

Professional Development through Networking

Case studies and commentary by Lauren Healey on this imaginative scheme for artist-led professional development.

Introduction

The NAN Professional Development through Networking scheme in North East England ran 2006-08, funded by ERDF via CSDI and a-n's funds, supported the development of an important programme of artist-led projects. Applicants ranged from individuals requiring personalised support to initiatives aimed at large groups with broader visual arts audiences. Applicants were required to submit their proposed projects under one or more broad headings: practical training workshops; one-to-one advice; mentoring; peer critique; critical debate; and research trips. Often projects would cross several areas, giving artists opportunity to create a personalised programme of professional development tailored specifically to their needs. Artists not only devised and participated in their own professional development, but were also paid for their time as project managers – an important aspect in a culture of low pay and expectations of voluntary work. The entire project budget was £135,200 enabling twenty-three individual projects and directly benefitting 144 artists and arts practitioners.

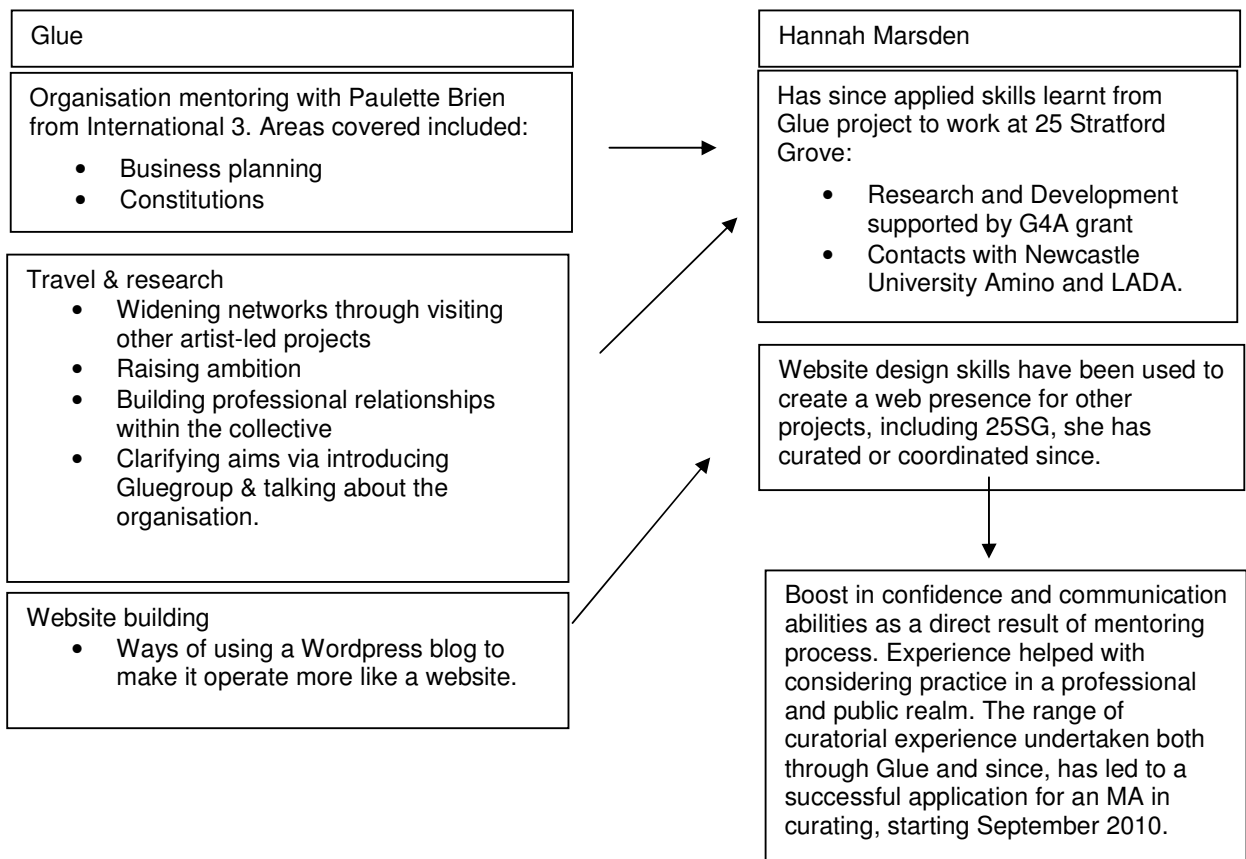
To evaluate the impact that this broad-ranging and open-ended scheme has had on the practice and professional development of artists, this report examines eight specific case studies. These have been divided into four sections: Successful Failure, Collaboration and Group Working, Practical Mentoring, and Mentoring Critiques. Each section looks at a different approach taken by the participating artists, and evaluates the resultant impact upon their practice in the longer-term.

