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5 things people forget about 'resilience'

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As someone who sometimes gets stuck for the ubiquity of 'resilience' in arts rhetoric, because of the papers I've written on adaptive resilience, I want to discuss some aspects that are often forgotten when the word is used simplistically.¹ In doing so I aim to defend the notion of adaptive resilience against accusations of collaboration with the forces of 'Austerity' and Neoliberalism.

1. Resilience is a dynamic, not a state of being

Too much rhetoric suggests resilience is something one attains and then retains. It gets used to suggest 'immortal' when a more productive use might be closer to 'healthy'. Like well being it is something you can work on or towards, but not something you can achieve and then just let be. It can fluctuate and be destroyed. This applies even if one thinks of resilience as a set of skills rather than attributes and assets. The ability to problem-solve, to attract positive attention, to maintain a vision – these are not things you 'have' like qualifications but things to be practiced and honed over time.

What contributes to resilience today can be something you should adapt or ditch in five years. Something you see as a threat or an irrelevance might be central to your income in future. And then it might change again. Resilience is about being alive to your situation and taking control.

This pass/fail syndrome was one of the things that led me to look further than 'sustainability' when I came across the ideas of resilience in natural and social ecologies, in the work of Brian Walker and David Salt.² (I first wrote about 'resilience' back in 2009 <http://artscounselling.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/wednesday-word-of-week-resilience.html>,³ after I'd been alerted to it by references from Andrew Taylor http://www.artsjournal.com/artfulmanager/main/circle_of_life.php.⁴) For me it is more a matter of design than essence – the key being that you can change the design of most organisations, in some ways.

It's tricky to describe the arts as an ecology, although it's often done, including by myself.⁵ This is not the article to dissect that usage.

(My favourite challenge to it is: ‘in an ecology some things destroy or eat other things: who’s who in the arts?’) But I would argue that whatever the detail, the arts are a living system, as is each organisation in it.

The complexity of interdependencies should not be reduced to a simple set of static readings. This is not to say that some indicators of what proportion or percentage of your revenue comes from earned and contributed income for instance cannot be helpful. The need to be alert to many factors, and to the way they are changing, informs your own changes. The paradox is that being more resilient does not give anyone a greater ability to stay the same. It gives you the potential to change, to adapt, to shift to another model when helpful, in keeping with your core purpose and values, rather than merely at someone else’s behest. (This is one reason I prefer the phrase ‘adaptive resilience’ to the R word on its own.)

2. No one escapes the adaptive cycle

To all things there is a season. ‘Static’ readings of proportions of income, reserves or asset registers can be helpful in assessing your ability to cope with drops in income or to capitalise on popular exhibitions by investing in, say, publications or merchandise. But a sense of where the organisation is in the adaptive cycle is vital. The ongoing work of change as well as of stability should be given greater prominence in discussing organisational or sectoral resilience. This is not least because it represents a workload in itself, one that

requires organisational commitment and investment. It’s not something you should just pile on top of the day job, although it may inevitably feel like a classic ‘change the tyre without stopping the car’ task.

The adaptive cycle suggests that any business and the broader ecology it sits within have four phases: the excitement of the Growth phase, Consolidation as things become more stable but also more fixed, and the Release phase where things have to change due to some kind of ‘disturbance’ such as a new CEO, a funding cut, or even a surprise ‘hit’, leading quickly into the ‘Reorganisation’ phase.⁶

Growth is not always about expansion of the overall size of the organisation, of course. You may shrink your headcount – as many people have done since 2010 due to funding cuts – but expand your education work or community engagement. Shrinkage in one part often means growth for another. Consolidation is not simply ‘calming down’, but about making the most of the capacity you’ve developed, and the visitors, customers or partners you’ve built relationships with.

Understanding this cycle can help assess current challenges and risks, such as ‘consolidation’ slipping into ‘maintaining the status quo’. You can consider which part of the cycle you are mostly in – big organisations will often have different elements in different phases simultaneously – and make plans accordingly. You need to think especially deeply if you’ve been in Consolidation

for a while. That's a dangerous time. (Think of Woolworths or even Tesco.) The inspiring leaders of organisations that last whilst staying vital and productive commonly describe introducing some change into the culture at exactly this point, to freshen things up.

