

A Case Study in Policy Delivery: Examining Social Inclusion through Interpretation and Practice

Victoria Durrer

Abstract:

The current body of literature regarding social inclusion and the arts tends to focus on two areas: the lack of clear or common understanding of the terminology involved (GLLAM, 2000) and the difficulty in measuring impact (Newman 2001). Further, much of the literature traces the historical evolution of social inclusion policy within the arts from a political and social perspective (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007), whilst others examine the situation in the context of the museum as an institution more generally (Sandell, 2002b). Such studies are essential; however they only touch on the importance of understanding the context of social inclusion programmes. As each individual's experience of exclusion (or inclusion) is argued to be different (Newman et al., 2005) and any experience is also process-based (SEU 2001), there is a need for more thorough examination of the processes underpinning project delivery (Butterfoss, 2006), particularly within a field that has its own issues of exclusion, such as the arts (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991). This paper presents case study findings of a programme of contemporary arts participation for adults with learning difficulties based at an arts centre in Liverpool. By focusing on practice, the paper applies Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning in order to assert that rather than search for measurable impacts, examining the delivery of programmes within their individual contexts will provide the basis for a more reflective practice and thus more effective policy making.

Key Words: Social inclusion, arts, disability, 'community of practice'

Introduction

This paper presents findings from a case study of a programme called the Blue Room based at The Bluecoat, an arts centre located in the city centre of Liverpool, England. The Blue Room is a project of contemporary arts participation designed for adults with learning disabilities, who are labelled 'socially excluded' in central and local government policies on social exclusion. More specifically, central government defines adults with learning disabilities as individuals who have "impaired intelligence", i.e. "significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and/or to learn new skills" and "impaired social functioning, ... [or] a reduced ability to cope independently [both of] which started before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development" (DH, 2001: 14).

This paper argues that it is crucial to consider the specificities of institutional contexts in which projects for social inclusion are being delivered: this includes meaning and practice on the part of the individuals involved (Wenger, 1998; Bevir and Rhodes, 2005). The Blue Room project will be examined as a 'community of practice' in which

participation takes place as a form of learning (Wenger, 1998). The paper asserts that rather than search for measurable impacts, an examination of the delivery of such programmes in real time within their individual contexts by individual practitioners and participants become a source of learning and therefore provide the basis for a more reflective practice and thus more effective policy making.

'Social *inclusion*' is a term that overtly entered UK public policy in 1997 when the newly elected Labour government founded the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU, now the Social Exclusion Task Force as of June 2006 (SETF)). The notion of 'social inclusion' constitutes an aim to assist individuals who may be shut out (or excluded) from participation in mainstream society not only on the basis of economic, but also social, political, and/or cultural means. In a 1998 report entitled *Bringing Britain Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*, SEU identified the problems of social exclusion: high concentrations of poverty, unemployment, and crime in particular neighbourhoods, poor housing, and poor access to public services and facilities. The Unit then coordinated eighteen Policy Action Teams (PATs) to devise policies for these problems.

In PAT 10, the Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS, 1999) considered the possible role of museums and galleries in tackling issues of social exclusion. As a result of findings from the PAT reports, SEU (2001) devised an action plan, *A New Commitment to Neighbourhood Renewal: National Strategy Action Plan*. The role of the DCMS in the efforts to lessen the gap between deprived areas and the rest of England is presented there in the form of distributing funding fairly and setting out social inclusion targets for arts organisations (SEU, 2001). The DCMS (1999; 2000; 2005) argues that increased access to involvement in the arts for a wide public can help 'combat social exclusion.' Involvement in the arts, whether through the examination and discussion of extant works in art galleries, museums, and art centres or through actively creating artistic products, is seen to have the potential to boost a person's self-confidence and self-esteem, improve one's quality of life, build more cohesive communities, and promote learning, all of which are aimed at assisting socially excluded individuals in achieving greater chance of employment, educational attainment, social networks, and life enjoyment (DCMS, 1999; 2000; 2007a). The ways in which DCMS directives encourage the arts and gallery sectors to promote inclusion implies a move toward a new form of arts management; one that follows on from the 'new public management', which began in the 1980s (Selwood, 2002; Belfiore, 2004) to one that emphasises opportunity via a method of "personalisation through participation", an approach that is intended to be driven by a client's needs and that client's direct engagement in their own welfare management (Leadbeater, 2004: 57; DCMS, 2007a).

The current body of literature examining social inclusion and the arts within the UK tends to focus on two areas: the lack of clear or common understanding of the terminology involved within the cultural sector (Sandell, 1998; GLLAM, 2000; Mason, 2004; Newman and McLean, 2004a; Kawashima, 2006) and the difficulty in measuring impact (Newman, 2001; Jermyn, 2001; Selwood, 2002). Further, much of

the literature traces the historical evolution of social inclusion policy within the arts from a political and social perspective (Kawashima, 2006; Scott, 2006; Belfiore and Bennett 2007), whilst others examine the situation in the context of the museum as an institution more generally (Sandell 2002b; Mason, 2004). Such studies are essential. However they only touch on the importance of understanding the context of social inclusion programmes (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991) and are ultimately more grounded in hindsight as well as theoretical and academic interpretation. This paper will begin by investigating some of these discussions and conclude by demonstrating through a discussion of the Blue Room case study, how examining the delivery of such a programme as a process of learning (Wenger, 1998) may provide a basis for a more reflective practice (Powell and Gilbert, 2007).

In this discussion, gallery and museum will be used synonymously to mean institutions that have permanent collections and special exhibitions. Art centres are institutions that do not typically have permanent collections, but do have special exhibitions. The Bluecoat, the arts institution that is the focus of this paper, is an arts centre. 'Institutions' refers to museums, galleries, and art centres. The 'arts' is a reference to the field of the arts (Bourdieu, 2000), or the 'art world'. This research focuses on that of the visual arts: painting, sculpture, printmaking, photography, film, video, installation, and performance or live art. With regards to 'arts for social inclusion', 'for social inclusion' is here defined as: 1) projects/activities that are funded under government directed aims for social inclusion, 2) projects/activities that practitioners articulate as part of a social inclusion agenda, and 3) projects/activities that are targeted at groups labelled 'socially excluded'.

A Policy Open to Interpretation

The term *social exclusion* was originated in France in 1974 to describe an underclass that fell outside the State's social insurance policies (Silver, 1995). The idea entered the UK in 1979 with Townsend's (1979) *Poverty in the United Kingdom*. Where a focus on questions of social justice would address a lack of material resources that aids one's participation in society, *social exclusion* is argued to be a more thorough definition of a process of being kept out of the political, social, economic, and cultural structures that govern one's integration into society (Walker and Walker, 1997). The SEU described social exclusion as:

“...what can happen when people or areas face a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. These problems are linked and mutually reinforcing so that they can create a vicious cycle in people's lives”.¹

Social exclusion is not a linear process, but a cyclical one that can be passed through generations (SETF, 2006). The issue of process is inherent in government and academic descriptions of social exclusion. More specifically, it is often seen as a breakdown between individual, society, and the state (Levitas, 2005). Some people may be socially excluded in one way, and not in others, and each individual has a

unique experience of exclusion (Newman, et al., 2005). The use of the term social exclusion is argued to account for individuals' inability to carry out their social roles; ultimately the discourse around social inclusion implies that it is the individual's responsibility to repair such a situation through accessing 'appropriate' forms of social participation (Townsend, 1979; Levitas, 2005).

