



Photo: Tatyana Garkavaya

School of Participation Plovdiv 2019

Staying close together /// report 2019-2020

School of Participation – Plovdiv, December 2019

report 2019 - 2020

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1. Objectives of the report



Photo 1. Bird making

This report aims to pinpoint some interesting trajectories for further research when the SoP develops both as learning by doing events and as a community of facilitators, creative practitioners and hopefully, community participants. At the same time, it will evaluate the activities of SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 in order to identify the good practices and the bottlenecks to be resolved or continued in the next SoP editions. If possible, it will incorporate data from the next SoP edition, SoP-2, Kaunas 2020.

A dramatic game changer entered the scene during this report preparation. The COVID-19 pandemic turned our lives, our world upside down. Nothing will be the same anymore and SoP are deeply affected as well. This report will focus on the first edition of the School of Participation project in the end of 2019, while aiming to estimate how the SoP activities could be adapted to the post-COVID-19 world...

2. Methodology of the research activities

The observations, the analysis and the recommendations stated in this report are based on:

- site visit 04-06 December 2019, during SoP-1 Plovdiv
- structured observations, photo and video documentation, interviews, a focus group with participants, questionnaire with community members(volunteers), interviews with the volunteers
- online post-event survey, January 2020

3. Objectives of SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019

This event was scheduled for the last month of Plovdiv ECOC year. It was designed as a celebration for the numerous volunteers who supported all events of the capital of culture through the year. The closing procession was scheduled to happen on 5 December, the International Volunteer day. The 'local community' the creative practitioners were working with was derived from the community of volunteers around Plovdiv ECOC. The procession and the feast were designed to be simple, yet spectacular, putting the volunteers in the spotlight in a delicate and intelligent way, presenting the citizens of Plovdiv with the enchanting view of a lantern procession going on the city's main pedestrian area.

According to participants, volunteers, and organisers the SoP has helped them fulfil their goals in a satisfactory way. Below follows the examination of SoP-1 Plovdiv's elements, the people who took part, their reflections on the school.



Photo 2. Volunteers in the closing procession. Photo: Dessislava Todorova

4. Activities of SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019

Here is the link to the official movie of SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019: <https://youtu.be/LQXOugMxNfg>

In accordance with the SoP main principle of learning by doing, the curriculum of SoP Plovdiv 2019 featured expert presentations, practical workshops, warm-ups, games, free time interactions, a closing event, followed by a party, and a debrief and emotional good-byes on the last day. The structure of the SoP was a repetition of the previous round of schools of learning by doing, the School of Spectacle, and is described and evaluated in the SoS reports.

To repeat here the main principles of the curriculum:

- learning by doing;
- encouraging creative practitioners to try new roles and activities;

- keeping the schedule intense and busy;
- not disclosing everything in advance;
- giving the decision making process to the participants;
- encouraging intense interaction between participants;
- keeping the atmosphere positive by prioritising the process over the end result.



Photo 3. Production briefings were held twice a day.

The only backlash from using this proven methodology in the current round of SoP is that for some creative practitioners (see the interviews) the role and the level of community work and engagement was not quite clear. After a dedicated conversation between the researcher and Liz Pugh, creative lead of the SoP, it has been cleared that a true community involvement work is impossible to happen in the week-long duration of the school. That is not the purpose of the project. Rather, it is about giving the creative practitioners simple and working techniques how to work with communities in their own working environment, what best practices to follow, and how to best accommodate communities in an open air participatory art project. It was agreed this point will be made more explicit when introducing the next editions of SoP¹.

Here follow Top 5 of the best loved and the most useful activities, according to SoP Plovdiv 2019 creative practitioners.

Top 5 of favourite activities at SoP Plovdiv 2019:
- Drawing each other's portraits
- Show and tell sessions
- Lantern making
- Informal talks and time spent together

¹ The preliminary plans for the next SoPs envisage new scenarios for the community participation component: for example, SoP Gratz will engage documentary theatre practices, SoP Kaunas will be working with a familiar community well ahead. And certainly, the new pandemic world will put its mark on all the rest of the SoPs and their curricula...

