Youth Peer to Peer

A Model of Engagement

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Creative Partnerships
London North Case Studies 2008

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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

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The Principle and Context

> 'We are assessed on student voice – for me, this means that in all aspects of decision-making, we should take a view from young people.'
> *Head teacher*

In many ways, youth voice has become the central issue in education. It appears in the guise of 'personalised learning', where teaching and learning are matched to an individual pupil's wants and needs. It is seen as essential to engaging – or re-engaging – students who have, for whatever reason, failed to stay the course at school. For Charles Leadbeater, one of the most innovative thinkers on education, it is crucial to encouraging participation, which he believes will be the future model for organising society as a whole: 'Schools have to be able to adapt to these new circumstances and find new ways of engaging with their students.'

Youth voice is, in fact, part of much wider, even global concern about the rights of children, stretching from the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child, which declares that all society has a moral responsibility to engage with young people's voice, to the statutory requirement that UK heads, governors and LEAs must give pupils 'a say', to the Children Act of 2004 which obliges local authorities to consult children and young people in the development of statutory plans for their services.

Creative Partnerships London North brokered three projects at the beginning of 2008 to support schools wanting to address this vital issue – and the related need to encourage peer-to-peer engagement: young people working together as a supportive learning community. Each project was planned to address particular local strategic needs through encouraging youth voice. The two that were led by north London boroughs were designed to influence the 14-19 strategy, in particular, for keeping more young people in education. The third, which is the main focus of this report, took place in a secondary school, where youth voice and peer-to-peer engagement were seen as ways of realising a commitment to a true 'comprehensive ethos'.

The scale of the challenge facing Creative Partnerships, its agents and artists on the ground, as well as the permanent teaching staff – particularly in the two projects targeting students at risk of exclusion – soon became clear. Young people are not, in any real sense, powerful – they are subject to the authority of their parents and their teachers and they have little or no agency in (or influence on) the running of the varied institutions that shape their lives, from schools to the mainstream media. That lack of power is starkest for young people who are on the brink of exclusion from mainstream services. A 'voice' is precisely what they do not have.

For voice, ultimately, is not about simply 'having a say', which is a form of tokenism, but about having – or sharing – real power. And helping young people to 'find a voice', which was a principal aim of these projects, is not a simple matter of asking them what they want. When the question is posed by the adult – the teacher, say – and the answer given by the child, the exchange is not an equal one and the ground rules are usually determined, visibly or not, by the adults who hold power. The challenge, therefore, is not simply – or not even – to give young people a voice but to create the conditions for a more equal conversation – a true dialogue – between adults and young people. As one educational theorist has put it, we must 'learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the child'.

The Ingredients

In order to draw out the overall learning from the youth voice programme, this case study will set its main subject – the trajectory and impact of the work of an aerial theatre company and a forum theatre group in the secondary school – against one of the borough-led projects, run by a different forum theatre company, where the process of engaging with 'disaffected' young people took precedence over the attempt to elicit youth voice.

The secondary school is a large comprehensive with around 1,600 students on roll, a small proportion of which are young people excluded from other schools in the borough. Although, in socio-economic terms, most young people here do not come from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds, there is a surprisingly high incidence of drug-taking and anti-social behaviour in the area. This is matched in school by what some teachers term 'passive underachievement' amongst many of the students – the new head describes the school he took over in Autumn 2007 as 'sleepy'. This sense of disengagement may have something to do with what he calls the school's history of 'extreme conservatism' in terms of teaching to test rather than taking a more creative and innovative approach to learning:

> 'They do stuff because the teacher tells them to. So, how do you free up the students' learning so that they actually start to engage more and see school not as the enemy HQ to truant from or trash, but as a place where they can find out more about their own potential?'

One answer, he believes, along with a growing number of his staff, lies in projects such as this one, which can catalyse the necessary transformation. Although (in terms of the total school population) the participant group began small – 25 students from Years 10 and 12 – and ended smaller with a cohort of 16, it exemplified the kind of integrated practice that the school is now committing itself to, bringing students with different levels of confidence and ability and with a range of learning styles together to collaborate on a peer-to-peer basis. Realising this 'comprehensive ethos' is seen as essential to creating a true learning community in the school.

For such a community to thrive, the young people involved need to have a genuine stake in it. There is a need to move away decisively from the transmission model of the teacher simply presenting knowledge to the student to a model where young people take responsibility for their learning. Whatever art might emerge in the process, the project had to go 'beyond flying' – a catchphrase that became the project's title.