A number of studies have demonstrated the varied interpretation of both the terms social exclusion and social inclusion in wider sociological and political debates (Silver, 1994; Byrne, 1999; Levitas, 2005; Levitas et al., 2007). Social exclusion is typically and variously defined by identifying social problems that are often delineated into areas that are political, economic, social, or cultural (Sandell, 1998; Levitas, et al., 2007). Social inclusion seems to have most often been defined and applied as policy in terms of attempting to eliminate or lessen the barriers that create social exclusion in the first place. This is not only seen with respect to museums and galleries (Sandell, 2002b), but also in areas of youth work, employment, and education (Kenway & Palmer, 2006; SETF, 2006). A recent study commissioned by the Department for Communities and Local Government, which initially housed the SEU, demonstrated that the causes of exclusion as yet remain unclear (Levitas, et al., 2007). This study, as well as the varying ways in which social exclusion can be interpreted, adhere to what O'Reilly (2005) explains as the current Labour government's relatively open approach to identifying exclusion. In other words, Labour's failure to set out a clear cut definition of exclusion, thus leaves the policy open to a variety of interpretations.

Labour's open method of addressing exclusion inevitably causes problems in the implementation of any policy for social *inclusion* (O'Reilly 2005); for if it is not clear what exclusion is, than how can *inclusion* be encouraged? It is argued in a number of policy documents, as West and Smith (2005) point out, that fostering social inclusion is seen as equal to combating social exclusion. However, this is problematic. For example, Sennett (2000) has shown that a true understanding of the term social inclusion itself is unclear, not only in practice but in theory as well. Further, in a study on young adults MacDonald, et al. (2005) have demonstrated problems arise for policy when those who are labelled 'socially excluded' are unaware of these categorisations and actually feel themselves to be 'included' via their own cultural and geographic life positions. As a result, O'Reilly (2005) explains that examining the ways in which exclusion is attempting to be combated, or inclusion is attempting to be encouraged, can only be successfully achieved by considering specific contexts of policy interpretation and delivery, particularly because the SETF is reliant on other public sector areas to deliver that policy. Such consideration should also include the views of the 'excluded' for whom the policy is intended to work.

With regards to the context of cultural policy and cultural institutions, the lack of clarity on understanding social ex- and inclusion existing in political and academic arenas can also be seen within the arts (Mason, 2004; West & Smith, 2005). This ambiguity inevitably creates inconsistency amongst practitioners as to how to address the issue of social exclusion and a continued debate on what the role of arts institutions and museums in general can be in society (Newman & McLean, 2004a).

This has recently been demonstrated in the DCMS (2007b: 11) evaluation report *Inspiration, Identity, Learning: The Value of Museums, Second Study*, which states that many but “not all” museums involved in the delivery of cross regional and national museums’ social inclusion projects had an “understanding of the complexities of social inclusion and how this relates to the use of museums.” In practice, further evaluations and academic studies have demonstrated that social exclusion and inclusion are sometimes understood as interchangeable and/or dependent upon one another (Sandell, 1998). In some cases it is about the “social inclusion outcomes of arts participation” (Hacking et al., 2006: 121). In other cases, such as concluded by the Group for Large Local Authority Museums (GLLAM, 2000), it is difficult for arts professionals to separate the idea of social inclusion from that of improved access to the arts. Kawashima (2006) has more recently discussed the close links to and dependence of interpreting social inclusion as primarily based on access and audience development. It is argued that social inclusion work is about connecting with or targeting specific audiences who have explicit, classifiable problems (West & Smith, 2005) and promoting their cultural inclusion and/or access to culture (Mason, 2004).

This lack of common understanding of social inclusion within the cultural sector demonstrates the importance, first and foremost, of gaining an understanding of how practitioners and participants interpret social inclusion within their specific institutional contexts. The constructions of practitioners and participants’ interpretation of social inclusion constitute the belief systems on which the design and delivery (Wenger, 1998) of a social inclusion project are based. Yet, a number of studies (Belfiore, 2004; Mason, 2004; Long & Bramham, 2006) contain very few approaches to investigating the meanings that practitioners and participants attach to social inclusion and even fewer when considering such meaning in relation to the arts (GLLAM, 2000; Jermyn, 2001).

The Difficulty in Producing Evidence of Impact

Belfiore (2004: 187) has explained that the link of social inclusion to the arts and culture has been part of what she calls an “instrumental turn” in UK cultural policy since the early 1980s under the Thatcher administration to Labour’s current day government. This instrumental turn has emerged from the “attachment” of cultural policy, viewed as a “traditionally ‘weak’ policy area” to what may be seen as a more “influential” policy concern (Gray, 2002: 80; Belfiore, 2004: 188). Since the 1980s, cultural policy has become married to the more “influential” policy areas of “economic development, urban regeneration, and social inclusion” (Belfiore, 2004: 188). This has also coincided with a turn toward a public management style of conducting public services that has trickled into the cultural policy sector (Belfiore, 2004). As a result of these attachments, institutions covered under cultural policy must not only deliver their own policy aims, but must also deliver the aims of the more influential policy to which they are connected. Further, they must be able to *evidence* (Selwood, 2002) the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of these attached policies, such as social inclusion, through the presentation of hard data (Belfiore, 2004). Scott (2006) has explained that this level of performance evaluation puts weight on quantifiable

results, which under Thatcher was intended to prove accountability for funding but under the Labour administration additionally calls for accountability to the public at large. This presents even bigger problems for the cultural sector, which must also accommodate issues of artistic excellence and quality of production and presentation.

West and Smith (2005: 283) explain that part of the problem is that art activities including those directed for social inclusion often impact personal development indicators that are considered “soft outcomes,” such as new social skills, increased understanding of specific or broad cultural issues and increased self-esteem and confidence, which are very difficult to measure in a quantifiable way. They often connect with criteria considered part of identity, human, cultural, and/or social capital (Newman & McLean, 2004b; 2006). While many working in the arts believe these outcomes are often achieved, they are difficult to prove (Scott 2006). In addition, such outcomes are variable and achievement of them is often unpredictable (Newman & McLean, 2004b; 2006). As a result, there is no clear or consistent method for evaluation and ‘proving’ social impact via the arts is therefore no straightforward task (Belfiore 2002).

With regards to addressing social impact or specific issues of social exclusion, individuals like Matarasso (1997) and Williams (1997) have attempted to set out ways in which to assess, rather than measure, the long-term social value of participation in the arts. Matarasso’s (1997) research, which has met criticism (Merli, 2002), appeared to demonstrate that the arts can increase personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination. Other studies (Sandell, 1998) and evaluations (DCMS 2007a) show positive outcomes of cultural programmes in relation to social inclusion and social equity. Yet, a number of research reports regarding the arts and participation or inclusion tend to focus on community arts for the young unemployed and arts in health rather than on art galleries (West & Smith, 2005).

