**A New Direction: Roundtable on an Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning**

**2-4pm, Thursday 8th September: St Luke’s Community Centre, London**

**Attendees**

* Bavaani Nanthabalan, Torriano Junior School, Netley Primary School
* Bridget McKenzie, Flow Associates
* David Jubb, Battersea Arts Centre
* Jim Minton, London Youth
* Jo Hunter: 64 Million Artists
* Jonathan Gross, Kings College London
* Judith Ackrill, London Symphony Orchestra
* Julian Knight. Creative Futures
* Kirsty Brodest, Arts Council England
* Lawrence Becko, Creative Consultant
* Matt Griffiths, Youth Music
* Paul Roberts, Creativity, Culture & Education (CCE)
* Shoubhik Bandopadhyay, Barbican Centre
* Si Wharton, Tri Borough Virtual School
* Sue McCall, CULTURA London
* Holly Donagh, A New Direction
* Annie Thorpe, A New Direction

**Summary of Points Raised**

* It might be more useful to focus discussions of participation on Creativity rather than Culture/Cultural learning since it has the potential to disrupt notions of hierarchy & assumptions around low engagement, etc.
* A need to continue to explore the development/limitations of the ecology metaphor. It offers an interesting way to shift focus away from supply. However, there are questions over whether the ecological concepts currently explored go far enough. Can we think about how various elements interact with each other, the power dynamics between elements, etc.
* In contrast, it may be more useful to shift away from an ecological metaphor and instead think about adopting an ecological attitude to supporting cultural learning.
* There is a need to unpick the various implications of an ecological approach when looking at the national, the regional, and the local and how these various aspects interconnect.
* The existence of many micro-ecosystems in a place – should we be focusing on supporting children and young people to navigate between the systems which they are already a part of? What is the role of the mediator?
* The importance of the inspirational presence/figure – should we be thinking about investing in people, rather than places and organisations?
* The important role that arts and culture can play in forming identities. What are the implications of centralising youth voice? How can we mediate between what children and young people want without sacrificing what we know is of value?
* Does a ‘cultural learning sector’ actually exist, in what ways does it currently act as system?
* The importance of schools as super-structures, with very powerful and wide-reaching influence.
* A need to develop more understanding of the role arts and culture play in unlocking family and parent engagement.

**Extended Meeting Notes**

Introduction

The roundtable opened with a brief introduction to A New Direction & why/how they are thinking about the subject of an ecological approach to cultural learning. Elements to consider throughout the roundtable identified:

* Esoteric (metaphor) V Practical application of an ecological approach
* If you are in the privileged position of being able to stimulate demand, how do you decide what to spend your money on? What information do we need to know in order to make the best decision? Does an ecological approach offer a different lens through which to address these questions?
* How do we ensure we are planning in a way that is relevant and keeps pace with young people, whilst not sacrificing what we know is of value?

Key points that arose when discussing the reasons for attendees’ interest in this topic included:

Creativity V Culture

* The role of arts and culture sector in championing creativity and a creative curriculum across all school subjects;
* An interest in disrupting the hierarchy implicit in how culture is often understood and a need to look at the various ways in which people are creative - move towards a situation where all is valued equally.

Definitions of Ecologies

* The different implications of an ecological approach when looking at the national, the local and the regional. How do these various ecologies interconnect?
* How can individual organisations identify and subsequently react to their position within the specific cultural learning ecologies in which they exist?
* How can we involve children and young people in planning for the creative ecosystems of the future?

Understanding participation & engagement

* Can we better understand the things which underlie the reasons for low levels of engagement & explore the extent to which people take up existing offers even if they don’t necessarily align with individual interests/tastes.
* A need to acknowledge the important role that arts and culture plays in creating an identity
* An interest in moving beyond the focus on supply, although there is a key challenge in the ecological approach to go from analysis to practical action.
* The importance of social development of children and young people, how can you trace change, the importance of youth voice.

Attendees’ own experience of what ignited their interest/engagement in the arts as a child reflected the importance of schools, of environments/safe places where people can access culture, of parents/state parents, of opportunities of young people to access culture and create culture for themselves and the prevalence of music.

Reflections on John Holden’s paper: Organism, not Mechanism: An Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning.

The paper was recognised as an interesting counter-weight to the focus on supply side.

Questions were raised over whether the paper’s assertion that the (arts & culture) system should try to interconnect was important. The importance should be placed on how organisations interact with children and young people rather than how they engage with each other, which might be seen as intrusive and unnecessary.

