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[Episode 114: Developing Your Creative Practice](#) (12/06/2018)

Transcript by Christabel Smith

Host: David Turner – **DT**

Guest: Gemma Seltzer – **GS**

Intro:

DT: Hello, welcome to episode 114 of Lunar Poetry Podcasts. My name is David Turner. This is a special, as in out-of-the-ordinary, episode. It's a lot shorter than normal and I'm posting it on its own, rather than including it in a longer episode, so that it's easier to find. One thing to bear in mind is this episode is probably only relevant to artists and writers living

in the UK or UK artists living abroad, which is probably another reason to make it a stand-alone episode.

At the end of April this year, I met up with Gemma Seltzer at the London office of Arts Council England or ACE for short, to discuss their new funding scheme Developing Your Creative Practice and how it differs from their more established Project Grants or Grants for the Arts, as they used to be known.

I mention this in the conversation, but I think it's worth stating it here as well, this interview was arranged before I received my most recent batch of funding from the Arts Council and would have gone ahead even if that application had been turned down. Sharing of information and privilege is central to what I do as a producer of this series and I just want as many people as possible to be aware of this new funding and to have access to the same amount of knowledge as me.

Hopefully the conversation is relevant to those who have never applied for funding to ACE and to those that are already familiar. I'm really pleased that ACE have put this new funding in place, as it really simplifies the application process and removes the burden of projecting or predicting what kind of audience participation or interaction there may be. It seems as though it will allow applicants to focus on whatever will allow them to develop their creative practice.

I've written a blog post to outline what I see as the main differences between Developing Your Creative Practice and Project Grants, of which I've received three since 2016. You can read that post over at www.lunarpodcasts.com where you can also find a transcript of this conversation. Alternatively, follow the links in the episode description.

Conversation:

GS: Hi there, I'm Gemma Seltzer, I work in the literature team at Arts Council England's London office. I work a lot with artists and writers, supporting them to navigate their way through Arts Council funding.

DT: I may well have already said this in the introduction and as regular listeners will know, I've no idea what is going to happen with introductions and I'm constantly saying 'You may have already heard this', but today we are meeting up to discuss the new Arts Council England funding scheme, called Developing Your Creative Practice. If you could just give us a brief description of what that is, we'll get into it from there.

GS: Absolutely and thank you for having me today. I'm really excited about this scheme. It's brand-new and it's called Developing Your Creative Practice and it's all about the development of independent creative practitioners, so writers, artists and makers of all kinds. As I say, it's a brand-new scheme, it's about giving individuals the opportunity to take time and space and identify what support they need around them to focus on their own creative development and take them to the next stage of their practice.

What's exciting about the fund is I think it's a great invitation for writers and artists to think about what they need. It could be applying for a period of time to write, to research, to travel, including working internationally, collaborating, it might be training, it might be developing new ideas, but there's a good invitation there for artists to think about what they need and apply for funding to support that.

DT: So who can apply for this new funding scheme?

GS: Artists and creative practitioners, so anybody who considers themselves an artist.

DT: You were kind enough to send me some links to some guidance forms that exist as pdfs, which you can download and take away from the Arts Council website. Any links we're talking about will be in the episode description so wherever you're listening, you can just go down to the episode description and click on those links. I noticed one of the guidance forms said 'applicants should have at least three years' practice experience', ie not immediately out of education, so that seems one criteria I hadn't noticed before from Arts Council applications.

GS: Yeah. I've been part of the team that's put together the application process and guidance information and it's quite a simple application process and application form, but we have had to put in some filtering and eligibility criteria. I think the criteria are pretty straightforward. You have to be an individual, based in England, have a UK bank account and be over-18, so that is a lot of people. Then we say 'three years' creative practice outside of a formal education context'.

That's really because as you build up a practice, you're working out where you want to be with it and we think the fund is most suitable for those that are at a critical point in their career. They're ready to take the next step, they're ready to take a risk, they've moved on beyond their college or university practice and they're starting to try something new. It doesn't mean people who've had a practice for a period of time and then might go back to college or studies. It can be for any time, so three years of formal education at any point moving beyond that.

DT: I'm assuming you allow the applicant to define what those three years are and there's no fixed criteria, no boxes to tick as to what those three years equate to.

