

Inspiration:

Managing a Successful Partnership in a Youth Work Setting

An interview with Fiona Creedon and Pier Leonard about their Artist and Youth Work Residency Project

How do you lead a successful youth arts residency in a youth work setting? Fiona Creedon, a youth worker with Crosscare in East Wicklow Youth Service, and Peir Leonard, a ceramic artist with Solace Studio Pottery, Arklow, ran a youth arts residency in 2017/2018 for which they received an Artist and Youth Work Residency Scheme grant through NYCI. Using Arklow's rich pottery heritage, they explored pottery making processes with a group of young people in the youth work service. Anne O'Gorman, National Youth Arts Programme Manager, spoke to them about the project and their experience of working together to facilitate this residency.

THE PROJECT

The Arklow Pottery Youth Project

Two groups of girls from the East Wicklow Youth Service explored pottery making processes inspired by Arklow's pottery heritage and produced a series of mugs of their own design. The young people worked with two youth workers from East Wicklow Youth Service and a local ceramic artist. The project involved intergenerational skill sharing and formed links between the young people and previous workers from Arklow Pottery (which closed in 1998). Young people were involved in the design and delivery of every element of the project.

The project began with a series of workshops introducing the young people to all the elements of producing a finished piece of ceramics. These workshops included: hand-building using clay; making cups using coils; decorating using glazes, stamps and decals; discussions on the firing process and around the shape / theme of the end product. It was very evident in the sessions that the participants were enjoying the process: the conversation went quiet as young people became absorbed in their work, or they sang their way through the workshops.

The young people had an input on the history of Arklow Pottery from previous workers and a DVD demonstration of the layout of the old Arklow Pottery factory. This contact really facilitated an appreciation for the heritage of their town and a sense of their participation in its future by becoming the next generation of Arklow potters. Local volunteers from Arklow also mentored young

people to develop the marketing skills needed to promote their finished work.

The young people visited the Nicholas Mosse factory in Kilkenny to see work-in-progress and visited the Arklow Pottery display in the Bridgewater Centre where they had a decoration workshop. Conversations after the pottery visits were encouraging as the young people were able to name the different stages of making pottery and spoke about their preference for shapes, sizes and decoration. These trips and an overnight trip to Glendalough connected both groups and helped deepen their engagement and ownership of the project.

The group moved from being uncomfortable and unsure of their skills in relation to pottery / ceramics to producing their own unique patterns and illustrations that decorated their own range of mugs. The project finished with a launch event, where young people explained their creative process and promoted their work to an audience of family members, friends and local people involved in the creation of a new Pottery and Heritage Centre as well as those who had been involved in the old Arklow Pottery.

Anne: *Where did the idea for this project come from?*

Fiona: Peir and I are always chatting about Arklow Pottery. The town is so proud of its heritage and the industry produced such beautiful craft made by some amazingly talented crafts people. We talked about involving young people in a production of the next generation of Arklow pottery and tapping into the skills of the factory workers from the old factory before they were lost. For me, the project has huge potential as a citizenship project; young people making a contribution to their community, intergenerational skill sharing and a fabulous learning opportunity for the young people.

Peir: I have been trying to establish a new generation of Arklow Pottery in Arklow for the last few years, so when the opportunity came up to apply for the Artist and Youth Work Residency project in conjunction with Fiona & Angeline, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to involve the young people of Arklow with an art project that would reconnect them with their town's heritage and preserve the skills of some of the former master craftsmen at the same time. Arklow Pottery employed over 600 people at one stage and exported tableware worldwide until it closed its doors in 1998. It was no surprise to me when I met the young people involved in the project, that some of their grandparents had actually worked in the pottery.



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What resources or strengths lie within your community / organisation that could enhance your youth arts project?

Anne: *The day that we came to meet with you about the project, it was clear that you got on well with each other. Every year, the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and artist is cited as a really important success factor in the project. Could you speak a little about what you think the other brought to the project and how you supported each other? What advice would you give people embarking on a partnership?*

Fiona: Peir brought the Arklow Pottery link to the project. She also brought the artistic skills, the vision and the connection with workers from the factory. She provided a beautiful studio space, which was ideal for groups. We knew each other through work prior to the project and we are good buddies, which meant we were familiar with each other's work ethic, interests and values. I think we both were very excited about the project for the same reasons and my colleague Angeline was very easily brought on board, being of a similar mind-set too!! Peir is so easy to work with: easy-going, flexible and enthusiastic. She also has this can-do attitude and no issue is insurmountable (I panicked once in a while....how are we going to do this?).

As for advice for other people embarking on this partnership – communication is key! Before the project starts, have the conversation about how you will manage any wobbles or panics as you go along and make the decision to have regular chats and check-ins (not check-ups!!). Planning is important. A time-frame of some description keeps the non-artists going (both youth workers and young people!). Programme plans and sessions plans for the youth work part are essential and the NYCI resource '[Capturing Magic – A Tool for Evaluation Outcomes in Youth Arts Projects](#)' is a

brilliant resource to support the project at all stages, from application to evaluation.

Peir: Anybody who knows me, knows that I am probably the most unorganised person EVER ☺. Having Fiona there, with her expert organisation and youth work skills, ensured that a steady momentum was kept throughout the project. As mentioned, we were lucky to already have a strong working relationship, as we have worked on previous projects together. Fiona was fantastic with the young people. She co-ordinated and supported both them and me throughout the project. One of the first things I learned in previous youth work projects, was how important it is that young people do not give up as when they achieve their goal, it can bring such feelings of pride and self-worth. This was also true for me as an artist. Towards the end of the project, Fiona held things together and got us all through with her invisible whip of encouragement! My advice for anybody embarking on a partnership, is to let each other's natural strengths come to fruition. Myself and Fiona were extremely lucky to be very in tune with each other, but for others who mightn't be that fortunate, it might be good to spend a bit of time getting to know each other before the project. Go for a coffee and exchange a bit of a personal information with each other in relation to your strengths and weaknesses, likes & dislikes etc. Also, never forget the importance of a bit of humour. Enjoy the journey – it's meant to be fun!



