

Using the ‘audience exchange’ approach to help first-time audiences

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This research was conducted by **Stephanie E. Pitts** and **Jonathan Gross** at the **University of Sheffield, UK**

Summary

This paper outlines the use of the ‘audience exchange’ approach to audience development. This involves facilitated group dialogue between audience members who are first-time attenders who may lack confidence or familiarity with the art form they have just encountered. Discussants are asked to reflect on their impressions of the work, their engagement with it, and how it links with their existing leisure activities. The project found that audience members used ‘exploratory and emotional language’, rather than expert vocabulary, and in aggregate the conversations comprise a form of peer-to-peer learning for inexperienced arts attenders.

The paper describes a set of relatively small-scale studies

It draws from projects that engaged audiences at nine different arts performances in the UK cities of Birmingham, Sheffield and Leeds. It is understood that first-time attenders have a specific set of barriers and needs compared to more seasoned arts audiences. In particular, this study emphasises the difficulty that new audiences face in describing the work and their own reactions to it. ‘Expectations are recalibrated after even just one exposure to an art form.’ The authors ponder whether specific groups (such as young people or ethnic minorities) would benefit from customised versions of the audience exchange approach.

The research revealed a range of engagement: from the attentive to the drifting

Some people were unapologetic drifters, whereas for others their drifting led to a sense of guilt about not being better audience members. The authors reflect on the way that the carefully facilitated ‘audience exchange’ conversations weren’t merely a fruitful research method, but frequently led to a deeper engagement with the art by the discussants.

Keywords

talk audience UK observation

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