Successful Failure

Glue and Hannah Marsden / mentoring, travel and research, one-to-one advice

Glue was a group of ten early career artists based in Newcastle upon Tyne. At the time of applying to NAN, they were in the planning stages of a new development, having already established themselves as an artist's network. They aimed to set up a gallery space in a shop front they had been offered rent free in the Heaton area of the city, with the intention that the space would offer a platform for exhibitions, live art events, discussions, training and community exchange and involvement. This would be achieved by formulating a professional development programme for the members of the group via mentoring and research, whilst simultaneously seeking to engage the local audience via creative workshops and events.

Over time, the group eventually formed into five key members, one of whom was Hannah Marsden. Hannah benefited directly from the experiences with Glue, with much of her professional development and network building having descended either directly or indirectly from this project.



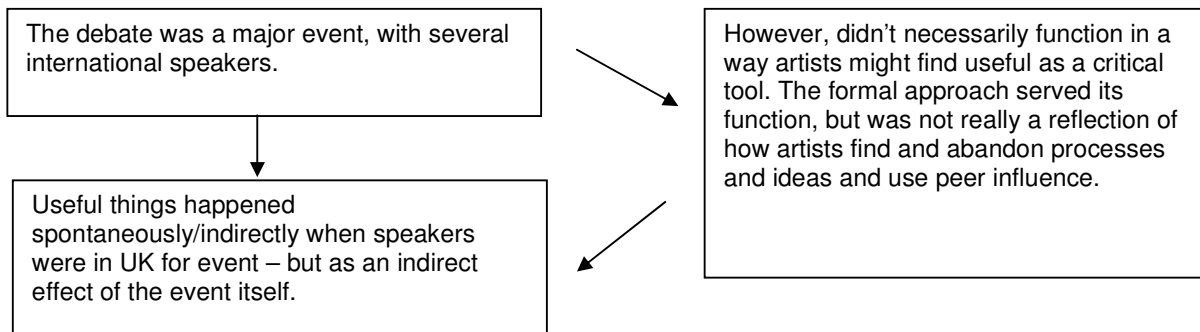
Glue ceased operation around a year after opening the gallery space. However, as Hannah's experience in particular demonstrates, the benefits of the mentoring have continued long after the initial project itself had ended.