Neglecting the Specificity of Fields of Practice

Selwood (2002: 76) has explained that within the cultural sector there are “ideological, practical and managerial” difficulties in producing the data required for demonstrating concrete and measurable outcomes of social impact. Scott (2006) explains that this performance-indicator method is not necessarily entirely appropriate for public sector institutions with multi-dimensional briefs and a wide range of stakeholders. This is particularly the case when attempting to measure outcomes resulting from arts and creativity projects. In such projects, risk taking and experimentation are at the very heart and prescribing outcomes is often felt to challenge the very nature of creativity (Jermyn, 2001; Scherer, 2002; Tranter & Palin, 2004). In addition, studies and evaluations on the arts and social inclusion must take into consideration the subjective and contentious issues of aesthetic quality and value that defines much of the structure of institutions within that field (Bourdieu, 2000); a structure which has been argued to be inherently exclusive and elitist (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991). Such a tendency is evidenced by the DCMS (1999: 5),

which stated “arts ... bodies which receive public funds *should* be accessible to everyone [and] actively engage those who have been excluded in the past” (emphasis added). Such institutions have their own barriers of exclusion to overcome in addition to addressing the more ‘influential’ social ones.

The presumption appears to be in these studies that practitioners are forced and not desiring to break down the exclusive barriers in the arts. Belfiore (2004) while calling for the need to consider developments in cultural policy alongside those in the British welfare state does not fully address the arts and its own wider context and system of regulation with institutions at the macro level and individuals, gallery administrators, artists, and audiences at the micro level. In order to truly examine the rationale behind these projects, it is necessary to consider the context, both institutional, and personal, in which these projects are often taking place, particularly as a certain perceived level of exclusion may need to be initially addressed within that context (Kawashima, 2006). Then and only then, based on that field (Bourdieu, 2000), its institutions, and their perceived exclusivity, will there be a strong foundation from which to examine the circumstances of inclusion that may be fostered.

Approaching an Understanding of Project Delivery

Many of the studies discussed here thus far have largely been focused on policy (Selwood, 2002; Belfiore, 2004; Newman and McLean, 2004a) rather than on practice. Any mention of practice tends to emphasise a lack of consistent approach in designing, delivering, and evaluating projects (West & Smith, 2005). This may not be surprising as the kinds of ‘excluded groups’ that are targeted are varied and have different needs, which would inevitably affect the approach to and method of project delivery. Morris (2001) has discussed the narrow policy view of exclusion with regards to individuals with learning disabilities. She (Morris 2001) calls for a consideration of how individuals suffering from exclusion interpret and perceive their exclusion. Current literature, while referencing anecdotal evidence on the potential of the arts to effect change (DCMS 2007b), has a paucity of in-depth case studies on individual groups, such as adults with learning disabilities, offenders, and youth gangs, and stakeholders such as care workers and service providers. Many studies only briefly list descriptions of project types rather than the individual needs and involvement of people (GLLAM, 2000; West & Smith, 2005). As each individual’s experience of exclusion (or inclusion) is argued to be different (Newman et al., 2005) and any experience is also process-based (SEU 2001), there is a need for more thorough examination of the processes underpinning project delivery (Butterfoss, 2006), particularly within a field that has its own issues of exclusion, such as the arts. Sandell (2003) and GLLAM (2000) have acknowledged that more research on delivery needs to be conducted to further illuminate ways in which social inclusion policy is being engaged within the cultural sector.

Examination of these studies, however, does highlight some common approaches to delivering social inclusion projects, particularly within the arts; ones that echo Labour attempts at promoting more ‘personalised’ or client-needs-driven approaches to the delivery of welfare services (Leadbeater 2004). The GLLAM report (2000) and

Jermyn's (2001) report for ACE highlight similar methods for programme delivery such as the need and ability to take risks and have flexibility as well as consult and partner with groups involved. These areas are also mentioned in the DCMS (2007a: 10) evaluation on *Cultural Pathfinders*, which emphasises the role of individual practitioners as brokers who have the ability to "speak the language" of the stakeholders and individuals involved in projects for social inclusion. The DCMS explains that the delivery of such projects requires sensitivity, vision and determination as well as the ability to connect and negotiate with people. In early discussions regarding project delivery, the DCMS has acknowledged that institutional and local contexts must be taken into consideration: "Individual museum, gallery and archive governing bodies will need to consider their own particular local circumstances and develop their own policies" (DCMS, 2000: 3).

Such localised contexts and individualised approaches not only reference moves toward a more personalised approach to services, but in doing so, they require a particular degree of flexibility as well as dialogue and partnership with multiple stakeholders. Such approaches in turn call for a much more in-depth examination of project delivery. While the ways in which an instrumental use of cultural policy (Belfiore, 2004) may dichotomise social participation as being centred on either consumption or social justice, this paper argues that one cannot presume that encounters that occur on-the-ground are a result of those conditions (Powell & Gilbert, 2007). Francis (2004) has explained that the arts appear to have enthusiastically adopted the social inclusion agenda, without necessarily 'knowing' whether or not they are meeting its imperatives. While such projects allow for the cultural arena to "negotiate and participate" with non-cultural agencies (Francis, 2004: 159), such projects may contribute to a stigmatisation of difference and a fostering of social control that the agenda of social inclusion in some ways implies (Francis, 2004; Levitas, 2005). Inclusion in arts projects, may obscure major inequalities or exclusion existing in other public provision (Francis, 2004)—a cover up for problems that the government has not addressed. The implications of this are massive. As a result, "the arts world needs to know what they *do* do," Francis (2004: 156) explains, "not what they, or others, would like them to be *seen* to be doing." Examining the particularities of field and institutional context as well as meaning and interpretation of policy and its practice by and with practitioners and participants during the process of project delivery, may yield different ways for understanding the practice of social inclusion within the arts specifically. As such this paper will use the Blue Room project as a case study for looking at 'arts for social inclusion' practice as a practice of learning (Wenger, 1998). Such an understanding is reliant on the interpretive approach (Taylor, 1971), which informs the methodology of this study.

The Blue Room at the Bluecoat, Liverpool

The Blue Room project at the Bluecoat in Liverpool, England is a partnership between The Bluecoat and the Liverpool City Council's Supported Living Department (LCCSLD). The Blue Room group consists of five service users, four support workers, and five artists. The group of service users were selected in part from a previous and still continuing arts group of individuals with learning disabilities from two Resource Centres that participate in arts activities at the Bluecoat. Other service

users and support workers were selected from a different Resource Centre in the area that has a strong visual arts programme, but had not previously been involved with the Bluecoat. The selection process consisted of support workers approaching individual service users they knew to have an interest in the arts and inquiring as to whether or not they were interested in participating in the Blue Room.

The Blue Room project is a long term project with a development phase for training these five key service users who have a strong interest in the arts and their support workers to deliver workshops for other service users in the Bluecoat space once the Bluecoat building reopens after a major refurbishment. The Blue Room has three main aims as articulated in documentation provided by the Bluecoat. These aims are:

- “To provide a regular and ongoing programme of contemporary arts participation opportunities for adults with learning disabilities, based at the Bluecoat and linked with the Bluecoat’s artistic programme;
- To support independent access to this activity wherever possible; [and]
- To encourage progression along pathways offered through this programme, other participatory programmes, volunteering opportunities and work experience at the Bluecoat” (BC Archives, 2006).

The Blue Room project is funded through ACE’s Grants for the Arts, a grant which aims to “help” more people take part in the arts; involve artists and the arts in creating vibrant communities; improve the performance of the arts sector; and help the development of artists, arts organisations and the creative economy.ⁱⁱ The grant thus demonstrates the Arts Council’s attempts to link excellence, by promoting the development of artists, with the economy by promoting the “creative economy”, participation through encouraging more people to take part, and social cohesion through encouraging vibrant communities.

