

ACTION RESEARCH REFLECTIONS 2015 – 2018

Summary

LONDON CULTURAL EDUCATION CHALLENGE

Three Years

Ten Challenge Partners

One London Cultural Education Challenge

A Generational Commitment

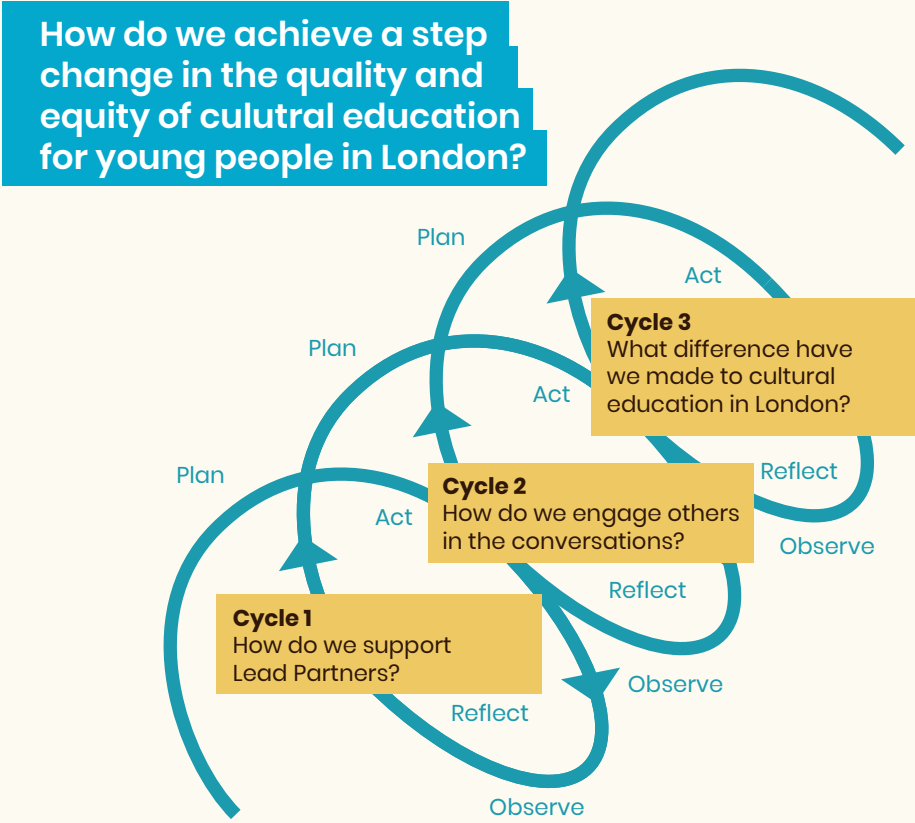
Contents

Summary4

The Inquiry questions5

Acknowledgements12

The Challenge Action Research approach



Summary

Article 31: States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

UN Convention on the rights of the child

Challenge is a story of hope, tenacity and commitment. It is also the story of A New Direction (AND) moving into the role of investor as well as partner. Most of all it is a story of connections; embedding existing relationships, creating new ones, building dialogues and moving beyond existing networks to create pathways across sectors.

Through Challenge, AND has created a programme that put children and young people at the heart of conceiving, developing and delivering aspects of cultural education in London. It has involved a significant number of organisations and young people in the debate around what quality and equitable cultural education looks like.

Although the rights of the child to culture is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and recent UK governments have declared support for cultural education, the background research to Challenge demonstrated significant issues in relation to the quality and equity of cultural education in London. If anything the view of the Lead Partners is that the situation has deteriorated since 2015.

This VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) environment has meant that Challenge has had to be responsive to on-going contextual changes. This has influenced action during the programme and reinforced the need for moments of reflection and review.

The Inquiry questions

Action research was included as part of the process and it was undertaken on the basis of three annual cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection.

Each cycle was based on an inquiry question designed to feed into the overall programme question:

“How do we achieve a step change in the quality and equity of cultural education for young people in London?”

Cycle 1: “How can the Challenge participants (and other cultural education practitioners) be supported to achieve a step change in the delivery of cultural education in London?”

Cycle 2: “How do we engage others in conversations about the needs and value of cultural education in London beyond the Challenge partners?”

Cycle 3: “What difference has Challenge made in terms of the delivery of Cultural Education in London?”

It was recognised from the outset that the ambition for Challenge was big, bold, and compelling, what might be described as a Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG). No one was under any illusion about the scale of the undertaking. The success of Challenge has therefore been about what has been achieved in striving for the goal rather than reaching it.