- The closing event
Top 5 of the most useful activities SoP Plovdiv 2019:
- Mind maps and sketches, graphics design
- Lantern making
- Lectures of management of outdoor events
- Show and tell sessions
- Interviewing respondents

Table 1. Top 5 of activities at SoP Plovdiv 2019. Source: focus group, interviews, survey open question replies

The focus group discussion provides views and statements on the usefulness and enjoyability of the SoP-1 Plovdiv activities.

“I gained experiential knowledge of assuming different roles than I usually would in the delivery of a project. I became more aware of how to overcome logistical issues and plan pre-emptively to avoid them. I gained a lot of understanding about non-verbal communication that can transcend language barriers.”

Creative practitioners from Armenia for instance have shared later on how useful was for them to take part in this international multicultural training event and that they would definitely seek opportunities to join some of the next editions of SoP.

4.1. The closing event on the International Volunteer Day



Photo 4. Visual language training in action: the procession storyboard.

Plovdiv 2019 Foundation took the opportunity of hosting of SoP to celebrate and express their gratitude to the numerous volunteers without whom the whole Capital of culture year would be impossible. Therefore, an invitation to take part was extended to the community of volunteers at Plovdiv 2019 and the closing event was scheduled for 5 December, the International Volunteer Day.

The CPs created both the storyline and the design of the procession putting the volunteers in its centre. On the one hand, the numerous lantern lights and the birds symbolised the volunteer pure heart and kindness. On the other, lanterns were an



Photo 5. The volunteer tree. Photo: D. Todorova

easy prop to make together with the volunteers and they served as a nice gift, since every volunteer could take their lantern after the event.

The storyline of the procession-spectacle was about the cycles in nature. There were the Spring and the Autumn walking on stilts in spectacular costumes, the sound design featured bells for water, bag-pipe improvisations, drums. The props were designed with natural and recyclable materials: willow sticks, branches, leaves, tissue paper and so on.

The participants started gathering half an hour before the procession at Sklada, to take the lanterns and the sticks. The procession with around 50 volunteers, creative practitioners, facilitators and tech staff aligned in Tsar Simeon park. The lanterns were lit, the bagpipe improvisation began, the jingle-bells tunes were playing on the smartphones.

The procession headed towards the main pedestrian street, reached the mosk and the ancient stadium and then entered the Kapana Creative District for the closing concert of more bagpipe music, the stunningly talented Anna-Sophia Menato's traditional Bulgarian singing and the big horo dance at the Core outdoor area. A big volunteer tree was set at the square for the participants of the procession to hang their lanterns. (The tree was designed in a way which allowed multifunctional reuse and repurpose after the event).

Nobody wanted to leave soon despite the chilly evening. Many of the participants stayed for another hour to chat, take photos and exchange contacts. Each volunteer could take a lantern home and they seemed more than happy to do so.

Numerous pictures and videos of the event were posted on social media, provoking positive comments, likes and shares.

On the next day, in the debrief of the event, the CPs shared that they have been greeted by volunteers and members of the audience for the intimate and touching, yet spectacular, event they created.



Photo 6. Anna-Sophia Menato singing. Photo: Mili Angas



Photo 7. Spring and Autumn in the procession. Photo: Mili Angas

5. Participants at SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019: creative practitioners and volunteers

Participants' invitation and selection procedures followed the practices established at the School of Spectacle edition. In result, 28 **creative practitioners** (CP) enrolled for the first edition of SoP, which took place from 29 November till 6 December 2019 in Plovdiv:

Bulgaria, Plovdiv – 14; Yerevan, Armenia – 2; Hungary, Veszprem – 2; Serbia, Novi Sad – 2; Latvia, Kaunas – 2; Estonia, Tartu – 2; UK, Coventry – 2.

Partners from Gratz, Austria were not represented by participants in this school.

In terms of gender, women prevailed over men. In terms of age, there was a fair distribution between young CP and 45+. As of professional specialisation, the group was diverse. There were dancers, makers, visual artists, community workers.