The Blue Room began in September 2005 with a two-year development phase. This phase has involved identifying the team of service users and support workers for the Blue Room and providing them with training opportunities in the contemporary arts as well as for delivering effective support roles in a creative environment. This training has involved visits to area galleries discussing extant works as well as making visual and live art in the form of workshops delivered by five different professional artists hired for the project. More widely, training for the five service users and their support workers has also consisted of developing skills for the five selected service users to take a role in workshop planning and leadership in the project once it is rolled out to other service users through workshops held in the newly refurbished Bluecoat building in April 2008.

This phase has also included ‘taster’ sessions, which took place in the area’s eight Resource Centres. The ‘taster sessions’ consisted of one professional artist going out to a Resource Centre with a few of the service users and their support workers to deliver workshops. The aim was to expose new service users to the Blue Room and encourage them to attend the Blue Room themselves when it is launched to new

users in the newly reopened Bluecoat building in March 2008. In addition, the 'taster sessions' aimed to give the five trainee service users and support workers an opportunity to experience the planning and delivery of the workshops, in which they will have a larger role once the Bluecoat is reopened.

The five service users being trained to deliver these workshops will occasionally be referred to as 'trainees' in this paper in order to differentiate them in the discussion from new service users who will access the Blue Room in the coming phase of the project.

Methodology: An Interpretive Approach

The research presented in this paper is part of a larger project investigating the interpretation and practice of social inclusion within the arts. Study of the Blue Room project is one of three case studies, each within an arts centre or gallery in Liverpool, England, that examine the ways in which the term 'social inclusion' is interpreted and delivered within different institutional contexts not only by arts professionals charged with addressing 'socially excluded' audiences, but the individual project participants who are labelled 'socially excluded'.

Case study

This research study has examined the development phase of the Blue Room project from October 2006 through July 2007. The Blue Room was an ideal case study as it not only attends to adults with learning disabilities, a target audience that is labelled in policy documents as 'socially excluded', but the project also relates to the interpretation of 'social inclusion' by staff from both key partner institutions. Further, this inclusion addresses not only the wider issues of society, such as adults with learning disabilities accessing community provision and promoting independence and possible work training among service users (DH, 2001; SETF, 2007), but it also addresses inclusion within the arts, encouraging individuals who may not have traditional avenues into the arts at their disposal to pursue artistic careers (DCMS, 2000).

A case study approach for this study was appropriate (Yin, 2002) as this research does not attempt to make generalisations, but explore meanings and describe and understand the complexity of the practice of arts for social inclusion, discovering what people think, what occurs and why. Unlike in the positivist approach, this method correlates with the idea that "people respond to specific situations as they see them and they make value-led choices" (Arskey & Knight, 1999: 10). This study has revealed that individual's beliefs or interpretations are situated in contexts and experiences. Such beliefs or interpretations in turn inform individual's actions or practice (Bevir & Rhodes, 2005). In discussing interpretation theory, Taylor (1971) has explained that meanings, understandings and beliefs have a relationship to actions. Beliefs and actions cannot be separated. Bevir & Rhodes (2005: 4) have stated that "Practices could not exist if people did not have the appropriate beliefs." For the purposes of this study 'appropriate' refers to the regulatory practices that exist within an institutional context as well as a field of practice (Bourdieu, 2000),

such as the arts. As Bevir & Rhodes (2005: 4) go on to argue, “Beliefs or meanings would not make sense without the practices to which they refer.” Thus, in this study the interpretive approach has been employed in order to gain an understanding of the meanings that arts administrators and artists attach to work they carry out ‘for social inclusion’ as well as how those meanings are interpreted by the Blue Room participants themselves, both the service users and their support workers. The aim has been to understand the meaning of the actions undertaken in this project from the viewpoint of the actors involved within their specific institutional context.

The open nature of social inclusion policy and the methods for approaching it allows for practitioners, and in some cases, participants to interpret for themselves methods of delivery, despite the impending need to evidence its impact (Selwood, 2002; Belfiore, 2004). As a result, the interpretative approach offers the opportunity to explore how actors self-describe the contexts and structures within which they operate (Denzin, 1989) and goes some way to illustrating how these self-descriptions may influence their practice. Further, the interpretive approach argues for the fact that individuals “are not merely passive vehicles in social political and historical affairs, but have certain inner capabilities which can allow for individual judgments, perceptions and decision-making” (Garrick, 1999: 149). Through conducting semi-structured interviews, not only has the way in which practitioners and participants interpret the meaning of the term social inclusion been investigated, but so has their accounts of how the practice itself is taking place.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews with the two arts administrators charged with managing the Blue Room project, the five professional artists hired to conduct the training and ‘taster’ sessions, and the four support workers who assisted the trainee service users were undertaken. A series of main questions provided a framework or guide for the interview, but also allowed for improvisation and further exploration of discussion in certain areas (Arskey & Knight 1999). Such a method is useful for the interpretive approach. As Arskey & Knight (1999: 3) have explained, “perception, memory, emotion, and understanding are human constructs” that take place within cultural and sub-cultural settings, which provide a strong framework for meaning-making. As a result, individuals may share similar understandings of common experiences with, at the same time, personal elements (Arskey & Knight, 1999). Interviewing allowed for the exploration of “broad cultural consensus,” or in this case understandings within the field of the arts, and, at the same time, people’s more personal, private and particular understandings of that consensus (Arskey & Knight, 1999).

The interpretive approach is closely linked with context in the sense that it argues that meanings or beliefs are holistic. As Bevir & Rhodes (2005: 4) explain, “we can make sense of someone’s beliefs only by locating them in the wider web of other beliefs that provide the reasons for their holding them.” This “wider web of other beliefs” is interpreted here as ‘context’: the art world or field (Bourdieu, 2000) and the policy of inclusion that is encouraged from central government. In addition, the context of the Bluecoat as the specific arts institution which hosts the Blue Room is

under consideration. The interpretive approach focuses on investigating the way in which practice is “created, sustained, and transformed” through the interplay and contest of the beliefs embedded” in that activity (Bevir and Rhodes, 2005: 5). So, by examining the interpretation and delivery of social inclusion via the Blue Room project within the confines of the mission and vision of the Bluecoat as an institution, one can better understand the circumstances of inclusion which are provided by the Blue Room.

Participant Observation

Garrick (1999) has pointed out that interpretive approaches are problematic in that they do not always account for the specificities of practice: whether that is historical, social, or workplace related. This study argues that the interplay of beliefs emphasised within an interpretive approach can best be examined, not only with a consideration of context, but also through a consideration of process and interaction within practice. It is felt that by looking at the Blue Room through participant observation, this method helps to combat some of those problems while creating a more triangulated understanding of the case study. For, aside from understanding interpretation of the term ‘social inclusion’ as well as accounts of how the practice of ‘social inclusion’ is carried out, this research on the Blue Room focuses also on the interactions and processes involved in the practice itself.

During the research period, skills sessions taught for service users by professional artists and subsequent ‘taster sessions’ were attended. Participant observation was the most appropriate approach because, as Ruane (2005) explains, the researcher is able to be fully involved with the group or setting and remains completely open about the research agenda. The ‘participant observation’ approach allowed for maximum participation while maintaining an ethical high ground as research was not covert. In addition, the method allowed for a less reactive effect as the researcher was sincerely involved in the project being researched, lessening any discomfort regarding ‘note taking’ (Ruane, 2005).