www.25startfordgrove.wordpress.com

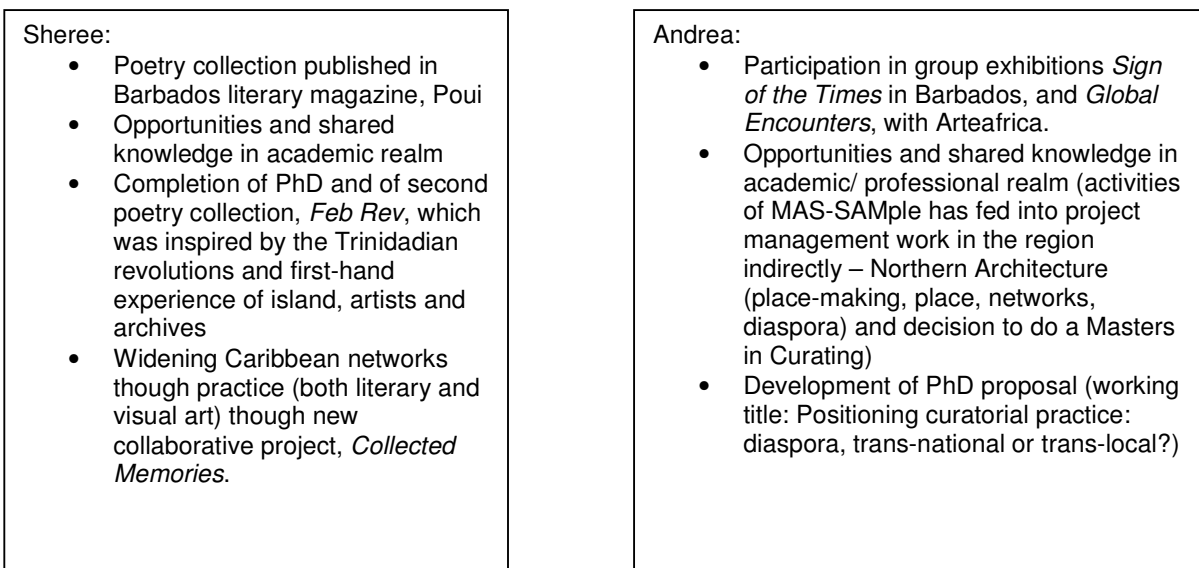
MAS-SAMple / critical debate

MAS-SAMple was a combined arts initiative based in the north east of England, which sought to engage artists from the Caribbean Diaspora, especially practitioners and organisations embracing hybrid processes and thinking across visual art forms. Artists Sheree Mack and Andrea Macdonald established MAS-SAMple in April 2007, after their return from a creative research trip to the Caribbean islands of Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago. The intention with the NAN funding was to deliver a one-day critical debate, which involved a chaired discussion with presentations from guest speakers; a networking session for the participants and audience; and live performances and/or time-based installations from three artists. The aims of the event were to:

- Raise profile as a formal artist-led initiative
- Create a foundation to import/export critical exchange to and from NE region
- Building networks and partnerships



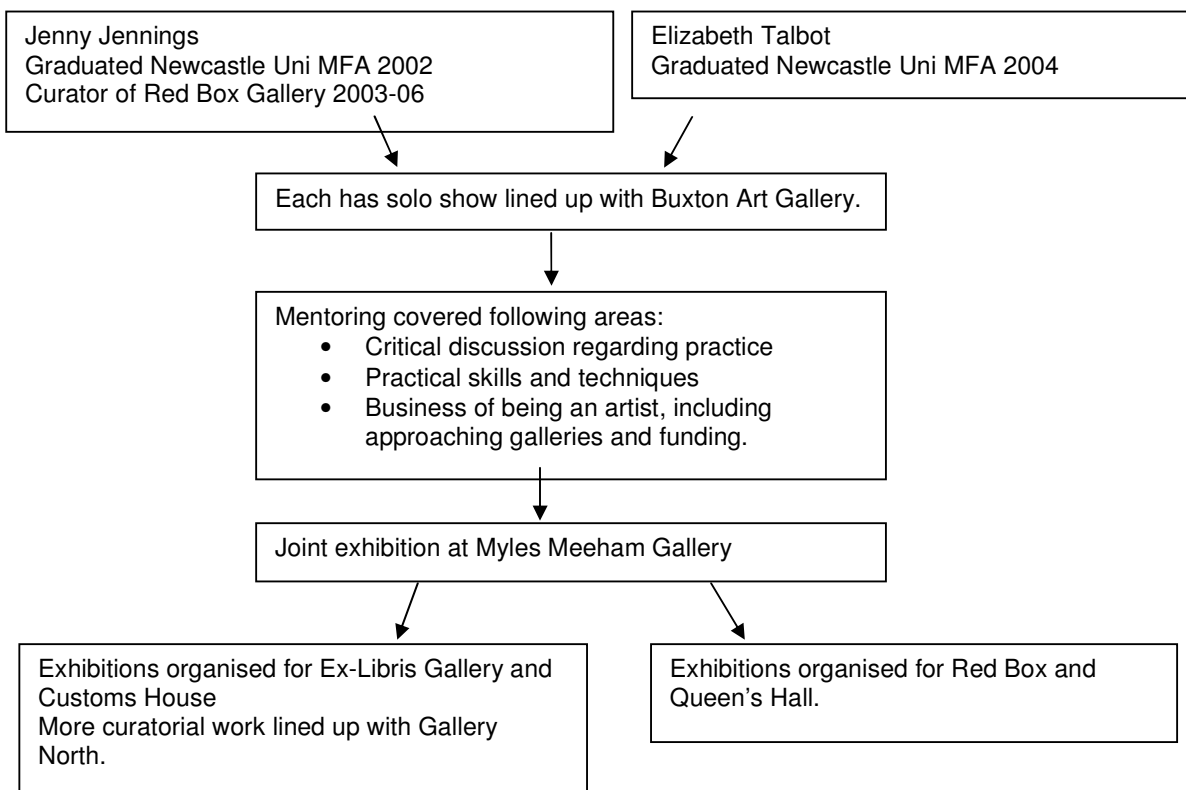
MAS_SAMple ceased operation in 2008. However, Mack and MacDonald continue to support each other's work and practice via informal channels. They have also made considerable individual achievements since MAS-SAMple, both as a direct and indirect result of the project:



Collaboration and Group Working

Jane Jennings and Elizabeth Talbot / mentoring

Having established profiles in exhibiting/curatorial practice within the north east of England, Jane Jennings and Elizabeth Talbot aimed to use their NAN funded mentoring to consider their practice within a wider framework beyond the immediate geographical area. Through supportive joint mentoring, they intended to gain a better critical understanding of each other's practice, with the intention of providing each other with mutually challenging support for their ongoing creative development at the end of the project.



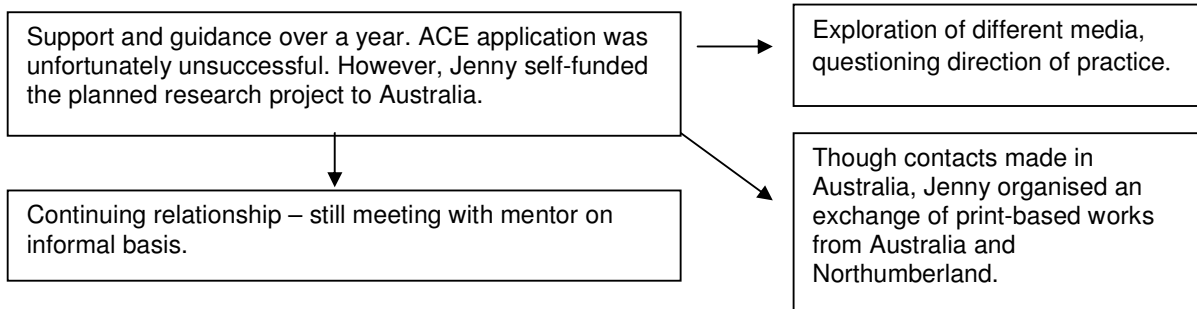
Both artists found that having the opportunity to focus in depth on the qualities and progress of their work with another artist without worrying about taking up too much time or patience was invaluable. Both feel that positive results have emerged for them as a result of this experience.

Jenny Mathers / mentoring, critical debate

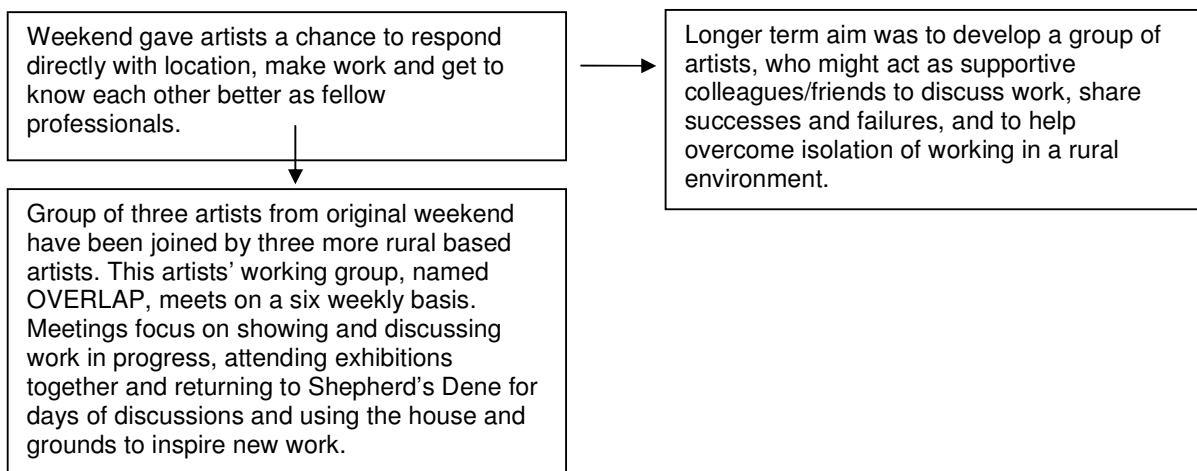
Jenny ran two different projects through this scheme. Firstly, there was a mentoring project aimed at providing guidance, advice and critical appraisal of work over a fifteen month period to ensure successful completion of an arts-science collaboration project. In addition, the mentoring would support an application to Arts Council England to fund a three month project in Australia with John Mathers, Professor of Human Nutrition, School of Clinical Medical Sciences, Newcastle University. Whilst undertaking the research at Queensland College of Art and CSIRO Australian Government Research Units in Brisbane, Jenny also intended to make contact with other artists' networks in Australia and New Zealand. The mentoring support would help with identification of Australian/New Zealand artist contacts and would provide a point of reference during the research period.

