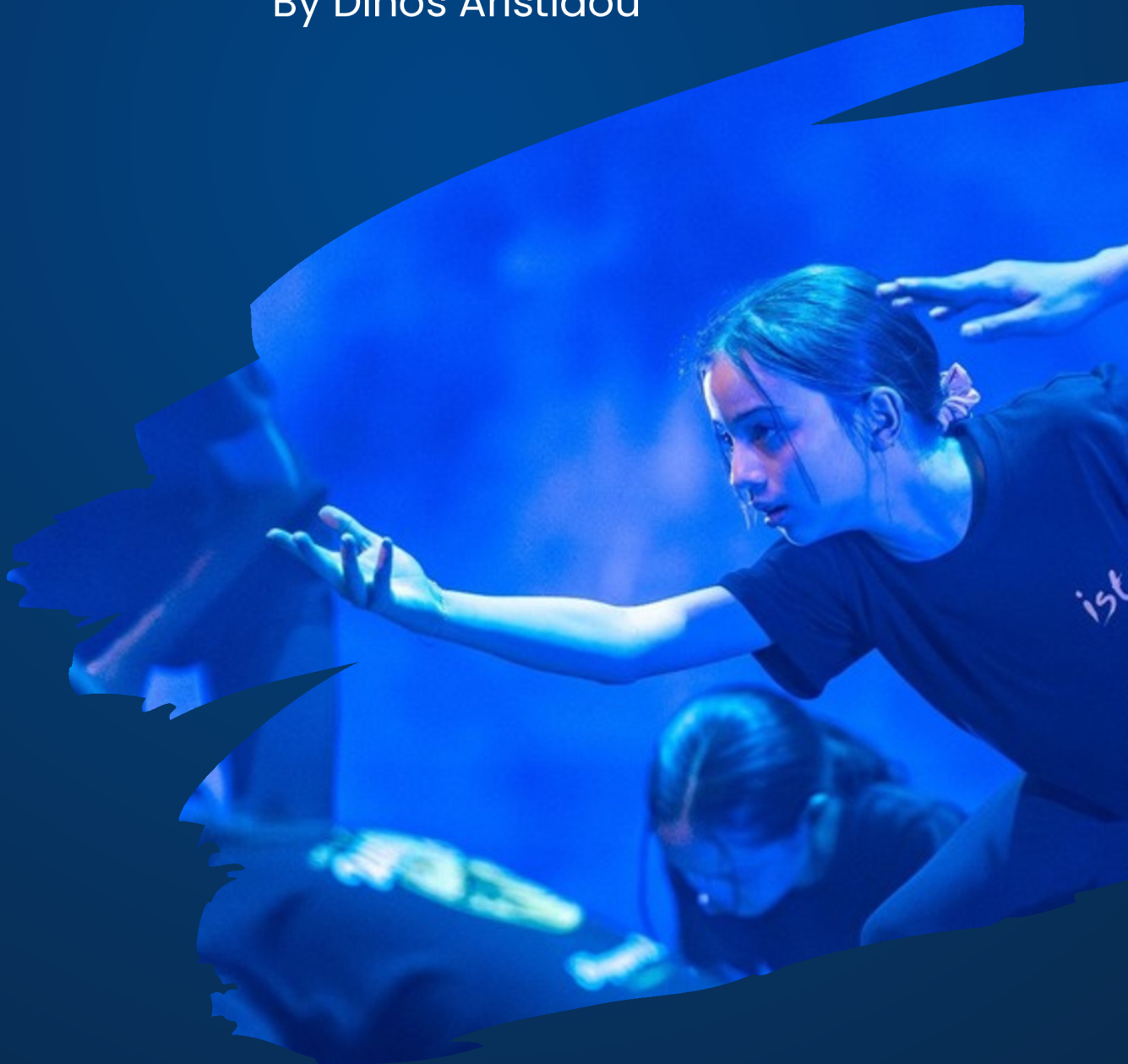


# The Nature of Immersive & Experiential Learning:

## ISTA Festivals and the Impact of The ISTA Ensemble Method

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## **Introduction**

### **Purpose of the study**

This impact study was commissioned to examine the ISTA festival as an immersive theatrical learning experience. This is in the hopes of providing a theoretical framework and language with which to explain how the ISTA festival experience is designed and why the festivals have such an impact on the children and young people who participate in them.

This study will provide:

- those who produce, attend or who are involved with the experiences (ISTA team, artists, teachers, participants)
- those who have heard of or encountered these experiences (school administrators, parents, non theatre teachers, cultural organisations) and
- those who are new to the organisation

with some insight into the nature of these experiences, why they are so successful and the way in which they achieve their artistic and pedagogic objectives.

This report may also encourage other researchers or those interested in immersive learning to consider the ISTA experience as a focus of attention and study. The methods and approaches that this research identifies can be applicable and are of value to learning experiences other than the theatrical and as such can be of value in a variety of educational contexts and situations that privilege intensive, time limited experiential learning.

### **Objectives**

- To examine the ISTA festival as an immersive learning experience.
- To examine the impact the ISTA festival experience has on children and young people and the reasons for this impact.
- To examine some of the principles of the contemporary form of immersive theatre which engages audiences with theatre as participants and co-creators of meaning.
- To examine how immersive theatre principles apply to the ISTA festival experience.
- To examine the processes associated with experiential learning and see how these are used to design and define the ISTA festival experience.
- To provide research to inform ISTA's review of its festivals and their future development.

### **Some background**

ISTA's focus and a constant over the years has been to work in an international context with a commitment to the role theatre plays in developing internationally minded, responsible young people who will contribute actively to the creation of a better world. As a result of this constant consideration, the art of theatre, the nature of learning and responsible citizenship have been the predominant focal points and

areas of development in recent years, ensuring the organisation retains its reputation as a relevant and respected provider of theatre learning experiences and training.

ISTA is an organisation that prides itself on being current, relevant and a provider of high quality learning experiences. It consistently reviews and considers feedback in the development of its experiences but also commissions research to ensure its offer is not only current but also theoretically, artistically and pedagogically rigorous. In 2008 ISTA commissioned research into the ISTA festival experience examining its pedagogic, artistic and international aspirations and philosophy. In particular the organisation wanted to examine what it was that made ISTA's festival experience and its impact on participants unique. The report, 'The ISTA Festival: a unique international theatre experience' was produced in 2010 and led to a review of the organisation's mission. Most significantly, it resulted in the formulation of the ISTA pedagogy in 2013, revised in 2017<sup>1</sup> as well as in the current festival model. The most recent development of the organisation's offer to schools has thus been informed by current pedagogy, both general and theatrical and by consultation with practitioners, educators and experts. The organisation's board of trustees is also made up of artistic and educational experts who together with the executive director and ISTA team, keep a steadfast focus on authenticity and relevance.

The other factor that has determined the development of these events is the nature of teaching and learning in international schools. ISTA keeps abreast of the curriculum developments of various accreditation bodies and examination boards. Particular attention is paid to the International Baccalaureate's (IB) programmes regarding theatre, the arts and creativity. Developments within the IB programmes are informed by research, contemporary pedagogy and brain science, and its commitment to international mindedness and student centred inquiry make it the most appropriate focus regarding international curricula and educational initiatives.

Through its community of artists, arts organisations and theatre educators who work with ISTA and who ISTA works with, the organisation keeps abreast of contemporary theatre practice and theatre education.

Until relatively recently, ISTA considered itself to be the organiser and producer of **events** which engage international students and educators with learning through and about theatre. As the nature and make up of these events has developed over time in response to all of the above as well as the changing worlds of international education and theatre (the two main contexts in which ISTA operates), so too has ISTA's perception of what it produces. One major development which is of particular significance to this research, is a change in the language ISTA has adopted to describe its offer to young people and schools. It no longer refers to itself as a producer of **events** but rather as a producer and provider of **experiences** that engage young people with theatre, with learning and with others. Starting to consider these events as experiences has altered not only the way events are designed, organised and run but also the very culture of the organisation. From being an organiser of festivals and conferences, ISTA is now considered an innovator and

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1- ISTA Pedagogy

designer of international learning experiences through theatre – providing attendees with the opportunity to be simultaneously engaged as creators, performers, audience members and learners, experiencing and encountering themselves in all of these roles. It therefore makes perfect sense for the next research project commissioned by ISTA to be based on the nature of the experiential. As the ISTA festival is one of the key experiences that ISTA offers and represents the very reason for the organisation's founding in 1978, it seems the obvious focus for this study.

### **What is an ISTA festival?**

ISTA festivals are typically hosted by international schools from around the world with a small number hosted by ISTA in schools or in settings (known as 'sites of learning') that have been selected by the organisation for their educational opportunities. Examples of the latter include the Eden Project in the United Kingdom and Terezin in the Czech Republic.

The ISTA festivals range in size from between 40 to 130 students and bring together children and young people from around the world to explore a starting point through theatre. They are usually three day events which conclude with a 'sharing'. This sharing is a culmination of all the work that has been produced in response to the starting point associated with the event and is presented in the form of a final piece of theatre presented to an audience. The starting point is determined by a collaboration between ISTA and the host school.

At the festival participants are divided into ensemble groups, each led by an ISTA artist referred to as the student ensemble leader (SEL). An artistic director (AD) appointed by ISTA for each event, guides the artistic process, bringing coherence both to the process of exploration and to any sharing.

The experience is comprised of the following elements:

- A full group opening
- A number of ensemble sessions
- A cultural experience<sup>2</sup>
- Workshops designed to develop theatre skills<sup>3</sup>
- Full group sessions
- A final sharing or performance to an audience of members of the host school
- Social events designed for students to interact informally

The festivals fall into three main categories: primary, middle and high school.

The ISTA 'Connect' experience is a particular form of festival, offered at middle and high school. It was developed in 2013 and ran as a pilot until 2016. It has been conceived as a service learning programme with the aim of using theatre and the ISTA experience to:

- connect diverse young people from different (local) communities and backgrounds;

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<sup>2</sup> This is designed to offer students a cultural experience of the host culture. It is usually related to the starting point. In some instances this involves an experience brought into the school.

<sup>3</sup> These are delivered by the artistic team and local artists and are usually not related to the starting point.

- connect ISTA to a range of communities and young people worldwide that it has not worked with before and who would benefit from the ISTA experience;
- burst what might be conceived as the international school 'bubble' (M. Westberg, 2013);
- connect ISTA member schools to their local communities through service learning.

Service learning involves bringing together diverse communities so that they can learn together and from each other. It is called *service* to denote that the international school is reaching out and engaging with a particular community which has some sort of need. Participants from these communities, usually referred to as 'ISTA scholars', are connected through the host school's service learning providers.<sup>4</sup> These 'ISTA scholars' are funded by ISTA to attend the festival. This development was also an attempt to extend ISTA's charitable scope to reach some of the communities where its festivals are hosted.

Another recent key initiative resulting from ISTA's process of self-reflection (its internal review systems and consultation) was the development in 2018 of the annual ISTA Global challenge initiative. This is a way of each year bringing together all its festivals under **one** umbrella learning area. This initiative provides participants and schools at all festivals with the opportunity to examine, learn and engage with a current and relevant global challenge or global issue through theatre. The different contexts, approaches and aspects – explored at each festival during the year – provide a diverse range of responses and ideas related to the ISTA Global challenge. Having one common ISTA Global challenge means that all festivals in any one year are interconnected and that all students around the world for that year are using theatre to examine the *same* global challenge collectively. This makes the ISTA learning global, relevant, authentic and truly interconnected. It also provides many opportunities for the sharing of work across festivals, examining how the same challenge has been tackled at different events, in different settings and by different age groups. In 2019–2020 the ISTA Global challenge is 'Identity' and for 2020–2021, 'Borders, barriers and boundaries'.

## Conducting the research

### Research

This study, focused on the impact of a learning experience, can be considered a form of ethnographic research. This type of approach considers research as knowledge that '*emerges not through detached observation but through conversation and exchanges of many kinds among people interacting in diverse zones of entanglement*' (Elliott, D and Culhane, D. 2017) and is particularly effective when researching situations and contexts that involve '*entangled relationships*' (ibid). This form of research is commonly used to examine areas which involve creative practice, human relations and embodied processes.

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3 'ISTA CONNECT'

*‘The three methods conventionally considered to form the core of ethnographic research practice are participant observation, interviewing and analysis of documentary, archival and scholarly research.’ (Elliott, D and Culhane, D. 2017)*

As immersive theatre practice and experiential learning theory are also being used as the theoretical lenses to analyse the ISTA experience and its impact, the ethnographic approach seemed most appropriate. Ethnographic research can also be conducted by ‘insiders’, by those ‘conducting ethnography within what they identify as their own communities, networks, and organisations.’ (Elliott, D and Culhane, D. 2017) In this instance this study has been conducted by someone who has been very involved with the organisation and its development since 1989, working with the organisation as an artist, consultant, researcher, participant, trainer and former member of the board of trustees. In this respect, this study is a critical and analytical study of the ISTA experience from someone who considers themselves a committed and active member of the ISTA community. This commitment extends to wanting to ensure that the experience is of the best quality and that it continues to engage young people and children with learning, theatre and the world.

The study has been conducted through:

1. Academic research into current learning, arts practice and contemporary immersive theatre theory.
2. Observation of events, participants and interviews with teachers, hosts, the artistic team and participants at a range of festivals.
3. Questionnaires to participants and teachers at events.
4. Analysis of video footage and photographs.

The research was conducted between September 2015 and June 2017.

### **Additional research**

Following a meeting with Jonothan Neelands, patron of ISTA and Professor of Creative Education at the Warwick Business School (WBS) and Chair of Drama and Theatre Education at the University of Warwick, the research was extended from qualitative, anecdotal research based on questionnaires to quantitative research. With this in mind a survey was developed (see Appendices) which was completed at four festivals which took place during ISTA’s 2017–2018 year period:

Terezin  
Phnom Penh  
Hong Kong  
Copenhagen

## PART 1

### The theoretical framework: immersive theatre practice and experiential learning

#### Immersion and agency

Immersive theatre has become a broad umbrella term used to describe diverse pieces of theatre united by a common feature: the audience is immersed *within* the theatrical experience rather than observing it from the *outside*. Different strategies are employed by different companies and artists to achieve this experience but whatever the form or the process, it is the audiences' experience and agency that is of primary consideration.

*'It marks a piece of theatre experienced from within rather than as an outside observer. The work happens around you or to you. You are part of it, rather than looking on fundamentally distinct.'* (Trueman, 2011)

In *Immersive Theatres* (2013), Jubb and Machon consider that this coming together of audience and artist establishes theatre as congregation, explaining that:

*'... in 'a relatively secular society perhaps theatre can provide that place where people come together, explore their differences and by putting difference and creativity together, invent something new, invent a future...' and they go on to characterise it as being about putting people at 'the heart of the experience'.*

This chimes perfectly with ISTA's mission statement that sees the coming together of people from different places and cultures as a world changing phenomenon.

*'ISTA believes that the future of our world depends on confident, internationally minded, collaborative and culturally literate young people who are empowered to engage with and change the world responsibly. We believe that this is achieved through the ISTA experience.'* (ISTA mission)

The immersive theatre approach considers the usual features of theatre making in the creation of its work – but it also pays particular consideration to the way an audience is engaged and involved. Immersive theatre reconfigures the traditional model of the audience passively observing while artists are actively presenting. Like ISTA, the focus of immersive theatre is not only on the quality of the audiences' experience of the art but also in the audience's *agency* and in the recognition of their responsibility for, and role in, the construction of the experience – of the art and of its meaning. The creators of immersive theatre experiences therefore consider the nature and process of the audience's agency as paramount. Each participant is welcomed not as a recipient of an experience but as 'an interactive agent' (Machon 2013). Considering audience as 'interactive agent', immersive theatre companies focus on and carefully plot the trajectory of the audience's physical, mental and emotional journey and their role within the action. This approach is a 'vital component' (ibid) not only of immersive theatre but also of the ISTA festival, where

the participant is required to be an active creator and learner as well as a recipient and consumer of the experience.

However, a marked difference between immersive theatre and the ISTA festival experience is that participants as audience don't *step* into a fictional world or created environment but rather are responsible for the *making* of this environment through their actions and interactions. In the ISTA experience the term 'audience' does not accurately describe the participants. Though there are moments when ISTA participants are an audience, the experience is more one of witnessing and celebrating<sup>5</sup> than spectating and being theatrically transported. For example, in the final sharing at ISTA festivals, participants are all part of one piece of theatre or sharing even though each ensemble presents a separate piece that other ensembles watch. They are therefore both an active part of a festival's closing piece and a witness to it. Being a creator and a manipulator of the environment, as well as an inhabitant and witness to it, creates a dual relationship with the experience being one that is both immersive and reflective and which leads to agency – not only creatively and artistically but also educationally.

Student agency, responsibility and their role in learning and the development of new understandings is also a key feature in current teaching and learning models that locate the student at the centre of their learning. These perspectives no longer situate the teacher as the holder of knowledge and deliverer of learning but rather ascribe to the notion that the most powerful learning comes about through a collaboration between learner and educator (in immersive theatre between audience and artists), between learner and learning content (in immersive theatre between audience and performance material) and between learner and the learning experience that has been designed and developed by the teacher (in immersive theatre between audience and entire theatrical experience).

In *Creating cultures of thinking*, Ritchhart (2015) defines agency in an educational context as the 'ability to make choices and direct activity based on one's resourcefulness and enterprise.' He advocates for the gradual release of responsibility to learners, which empowers them to be autonomous and independent. This gradual release of autonomy is also a characteristic of the schedule of the ISTA festival experience which moves from tightly structured activity to autonomous presentation to audience. The student ensemble leader (SEL) at the ISTA festival encourages autonomy whilst engaging participants in the real life task of creating the piece of theatre for an audience. This ensures that the 'cognitive processes the students are learning are both authentic to the task... and that these processes are highly transferable across a variety of contexts' which Ritchhart (2015) identifies as 'thinking routines'. The combination of authenticity and autonomy in a theatrical learning context is very powerful and these 'thinking routines' are something the participant takes away with them and into their own learning context.

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1 – ISTA pedagogy. The finale of all ISTA experiences is framed as a celebration.

Making theatre relies on live action and on human interaction. It is concerned with the creation of an alternate world and in the ISTA context the creator/performer is invested with agency to design, determine and construct the nature of that world which is presented in the final sharing. The *transfer* of this ISTA festival 'thinking routine' occurs when participants recognise that the theatrical tools they have been using are the tools of real world change. In this way, theatre becomes an effective medium for empowering students to understand that they can play an active role in determining and shaping the nature of the world while encouraging them to consider their actions and reflect on the impact of these actions.

'If nothing else, children should leave school with a sense that if they act, and act strategically, they can accomplish their goals' (Johnston, 2004).

By demonstrating to young people that they are actors or activists, active agents who have power and influence, this process of ISTA theatre making raises their aspirations and provides them with the cognitive resources and skills that can be employed to make positive and responsible changes to themselves and their own contexts. In this respect participants at an ISTA festival are involved in a process of evolution.

Machon (2013), discussing immersive theatre, also suggests that audience involvement through the immersive leads to an evolution of the audience, what she calls 'evolvment through involvement', where the 'audience-spectator' evolves into a 'performer-collaborator'. This new relationship establishes 'a temporary community' who together experience something new (Mitchell in Raynaud 2008). This is also an accurate description of the ISTA festival experience where children and young people from different countries come together creating this temporary community of learners, experienced by all participants. Community is created through the sharing of a common purpose, a common process and a focus on the same starting point. This 'evolvment through involvement' occurs through the reformulation of learning into an immersive, time constrained<sup>6</sup> and theatrical experience. An experience which is both didactic and essentially playful. Interaction, connection, creation and learning occur through play which is the essence of what ISTA calls the Ensemble method.

The time limited nature of the ISTA festival is also key to this development and learning because it provides students with tools, understandings and connections that go beyond the temporary and which are considered by some to be life changing. ISTA also provides the means, through membership and social media, that give participants (students, teachers and artists) the possibility to extend this feeling of community beyond the temporary. Often referring to itself as the ISTA family, the ISTA Rep at festivals often formally welcomes young people attending for the first time into this ISTA family. This helps to create a sense of belonging beyond the event and is something we will be considering later.

In her analysis of immersive theatre and adapting Calleja's (2011) ideas regarding game theory, Machon (2013) identifies three useful definitions of immersive practice

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<sup>6</sup> ISTA experiences are 3 day experiences

related to the theatre experience which may also prove useful in our analysis of the ISTA learning experience:

- Immersion as *absorption* where the participant is interested in and engrossed in the experience both imaginatively and physically.
- Immersion as *transportation* where the audience-participant is transported through the *imagination*, through *the physical environment* and through the *scenographic transformation* of the environment to a different world. Transportation is often the basis of site-specific work; the participant physically cohabiting this world with others who also comply with the make-believe. Though this world may resemble our world it is a fictional world created by others or by participants in collaboration or negotiation with others (artists, performers, fellow participants). This world will often have its own separate rules of logic.
- Total *immersion* – this combines both of the above and allows the participant to inhabit the created world and ‘live’ the experience imaginatively, cognitively and emotionally.

The ISTA experience has much in common with these areas but one major difference is that the transportation is not just imaginative but also physical; the student is literally transported to different geographic locations, school settings and sites so that these worlds are experienced physically as well as imaginatively. Location, the site where the experience takes place, is therefore a significant feature of experiential learning and immersive theatre.

*‘Experience is created in the transaction between the learner and the milieu in which he or she operates – it is relational.’ (Boud et al, 1993)*

The ‘milieu’ that participants are transported to in an ISTA context is usually the school that hosts the festival or the site where the festival is taking place. In addition participants are also transported to a cultural experience where they engage with a different place or experience *apart* from the festival experience. This cultural experience is designed to align with the festival starting point and usually takes participants out of the school in order for them to experience something cultural related to the host culture where the festival is taking place. Location, in this instance, acts as an active site of research and participants are assigned particular tasks by their ensemble leaders which will inform the work of the ensemble when they return back to the school. Interaction with spaces and locations which are unfamiliar to the participant is a key part of the experience and a key element in the development of what ISTA refers to as cultural literacy; the ability to engage with and understand unfamiliar cultures. For local participants from the host school attending a festival, attempts are made to ensure that they engage with their familiar environment in different and new ways, engaging with the familiar afresh. This often occurs regardless, through the fact that they are communally interacting within their familiar confines with other participants who are not from their school and engaging with activities which are not part of the environment’s usual practice. This idea of stepping out of the familiar opens a door to new perspectives and enhances the learning possibilities. It encourages students to be more alert and more aware of

their location. Awareness of environment and cultural location, as I mentioned above, is a key aspect of cultural literacy which ISTA sees as a key feature of international mindedness and defines as 'the ability to "read", learn from and engage appropriately and confidently with a culture and country' (ISTA mission and pedagogy). This definition provides an insight into the purpose of the cultural experience as a place that participants 'learn from' and 'engage with'. The choice of the cultural experience by the festival host as well as the design of activities, perspectives and approaches for the participants by the artists regarding these locations/experiences are both key to the effectiveness of the experience. They determine both the learning related to the starting point and the development of cultural literacy.

Neither are participants just transported beyond their school settings but also beyond themselves. Immersive theatre enhances the experience of theatre as 'encounter' but the ISTA festivals' immersive experience functions not only as an encounter but also as an interruption. It interrupts a student's usual experience of learning. It allows participants to step out of their typical modes of engagement and educational settings to encounter themselves and their learning afresh from a different perspective and context. The duality of change in both context and engagement allows for new insights and for the development of new strategies for learning about the world. Away from the familiar, they are given the opportunity to try out ways of being that would otherwise, amongst a context where they are known, be impossible. Being transported beyond self in order to encounter self, therefore, becomes another key feature of the artistic encounter resulting from this interruptive experience. As an interruption, it is essential that it is and feels different to a regular school experience. The element of active participation and agency is key to the experiencing of the festival as different and is an area to examine a little more closely.

In *Making Learning Whole* David Perkins (2009) points out that in schools we teach students about a subject rather than engaging students as 'members of it' (Ritchhart 2015). The ISTA experience is designed to make participants active 'members' of the learning experience, to immerse them in the learning so that they are interacting, exploring and playing with the starting point from *within* the experience. We can therefore add another form of immersion to describe what is at the heart of the ISTA experience; what I am calling 'immersion' as creative inquiry. Immersion as creative inquiry is where the participant is immersed in an experience focused on discovery, finding solutions, solving problems and overcoming challenges. This form of immersion simultaneously positions the participant both inside and outside of the experience; absorbed in the flow of creation while standing outside it in order to view it from a distance. Immersion as creative inquiry, combined with immersion as absorption and immersion as transportation, characterise the immersive ISTA experience and make it both educational as well as theatrical.

### **Gaming and the principle of play**

Gaming theory has provided some interesting insights into this process of transportation of both learners and audiences. Some immersive theatre companies have used this to inform the design of their experiences. Educators, recognising how popular digital games are with children and young people, have also looked to

gaming principles as a way of making learning engaging. It seems pertinent therefore, to look at gaming principles and the extent to which these are being used to inform the design of the ISTA festival experience. In *Immersive learning* (2013) which deals with technological experiences and game based learning, this is referred to as 'designed practice'. It is how design practice facilitates the process by which participants shift from individual engagement to interaction and on to complete absorption and immersion, that is of particular interest both to some immersive theatre companies and to ISTA.