The international creative practitioners, as well as all the facilitators, were accommodated together at the Inter COOP hotel, which services were used during SoS Plovdiv 2017. Albeit certain explicit recommendations for change made in the research report for SoS Plovdiv 2017, no positive changes were noticed at the hotel. Again, several CP complained from the quality of food served at breakfast and dinner. Otherwise, they were mostly satisfied from their stay and quite positive about their overall experience in Plovdiv wishing – of course - to have more time to explore the city.

A specific segment of participants were those who took part in the School of Spectacle 2017-2018 edition of the project:

Karamfila Prahcharova, as participating creative practitioner
Iliyan Marinov, consulting on electrical installations,
Diana Tankova, stilt walking, part of Plovdiv 2019 team,
Georgi Vassilev, sound facilitator,
Plamen Ivanov, stilt walking facilitator.

We should also mention Maria Koicheva, scenographer and making facilitator in the second round of schools as well as in the first one.

Their thoughts and perceptions on SoP, in comparison with their experience at SoS, brings some valuable insights. (See excerpts in the focus group and interviews resumes.) The quality of training, the positive and welcoming creative atmosphere, the opportunity to meet new peers and make new friendships and meeting with old friends were the reasons which brought SoS participants back to take part in this round of training by doing.

Inviting **community members** to join the SoP intense eight-day learning by doing format was also tested in SoS editions at Limerick 2017/ 2018. Yet, SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 targeted a specific group of participants to make an outdoor art event with:

Plovdiv ECOC 2019 volunteers who worked on the multitude of events throughout the Capital of Culture year. Therefore, the outdoor event, the lantern procession, was scheduled for 5 December, the International Volunteer Day (See. 4.1) *“That is our way to celebrate them and show them our gratitude for everything we have done together in this ECOC year.”*, explained Kami Clifton, Volunteers Coordinator Expert at Plovdiv 2019.

The volunteers who participated the SoP training/ making activities were about 20 people and in the procession, more than 50 took part.



Photo 8 Closing event: walking with lanterns

Chapter 4. Activities... examines the methods and the means of involvement of CPs and of the volunteers. Here follow some major findings from the post-event online survey, the questionnaire distributed among the volunteers at the closing event, interviews, and the focus group discussion.

5.1. CPs overall satisfaction with teaching, with peers, and the overall experience of SoP Plovdiv:

How would you rate	excellent		good		neither good nor poor		poor		very poor		Total
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	
the quality of teaching	100%	9	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	9
the value of learning with your peers (sharing and group working)	78%	7	22%	2	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	9
the whole experience	100%	9	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	9

Table 2. Rating overall experience. CP survey

100% of the respondents rate the whole experience as ‘excellent’.

Here are some quotes on what worked best for the CPs:

“I am very satisfied with the workshops concerning the organisation of outside manifestations.”

“For me I had opportunity to see how smoothly and very professional teaching can be, without one leader (even it was one leader) but it was given to everybody and in

a subtle manner showing possible mistakes or maybe not, teaching how to fail without feeling that is end of the world, it just a good start...and many more useful things I learned. Thanks you so much."

"Creating trust and connection in the group, so everyone felt they could contribute equally. Also the progression of learning a skill and immediately applying it."

In terms of the SoP's main objective: to encourage creative practitioners to engage with local communities and involve them artistically in their projects, there are some promising signs manifested in the online survey:

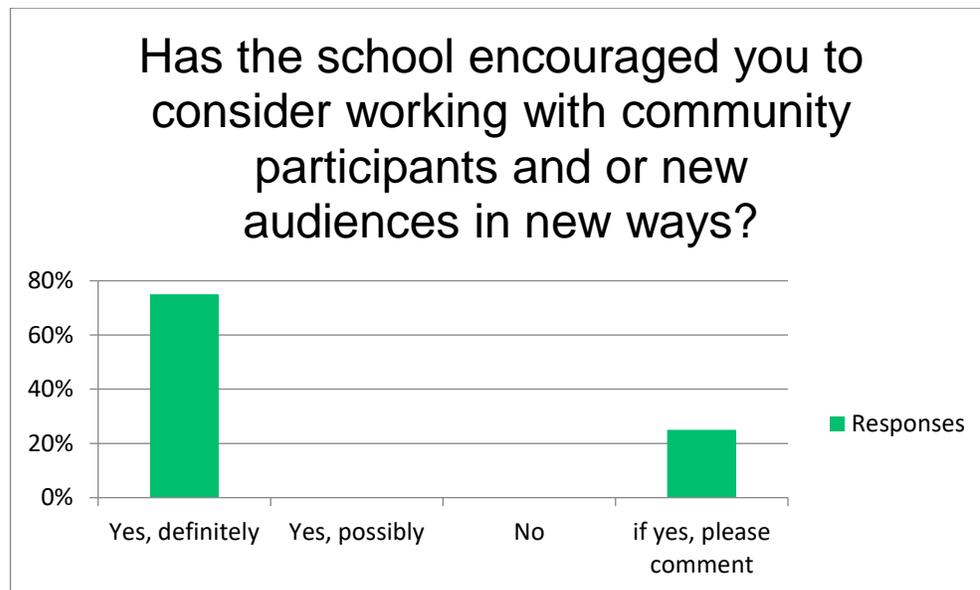


Figure 1. Future work with communities. CP survey.

"I feel I have a better understanding of how to effectively create a project of scale with simplicity. I've learned that participant's roles don't have to be massive to be effective."

5.2. Volunteers' overall satisfaction:

How would you rate the following? (Please give one rating for each item)	Very good		Good		Neither good nor poor		Poor		Very Poor		Don't Know / Not applicable		Total
	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	
The ease of applying to take part	50.00%	4	50.00%	4	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	8
How welcoming the team were	62.50%	5	25.00%	2	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	12.50%	1	8
The quality of training & support	62.50%	5	25.00%	2	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	12.50%	1	8
The quality of the event artwork	75.00%	6	25.00%	2	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	8
The whole experience	87.50%	7	0.00%	0	12.50%	1	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	8

Table 3. Volunteer overall satisfaction with SoP-1. Volunteer survey

Among respondents, 87.50 % rate the whole experience as 'very good'.

The closing event, a lantern procession and an intimate feast at the Core open area scene at the Kapana, was designed in a way to reflect the values of volunteering, i.e. helping from one's kind heart, not "blowing the whistle" about it. Here's the volunteers' estimation of the adequacy of the proposed event:

Statement:	Strongly agree and Agree
The project/event is welcoming for the whole community	87.50%
The project/event encourages participation in community life and events	62.50%
The project/event enhances the sense of community in your city	71.43%
The project/event is good for your City's image	87.50%

Table 4. Attitudes towards the closing event. Volunteer survey.

Here are some quotes about what they particularly liked:

"The making of the lanterns and then actually lighting them. It was so beautiful. Also walking down the centre with them was so magical."

"The thing I most liked was that everyone gave a 100% of their time and knowledge so that the events and projects can be successful and accessible to a wider variety of people."

The three-word description of their experience outlined 'fun' and 'amazing' as most remarkable traits:



Figure 2. Three words description of the experience. Volunteer survey

All data is available in Appendix 1 SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 Surveys.

So definitely, we can say the SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 was evaluated as a positive, fruitful and rewarding experience by its participants.

Looking in the broader perspective, it would be fruitful to monitor over time if and how the participants incorporate newly acquired skills – especially skills concerning participatory interactions– into their artistic practices; do they experience better career development; do they interact with one another, form and keep relationships, start collaborations and so on... Yet the pandemic situation will

definitely hamper any favourable developments of these positive SoP impacts... How and what to take into account in order to see the long-term effects of the project – in Trajectories of research.

6. Some long(er)-term outcomes of the SoP Plovdiv 2019 activities

6.1. Future practice

The survey revealed that the majority of the respondents are certain that the newly acquired techniques from SoP will affect positively their future practices.

