



Caring for Cultural Freedom

An ecological approach to
supporting young people's
cultural learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Caring for Cultural Freedom: an ecological approach
to supporting young people's cultural learning

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This report has been commissioned by A New Direction and written by **Dr. Nick Wilson & Dr. Jonathan Gross** from the Department of Culture, Media & Creative Industries (CMCI), King's College London.

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Executive summary

This report examines young people's cultural learning within the London Borough of Harrow. It makes a significant contribution to recent debates concerning the value of understanding the cultural sector ecologically¹. It provides new ways to interpret how cultural opportunities operate for young people within *cultural ecosystems*: complex networks operating within and across a range of scales, including home, school, the borough, the region, and the nation. It thereby raises fundamental questions for policy and practice regarding how young people's cultural learning can best be supported on an ongoing basis.

Drawing on extensive empirical findings — analysed in relation to recent conceptual innovations regarding both the ecology of culture and the politics of care — the report's overarching proposal is the need to develop 'caring' approaches to support cultural learning ecologically. Following Joan Tronto's account of the four characteristics of care,² this means developing practices of managing cultural ecosystems that are not only ecologically *competent* (effective in cultivating and sustaining vibrant interconnections), but which are — through the approaches they develop to partnership working and creative citizenship — *attentive* and *responsive* to the views and needs of young people, and *responsible* for the health of the ecosystem as a whole.

¹ Holden, 2015; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016; Wilson et al. 2017.

² In *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice*, (2013), Tronto argues for the need to give practices of care a central place within contemporary understanding of democracy and citizenship, and identifies attentiveness, responsiveness, competence and responsibility as the four 'moral' aspects of care.

³ This definition builds on the account of cultural capability presented in *Towards Cultural Democracy*, but develops it considerably further, in the light of our subsequent research.

The Capabilities Approach

This research builds on the work of another recent report, *Towards Cultural Democracy: Promoting Cultural Capabilities for Everyone* (Wilson et al. 2017), written by this report's authors. Both pieces of research examine how cultural opportunity operates. In doing so, they draw on the Capabilities Approach (Sen, 2001; Nussbaum, 2011): a conceptual framework that provides tools with which to investigate a wide range of social and political issues. What the Capabilities Approach offers is a way of examining social progress in terms of substantive freedom: people's ability to choose to be and do what they have reason to value. With the assistance of the Capabilities Approach, these two reports indicate ways for cultural policymakers and practitioners to move beyond the supply side 'deficit model' of cultural provision and participation, offering a new overall ambition for cultural policy: cultural democracy, characterised by cultural capability for all. In particular, this report's focus on 'caring for cultural freedom' provides an important next step in understanding *how* we might go about promoting cultural capabilities for everyone.

Caring for Cultural Freedom builds on Holden's distinction (2016) between cultural education (through school curricula) and cultural learning (the much broader range of ways in which young people engage with and make culture). We employ the language of cultural learning, but also make central use of the phrase 'cultural opportunity'. In turn, we characterise cultural opportunity as cultural capability, *the substantive freedom to (co)create culture, giving form and value to experiences of self, and self-in relation*³.

Supported autonomy

Giving form and value to experiences of self and self-in relation connects closely to one of the key findings of our fieldwork in Harrow: that young people particularly enjoy and value conditions in which they feel 'free' and 'creative'. This can be in a classroom setting, in an after-school club, or at home. The experiences of freedom described are not reducible to the *absence* of structures. Rather, they are supported by particular kinds of structures that enable freedom. In some cases these are 'safe spaces', in which young people feel more secure, giving them the opportunity to relax, and make themselves vulnerable in creative ways. Similarly, they can be 'holding environments', reliable conditions in which new and unexpected things can happen. In some cases, we also found these to be what we call 'listening spaces'. Conditions in which young people have the opportunity to speak and be heard, in ways that are valuable for their sense of self, and self-in-relation; and/or through which their views are heard and inform decision-making processes in meaningful ways. Drawing these findings together, a central theme of this report is the importance of *supported autonomy*, and how — through specific practices of *care* — conditions can be developed in which supported autonomy can be cultivated and sustained. These insights raise key questions regarding how the active management of cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems can most effectively achieve supported autonomy for young people.