The use of games, practical activities and the employment of the principles of play are by no means anything new to theatre teachers. Inhabiting the make believe, working within the rules of fictional worlds, applying constraints that help create dramatic tension, working collaboratively to construct alternate realities are often features of theatre programmes from primary to high school. Games, by their nature, are absorbing. They make us lose a sense of time as we become immersed in alternate mental states and spaces, sometimes working together and sometimes working alone, sometimes competitively and sometimes collaboratively. Technological advancements in gaming have also taken us beyond the flat screen of the computer, phone or television and into a platform where our technological selves, sometimes as other characters (avatars) and with other names (handle or username), inhabit other realities and interact with other players. In these instances we are simultaneously both creators of the experience ('I have logged on and am playing the game') and recipients of the experience of the game ('I am in the world of the game and the game is happening to me'). It is therefore no surprise that immersive theatre should turn to gaming for inspiration and to investigate models to inform the design of immersive theatre experiences with some companies actually using technology to aid immersion. The engaging nature of these technological advances in gaming and their ability to capture the attention of young people and absorb them has also led to an increase both in the use of digital games specially designed for the classroom and research into how gaming principles might be used for learning. Elizabeth Lawley (2012), professor of interactive games and media and founder and director of the Lab for Social Computing at Rochester Institute of Technology claims that 'Games can be powerful experiences, leveraging both motivation and engagement.' (McCarthy ed. 2012) while Pagano (2013) asserts that 'game-based learning has been on an "emerging trends" list for years' with the prediction that educational settings and organisations 'will finally figure out that games and immersive learning experiences are more engaging and effective' than regular classroom experiences. The Institute of Play in New York (<https://www.instituteofplay.org/gll-principles>), founded by game designers, specifically looks at how education can be informed by the principles of gaming and provides resources for educators that use these developments and principles.

The seven principles are defined by them as:

1. Everyone is a participant
2. Failure is reframed as iteration
3. Learning feels like play
4. Learning happens by doing

5. Feedback is immediate and ongoing
6. Challenge is constant
7. Everything is interconnected

These seven principles are evident in the ISTA festival experience. As we have already mentioned, everyone is considered and sees themselves both as a participant and a creator, engaged in learning through practical work and activities which are essentially theatrical and therefore rely on live action and collaborative interaction. The idea of failure being reframed as iteration is a key part of the experience where we return, revisit, deconstruct and reassemble material consistently in a creative process of trial and error, making and discarding, rehearsing and presenting. The playful atmosphere and the communal quest for what is right frames everything as iteration. This is a key element and often part of the artistic director's role, to make sure that the atmosphere is playful and never becomes stressful, that all the work and all the sharings are presented as iterations and that each iteration is marked as a development of the one before so that there is a sense of accomplishment and movement. This is similar to the gaming principle of moving from level to level, each level an iteration of the one before and each stage presenting its own challenges which get more complex as the festival moves towards the final sharing. This is partly down to the way the work is talked about and presented. Feedback also has an important role to play in ensuring that the work is framed as iteration and remains playful. This is as significant for feedback from student ensemble leaders as it is for feedback from the artistic director or from peers. Appropriate feedback ensures that challenge remains constant without causing anxiety or stress.

The collaborative nature of the experience also means that everyone feels supported and 'held' by the ensemble. This principle of interconnection is important both to the way the experience is designed as well as to how it is experienced by participants and teachers. This is another key area of the artistic director's work. The exploration of the starting point, the work of each individual ensemble, the full group work and the final sharing need to feel interconnected and of equal significance so that any undue emphasis on the final sharing doesn't create an imbalance in the experience, learning or engagement.

Safety and clarity are other key considerations central to engagement. The 'rules of engagement' according to Machon (2013) consist of *'clear, even if tacit, guidelines (written, verbal or unspoken contracts understood) that make the immersive world a safe environment for the participant and embrace the impromptu possibilities proffered by the event itself.'* (ibid)

These 'rules of engagement' and the establishment of a safe environment are provided by ISTA through a number of ways. ISTA's pedagogy<sup>7</sup> plays a key part in guiding the artistic director and the artistic team in their design of the theatrical activity during the festival. The hosting organisation (usually a school), together with ISTA, determines the focus of the learning and any cultural exploration that occurs.

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 1 mission and pedagogy

The ISTA team members, guided by ISTA's systems of event production, codes of conduct, risk assessments and through close communication with attending schools, manage the operational nature of the experiences. The ISTA Rep oversees the experience on site and ensures that the contracting is clear, that guidelines are followed and that the environment is safe.

The contracting, which is key to this engagement, is created primarily through five interactions. The first is the interaction between ISTA, the host school and participating teachers who are all agreeing to a contract based on ISTA's mission, pedagogy and values. This is further developed during the festival through the relationship between the Rep and the host and the Rep and the visiting teachers. The second is between the artistic director and artistic team and this is developed and established in the planning meetings prior to and during the festival. The third is between participants, the artistic director and the artistic team and this is established during the opening session and in the full group sessions that occur throughout the experience. The fourth is between the student ensemble leader and their ensemble and this is established through the ensemble sessions. The first session as an ensemble is usually focused on exactly this type of contracting, using ensemble activities and games to establish the rules, ethos and interconnections that are key elements of the contract. The fifth interaction is between participants themselves and this is established through the common purpose of the final sharing and the ensemble method where everyone is valued and all contributions welcomed and which is founded on principles of support, collaboration and interaction.

The ISTA experience, therefore, can be considered as sitting on an intersection between immersive learning, gaming and immersive theatre, between engaging with an experience as learner/inquirer and as a playful theatre maker/performer. Participants can therefore be characterised as artist-learners; learning through art and making art through inquiry and play. This experience is identified by Bishop (2006) as fulfilling the triple purpose of participatory and interactive artistic practice: 'activation, authorship and community'. Activation is defined by her as the empowerment that comes from 'the experience of physical or symbolic participation'. Authorship is seen as the 'ceding of some or all authorial control' so that the work is collaborative, making the process democratic. Community is considered as the creation of a 'social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning'. These three areas of 'activation, authorship and community' can be seen as the foundation of the ISTA experiences, ISTA pedagogy and ISTA mission. They are also key features of the ensemble process, one of ISTA's defining features and its key founding principle.

Traditionally, as Machon (2013) points out, the visual and the aural are prioritised in theatre but the ISTA experience, alongside immersive theatre practice, engages participants through all of the senses making the experience 'an embodied event,' with, as Trueman (2011) explains, 'no distance between oneself and the work' so that 'the edge of one's body is the beginning of the work's sphere'. This characterises the ISTA idea of ensemble, where each individual becomes part of the 'work's sphere' and where the physical and practical approach is prioritised, engaging participants through the body, as part of the process of developing the one cohesive body – the ensemble.

### **The ISTA ensemble and embodied cognition**

ISTA recognises the value of embodied cognition. Immersion through the physical, through the whole body, ensures that knowledge, understanding and skills are embodied and reside in the body, in the same way that a role in a play resides in the body of the performer. This is also often a powerful departure from the regular school experience where the emphasis is primarily on conceptual development and assessment is conducted through the written form.

Wilson (2002) draws attention to the growing movement in cognitive science ‘to grant the body a central role in shaping the mind’ and that the mind needs to be examined ‘in the context of its relationship to a physical body that interacts with the world.’ The idea that the body and the use of ‘bodily resources’ can play a key role in cognitive processing is what is broadly defined as embodied cognition. Cognition is ‘not an activity of the mind alone’ but is instead ‘distributed across the entire interacting situation including mind, body and environment.’ (ibid.) This interaction of mind, body and environment is in itself intrinsically theatrical – if we take performance as fundamentally being about people in space engaged in action which signifies meaning. Learning through theatre seems naturally aligned with this idea of learning as embodied cognition and thus serves as a central feature of all ISTA learning experiences making the ISTA method and pedagogy *action* focused.

Each ISTA festival begins by demonstrating the significance of the body and the physical in the first session, the full group session, that begins every festival experience. These sessions are characterised by physical activity and by playfulness, meeting and being introduced to each other through physical games and playful physical interaction. This first session gives participants the sense, from the outset, that the work is physical and that they are all part of one large ensemble, one body, before they break up into smaller ensemble groups, the smaller parts that make up the whole. Each individual ensemble group also begins with physical activities which serve both as icebreakers and getting-to-know-you activities, once again establishing the primacy of the body.

But the body is not only predominant in how participants interact but also in how participants research the starting point. The exploration is physical and as discussed earlier, is also situational in that the participant is transported to another physical setting. Geurts (2003) considers this form of learning as ‘bodily ways of gathering information’ and sees this way of knowing as having a social and cultural function helping with the development of a society’s ‘cultural identity and its forms of being-in-the world’ (2003). In the ISTA context, this physicality and method of investigation characterises the work of learning at an ISTA festival as being of the body and establishes a culture of the physical, devoid of the judgments and notions of beauty which often characterise the physical in the world outside of the festival. In another article, Geurts (2006) provides further insight into the way the body is not only a conduit for research and inquiry but also the tool through which ensemble is established. He explains the West African Anlo-Ewe people’s concept of ‘seselelame’ as a way by which Anlo people ‘attend to and interpret their own bodies

while simultaneously orienting themselves to the bodies of those around them', an idea which characterises the ISTA ensemble. Furthermore, this predominantly physical way of creating ensemble and of collective learning can be considered and is positioned by Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009) as a political interaction.

*'Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of "being together."*

Examining the cultural and political function of learning through the body and the way the body is used to build both the individual ensemble and the whole group ensemble is important in relation to ISTA's mission regarding international mindedness and cultural literacy.

### **The ISTA ensemble method**

The ISTA ensemble method, which recognises the importance of individual perspectives as well as the power of the collective, is political in that it frees and empowers young people and democratises the process of theatre making, of learning and of being. ISTA ascribes to the belief that 'learning is a social endeavour in which our interactions with others not only support the learning process but are inseparable from it' (Ritchhart 2015). This 'transformative learning' is characterised as 'learning that cultivates the development of the whole person' but that 'is more likely to happen in a community than in isolation' (ibid). This forms the basis of the ISTA experience and the ISTA ensemble building process with its objective of developing communities which 'are largely democratic in nature, stressing mutuality, support, connection and shared decision making' (Ritchhart 2015). The work of the festival is therefore characterised by this sense of democracy and a lack of competition. Artists work together with participants to create and shape, offering their experience but never directing the action.

The ISTA ensemble method is also the 'fabric' which weaves people together, offering young learners spaces of emancipation and connection where they can be who they want to be, engage with unfamiliar people in an unfamiliar context and learn in a new and collaborative way. This practice offers spaces where participants engage with 'alternative forms of sociability' and 'moments of constructed conviviality.' (Bourriaud 2006). This 'conviviality' is, for the young people, one of the key features of the ISTA experience and the basis for the formation of new friendships. This conviviality of strangers, often a feature of immersive theatre pieces where audiences of strangers interact and experience together, partly results from 'contact, tactility and immediacy' (Bourriaud 2006). These three elements can be considered as three essential ingredients of the immersive nature of the ISTA ensemble building process; meeting new people (contact) and working with them physically (tactility) to create and learn in an extremely short and time pressured period (immediacy). But there is another key feature of this experience; the location. The interaction of brain and body makes this an embodied experience of learning but the fact that this takes place in what is often an unfamiliar environment also makes this an 'embedded' experience, an experience embedded within a new place and

new cultural context. This 'connected relationship of brain, body and environment is a key part of experiential learning' (Beard and Wilson, 2015) and lies at the core of the ISTA festival experience and is the method through which participants engage with inquiry, learn about themselves, others and the world as well as develop their cultural literacy and international mindedness.

*'As social beings, we recognize that it is through interacting with others that we learn what a group or culture is about, how it operates, its norms and values. Interactions give us a feel for a place, help us learn how to behave in the group and to know what is expected.'* (Ritchhart, R. 2015)

### **The final sharing**

Experiential learning has often been criticised as being subjective. ISTA's unique feature, however, through the centrality of the ensemble method, is that these 'responses to the world' are captured and shared collectively through interaction with others. The lived, educational and artistic experience develops participants' capacities to investigate, discover and respond to the world in different ways but always with an awareness of others and the necessity that learning, ideas and discoveries have to be shared before they can be actioned. Inquiring, understanding and expressing this understanding remains consistently the result of a process of co-construction; avoiding the dangers of this becoming solely an internal process.

Furthermore, the inclusion of a final sharing as the culmination of all festivals, is crucial and ensures that the experience continues to be an interplay between the individual (What have I learned? How can I contribute?) and the collective (What have we discovered? What should we share with an audience?).

ISTA's premise, like Rogers (1996), is that 'experience forms the basis of all learning' and that for the learning to be effective, the experience, as Boud *et al* (1993) assert, needs to be engaging. The knowledge that there will be an audience and that a piece needs to be presented, raises the stakes and becomes in itself engaging as the clock ticks away before that moment of presentation.

Pine and Gilmore (2011) go on to also identify 'the multiplicity of dimensions' that are required to make an experience engaging and in many respects these also form the basis of the preparation of the final piece. The generation and creation of material as well as the preparation for the final sharing requires participants to respond to the starting point and to the cultural experience and consider it:

- Cognitively
- Affectively
- Physically
- Aesthetically
- Metaphorically

This engages young people in a sustained way with the area of learning; shifting between modes seamlessly but also affirms the nature of theatre as a mode of communication. The final sharing necessitates the employment by participants of a

cultural literacy, a consideration of how ideas and learning might be conveyed to others – many from settings and cultures different to those of the creators and performers.

Theatre and the collaborative creation of a performance piece requires us to work both internally and externally, thinking about ourselves and how we are communicating while keeping our eye firmly fixed on the fact that what we are producing is being received by an audience. The preparation for the final sharing therefore encourages participants to consider how these discoveries could be communicated to others.

In considering the final sharing and the exploration of the starting point, ensemble leaders are required to take multiple areas into consideration, taking account of participants 'level of personal meaningfulness' as well as 'cultural considerations and national and local sensitivities' (ibid). Beard (2010) considers experiential learning as a 'sense making process' which actively immerses and engages 'the inner world of the learner, as a whole person (including physical – bodily, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually) with their intricate 'outer world' of the learning environment'. Within the ISTA experience, theatre is considered as a series of interrelated and interconnected processes:

- a) A sense making process, where participants make sense of the starting point and the areas of exploration and then create a piece of theatre which communicates these explorations.
- b) A process for making sense of the 'outer world'. The experience of the cultural experience is often used as the basis for theatrical exploration and requires participants to make connections between this and the starting point of the festival.

These processes result in the creation of a relationship between participant, environment, starting point and unfamiliar context and audience. Appropriacy, form, signs and symbols, use of space, proxemics, language, the use of the body – all become key considerations developing the basis of a cultural literacy that requires us to take all these things into consideration.

But the final sharing, within the context of experiential learning, is also just that – another key part of the learning experience. This is why ISTA is at pains to ensure that though the final sharing is of high quality, it does not become focused on unrealistic production values or feel like jumping through the constant rehearsal hoops that come from the endeavour to produce polished and highly rehearsed shows. The culmination of the experience, the final sharing, is therefore positioned as a celebration of the learning. Final sharings are sometimes criticised for being incomprehensible. This may be partly because although they are designed for an audience, for the participants they are a continuation of their experience of learning. They are perhaps better framed and understood as a theatrical component of the immersive learning experience – a theatricalisation of particular moments of discovery and connection – rather than as traditionally constructed pieces of theatre. They also represent the struggle for an appropriate form and cultural language to

express ideas in an unfamiliar cultural setting and space. The audience are invited in not as spectators but as witnesses to the participants' struggle to find the 'symbols and aesthetics' (Sobel 2014) to express their learning. Still immersed in the learning, the participants in the final sharing are simply sharing a moment in the trajectory of that learning rather than an end product. To consider the final sharing as an ending is to artificially shut down the process and mode of learning that the ISTA festival has initiated and that the students have embarked on. Nathan Allen, Artistic Director of The House Theatre of Chicago, beautifully expresses this immediacy and this sharing of a moment in time when he explains that:

*'... at its root our art form functions... to share an experience together, at a specific moment in time, in a space where the symbols and aesthetics can be adjusted to address this moment now.'* (Sobel 2014)

This idea of the adjustment of symbols and aesthetics to express the culminating moment of an immersive and collective learning experience rather than the finale of the individual participant's learning, perfectly describes this moment of sharing. However, the nature of the final sharing continues to be an area of challenge for artists, teachers and for ISTA – torn between the significance of containing the sharing within the experience of learning and the positioning of it as theatre, a form of communication which makes concepts, ideas and stories accessible to others. The answer lies in the final reflective process that marks the learning and moves participants from the communal back to the individual.

Kolb and Kolb (2009) see learning as a 'spiral', explaining that 'when a concrete experience is enriched by reflection, given meaning by thinking, and transformed by action' the learning spirals to greater depth, embedding itself within the learner so that it can be transferred by the learner to other contexts. The culminating presentation of the experience through the final sharing brings the ISTA festival to a close and provides some sort of record and marker for the participants to refer to and use once the festival is over. Together with the continuous process of 'reflection-in-action' (Schön 1983) during the experience, these reflective opportunities break the flow of the experiential, require participants to step out of what they are doing to consider their learning and manage to shift the experience from the purely affective to the cognitive so that the learning is made conscious and deepened. The final sharing itself can also, therefore, be considered a moment of reflection.

## PART 2

### Designing the immersive learning experience

The ISTA experience works on an interplay between the real and the imagined. Kirk (1986) differentiates between three dimensions of reality – participant reality (the experience that each young person brings to the festival) theoretical reality (their experience of theatre) and resource reality (the festival experience itself). In the ISTA festival experience there is, in addition, the theatrical reality constructed imaginatively through theatrical activity and play. Imaginative play and the use of fantasy suspends reality and gives participants the chance not only to examine the world from a distance but also to explore the world safely. This provides participants with the opportunity to ‘rehearse and exercise skills in a safe environment’ (Beard and Wilson, 2015) exploring possibilities without the consequences of real life. This combination of safety together with the challenge of exploring the unfamiliar and working with people you have only just met, provides a tension which ensures that the experience is both engaging and educational. Shernoff *et al* (2003) suggest that ‘sustained student engagement and perceived learning’ are most commonly present in ‘learning environments that combine challenge with support’. This tension between feeling supported and yet challenged is a strong element that runs through the entirety of the event. Another key feature of the reality of the ISTA experience is that it is negotiated and communally agreed and constructed by the ensemble. This co-construction between ensemble members of both make believe (the theatrical) and reality is of course the main mechanism, as we have already discussed, which fuels the ISTA experience and its by product, a sense of community, is also its central feature. For this co-construction and this ensemble process to occur authentically and fluidly, the event needs to be carefully designed and a whole range of components and elements put into place. Different theories and models regarding the design of experiential learning provide helpful insights into the elements that make the ISTA experience so successful as well as providing us with some possibilities regarding future development.

The overall design of the ISTA festival experience is determined by ISTA using predetermined structures and processes. The choice of activities, guided by the ISTA pedagogy, is primarily the responsibility of the artistic team, referred to as student ensemble leaders (SEL) led by an artistic director (AD). An inspiration pack designed by the AD, together with the planning day which takes place the day before the festival, set the tone and provide a creative steer to inform the artistic and pedagogic design of the experience. ISTA is however very clear on that space has to be left in the experience for participant and artist input. In ‘The AD Handbook 2016-2017’ the advice to the artistic directors is to ensure that this space is built into the planning.

*‘You will have a vision – but the artist’s vision and more importantly the students’ vision are paramount to the ISTA philosophy.’*

The design of the festival experience is constructed through a careful consideration of pedagogy and the development of young people’s skills and understandings both

through theatre and about theatre. In *Creating Cultures of Thinking* (2015) Ritchhart asserts that the focus of teaching should be 'generative topics'. He defines these as big ideas 'worth understanding' and describes understanding as the establishment of 'a web of connections and relations'. ISTA also works with teachers who are hosting festivals, encouraging starting points that comply with this definition and which generate ideas and understandings 'rather than a list of things to know'. Ritchhart also introduces the idea of a 'performance of understanding' which 'allows students to demonstrate understanding' while simultaneously developing this understanding. This is exactly the case regarding the final sharing which presents the understandings reached by the participants as well as, through the process of its creation, develops their understandings further. The final aspect which Ritchhart mentions regarding effective teaching is the importance of 'ongoing feedback'. This is required to help learners to improve their performance. This feedback loop happens at festivals in an unconscious and informal way and is part of the ensemble sessions as well as the full group sessions. Feedback is provided by peers, ensemble leaders and artistic director and is offered to the ensemble so that it can develop both its work and its understandings.

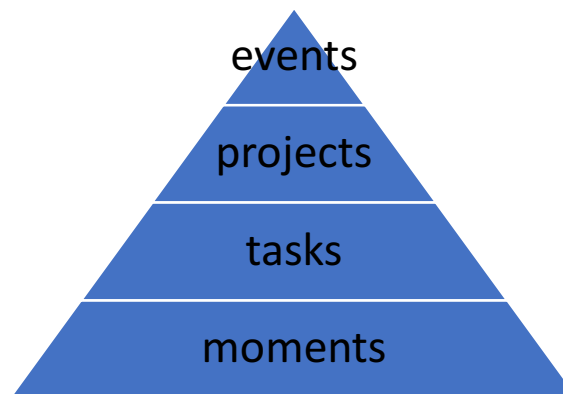
### **Tasks, activities and exercises**

Ritchhart (2015) also suggests categorising tasks according to their 'duration, complexity and format' and such classification is useful as a frame to examine the ISTA activities and the design of the learning. Ritchhart considers duration not only as the amount of time spent on a task but also the 'energy expenditure, energy gains and energy renewal' involved. The amount of energy expended, especially during a time-intensive experience, should be commensurate with both the purpose of the experience and the values which underpin the work – the areas of the ISTA mission which are considered valuable and important. Spending time and energy on ensemble building and consistently reviewing and developing the interconnections and relationships amongst participants is therefore of key importance. As a result, a lot of energy as well as time is dedicated to this and to checking this. The ensemble format is employed for most exercises and activities and many students identify this feeling of community, interconnection and the development of friendship as a key element and highlight of their ISTA experience.

The tasks and activities selected by the artistic team to make up the experience are also what Papert (1980) refers to as 'high ceiling' tasks. High ceiling activities are accessible activities which allow for different variations and levels of complexity. They should ignite the imagination, develop participants' skills as well as provide challenge. The high ceiling activity also allows students to stretch themselves beyond their familiar experiences and work creatively with a sense of accomplishment. These tasks, however, are also 'self-differentiating' and 'create a sense of ownership' – offering students opportunities for challenge and development without forcing them or making them uncomfortable. It is important that most of the activities fulfill these criteria to ensure that the ISTA festival experience is both accessible and challenging.

Ritchhart (2015) sees 'events' which encompass moments, tasks and projects as having the richest educational potential. The ISTA festival event fulfills all the criteria

for a rich learning experience by initially engaging the ensemble with the exploration of the starting point, then with imaginative activities and tasks that seek to establish a format to hold these discoveries before moving on to the creation of theatrical moments.



It is the event in its entirety, however, that makes the ISTA festival experience so powerful. The combination and synergy of all the distinct parts of a festival – from workshops to ensemble sessions to the social times – all are essential to the learning, to the development of theatre skills and to the participants' personal and social development.

Woods (1993) also provides an interesting framework regarding experiential learning which illuminates the ISTA model even further. He identifies six stages that events progress through and I've set these out, examining how ISTA follows this process.

1. *Conceptualisation*

For ISTA this is the preliminary work that takes place between the host of the festival (usually a teacher in the school), the executive director of ISTA who oversees programming and the ISTA event coordinator who has been assigned the event. During the programming stage the key concepts for learning are identified and aligned with the cultural experience to produce the festival focus. Once the artistic director has been confirmed they typically have a conversation with the host and then produce an 'Inspiration pack' which goes out to all artists. This pack provides artists working on the festival with ideas and references for inspirations.

2. *Preparation and planning*

This is conducted by ISTA in collaboration with the host school. Areas such as scheduling, accommodation, meals, spaces etc are decided. The artists who have been hired for the event also begin their planning, using the Inspiration pack and any related research to guide them.

3. *Divergence exploring: 'innovation' and 'the exploration of possibility'*

The planning day before the ISTA festival is when the artists meet for the first time to plan collaboratively. Led by the artistic director, the planning day focuses on the various artistic possibilities of the festival as well as establishing the nature and location of the final sharing. The artistic director engages the artists in activities and tasks which bring them together as a

team as well as modelling the approach they are to employ for the event. The artistic team usually explores the starting point and considers how to best engage participants within this area of inquiry in an authentic and original way.

4. *Convergence: where ideas are 'integrated and pared down'*

The process of convergence begins on the planning day but continues as an ongoing feature throughout the duration of the event. The ensemble leaders, together with the participants, 'pare down' ideas and understandings into final pieces. The artistic director is responsible for the focus and integration of the ideas and creations produced by the individual ensembles. The convergence occurs through the artistic director visiting all the ensemble groups to see the development of the work and, during planning meetings with the artists, by coming up with a vision for the final piece.

5. *Consolidation: which involves the 'coming together of parts into a whole and refinement'*

The consolidation of the ISTA festival comes through the preparation and putting together of the final piece. This occurs during the full group sessions where the artistic creations of the individual ensembles are brought together into one whole; rehearsed and prepared for presentation. These group sessions are held by the artistic director who plays a key role in ensuring that the process remains educational and that the learning continues.

6. *Celebration: which involves some sort of 'sharing with an audience'*

The final sharing involves a 'performance of learning' presented to the school community. It is considered by ISTA to be a celebration of both the learning and of the building of connections between the different young people, teachers and schools who attended the festival.

These various stages occur organically, guided by the ISTA pedagogy<sup>8</sup> and ensure the high standard of the event.

Meggison (1994) also distinguishes between 'planned learning' and 'emergent learning'. Both of these are key elements of the ISTA experience where the artistic team are required to both *design* the experience as well as be *responsive* to it, providing a clear artistic steer while also embracing the unexpected and the accidental. This is an essential feature of the immersive theatre experience where the audience influences the course of the action. In a learning context it provides participants with agency, empowering them to influence the shape of the piece. This provides them with an opportunity to function as artists, to develop both theatre skills and the ability to communicate ideas and learning through artistic expression. The 'planned learning' is consciously designed to make room for emergent learning, so that the experience flows fluidly between the two with the artists sometimes providing form to contain participants' ideas while at other times suggesting ideas that the participants need to find a form for. ISTA is careful to ensure that artists understand the distinction between planning an experience and directing a piece of theatre. With this in mind, artists are instructed to avoid coming to a festival with a fixed idea that

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<sup>8</sup> See ISTA mission and pedagogy (2016)

will encourage them to ‘direct’ the participants but to instead come with a variety of ideas and the appropriate tools to shape a theatrical learning experience.