That is the paradox of resilience that the arts sector should be perfectly placed to grasp, given our creative nature. To use a favourite quote from the natural ecologist C.S. Hollings, one that generally gets a murmur of recognition when I give talks on this subject, 'change is essential and yet stability is necessary'. On a human and cultural level, I have found this to be true. Too often we forget one side or other of this balance.

There are some who would say this is not 'disruptive' enough to the status quo, or to maintaining an arts ecology under pressure from government-imposed 'Austerity' and marketisation. I would argue that a sense of the adaptive cycle can give us a framework in which we can build up skills, assets, relationships which will be useful when that 'weather' changes, and that it also helps us make the most of the growth opportunities (things which are not 'fixed' or already allocated) to maintain our purpose in challenging times.

3. Size doesn't matter

Resilience is not primarily about quantum it is about proportion. Size is often seen as a strength, and there is no denying that scale can in practice seem to be helpful to some organisations. (Including 'too

big to fail' syndrome.) But for many organisations it is not so much the size of their turnover that makes them resilient as the diversity of their income streams and how reliable their predictions about income can be.

There is an old saw in business that 'turnover is vanity, profit sanity but cash is reality'⁷ and this has much to commend it to arts organisations. In the 'growth' phase, we take huge pleasure from the amount of great work we do, how many projects, how many partnerships, how many invitations this leads to. This is often an absolutely necessary phase of long-term resilience. As we consolidate, this 'turnover' preoccupation should move to include the real return from the projects – in terms of however you want to define your 'cultural value', and in terms of the outcomes for the people involved, be they audiences, artists, or participants in one way or another.

We should also be thinking about how the activity yields, even if little by little, cash with which to build up reserves, ideally unrestricted reserves which can be invested in things which develop other income or partnerships, or used in emergencies or during transitions of business models. It can be argued larger turnovers give more scope for developing reserves, and certainly some grants regimes for project-funded organisations mitigate against it. Earned income gives greatest flexibility, but I would always urge people to make sure *how* it's earned is in keeping with core purpose and values.

Similarly, the number and scale of your assets may not be as helpful as you think if they are also liabilities. Acquiring a building can be exciting and productive. It can also be fatal. Or distorting. Having a big collection can be really important. But if it doesn't connect to your public programme or retail or education work, or win you any well-connected friends, it is not helping you to act in the world, or to respond to the unexpected. (Unless you see it as simply something to sell off in a cash emergency.) It's what you do with scale that counts.

Live Theatre in Newcastle is a good example of this. Always a very small theatre in capacity terms, its strengths in new writing simply could not translate into far greater ticket income from its own shows because houses were close to capacity anyway. However, a strategy of ambitious touring, co-productions and transfers – e.g. of *The Pitmen Painters* to National Theatre – alongside entrepreneurial use of its building assets for workspace provision, joint ventures with restaurateurs, and events and education offers, have helped the theatre to navigate a period of funding reductions. Arguably building a bigger theatre might not have been so helpful.

4. Redundancy is resilience's ally

One often overlooked but important element of adaptive resilience is how much your human, financial and physical capacity or reserves are able to respond to disturbance. Talking about reserves to some arts leaders can be a bit like talking to

some kinds of Catholics about contraception. There's a mixture of guilt, amusement and bemusement in the conversation.

Stripping back may be crucial for survival in lean times. But cutting back can cost you when a disturbance or an opportunity comes along. You need 'unrestricted' capacity for change and to be able to respond to opportunities for growth. So I do not mean redundancy as in making people redundant, but in retaining or developing some human, financial and physical resource that is not fully stretched 100% of the time.

We all know organisations where people 'cannot' meet you for a month as they are 'too busy'. Lack of time is a constant theme of away days and performance review meetings. But the adaptive and resilient organisation does not design a programme that has to be delivered at full tilt all the time by all its people. Even as I write this I see skeptical eyebrows raised and hear exasperated if not exhausted spluttering. But no matter how much pressure is applied, this is not resilient behaviour and we have to call it, pointing out the risks involved and the long-term damage done. Make time. Make space. Or store up problems. (At least this is what I have learnt to tell myself.)

A number of people are correctly, in my view, identifying variants of this point as a key danger.⁸ Further cuts will see this issue bite in the next few years as so many organisations in the cultural sector – from large local authorities down –

move beyond the shrinking which has happened in recent years.