Experiences of the programme suggest it was reasonable to define the future needs of cultural education as a ‘wicked problem’ and while this could have proved potentially counterproductive, a number of mechanisms were put in place to support Lead Partners in addressing this seemingly intractable problem.

During the programme a Theory of Change (ToC) evolved that provided added depth to what was meant by a step change and the intermediate outcomes it might involve. It was important to keep the ToC complexity sensitive, rather than be seen as a straight jacket. That said Lead Partner aims have remained consistent throughout the programme.

A collaborative action framework was created after year one that included five elements: create, connect, commit, collaborate and change. This has remained valid as Challenge was implemented with different elements having a different emphasis dependent on the nature of project delivery and maturity.

The infographics that outlined the six themes have proved a very important part of the programme and served as a key visual communication tool as well as being cultural artefacts. The new London Challenge infographics illustrate how the themes have moved on and are likely to work for an even wider audience. Challenge has been on a journey of four phases from description to activism.

Several themes have arisen during the programme:

- Learning: its different forms, how it can be orientated and how it might be shared
- Cross sectoral socially oriented partnerships (CSSPs): the importance of CSSPs and ensuring they are complexity sensitive
- Prototyping policy: Challenge has adopted a prototyping approach allowing flexibility and adaptation
- Networks: network structures configured in different ways to allow additional flexibility

What worked well?

- Young people at the heart
- The extent of the connections generated
- A diverse group of Lead Partners and projects
- Cultural Education networks extended
- On-going learning and the development of resources
- Overall programme flexibility

What might have been done differently?

- Alternative mechanisms for delivering Challenge have been considered, and most suggest that the approach adopted was appropriate given the programme purpose
- Early engagement of senior leaders – recognising efforts were made to try and gain their support
- Earlier set up of online/shared resources
- Innovation workshops pre-application to help stretch project ideas and ambition
- Potential for role conflict with AND as investor and deliverer could have been explored earlier
- More use of digital activism
- Connecting evaluation strands across the projects and programme more clearly

Implications:

- A robust and varied evidence base is important
- Having a big hairy audacious goal is motivating
- Flexibility at all levels is crucial
- It takes cross sector and collective effort and a lot of dialogue
- Being open to different voices and value sets means checking assumptions
- Prototyping, quick fails and redesign gives flexibility
- Relationship building is long term and unpredictable
- Expect change!

- There is a need to balance a range of tensions:
 - Holding vision vs allowing flexibility and supporting projects to change
 - Staying true to your values vs accommodating different value sets
 - Linear planning vs non-linear change
 - Working in familiar ways vs moving outside of comfort zones
 - Maintaining control vs allowing autonomy
 - Public accountability vs risk taking

Recommendations:

AND

- Sharing the story: Continue to spread the stories generated by Challenge, exploring different channels and audiences. There is enough content to tell the story in different ways focusing on different aspects of the experience. Explore the potential for more digital activism
- Developing a story map: Consider developing an interactive story map where you might be able to scroll over images that give different perspectives and voices
- Development of the interactive map and partners: Continue developing the interactive map, adding partners as the work continues
- Sharing lessons with other funders: Share experiences with other funding bodies of how Challenge has adapted and provided flexibility, and balancing the roles of investor, partner, facilitator and initiator

