

How change happens

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When cultural producers have the time and space to think ahead and bounce ideas off each other, remarkable ideas emerge. **Richard Watts** shares the new thinking starting to emerge from the Culture Reset programme as delegates prepare for an uncertain future.



Sam King references the role of 'imaginal cells'

Photo: Bankim Desai on Unsplash

It turns out a month is a very long time in 2020.

In mid-August, 100 cultural producers from across the UK completed the first four-week intensive of Culture Reset, whilst another 92 embarked on their first week together. In four sweltering weeks, the employment conditions of many had changed profoundly: there were new government directives to get your head around and new funding schemes to tackle. Priorities shifted - understandably so - and as the social and political heat was turned up, so the urgency to hold onto progressive change in our beleaguered sector intensified.

Hopeful energy

It is testament to a sector under such pressure that the Culture Reset participants committed to undertake a programme of collective study and learning to reimagine the future of the arts, whilst also attending redundancy consultations, scenario planning, application writing and/or advocating for the sector's survival - not to mention remapping and scoping new kinds of creative projects and programmes.

The 4-week intensive of Culture Reset was structured through a series of tasks to guide the producer's self-directed enquiry into their own question, punctuated with weekly facilitated workshop sessions which brought small cross-sector groups together to share experiences and insights. Online resources, a podcast series and commissioned video content acted as stimuli for conversations, with these being enriched through ideas and insights being shared across the first cohort of eight small groups. Right now, as September arrives, the second cohort are in the midst of their own four-week intensive.

It's early days to determine the insights and breakthroughs that are emerging for the participants. The 're-entry' after an intensive programme such as this is a vulnerable moment in a change process - where the energy, heat and possibility that we can each create within a programme meets external conditions and pre-existing barriers to change. True breakthroughs often only happen in that context, where hopeful energy and ideas evolve through tenacious and empathetic work into sober concrete shifts with lasting impact.

Producers as change-makers

On 11th September both cohorts will gather online to share their initial thoughts with six keynote listeners. It's the first in a series of opportunities to ensure that the breakthroughs from the programme are shared together with policy-makers and funders - and we commit to share those insights and actions more broadly with the sector as soon as possible. As the value of the programme lies primarily in its support structure for a self-directed, peer-to-peer process of learning, we know that the actions that result will largely be self-organised. Culture Reset is the catalyst but the producers themselves are the change-makers. We have begun to see the first signs of what that might look like as groups self-organise to work on projects together beyond the programme, as new principles for working emerge, and new approaches to funders and policy-makers result.

As I write, 17 topic groups have been self-organised across the cohorts to advance new ideas and thinking including the challenges young professionals face, mutual exchange between freelancers and arts organisations, decolonisation and anti-racism, disability, neuro-diverse and deaf perspectives, environmental sustainability, breaking down and redistributing privilege and considering how to better operationalise values and mission.

Nudging forward

Producers are already sharing their initial thoughts.

Jake Orr, change maker and outgoing Producer at Nottingham Playhouse, has authored a [Producing Manifesto](#) following his four-week intensive. This will act as a document for accountability, vision and like all good principles will evolve over time. One of his principles states: "Normalising mental health in theatre is crucial to our sector's survival, that's why I'm always discussing my own mental health. Leading by example. Making art is tough though, it makes us vulnerable. Rarely do we consider how this impacts our mental health. Through my producing, we'll work out a mental health support plan for those involved."

Sam King, currently the Senior Producer of Audience Labs at the Royal Opera House, has shared her initial questions and thoughts on Medium - [#Culture Reset: Imagined Cells](#) - asking, "What opportunities might emerge from new kinds of cultural infrastructure that mix live and digital in entirely new ways? What new approaches for artists and makers might come from working with emerging digital formats – virtual reality, augmented reality, AI, spatial audio? How might technology open up pathways into the arts for a broader range of creative collaborators and bring in new voices from diverse backgrounds?"

Zak Khan, producer at Royal Exchange Theatre, reflected on his intensive month with Culture Reset, thinking about what it takes to address some of the challenges he was exploring in the programme: "I have the access and the relationships required to address some of those barriers and gatekeepers directly, so what is actually stopping me? As one of my brilliant group members said later, that was a moment of 'piss, or get off the pot'. There was something so liberating and inspiring in that for me, and really encapsulated how this is a space of support, challenge, positive accountability, and inspiration. It gave me the nudge I needed, in the way I needed it, to go forward."

Collective responsibility

There is one principle of reset at this early stage that we might take forward into an uncertain autumn: that change is not the sole preserve of directors and chief executives. It is not confined to the pages of the strategic plan. It is, instead, led at all levels and fuelled by collaboration. Change takes risk and requires vulnerability - hence why cross-sector, relatively private group working can often accelerate insight and learning because it creates the conditions for authentic breakthroughs that our sector often doesn't enable. The initiatives borne of Covid-19 such as Freelancers Make Theatre Work and We Shall Not Be Removed as well as long-standing networks such as Arts Emergency prove that change leadership is most effective when distributed and generous and undertaken without concern for ownership or competition.

It is clear that Culture Reset is part of a sector-wide commitment to inclusive, progressive change. That we might have thought this was someone else's responsibility or dependent on those who hold political or economic power is perhaps the greatest fallacy of a crisis of isolation. The collective will to reset the conditions of how the arts will recover is our greatest asset.

Richard Watts is CEO of **people make it work**, Co-Director of Change Creation and instigator of Culture Reset.

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This article, sponsored and contributed by people make it work, is part of a [series](#) sharing insights and learning to help organisations facing change challenges to grow and develop.

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people make it work is 20 years old in September 2020 and is working with 220 cultural organisations in this anniversary year to help them change and develop through our programmes, partnerships and consultancy support.

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