

Exploring Cultural Learning Ecologies with Children and Young People

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Cultural ecology approaches the arts and culture as an interconnected system in which everyone plays a part. The approach focuses on relationships and patterns, and applies ecological terms and metaphors to the study of culture. In a new think-piece for A New Direction, cultural thinker John Holden explains how ecological theories might be applied to cultural learning and education. He argues that children and young people play a central role in their own cultural experience and urges us to do more to understand the ‘lived experience’ of children and young people, including “*network mapping from the point of view of the child*”.

This response seeks to shed light on how we might engage children and young people directly in exploring and shaping their own ‘cultural learning ecology’. The recommendations are drawn from my experience of applying theories of *youth participation*, first in music, and more recently in cultural education, particularly as a Youth Arts Consultant for Creative Croydon, a local cultural partnership supported by A New Direction.

What is youth participation?

Youth participation is an approach that developed from ‘democratic participation’ – the notion that citizens should be actively involved in decision-making that directly affects them. Roger Hart’s report for UNICEF in 1992 highlighted the importance of young people being involved in shaping their own societies, and this principle is enshrined in the UN Rights of the Child. Youth participation was advanced significantly in the UK by the creation of the Participation Works coalition led by the National Children’s Bureau and National Youth Association in 2005. The legacy of this work is seen in youth councils across the country, whilst their training was also taken up by many working in youth arts. Unlike the commercial practice of market research, youth participation actively invites the ‘end user’ to share in decision-making about the activities in which they participate.

Youth participation gives us a wealth of tools to help engage young people in the conversation about their own cultural journeys. I first used the principles of youth participation when I managed Wired4Music, the music council for young Londoners, which gives young people a voice to shape their own musical futures. I have gone on to consult arts organisations, music hubs and, most recently, Local Cultural Education Partnerships about how they can consult young people and involve them in decision-making. These principles could be very helpful for exploring cultural ecology with young people themselves.

1. Describing cultural education and learning

Any consultation with children and young people needs to take into account the complexity of the existing language and the diverse range of understandings and reactions it elicits. Our research in Croydon found that young people did not necessarily identify strongly with the concept of 'arts and culture' and were more likely to relate to a specific art form, such as music or dance. It became clear that the arts and culture play only a small part in some young people's lives, except where they reported a particularly positive or transformative experience, or where they were going on to study a particular discipline at a higher level. At the same time, we found that young people did identify with the idea of 'being creative' or taking part in 'creative opportunities'. For example, one young participant in Croydon asked if the fact that he was designing a car with a family member (for a Richard Branson-backed competition) 'counted' as arts and culture. Whilst it may not strictly have been 'culture', it would certainly appear to be creativity. Other consultees saw even less separation, and were also keen to share their thoughts on leisure activities such as quad biking, visiting a park or attending youth parliament.

We may therefore need to expand our understanding of cultural learning and education, to include consideration of the many different ways young people can be creative outside the arts and culture, for example in disciplines which combine scientific and artistic skills such as architecture, engineering and programming. Looking at the wider *creative ecology* might help us better understand the intersecting communities, sectors and industries which form this landscape. In Croydon, we have witnessed the arrival of Westfield, the establishment of a new tech hub and the closure of the largest cultural venue, Fairfield Halls in little over a year. At the same time, we have founded a youth arts ambassador scheme and seen the opening of a community-run saffron farm – all new additions to the shifting landscape of creativity in the borough.

Next steps: Future research might begin by workshopping the phrases, concepts and ideas with children and young people themselves in order to arrive at a shared language for talking about the cultural or creative ecology.

Activity: Definitions

Focus groups are an engaging way to find out what young people think. Working in a group with researchers, a diverse sample of children and young people could explore terms such as 'arts', 'culture', 'creativity', 'learning', 'education' and 'creativity'. Suggested games:

1. Match the definition to the term
2. Think of as many activities as possible under each phrase
3. Come up with a one-minute 'elevator pitch' to explain what we mean by arts, culture or creativity
4. Write down as many jobs as possible that use creative skills

2. Exploring young people's cultural ecologies

We may need to further widen our understanding of the ecology in which children and young people exist. The consultation in Croydon reminded us that young people are part of a much larger 'ecology' which includes school, study, sports, leisure and other hobbies, socialising and family commitments. It was noted that young people may not compartmentalise creative activities and that their cultural engagement accounted for only a small part of their time. Young people's time is finite and they are under increasing pressure to make choices. We need to be aware that we promote arts and cultural learning in competition with other 'suppliers', be they commercial culture providers (multiplexes, record labels, West End shows, pantomimes), sports providers, youth services, retailers, or faith groups. In some cases, young people reported they were too stressed from academic pressures or overwhelmed by choice to take part in organised activity. Many opted to spend their time socialising with friends either face-to-face, or increasingly using social media.