GS: Yes, exactly, it's self-defining criteria. Each of the applicants or the applications will need to make their own case for funding. There's a section about your track record and practice and that might be where you talk about what you've been doing and the education pathway you've taken.

I think the three years of creative practice outside formal education is interesting. It's so different in every art form. It couldn't be that we had a blanket criteria that was for everybody. We know it's so different for writers in that pathway you take, compared to the formal education that happens in dance or music. It's open enough, we hope, to be suitable to all kinds of different artists.

DT: As we discussed before I turned the microphones on, this conversation will hopefully help those that have previously applied for 'G4tAs' or Grants for the Arts, which are now known as Project Grants through the Arts Council, those that have applied but not been successful, those who have merely gone on and witnessed what Grantium tries to do to you online and walked away from it and those that are coming at it afresh.

If we just start from the very beginnings, you need to register an applicant account online. My one question about that was if you've already registered before for other types of funding, does that mean you're already registered?

GS: Exactly. If you're new to it, you would have to register a profile on Grantium, which is basic details about name and address, so where you're living and which area office might look after your grant, so that's really basic. It takes five to ten days for that to be approved, so we always encourage applicants to allow enough time for that.

DT: I think it said on some of the forms to allow up to 15 days. If you allow up to a fortnight for something, I think that's a good place to be. Don't do it on a Thursday and hope to be ready to go on a Friday morning. That's not going to happen.

GS: Yeah, we're here with the top tips. That's great, just allow enough time so it's not stressful. As you've said, if you've already got a Grantium profile set up, this is just another strand you can apply for.

DT: The next step from setting up an applicant profile is the application form itself. Listeners may not know I've previously had three successful awards from the Arts Council. I've had two refused, so I have a fair bit of experience working with Grantium and the ways the Arts Council award their funding.

One thing I really like is there is a breakdown of all the questions for this particular strand of funding we're talking about today and whilst we still need to use the Grantium portal, which I know some people have issues with, you do at least get a breakdown of all the questions and you can go away and write a draft yourself. That seems to have been a conscious decision, to simplify this process and make it really clear.

GS: Yeah, because it's public money, we at the Arts Council absolutely have a responsibility to ensure a wide number of people are applying for funding, so both with our new project grants and Developing Your Creative Practice, there are these questions you can download and start working your way through outside of Grantium, because as you suggested, that can be a place you need to navigate your way through.

What is useful when you download the questions for Developing Your Creative Practice, you see there aren't that many.

DT: Only about a third compared to Grants for the Arts.

GS: I think that is brilliant and so exciting. We did a lot of research about what other funders do and how you can serve time-and-money-poor artists and include as many people

as possible and it really is about simplicity. Other funders were really confident that even with a more simple application form, you still get all the information you need and you're still fair and able to scrutinise the detail. It's just an invitation for more people to apply.

There are five questions and they're centred on what is it you want to do? And why now? I keep using the word invitation, but I think it's important it's not trying to exclude anybody. It's trying to ask the right questions so people can really share their ideas.

DT: Second top tip, along with allowing a fortnight to register your profile, I find it very odd, I sort of understand why Grantium works with a character count in terms of how much you can type in for your answers I can see from this form that the Arts Council have suggested approximately how many words this character count equates to, but people need to be aware there is a character count that includes spaces and punctuation.

That was something I tripped up on the first time I did an application, because I didn't allow for spaces and punctuation to include as characters and I had to re-edit and chop a lot out. This is just a practical point for people who may be coming at it for the first time, because not everyone knows the solutions to this. If you're typing out your draft in Word, you can click down the bottom of the form and change the word count to the character count.

If you're not typing on Word, which I didn't for my first application, I downloaded an app and wrote my whole first draft on an iPad. I found an app which counted the characters as I typed. So there are manageable ways to make sure you're heading in the right direction for the draft and not making extra editing work for yourself, because it's a long and difficult enough process doing these forms for the first time without having to come back and change everything.

I noticed from the way the questions are worded, there's also an emphasis on making sure you're ready to apply, because you're anticipating a lot of applicants for this new form of funding and not only that, but there seems to be an emphasis on getting people to explain exactly why they need the funding now. That seems to be quite a serious consideration that people need to spend a bit of time on.

