

## The Creative and Cultural Skills podcast: Build Back Fairer Bonus content: A discussion between former apprentices, Emma Blake Morsi and Ellen Johnson. This discussion was featured in Episode 3.

### Transcript

- Ellen Johnson** Hi, I'm Ellen Johnson. I did a Community Arts Administration apprenticeship in 2019, and now I work as a Project Officer for an arts organisation in Newcastle.
- Emma Blake Morsi** Hi, I'm Emma Blake Morsi, and I did an apprenticeship in 2016 / 2017 as 'Digital Marketing Apprentice. But now, I'm both a Multidisciplinary Arts Producer, and a Content and Partnerships Manager for an ethical marketing & PR agency.
- Ellen Johnson** I actually went to uni, and then dropped out of uni in the first year. I knew that I wanted to be in the cultural sector in soame way, but I didn't really know how to access it without a degree. And I was just looking through a job site one day, hoping to find some kind of opportunity that didn't need a degree, thinking "maybe I'll find a kind of unpaid internship, that I might be able to juggle with my hospitality rota." But then, I just happened upon this advert for a creative apprenticeship, and I remember being really shocked. At that point, I'd never seen an arts apprenticeship being advertised - I'd never even heard of one. Like, this full time job, where I didn't really need any knowledge; in fact, it was better that I didn't know anything, so that I could learn more. It's an arts job where you learn on the job, and you get paid for learning. It was a wonderful discovery.
- Emma Blake Morsi** So I actually came across the apprenticeship in a similar way to Ellen - as in I stumbled across it. [LAUGHS] I actually met my (who then became) my boss at the launch of a magazine called gal-dem. By chance, I knew someone who knew the person who was starting up this record label, who then was starting up and having apprentices. So, I just started talking to her, and they just put me in touch - and I was really lucky. In many ways, [it] really changed the trajectory of where I was going to go career wise, and it really elevated a lot of the work that I did, so I'm literally so forever grateful for that chance meeting, and also for everything that kind of happened since. That was an absolute rollercoaster of a year, which is incredible, which allowed me to go to Palestine, and do work in really meaningful ways. And yeah, I just feel really proud of what I was able to do during that time.
- Ellen Johnson** And I'd say that the pathway through my apprenticeship was pretty clear. The portfolio that you had to create, the mark scheme for it was designed so that you could easily hit all of the mark points just from evidencing your everyday

work. And even when you found something that you needed to do, but you didn't do regularly in your workplace, apprenticeships just gave you the freedom to say to your line manager, "look, I need this bit of experience for my portfolio," and then you could just take it from there. I definitely had a few of those instances where I had to go to my manager, and I was like, "I'd really like to do this for my portfolio." Like in a normal job, for instance, instead of going, "well, that's not in your job description, so you're not going to do that," my manager was like, "great, that's amazing. Let's find this area of experience for you, and help you develop." So, yeah, it was a really worthwhile and really positive experience. It's a really great place to learn.

**Emma Blake Morsi** So within my role, I was Digital Marketing Apprentice, but because of the way the label had just been set up, I was technically the only person in digital. [CHUCKLES] Or in marketing, rather. So, it meant that I basically was 'Head of Marketing' for the label, and the artists. I guess that was a baptism of fire, because it meant that I was fully taking on a lot of responsibility, and accountability. I got given so many like responsibilities and roles within that, that actually when it came to going to uni, I already felt like I was so equipped to be in that space. But I think the real growth and potential with apprenticeships is that you have so many options afterwards; you don't have to follow a traditional route, and you don't have to limit yourself with what you can do, because so many development opportunities that come from that.

**Ellen Johnson** So you had a group of people that you learn alongside with - people similar to my age. They were already supportive. And then, in the workplace, all my colleagues were super supportive, always asking me how I was doing, giving me just the right amount of opportunity so that I could really focus and hone in on the skills that I needed. The sheer positive energy that I was in, in that workplace...

**Emma Blake Morsi** It's just so beautiful to be in amongst a space where you get to meet other people who are having just gone through a similar process in their apprenticeship... The fact that you have all these conferences, where you get to meet others, and can network and connect with people. And the support I've gotten from the Creative and Cultural Skills throughout, even in the last few years, has been so meaningful. And so, it's beautiful to have that continuous relationship, even though technically my apprenticeship finished, like, four years ago! It's just crazy to think! [LAUGHS]

**Ellen Johnson** My apprenticeship really helped me begin my career, essentially, because an apprenticeship fosters such a new way of working - because it's the combination of working and learning. It breaks the common perception that you learn, and then you work, and that there's a clear difference between the two. But apprenticeships show you how learning and working can complement each other perfectly. And now, even though I've finished my apprenticeship, and I've begun my path in the industry with this organisation, I still approach my work with that same element of curiosity that was just consistently fostered in my apprenticeship.