Secondly, she organised a residential weekend for a group of rurally-based artists at Shepherd's Dene retreat in Northumberland. This was a follow-up session aimed at consolidating relationships first formed during an a- n sponsored round table event during October 2006.

Mentoring



Shepherd's Dene

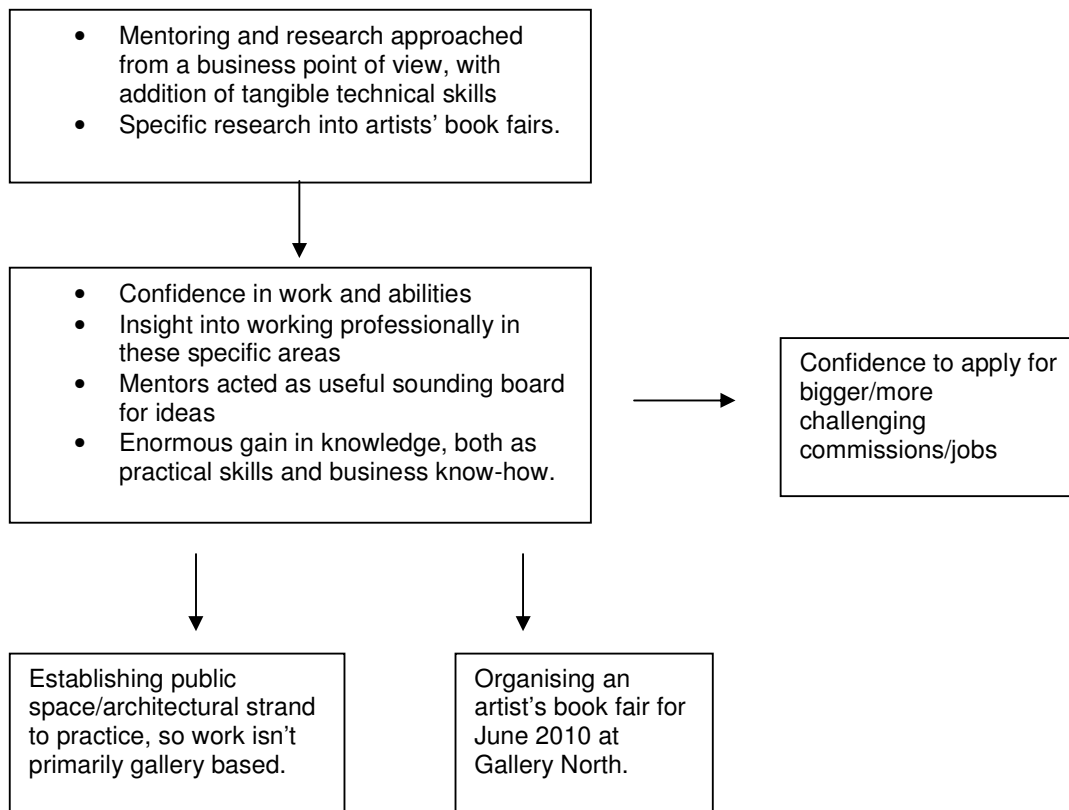


Both projects are still on-going. Jenny continues informal meetings with her mentor, and the body of work the sessions were aimed at supporting is nearing completion. The development of OVERLAP from the residential weekend has created a long-term support network, particularly important in a rural location.

Practical Mentoring

Theresa Easton / mentoring and research

Having been awarded her first public commission in a school, Theresa felt that mentoring support for the practical and business aspects of this area of work would be useful. The areas identified for support included budgeting, presentation, applications, contracts, PLI, networks, contacts, fabricators and business planning. As part of the commission, Theresa planned to make a series of artists' books and editioned prints, with the intention of selling them via galleries and artist's book fairs. She therefore planned to visit fairs in London and Glasgow to research possible outlets and build contacts, with the intention of exhibiting at such fairs in the future.