Although all students from the relevant years were invited to participate, the project was to be held over the summer term largely outside school hours – with twilight sessions on Thursdays and Fridays and some weekend activity – and had to be voluntary, which inevitably restricted uptake. However, to promote the 'comprehensive' aspect of the initiative, the organisers persuaded certain students to participate, selected from those who were otherwise unlikely to 'put their hand up', either out of diffidence or disaffection.

On the adult side, apart from three artists from the aerial theatre company and one from the forum theatre company, two enthusiastic arts teachers were closely involved. Creative Partnerships was represented by a 'creative agent', who skilfully liaised between all parties to try to ensure that the learning was shared and that it remained the prime focus of a project.

Youth voice was also central to the borough-led project. Two artists worked with two groups of fifteen students, all with a history of exclusion (or risk of exclusion) and all new to the school, every Wednesday and Thursday afternoon. A series of workshops based around writing, drama and film were intended to explore the young people's experiences of and opinions about education. Again, a public sharing was planned, in this case to make the case to the local education authority on how students' own ideas might have an impact on the new 14-19 strategy. In this way, the project would provide a model for engagement with disaffected young people and peer-to-peer engagement.

In Practice

> 'We may have shaped the choreography but the choreography entirely consists of material that they have come up with themselves.'
> *Artist, aerial theatre company*

It might seem a paradox that a youth voice project ends up with a performance where spoken words are few and far between. Beyond Flying as a discrete project came to a conclusion with a remarkable display of aerial theatre by young people who, two months earlier, had had no experience of doing more than, at most, climbing a rope in PE lessons. In pairs they swung and span, turned upside down and soared across the room to join hands with an opposite partner. The drama they enacted was about bullying and what choices young people might make in dealing with bullying, whether the teasing of a new pupil or the more extreme cases of happy-slapping and gang violence. It was strong stuff – 'the stronger the better' agreed one of the students afterwards, if it was to achieve the desired effect:

> 'A lot of people think that young people like "showing off" their artwork to please an audience, but we're not showing off – we're actually trying to show you something, to make a point, to get a message across to you.'

This was art as an act of communication – an in-your-face physical expression of youth voice – and as such it fulfilled the project's mission to go 'beyond flying', leaving a lingering and powerful aftertaste. It was, in one student's words, 'disturbingly entertaining', making the audience laugh and then question why it was laughing.

It all began with words, however, in talk sessions facilitated by the adults but foregrounding the concerns – and voices – of students. Large sheets of paper were covered in life and death issues, each branching off to another topic, until there were too many topics and a choice had to be made. They chose to deal directly with the stereotypes that surround young people – such as the classic anti-social drunken hoodies hanging out on street corners. Scenarios were enacted, participants hot-seated and conflicts enacted, sometimes using professional stage-fighting techniques. When the ropes and harnesses and cradles were slung from the roof of the large gym hall, these dramas were translated into aerial manoeuvres.

It was an opportunity for a group of young people to express what they feel about society at that time. 'We learned to become more responsible and how to express our views in a totally unique way.'

In the very first session on the ropes, students found themselves doing far more than they had thought possible. By the time they came to perform to other students, including a contingent from a feeder primary school (who must have been surprised to see what goes on in secondary schools these days), the group had begun to play with the movement material – a real sign of confidence.

Though this might seem the whole story, a successful arts intervention complete with a happy ending of clapping spectators, another narrative was playing out during these weeks of rehearsals, one that organisers hope will help push the school in the new direction that the head has set. Having with some success facilitated the proliferation of ideas and scenarios for a performance piece, the artists realised that they needed to explore more directly just what was and was not working in the process – to confront what was not being said:

> 'They like you, so they won't just tell you. You have to give them permission and invite them to talk about the 'messy' bits. It's true that young people are more sophisticated than perhaps adults give them credit for. They know the right thing to say to the teacher/practitioner; even if it is something they do not really believe. With each exercise they know what is expected from them even if it really does not interest them. And they can also see through the various strategies adults use in terms of how to engage young people and get them involved. So we stopped and talked about the bits of the process they didn't get and that irritated them or put them off.'

That not only cleared the air somewhat – practical changes were made, including instituting a more varied warm-up routine before getting into the lengthy yoga session necessary prior to aerial work – but, in hindsight, it also represented a significant turning point in the whole process. Given encouragement to say what was bugging them released a small flood of criticism:

> 'Don't talk at us for hours on end.'
>
> 'Don't overpraise us – "You're really special!" is patronising.'
>
> 'Relate to us but don't act like us – it's cringeworthy.'
>
> 'Take us on our own terms – don't always compare us to other groups.'