**Emma Blake Morsi** I've been really fortunate enough to be around people who are super like-minded, and be able to take opportunities that have allowed me to elevate the work I am doing, and want to do further. I've been really keen about using the arts as an opportunity for change, and to really use it as a catalyst for doing

the work that needs to be done across society and beyond. And I think this space within the cultural and creative sector - it allows that level of engagement through the apprenticeship. Being able to have actually been able to do it from a young age as 18 I think has been a learning curve, in that it's allowed me to really foster the networks you need in order to build a career.

**Ellen Johnson**

When I used to work in different sectors, it was very much a tick-list workplace, with a lot more emphasis on doing the tasks in the same way, and not deviating or trying new things. But in this industry, I find that they're a lot more open and excited by new ways of working, and they're also more empathetic when you take a risk and it doesn't work out - because that is such a good part of the cultural and creative sector, is that it's just an industry full of risk taking, and trying new things, and continuously renovating how you work. And it's so inspiring. And I completely agree with Emma as well, because it gives you the opportunity to do so many things in a working day. So you're not just one thing, you're like eight other things as well; the sheer variety of what you will do in a working day, I just think it's unmatched, really.

**Emma Blake Morsi**

There's a great quote that I love, which is about "the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible." And I think that really feeds into I go and approach my work. But I also think, in a similar way, within this sector there are so many jobs, and there's so many roles. I think actually when you do an arts or creative course, it's almost a disservice to the opportunities that are in and around the sector, because you don't really get to understand the breadth of what you can do. I just know, even from just going to the previous Creative and Cultural Skills conferences, and seeing the absolute range of jobs; whether it's within the craft sector, and then you've got people doing pyrotechnics, and there's so many levels of it that just... There's so many opportunities to grow within this sector. And you might start off loving one thing: I did a Digital Marketing Apprenticeship, and really, that taught me in many ways how actually just being digital isn't something I wanted to always be stuck into. But equally, now I'm in a place that I actually call myself a Multidisciplinary Arts Producer, because I've actually understood that I love to be able to do multiple things. I love that I can go from photography, to illustration, to working on events, and then graphics, or words. And I feel like that really is the skillbase that I really want to champion and hone into. But then there's not many other sectors that you can really tap into all your interests like that - and so, I find that as much as it requires a lot of passion, and time, and maintaining that continuous motivation and inspiration, I do feel super fortunate to be able to work around, and do stuff that I love every day. [CHUCKLES]

**Ellen Johnson**

I think there are definite barriers, and a lot of negative associations with apprenticeships. I don't think that many people know about apprenticeships in the creative sector. I'm not fully convinced that people, especially young people who have recently left the security of education, know where to look. I think the negative associations surrounding apprenticeships is that they're often compared with academia in a way which belittles the impact that apprenticeships can have on the development of young people. There's a certain stereotype of apprenticeships; being that people don't have the intellectual standing to make it through university, which is still very much an issue that must be addressed. It's important to note that apprenticeships

aren't for any person in particular, and just because a person chooses to learn through an apprenticeship doesn't say anything more about the person's abilities than it does when a person decides to go to uni. There's an unequal footing between the public prestige of university and apprenticeships that I don't believe is been combated enough. And, to be honest, the very fact that they're often pitted against each other is the thing that makes this open dialogue harder to come by. And this exists in the cultural sector as well; it's not innocent from the kind of hierarchy of learning. University and apprenticeships should be considered as just different avenues to take. It's the hierarchy that not only still exists, but is stopping a lot of young people from choosing the right path for them in the cultural sector. Because, when I was going through that job site looking for arts opportunities, when I didn't know that apprenticeships existed, the arts opportunities that I did find... You needed a degree, or you needed to have had unpaid internship experience, which for a lot of people is not accessible. And so how are they supposed to access the sector and fulfil their creative potential if they're being just roadblocked at the first step?

**Emma Blake Morsi**

I was really fortunate enough to be in an amazing team, and have a really supportive boss who during that time, and still even now... I had been a child carer for my mum, so there's a lot of other responsibilities I had outside of work. The level of nurturing, and actual understanding that went into that... When you work with people from diverse backgrounds, and just generally speaking, there's a lot of different needs that people have. And in order to make a space - like any other sector, in order to make space more inclusive, more diverse, when you want to work with diverse people - you've got to consider actually; what needs can you offer? And how do you create space and workspace around them that is that supportive?