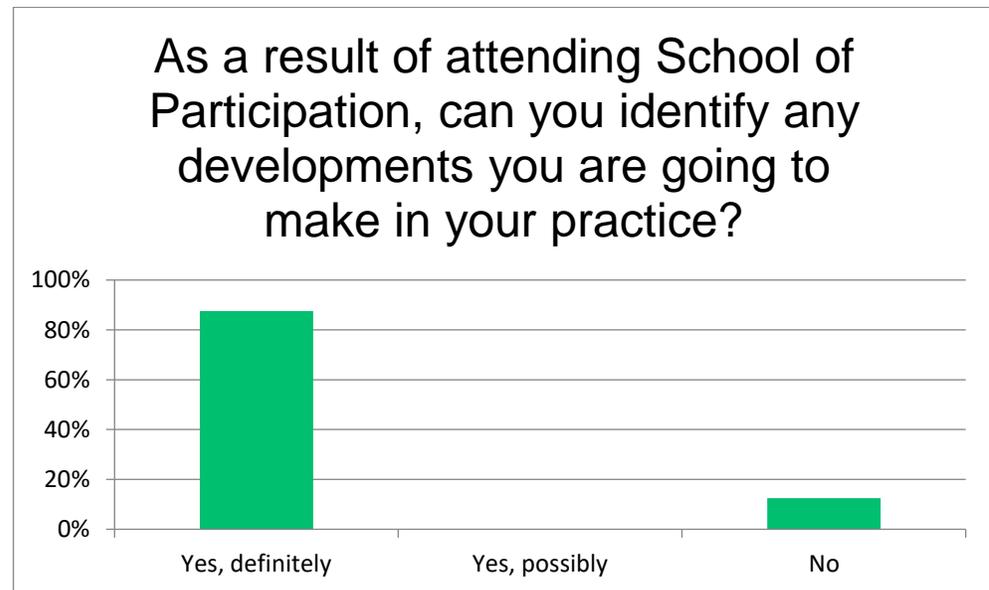


Figure 3. New developments in creative practice. CP survey.

“I feel more equipped to lead on community projects within the company I work for, and also to express my creative ideas.”

“To see the whole picture, communication skills developed and now I am brave enough to participate in another program just like this was.”

“Creating trust and connection in the group, so everyone felt they could contribute equally. Also the progression of learning a skill and immediately applying it.”

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic limited considerably any artistic activities in 2020 so it was not possible to trace consistently if these intentions came true or not. Nonetheless, we can consider as evidence in this direction the fact that Rasma from Lithuania took part in SoP-2 Kaunas as creative facilitator and that she implemented lantern making techniques in a community project she managed in the summer of 2020.

6.2. Networking

Making friendships, establishing long-term connections, working on joint projects, i.e. networking was one of the main positive outcomes from the SoS round of the

project. Now, with SoP, the smooth implementation of which has been disrupted right after the initial SoP by the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing a steady network seems at risk. Is this so?

“I created strong connections with various artists across Europe, and thanks to the tight-knit group the school formed, I feel we could contact each other with collaborative ideas easily.”

During SoP-1 Plovdiv and the weeks after there was a pronounced feeling that joint projects are doable. For instance, CPs from Lithuania thought of inviting the two Plovdiv based CPs who run a puppet theatre in a coat to join Kaunas 2022 programme. Dancers from Novi Sad and from Coventry were also thinking of some kind of a collaboration. The majority of CPs planned to join the next editions of the SoP project.



Photo 9. Lantern making.



Photo 10. Lantern making with the volunteers. Photo: Mili Angas

Due to COVID-19 safety restrictions, in September 2020 at SoP 2 Kaunas, the only CPs who could re-join were the ones from the country. The online sessions were followed by 2 CPs from Novi Sad who were not part of the event in Plovdiv. Yet, under these most difficult circumstances, the CPs do not cease working and although they shy away from sharing their work in the closed Facebook group, the activity of another participant reveals what they have been up to and as a positive side effect, weaves the network between the people of SoP-1 Plovdiv...

Tatyana Garkavaya's blogposts: <https://insight-oriented.com/>

[Tatyana](#) joined SoP-1 Plovdiv on the part of the Plovdiv ECoC 2019 team where she was on internship by the time of the SoP. Her specialisation being in marketing and communications, she has felt a bit nervous about the creative part. Nonetheless, she has found her place at the SoP and developed relationships with her peers. During 2020 these relationships gave way to a series of blogposts featuring various artists whom Tatyana met at SoP-1 Plovdiv. All the articles are 'full-featured', reflecting various aspects of the artists' work, as well as the impact of SoP1 Plovdiv on their artistic practices.