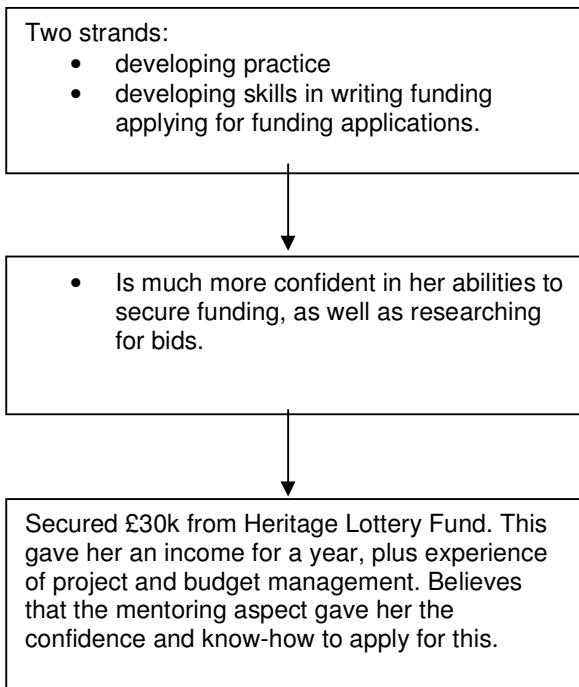
Theresa's practice has broadened as a result of this mentoring she received, allowing her to apply for a wider variety of commissions and project. This in turn will substantially increase her ability to sustain her practice in the long-term. She was successful in applying to ACE for funding for the Artists' Book Fair at Gallery North.

<http://gn.northumbria.ac.uk/whatson/1656611>

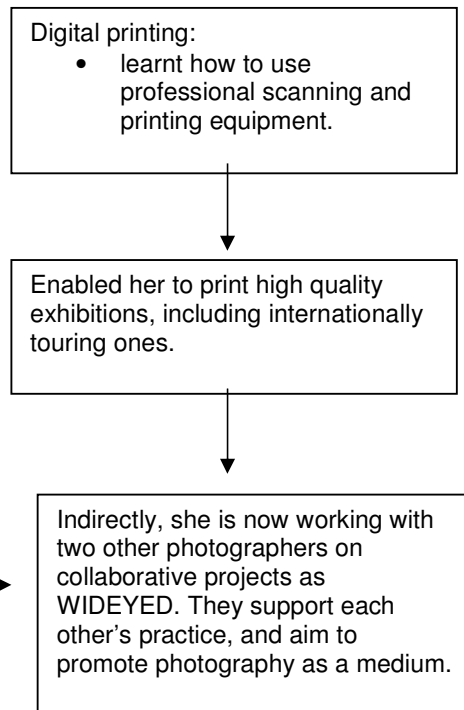
Louise Taylor / mentoring, practical training workshops

Louise is a freelance photographer based in County Durham. In order to take greater control over her photographic prints, she undertook a series of training workshops at Darlington Media Centre. This gave her the skills and knowledge to print archival exhibition-quality digital prints. She intended to use the mentoring area of her project for support in writing funding bids, ranging from personal projects to larger community bids. She wanted to gain a better understanding of funding procedures, what funders look for and get feedback on the applications that she wrote. By doing this, she intended to raise her profile as an artist.

