Caring for Cultural Freedom

AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE’S CULTURAL LEARNING

Report by Dr. Nick Wilson and Dr. Jonathan Gross at King’s College London
Emphasis on understanding interdependency, co-development, complexity and change inherent in the cultural sector as opposed to viewing culture as a set of ‘offers’ or ‘provision’.

The substantive freedom to (co-)create versions of culture — the ability and the opportunity to engage with and make culture as valued and defined by the individual.

Only through all having the capability to engage with and make culture can democracy in a civic sense be realised — an issue of rights, agency and voice.

The practices of care (being attentive to need, taking responsibility for those needs, being competent at care-giving and being responsive to feedback) can help us understand how to manage a cultural ecosystem, tending and cultivating, rather than imposing or demanding. As an active process, always with ethical implications, care without appropriate attentiveness, responsiveness and respect can lead to (cultural) domination and possessiveness.
The goal
Young people with freedom and agency

The mission
Supported autonomy

How?
Through careful management of the cultural ecology
Utilising the principles of caring —
  • Attentiveness
  • Responsibility
  • Competence
  • Responsiveness

Why?
Because despite the abundance of young peoples’ cultural and creative engagement - all is not rosy – young people require support to flourish and systemic intervention to tackle inequality

Why?
In this way we respect young people’s own valuing of culture, we take account of context and make better and more effective interventions
How do young people in Harrow feel about their place and creative lives?

Identity and self is crucial for engagement and countering alienation – Whose culture? Who is reflected in the dominant cultural norms taught in school?

Place is crucial - home, parks, cafes, the cinema, shopping centres — young people often not very mobile and perceive their place differently to adults

Importance of family, sport, games, friends, parks, relaxing, shopping — especially spending time with family

Young people's lives are regimented and orientated around school work, high degree of stress

Often art is seen as the treat that has to be put aside in favour of more useful pursuits

Aspects of cultural agency

- Freedom to choose — means choices have to be on offer
- Information and pathways — young people need to know about what is possible not rely on their own experience
- Goals and incentives — useful tools for engagement
- Confidence, embarrassment and vulnerability — all play a part in enabling or stopping engagement and all can be addressed
- Confidence and selfhood — tools to experience the works and make better choices
- Freedom to become who you are — headspace and time to be creative and build self knowledge
- Being treated as a whole person with a cultural life beyond school or home
- The importance of being listened to is crucial for real agency
- Skills in potential — recognise what you are good at and take this into your life

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How do young people in Harrow feel about their place and creative lives?
What might supported autonomy look like in practice?

Democratic governance is a key long-term challenge
How to link attentive and responsiveness to governance for the long-term?

Co-produced knowledge is essential
There is no single bird’s eye view of cultural learning – instead concentrate on building systems for ongoing production of knowledge with multiple views expressed

Psycho-geography is important
Where things happen matters to young people who are highly localised and attuned to issues of safety

Make partnership working adaptable and clear
Pay attention to systems and structures of partnership and collaboration

Potential of creative citizenship and positive deviance
Build on the strengths in communities and with individuals and empower them to be able to shape cultural possibility for themselves

Safe spaces and holding environments
Creativity can only happen in safe spaces where young people feel free to be themselves

Spaces of listening
Need to be attentive to the views and needs of young people for the young person

Tipping points /opportunity costs can be mitigated
Careful thoughts needs to be given to how to encourage and nurture creative pathways and the ‘organisation of interest’ at key moments in the life of young people

Mentoring to cut through inequality
Building meaningful relationships based on trust can help support those young people who might otherwise be left behind

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Building meaningful relationships based on trust can help support those young people who might otherwise be left behind
Overcome vested interests, path dependencies and the disciplinary ‘labour of division’ — and, instead, teachers, arts organisations, youth workers, parents, policymakers, etc. to see themselves as having very connected roles in enabling the supported autonomy of young people — recognising that this is a genuinely shared endeavour.”
Focus groups with students (years 7-13)

Questionnaires with school children and parents

Asset based community development workshop

Semi structured interviews with life history elements – adults, 18-25 year olds, secondary school students

Give up the single mapped viewpoint and embrace multiple perspectives

Mixed methods - no one perfect method

About distributed knowledge

Creating ‘openness’ - not path dependency

Think about possibilities and potential

Local authority is key

Is there a local ‘backbone’ organisation? Can one be created?

Methodological Principles

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Consideration of how to generate sustainable knowledge production

Local authority as critical player

Role of backbone organisations

Longitudinal work

Large-scale data

Action research

Research into the nature and possibilities of creative citizenship

Harrow process

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