**Ellen Johnson**

I think in order to remove these barriers, the sector needs to champion that public voice of apprenticeships. It needs to not only be stronger, but more prevalent in early education. I didn't find out about apprenticeships until I was 21 years old - which is, to be honest, about 15 years too late. Because once the stereotypes of apprenticeships are ingrained in you, it's half the battle to reprogramme the way you think about different ways to educate yourself. It's fair to say that a lot of young people continue to miss out on opportunities in the cultural sector that apprenticeships can bring, because they aren't properly taught about them from an early age, or they're not consistently mentioned in education just like university is. I remember my college experience; from the first day of college, I was taught about university, I was taught about how to write a UCAS application. I was taught about all of these things, all of the various options that university can bring, but never once was apprenticeships mentioned to me. And that's something that the cultural sector can really work on.

**Emma Blake Morsi**

A lot of aspects, in terms of barriers to apprenticeships in the creative and cultural sector, I think Ellen's done an amazing job articulate the significance of access, and actually be to recognise how the perceived disparity between apprenticeships and universities, and what it can really offer in someone's development within their career. And I think, even just like as an add-on, I'll take everything Ellen said, and just... There's a lot of elements when it comes to also, even just financially, like I was in a position that I was still very much at home, and so I could afford to take on an apprenticeship. But I think

realistically, you've also got to consider there are people - even in Ellen's case, when she was 21 - you have to consider, like, if they're living at home. If they're not living at home, is that wage in and of itself feasible for them to actually live off of? And I can actually say in hindsight that I probably benefitted a lot from that, because I lived at home - and in the grand scheme of everything, there are still barriers when we consider the value put on apprenticeships, and actually what they should be paid. Often you're doing a full time role within a position where a fellow employee would probably be paid an actual salary, or rate that would be relevant to their role. And I think just there's that mindfulness of, yes, you are training, and you are developing your career from an early stage, but I think it gets to a point where you are actually just a regular employee. And I think that level of growth isn't always represented in how that development goes financially.

**Ellen Johnson**

I did a speech at Dance City about apprenticeships. I think everyone in the room with uncomfortable [LAUGHS] with how direct I was being, I loved it! [LAUGHS]But yeah, it's super important, and I think it has to come from young apprentices. It's gotta come from us, who've experienced it, and we've gotta be the ones to tell the sector that "we've just gone through this, and it needs to change". People who are just getting together in a room, who've worked in the sector for 20 years, and probably haven't had an apprenticeship... It's not really that place to say

**Emma Blake Morsi**

There's a lot to be done within the creative and cultural sector - it's one which obviously likes to champion itself as being very progressive, and very mindful of a lot of these issues, and a lot of these really important considerations in society. I think actually there's still so much, so much that still needs to be done within the sector - and I think, actually, this is an issue that can also relate to apprenticeships in the same way as it does to any other job opportunity. I think there's a lot of culturally sensitive work that could be going on, and it's obviously a continuous issue that people are addressing in such interesting and nuanced ways. What's really exciting is that, even within the sector, there are people who are actually being really radical, but also being very progressive, and actually trying to think of other ways of working. And I think that's what's really exciting: Within this space, you have the freedom to think about and approach things creatively. And I think Ellen was talking about how, yeah, there's so many ways in which you get really championed for this within the sector, about working differently. And I think that in itself needs to take that ethos; being open to risk taking, and working with people who... For many other reasons, it might not just be a barrier, just working in the creative industry, but working in any position as a person from whatever background - whether that is around issues around different race, or gender or, even disabilities.... I think there's so many aspects that need to be considered, that aren't always. And I think that's really important, and I'd love to see more of, always.

**Ellen Johnson**

As Emma's just touched on, although there have been huge strides being made, it's still a place of privilege. And apprenticeships are open to everyone, regardless of race, and gender, and economic background. This can support people that don't have the means to make it through university, who are carers like Emma, and who have situations where if they went to university or other routes to try and get into the industry, they wouldn't be supported and they wouldn't be able to make it. But apprenticeships can support everyone

through that, and they're so important. And the fact that they're so important to everyone, but they aren't taught about as loudly as everything else, is just... It's just shocking. And it desperately needs to change.

**Emma Blake Morsi**

I think what needs to be done within the cultural and creative sector is policy level change. I think there needs to be some sort of framework that allows cultural organisations to reform structurally, and to also be held accountable if they fail to comply. I think there needs to be something that's very systematic. And, particularly if we want to continuously attract apprentices from diverse backgrounds, a lot of these businesses need to be braver about offering culturally sensitive support, and to be aware that the moment they start to feel comfortable with what they are offering (in regards to it being the norm, just about doing what everyone else is doing), you've actually already begun to fail these young people. And I think the approach really needs to be for a place of having a level of risk embedded within your structure. Young people are leaders now, and you're not simply giving a young person a helping hand; they're bringing just as much value as this opportunity will bring to their career. Really, you can't take that for granted, the real value young person brings. And so, continuously, that policy will change is really what's important for making sure businesses are held accountable, and that growth continues.