It was mentioned that the ecological concepts in the paper don’t go far enough in thinking through how the various elements interact with each other. Also, place is not mentioned at all. It could also be argued that whilst borrowing ecological terminology may be a useful way-in to thinking about the issue of need and engagement, it may not necessarily be appropriate in practical applications and discussion with children and young people.

The cultural learning ecology may work as a conceptual intervention. However, there are questions over how an ecological approach differs from what is already being done, what the implications are for the structures that are currently in place i.e. ACE’s Cohort 5. Similarly, what are the policy implications – i.e. the relationship between NPOs with the commercial.

Limitations in the metaphor: many different micro-ecosystems exist in a place. Should we be focusing on making connections between what is going on in these various systems and to make it easier for children and young people to move between the cultural learning micro-ecosystems that they are already a part of?

Is the question about tweaking the existing system or coming at the issue of provision, engagement and participation from a completely different perspective? i.e. should more agency be given to children and young people to make decisions? And, what are the limitations of this approach?

Need to recognise that the various elements within an ecosystem have differing levels of power and force, they aren’t necessarily all equal.

The importance of the mediating role. Those working in arts, culture, education, youth work, etc. need to give children and young people direction, challenge to navigate.

Categorisation can be unhelpful. Should we be talking about the various levers that we can use to support cultural learning?

Can we really define arts, culture, education as a sector? In what ways do we act as a system?

We DO, however, act within an economic system. Is the main ‘fuel’ coming into the cultural learning ecosystem money? The commercial sector has to listen to what people want in a way that the public sector is arguably not very good at doing.

Is it more useful to engage with the conversation around creativity, because thinking about culture prompts such complex questions around whose culture? etc. Similarly, the public sector’s use of language predicates what counts as culture.

The importance of schools as super-structures, with very powerful and wide-reaching influence that engage a range of different stakeholders including, crucially, families and parents. However, there is a need to understand more about how each school works as a system in itself i.e. its communication - how information about children and young people is transferred across staff, the multiple identities of children and young people within the school, what is driving that school – is it about the whole child? Is it about attainment? etc. Supplementary schools as holders of great cultural opportunities and there is a need to know more about these.

What role can arts and culture play in unlocking parents and family engagement? Similarly, how can we better understand the early stages and starts of engagement. A need to nurture creativity from the very earliest age and opportunities for families to learn more about and engage with creativity are decreasing and families are becoming more and more isolated. How can we support parents and carers to make creativity and culture a part of their children’s’ lives?

Is the biggest thing that the cultural sector should be doing be to help children and young people to be creative/ do creativity?

The importance of identity and participation and how children and young people often shape identities by not doing certain activities. What implications does this have for an approach which would look to give children and young people what they want?

Application to an actual place

The role of the inspirational presence/figure – should we be thinking about investing in people, rather than places and organisations? If so, how could this be done?

Instead of thinking about Guardians, connectors and platforms can we think about stewards, systems – that react to challenges, and places which are virtual as well as in the real world.

The context is key: the importance of space and people for organic culture to grow. There is rapid growth in numbers and demand for schools and increasingly fewer schools have space for arts and culture.

There are limitations in the current iteration of the ecological metaphor as suggested in AND’s current creative ecosystems work, for example it doesn’t acknowledge that there are a lot of different ecosystems. It would be more useful to act on an ecological attitude. Can we develop a better understanding of ecological thinking, then everyone may be able to work on their own patch?

Tensions over working at a larger geographical level V the very local. Is it useful to think about looking at engagement and participation at the micro-level? What are the funding implications of this? Do funders place an over-emphasis on ‘big’ things i.e. festivals, events rather than looking to fund individuals, provide bursaries, etc.

The ecology metaphor highlights the interconnections between things, people, etc. which can help to support us in not making interventions which might threaten various aspects of it. It could highlight areas which need nurturing, aspects which don’t.

Potential for further research into areas where there isn’t much going on and for the production of comparative studies with those areas which appear to have thriving cultural learning ecologies.

Summary

* The point of creativity - catalytic. Are we listening enough to children and young people, to families, etc.?
* We need to be thinking about the critical skills that children and young people need, not only the things that are there. How can an ecological approach incorporate this?
* We need to make visible the connections that exist.
* Institutions may need to relinquish control.
* Can we **act** in a more ecological way?