Focus Group

A focus group was conducted with the key participants of the Blue Room, the service users being trained to lead workshops for service users new to the Blue Room. Based on consultation with the support workers and an advocacy group, Peer Advocacy Changing Things Together (PACTT), for adults with learning disabilities at the University of Liverpool, a focus group method was felt to be the most appropriate and empowering method for interviewing service users. All five service users participated in the focus group, sharing their thoughts on the delivery of the project as well as impressions of their own experience of social exclusion and their experience of inclusion via the Blue Room project.

Ethical Concerns

Because this research was conducted with a group that is labelled ‘socially excluded’ and thus stripped of power in certain situations, a sensitive approach has been taken in conducting research with these individuals. The ‘insider approach’ (Petrie et al.,

2006) was employed, which requires that a substantial amount of time be spent with the group being researched in order to establish more equitable and honest relationships with those individuals. This allowed for a degree of participation and power in the study (Petrie, 2006). As such, the group was informed of the purposes of the research project at the beginning. In preparation of all consent forms and interview materials, consultation was sought. For example, the PACTT group was consulted in preparing information materials, consent forms and other research related information for the five service users who participated in the research. PACTT worked with the research materials to make them more accessible for adults with learning disabilities. Further, in order to ensure that information shared by the service users was not misinterpreted, the group was consulted before the submission of this article.

Learning as a Social Practice: A Framework for Examining the Blue Room

Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning argues that learning is based on social participation. Participation being a contentious term (Simmons & Birchall, 2005) here refers "not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998: 4). The Blue Room, according to Wenger's theory, is both a kind of action and a form of belonging. It is a 'community of practice' dependent upon the mutual engagement of individuals, artists, arts administrators, support workers, and service users in a joint enterprise, in particular the promotion of inclusion and participation for adults with learning disabilities in a city-centre arts project, through a shared repertoire or practice (Wenger 1998).

During the course of the Blue Room project, the service users, artists, support workers, and Bluecoat administration staff have been developing, and continue to do so, relations of mutual engagement organised around making and exhibiting art work as well as developing workshops to be delivered to other service users. This engagement is carried out amongst the individuals involved through the following ways:

- *The creation of a friendly and trusting atmosphere*
Wenger (1998) explains that what it takes for a 'community of practice' to enable engagement and develop a sense of belonging can be quite subtle and often less visible than more instrumental aspects of a group's practice, such as informative memos about project logistics. The members of the Blue Room group have developed and maintain a sense of belonging and group cohesion and they cultivate this through conversation and sharing experiences every week during their workshops. The group meets every Thursday morning from 10am until 1pm. Some service users and support workers travel to the group's meeting place together and others come individually. Upon arrival, they prepare cups of tea and coffee and catch up with one another about the happenings of the previous week. Jokes and stories are told in the midst of the training workshops. After the sessions are completed the group share lunch

together and discuss what they worked on that day as well as any upcoming projects. This kind of environment has caused the service users to see the Blue Room as a relaxed and enjoyable “public place where people go...to do stuff”, such as “artwork” as well as a place to “meet” and “talk to people”. All participants have explained that they are “genuinely committed” to the project.

- *A diversity of knowledge and experience*

The varied knowledge and experience that the individuals involved in the Blue Room bring to the project is necessary in order to sustain its development. Overall there appear to be two main purposes for the Blue Room: first, to introduce art to users of Resource Centre services who may not realise it is an option to them and second, to encourage service users to “get out” of the Day services or Resource Centres and be active. While they may have a common interest in the fact that they come together in order to develop an opportunity for adults with learning disabilities to become more involved in the arts as well as an activity outside the Resource Centre, they also have diverse perspectives on what they do, why and how (Wenger 1998).

The desire to encourage new service users to “get out” of the Resource centres is particularly important to the trainees who feel that due to a lack of staffing within centres or a lack of confidence among service users, that participating in activities outside the Resource centres is of limited opportunity. As such, these individuals see their role as being trained to “help” new service users in participating in the Blue Room: encouraging them to come having introduced the project via ‘taster sessions’ but also helping them once they have arrived, assisting new service users in whatever their needs may be to make artwork. The trainees consider their role largely as “artists” who are “committed” not only to making art work and visiting and participating in exhibitions but also to the Blue Room and providing new avenues into the arts for service users new to the project.

Like the trainee service users, the support workers bring to the project their knowledge of working with individuals with complex needs as well as the societal constraints often laid upon those individuals in having such needs. They largely feel their role to be one of “support” not only for the trainee service users, but also for those who will be new to the Blue Room. Further, they feel they support the artists in becoming more familiar with working with individuals who have learning difficulties. Of the utmost importance in their role, however, is supporting the existing service users to pursue a career in the arts. They express a desire to help encourage the arts community to see these individuals not as ‘adults with learning disabilities’ who make art, but as “artists in their own right”.

The support workers have explained that the understanding of the Bluecoat staff has been “paramount” in making the Blue Room happen, particularly as it is sometimes felt that the institutional regulations of the LCCSLD often put

constraints on the delivery of the project. Bluecoat staff themselves acknowledge their role as “facilitators” who “can speak the language” of the different partners involved: LCCSLD managers, support workers, service users, and artists. Their familiarity of working with public sector agencies that have little experience in the arts as well as introducing artists to working in the public sector has given them a “sensitivity” to the different perspectives that may be brought to bear in such a partnership. Artists and service users feel that Bluecoat staff’s administration and organisation of the project is crucial. In addition, as individuals closely tied into the art world, Bluecoat staff have explained that they are able to give “a behind-the-scenes” look into the arts and an opportunity to participate in and experience “the creative process from start to finish”. Their role is to promote the Bluecoat via the Blue Room so that “people [can] feel comfortable coming to the Bluecoat and accessing all areas of it and not feeling that because of anything about themselves that they can’t”.

It could be perceived from an outside perspective that the ‘professional’ artists on the project are there to teach service users and support workers the skills to deliver creative art making workshops. In fact, the delivery of “skills” has been mentioned by support workers in relation to what the artists do, however, at no time has anyone in the project described the artists as ‘teachers’. The artists themselves have acknowledged that the support workers provide support in delivering sessions to service users. The artists articulate their own roles to be as “facilitators” in generating ideas and vision for developing creativity. One artist explained, “I think going in as an artist, you’re not a teacher, you’re not a carer, you’ve got a completely different role...I think [the service users] respond to you in a completely different way, so I think it’s important you go in and you say, ‘I’m an artist’, even though you might be doing the same thing in helping, you’ve just got that overall kind of vision and they look to you for that.” Another artist explained that in working together in workshops they, the artist, support workers, and service users, become a “group [that] functions as an arts organism”. At the same time however, some of the artists do not perceive the trainee service users as having the skills or experience to be considered “artists” in their own right as of yet. As a result, there is a simultaneous sense of hierarchical and non-hierarchical structure to the Blue Room group. In working together as the Blue Room, the group is on equal footing in that they all need each other in order for the project to work. At the same time, however, they are continually negotiating their roles as individuals who bring their own perceptions and experiences to that group. These perceptions and experiences, while making the group function on the level of social agendas can also hinder its ability to be truly inclusive within the arts.

- *The establishment of interconnected relationships*
Wenger (1998: 76) has explained that the maintenance of relationships created through a ‘community of practice’ can often connect individuals

involved in ways that become deeper than simply “personal features or social categories”. The relationships may be positive and nurturing or they may involve tension and conflict. The stories and experiences that are shared between the service users and support workers through the discussion and making of art is felt to develop a sense of “community” amongst the group as “memories” and “emotions” are “stirred.” It is explained, “an awful lot of inner feelings comes out.” Through shared involvement with art and through participation in the project, support workers often “find out more than they ever knew” about the individuals who they support.