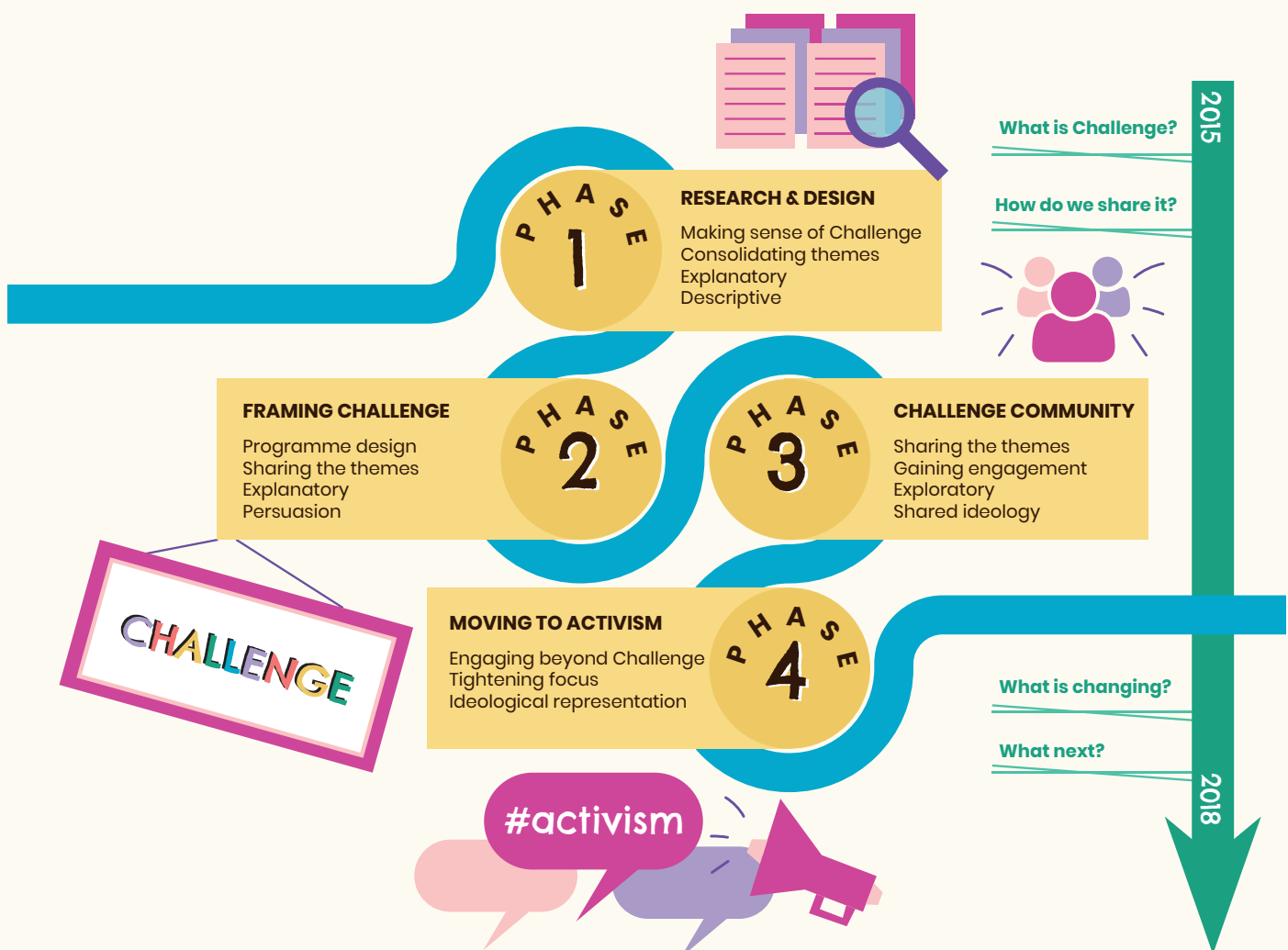
- Continue building the resource base: It is likely resources will continue to emerge from the programme so it would be good if the resource base could keep developing
- Providing more opportunities for connections: Keep providing opportunities which might result in serendipitous developments
- Continuing to extend partnership base across the three sectors: Continue supporting connections across sectors and helping the cultural sector create meaningful dialogue
- Maintaining an on-going relationship with Lead Partners: Where feasible maintain connections to keep monitoring impact of the work to date
- Acknowledge secondary partners: Where possible contact all secondary partners to acknowledge their contributions and keep building a distributed network

Lead Partners

- Sharing the story: Continue to spread the stories generated by your project/programme, exploring different channels and audiences.
- Visual stories: Explore/continue use of infographics and other visualisations for your own projects
- Resources: Continue to build your own resource base and link to AND
- Mapping the progress of young people: Where possible keep a connection with the young people that have benefited through Challenge and monitor their progress
- Staying connected to AND: Maintain an on-going relationship with AND where feasible to continue sharing the development of your work beyond Challenge

I'd like to thank A New Direction for investing in long term projects that allow for experimentation and research and don't micro manage it and don't have set agendas at the outset beyond seeing what happens in a particular field.
(Lead Partner)

Mapping the journey of Challenge



Acknowledgements

To work within a programme for a three-year period is a rare and privileged opportunity for any researcher. To do it alongside A New Direction and the Lead Partners who have delivered the London Cultural Education Challenge has been thought provoking, inspiring, and enthralling. My gratitude to everyone who has taken part and contributed to the action research process. Particular thanks must go to Corinne Bass (Senior Partnerships Manager, AND) who has worked with me so closely, and patiently endured the testing of ideas and sometimes off the wall thinking! Without everyone's support the process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting would not have been possible.

Designed by



JAZ DESIGN

FREELANCE WEB DESIGNER



ALCHEMY

research & consultancy