The importance of multiple perspectives

It is clear from this research that in order to effectively understand how cultural learning happens and how it is supported (or not) within and across cultural ecosystems, multiple perspectives must be taken. This means a variety of ways of generating knowledge, and a broad range of people contributing. There is a need to set aside expectations of a single 'bird's eye view', and develop understanding of the cultural ecology from multiple perspectives, inclusively, and on an ongoing basis — responsive to the emergence, growth and evolution that is inherent to ecosystems. Developing co-produced, ongoing knowledge is both an epistemological and a political necessity.

Through our research in Harrow we observed the richness of everyday cultural life for young people in this borough. From drawing, to taking photos, cooking and singing — young people are involved in an array of everyday creative activities outside of any formalised educational or organisational setting. These

findings strongly connect with our previous research in which we showed the plethora of everyday creativity that takes place 'under the radar' of cultural policy and planning. With young people, the extent of 'invisible' cultural life may be particularly extensive.

The extent of this everyday creativity, however, should not encourage the conclusion that everything is rosy. Opportunities are very uneven, with limitations of many kinds on young people's freedoms to make culture, giving form and value to their experiences. These limitations include the pressures of the school curriculum, lack of information about available opportunities, and restrictions on geographical mobility due to factors ranging from parental busyness, to lack of money, to aspects of psycho-geography such as lack of confidence to travel beyond areas that feel like 'home'.

The organisation of interest

Another of our findings concerns what we call 'the organisation of interest': the ways in which young people's cultural interests do not simply come into being and operate in a vacuum. They are subject to ongoing processes of enablement, constraint, encouragement, and discouragement; and often the need to make choices and to prioritise. Young people's interests are cultivated, managed and organised through this range of influences. By studying their cultural learning within cultural ecosystems (within and across a range of scales including, for example, home, school, the London Borough of Harrow, and London as a whole) we see that young people's interests do not simply emerge, 'naturally', as it were. However natural an ecology may appear, kinds of *ecosystem management* are happening. The question is, what form does this management take?

Consideration needs to be given to how the organisation of interest happens. Whilst there may be a plethora of everyday creativity, there are many ways in which young people's cultural opportunities are constrained – and in which these opportunities are not enjoyed equally. Some young people have many more cultural pathways visible to them than others. Having access to information is key – a necessary condition of cultural freedom (or what we call, following the *Towards Cultural Democracy* report, 'cultural capability') – but it is not sufficient. Information is just one important factor; others include mobility and confidence.

Through this research, we identified a range of approaches that schools and other organisations working with young people are currently taking to enable the sharing of information, and to support confidence and mobility. At the same time, we go further than documenting these examples of current practices of care for young people's cultural freedom, and indicate new approaches that could be taken – including the development of mentoring programmes or a 'cultural careers service' that would support the cultural autonomy of young people.

Creative citizenship

This may, in part, involve enabling young people to operate as creative citizens (Hargreaves and Hartley, 2016; Wilson *et al.* 2017), or positive deviants (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010): making connections, and enabling cultural opportunities for themselves and others. Young people have a range of potentials – including skills, knowledge and networks – that they could be further supported in mobilising. Examples from two very different organisations in Harrow illustrate the possibility for this: Harrow Youth Parliament, and the Ignite Trust, which works with young people at risk. In both of these cases, we saw the potential for young people to be supported to act as creative citizens in new ways.

This further builds not only on recent discussions of creative citizenship, but also on the Asset Based Community Development tradition, which lays emphasis on the untapped potential of communities to develop a project, or respond to a local problem, by recognising and mobilising its assets – particularly intangible assets such as knowledge, skills and relationships. We

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built on this tradition as part of the overall methodological mix for this research. One of the strengths and attractions of the ABCD approach is that it combines knowledge production and action. In looking towards the future, this report indicates a number of ways in which better understanding and better co-management of cultural learning ecologies can (and must) go hand-in-hand.