Yet as arts professionals we instinctively believe that artistic, cultural and creative activities can offer an escape and release from the other pressures of growing up. Most of those working in the publically funded sector would probably report entering the sector because they had a positive creative experience as a young person. Perhaps they faced challenging circumstances and art gave them a much-needed opportunity to express themselves, or they made great friends by taking part in a drama group. We need to share these stories. This idea is encapsulated in the Croydon Cultural Education Partnership's vision for *"every young person in Croydon to tell a positive story about their engagement with arts and culture"*.

Next steps: Further consultation might explore young people's wider day-to-day ecology, and examine young people's motivations and drivers for engaging in arts and cultural activities. We might capture their stories, as well as the stories of adults who have benefitted from a creative childhood experience.

Activity: Journey mapping

Journey mapping is an excellent tool which can be carried out individually or in a group. We might chart:

1. When children first engaged with culture, what they did and why
2. When they first realised culture or creative activities were important to them
3. Where they are now and what they hope to do in future
4. If they are no longer involved, we could find out why.

By looking at the interconnecting journeys of young people and adults, we will start to capture a picture of how young people grow and thrive in the cultural ecology.

3. Using ecological concepts to shape the future

If we plan to use ecological metaphors to better understand culture, we should also ask how young people as the future creators and custodians of the cultural ecology would approach this. We might look at what an ecosystem needs to grow and thrive. Just as a natural system needs light and oxygen, so culture needs ideas and investment. Is creativity our sunlight? Are ideas our oxygen? Or have we become dependent on funding to survive? And when funding is reduced will the pond stagnate? Are the arts and culture locked in a battle for survival?

Ecologists examine the natural world's biodiversity. In a city like London, it will be helpful to better understand the role of cultural diversity in the ecology of disciplines, heritages, traditions, cultures and faiths. The case for creative and cultural diversity is strongly made by Arts Council in *Equality, Diversity and The Creative Case*. We might ask how cultural or creative diversity can be protected and encouraged to flourish. What role does cultural education play in this? How can we ensure a rich and diverse cultural learning ecology?

Ecology also examines major threats to the environment. We might follow suit by examining the effect of cultural 'overproduction' in certain areas over others. Or ask whether talent shows are the new battery farm. How do external threats impact on young people's cultural learning? And how will this affect future generations of young creatives? Might we arrive at Peak Culture – the moment where our natural resources are so depleted that we cannot make art anymore? How might a future group of young 'cultural ecologists' explore these questions? What longer term solutions can we find by working with young people to shape our cultural ecology?

Next steps: If we wish to further explore the ecological metaphor, we could do this with children and young people themselves. We might ask them to what extent the ecological concepts resonate with them and what they feel they need to thrive in a diverse cultural biosphere. Furthermore, we can explore the major threats to their cultural future, and together devise solutions to sustain and nurture the ecology.

Activity: Meet the ecologists

Experts from different disciplines can bring new insights to the conversation. Young cultural ambassadors could host a seminar with young leaders from the field of ecology to explore how ecological concepts might be applied to cultural planning, and how culture can make a positive contribution to environmental causes.

Concluding thoughts

It is suggested that youth participation can provide us with a good understanding and useful tools to involve young people in the conversation about their creative learning in an engaging and meaningful way. We now benefit from existing groups in London, such as AND's Young Challenge Group and the Croydon Youth Arts Collective, who are trained and ready to explore new concepts and approaches like cultural ecology. With many more youth boards

in development, there is potential for wide-ranging consultation which might include surveying, focus groups, journey mapping and future-gazing.

It is clear that the 'cultural learning ecology' will look very different from the perspective of each young person we go on to meet. It will vary from musician to actor, and from the engaged to the disinterested. It will be shaped by background, heritage, experience, upbringing and even by chance. The iterations are potentially limitless. And here we must accept that we cannot cater for every possible cultural need, want and expectation. What we *can* do is engage young people in the conversation about their own cultural learning, listen to them and make well informed suggestions. This will include providing cultural opportunities that young people have not asked for – because we understand the importance of opening their eyes to opportunities they did not know about.

In the final analysis, we will need to continue finding compelling ways to articulate why cultural engagement is not only a valid choice, but a great and potentially life-changing one. We need to convey to young people that arts, culture and creativity can be rewarding, fulfilling and enriching, in language which they understand. As a sector, we will continue to need to make the artistic, economic and social arguments for creative learning. Whether the *ecological* argument takes hold remains to be seen. But in the face of significant political and social uncertainty, we may find ourselves increasingly asking how we conserve, protect, nurture and sustain culture by harnessing an ecological mindset. It makes sense to put young people at the heart of that conversation.

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