Emboldened by this collective expression of bottled-up feelings – and, crucially, by the fact that these were not only listened to but acted upon – the young people were able then to move forward with greater autonomy and confidence, exemplified not only in the boldness of their final performances but, perhaps more tellingly, in the presentation made by several of them at a conference in north London; Culture and 2012: engaging marginalised young people through arts and sport. Anxious to know how best to consult young people, delegates were startled to hear a group of them focusing not on their project's great achievements or on their own personal epiphanies but on what had gone wrong in the process. By dramatising such issues, the group provoked debate amongst the assembled adults about the implications of all this for their own work with young people.

More than anything else, perhaps, this moment exemplified the possibility of a genuine and equal dialogue between adults and young people – and the realisation of youth voice.

Reflections on Process

It is no coincidence, perhaps, that a project around the broad subject of youth voice should become fixed on notions of power. Bullying and dealing with bullying is about negotiating over power – whether that is the power of the tabloids to stigmatise a whole generation or the power of a postcode in determining a person's identity. So much for subject matter, but the connection to power was more than that, given the nature of the project – and not only because it was held in a disciplinary institution with teachers in attendance. Crucial to the whole process was the artistic discipline exemplified by the artists and their professional expertise, particularly the aerial artists. In conventional theatre, the director rules. That is not, however, the approach of these artists, according to the students:

> 'Rather than say "Don't do that" or making us do things they wanted, they would listen to an idea from us and say "You could do it like this" or "You wouldn't best be doing that because…"'

In other words, these artists engaged in a dialogue with young people, working towards a shared creative – and social – end. Their role was to give students the tools to express their own feelings and opinions.

> 'I think the young people were surprised not to get a script and be told what to do. But that is not our approach in creating any of our work.'

That approach also includes a sensitive awareness of group dynamics, another significant aspect of the project and one that closely relates to the notion of a 'comprehensive ethos'. From the head to the artists to the students themselves, it was clear that a coherent and self-supportive group had emerged remarkably quickly during the arts process, despite the fact that, as one young person commented, they 'barely knew each other' before.

> 'We all put our trust in each other – you have to when it comes to the risks of flying, otherwise you're dead – or at least badly hurt!'

The artists felt that the young people involved had grown in terms of realising their own individual skill, endurance and courage but that this had happened very much within – and with the support of – a truly collaborative setting.

> 'They were able to express themselves for who they are but also to respect the group dynamic.'

When some of them went on to run a skills-sharing session for younger children – showing Year 8 the ropes, as it were – they brought to it a maturity and a new respect for the complex business of teaching and passing on skills to others. This exercise also contributed to the dissemination of the project beyond the participant group, along with the performances.

Q How did you find it?
A It was good.
Q Could you elaborate on that, please?
A It was really good.

One major learning point that adults, including myself, were able to take away from those performances and the process they formed part of is that youth voice need not be verbal. In one of the early drama skits devised by participants, a student mocks the way in which adults try to evaluate impact:

Q How did you find it?
A It was good.
Q Could you elaborate on that, please?
A It was really good.

Beyond Flying showed that, sometimes, actions speak louder than words and that adults might rely too often on words they can get down into reports like this one. The way that youth voice became embodied was one of the most striking and unexpected outcomes of the project.

> "It needs to be visually stimulating for the audience so they teach you to be extrovert in your movements. Then, instead of hearing words, the audience can see what you mean in the way you are standing or moving."

The jury is out on whether longer term change will happen as a result of the project but the signs are promising, not least because there is such a strong high-level 'buy-in' by the head and key staff at the school, providing a central strategic context and purpose for the process. Recently successful in a bid to become a specialist arts and humanities school, the school has now secured 'Change' school status, which will strengthen the creative input in pedagogy throughout the curriculum.

The close fit between the varied partners in this project was not matched in the borough-led project, where the college and the artist team found themselves working from different agendas and in ways that did not mesh effectively. Leaving aside local difficulties, there are several broader learning points to draw from a project that promised much and, after weeks of effort, has delivered relatively little.