GS: That's really important. I think we know competition will be high. There are loads of brilliant artists out there, who absolutely need time and space to make their work and there aren't many funders who would be able to offer what they see as a lump of money for development of your practice. We know the competition will be high and we know it's intended for those who are at a critical point, who can really make the most of the money.

The questions are about why now? We should be asking that of ourselves all the time, for everything we do. Why now? Why does it matter right now? For me, that will hopefully act as a test for people applying. Is now the moment I really need this money? So you can apply for between £2,000 and £10,000. Is it going to make a significant difference and can I make the case for it? Maybe there's an opportunity that's come your way or you've reached a point where you're ready to change direction or you want to explore a new area of work and just need that quiet, time and space.

The other reason 'why now?' really matters is because applicants should be aware we can only accept two applications for this fund in a 12-month period. So while it's open for four years, with four rounds per year, there's no rush to get an application in for the first, or even the second, deadline. You know it's going to be there for four years, four rounds, it's like when is your moment? You might be rejected in the first round. Maybe you don't come back in the second round, but you think maybe that wasn't the moment, maybe it's the next time.

We know we'll be able to fund a number of artists each year. There's £3.6 million every year, so hundreds of artists will be able to be helped, but it won't be everybody, so the 'why now?' question feels really vital. Can you make a good case that the moment is now?

DT: It's a really important thing to talk about, not that we want to put anyone off or make them feel nervous, but I think when you're putting these applications in, it's important to remember there are going to be four application windows. The first was in May, the next coming up is 16 August 2018, then there will be a third window on 14 November 2018, then a fourth window, 21 February 2019.

If you go through the guidelines, which I highly recommend, there are some rules about if you have two rejections, you then have to wait a certain amount of time before you can come back and apply again. We don't want to be coming in not ready. The reason we're having this conversation is because so many applications are anticipated, you're unfortunately not as an organisation going to be able to offer any one-to-one advice, are you? Via social media, you are going to be able to find a lot of other artists offering guidance and advice because they know how hard it is to get through this process and how important it is we all help each other and give each other a leg up. This section of this conversation is not to put anyone off. It's just to highlight to take some time, because there are more application rounds coming around.

GS: Exactly. This fund is aimed at individuals, purely, so you're not competing with organisations, but that doesn't close the doors for Project Grants, which are also open to individuals. Again, I think it's a great opportunity for artists to work out where they are in their practice and what's the shape of the work you want to do? In really simple terms, if there is any element of reaching an audience or engaging with members of the public, whether it's through readings or audiences, readers, then probably it's a Project Grant because then there's a very clear outcome that will reach people and then the beneficiaries of the project go beyond you.

Equally on the other side, there's the Developing Your Creative Practice. If the main beneficiary is you and it's about spending time thinking about your craft, maybe mentoring, networking, expanding what you're doing, then the Creative Practice grant is going to be the right one. You can't apply for both at the same time, so again, the 'why now?' and 'which fund?' are good questions to ask yourself. Rather than quickly gathering together some information and putting in an application, it's worth thinking about what's the best route for you and where you are right now.

DT: After the conversation, but before this episode goes out, I think I'm going to write a short blog post about the differences I've noticed between the applications I've already done

for the Project Grants that have been successful and unsuccessful, and what I've noticed. I think it will help people break down quickly which is appropriate.

I think two things really stand out. One, how this Developing Your Creative Practice seems more aimed at the individual and their own development and there's less of an obligation on them to prove outcome along the lines of audience impact. There's a lot of talk about what outcomes will be and that seems to have been shaved off this process a bit. Secondly, how openly welcoming you are to projects that are happening outside the UK.

GS: Yes, so this fund doesn't replace the Artists' International Development Fund because it's got a different criteria, but it does build on the legacy of it, I suppose. There's so much value in individuals being able to take their ideas or their performances, their books and activities into other countries and build up a market, a network and find people interested in what they're doing. So definitely this fund will support international travel and making connections abroad. I totally agree with you, Developing Your Creative Practice takes away any of that public engagement stuff.

It's definitely the case that the artists and writers I work with will have a really great project and then realise there needs to be a public outcome. That's sadly how the National Lottery funding has worked, so there needs to be a public-facing outcome, so kind of smash on a couple of workshops or add on some elements to make sure there was a public-facing bit. That can work really well, it's a great opportunity to share your work, but it's not always what the artist wants to do. They're shaping their project in order to meet the criteria so with the new fund, Developing Your Creative Practice, hopefully that streamlines it a bit. It's just about the idea.