Informing policy and practice

One of the implicit but central questions this research asks is whether thinking ecologically about culture, cultural learning, cultural opportunity and cultural freedom is a promising route forward for policy and practice. The answer from this research is a strong yes. Indeed, we argue that the 'cultural ecology' is not simply a useful metaphor, but an ontological imperative. Culture, cultural learning, cultural opportunity and cultural freedom are 'relational goods' with emergent properties and powers (Donati and Archer, 2015), dependent upon the myriad interpersonal relations that make up the social life of each and every person. Thinking ecologically is both empirically powerful – producing deeper, more accurate understanding – and has considerable practical and political potential.

There are a range of reasons why ecological approaches may be 'in the air'. These include the pressures of funding cuts, and the need to develop new and effective kinds of partnership. They also include the need to democratise many aspects of life in the UK, and the need to find new and better ways of doing this (Wilson *et al.*, 2017). Our research indicates that ecological approaches to understanding and enabling cultural learning and cultural freedom (cultural capability) more broadly have the potential to make a significant contribution in responding to these circumstances.

At the same time, the research highlights a number of challenges that such approaches will face. Foremost of which is the inherent complexity of ecosystems. Interdependency, constant change and complexity are their central characteristics. One of the strengths of ecological language and thought – in its application to the analysis of the cultural sector – is precisely that it provides tools with which to investigate these complexities. By opening up cultural interdependences and processes of emergence, growth and evolution, new questions arise in terms of knowledge-production and understanding. This report offers a series of insights regarding the challenges and opportunities here, both methodologically and politically.

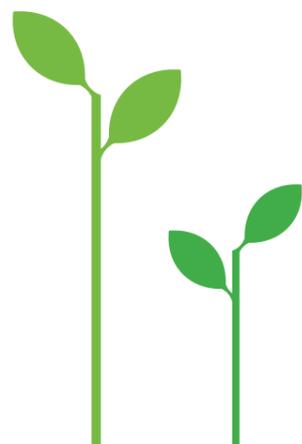
The challenges of ecological complexity

In order to meet the challenge of complexity, this research employed a wide variety of methods:

- » Interviews with adults (teachers, head teachers, youth workers, council staff and the owner of a creative business).
- » Interviews with 19-25 year olds.
- » Interviews with secondary school students.
- » Focus groups with secondary school students.
- » Questionnaires completed by secondary school students.
- » Questionnaires completed by the parents of primary school students.
- » Activity diaries completed by Year 5 pupils.
- » Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) workshop.

The challenge of ecological complexity was also made an explicit part of our research brief, with methodological considerations included as the fifth and final of the overarching questions this report addresses:

1. Which cultural activities and interests are valuable to young people in Harrow and why?
2. What kinds of creative citizenship are young people involved in – are



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- they making and contesting 'versions of culture', and creating cultural opportunities for themselves and others?
3. Is it possible to identify key aspects of cultural learning within the cultural ecosystems of Harrow?
 4. What kinds of intervention, if any, would support healthier, more democratic cultural learning within the cultural ecosystems of Harrow?
 5. How should cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems, operating at different scales (e.g. within and across home, school, local authority, region, and nation) be investigated – which methods are most useful?

Over-arching research insights

Across this report, we provide answers to all five of these questions. Our answers are framed by two over-arching insights from the research. First, whilst it is important to understand the cultural ecology as a complex adaptive system which has self-organising patterns, cultural learning is nonetheless something that people do actively seek to organise, manage and support. We therefore speak of 'managed cultural ecosystems' (see Chapter 2). The education system, cultural policy, and – indeed – this report itself are all in their own ways motivated by a desire to do this as best we can. The distinctive point here, therefore, in responding to recent discussions of cultural ecology, is the need to address how young people's cultural learning is actively supported (within the interdependent contexts of cultural ecosystems).