Some organisations are born resilient, some achieve resilience and some have it thrust upon them by funders and policy makers.

5. Resilience is for you (us), not them

Some organisations are born resilient, some achieve resilience and some have it thrust upon them by funders and policy makers. The end, surely, has to be to last, in good health, as long as you need to for your mission. This might be 3 years, or forever – that's up to you in the end, in the context of your work, your organisation and so on. The skills and resources of adaptive resilience give you more shaping power in deciding how best to put your principals and values into action in the world.

(As a personal aside, it occasionally makes me smile when I'm suggested to be arguing for resilience as some kind of dogged resistance that contradicts the subversive pleasures of creativity, as someone who has never been afraid of walking away from secure jobs or ending projects when I felt they'd outlived their usefulness or were no longer the best way for me to make my contribution. Being resilient is not about being long-suffering.)

There is a valid critique of how resilience has become both a buzzword and a policy priority at a time when the government in the UK is intent on shrinking the state and public spending, and when globalisation and international capitalism is intent

on what it's always been intent on, making the rich richer. Looking for ways in which you can maximise return from your work, your intellectual property, your earned income, and so on, could to some extent go with that flow of marketisation and privatisation which is so damaging in so many ways. However, in the words of Jim Beirne, when describing Live Theatre's approach to income generation to *The Guardian's* Charlotte Higgins. 'It's just a tool to deliver what we do. Of course we have to be robust about what we stand for and what our values are. If we didn't do this, what the fuck else would we do?'⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/dec/14/nick-forbes-newcastle-upon-tyne-austerity-theatre-companies/print>

The development of assets and networks that enable you to 'be robust about what we stand for and what our values are' holds, for me, the potential to take an absolutely anti-austerity position. It is in keeping with a long history of self-organisation such as trade unions, co-operatives, credit unions and other coping mechanisms necessary for living under late capitalism. That a way of thinking helps you cope with the effects of neoliberalism does not necessarily mean you cannot also use it to continue to work to change that marketisation in the long-term. In culture we have great opportunities to do this by the way our work can simultaneously add to 'the commons' as well as generate income streams which maintain our work. I would argue we need

to build our adaptive resilience in the context of this cultural commons rather than a marketised competition.

These are not easy positions to take, or simple to deliver. At what point you feel bending not breaking turns to bending out of shape, or the stubbornness and sacrifice necessary for digging in becomes self-destructive are, to some degree, questions of values and design. What do you feel is right to do? And how do you want to live? For me those questions exist at a point of balance, rather than stasis. If you stop asking them, you are likely to tip in a direction you do not own.

You *are* going to have to make choices, if you want resilience to be more about 'you' or 'us' than 'them', if you want, as I do, to use it to avoid being done to. This is one reason I've toyed with 'existential resilience' as a term, being something of a Sartrean. Choice is commitment, the expression of values and purpose, no matter how hard, or even how wrong it might prove later.

To return to the well-being metaphor, and end with another thing people sometimes seem to forget about resilience. It should not be a substitute for creativity but a tool for it. You should not let it dominate all your thinking. After all, having a low BMI doesn't mean you can't get run over, or die of boredom. Resilience is not a panacea.

Notes

1. Robinson, M., (2010), *Making Adaptive Resilience Real*, Arts Council England.
2. Walker, B. and Salt, D., (2006), *Resilience Thinking*. Washington DC: Island Press
3. Robinson, M., Arts Counselling blog, 25 February 2009 <http://artscounselling.blogspot.co.uk/2009/02/wednesday-word-of-week-resilience.html>
4. Taylor, A., 'Circle of Life', *The Artful Manager*, 29 January 2009 http://www.artsjournal.com/artfulmanager/main/circle_of_life.php
5. Robinson 2010, op. cit., pp. 22-26
6. Robinson 2010, op. cit., pp.18-227.
7. Lewis, Carol, 'Turnover is vanity, cash is reality', *The Times*, 10 June 2014 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/public/smehub/article4111197.ece>
8. For example, *Enriching Britain: Culture, Creativity and Growth, The 2015 Report by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value*, <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/finalreport/>
9. Higgins, C., 'Nick Forbes: we were whistleblowers for what austerity meant for the arts', *The Guardian*, 14 December 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/dec/14/nick-forbes-newcastle-upon-tyne-austerity-theatre-companies/print>