What is it you want to do? You don't have to reach an audience in the near future and obviously, it doesn't have any of the match-funding element either, which again is another barrier for artists, particularly a diverse range of artists. Not everybody can get money from other sources. Where would that money come from anyway? So having to secure that before you come in for funding, or promise it before you come in for funding, is a real challenge and a barrier.

In the application form for Developing Your Creative Practice, you do have to show a budget, show expenditure of what you would spend the money on, but you don't have to have an income strand. You don't have to show there are other people supporting what you're doing or having any money from other sources. It's purely, 100% funding to support what you want to do as an artist. That's exciting.

DT: It's really exciting. I've just become hyperaware of something we were talking about off-air, which is whether I need to give some sort of clarification as to this not being a commercial for the Arts Council, because I have funding from the Arts Council. This interview, or discussion, was put in place before I got my last lot of funding and I would have done it had that application been rejected as well.

Now is not the right time to be picking apart any scheme and trying to find holes in it. I wanted this conversation to happen because I wanted to remain positive throughout it because

there's £3.6 million a year available in lots of tiny – £10,000 is not tiny to me – but in terms of the overall scheme, these are really small amounts of money, which can do a huge amount of good to people's practice and careers. I think at this point, it's just good to remain positive and try and emphasise to people that they should have a go.

I've met a lot of people in the last few years who've been completely terrified of approaching Grantium and I think some of those anxieties will still exist with this funding. You can at least get in touch with us at Lunar. I'll try and point you in the direction of some discussions that are going on already with artists and applicants about how to make that process easier. It's just that's a very lengthy discussion in itself and we don't have time for that now, but criticisms of all these schemes will come later on.

GS: That is such a useful point to make right now, because this is almost an experiment, this is brand-new for the Arts Council to be doing something like this. Just this strand for individuals and the intention is as accessible and simple as possible, so we're going to be gathering data, we're going to be seeing who applies, who is successful, how far is it reaching. One of the reasons I wanted to have this conversation is because it's really important that we're talking about it and making it seem like a real thing for people. It's not until somebody you know gets funding that you start thinking 'actually, it could be a possibility for me'.

So it's really important to have this conversation. Also we're committed to just hearing from people and evaluating it. After 12 months, we're having a full evaluation and checking the information, but you'll see online the guideline material. There's an invitation to offer comments and feedback. It's supposed to be a reactive, responsive grant. It's supposed to be able to support people in the kind of work they want to make, so if it's not doing that, we need to hear about it so do get in touch with the Arts Council directly.

DT: I think it's also important to remember that if you don't feel you can get in touch with the Arts Council straightaway, try and get in touch with artists who are having these discussions online because there's a lot of help going on there. The final thing I wanted to say is if you feel like you can't apply, just remember that I felt like that a couple of years ago and I don't have any formal background in literature.

Plenty of people have heard me banging on about this, but I served an apprenticeship as a carpenter, I had no formal background in literature. I failed my English Literature GCSE, got thrown out of school and all that lot and now I'm running this podcast and am very lucky to have received three lots of funding and it's all been ploughed back into this podcast. I only had funding accepted because I applied and I only applied because of the support from people at the Arts Council and other artists.

So hopefully, this conversation will make you feel as if you can at least open the Guidance pdf online.

GS: First step, definitely.

DT: Any questions, do get in touch with us or the Arts Council. Thanks very much, Gemma.

GS: Thanks for having me.

Outro:

DT: Hello. I really hope this short introduction to Developing Your Creative Practice is helpful. If you have any questions, do get in touch with me via the contact form on the podcast website or on Twitter @Silent_Tongue and I will try my hardest to answer any question or, at the very least, point you in the right direction of someone that can help.

To summarise, do take a look at my blog post, which outlines my experiences with asking for funding and get yourself over to the Arts Council England website and download the Developing Your Creative Practice guidelines and questions. Links to all of those things in the episode description. If you do apply and I wish you the very best of luck, remember if you feel in any way you're not the kind of person that deserves this funding, then you are exactly the kind of person that deserves it and this funding is aimed at.

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