Beard and Wilson (2015) combine Cornell’s notion of flow learning (1989) with a model by Dainty and Lucas (1992) to produce a four stage sequence which provides a useful insight into how the ISTA experience sets into motion its ‘experiential wave’ of learning:

1. *‘Awaken participant enthusiasm with ice-breakers and energizers;*
2. *Start to focus attention with medium-sized activities and narrow skills;*
3. *Direct the personal experience with larger and broader skills;*
4. *Share participant enthusiasm using regular reviewing activities.’*

The ISTA festival experience moves fluidly through these four stages but the final sharing – the working towards something that will be presented to people outside of the experience– introduces a fifth element to the experiential wave, which is crucial both to the learning and to the deep engagement which is at the heart of the experience. The full group sessions which inform and often focus on the construction of the final sharing bring everyone together with a common purpose and in addition to providing a sense of community, introduce a ‘pressure point’ that brings excitement and urgency to the experience. It enhances the theatrical nature of the experience, the communication of ideas to others, as well as clearly indicating that the ISTA experience is about going beyond ourselves and coming together with others, both fellow participants and audience, to share ideas, create and communicate. The finale presented to an audience enhances the element of risk and frames the experience as an adventure.

*‘To be an adventure an experience must have an element of uncertainty about it. Either the outcome should be unknown or the setting unfamiliar.’* (Priest and Ballie, 1995)

Beard and Wilson (2015) also use the idea of the journey as a metaphor to guide the design of the entire learning experience.

*‘Journeying over periods of time and through physical and metaphorical space is an important component of any learning. The journey from where the learner is to where the learner needs to be is fundamental to the experiential process.’*

In terms of the ISTA experience, the destination is not related to achievement levels or any form of assessment. The end point is the ability of a participant to make theatre collaboratively, to work and cooperate with others in order to come to an understanding of the world and to understand that the diversity of multiple perspectives is richer than the individual point of view.

Beard and Wilson go on to present a ‘basic experiential learning programme typology’ adapted from Beard’s *The Outdoor Leisure Industry and the Environment* (1998). This is a fascinating model and perfectly describes the ISTA process, providing a useful model of practice for ISTA to consider though it also demonstrates

that the ISTA events have been designed and constructed with rigour, care and expertise.

- ‘Set a **target**, goal or objective, where goals create an underlying “state of mind”.
- Create a sense of a **journey or destination** – physical movement and exercise; people, information and objects are moved from A to B.
- Allow participants to **exercise many forms of intelligence**.
- Create and sequence a **theme** of **social, mental, psychological and physical activities** – mind, spirit and body.
- Adjust the elements of reality.
- Stimulate the senses.
- Use **construction or deconstruction in activity design**: a physical object e.g. bike, wall or raft or non-physical item e.g. a clue, phrase or poem.
- Design social **collaborative or competitive strategies**.
- Create **combative and/or empathetic** approaches to the environment
- Create **restrictions**: obstacles; sensory blocking, e.g. blindfolds; rules; procedures.
- Provide elements of real or perceived challenge or risk.
- Set time constraints.
- Allow people to deal with change, risk, success and failure – stretching personal boundaries.
- Design sorting and/or organization skills – a mass of data, information to sort or activities to do or consider.
- Include functional skills such as surveying, juggling, map reading, knot tying etc.
- Design quiet time for reflection – physical or mental space.
- Allow the story of the experience to be told.’

The selection, adaptation and use of exercises and activities is a key component to any of the stages described above. The employment and range of activities is what is referred to traditionally by ISTA as the ensemble technique or more currently as the ensemble method. It is not the activities or games themselves that determine this approach but rather their selection, use, combination and the way they connect the ensemble to the starting point by taking the ensemble beyond and outside of itself. Though the focus of the work is inquiry, through the method of engagement, i.e. theatre, the design of the experience is guided, as Martin *et al* (2004) describe, by a dramaturgy which examines ‘the links between the world and the stage’, where the emphasis is always on making connections that are not internal but out there in the world, be they conceptual or social. This dramaturgy also takes into consideration the ‘method of selection and time order of the activities with the aim to reach the maximal pedagogical effect’ (ibid) and characterises games and activities under four sections:

*‘creative, social, physical and psychological (reflective/emotional)’.*

These headings provide a useful method for the categorisation of the ISTA ensemble games and activities. Diverse activities are planned and selected to consistently

ensure that the participants operate as an ensemble, reach conceptual understandings related to the starting point, develop their theatre making skills through skills based workshops and create the final sharing always as one body, as one ensemble.

### **Reflecting and modelling**

Designing time for reflection and 'allowing the story of the experience to be told' is also of particular importance in this context; to provide opportunities for participants to consider their learning as a group but to identify how they have developed individually too and what new insights they might have gained. Reflection, as discussed previously, takes place throughout the festival in many informal ways through discussion, feedback and during the breaks. The final sharing does, to an extent, tell the story of the experience and this has the potential to mark the process of learning, giving participants the opportunity to consciously transform the affective experience into conceptual understanding. Reflection also helps to ensure that the experience is educationally relevant for students and in all literature regarding experiential learning this is an essential component. Of course it is also important that the experience is seen by teachers as being relevant and leading to conscious learning and development. Ensuring relevancy is a key issue for ISTA and its various models and developments over time have been guided by this principle. It is therefore important to continually develop and create reflective processes and activities that will help participants relate their ISTA experience to their experience in real life, whether that is by making connections to their learning in general, their understanding of theatre or their development as an internationally minded young person.

The ISTA artist does not only play a critical role in the selection, organisation and flow of activities that make up the ensemble learning experience but is also key as a model, embodying principles, values and approaches which are key to the learning. In their section on modeling (Ritchhart 2015) considers 4 modelling practices:

1. *'Dispositional apprenticeship: being a role model of learning and thinking;*
2. *Cognitive apprenticeship: making our thinking visible;*
3. *Gradual release of responsibility: modeling for independence;*
4. *Interactive modeling: learning from examples, practice and reflection'.*

For participants, becoming more expert *'must also include an understanding of how experts think: how they work through difficulties, how they make judgments about quality, how they identify problems, the decision-making process they employ and so on'*. (Ritchhart 2015)

It is therefore important for the artist to share their thinking and to present the challenges regarding the exploration of the material and the creation of the final sharing with the ensemble so that these are overcome together. In 'The Passionate Teacher: A Practical Guide' (Robert Fried 1995) writes that:

*‘... (effective teachers) are always taking risks, and they make at least as many mistakes as anybody else... What’s different is how they react to their mistakes, they choose to acknowledge and learn from them, rather than ignore or deny them.’*

The artist’s task must be to work in collaboration with the student, as a co-creator and guide but also to always look ‘for ways to step back so that students can step forward’. (Deci, E.L., & Ryan, R. M., 1985)

### **The power of ensemble and the ISTA family**

We have already discussed the significance of the ensemble and its primary role in the ISTA experience but I wish to conclude this section with a closer analysis of the ensemble and the unique and significant effect it has on participants.

The ISTA ensemble experience, as we have already examined, is characterised by this feeling of ‘connectedness or sense of oneness towards people, self and things’ which Fox (1999), in a study of outdoor experiences, identifies as an element of the spiritual. This sense of the ensemble as a spiritual body, a unit of connection, a place of safety and creativity, is magnified when all the participants come together in full group sessions and experience a shared sense of journey, exploration and purpose. From this comes ‘a sense of awe and wonderment’ (ibid) not only for what has been accomplished and what is possible – which is both empowering and inspirational – but also for the power that comes from a mass of people congregating and connecting together with the same purpose and passion. As a result of this ‘spiritual awe’, congregation and interconnectivity, participants leave inspired and feel part of the global network referred to as the ISTA family.

The theatre director Giorgio Strehler (in Delgado, M. and Heritage, 1996) describes ensemble in the following way:

*‘I have a deep rooted and ancient idea of what an ensemble is. I love the theater only when it is a family, a fraternity, a house filled with parents, children and cousins. I don’t mean by this that I think of the family as a pure harmony. For a family is also a space of descent and of abandonment. But the theater is home, is the only one that for me is worth the effort.’*

The description of this experience of family being an experience that also contains challenges is significant. Lindh (2010) develops this idea further by considering ensemble instead as ‘a constellation of individuals who act independently’. This metaphor of the constellation made up of individual pieces, which she refers to as ‘a network of diversities’ that only reveal their shape and purpose in relationship to each other, is very much the experience of the ISTA festival. The idea of a ‘network’ suggests something that is connected and collective while simultaneously the word ‘diversity’ suggests the importance of individual difference which also lies at the heart of the ISTA experience; a constellation coming together to create theatre made up of young people who have different cultural backgrounds, experiences and who come from different locations. This dichotomy of communion and singularity and the complex process by which individuality transforms into collectivity is also a key part of the ISTA festival experience. This dynamic of the one in a continuous interplay with the many is apparent in all aspects of the festival: the individual school part of

the festival, the participant within the ensemble, the final piece made up of individual pieces. The experience of ISTA's global programme of events based on this principle leads to a form of unity which ultimately creates the sense of belonging, the intensity and the sense of communal learning and empowerment. Within the ISTA context, the word 'ensemble' carries all of these associations.

Within this context the final product, final sharing or final celebration, becomes what Leach (in Hodge 2010) calls the 'shared point of intense concentration' that defies the differences, overcomes the discomfort and produces a dynamic energy of creation that overrides the ambiguities and complexities and brings about a closure which is artistically, emotionally and culturally satisfying. Viewed in this light, as Britton (2013) suggests, the ensemble performance is not 'showing a product' but is in fact 'the recreation of a creative process in the presence of an audience'. He goes on to suggest that in fact, the audience witnessing this final closure often become 'in some way an extension of the onstage ensemble', congregating to celebrate collaboration, creativity, learning and cultural unity. Placing the work in context for the audience is therefore of utmost importance and strategies are required to ensure that they relate to the performance as witnesses; as part of a congregation that has come together not to watch theatre but to be part of a collective process of celebration and unison.

This process of connection between participants does not happen automatically. It is something which is created and curated by artists, young people and ISTA working together and using the ensemble method or technique which contains all of the above aspects and nuances. The term 'ensemble technique' in relation to ISTA's work was used by Zich, one of the founders of ISTA and its chief executive from 1978-2000, to describe an approach developed to inform classroom practice. Her publication 'Teaching Ensemble Technique in Theatre' (1986), a popular resource for international school drama teachers at the time, was an attempt to shift teachers away from theatre classes that focused only on the staging of production to a more play and game focused approach that was collaborative rather than competitive. The purpose was also to shift students and teachers away from the notion of theatre in schools being about leads and small parts, about talent and 'star turns'. Her publication was designed to use games, exercises and activities to not only develop performing skills but more importantly to develop theatre in schools as a collective, communal and playful practice where every member of the ensemble is of value regardless of the size of the role. This approach also encouraged the reconsideration of the role of the teacher/director and made a significant impact on theatre education in international schools.

*'A strong Ensemble is created by establishing an atmosphere in which each individual is valued and appreciated for her own merits. She is encouraged to share creatively with others. She is both supported by, and supports, others in the Ensemble. She is given respect by her fellow performers and her director. She feels, and **is**, an essential part of the production. As a result, there is a commitment on the part of **all** performers that is unique in an Ensemble – the director/teacher role becomes that of collaborator, not superior.'* (Zich 1986)

This was very much at the heart of the founding principles of ISTA. ISTA was fundamentally developed to bring together international school teachers from different geographic locations that were working in isolation and to provide young people with a much needed antidote to competitive theatre festivals which were the primary offer to international theatre students at the time.

Over time, the ensemble technique has developed beyond the game focused approach and is now referred to as the ensemble *method*. It is a much more sophisticated and complex process, although in many ways those early founding principles continue to define the vision and the approach, with play and physical engagement still a key part of the experience. But the focus now is also on common purpose, shared values and communal objectives. Participants are aware that ensemble is both a method of working but also something that we work together to construct.

The principles of the 'Ensemble Technique', however, went beyond the theatrical. ISTA's founding mission became to create a better world through theatre, making young people the collaborative authors and agents of the work, providing them with models of democracy learned through artistic practice.

This sense of something that we work together to make, that is not immediate or natural, is the very factor that develops agency and empowerment. Empowerment within the ensemble is also largely the result of a sense of belonging, the 'home' that Strehler refers to. The concept of home and belonging is often a challenge for young people in an international context. Sometimes referred to as 'global nomads', many young people move due to their parents work situation. In this they lack agency. This can be disempowering and alienating. Furthermore, they find themselves not only in new countries but also in new contexts and environments. Many international schools recognise this but for many students (especially those who have moved many times) schools still often feel like places of transience. Any experience that gives young people a sense of belonging, connection and home is essentially emotionally empowering and helps build a young person's resources.

The friendships and connections that are made come from being part of an experience of a collectivity that has spiritual proportions, that feels larger than us, that is felt rather than seen. Callow (Shevtsova, M. 2004) describes this as a 'corporate life'. His description encapsulates the powerful feeling of ensemble and its role in making the ISTA festival a unique experiential learning opportunity.

*'... the underlying sense of the whole, more extraordinary even than the individual performances, or the interplay between the characters was the corporate life manifested on stage. The connectivity of the actors was almost tangible, an organic tissue, which made them breathe as one.'*

## PART 3

### The findings

#### a) Analysing the questionnaires

In this section we move away from the theoretical frameworks that inform the ISTA festival experience and turn to the findings of the research conducted at various events. The research focused on specific areas:

- Learning about the starting point
- Learning about theatre
- The longevity of the learning
- Cultural learning
- The general impact of the experience

#### Learning about the starting point

When participants were asked how their understanding of the festival starting point changed as a result of the festival, the response was varied and was partly dependent on the extent of their exposure to the subject matter before the festival. The starting points, set by the host school in collaboration with ISTA, vary enormously. For example, the starting point for the MS festival in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2016 was an exploration of 'Karma' – a spiritual idea which was perfectly fitting for the cultural context of the festival. For the Atlanta HS festival in 2017, in a setting with a significant and rich civil rights history, the focus was civil and human rights. Participants who had no knowledge of the starting point in the instance of karma, stated after the festival: 'I came out with a complete understanding of what it is' (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016). Even when questioned three or six months after the festival participants believed that the festival had made them 'more aware' (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017) and helped them develop a 'deeper understanding' (HS student Atlanta festival 2017). This depth of understanding was related to the fact that the exploration and engagement with the starting point was practical and physical.

*'This festival changed my understanding of karma because of the activities we did.'*  
(MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

In addition, this learning was related to the different perspectives on the starting point and the way that the immersive experience engaged participants with a broad view of the subject. It is key that the participants felt they were *exploring* the starting point rather than learning about it.

*'The ISTA festival really broadened my idea in karma, as I explored in depth the different types of karma, their forms and the reactions that are provoked through them.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA Festival 2016)

The other key area that emerges regarding the starting point is that of connection – with the intensity of the immersive experience resulting in students feeling that they

‘connected more’ (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016) with the subject. Immersion provides the opportunity for a time intensive and focused approach to an area of inquiry, something which a school programme rarely offers, especially at high and middle school level.

This learning and the ability to view a starting point from a new perspective was also largely related to the fact that the festival engages participants with the opportunity to visibly present their ideas, ‘to display the concept’ (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016). Furthermore, theatre as a mode of exploration brings subjects to life and engages young people with the ‘humanness’ of a particular issue. This makes issues both more vivid and more urgent, giving them a relevance and encouraging young people to see as well as engage with world issues. Where the starting point is of social or cultural interest or significance, it leads to a greater social consciousness which often, as in the instance of the Atlanta festival, results in young people becoming social activists, transferring their actions out of the theatrical realm and into the real (Jonathan Neelands, Atlanta 2019). This is further enhanced by their understanding of theatre’s political potential, providing young people with an understanding of ‘how to convey messages through theatre’ (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017).

*‘My understanding of the topic of “Civil and Human Rights” has changed tremendously as I had never focused on a topic/idea like this in theatre. The festival made me aware of global issues that are still occurring even in 2017.’* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

Positioning theatre as something relevant and of contemporary significance is also something that seems to come from the students’ engagement with the starting point, signifying how important it is to have a starting point that is authentic and relevant.

*‘I learned that theatre isn’t only inspired by imagination, while it is partly, the world around you can inspire a theatre piece.’* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016).

The cultural experience, located within the social and cultural context of the place where the festival is hosted, when selected appropriately, makes the learning experience even more powerful and encourages students to consider their learning within a broader context and beyond the festival.

*‘From the visit to the museum I learnt so much more about civil rights and its importance in today’s society. I also learnt that the only option to make a change in this subject is not just to go to a protest, the arts can be used to make a difference too.’* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

The final sharing, with its emphasis on the live representation of ideas, of performing understanding and exploration leads to this deeper connection with concepts and with material, bringing together the learning and finding a form to represent it.

*'I think my experiencing (at the festival) what it is like to embody karma that gives you a deeper insight on the idea of creating karma.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

### **Learning about theatre**

Learning about theatre through the immersive experience is one of the key areas of learning for most participants. Participants experience theatre through full group, through ensemble sessions and through workshops. Each experience has its own function and its own results but all are essential components of the learning experience, fulfilling different types of learning and different understandings.

*'I learned some valuable cooperation skills in my ensemble as well as knowledge from the workshops.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017)

One of the strongest features of the workshops, as one student at the Atlanta ISTA festival 2017 indicated, is that they provide students with the opportunity to 'experience theatre in new ways' and to encounter a different form whether it's 'post dramatic theatre in the workshop' or 'a little bit about clowning'.

It is not, therefore, just the development of theatre skills and the art form of theatre that is learned but also theatre's potential and cultural role. The intensive nature of the ISTA festival experience also powerfully demonstrated to many participants, theatre's capacity to 'bring people together and build lifelong relationships in just a weekend'. (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017) The ISTA festival experience takes many participants *beyond* their own experience of theatre, providing them with new perspectives on theatre and what it is capable of.

*'I think the festival reminded me of the breadth of theatre. I live in a place that is filled with acclaimed theatre, dance and music, but most of it is quite traditional. The festival has charged my curiosity to seek out more creative work.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017)

For many young people, in many locations, it seems the ISTA festival experience offers them access to forms and approaches to theatre which are contemporary, unusual and unfamiliar and a sense that their 'view of theatre has been greatly expanded'. (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017) This is an area which we often underestimate in our judgments regarding the impact of the festival experience.

Another key feature of the learning comes from the fact that the participants encounter and artistically engage with people who are different to those they usually work with. Artists and practitioners different to their teachers bring new perspectives, approaches and relate to the participants in a different way; as artistic collaborators rather than educators. The dynamic of the ISTA festival is one of artistic endeavour rather than of learning and this, ironically, leads to deeper learning. Participants are also collaborating with other young people who have different experiences of theatre, are often from different cultural settings and have different experiences and reference points dependent on the drama programmes in their own schools and their teachers.

*'I was able to expand on my knowledge of devising by practicing it with different practitioners and ensemble members.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

This sense of encountering the new brings with it a sense of awe and a sense of achievement as well as developing a young person's lifelong love of learning and their cultural engagement with theatre. As well as developing them as learners and as audiences, the ISTA experience therefore broadens their grasp and understanding of the craft of theatre both as an art form and as an instrumental tool for change.

*'At the festival, I learned most about: the different forms of theatre and drama, and how each one can be manipulated for various purposes, like raising awareness or communicating a message. I also learned about the importance of expression of thoughts or feelings through theatre.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

Participants understand that the ISTA experience, though quintessentially theatrical 'is not all about the performance' (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016) but rather about the expression and presentation of ideas, concepts and perspectives. The final sharing is often abstract and does not necessarily follow traditional narrative structures. For some participants, even at middle school, this feature regarding theatre's capacity and potential to go beyond the narrative becomes a key revelation and provides them with a powerful tool for communication. The ISTA festival experience, therefore, expands participants' view of theatre as well as providing them with a new intercultural language to express ideas.

*'I learned that theatre is not only acting out a story, it can be a unique portrayal of the way we think about a certain topic.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA Festival 2016)

The expression of ideas comes about through the essentially theatrical meaning making process that the participants engage in when preparing the final sharing. Participants recognise the ISTA experience as a learning experience because they engage both in recognisably meaningful play: 'we play games that have a meaning to them' (PS student Singapore ISTA festival 2017) and in meaning making: 'I learnt that in using my imagination a box can be absolutely anything you want it to be'. (PS student Singapore ISTA festival 2017) It is through this process of making meaning that participants' practical knowledge and understanding of the craft of theatre as a physical language that communicates meaning is developed and this gives them the power to express themselves in new ways. For some students, the linguistic element itself is of importance, as it becomes a supportive opportunity for the development of language. One MS student at the Colombo festival identified the supportive environment as one of kindness, allowing them to develop their English skills by making them feel comfortable and included.

*'ISTA is a very good time to make and communicate with people. My English skill is very poor but there are a lot of kind of student who is very kind and they keep talking to me, so I really love ISTA!'*

### **A space of liberation and safety**

For many students, however, theatre at the ISTA festival experience does not only provide them with a language and a form to express themselves and their ideas. It also provides them with a space of liberation and of safety, creating a space where they feel free to be themselves, express themselves and their ideas:

*‘... a place where you can express yourself without being judged. You can sing or dance or speak words and nobody cares whether it was good, mediocre or bad. They respect you because this is your way of expressing yourself and therefore should not be criticised.’* (MS student Colombo ISTA Festival 2016)

The creation of this space, with its own rules, ways of being and ways of working is established from the very beginning of the festival and lasts for its duration. The hope is that the participants carry these values and these ways of working into their own communities, theatrical work and friendships. The participants operate for the duration of the festival within a micro community and unit, which we have referred to as ‘the ISTA family’ with its own particular values and modes of operation which is different to their everyday lives. Operating within this ISTA festival community brings with it an understanding of self, an understanding of community and an awareness of the roles and responsibilities the individual has within a community. We can argue that self-awareness and knowledge are key to the creation of a strong ensemble or community and that the development of this awareness should drive the initiating activities. Alternatively, we can argue that it is only by being part of an effective ensemble that we can understand ourselves and the establishment of the ensemble, therefore, should be paramount.

*‘I learned ISTA can bring so many people together. At the beginning of the festival, I was very hesitant as to who I would meet and have to work with. I wasn't sure if I would feel open to share my ideas and thoughts let alone be completely vulnerable. With theatre, we were all able to relate to each other one way or another, which made all of us comfortable enough to create such impactful performances.’* (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017)

The participant here demonstrates an awareness and understanding of the ecology of the experience and the process of evolution from hesitancy and vulnerability to a comfortable place where impactful work can be made. This is enhanced by the intensity of the experience and its immersion. The development and the change happen through the immersion and because of it, as it engages and absorbs the participants into its communal, ensemble energy. It is this absorption within the energy of the ensemble, however, which ironically liberates the individual. Immersed within this communal safe space, individual insights and understandings are given permission to rise to the surface and make themselves known. Being part of a community and feeling safe in an environment where failure is reconfigured as iteration, provides the best possible conditions for learning, for creativity and for self-development. With this comes a sense of empowerment and aspiration that leads participants to consider themselves and their role in the world.

*'I learned that I have an extreme passion to create change in the world but that it often becomes way too easy for me to step back and allow someone else to carry the load. Through this process, I've rediscovered my extreme sense for injustice in the world and wanting to create a change.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017)

These understandings are deep and often go beyond theatre and the theatrical. They are an intentional part of the ISTA experience and sit at the heart of its mission. The festival is not without challenges and discomforts but these are also seen as an integral part of the learning. One HS student explained how they learnt 'how to reach out of my comfort zone and how I can learn to trust other people and go with their out-of-the-box opinions.' (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017) Another student at the same festival claimed: 'I learned that I can do things that make me uncomfortable.' This exposure to both discomfort and the 'out-of-the-box' thinking offers participants the opportunity to develop a growth mind set, that takes them beyond their everyday and their usual modes of learning and engages them with a new way of learning, of being and of being with others. This growth is an essential feature of creativity and creative learning as well as being one of the attributes of international mindedness which lies at the heart of ISTA's mission and purpose.

Another element of the experience which participants identified as initially being challenging is a sense of nervousness and a fear that comes from meeting new people. This very quickly dissipates partly through the recognition that these 'strangers' all share a similar passion, 'a shared love for theatre' (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017) which connects them and creates the conditions not only for effective collaboration but also for the creation of strong friendships.

*'The connections I made with people who share the same interest as me. The laughter and the screams and how for three days it didn't matter what colour, race or age you were – we just worked in harmony.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

These friendships and this collaboration are not always with strangers. As an ISTA artist who was formerly a student at an ISTA festival explained:

*'Not only is there the element of making friends with the people that you meet but also with your own school, getting to know your group and your class differently.'* (Artist, Singapore ISTA festival 2017)

Being distinctly different from their regular school based drama experience, some students felt a liberation from this experience of working with strangers, giving themselves permission to be who they wanted to be and to try out new ideas without fear of judgment.

*'At school there are a lot of social barriers that I feel our class needs to take down but in our ensembles, nobody knew each other and we probably weren't ever going to see each other again, so people were less nervous and I felt like that really made working together much more efficient and fun.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

As is evident, participants are clear that the ISTA experience presents them with a strong model for collaborative learning: 'learning by working with others' (PS student Singapore ISTA festival 2017), a model where learning – individual, artistic and conceptual – occurs through interaction and connection, through the development of a space of collaboration and community and through a recognition both of self and of others. A feature of collaborative learning is, of course, appreciating the value of diversity and the importance not only of contributing but also of listening. This recognition of how the contribution of others can make a work richer works in parallel with the understanding that the individual is required to operate in a particular way – accepting, listening and working with an open mind, letting go of ideas and accepting the ideas of others.

*'I learned that everyone around me has a story to tell and if I listen long enough, I can learn a lot.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

The sequence of the activities, from ensemble building to inquiry and skills building, to creation and finally presentation also provide students and teachers with a model for the creation of original theatre. This is a model which is easily transferable and can be used again and again for theatre making. Participants as young as primary school children recognise the model and are made conscious of it so that they can carry and use this artistic and creative model beyond the festival.