Tatyana's reflections on SoP-1 Plovdiv: <https://insight-oriented.com/experiments-with-engagement-at-the-plovdiv-school-of-participation/>

<http://plovdiv2019.blogspot.com/2019/12/o-7-performance-without-rehearsal.html>

on volunteering at Plovdiv ECoC 2019: <https://insight-oriented.com/exploring-the-invisible-force-of-plovdiv-2019/>

<https://insight-oriented.com/https-insight-oriented-com-volunteers-of-the-poorest-european-capital-of-europe-created-community-service-from-scratch/>

*

Rasma Noreikytė, Kaunas: <https://insight-oriented.com/make-your-own-national-costume-with-lithuanian-artist-rasma-noreikyte/>

Fireter, Sofia: <https://insight-oriented.com/fireter-show-fairytale-about-harmony-on-one-of-the-ancient-scenes-in-the-world/>

<https://insight-oriented.com/fireter-10-fascinating-insights-into-the-hottest-bulgarian-theater-10-%d0%b8%d0%bd%d1%82%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%81%d0%bd%d0%b8-%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%be%d0%b7%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b8%d1%8f-%d0%b2-%d0%bd/>

Georgi Vasilev, Plovdiv: <https://insight-oriented.com/bulgarian-3d-artist-digitizes-national-cultural-heritage/>

<https://insight-oriented.com/good-music-ideas-from-the-bad-radio-discover-unknown-bulgarian-music/>

Elena Stoycheva, Plovdiv: <https://insight-oriented.com/how-to-learn-foreign-languages-quickly-with-suggestopedia/>

Yaroslava Bykova and Varvara Karnauh (Bulgaria) - <https://insight-oriented.com/street-puppet-shows-in-plovdiv-united-craftswomen-from-russia-and-ukraine/>

6.3. Social media connections

The SoS project outlined that connecting on Facebook and keeping the closed Fb group active is a productive way for the CPs to stay connected and to learn about new opportunities and each other's projects. Yet, it took time for this social media tool to work. It was only about the third SoS that the group has accumulated enough members who have met at two SoS editions and have already developed strong bonds at these real-life meetings. Unfortunately, the pandemic stopped this process for the current participants so the Fb group is not really active. Mostly, it is singular Facebook friendships and interactions that are active almost a year after the SoP completion.

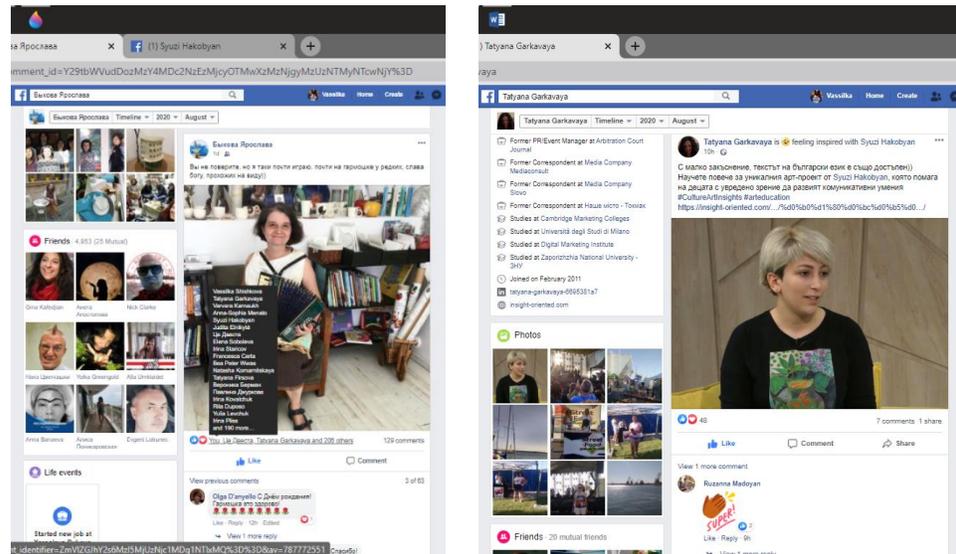


Photo 11. Social media responses.

7. SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 strengths (s) and challenges (w)

(Estimated by the independent evaluator, based on observations, interviews, the focus group and the post-event survey)

	Strengths		Challenges
s1	great learning opportunities 1: learning by doing	w1	too short interaction: no bond between the artists and the community can be developed
s2	great learning opportunities 2: training sessions by seasoned practitioners	w2	not enough time to dig into the local culture
s3	great opportunity to meet peers and become friends	w3	too much travel; too short duration
s4	good opportunities for future collaborations	w4	catering at the hotel was barely decent; unsustainable non-eco food packages on site
s5	exciting new experiences for everyone	w5	dependent on space – both for working and for the outdoor event
s6	working under stress but in a controlled environment	w6	
s7	making outdoor arts visible and celebrated by peers, local media, the local community		
s8	engaging the local community – through inviting local people to take part		
s9	exciting props and spectacular events		

Table 5. SoP-1 Plovdiv Strengths and challenges.



Photo 12. Working really close to one another.

In the light of COVID-19 pandemic which marked the whole 2020, it is crucial to evaluate SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 activities, strengths and weak sides in the prism of the newly adapted COVID-19 safety measures so that we can estimate the possible losses and gains for the overall SoP project in this new situation.

7.1. SoP-1 Plovdiv 2019 lessons on distancing and togetherness

creative practitioners stated they....
- like the opportunity to travel and meet new cultures, new peers
- like the draw my portrait exercise and other interactive games
- like trying new things, learning new techniques
- find the training modules useful
community participants stated they....
- like to try new things and meet new people
- enjoy working with CP facilitators
- enjoy making lanterns

Table 6. Best loved in SoP by CPs and the volunteers. Source: focus group, interviews, survey

creative practitioners are observed to...
- work really close, under 50 or 30 cm apart, when making lanterns and other props
- sit close to one another at dinner, share stories
- like to spend as much time together as possible
community participants are observed to...
- shy away from being in the spotlight
- tend to stick to their group
- prefer taking part in mass production i.e. events involving many people to small events

Table 7. Behaviour of Cps and volunteers. Source: evaluator's observations

Having in mind these statements and observations, we have to acknowledge that the power of the SoP project is in bringing people – closely – together in the real



Photo 13. Lantern workshop with volunteers. Photo: M. Angas

world. There are not so many SoP activities that can have similar success if they are done online. Scaling down the participants is not a good option as community members would prefer to engage in any outdoor arts activity as a group rather than a solo performer – which can put a lot of stress and make them shy away from taking part...

Yet, if there is a will, there is a way; and many of the obstacles imposed by the post-COVID-19 world can be cleverly overcome, and even, some project design weaknesses can be resolved as well... Here is a suggestion how the project's main strengths and challenges will be affected by simply moving some modules online.

Colour legend:

needs to stay offline
can be sustainably modified to go online
can be resolved by going online
will be exacerbated by going online

	Strengths		Challenges
s1	great learning opportunities 1: learning by doing	w1	too short interaction: no bond between the artists and the community can be developed
s2	great learning opportunities 2: training sessions by seasoned practitioners	w2	not enough time to dig into the local culture
s3	great opportunity to meet peers and become friends	w3	too much travel; too short duration
s4	good opportunities for future collaborations	w4	NA
s5	exciting new experiences for everyone	w5	dependent on space – both for working and for the outdoor event
s6	working under stress but in a controlled environment	w6	
s7	making outdoor arts visible and celebrated by peers, local media, the local community		
s8	engaging the local community – through inviting local people to take part		
s9	exciting props and spectacular events		

8. Concluding remarks

SoP-1 Plovdiv in 2019 outlined the most important and impactful features of the SoP format which have to be preserved even in the difficult times of pandemic and post-pandemic restrictions that will inevitably mark the next editions of the project.

First of all, real-life interaction between CPs, facilitators, the community has to be preserved to the greatest extent possible. Genuine and lasting relationships, future working plans, mutual understanding – all need looking into each other's eyes, staying together, sharing food, working together, walking together, partying together. Being sad to say goodbye and wishing to meet again...

