of the challenges in terms of growth of the organisation is the dependence of the organisation on the Adrian as creative director. Heads Together is a vehicle for his ideas and creative practice. The scope of the organisation can only grow to the extent of his individual capacity to support it.

The history of Heads Together has seen shifts in practice in response to changes in funding patterns. Whilst organisation is dependant on some form of public funding it will always be subject to shifts in the agendas of funding bodies. Both the dependence on one creative practitioner and the precarious and highly political environment in which Heads works may threaten the long term sustainability of the business.

How does innovation happen? The Musicathon

The Musicathon is an event scheduled for April 2009. The idea is to get as many musicians as possible to play live in a 24 hour music marathon in a church in East Leeds. The event is a spin off from the ELFM project, and will be supported by technical teams that usually run ELFM and broadcast over the internet and on FM radio. Several podcasts about the ELFM project are available on the ELFM home page at <http://www.elfm.co.uk/>.

The origin of the Musicathon idea is unclear, something that came out of conversations between people at ELFM. This idea was 'self generated' by Heads, but for many other projects the initial idea or question comes from a commissioning organisation. The process through which the idea was developed is an example of the Heads Together approach to participatory creative practice.

The process of innovation is open, with the aim of getting people and organisations actively involved. The Heads team makes sure that the core activities (things that need to happen to make the event happen) are organised, and then the rest is open to whoever wants to get involved. It is this open element of the work that makes Heads projects special. The Heads team use

skilled facilitators to make sure that project participants can genuinely get involved in the project development.

Once an idea is generated, it is put out to 'consultation', essentially they talk about it to as many people as possible, as enthusiastically as possible in order to develop the idea and motivate people to get involved.

Regular meetings and workshops provide opportunities for people to participate throughout the development process. These are advertised via the ELFM mailing list and on the website. The emphasis at these meetings is on activity and everyone is encouraged to get involved with practical tasks such as making recordings and generating ideas and plans for the event.

Heads try to keep a creative spirit going throughout the life of a project, making sure that the plans are always open and flexible enough to incorporate new people and their ideas, right up to the point where the projects are happening.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of Heads Together is an interesting balance between creative leadership, and the commitment to open, participatory processes where all participants are empowered to contribute to the processes of the organisation.

Heads Together currently has two members and is recruiting a third.

Adrian Sinclair is Creative Director. Adrian has an eclectic background, starting out in rugby and engineering, then training in theatre and dance. He was one of the founders of the company in 1985. His current creative practice is focussed on film and radio. He designs and manages projects.

Linda Strudwick is Development Director. Linda has a background in media work, funding and training. She joined the company in 1998 and is responsible for developing new strategies for Heads Together, particularly with respect to funding.

Until recently Heads Together was a workers co-operative. The International Co-operative Alliance (2007) describe a co-operative as

'An autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.'

Under this structure the company grew to eight members. In practice this meant that all members of Heads Together shared responsibility for decision making within the organisation. This worked well in periods of stability when funding was secure and the company was prosperous, but not as well when the company was under pressure and difficult decisions needed to be made (for example in relation

to redundancies). According to Adrian, it can be difficult in a co-operative structure for an individual to act at the same time as a director of a company and as an employee. Partly in response to requests from funding bodies, the company structure has changed to a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee.

Despite moving away from a co-operative business structure, Heads still maintains their commitment to open decision making processes. As the emphasis of their work is on participation and empowerment, genuine involvement of project stakeholders in decision making is paramount. These values embed themselves in the open processes of innovation as outlined above in the Musicathon case study.

Heads are currently recruiting a new member of staff to work on East Leeds FM as project director. Funding for this post was provided by the [Tudor Trust](#), in the first instance for three years. New posts at Heads Together normally need to be funded directly by an organisation, or by a combination of organisations. As with their projects, the emphasis is on participation and active involvement and their recruitment processes usually include some sort of active participation in projects as well as formal interviews.

Resources

British Council Arts Directory [accessed on 19.12.08]
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-performing-arts-heads-together-productions.htm>

East Leeds FM website: <http://www.elfm.co.uk/>

Heads Together website: <http://headstogether.org/>

Heads Together Productions (2004) Heads Together Productions – A Manifesto. Huddersfield: Heads Together Productions Limited [accessed on 19.12.08]
<http://headstogether.org/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>

Heads Together Productions (2004), Meltdown: Words and images from a Yorkshire Foundry.

Heads Together Productions (2005), Two Villages. Yorkshire: Conisbrough and Denaby Main Education Action Zone

International Co-operative Alliance (2007) Statement on the co-operative identity. Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance [accessed on 19.12.08],
<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>

Williams, J. (2004) The Hybrid Worker. Centre for Creative Communities. [Accessed on 19.12.08] <http://www.creativecommunities.org.uk/essays/253.html>