



Connect festivals – a brief summary

“I can honestly say that my ISTA experience has been life changing. The most amazing part of ISTA was the incorporation of service learning and drama.”

Razel Suansing

Background

ISTA Connect was established in 2013 with the aim of using theatre and the ISTA experience to:

- connect diverse young people from different communities and backgrounds;
- connect ISTA to a range of communities and young people worldwide that it has not worked with before and who would benefit from our offer;
- connect ISTA member schools to their communities through already established service learning programmes.

To date there have been a number of ISTA Connect festivals in schools where service learning is considered to be an important part of learning, in schools that are keen to develop their service learning programme or in schools that are keen to engage more with communities outside of the school.

The impact of these experiences on the participants, visiting schools, teachers, artists and service learning communities has been enormous and almost no one has left an ISTA Connect festival without feeling that they have been part of something transformative and special. It seems that with the ISTA Connect festivals the results and impact is much more tangible and goes way beyond the normally expected reach of theatre.

It's important in the discussion of these experiences to think about the impact of the ISTA Connect festival on each of the following beneficiaries:

Participants

Service learning organisations/communities

Host school

Visiting school

Artists

Communities

Findings as a result of the pilot

What is it?

Fundamentally it's a service learning programme where participants connect and work with participants from a community other than the international school community. This is identified by the school. The emphasis is on connection, collaborative play and interaction.

Models

What has emerged over the years of pilot programming is that there is no such thing as a standard ISTA Connect experience. There are different models of practice. What is essential in a Connect event is that the host organisation/school is connecting directly to its local community so that young people relate and collaborate directly with others. The ethos and objectives are fundamentally the same but the form which these festivals take is dependent on the school, the school's local communities and their service learning programmes.

In this respect the ISTA Connect festival is bespoke to each setting. It is designed in close collaboration with the host who selects the community, or communities, outside the school which the festival participants will work with or focus on as a starting point. In addition, in some instances, the out and about has been within particular communities where the host school has an established service learning relationship.

More than with regular festivals, the ISTA Connect model requires careful planning and collaboration in order to ensure that the festival appropriately and feasibly brings together a school, its chosen local communities and visiting students to meaningfully learn and play together.

The host school

It is clear that the ISTA Connect festival has to be hosted by a school that has a strong service learning programme and a commitment to this type of learning. The host schools' interest in hosting an ISTA Connect festival seems to stem from a desire to "burst the bubble" that arises out of an international school's detachment from its local community.

Schools often see the ISTA Connect festival as an opportunity to offer the ISTA experience to other communities and a chance for integration of the school's community with local communities. It serves to develop or further strengthen connections to service learning partner groups by offering them a unique experience.

It can also in some instances be considered as an opportunity to introduce and engage students to applied theatre practice and to help the school's arts community better understand the role of theatre in service work.

The festival starting point and out and about

The motivation for schools interested in the ISTA Connect festivals is usually the community the school wants to engage with. The starting point and the out and about are closely linked to this and therefore there is often perfect alignment between the starting point selected, the out and about and the community. There also seems to be more of a sense of visible learning as participants engage with what seem to be “deep” experiences with different communities. The key here seems to be that the following elements, which are present in all festivals but necessarily explicit, are more clearly obvious in the ISTA Connect festival model:

- stronger connection to the local community and setting of the festival;
- growth for students in empathy and understanding – aspects of international mindedness;
- high impact of the effect of the out and about on participants;
- valuable learning about global issues and responsibilities.

“A much stronger sense of the local culture and of experiencing a side of the community that one otherwise rarely sees... allowed all international school students to grow in empathy and understanding. The out and about was a genuine highlight of the festival and something which had lasting impact. The starting point was more meaningful because it was so related to real issues and concerns. There was much valuable learning for the students about their role in the world and their responsibilities because of that role.”

A teacher who attended a Connect festival in Hong Kong

We have perhaps some lessons to learn from the ISTA Connect experience regarding the future development and choice of starting points and out and about.

Participants form service learning communities

In many of the ISTA Connect festivals to date, young people from the service learning communities have attended the festival as full participants (including having them hosted by families like all other participants). At the festival in Manila they were referred to as ISTA Scholars so I’m adopting this name for the purpose of clarity.

The original idea of the ISTA Connect model was that these festivals would bring together young people from international schools together with young people from local communities as equal participants in a theatrical experience. These young people would be funded by ISTA funds. Though the relationship between the host school and the service learning community is one of service, the focus for all participants at an ISTA festival is one of collaboration and mutual learning rather than a service relationship. In other words, it is important that the international school students do not see the relationship with the ISTA Scholars as a relationship of service but one of mutual creation and learning.

In instances where young people from the service learning communities that are part of the full festival, the schools went through rigorous process of selection, preparation and engagement. This seems to

me to be key to the success of this interaction and is something that ISTA should be developing as a resource for ISTA Connect festival hosts.

There needs to be clear guidelines regarding how the young people from different communities who will attend the festival are identified, recruited, prepared for the experience and engaged during the festival (this often requires translators).

Though young people from service learning communities have attended some festivals this has by no means been primary model of the ISTA Connect festivals.

Legacy Training Day

As part of the ISTA Connect programme and to ensure that there is a longer lasting legacy, ISTA also offers a full day's training after the festival for students at the host school. This is a pre-established ISTA programme of activities developing young people as workshop leaders.

The training equips the young trainees to autonomously and independently run workshops in service learning communities. This is offered by one of the artistic team and is a legacy gift from ISTA to the host school.

Collaboration

What is key in all the ISTA Connect experiences is that the artistic team has ensured that the experience was one of connection and collaboration between the young people rather than "service". This is especially important as the ISTA Scholars sometimes make up a part of the ensemble. The Artistic Director (AD) has to clearly steer the focus of the experience as one of connection and our shared humanity rather than one of difference.

Some operational recommendations that came out of feedback

- It may be beneficial for the AD to be in contact with the host much earlier than usual and to start a dialogue about the festival in advance and in order for the AD to have an understanding of the communities they will be working with.
- Careful choice of artistic team and preparation of the team in advance.
- Schools should be clear that this type of festival may not suit every school but that schools may have signed up because this is all that's on the calendar - they need to be informed regarding how different this is from usual ISTA festivals.
- Raise the profile of the benefits to the school and the legacy training that is offered free to the host school through communication with the school administration and service learning team as well as theatre teacher
- Communication with senior management regarding what ISTA is offering to the host school

Possible next steps and developments

- Launch the ISTA Connect offer more extensively to make sure that all members are aware of it.
- Develop an ISTA Connect pedagogy focusing on using theatre as a tool for communion: to collaborate, to play, to share, to create and to learn from each other.
- Create a handbook specific to the ISTA Connect festivals/events for hosts and artists that will include a menu of different possible structures for schools to choose from. This would also include a resource for the selection, preparation and engagement of ISTA Scholars for host schools.
- Develop a resource for visiting schools on *Preparing your students for the ISTA Connect experience*.
- Further develop the legacy training package for the host school.
- Build in a system to discuss the future of the relationship between the host school and the service learning communities beyond the festival.

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February 2017