The other remark is on working with communities. Although just an eight-day intensive learning by doing training cannot allow for true participatory project to develop, it gave an adequate vision, as well as numerous working tools and

techniques, of what it is to create an artistic project with people who could be far from any creative practice. Keep it simple and doable, but do not underestimate the participants' strive for creativity and craftsmanship. (One of the volunteers taking part did not have one arm, yet this could not stop him from making lanterns himself!) More importantly, learn more about the community you are working with, ask questions and listen. When designing the co-creative project, keep the community's values at the core of the whole piece, because this art piece has to be true and meaningful to them, on the first place. Plovdiv ECoC 2019 volunteers did not want a noisy celebration as the core value of their voluntary work is to quietly help others, with kindness that comes from the heart. Thus one can spread the kindness among more and more people... What a better symbol for this than the intimate and delicate lantern that keeps the fire lit through the winter night?

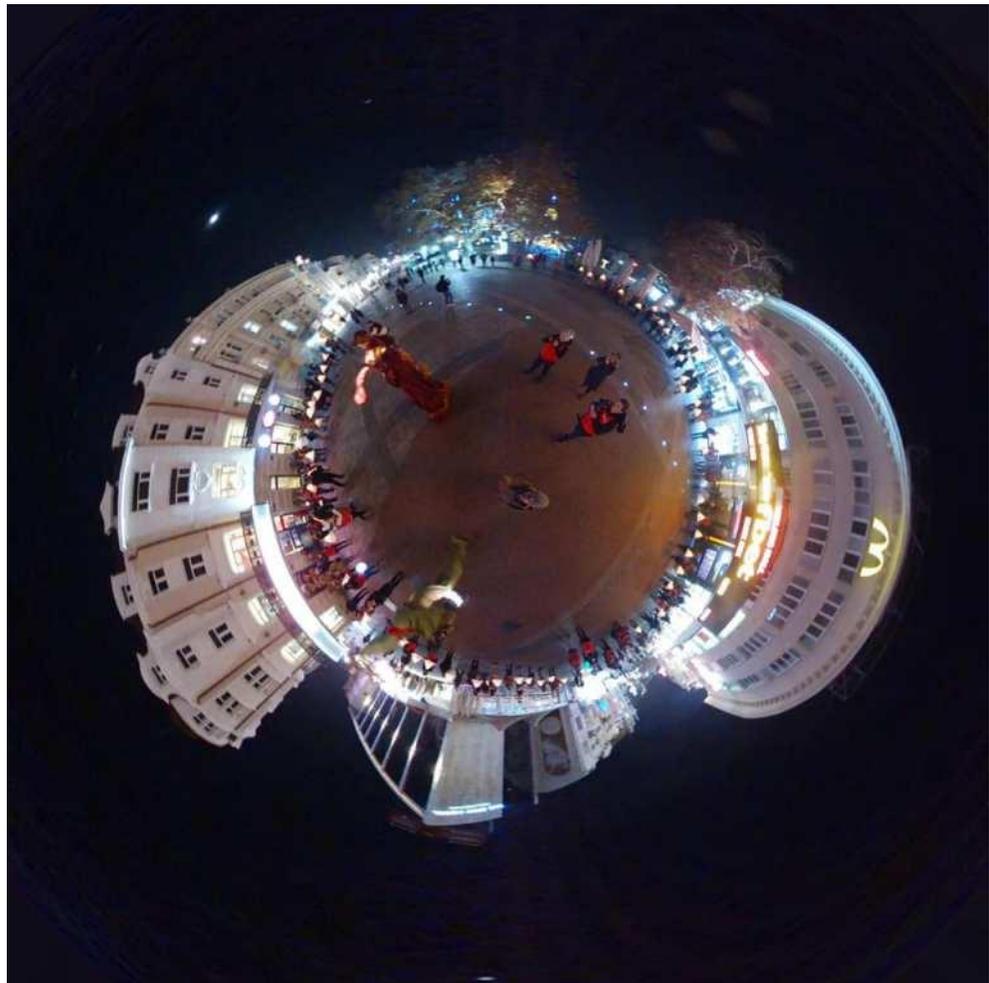


Photo 14. Aerial photo from the main square. Photo: George Vassilev