*'I think that we learn by playing, from the skills inside of the activities. So when we have done that activity, we've brought the skills from another activity to that activity.'* (PS student Singapore ISTA festival 2017)

### **Longevity**

Time plays an important role in the immersive learning process. The time pressure becomes not only an opportunity to develop individual decision making and leadership skills but also a lever that encourages everyone to participate and contribute. It becomes a mechanism for the development of the ensemble by introducing the creative pressure of the final sharing, the production of something for an audience. There is no time to spare and no space for disengagement. The weight of limited time encourages commitment as well as efficiency; making use of everyone's resources. This recognition of making the best of the moment and using the available resources effectively is what contributes to an environment where everyone is valued and all input valuable.

*'Other people can contribute in so many different ways to a devising project even if they are not great actors... It is hard to find out other people's strengths and really use them in a short amount of time but it was also good to have a short time frame because the deadline helped us move our project forward and we did the best we could with the available resources.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

In an attempt to try to capture what the impact and imprint of an ISTA experience might be beyond the festival, participants from the Atlanta HS festival and from the Colombo MS festival were asked, six months after the event, what they remembered

most about the festivals. The result was that one of the most lasting elements of the ISTA experience is the connection to others and the friendships that are developed.

*'I remember working with people and making great connections with others. I am still in contact with many of the people that I met.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

and

*'The friends I made will stay with me for a lifetime.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

The intensity of the experience encourages the development of deep connections; there's little time to waste on anything other than the meaningful. The atmosphere, the common purpose, the working together to create something new and the fact that they are all together encountering the unfamiliar builds bonds that go beyond the experience. One participant explained that the significance of the festival was 'the shared experience of making new friends and discovering the path of Theatre that I never took before'. (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017)

This intensity and the importance of forming friendships was particularly significant to the middle school participants interviewed at the Colombo MS festival. For many of them, the ISTA experience was transformative, taking them out of the awkwardness of adolescence and allowing them to connect without being self-conscious physically and emotionally. This was also partly due to the sense of equality that students felt, the fact that away from their home environments they become unhindered and unburdened by existing perceptions and habitual roles they adopt.

*'At school there are a lot of social barriers that I feel our class needs to take down but in our ensembles nobody knew each other and we probably weren't ever going to see each other again, so people were less nervous and I felt like that really made working together much more efficient and fun.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

Students also experienced a newfound confidence which extended to the performance:

*'On the ISTA stage, I was more comfortable performing more than anywhere else'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

It is important to note that the student identifies the performance space as an 'ISTA stage' whereas this was in fact the performing space of the host school. This demonstrates the fact that ISTA is not only a process and an experience but is also a space. It is consistently identified by participants as a performance space of comfort, accomplishment and liberation. This liberation, resulting from the magical combination of safe space, concentrated time and likeminded people is further enhanced by the intensity of their age and contributes to making ISTA a life changing

moment that students remember and speak of, many years later, with passion and love.

*'(I remember) my group members, what did we play, where we visited like temples and villages, my host family, new friends etc. I really love ISTA more than any other activity. I wish I could do that again.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

The students are also aware of the life changing nature of the experience and how it shapes identity as well as understandings.

*'This experience left a mark on my identity and I talk to people about how much I enjoyed myself in the festival. And if I had the choice to do it again I definitely would and I wish I could explain how much this affected me positively.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

This element of the 'new' (geographic, cultural, artistic, social) alongside commonality, (purpose, passion) is an important tension for ISTA to acknowledge, enhance and celebrate. It is this sense of 'people from different places meeting up together to create something that they are passionate about' (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016) that gives these experiences their celebratory feel.

Where the focus of the festival is cultural and where the starting point, the cultural experience and the nature of the creative work are all in perfect alignment, we see an impact that is also cultural and related to the student's world view not just their experience of theatre. This was the case with both the Atlanta HS festival on civil and human rights, with a cultural experience at the National Center of Civil and Human Rights and a final piece staged as a symposium at the Colombo MS festival with its focus on karma, a cultural experience in a temple and a final piece that conveyed the meaning of karma.

*'The moments that I remember most out of the whole experience were the moments where I discovered and made new realisations, enlightened myself on Sri Lankan culture and the strong bonds that I made with the individuals I met on this trip.'* (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

and

*'From the visit to the museum I learnt so much more about civil rights and its importance in today's society. I also learnt that the only option to make a change in this subject is not just to go to a protest; the arts can be used to make a difference too.'* (HS student Atlanta ISTA Festival 2017)

Homestays also add to the cultural experience and enhance a direct relationship to a different culture by giving participants the experience of someone else's way of life. For the duration of the festival they literally step into someone else's home, which for young people can be as powerful as stepping into someone else's shoes.

*‘The experience I remember the most is getting introduced to this new culture and their new way of living through my host family.’ (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)*

This does not, therefore, only develop a student’s cultural understanding but also their capacity to empathise, to see the world from another’s point of view. Students are given the opportunity to adopt and live different lives during this time intensive engagement and come away from it richer, freer and with a wider perspective.

*‘Staying with in the home of somebody else, I thought that it was really enjoyable and it was awesome to live in the life of someone who I am not and probably won’t be. I loved their food and even the rooms looked different than the ones where I live, so I really enjoyed it.’ (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)*

Another feature which is rarely considered is that teachers and students are often on a level playing field, encountering the new together. One participant remembers ‘how impactful this experience was for teachers and students alike’ (HS student Atlanta ISTA festival 2017), recognising that through workshops, observations and professional development the teachers are also engaging in something new, as learners themselves. This provides opportunities for students to see their teachers as learners and for teachers to relate to their students differently. It provides them both with a chance to see each other in a different and new light and this dynamic has longevity, as it is something which teachers and students take back to their schools and which impacts their theatre programmes and the nature of both teaching and learning.

### **The significance of cultural education**

As well as the key role played by the ISTA ensemble pedagogy and its provision of educational and rich learning experiences, ISTA is also an international provider of *cultural* experiences. Sorrell, Roberts and Henley (2014) in their study of cultural education, *The Virtuous Circle: Why Creativity and Cultural Education Count*, assert that cultural experiences often provided by agencies external to the school, contribute not only to the development of the artistic and social self but also can ‘be a major contributor to helping a young person to develop a sense of their own identity.’ They relate this to the raising of self-fulfilling aspirations:

*‘... creative and cultural education unlocks expectation; it unlocks heightened expectation for young people of themselves. Even more powerfully, it unlocks the expectations placed by teachers, parents and carers in young people. And those heightened expectations are self-fulfilling.’*

The authors go on to provide a framework for cultural learning which resonates with UNESCO’s characteristics of quality in education in *Education for all – The Quality Imperative* (2005). They list the following areas:

**Learning to know** acknowledges that learners build their own knowledge daily, combining indigenous and external elements.

**Learning to do** focuses on the practical application of what is learned.

**Learning to live together** addresses the critical skills for life free from discrimination, where all have equal opportunity to develop themselves, their families and their communities.

**Learning to be** emphasizes the skills needed for individuals to develop their full potential.

As we have already discussed, the ISTA experience fulfils each of the above areas of cultural learning through its process of empowerment and/or transformation. Students are not only given the chance to develop their full potential but are also given the space and the safety to reconfigure and reconsider their identities. It's difficult to know whether the immersive ISTA experience ignites the aspirational self or simply reveals it. Teachers at the Colombo festival 2016 and at the Atlanta and Singapore festivals in 2017 stated that one of the features of the ISTA experience is that they saw some of the students in a different light. Away from their regular school environments, students often demonstrated different qualities which changed their behaviour and their way of interrelating both with other students and their teachers. For some teachers, the cultural experiences offered by ISTA are considered to be a strategic cultural intervention which can be transformative, '*... acting as catalysts for life changing experiences that have a positive impact on the ambition and confidence of young people.*' (Sorrell, Roberts and Henley (2014).

#### **b) Analysing the surveys**

One of the areas revealed by the surveys is that though the festival experiences all share particular features which contribute to the nature, quality and effectiveness of the learning, the nature of the learning itself varies from festival to festival. This demonstrates the fact that the ISTA experience has a uniform collection of qualities which identify it as an essentially ISTA experience. Each experience, however, is also unique, bespoke and particular to its context. The nature of the learning is determined by the site of the festival, the starting point, the artists and the participants who attend. This diversity alongside uniformity is wholly appropriate for an organisation that has a fixed pedagogy and mission but that also recognises difference and values diversity, celebrates international mindedness and recognises the importance of cultural literacy. The common features of the ISTA festival experience can be identified as:

- Being part of an ensemble and contributing to the making of ensemble;
- Learning about a starting point;
- Developing new skills and understandings related to theatre;
- Engaging with cultural learning;
- Connecting, interacting and learning with and from different people;
- Working in a safe, failure-free environment;
- Working to find a form in order to present discoveries and learning in a final sharing;
- Presenting something to an audience outside the participants' festival experience;
- Developing friendships;
- Working with artists who introduce different ways of working;

- Working in a way that is different to learning from school.

The learning that comes from connecting and interacting with other people is a key feature of the experience. It was identified as the most important aspect by 82% of participants at Hong Kong middle school festival, 69% of students at Phnom Penh high school festival, 73% of students at Terezin high school festival and 75% of students at Copenhagen primary/middle school festival. In all festivals over 85% of students stated that they connected with new people and made friends, with over 76% stating that working with students from different schools was a feature of effective learning. This comes as no surprise for an organisation whose roots, mission and pedagogy are founded on the idea of ensemble and is something that this study has consistently addressed as a key feature of the experience. Bringing people together to learn, create theatre and form friendships beyond the duration of the event is key to the organisation and clearly a key feature of the immersive experience for students. But beyond this we need to acknowledge that what participants have identified is not simply that they have interacted but rather that they have *learned* to interact with new people and that they have understood the value of learning communally and collaboratively. This is an important skill for young people, particularly in an international context and is something which lies at the heart of cultural literacy; the ability to operate within an unfamiliar setting, behave appropriately, make deep connections with people you don't know and celebrate commonality, collaboration and diversity.

The significance of the starting point seems to grow when the subject matter is site specific, emotive and of global significance, such as with Phnom Penh and Terezin – dealing with genocide and with trips being made to the Killing Fields in Cambodia. In both these instances cultural learning scored higher. This indicates that the choice of site, choice of cultural excursion and a meaningful connection between these and the starting point is key to the depth nature of learning both about culture and the starting point.

Participants identify the fact that the experience is different from school as a significant feature to the effectiveness of the learning. This sense of difference is also related to working with artists and with students different to their regular classmates. Encountering and working with artists is key to the learning experience because artists can provide different approaches to learning, to making art and to collective working. Working with artists rather than teachers is an important contributing feature to participants' sense of liberation and to feeling that the experience is situated in art making rather than in educational practice. Though participants recognise the power of this as a learning experience and even though the experience usually takes place within a school, ISTA takes care to ensure that the scheduling, the artists, the energy and the social and cultural interactions do not feel institutional or like a school experience. In this respect this also provides new insights for teachers.

One of the features of working with artists is the sense that the students are in a relationship of creative collaboration with an adult. This power dynamic, which is distinct from the teacher/student relationship, is a seminal aspect of the ensemble

method and is clearly defined by ISTA pedagogy. The ISTA artist directs the process but not the work; this is co-constructed by artist and ensemble. This experience of collective responsibility is both empowering and liberating because unlike school, there is no such thing as assessment or any emphasis on individual reward. Success is communal and the result of collaboration.

‘ISTA is more of workshops and social connections through Theatre, whereas drama in school is learning and applying it in practice assignments and assessments (it's graded).’ (MS student Colombo ISTA festival 2016)

Learning new skills and ideas about theatre is consistently considered across all festivals as a key feature of the experience. In all festivals over 86% of participants identified this as one of the key areas of learning. Developing new ideas about theatre, participating in specialist workshops, working in different ways and creating original theatre offer an intensive theatre learning and theatre skills building experience for young people. As a theatre organisation we sometimes take this as a given without recognising that participants consider this a powerful feature of their learning in theatre.

The survey responses demonstrate that an ISTA festival is undoubtedly experienced and perceived as a learning experience which engages students with new concepts through the starting point and which provides them with new ideas, skills and approaches to theatre and theatre making. It develops their personal, social and emotional skills through their interactions with other young people and with new cultural contexts, developing them as internationally minded and culturally literate young people. This is all achieved through collaboration – the ensemble approach – which lies at the heart of ISTA and which provides young people with an immersive experience of collaborative learning, as well as developing them as better humans through rich, mindful and deep interactions with others and with the unfamiliar.

### **c) A case study**

This is a case study based on an interview with the head of middle school Atlanta International School in March 2017.

In an interview with the head of middle school at Atlanta International School (AIS), who had just accompanied a teacher and group of students to a MS festival in Jamaica in 2017, it was evident that the ISTA experience was recognised as having value beyond the theatrical and as having a significant impact not only on learning but also on student engagement and behaviour.

Though he understood that the intensity of the three day ISTA experience was not sustainable in school, he could see lots of possibilities regarding how some of the elements could be transferred into the classroom. The intensive and immersive way of working engaged students in a much deeper way and he could see how this could be used beneficially as a model for learning across disciplines.

He also recognised that part of the power of the experience was that it allowed students to grow, develop and relate in a different way to the way they did in their school context. He suggested this was partly because they found themselves in different circumstances, working with artists and with different people than the ones they were accustomed to working with in their own school. This gave students license to be who they wanted to be, to redefine themselves and engage differently during this 'time out' from the school experience. The new ways of working and being allowed students who may be perceived at school as challenging or disengaged or who may perceive themselves in this way, to reconsider and reconfigure their learner identity. At the festival, working with artists and other students, students could try out and adopt different personas which were more positive and engaged. This also had an impact on their learner identity back at school. The intensity and the experiential nature of the event, according to the head of MS, meant that there was 'nowhere for students to hide' and this led to students coming out 'of their shell', building their confidence and giving them a sense of success.

It was also clear to him that students working with different people was also a key element of the effective learning that takes place at the festival. This model of collaborative learning was particularly powerful and he saw this as the core of the ISTA learning experience. Collaboration was the mode through which students learned about the starting point, the way they created theatre and the nature of the final sharing. Unlike a school setting where an individual's progress and achievement is paramount for assessment and reporting purposes, ISTA revels in the collaborative and makes it one of the most powerful aspects of its pedagogy. As indicated in the results of the surveys, young people recognise this and consider it to be one of the strongest features of the experience.

Collaborative learning and working as part of a team are not only key 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills but are also at the heart of the creative process. Creativity is dependent on collaborative processes – the pooling together of resources to create something of value, the connecting of diverse ideas to inform understanding and the creative process and the development of prior knowledge and understanding.

Working with artists who's professional every day is situated in the making of art, enhances this further as they bring to the creativity table a different set of skills, drawn from the professional experience and from authentic artistic contexts. Working with artists is another area in the surveys which students identify as being a key element of effective learning. The MS head of AIS considered this and the fact that the students are being treated 'professionally' and as young artists, another key factor in engagement. As working artists they bring current processes, agendas and considerations to the table which provides students and teachers with further skillsets or perspectives to enhance their engagement with theatre in a learning context.

## **PART 4**

### **Conclusion**

There is no question that the ISTA festival experience is a rich and varied immersive learning experience. This study has revealed the theoretical basis that supports the research findings from participants. It attests to the amount of thought and attention that has gone into the development of the ISTA festival model and the care that goes into producing, designing and carrying out what is a sophisticated and subtle pedagogic experience for children and young people from around the world. It also clarifies and explains the elements that contribute to the ISTA festivals' impact as a learning experience.

Examining immersive theatre and the principles of gaming that often lie at the heart of this experience has illuminated that one of the key features of the ISTA experience is the empowerment of the participants and the development of their agency as creators, inquirers, presenters and witnesses of their own learning. Alongside this individual growth there is also the significant element of congregation, of coming together to work, experience and learn with others which is also a key feature of the immersive theatre experience. This interplay between the individual's agency and the development of the collective, which characterises the ISTA ensemble method, frees and empowers young people and democratises the process of theatre making, of learning and of being. It puts into practice ISTA's mission to use theatre experiences to create a better future through collaboration, international mindedness and cultural literacy. By engaging and developing young people as active agents who have power and influence, this process of ISTA ensemble learning raises aspirations and provides them with the cognitive resources and skills that can be employed to make positive and responsible changes to themselves, their own contexts and the world.

The study of experiential learning illustrates how the modes and processes of learning at an ISTA festival bring about learning that results from being inside the experience and develops thinking routines that are authentic and transferable both to theatrical creation and to learning in general. The principles of both immersive theatre and experiential learning point to the significance of the body and the physical. The ISTA ensemble method privileges the use of the body as well as the mind and uses the physical as a tool of inquiry as well as a methodology for the creation of unity. As a result, the embodied cognition that occurs through working physically and actively means that participants' understandings, their agency and the tools for change are not just conceptual ideas but reside within the body of the participants and in the collective body; the ensemble.

The ISTA ensemble method consistently emerges as a strong component and as the cornerstone of the ISTA festival experience. If anything, this study provides some sort of definition and explanation of the myriad aspects and elements that constitute the particularities of the ISTA ensemble method and how it is used for learning. The ISTA ensemble method brings together immersion, experiential learning, theatre practice and conviviality in a unique mix which leads both to deep learning and empowerment. Based on the dual notion of individual ensemble group as well as a

whole ensemble group, it creates the conditions for communal and collaborative learning, essential features of both theatre practice and of 21<sup>st</sup> century learning. It is also responsible for producing a sense of community and belonging. Though the ensemble method is essentially theatrical, it also goes beyond the theatrical. It creates a global network of connected young people who have experienced collective learning and who understand the power of support and the significance of friendship. In the findings of the surveys and questionnaires, the sense of camaraderie, friendship and commonality feature highly as key aspects of the experience. This sense of belonging and family celebrates both unity and diversity. It provides participants with the sense of breathing as one, making the tissue that unites us as human palpable. It is hard to describe how it feels other than to say it is like 'a pulse' that holds the participants together, a *'heart pulse rather than the individuation of the head impulses'*. (Worley 2010)

The ISTA ensemble method is also the method of contracting, providing clear guidelines and an atmosphere of safety that allows participants to thrive. It creates the appropriate conditions for the experience and determines the way we learn, the way we share, the way we are liberated to try and fail and try again. Creativity is dependent on collaborative processes – the pooling together of resources to create something of value, the connecting of diverse ideas to inform understanding and the development of prior knowledge and understanding. In doing this they also develop their capacity to be creative and to imagine themselves in other people's shoes, to imagine the potential of their own futures, to imagine the possibilities for the creation of a better world.

Through the ISTA ensemble method failure is reconfigured as iteration. This and all of the elements mentioned above are particularly activated by the final sharing which, as we can see from the study, is an essential and possibly overlooked key element in the process of collective, immersive learning, in the creation of ensemble and in the development of cultural literacy. The final sharing and the preparation for it, as we can see from the study, activate a whole range of immersive learning processes and responses which contribute not only to providing participants with the tools and understandings for the creation of original theatre but also a language which can form the basis of cultural literacy. As Climenhaga states (in Hodge 2010) 'You are not preparing a product to deliver to an audience but creating a way of being in a world in which they may share.' This final sharing, collectively created and presented, therefore becomes not only a rehearsal for collective performance within an artistic context but also within the context of the world beyond the festival and ISTA, developing young people as social activists and as agents of change through an awareness of their collective potential.

Jonothan Neelands explained this in an address at the end of a festival performance on modern slavery at the Atlanta Connect ISTA festival in March 2019. He explained that the significance of working as an ensemble means that individual interests are put aside not only for the purposes of theatre but also to act as agents of change in the world.

As patron of ISTA, his words deserve to be the final words of this study, as they perfectly describe the purpose of the ISTA festival, the power of immersive learning and the great potential of the ISTA ensemble method as an instrument for change.

*‘Through the process of making art together, committing themselves to the common good and the bigger picture; putting aside their own self interests to act together. Through their artistic actions and acting they have caused us to think, to feel, to be moved to action ourselves. By learning to act together in the artistic world these young people model for themselves and for us the power of acting together in the social world as well.’*

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – ISTA pedagogy

Appendix 2– calendar of events 2017–2018, 2018–2019

Appendix 3 – ISTA Connect

## PART 5

### The results of the research

#### Research calendar

##### Questionnaires

Event date	Event name	Region	Host school
11 <sup>th</sup> –13 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	Colombo MS festival	Asia Pacific	Overseas School of Colombo
16 <sup>th</sup> –19 <sup>th</sup> March 2017	Atlanta HS festival	Americas	Atlanta International School
21 <sup>st</sup> –23 <sup>rd</sup> April 2017	Singapore PS festival	Asia Pacific	Tanglin Trust School

##### Surveys

Event date	Event name	Region	Host school
3 <sup>rd</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup> May 2018	Copenhagen PS/MS festival	Africa, Europe and the Middle East	Copenhagen International School
2 <sup>nd</sup> –4 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	Phnom Penh HS festival	Asia Pacific	International School of Phnom Penh
16 <sup>th</sup> –18 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	Terezin HS festival	Africa, Europe and the Middle East	Site of learning
13 <sup>th</sup> –15 <sup>th</sup> April 2018	Hong Kong MS festival	Asia Pacific	The International Schools Foundation Academy

## The figures

Quantitative surveys were conducted across a range of four different types of festivals in different regions.

Copenhagen PS festival	35 student responses
Hong Kong MS festival	82 student responses
Terezin HS festival	30 student responses <i>This festival, one of ISTA's sites of learning events, is offered annually and hosted by ISTA with an emphasis on learning related to the Holocaust.</i>
Phnom Penh HS festival	62 student responses <i>This event is an ISTA Connect festival working both with local artists and local students working in collaboration with two NGOs.</i>
Colombo MS festival	23 student responses <i>Questionnaires were completed at the beginning and four months after the Colombo MS festival.</i>
Atlanta HS festival	12 student responses <i>Questionnaires were completed at the beginning and four months after the Atlanta HS festival.</i>
Singapore PS festival	12 student responses

## Questionnaire questions 2016–2017

### Colombo middle school festival

11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> November 2016

#### Initial questions sent November 2016

1. The starting point for the festival was '*Creating karma*'. What does this mean to you?
2. How has your understanding of karma changed as a result of the festival?
3. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your knowledge and understanding of Sri Lankan culture?
4. What do you think is the difference between drama at school and the ISTA festival experience?
5. How do you think the ISTA festival contributed to your education, skills and development?
6. What do you think you will remember most about the experience?

#### Follow up questions sent four months later in March 2017 to the same participants

1. The starting point for the festival was '*Creating karma*'. What does this mean to you?
2. What do you think you learned most at the festival?
3. What did you learn about yourself? About other people?
4. What did you learn about theatre?
5. What do you remember most about the experience?

### Atlanta high school festival

16<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> March 2017

#### Initial questions sent March 2017

1. The starting point for the festival was '*Civil and human rights*'. How do you think your understanding of this subject has changed as a result of the festival?
2. What do you think you learned most at the festival?
3. What did you learn about yourself? About other people?
4. What did you learn about theatre?
5. What do you remember most about the experience?

### **Follow up questions**

1. The starting point for the festival was '*Civil and human rights*'. What does this mean to you?
2. What do you think you learned most at the festival?
3. What did you learn about yourself? About other people?
4. What did you learn about theatre?
5. What do you remember most about the experience?

**Singapore primary school festival**  
21<sup>st</sup>–23<sup>rd</sup> April 2017

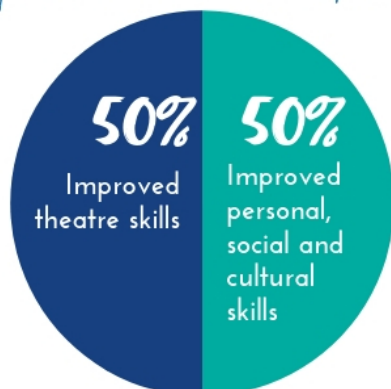
### **Questions sent April 2017**

1. What's in a box?
2. What did you learn at the ISTA festival?
3. What did you enjoy the most?
4. How do you think we learn by playing?

## Questionnaire results



How do you think the ISTA festival contributed to your education, skills and development?



Questions asked *AT* the festival

**73%** Participants said that their own learning deepened as a result of the festival.

**69%** Participants felt that friends and friendships they made were the most memorable feature of the festival.

**27%** Participants identified the final performance as being what they would remember most about the festival.

## Colombo MS festival

Questions asked *4 MONTHS AFTER* the festival

What do you remember most? Choose as many as you wish.

**93%** Students felt that friends and friendships they made were the most memorable feature of the festival.

**43%** Identified the development of theatre and theatre related skills as a significant feature of the festival.

**39%** Identified learning about the starting point as a memorable feature.

What did you learn most? Choose as many as you wish.

**69%** Students felt that theatre related learning was what they learned most at the festival.

**34%** Students felt that cultural and international mindedness was what they learned most at the festival.

What did you learn about yourself or other people?

**52%** Identified qualities that we associate with international mindedness.

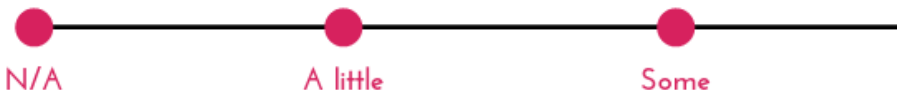
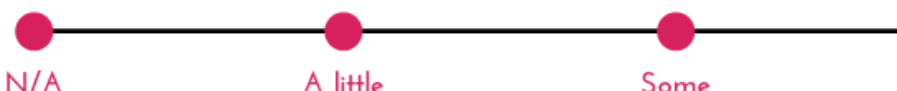
What did you learn about theatre?

**73%** learned about the role and form of theatre and its possibilities rather than identifying particular individual skills.

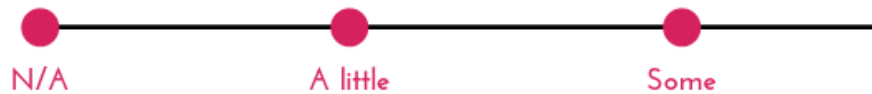
## Festival survey questions 2017–2018

The following survey questions were distributed to students across all festivals included in the study.