Mentoring



Training

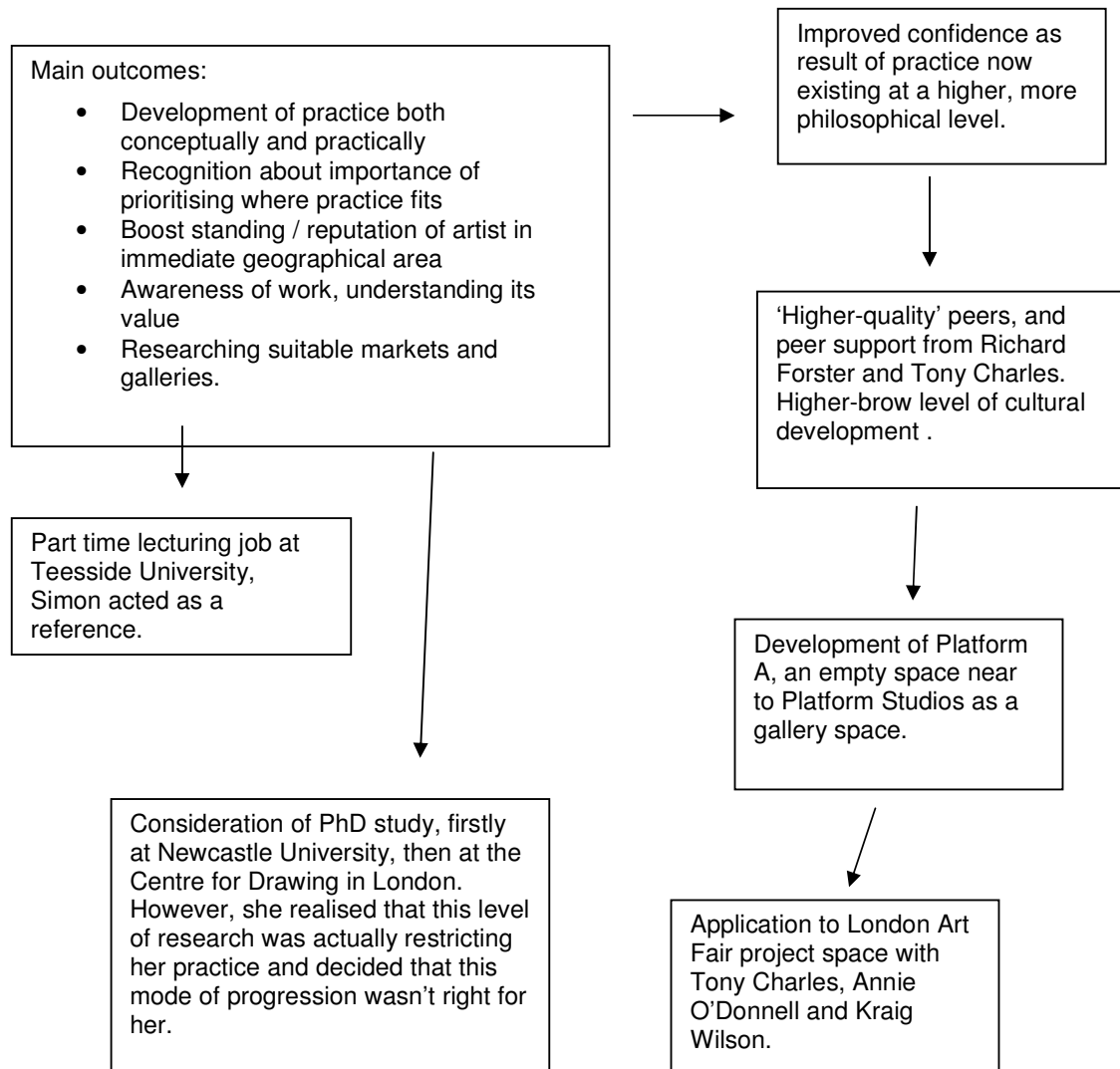


<http://wideyed.org>
www.louisetaylorphotography.co.uk

Mentoring Critique

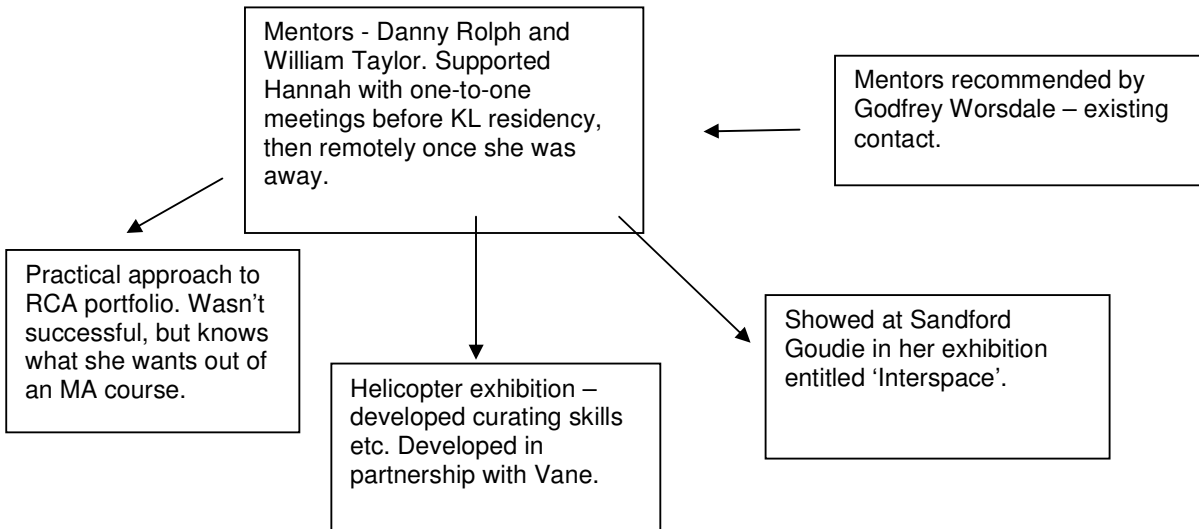
Debbie Covell / Mentoring, travel and research