Second, and following on from this point, we argue that such support must necessarily be characterised by elements associated more broadly with practices of care. Our empirical findings lead to this conclusion in a variety of ways, detailed throughout the report, in which practices of *ecological care* – characterised by attentiveness, responsiveness, competence and responsibility in the co-management of the ecosystems in which young people's cultural learning takes place – are key. One important implication of this is that any form of intentional intervention has to recognise that the interests of young people are best served by partnerships and governance structures that are themselves responsive and adaptive.

We refer to 'caring for cultural freedom', then, as the distinctive means by which cultural learning of young people is already supported (in some quarters), but can be further, such that the necessary freedoms and diversity that characterise vibrant cultural ecosystems are cultivated and sustained. Practices of care across a variety of scales – from individual workshops and clubs, to caring for a cultural system across a local authority area, or beyond – require taking collective *responsibility* for the health of that ecosystem, and doing so in ways that are *attentive* and *responsive* to the views and needs of young people, and promotes their cultural freedom (their cultural capability). This requires an ongoing process of co-producing knowledge of that ecosystem, and of the views and needs of the young people within it.

Managing cultural ecosystems

We outline 10 key findings that can be summarised as follows:

1. **Supported autonomy – a central goal.** Young people place great value on freedom, and on the spaces and activities that enable them to experience freedom and creativity. Giving support to young people's cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems needs to place supported (cultural) autonomy front and centre of its ambitions.
2. **Co-produced knowledge is essential.** Cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems cannot be understood from a single bird's eye view. In order to understand and co-manage it effectively, a sustainable process of co-producing knowledge about that ecosystem must be in place, with many voices heard, on an ongoing basis.

3. **The psycho-geography of cultural opportunity should be considered,** and factored into how we give support to young people's cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems. By psycho-geography we mean the ways in which people experience the spaces and places in which they live as complex environments – shaped by a range of historical and contemporary factors including class, race, gender and (collective) memory – in which "psychology and geography collide".
4. **Safe spaces and holding environments are vital.** Reliable conditions that allow for absorption, vulnerability and creativity play a crucial role in enabling young people's cultural capability. Based on research of the kind presented in this report, the contexts and conditions in which young people's cultural growth occurs can – to some extent – be anticipated. But the forms and consequences of this growth cannot be predicted. One of the roles organisations such as schools, youth clubs and arts centres can play is to actively cultivate the conditions of care – the safe spaces and holding environments – that enable unexpected flowerings to occur: expecting the unexpected.
5. **Spaces of listening are key.** They enable young people to develop their sense of self, and self-in relation. Characterised by attentiveness to the views and needs of young people for the young person, they can play a very promising role in generating inclusive, co-produced knowledge of young people's cultural interests, with the potential to inform decision-making. More of these – and connections between them – should be developed.
6. **Mentoring can help cut through inequalities.** Sharing information within relationships makes opportunities much more real for young people. This is one of the ways in which mentoring is a particularly important possibility.
7. **Tipping points and opportunity costs can be mitigated.** The emergence and growth of young people's cultural interests does not happen in a vacuum. It is guided and shaped by the 'organisation of interest' that takes place through environmental conditions, particularly those of school. Further thought needs to be given to how to keep cultural options open for young people, minimising the foreclosing effects of tipping / decision points, and the opportunity costs of choosing one option rather than another. Mentoring and ongoing cultural 'careers' advice are promising possibilities.
8. **Creative citizenship / positive deviance has great potential** to expand cultural capability, and democratise cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems. Much more could be done to support both adults and young people to operate in these ways, which are themselves characterised by practices of care, including attentiveness and responsiveness to the interests of others, and taking responsibility – competently – for the conditions in which those interests can be met.
9. **Partnership working needs both adaptability and clarity of purpose.** Democratic co-management of cultural ecosystems requires effective partnership working. Whilst actively caring for young people's cultural learning within and across cultural ecosystems requires adaptability, there is at the same time – and particularly when schools, third sector organisations and local authorities are so overstretched – a need for clarity of purpose.
10. **Ensuring democratic governance is a long-term challenge.** In the medium and longer term, issues of governance – and the relationship between different scales of decision making in caring for cultural ecosystems – will be important to consider.

References

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