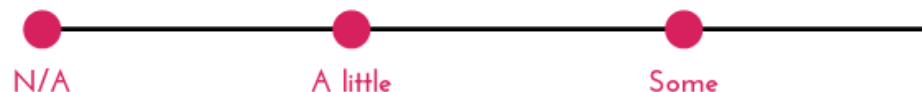
Event date	Event name	Region	Host school
3 <sup>rd</sup> –6 <sup>th</sup> May 2018	Copenhagen PS/MS festival	Africa, Europe and the Middle East	Copenhagen International School
2 <sup>nd</sup> –4 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	Phnom Penh HS festival	Asia Pacific	International School of Phnom Penh
16 <sup>th</sup> –18 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	Terezin HS festival	Africa, Europe and the Middle East	Site of learning
13 <sup>th</sup> –15 <sup>th</sup> April 2018	Hong Kong MS festival	Asia Pacific	The International Schools Foundation Academy

Name	
Festival	
School	
Date	
Questions	<p>Please answer the following questions:</p> <p>1. How much did you learn about the subject of the starting point of the ISTA festival?</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  </div> <p>2. How much did you learn about the subject of the starting point of the ISTA festival?</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-top: 20px;">  </div>

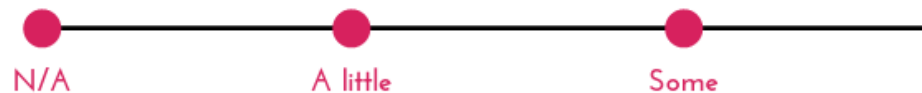
3. How much did you learn about theatre at the ISTA festival?



4. How much did you learn about the culture of the place where the ISTA festival took place?



5. Did you connect with new people?



6. Which of these were the most important aspects of the ISTA festival experience for you? Tick as many or as few as you wish.

- Learning
- Performing
- Creating an original piece of theatre
- Gaining theatre skills through workshops
- Time with your ensemble
- Working together with different people
- Learning about the world
- Social interaction
- The intensity of the experience

7. Please rate the following statements:

Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's practical.



Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're learning with students from different schools.



Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it all takes place in a short amount of time.



Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's different to learning at school.



Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're working with artists.



Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn about yourself.

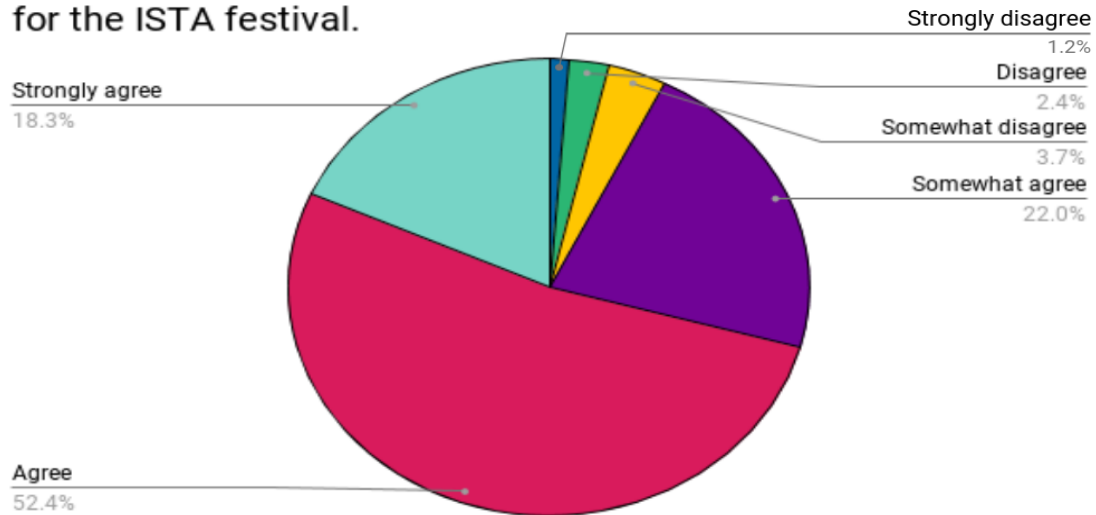


Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn how to interact with different people.

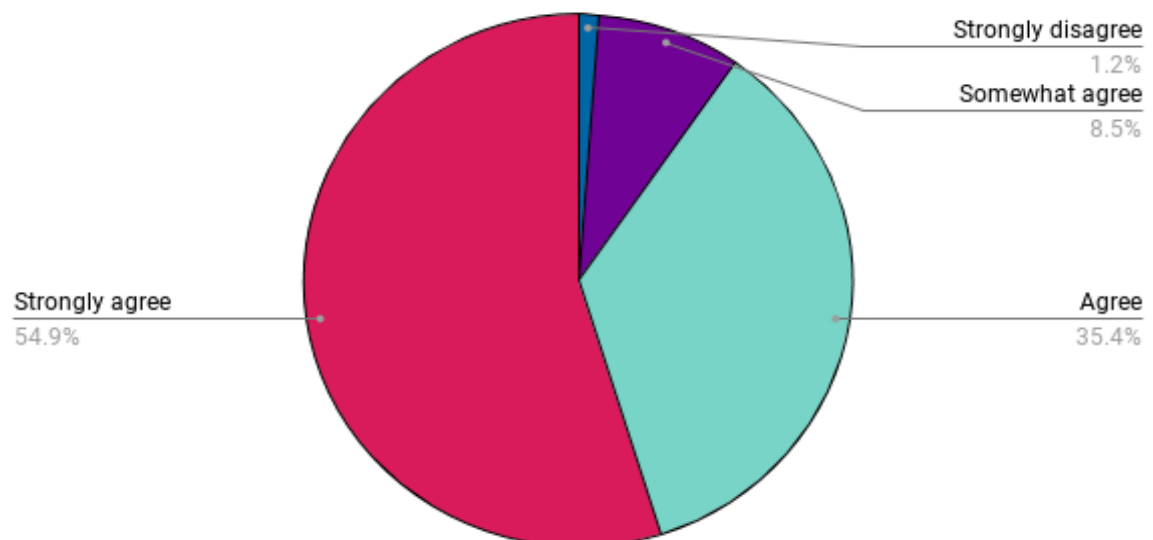


## Hong Kong MS student survey results

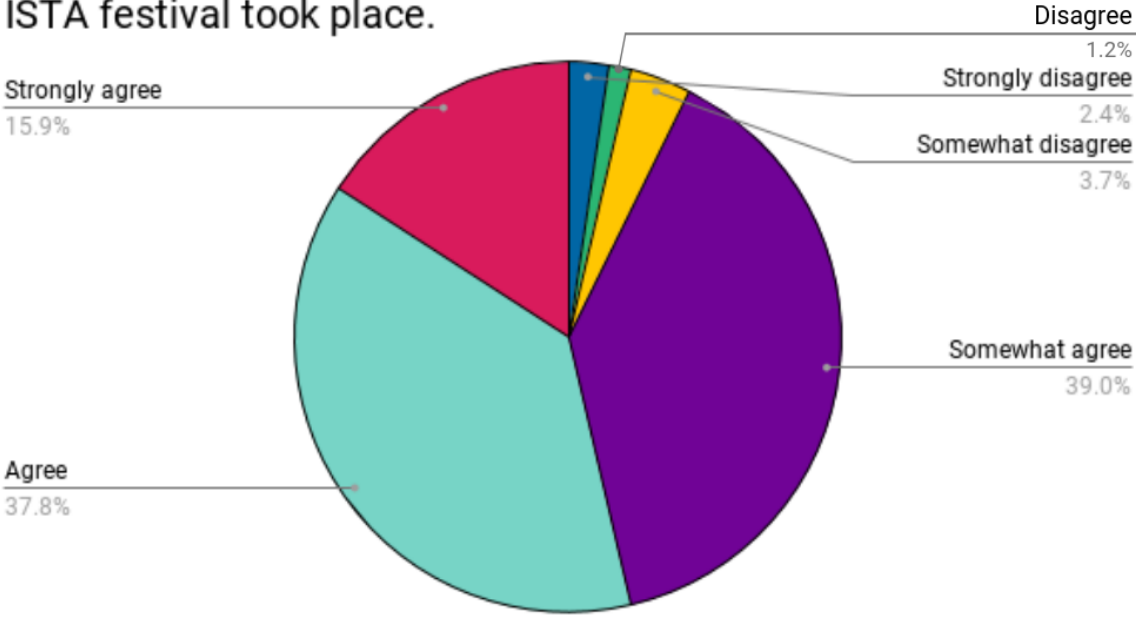
1. I learnt about the meanings and themes of the starting point for the ISTA festival.



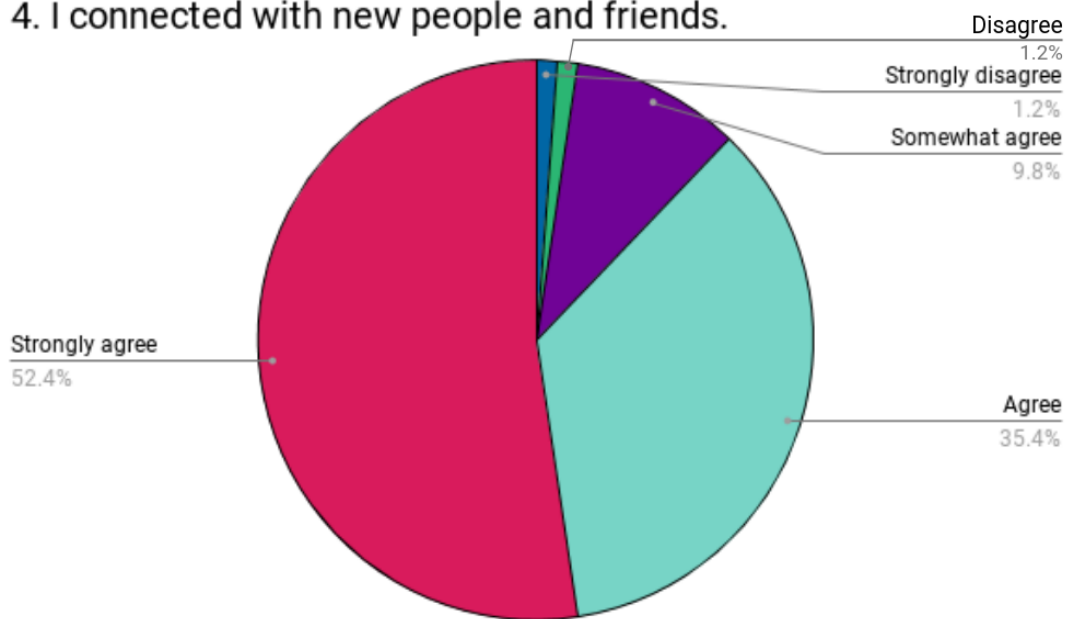
2. I learnt new skills and ideas about theatre at the ISTA festival.



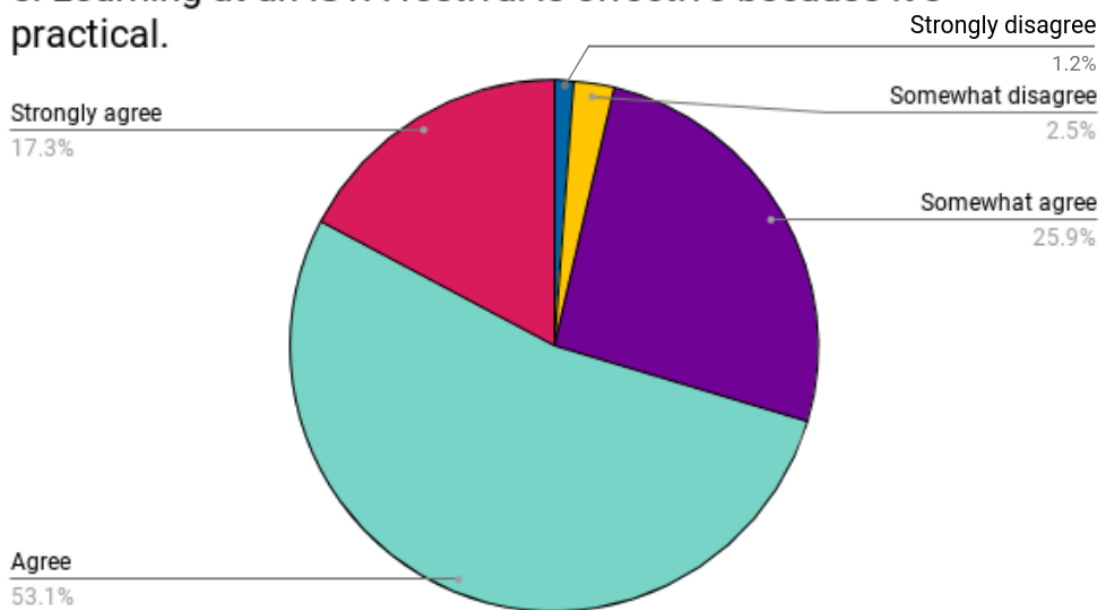
3. I learnt about the culture of the people and place where the ISTA festival took place.



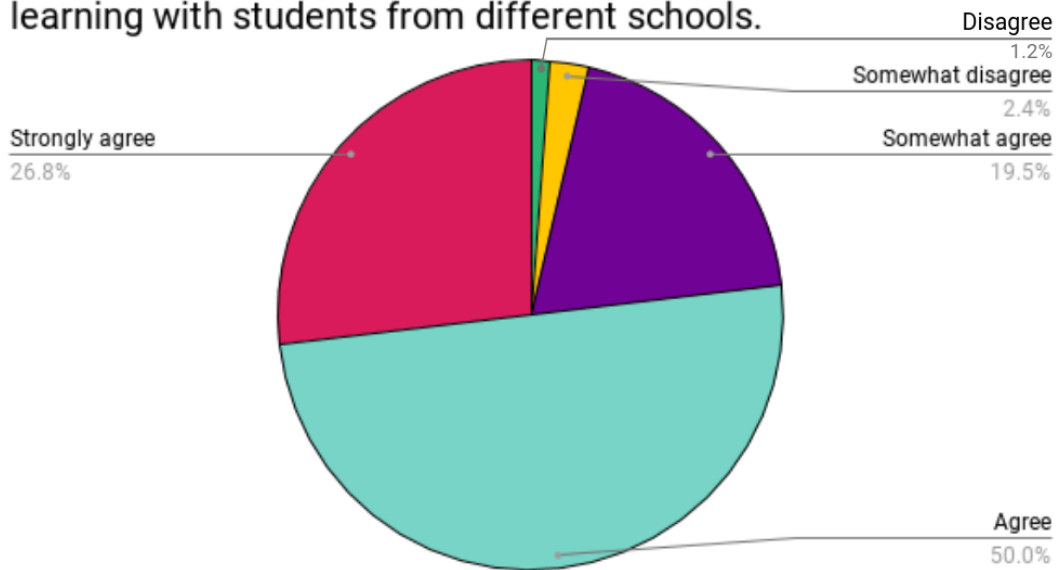
4. I connected with new people and friends.



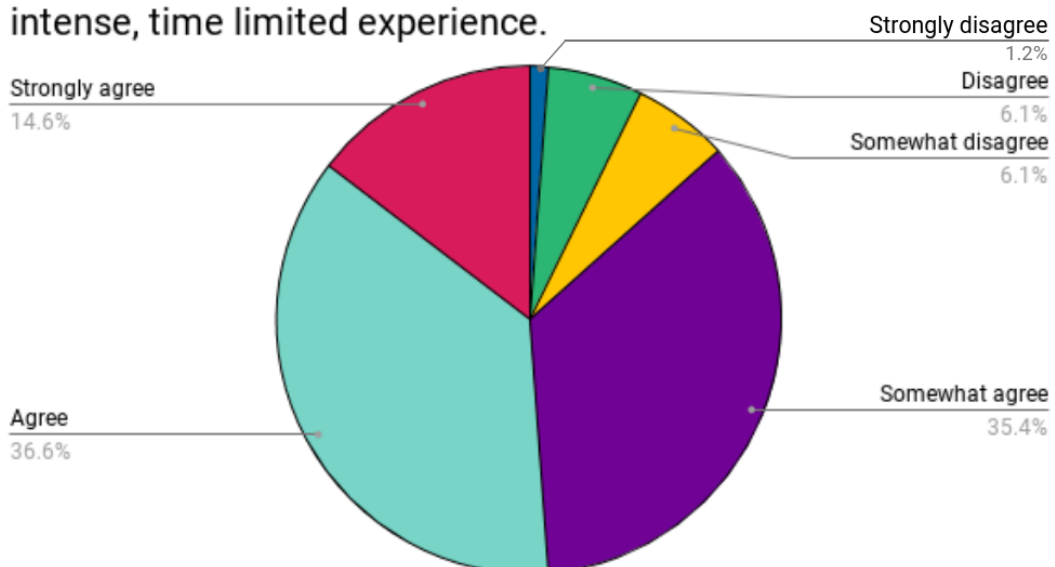
5. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's practical.



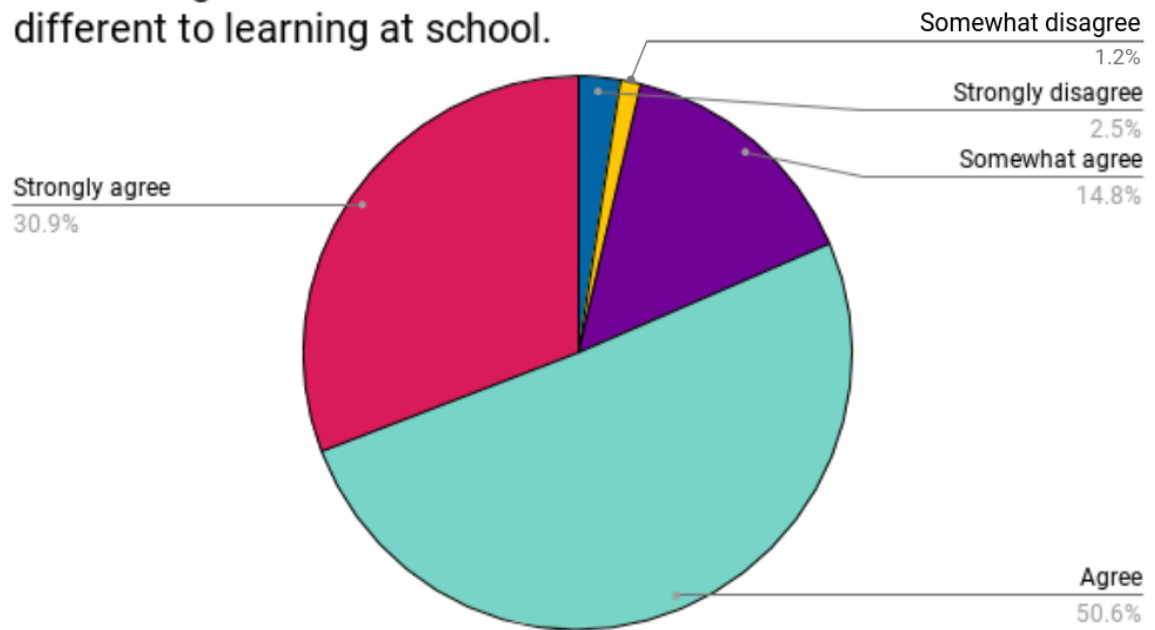
6. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're learning with students from different schools.



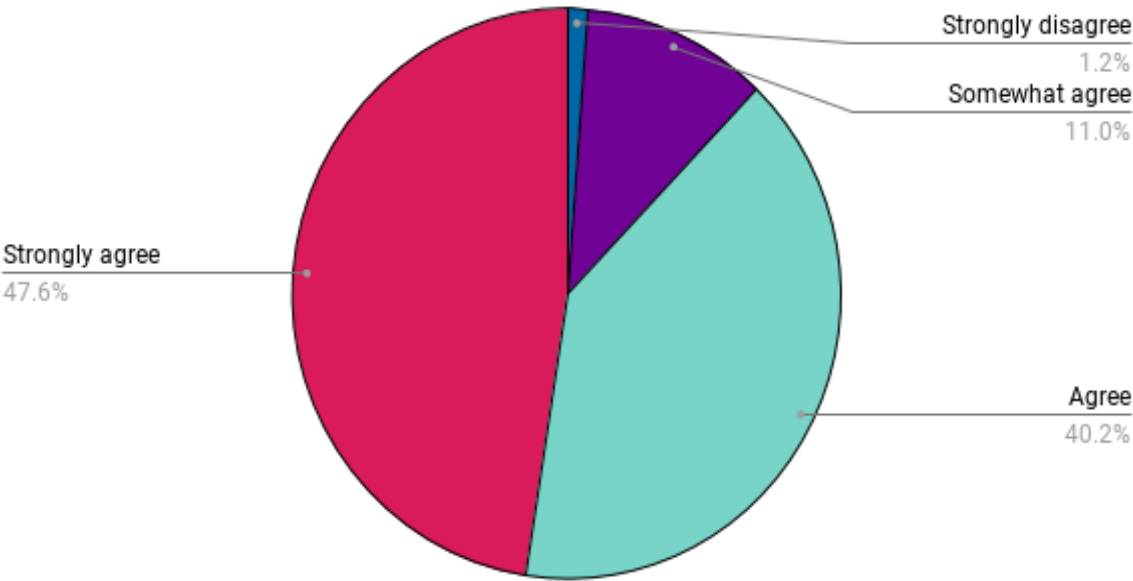
7. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's an intense, time limited experience.



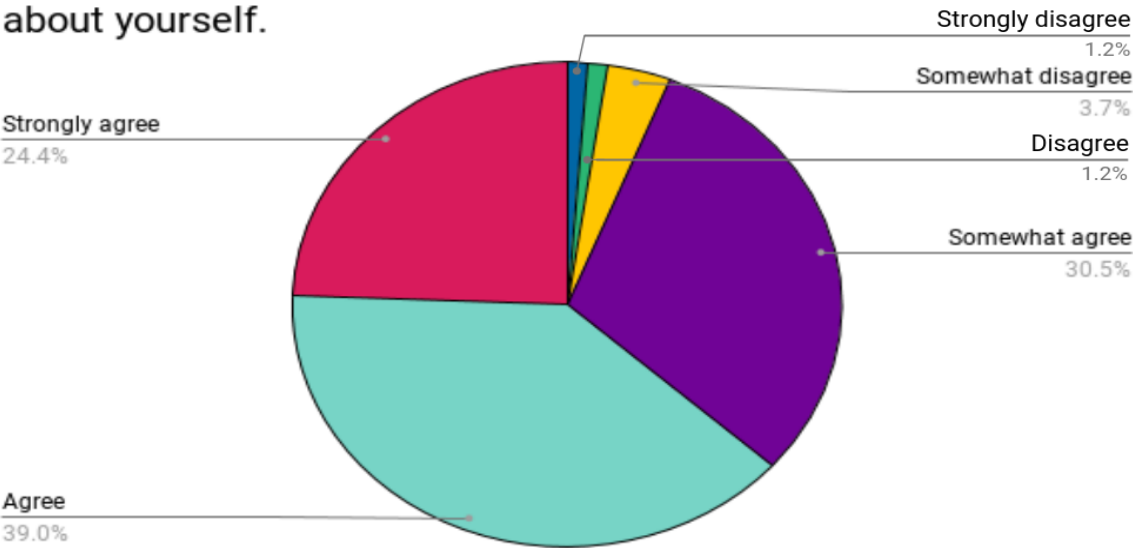
8. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's different to learning at school.



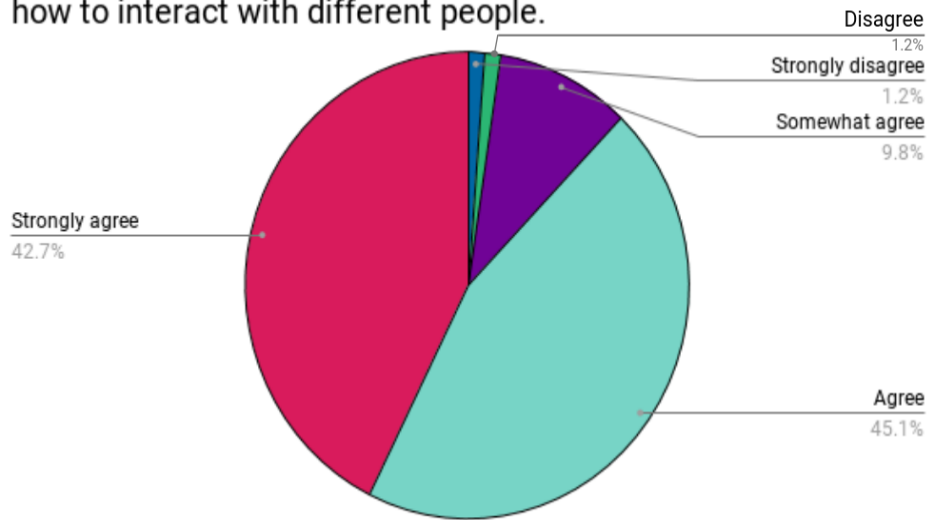
9. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're working with artists.



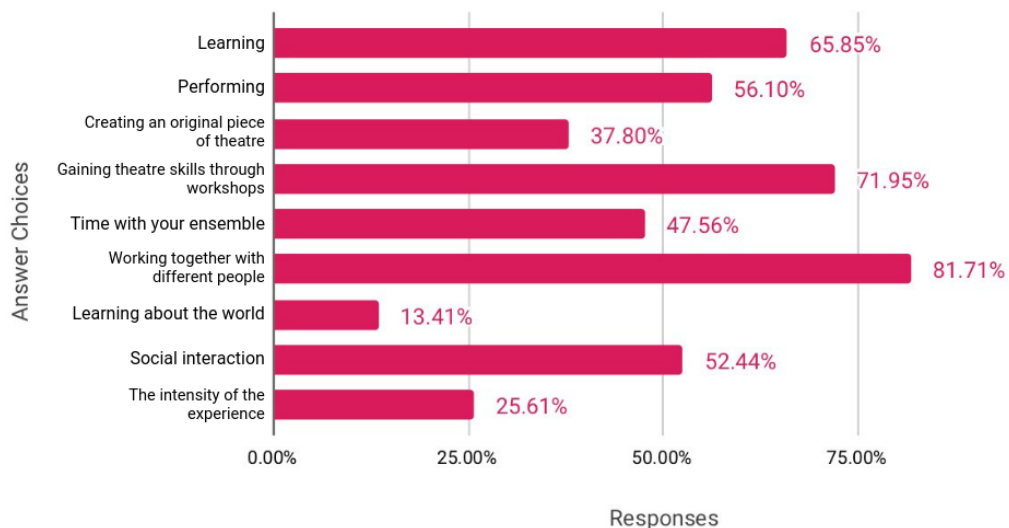
10. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn about yourself.



11. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn how to interact with different people.



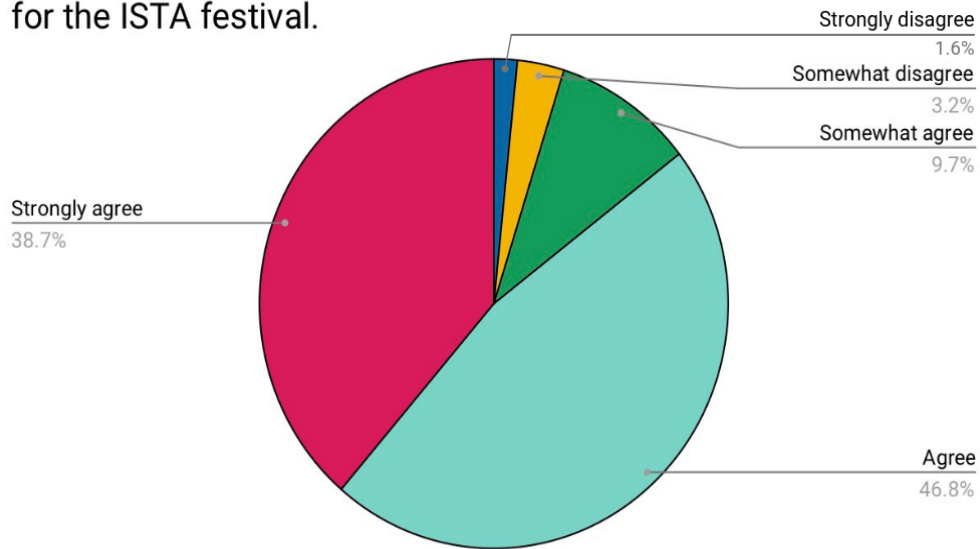
12. Which of these were the most important aspects of the ISTA festival experience for you? Tick as many or as few as you wish.



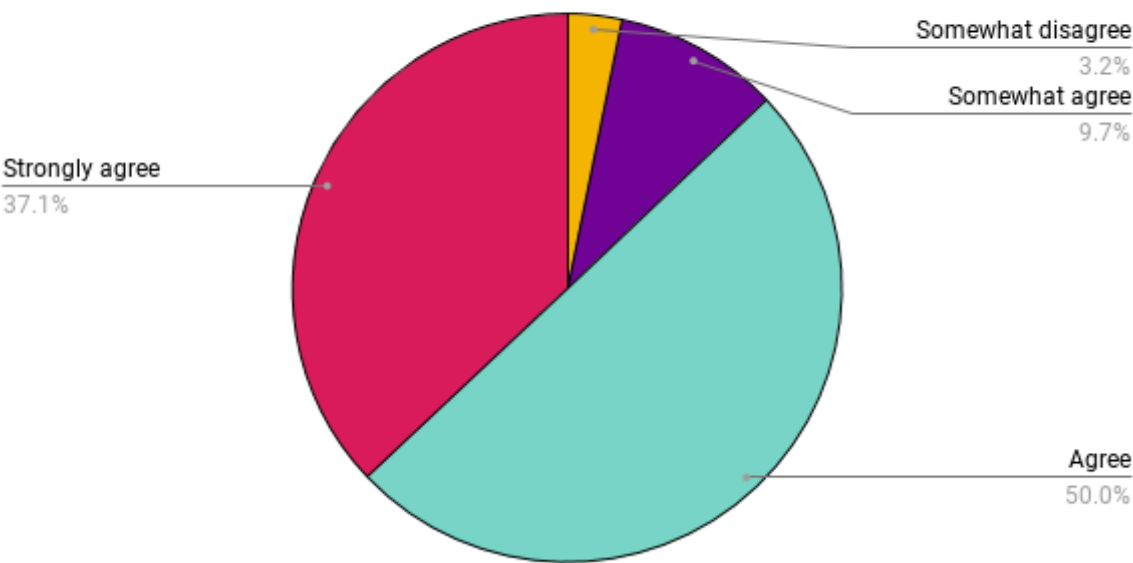
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## Phnom Penh HS student survey results

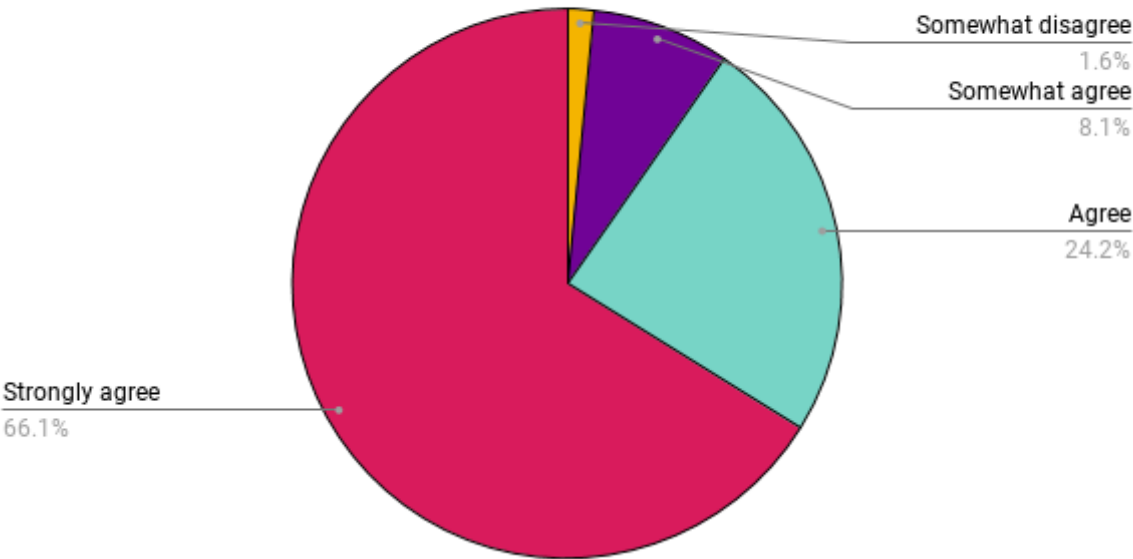
1. I learnt about the meanings and themes of the starting point for the ISTA festival.



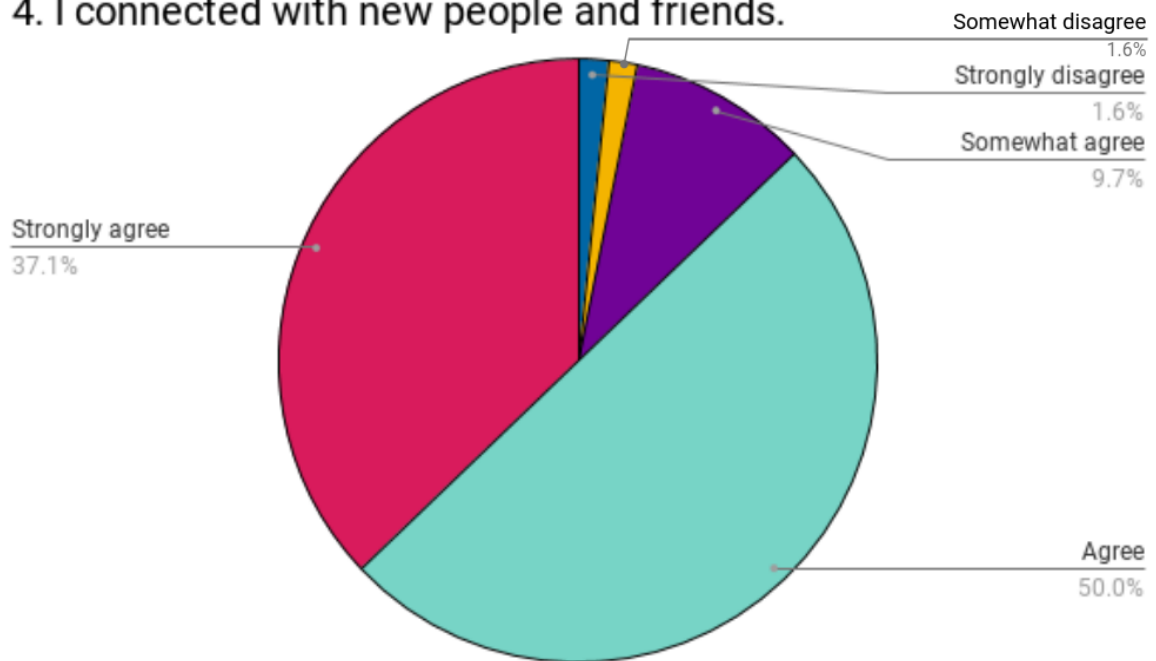
2. I learnt new skills and ideas about theatre at the ISTA festival.



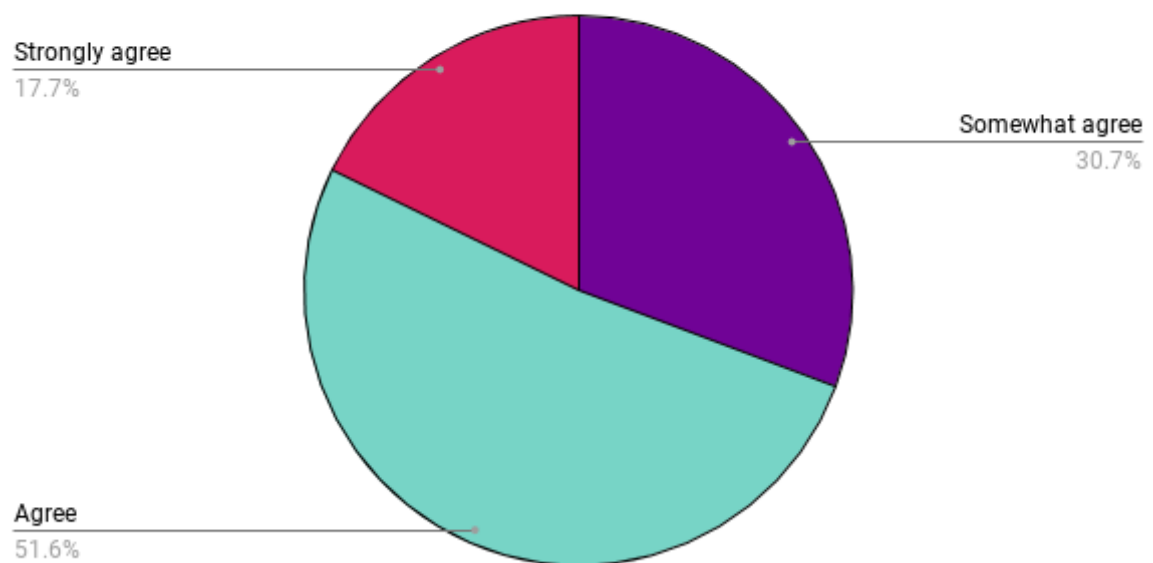
3. I learnt about the culture of the people and place where the ISTA festival took place.



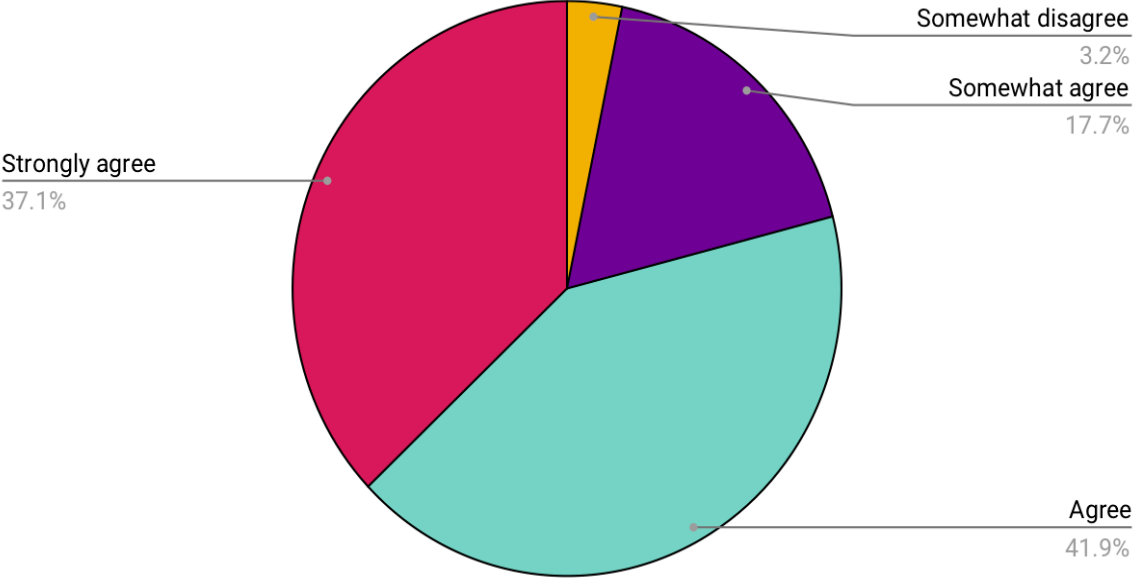
#### 4. I connected with new people and friends.



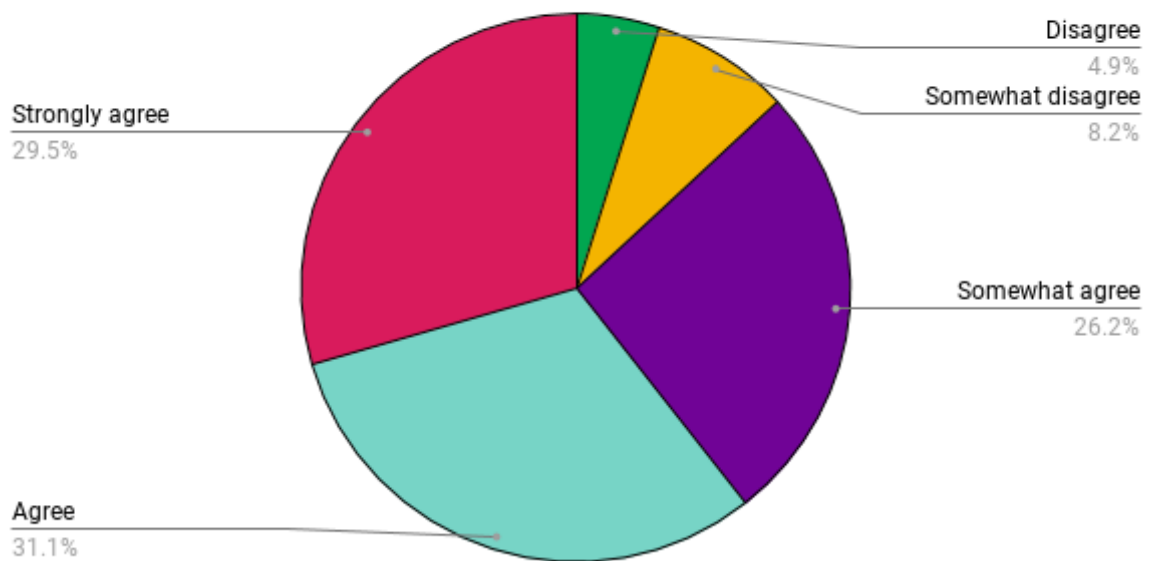
#### 5. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's practical.



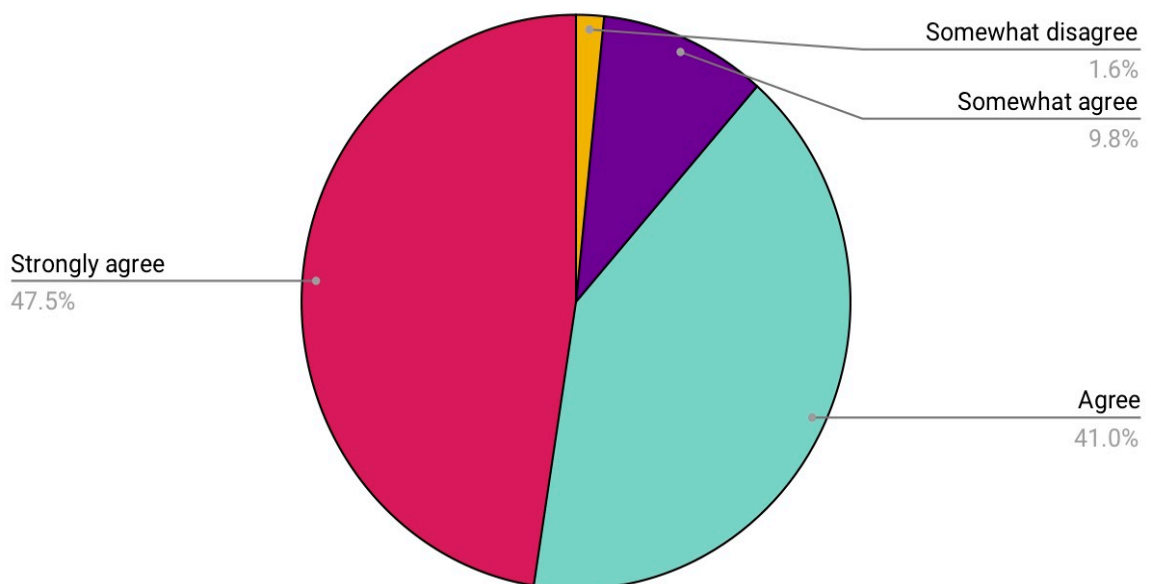
6. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're learning with students from different schools.



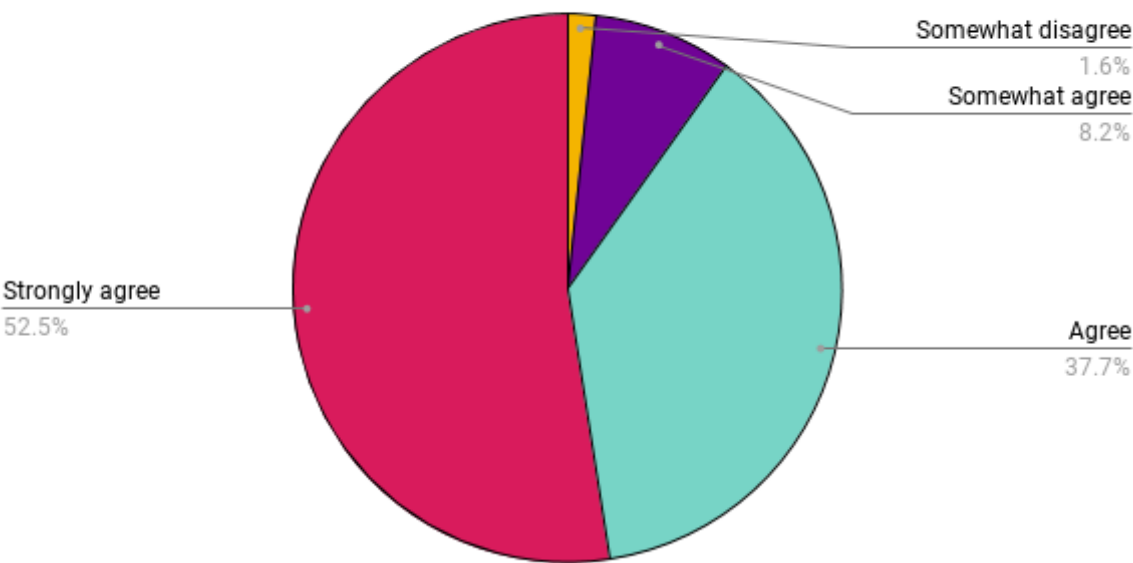
7. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's an intense, time limited experience.



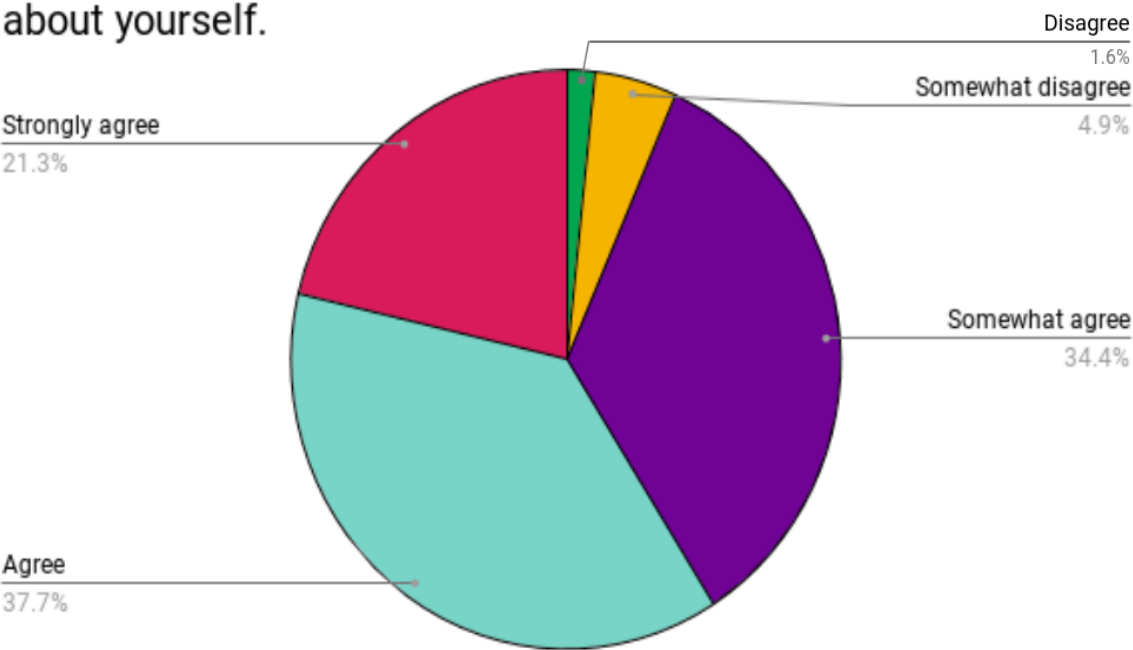
8. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's different to learning at school.



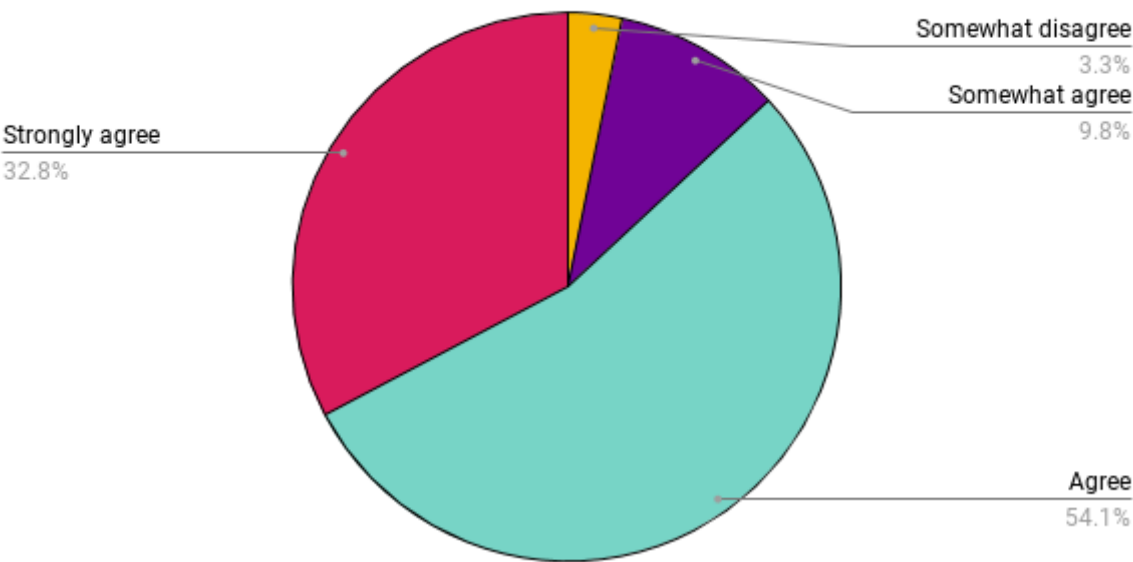
9. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're working with artists.



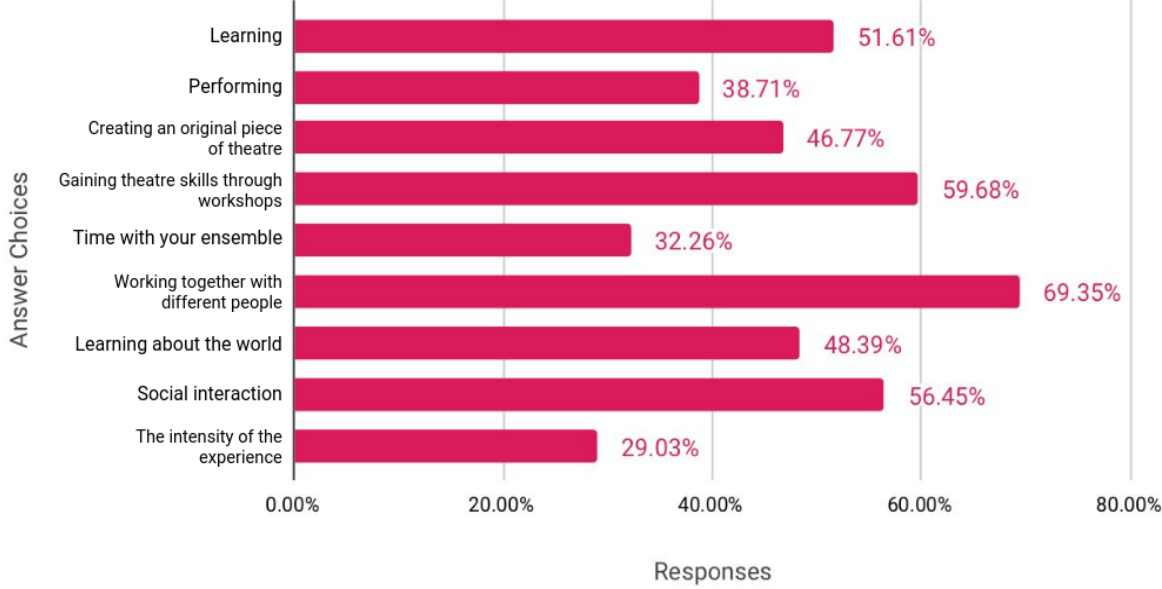
10. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn about yourself.



11. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn how to interact with different people.

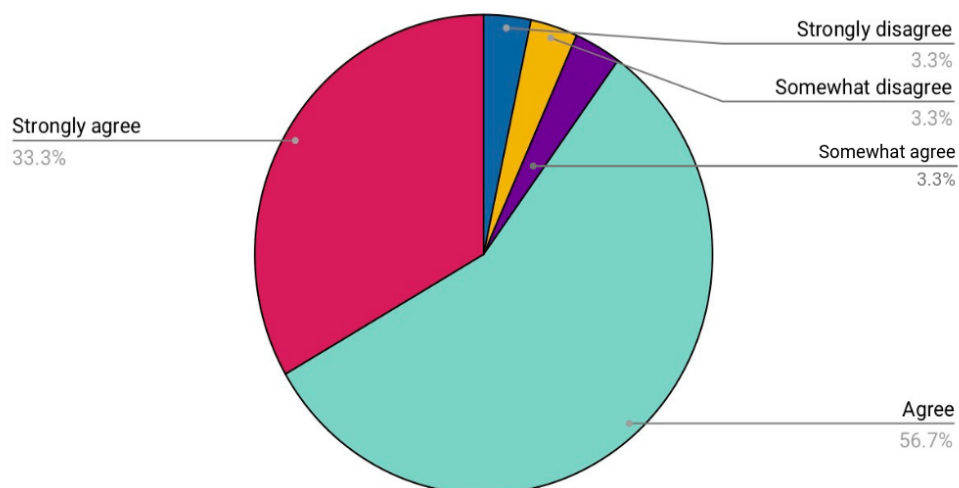


12. Which of these were the most important aspects of the ISTA festival experience for you? Tick as many or as few as you wish.

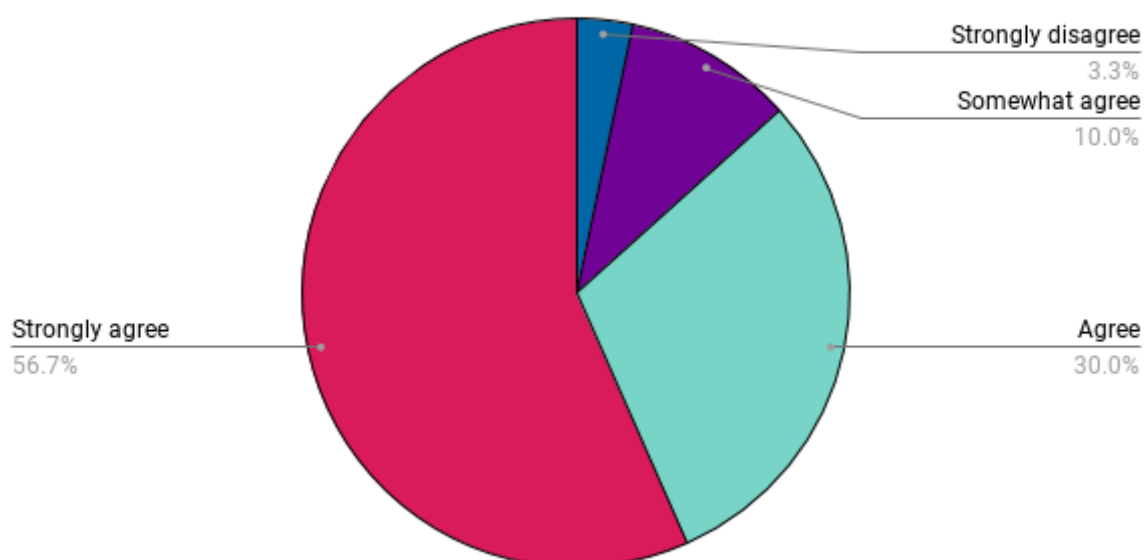


**Terezin HS student survey results**

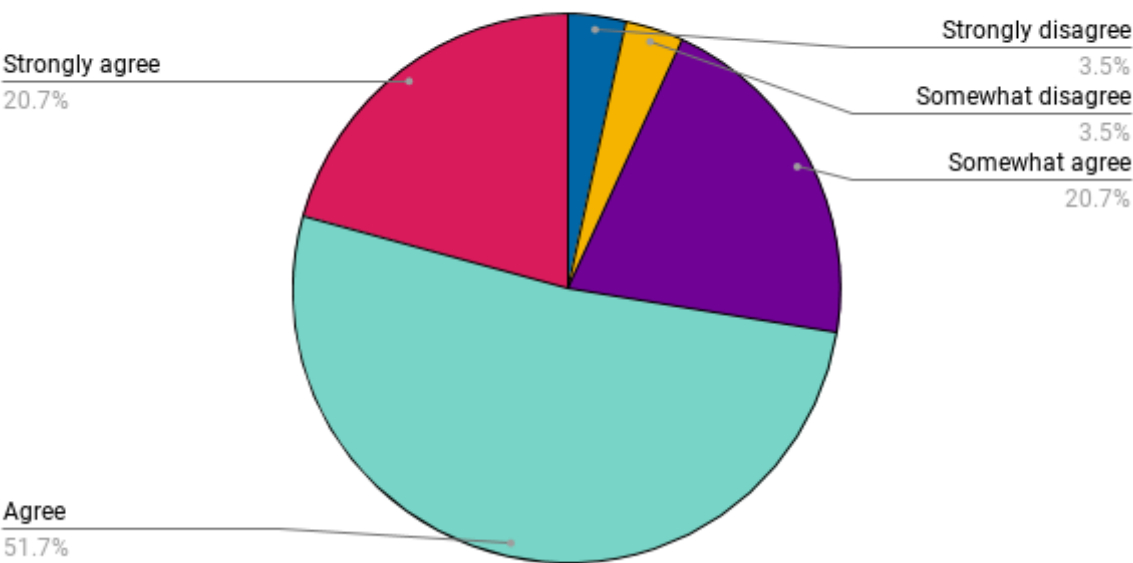
1. I learnt about the meanings and themes of the starting point for the ISTA festival.



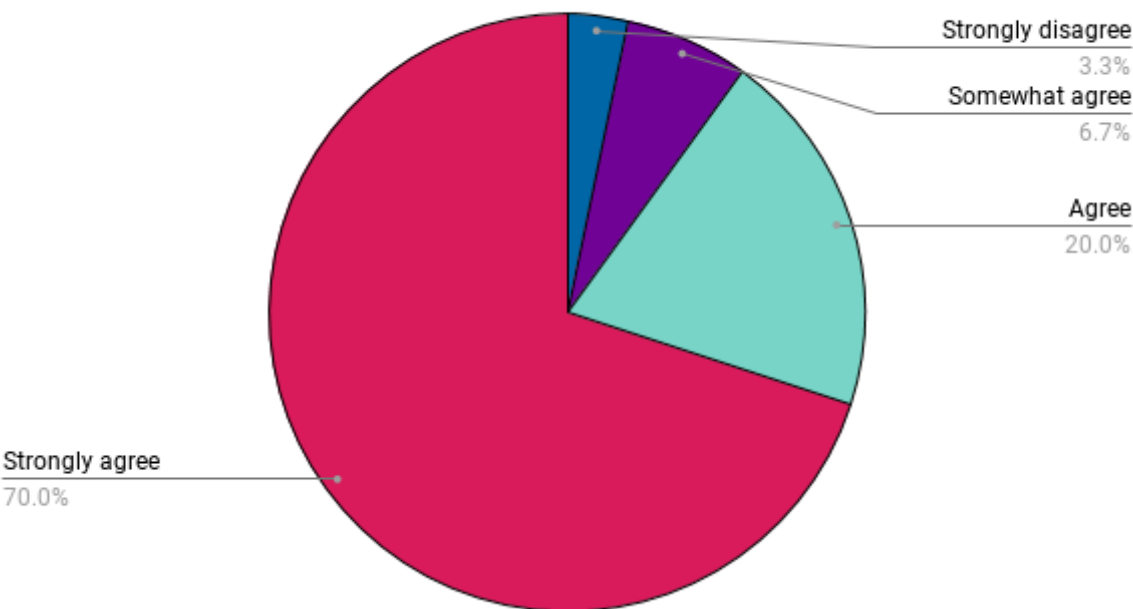
2. I learnt new skills and ideas about theatre at the ISTA festival.



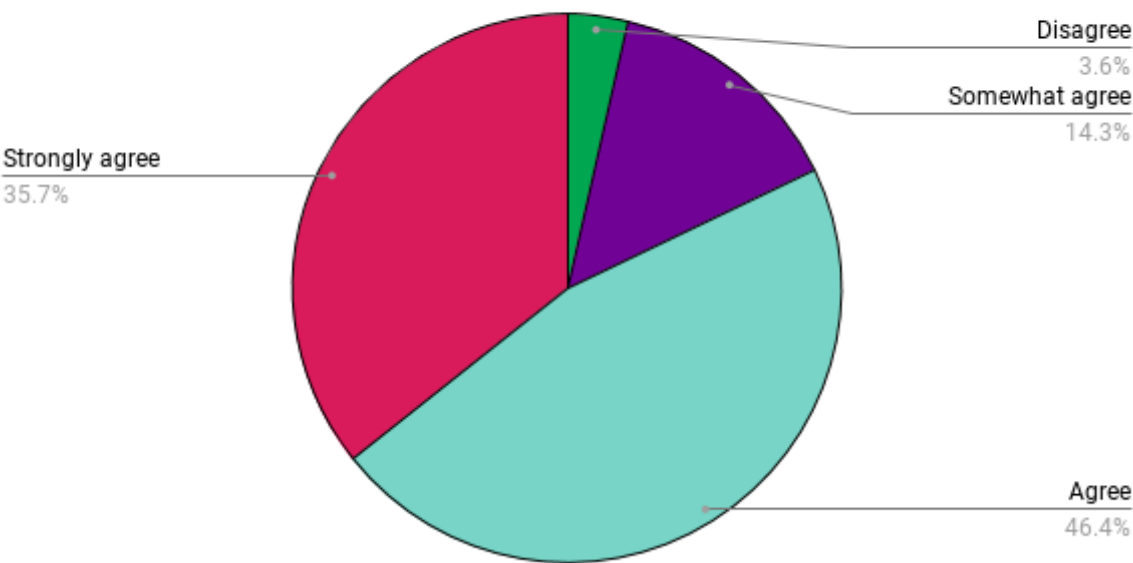
3. I learnt about the culture of the people and place where the ISTA festival took place.



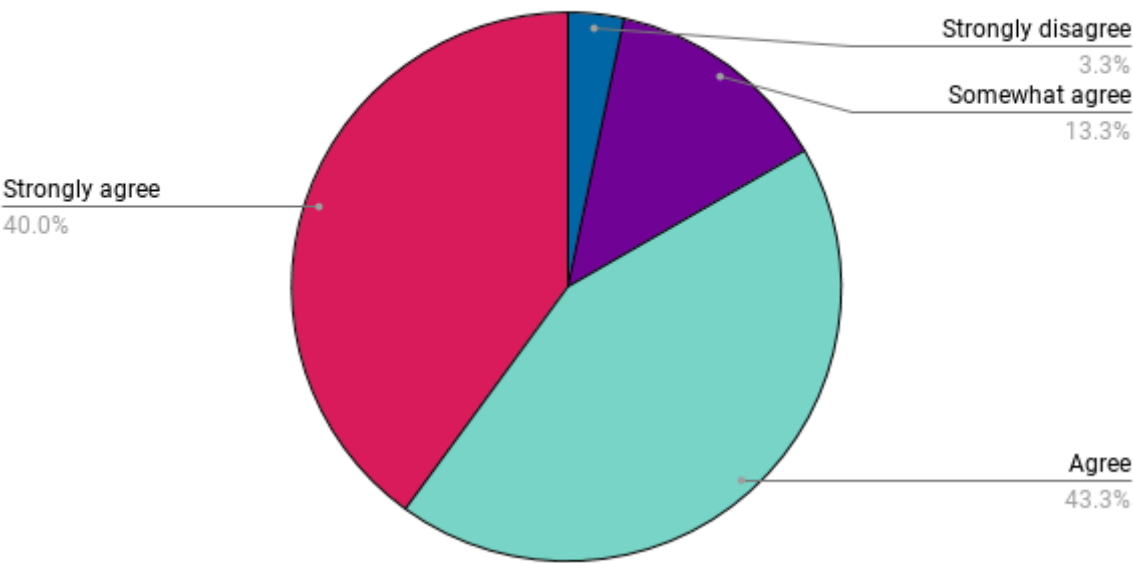
4. I connected with new people and friends.



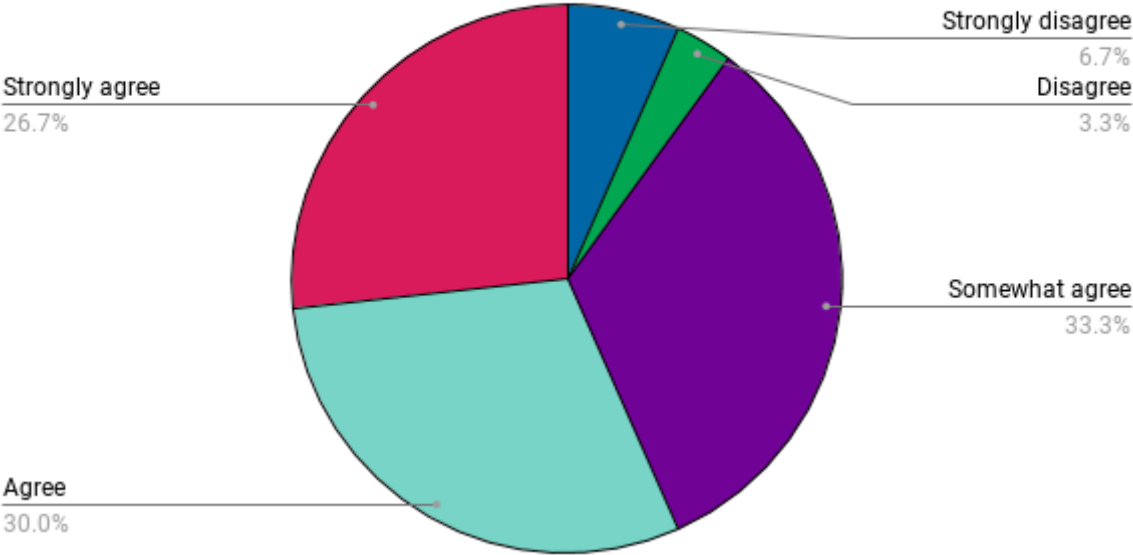
5. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's practical.



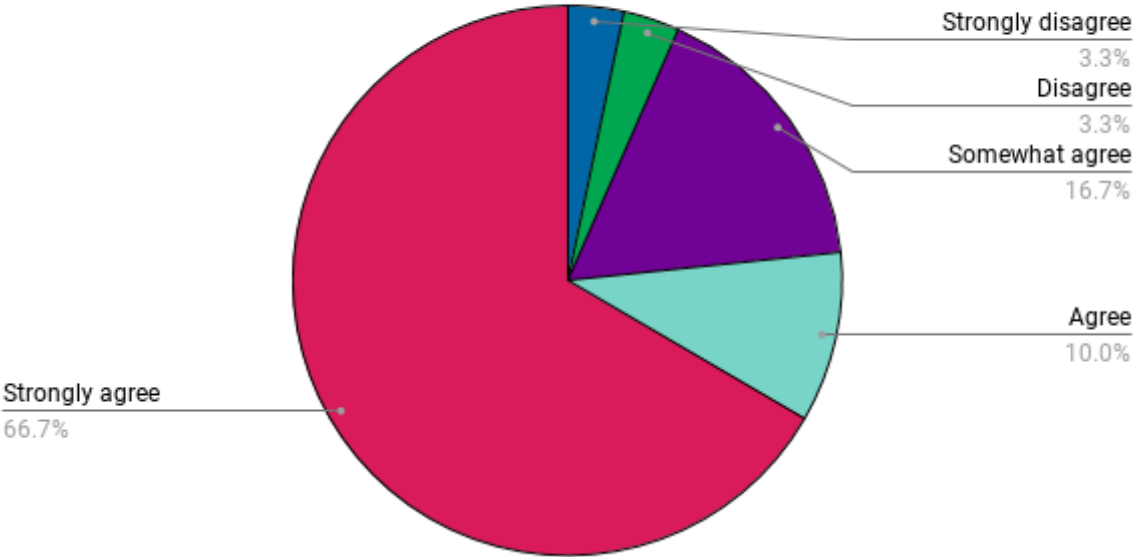
6. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're learning with students from different schools.



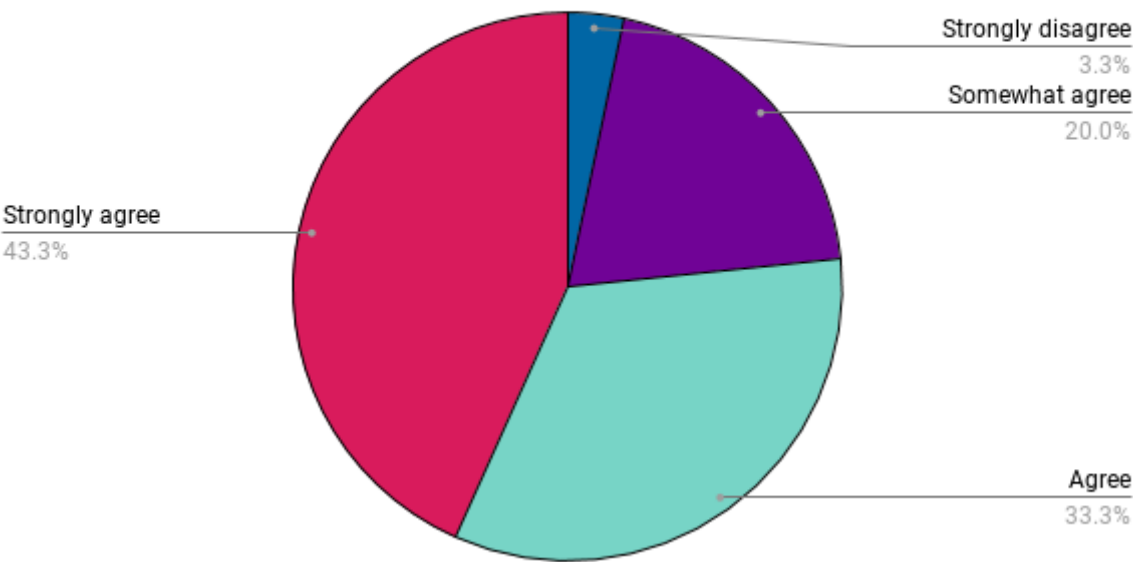
7. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's an intense, time limited experience.



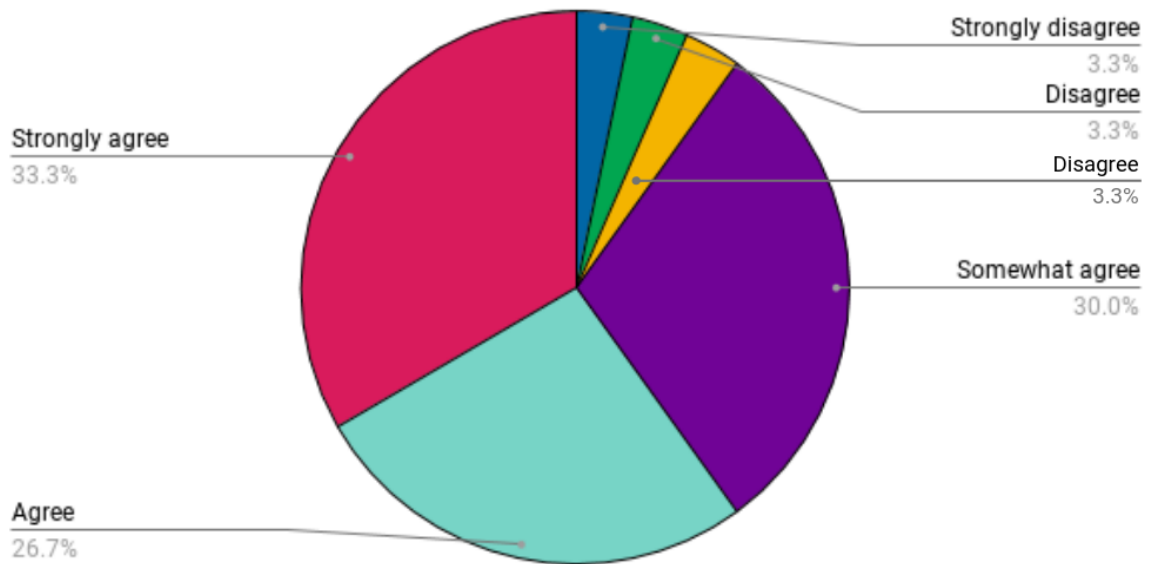
8. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's different to learning at school.



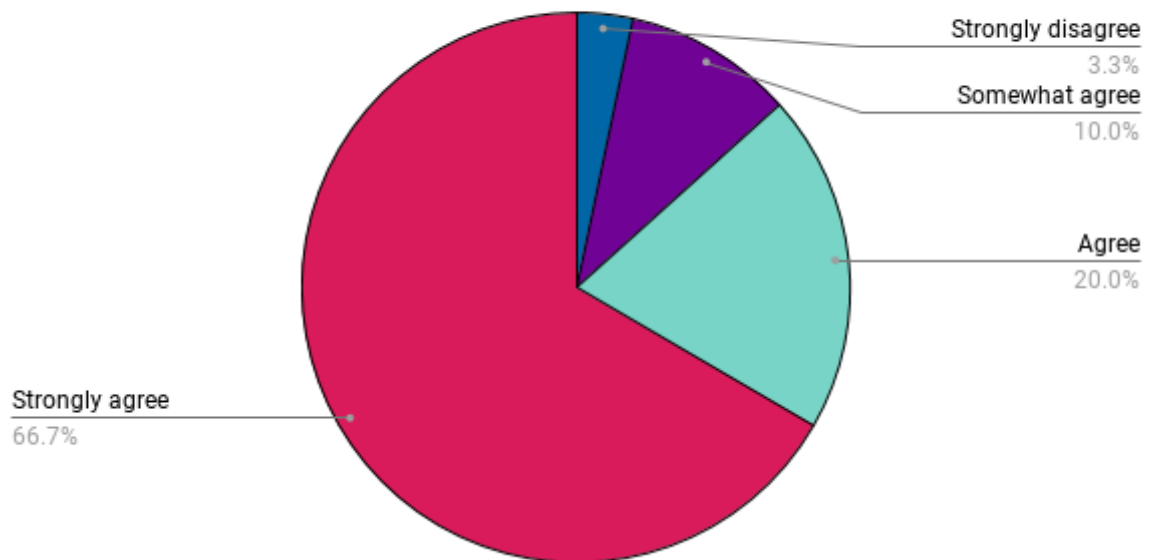
9. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're working with artists.



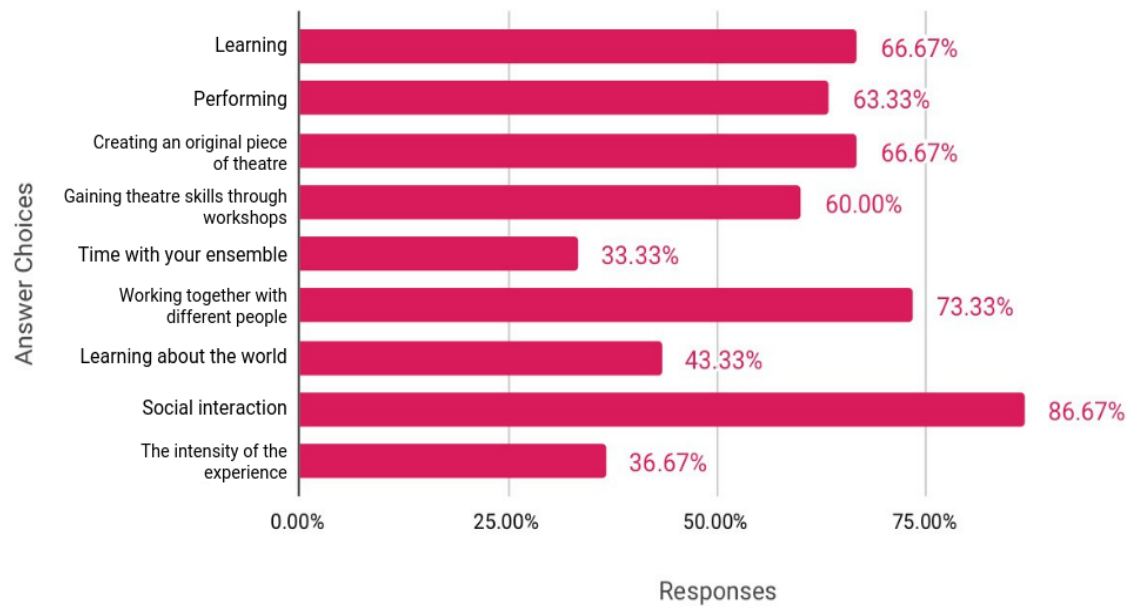
10. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn about yourself.



11. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn how to interact with different people.