Partly through creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere, the artists help facilitate these closer relationships amongst the group as a whole in the way in which they lead their workshops. Through the process of teaching new art making techniques or working with the service users and support workers to plan the delivery of a ‘taster session’ each artist in their own ways poses questions at the start of workshops about what the individuals in the group attach value to, how they define themselves, and how they have come to be the people that they are. The stories that are shared reflect fears from experiencing discrimination as well as humorous stories about family members and memories of past arts projects. These personal discussions not only help create the project’s supportive environment, but are also the source for how the Blue Room carries out its practice.

Although the Bluecoat staff is not directly engaged in the weekly workshop sessions, they as well have become closely connected to the Blue Room group. Their commitment in negotiating the challenges that have arisen with regards to maintaining the buy-in of the LCCSLD is described by support workers as something that “makes you want to do [the Blue Room].” As a result, and despite any tensions or conflicts that may arise amongst the group, individuals involved in the Blue Room feel a deep sense of connection and allegiance to one another that is against the odds they face in the bureaucracy of the wider public service sector or even the field of the arts. These connections have formed friendships not only amongst the service users and support workers, but also with Bluecoat staff. Bluecoat staff, support workers, service users, and in some cases artists, attend each others performances or exhibitions, have lunch together and even travel abroad together as a result of, but not for the purposes of, the project.

The creation and maintenance of a friendly and trusting atmosphere, a diversity of knowledge and experience, and the establishment of interconnected relationships help to maintain the Blue Room group as a coherent whole while they go through the collective process of negotiating not only the individual relationships they have with one another, but also the constraints of the institutions (the Bluecoat and LCCSLD) that mandated the project. The ways in which the individuals involved go about these forms of negotiation adds to their sense of belonging to the Blue Room as a collective and their notions of mutual accountability despite any influences that may

be beyond their control, such as hierarchical structures within the group and institutional control (Wenger 1998).

In the course of this shared endeavour, the Blue Room has developed a set of resources for negotiating the meaning of what they do (Wenger 1998). These include the routine of the project, the location in which it takes place, the art objects viewed and the language used to discuss them, the tools for art making and workshop planning, the stories shared during training sessions, and the ways of doing things. These ways include the flexible manner in which the artists lead the training sessions, the ways in which support workers support not only the service users to participate in the sessions, but also the artists to deliver them, and the ways in which the Bluecoat administration staff coordinates the running of the project as a whole. Two of the key elements in this repertoire are flexibility and risk-taking, which have recently been raised in DCMS reports on projects designed for inclusion (DCMS 2007a). This set of “shared resources” (Wenger 1998, p. 83) does not imply that Blue Room sessions are always harmonious, nor that there is no confusion at times. In fact at times some participants have felt uncomfortable with the flexible nature of workshop delivery and the risk-taking it entails, yet they continue to negotiate such approaches because they appreciate that it privileges process over outcome.

Applying Learning Theory to Delivery of the Blue Room project

Examining the Blue Room as ‘a community of practice’ and a process of participation in which learning occurs and can be examined, brings the complexity of the Blue Room to light. Wenger (1998: 85) explains that as “a locus of engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises” communities of practice like the Blue Room “hold the key” to the possibility of change that may be implied in its label as a social inclusion project. The dictates of cultural policy, the arts, the Bluecoat, and the LCCSLD and conditions of exclusion for adults with learning disabilities are no less significant; rather they are “mediated” via the processes of the Blue Room’s practice (Wenger 1998: 85). The aspects inherent in that practice, mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire are not static, but they flex and change over time (Wenger 1998) via the processes involved in delivering the Blue Room. Applying, then, Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning to observation of the Blue Room yields new ways in which to highlight the potential change brought about by the project. The aim here, as Francis (2004) noted, is to discuss what the Blue Room **does** do, while also bringing to light what it is **seen** to be doing but may not actually be. This will be carried out in the sections below, which highlight only two areas of learning achieved via the Blue Room project. First, the process of mutual engagement undertaken in the Blue Room will be examined followed by a discussion of the group’s struggle to reconcile their conflicting interpretations of the enterprise to promote inclusion.

Evolving Forms of Mutual Engagement in the Blue Room

In order for a ‘community of practice’ to cohere enough to function, mutual engagement must be worked at and maintained (Wenger 1998). The friendly and trusting atmosphere of the Blue Room that exists in each weekly session is part of

this maintenance, but mutual engagement must also be maintained at the institutional level (Wenger 1998). The ways in which mutual institutional engagement occurs affects the delivery of the project and what that can accomplish. Bluecoat staff have explained that the ways in which 'participation' takes place in projects, such as the Blue Room, that are partnerships with public sector agencies is based on the context of that partnership. This context typically includes the restrictions or allowances placed on a project by the partner organisation. The LCCSLD exists to promote independence among adults with learning disabilities, by enabling service users to live as independently as possible and take part in 'valued' activities in communities. The establishment of a partnership between the Bluecoat and LCCSLD for the Blue Room was actually a final step in solidifying collaboration between the two organisations. The Bluecoat had been working in partnership on projects with individual Resource Centres since at least the year 2000. The need, according to policy directives such as *Valuing People* (DH 2001) for LCCSLD to assist service users in accessing community activities and to provide more personalised services for those individuals in order to promote their independence and social inclusion matched the Bluecoat's own goals to increase access to and participation in the art centre's contemporary arts activity for all people in Liverpool. For the Blue Room to happen, the LCCSLD provides support staff and funding as well as transportation for service users in some cases. The Bluecoat organises the logistics of the project and provides supplementary funding and the venue.

For these partners to work together there must be mutual engagement. However, this engagement at the institutional level affects the engagement of the Blue Room participants at the project level. At certain points in the period of research on this project, it became apparent that Bluecoat staff had to "maintain" (Wenger 1998) the support of the LCCSLD managers, managers that may be new to the organisation and thus not fully aware of the Blue Room project, its aims and its practice. Difficulties have arisen in which some of the support workers on the project have been either taken off the project and shifted to new areas of the organisation or pressured to provide and/or organise transport for the service users with whom they work. This situation has at times affected the positive feelings participants have about the Blue Room, oftentimes concluding that the key challenge to the project's success often lies with negotiating institutional engagement with and understanding of it. As a result, during the course of workshops held for the Blue Room, support workers have been distracted and not fully engaged with discussions turning to complaints about the difficulties of the situation. At times, artists have had to be flexible and negotiate around these problems; in some instances allowing support workers the space to share their grievances and in other cases encouraging them to "get their minds off" those grievances by engaging in the tasks at hand. In addition, workshops have sometimes been cut short, due to the need of Bluecoat staff to discuss recent developments in the institutional partnership with service users, artists, and support workers.