A key difference between this and the secondary school project was that it exclusively targeted disaffected young people, not a broader, integrated group. Behaviours that had caused them to truant or act up in other institutions soon resurfaced after the 'honeymoon period' (when they were new to the college) and, once it was clear that this was billed as a voluntary activity (something that the artists themselves had not initially been made aware of), most drifted away. The initial enthusiasm and commitment shown by students at a forum theatre session tailed off in matter of a few weeks until, by the mid-point of the project, only one group was left and that reduced to a core of half a dozen students, not all of whom attended regularly. A good part of the reason for this was that both artists and teaching staff had expected to translate the dynamic of a short-term intensive project, typical of this kind of intervention, across a much longer period. Poor communication early on in the project meant that a strategy for encouraging youth voice – rather than simply engagement – had not been fully thought through.

'The project was about more than flying. It was about commitment, about self-discipline and building a bit of character, about trying to work as a team in order to get the job done, about the need to compromise – people skills, I guess.'

These problems were compounded by the fact that very few of the young people gave credibility to project's ambitious goal of having their views 'acknowledged and acted upon by the local education authority' – hardly surprising given that their major criticism of education was the perceived unfairness of teachers. It is, in my view, hard to see how youth voice can be elicited from such a group without a long process of building trust and engaging them in positive activities that will give them a sense of worth and purpose. The fact that such groups are usually composed of students from a variety of different localities and schools means that there is much to do first to build peer-to-peer working and create a positive group dynamic.

Even in the secondary school project, there was a significant drop-off in participation after the first few sessions, when around a third of the initial group – including, it appears, the more disaffected and hard-to-persuade students – dropped out. Apart from the voluntary nature of the project, another important factor was the total commitment required for the artistic process itself to unfold. As one aerial artist puts it, 'You have got to commit fully, otherwise you can't manage a highly skilled physical technique like this.' Similarly, the actors on the borough-led project 'operate on consistency', requiring a discipline on matters of attendance and behaviour amongst 'at risk' students that is often more exacting than a school's. It is hard not to agree with a student who felt that 'you can't make someone do something they don't want to do', especially when it requires '110% commitment'.

Further Questions

Participants and writers were invited to consider ways in which learning from the work could be applied elsewhere and to consider which questions, with the benefit of hindsight, might be useful for others embarking on similar initiatives. The intention with the following questions is to provoke thought and help convey how engagement itself can become a catalyst to create change and impact on our creative learning practice.

– How should adults in positions of power (whether artists, teachers or Olympic suits) go about earning young people's trust (the first essential step in engaging them and giving them the confidence to make their voice heard)?

– How can the immediate benefits of such interventions be sustained in the longer term amongst the rest of the student body – and be inscribed within or translated into institutional practice?

– How can adults begin to shift from using young people like these as genuine advisers rather than as reflected glory (i.e. begin to cede some of their power, reducing tokenism)?

Dr Richard Ings is an independent writer, researcher and arts consultant. He is the author of a range of publications on the arts, including From the favela to our manor: Translating AfroReggae (People's Palace Projects/Queen Mary, University of London), Creating Chances: Arts Interventions in Pupil Referral Units and Learning Support Units (Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation) and Funky on your Flyer, a report on young people's access to cultural venues (Arts Council England).

In October 2008, the three London Creative Partnerships teams (London East and South, London North and London West) joined together to become A New Direction, a new independent organisation delivering Creative Partnerships' three new programme strands (Enquiry Schools, Change Schools and Schools of Creativity) in schools across the capital, and extending its reach to 21 London boroughs. The organisation is also looking to developing other strands of work outside of the Creative Partnerships programme. For more information about A New Direction visit the website – www.anewdirection.org.uk

Creative Partnerships London North has worked with the London boroughs of Enfield, Haringey and Waltham Forest since 2004, collaborating with over 70 schools. Creative Partnerships London North joins Creative Partnerships areas across the UK to explore the impact of creative learning on whole school change. We have focussed on the creation of a climate for sustainable and creative change exploring the development of ideas with participants at the centre of their own learning; in other words, that the whole school community, young people, teachers, support staff, headteachers, families and communities in partnership with creative individuals and creative and cultural organisations would be doing this for themselves.

Like many communities across the UK, there is an exciting wealth of diversity as well as dizzying change. A defining feature of Creative Partnerships London North over the last 4 years has been to ensure a wide range of different voices in the programme – of mixing roles and sectors, those who might not normally work or learn together and trying to be sure we could hear the weaker voices. In strengthening these 'partnerships in learning', we will eventually make our own organisation unnecessary. These case studies attempt to analyze some of the many emerging models with engagement at their core that we hope will provide the basis for lasting and meaningful change.

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