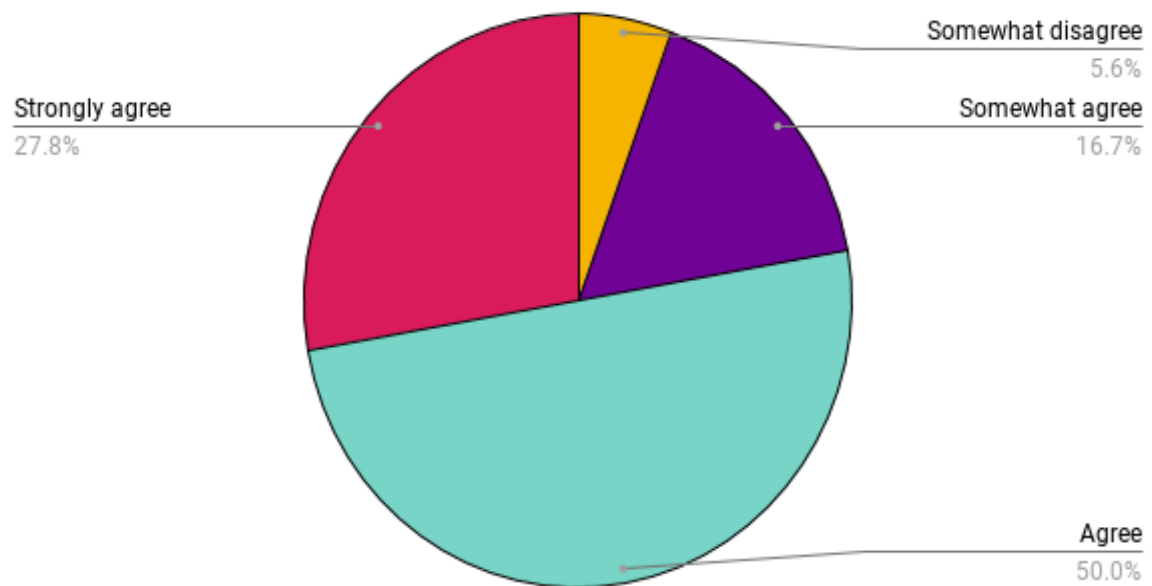
12. Which of these were the most important aspects of the ISTA festival experience for you? Tick as many or as few as you wish.



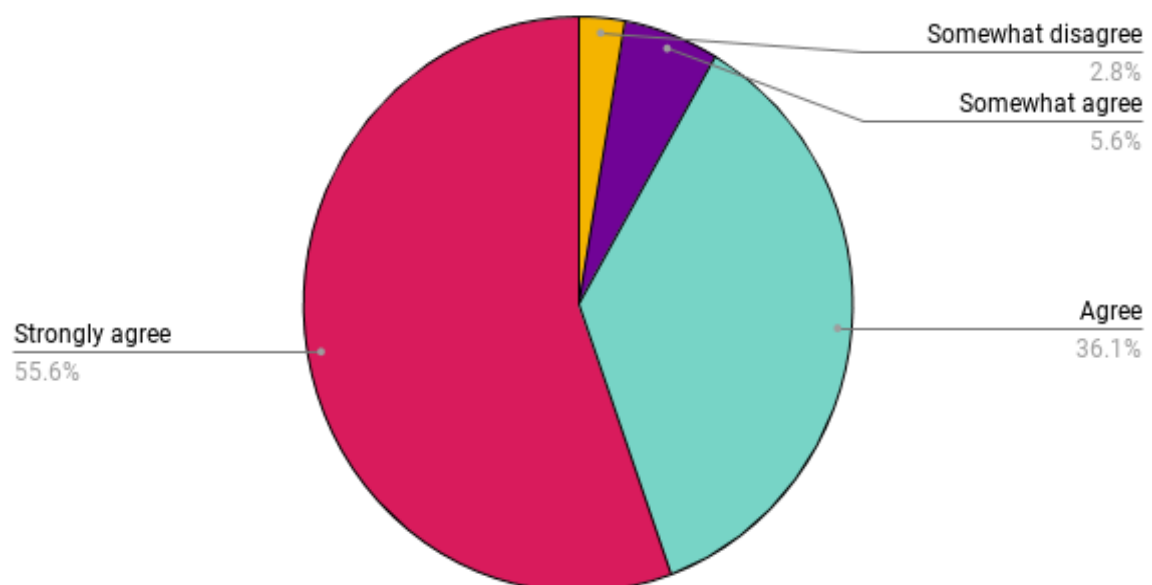
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### Copenhagen PS/MS student survey results

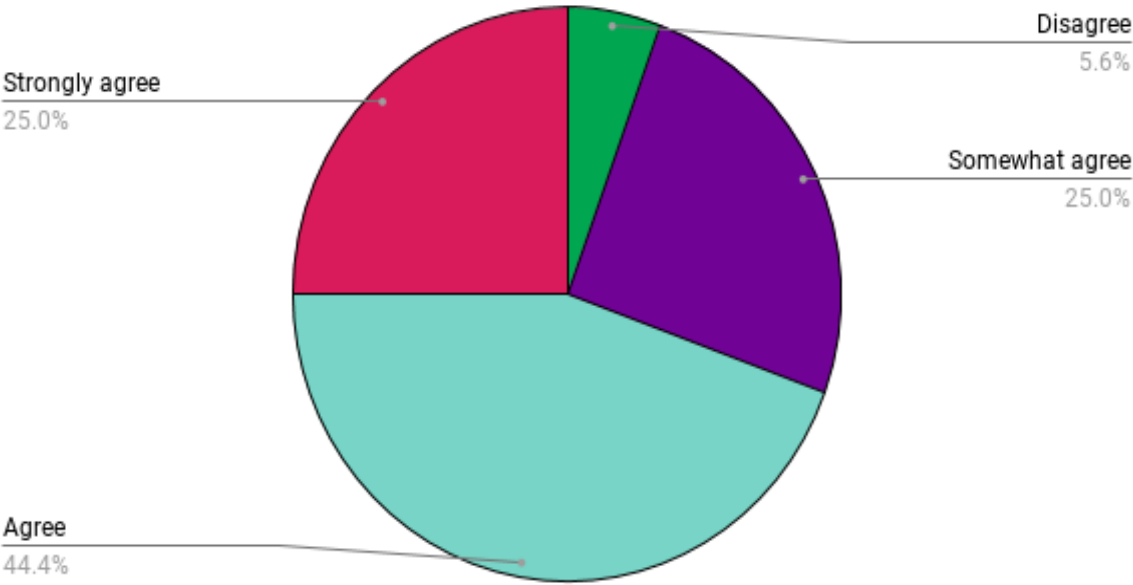
1. I learnt about the meanings and themes of the starting point for the ISTA festival.



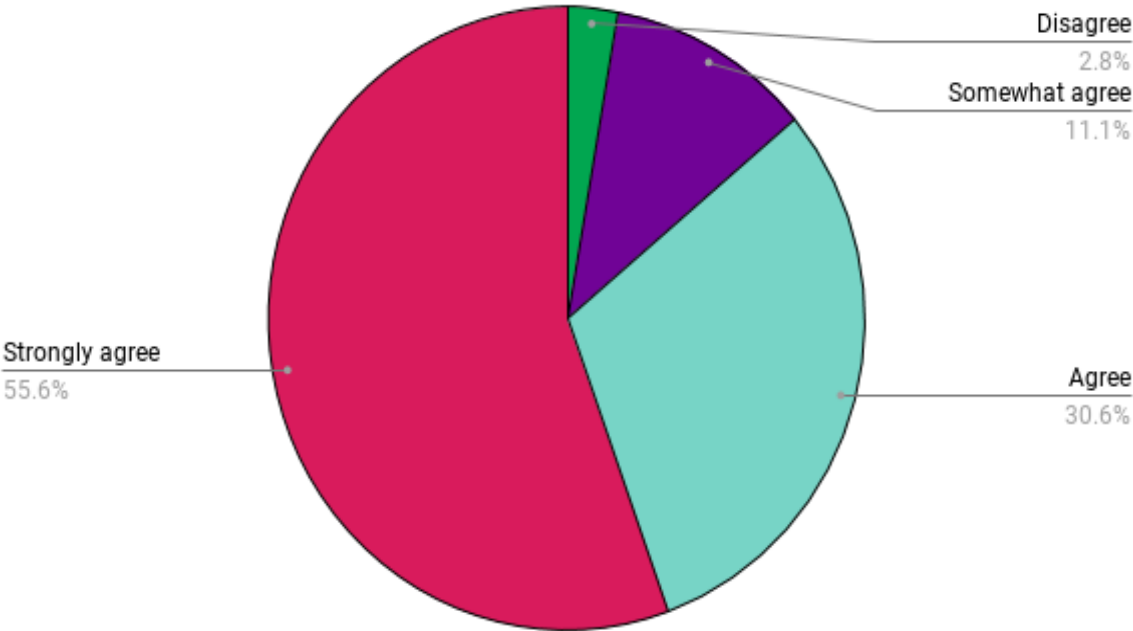
2. I learnt new skills and ideas about theatre at the ISTA festival.



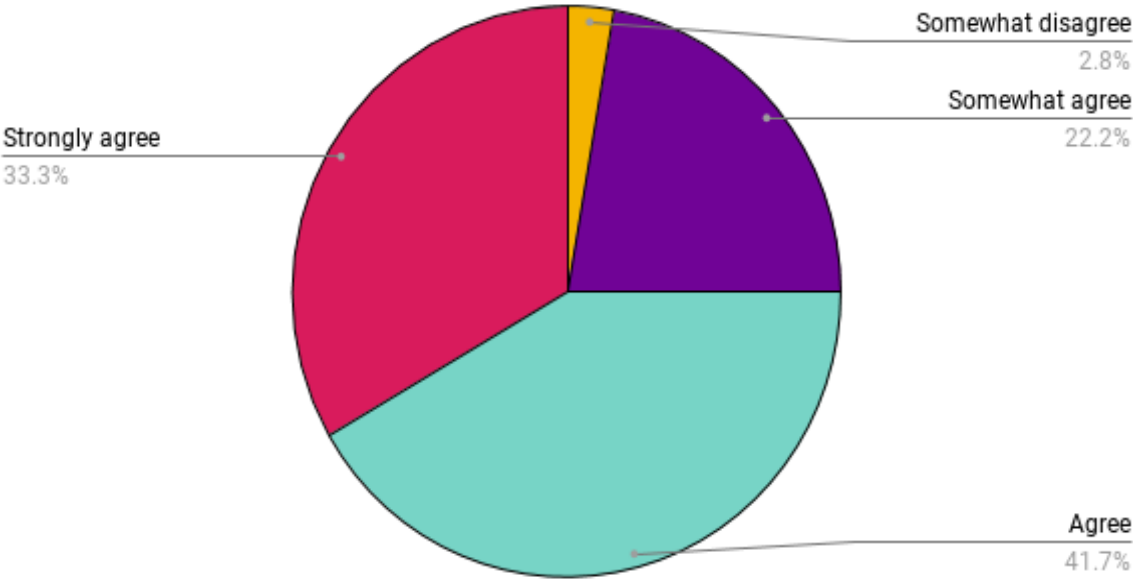
3. I learnt about the culture of the people and place where the ISTA festival took place.



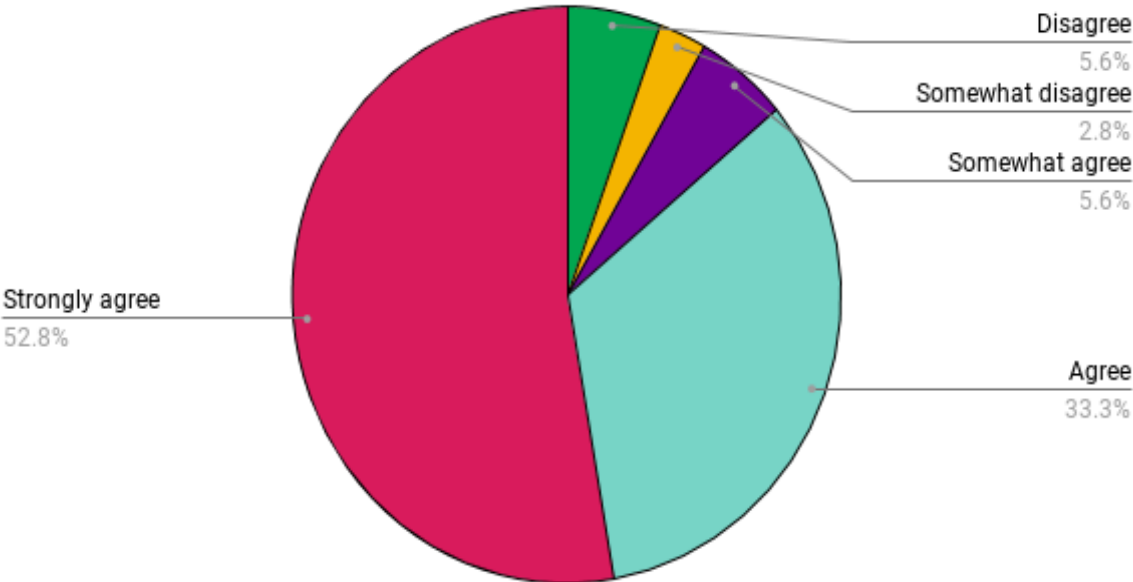
4. I connected with new people and friends.



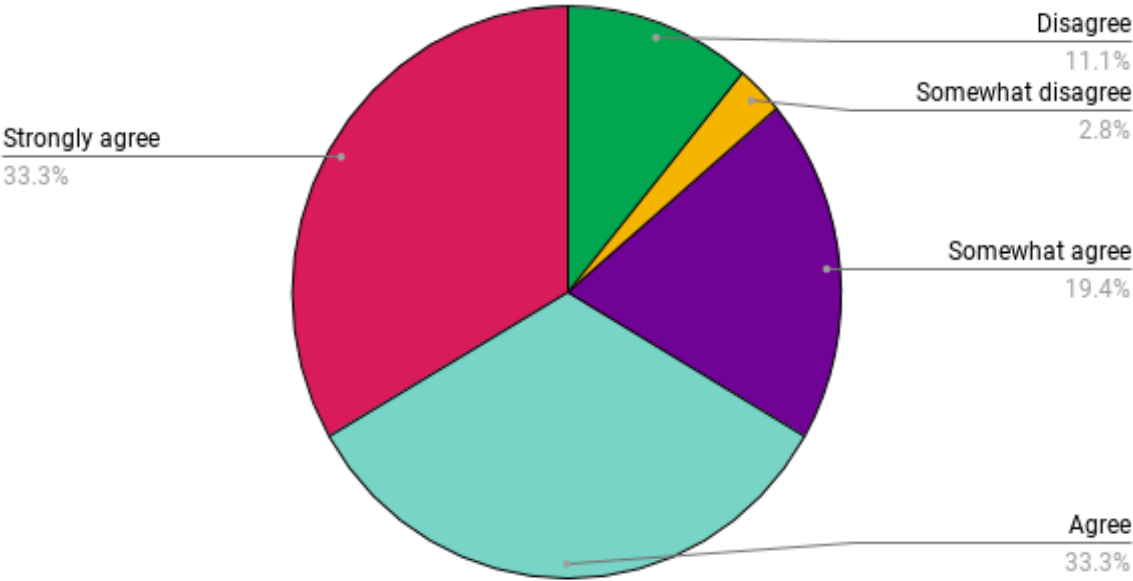
5. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's practical.



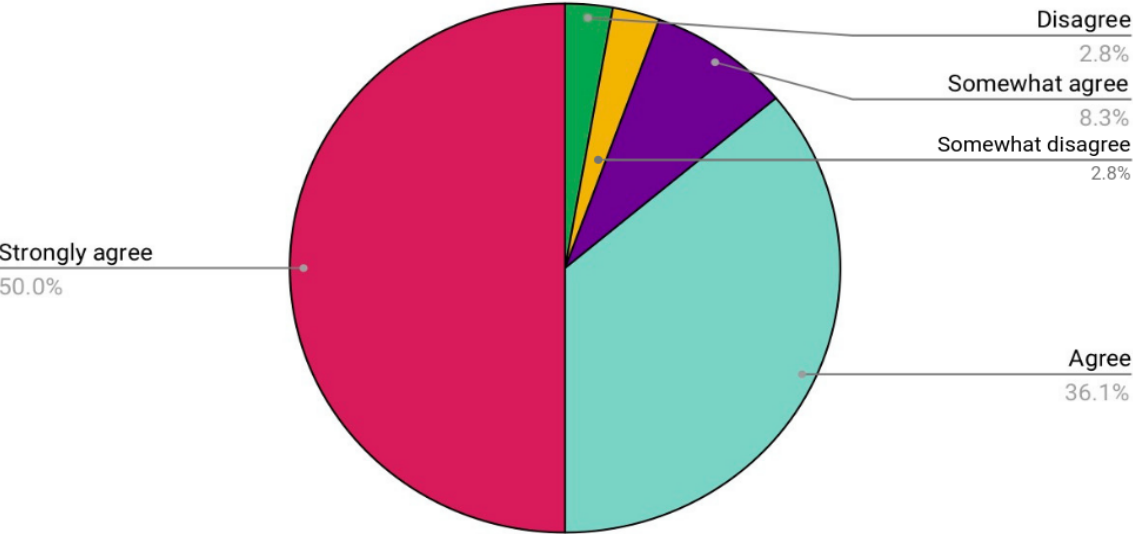
6. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're learning with students from different schools.



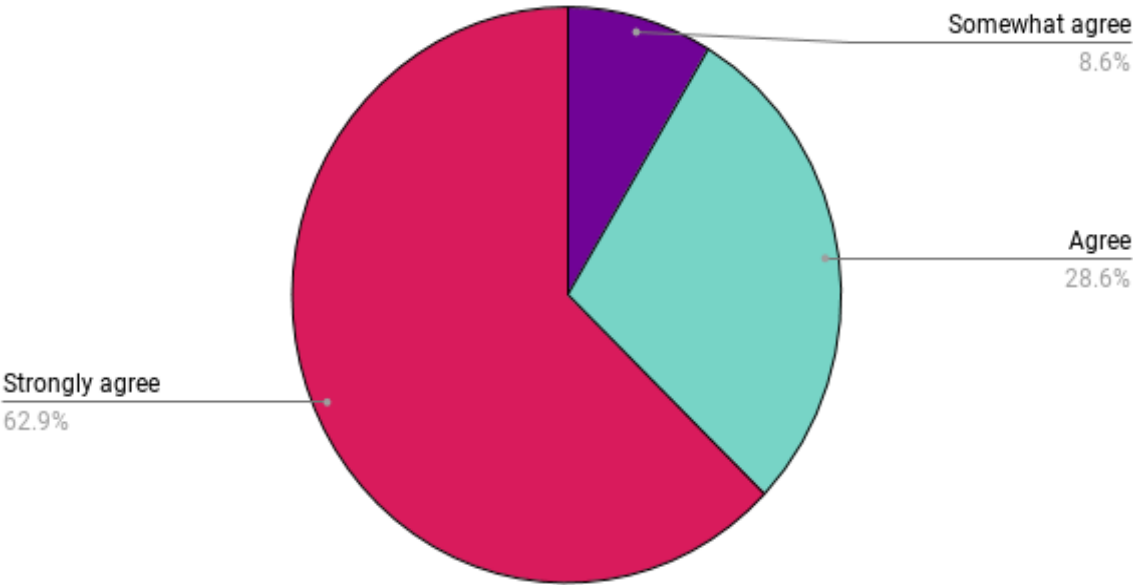
7. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's an intense, time limited experience.



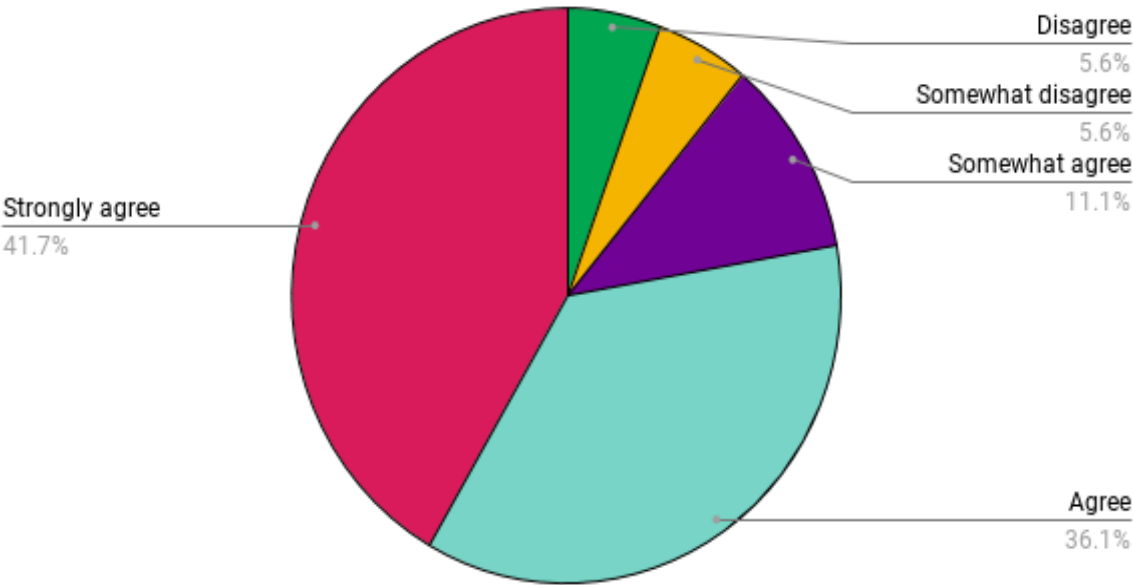
8. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because it's different to learning at school.



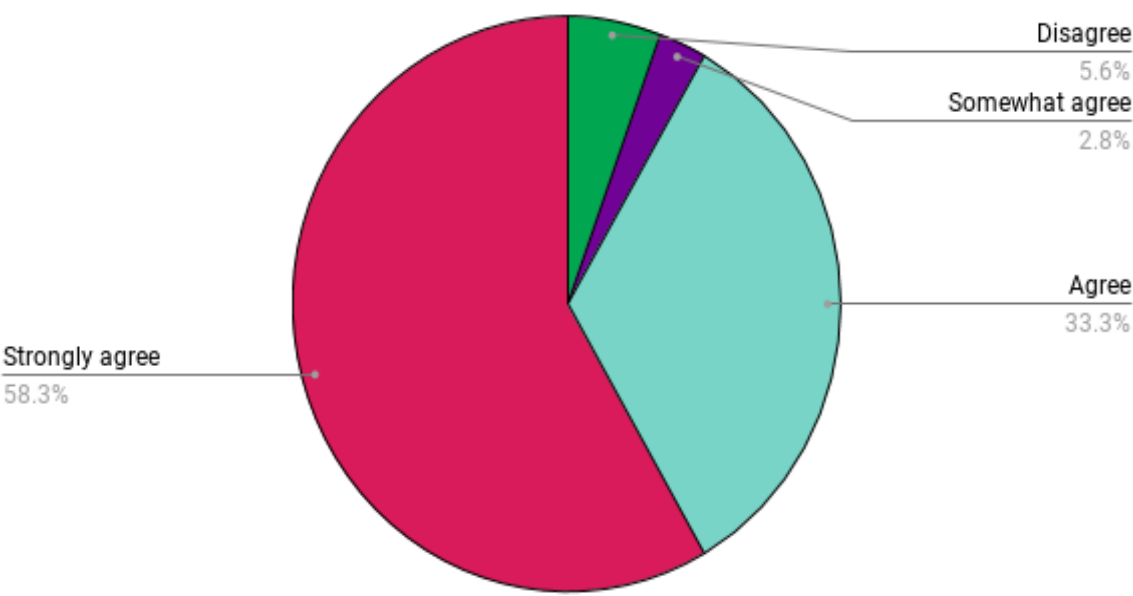
9. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you're working with artists.



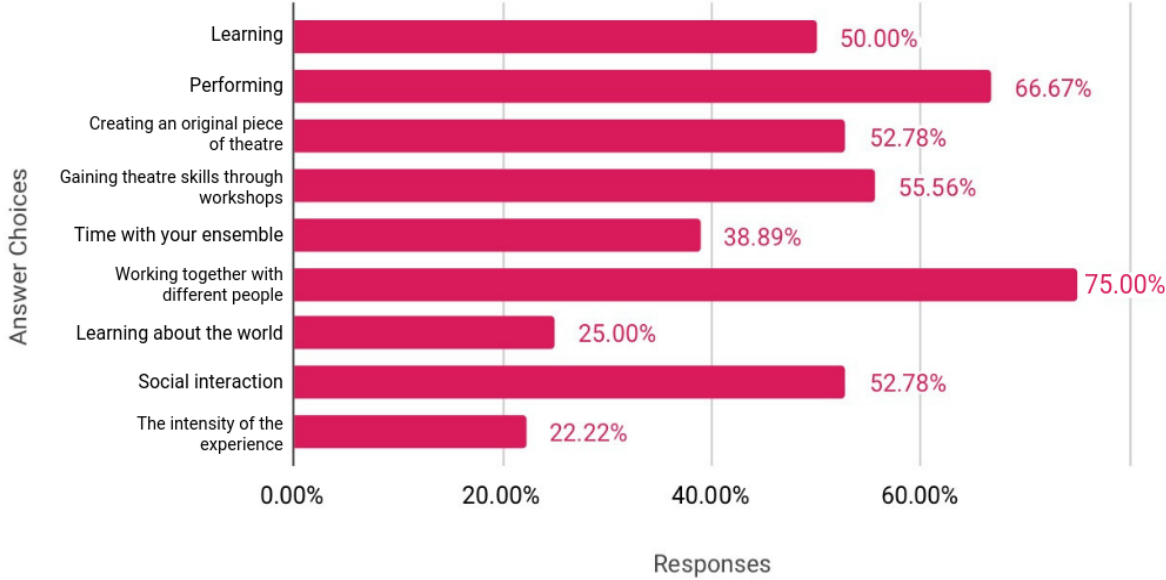
10. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn about yourself.



11. Learning at an ISTA festival is effective because you learn how to interact with different people.



12. Which of these were the most important aspects of the ISTA festival experience for you? Tick as many or as few as you wish.



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