Continuing on from an ACE G4A funding mentoring project, Debbie used the NAN funding for a series of sessions with Simon Grennan, stretching out over a year. The original plan was to provide support in creating a body of work with the aim for targeting good public galleries who would also support a publication. Debbie would also undertake extensive research into suitable public and private galleries which would be relevant to the manner in which her practice was developing.



Although not achieving the planned objectives, Debbie sees this as a positive thing. She doesn't believe her work would have been ready to approach the sorts of galleries where she would like to be exhibiting. The slower approach to the mentoring has been more akin to her practice, and has enabled it to become stronger as a result. It has allowed to her access ambitious / high end projects and galleries, a process that is still continuing.

Hannah's original plan was to use the NAN funding to help support her residency in Kuala Lumpur via mentoring, researching galleries and markets in SE Asia and Australia, and also to further the critical dialogue surrounding her work.



The entire experience challenged her work, research & ideas. As a result she is much more confident with her practice. She is able to turn down opportunities for they would not be right her practice in the long term.

www.hannahcampion.com

Conclusions

By offering artists a range of headings into which their projects could fit, and by allowing a mix of these headings, participants were able to design a professional development programme that would entirely suit their individual needs.

The mentoring aspect was particularly popular amongst artists applying to the scheme as individuals or small groups. Although the visual arts are a very social profession with regular discussion and critique taking place, having the paid time of someone especially to help with specific aspects of a professional practice has proven extremely beneficial for many artists, as these case studies demonstrate. Mentors were approached because of their professional experience and expertise, and helped artists develop their work both from a critical point of view as well as a practical one, whilst also expanding their networks.

Several projects put a great value upon critical discussion under the guise of peer-critique, critical debate, or incorporated into the mentoring scheme. This is an area which has often been overlooked in post-education professional work for early career artists – informal NE based groups such as NewcastleGRAFT have tried to address this in the past, but meetings have often been sporadic. Creating a funded arena for such discussions allowed them to become formalised, and to incorporate visitors from outside of the region thereby increasing professional networks. However, as MAS-SAMple discovered, effectiveness can be reduced if formality becomes rigid and inflexible. Groups and individuals seemed to benefit most from these types of discussion when a formal arrangement or approach provided a context in which open-ended conversations could take place.

Many participants cite an increase in confidence in terms of their practice and also in their professional judgement. Hannah Champion's ability to turn down opportunities if she didn't feel they would benefit her in the longer term, and Theresa Easton's skills development has meant that they are both in a stronger position with their practices. There have also been many indirect benefits of the scheme: artist groups such as WIDEYED and OVERLAP have formed; several artists have begun or are intending to begin postgraduate courses; new networks and professional relationships have developed; and exhibition opportunities such as Easton's Artists' Book Fair and Platform A's stand at the London Art Fair have been arranged or are in the planning stages. These indirect achievements illustrate how the scheme benefited artists in much broader terms than was originally conceived.

It is too early to assess in full the longer-term benefits of this scheme. Whilst some participants such as Louise Taylor have seen an immediate and demonstrable financial gain, this is not always the case as, for instance, Debbie Covell's slower approach to her mentoring sessions is only just beginning to show its worth. However, this illustrates one of the key strengths of this programme: projects were unique to the individual or group which allowed them to evolve and develop naturally. This has meant that participants' experiences were richer, and the benefits will be longer and deeper as a result.

Lauren Healey

Coordinator of the Professional Development through Networking programme, artist and arts organiser.