Anne: *What skills did you notice and appreciate in each other?*

Fiona: I've mentioned a few things about Peir's skills already, but what really struck me is how she can just do everything. Everything has a solution! She has a real investment in people and is so open-hearted that she easily makes connections. The young people felt comfortable with her straight away; this skill also brought buy-in from other key people, including former Arklow Pottery factory workers, local entrepreneurs and politicians, and local people with other skills who were willing to share with the young people e.g. marketing and media specialists.

Peir: Fiona is a breath of fresh air. She is intelligent, organised but also very creative – she has a great way of making a room full of people feel at ease. Her relationship with the young people always astounds me. I've worked on a few projects with Fiona now at this stage and, from start to finish, I can see the difference Fiona's guidance makes in terms of the positive outcomes young people achieve on these projects.

Anne: *Was there anything specific you did to manage the partnership/relationship (meetings, check ins? etc).*

Fiona: We chatted on the phone most weeks to check-in before the group met. We also had monthly meetings to make sure we knew where we were going next.

Peir: We set out a timeline at the beginning of the project and broke the project down into intermediate goals. That, together with weekly, mini-check-in conversations about the project and some longer meetings in the studio throughout, ensured that the project ran very smoothly.

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What skills and qualities do the youth workers and artists bring to your youth arts project? How can you use that knowledge to benefit your project?

Anne: *What were your expectations for the young people taking part in the project? What were you both hoping to see and hoping to give them the opportunity to explore? And how did you communicate those expectations to each other?*

Fiona: After the initial meeting between Peir, Angeline and I, we put the proposal to two groups of girls that Angeline and I were working with. We gave them an outline of the project, talked about what we hoped to achieve, introduced them to Peir and showed them her studio. It was very important for us as a team that young people would direct the project as much as possible. At the start, I think it was difficult for the young people to imagine what the project would look like but the job of youth workers is to reassure and encourage, so that they felt comfortable taking a chance at something they have never done before. Angeline and I were in the same position as the young people really, so we had to trust Peir, her knowledge and her process. Personally speaking, I do find this challenging because I usually know what is going to happen in a

session with young people (well more or less!) but over time I'm learning to trust the process as the outcome always exceeds expectations in an art project.

Peir: I wanted the young people to realise that each one of them could use their art to create a viable, handcrafted product from start to finish. They incorporated design, craft, heritage and art into this project. They really didn't believe their finished product would be so good! Even the guys that worked in Arklow Pottery were really impressed with the end product. You could just see the pride the young people took in their achievements. The night of the launch, they were beaming with pride, showing their families their work and explaining the process. That exceeded all my expectations. They displayed their ability to use art to bring a product to the market that was unique and one of a kind, that promoted their hometown of Arklow, its past and its future! Fiona, myself and Angeline guided the project but from start to finish, the young people were the ones who led the way. Arklow has proven it is still churning out a new generation of designers and artists. Watch this space 😊

Anne: *You both have been very mindful to celebrate the success of the young people who participated. Did you do anything to celebrate your success in working together to facilitate this project?*

Fiona: Success took various forms: that the young people turned up every week was a success; that they did the work was a success; that they designed their own mug and worked on a decorative theme was a success; that they were involved in every key stage of making the mugs was a success. Throughout the project, we took the groups on trips e.g. Nicholas Mosse Pottery in Kilkenny, Dundrum Shopping Centre, an overnight in Glendalough. These trips successfully connected both groups in the shared experience and ownership of the project as a team. Each young person was given two of their own mugs to bring home and their families were invited to the launch event in December 2018. This was a really lovely event and it was really important to us to make it as professional as possible. The young people spoke so positively about their experience of the project and their learning to the group of people who attended.

Peir: I suppose we all really took a bow the night of the launch. Some members of Wicklow County Council's new Arklow Pottery & Heritage Centre attended. They were so impressed with the outcome of this project, that they asked for a full set of the young people's range of artware mugs to be displayed in the new pottery museum due to be built in the town centre over the next few years. Really, it was always about the young people and let's not forget the pottery workers, especially John Byrne and Robert Ward from Arklow Pottery who helped and supported us all the way.

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How can you celebrate the successes of the young people in your youth arts project in a real and tangible way?

Anne: What are the 3 most important things a youth worker and an artist can do to support a partnership with each other on a project like this?

Fiona: Communication, planning, a sense of humour, trust – that’s 4! I cheated!

Peir: Ditto

Anne: What is the most important thing you learned for your own practice on this project?

Peir: Having a good, structured timeline and plan saves unnecessary worry and time. Using a calendar or diary, block in your anticipated end-date and work backwards from it. Also, it’s helpful to break the project up into smaller parts. For this project, because we were working with ceramics, we broke the project into smaller parts based around types of firing: bisque firing; glaze firing; and the end decal firing which was used to incorporate the young peoples’ art work.

Fiona: The trust piece. It’s important to trust the artist and the process but also to balance that with the need to support the artist within your joint project. It’s easy to hand over to the expert/artist on an art project but the youth work piece of supporting and keeping the young people going is vital too.

LINKS

East Wicklow Youth Service <https://eastwicklowyouth.weebly.com/>
Solace Studio Pottery <https://www.facebook.com/Solace.ie/>

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In your partnership work with others, how do you balance trust in your own practice/ instincts with trust in a practice that’s unfamiliar to you ?