Despite these challenges at the institutional level and perhaps in some ways because of them, the connection that individuals involved in the Blue Room share

has been strengthened. Support workers have explained that they feel an “affinity” to the Bluecoat because of their continual support of the project, despite any institutional complications. Bluecoat staff spends much of their time meeting with LCCSLD managers to negotiate how the project can best be delivered once it is rolled out to new service users and support workers have invited managers along to the project to see for themselves what is happening there. Wenger (1998: 79) has explained, “even when [a community of practice] is profoundly shaped by conditions outside the control of its members, as it always is in some respect, its day to day reality is nevertheless produced by participants within the resources and constraints of their situations. It is their response to their conditions and therefore their enterprise.” As a result, the institutional hiccups that have occurred, while in instances hurting some of the project’s delivery, has also strengthened the efforts to make the project happen because of the connections and mutual accountability the participants share with one another. These efforts may not lessen the control or requirements that the institution lays on the Blue Room project, but carried out by the ‘community of practice’ they do mediate that control in the ways that they respond to it (Wenger 1998).

Defining and Reconciling the Enterprise

Wenger (1998) has explained that the endeavour of a ‘community of practice’ is the result of the group’s collective process of negotiation of the meaning of that endeavour.

The enterprise of the Blue Room is on the whole, articulated by each participant as encouraging service users to “get out” of the Resource centres and feel confident and comfortable accessing arts activity provided by the Bluecoat. This second aspect of inclusion is of particular importance to Bluecoat staff and has much to do with understanding inclusion in the context of their work environment. At the same time, however, the Blue Room project has broader aims for inclusion, which not only promote audience development for the Bluecoat and provide new activities for service users, but also encourage wider and varied engagement with the arts as well. The long-term aim of the Blue Room project is to promote ‘inclusion’ in its broader social sense via pathways to greater involvement in the community, such as through volunteering at the Bluecoat and/or participating in the development of individual arts projects through the Blue Room. All of these aspects of inclusion are mutually understood by all individuals involved in the project, though some aspects may weigh of greater importance to different individuals than others, depending on their unique perspectives.

For the five service users involved in the Blue Room, the long-term aim appears to be achievable as these service users have been closely involved with the design and delivery of the Blue Room, from making decisions on the hiring of professional artists to the design of the project’s evaluation. Artists have explained how much they perceive the service users to be truly involved in the planning and delivery of Blue Room sessions. One stated, “I’ve never been in any other community situation where you actually plan with [the ‘excluded’ group] and they get...everyone gets time, chance to input...” Wenger (1998: 74) has explained that “being included in what

matters is a requirement for being engaged in a community's practice". As a result, the trainee group appears to have a clearly defined role and to be fully engaged or 'included' in the practice of the Blue Room. Discussions with the group reflect an impression of general inclusion in decision-making about the running of the project.

However, when issues of artistic value are considered in relation to the Blue Room project, the 'inclusion' of the trainees becomes less clear and their identity as artists comes under question. Identity, according to Wenger (1998) comprises the ability and inability of individuals to share the meanings that define their communities of practice and their forms of belonging to those communities." The trainees' involvement in the project highlights their identity and their role in the Blue Room as 'the excluded'. The consideration of the trainees as 'excluded' individuals becomes problematic when learning that the service users do not wish to highlight their difference (Edwards et al., 2001) so overtly, but rather wish to highlight their identity as artists. When asked about whether or not the group considers themselves to have a learning disability, statements shared included: "I'm not going to walk around...saying "I've got a learning disability"...You put labels on jam jars; you don't put labels on people". Another respondent stated, "I think everyone's got a learning disability in some ways...you're a person at the end of it." With respect to the arts, individuals in the group identified themselves as artists based on the fact that they are creative: "when I'm in my flat, I don't sit down. I always get pieces of paper and do like a collage or whatever. So I'm always doing something, so I am an artist in that way".

The association with the Blue Room is a crucial aspect to identifying and presenting themselves as artists since involvement in the project has been felt to enable the five service users, as they have explained, to "let people know what [they] do" as artists, not only because they can share their skills with other individuals from the Resource Centres who would be attending the Blue Room, but also because the Bluecoat has provided them the opportunity to exhibit and share their work. The service users themselves seem to most value the chance to "help" others develop the artistic skills they themselves have learned; not only to share those skills, but also to highlight the fact that they are 'trained' artists.

The Blue Room's location within the wider context of the arts (Bourdieu 2000) means that the construction of meanings inherent in that field comes to play within the practice of the project. Tensions arise for the project around reconciling the conflicting interpretations of what kind of inclusion the project is about as well as reconciling individual participants' roles and identities in relation to that practice (Wenger 1998). While the service users participating in the Blue Room at the moment appear to be included into the decision-making process of the 'practice', what they (and their support workers) appear to be striving for is acceptance and inclusion within the field of the arts as artists. Ironically, their association with the Blue Room helps them to identify as artists, yet simultaneously that association precludes them in some ways as being considered artists in their own right, as they are in fact labelled as 'excluded'.

The tensions arise in the negotiation of status within the arts, which is often associated with perceptions of artistic quality and skill based on perceived 'acceptable' levels of training within the field of the arts. The trainees differentiate themselves from the artists who have been instructing them on developing skills to lead workshops for other service users. They have explained that the artists who train them are "more of an artist than us" and "more professional than us". One service user attached the artists' professional status to the fact that "they probably done training for it before we started doing [the Blue Room]." In contrast, according to one Bluecoat staff, "self-definition" is of the utmost importance in identifying oneself as an artist:

"If people feel like an artist, then they are an artist. [If one individual in the Blue Room group] goes home and makes [art] you know in [their] own time, then that's [their] artistic practice. And that's how [that] artistic practice is expressed. Who's to say that that's any less valid?"

According to staff members involved in the Blue Room project labelling oneself as an artist should be enough to be considered as such. However, at the same time the categorisations of "experience" are inherent in discussions of such labels and touch on the tensions inherent in such considerations. The staff member quoted above goes on to explain...

[Some of the individuals in the Blue Room have] had 7 years of experience of working on contemporary art projects with a range of different artists, and across different art forms. [They don't have] a degree in fine art, but you know [they have] built up a considerable amount of experience...but how people who are curators, for example, in the contemporary art world would view that, I don't know and I think that's always where the battle will lie."

Wenger (1998) has explained that equality of status is not a precursor to mutual engagement in a 'community of practice'. In fact, a lack of equality in status can contribute to the competence of the individuals in the group where they draw on the experiences and knowledge of one another in a way to further the practice. However, problems can arise when participants in a 'community of practice' are not mutually negotiating the meanings of their enterprise.

One participant in the project noted, "There's a difference between tolerance and acceptance and value. While staff engaged in the Blue Room project may feel that participation in the project itself may provide an "alternative progression" to that of traditional training into the arts as a whole, support workers, staff, and artists alike all acknowledge that the arts have "standards" to adhere to. These standards make the inclusion of 'excluded' individuals more problematic, as it is the acknowledgement of their 'exclusion', which in a sense precludes their inclusion. Participation exhibitions of work such as that created by the Blue Room do not always get priority in gallery spaces and when they do, they are often highlighted as 'participation' programme

exhibitions rather than as 'art' exhibitions. Through the Blue Room project, Bluecoat staff and artists are seen to support the trainees' inclusion into the arts. This support happens during the sessions, where for instance one artist showed the artwork of a well-established artist and stated, "There's no reason why you can't do this kind of work too." In addition, Bluecoat staff have continually encouraged and supported the group to exhibit their work in exhibitions such as the Liverpool Biennial. Yet, the service users have expressed a feeling of exclusion from the arts in the way that their work is exhibited separate from that of other, non-disabled artists. Such issues have also been highlighted by staff as problematic, in ways questioning whether or not the art world values such work as equivalent to 'art'. The following discussion by the trainees illustrates the point:

A: " What I didn't like about it though, I was annoyed. They put [our art] in a little back street place where they should have put it with everyone else's...They put it there. And they put, um, [other disabled groups' works there] too. And I said to myself, '...They could have put it with other artists' work. Do you know what I mean? They just chucked it in a place there. ...I didn't know where it was going to be put...And I thought it was in a proper place, but it was just stuck in a back street place.

R:¹ A proper place like what?

B: In an art gallery and that.

R: It wasn't in an art gallery?

B: No. It was like an empty building.

A: When we do artwork, it's just shoved in a place for other people to go and see. ... It's not put with proper peoples.

In hearing this story, other Blue Room group participants responded:

C: Well, I think it should be because your artwork is good.

A: Yea.

C: Because, if it's shoved out the way, people aren't going to know it are they?

A: No.

C: ...That you done it.

¹ R = Researcher

A: I don't think many people went to that place, where it was put. Do you know what I mean?

B: It was like pure, um, pure empty.

A: It was in a poor place to me.

B: Like a dumpster place.

C: Did you complain?

A: I think it was degrading. In some ways, it was.

C: They should put...

A: I didn't [complain] but...

C: Well you should have done!

A: I said, 'fancy it being here.' And they said 'Well this is an artist's place.' But it wasn't. It wasn't a proper like gallery place. It was just ours and the [the other group of adults with learning disabilities] and that was it.

D: Yea.

This discussion highlights a number of problematic issues and misunderstandings. First, is the notion that because the trainees' work was not exhibited in a traditional gallery space, they feel their work was not validated by the art world as anything other than 'different'. Such a feeling illustrates that for the trainees, acceptance to the level of as 'standards' to which the arts are believed to uphold, are part of that in which the participants would like to be included. Staff have acknowledged that the trainee group have not come to understand that 'accepted' contemporary fine art exhibitions often occur in alternative gallery spaces. This misunderstanding demonstrates a lack of mutual understanding on the part of the group as a whole.

Despite the look of the location where the artwork was placed, the group feels that their work should not be exhibited apart from that of non-disabled artists, which is further demonstrated by this statement, "I mean, alright, I know we've got a learning disability, but they could have put part of the learning disability's in with the others couldn't they?" Labelling the work as 'participation' work, in addition to that of the main Bluecoat exhibition programme and exhibiting it separate from that of other mainstream artists is seen to promote exclusion rather than inclusion. In fact support workers also discussed this issue remarking that with regards to inclusion within the art world, there is still "a long way to go". One support worker further explained this, "Because why is it that their work is not displayed in [major art galleries], what makes

that of more value than what they produced, so you know is it acceptance [rather than value] to a point?"

There are issues of oppression that support workers feel adults with learning disabilities have long suffered, a story that others (Delin 2002) feel has been omitted from the history of art. They explained that this omission has been a miscarriage of justice to adults with learning disabilities, many of who could best share their stories through the arts. The way that the Bluecoat highlights its work with groups of 'socially excluded' individuals undoubtedly emphasises the Bluecoat as an 'inclusive' arts institution. In fact, the trainees have expressed feelings of "pride" in being a part of the Blue Room as they explain it is a "worthwhile" activity that gives them the opportunity to do something "outside the Day centre", to "be a part of the Bluecoat", to "work with artists" and to "help others make art". Yet, this very underscoring of inclusion may actually be further excluding the Blue Room participants from the arts as a whole.

Conclusions

Social inclusion is a public policy that lacks clear definition and as such is subject to wide interpretation within policy delivery. The attachment of that policy to the cultural sector has fostered numerous arts projects that are intended to provide social outcomes. These outcomes are not only difficult to measure, but the requirement to do so is argued to go against the very nature of creativity and the arts (Tranter & Palin, 2004). Further difficulties arise in promoting social outcomes as the arts must accommodate its own criteria of artistic excellence and quality of production and presentation. The marriage of the two, social outcomes and artistic excellence, creates tensions for the promotion of social inclusion via the arts.

This paper has shown that the current body of literature examining social inclusion and the arts within the UK lacks examination of the particularities of field and institutional context involved in such projects. Further, they lack in-depth consideration of the meaning and interpretation of policy and its practice by and with practitioners and participants during the process of project delivery. Because social inclusion is a policy open to interpretation, it is thus necessary to consider how that policy is addressed in particular contexts (DCMS 2000). This is especially important with respect to addressing the meanings and interpretations of the 'socially excluded' individuals for whom a project is designed (Morris 2001). The evolving nature of these types of projects, the complexity of the partners and individuals involved, and the multiple levels of change that is expected from them make a traditional examination of performance indicators and outcomes less useful than a process-based approach (Butterfoss, 2006). Further, such projects, particularly in the arts, require a level of flexibility and risk-taking (DCMS, 2007a; Tranter & Palin, 2004) that does not lend itself easily to more impact- and outcome- focused studies.

As a result, this study has employed Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning and examined the Blue Room project in Liverpool, England as a 'community of practice'. The framework allows for the acknowledgement and investigation of the problems

with top-down policies such as the social inclusion agenda, but moves on from that kind of discussion to one that examines the way in which social actors may be attempting to use practice to encourage such change. This is accomplished by the model's allowance for a deeper understanding of the continuum along which individuals involved in projects like the Blue Room travel in order to mutually engage in their common enterprise. Further, the framework's focus on meaning, interpretation, and action allows for a closer look at the circumstances and perspectives that lead to particular project designs and delivery. This focus as well creates more space in which reflection on practice can occur as such a methodological approach allows for the exploration of the dynamics of partnership working on-the-ground and, crucially, in real time.

An examination of the Blue Room in this manner has shown that localised and personalised approaches can mediate institutional constraints to promote some aspects of inclusion. However, promoting similar change within the arts itself proves difficult and in fact may further marginalise the trainees. Nevertheless, the very engagement of the group with one another allows the individuals involved to continue to work together to promote change despite perceptions, pressures and controls that come from outside the group. This engagement embraces experimentation and risk-taking and occurs through the deep connections and mutual accountability the group shares with one another. Exploring projects through this lens, then, one is able to more clearly see the learning processes under which each individual may be going, individually as well as collaboratively, as a project develops in real time. Individuals may not always agree or fully understand one another, but it is in the relationships that develop via the engagement in a long-term project such as the Blue Room, where such misunderstandings can begin to be unpicked and learning can occur.

Such relationships are argued to create a social space in which resistance to the kinds of social structures exclusion creates is possible (Powell & Gilbert, 2007). This resistance may only truly occur however, if practitioners and participants have the room in which to negotiate them, which the imposition of performance indicators and outcomes may often prevent. It is felt that the findings presented here may indicate that a more in-depth, on-the-ground, and in-real-time methodological approach to examining the learning processes that occur throughout the development of 'socially inclusive' arts projects, actually reveals outcomes of *learning*, which are more tangible and potentially encouraging of inclusive practices. It is hoped that policy would encourage and support, via time and money, institutions, practitioners, and participants to engage in such reflection, rather than prescribing indicators. In fact, the opportunity to investigate the Blue Room group through this lens by means of the research published here has been expressed by the Blue Room group as a whole as helping to create an occasion for feedback to and further and new reflection by the group, with Bluecoat staff reacting positively to a desire to address some of the tensions highlighted here.

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ⁱ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/gfta2006.php>