

## Organism, not Mechanism: An Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning

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*A note on terminology: The terms ‘cultural education’, ‘cultural learning’ and ‘cultural wellbeing’ are used throughout this essay. ‘Cultural education’ and ‘Cultural learning’ are used interchangeably in everyday language, but it is useful for our purposes to make a distinction between them.*

*In what follows, ‘Cultural education’ is used to describe how culture is taught within the formal education system: what the curriculum prescribes, how schools and other settings of formal education transmit cultural knowledge, encourage inter-cultural understanding, and enable creative artistic practices such as music, dance, painting and drama. ‘Cultural learning’ encompasses how young people learn about culture from all sources, including through their own enquiries, their families, and their peer groups. Hence activities like visiting a museum on the weekend or watching a youtube music video count as cultural learning. Since cultural learning is such a broad term, cultural education can be seen as a particular part of cultural learning.*

*Although cultural education and learning can be distinguished from each other in this way, there is no firm dividing line. Formal and informal activities are intertwined in real life – for example, are after-school piano lessons part of formal education, or of broader learning?*

*‘Cultural wellbeing’ is a ‘core planning principle’ within England’s National Planning Policy Framework. In other words, Local Authorities have to take account of ‘cultural wellbeing’ when they take planning decisions. Despite that, ‘cultural wellbeing’ is not defined by government, and there is some confusion about how the term should be understood. In some circumstances, it refers to the ways in which culture promotes health, general wellbeing and satisfaction (for example in the National Health Service: <http://www.nhs.uk/news/2011/05May/Pages/cultural-activities-wellbeing.aspx>). This is not what ‘cultural wellbeing’ means in this paper. Rather, the term refers specifically to cultural capacities and capabilities as ends in themselves rather as means to other social, economic or health outcomes. ‘Cultural wellbeing’, as explored in further detail in the body of the essay, is a positive condition implying knowledge, confidence, mastery, and creativity.*

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## **Organism, not Mechanism: An Ecological Approach to Cultural Learning**

Established ways of thinking and talking about culture tend to take an overly mechanical approach to the problem of how best to stimulate cultural learning among young people. The language of both policy and practice uses words like 'delivery', 'provision' and 'cultural offer'. Policies concentrate on the supply side of the equation, looking at what publicly funded organizations and schools provide to young people, rather than considering the conditions in which young people actually enjoy culture, and what they themselves might bring to the process. The government's recent Culture White Paper takes exactly this approach, speaking of 'transforming the way that cultural education is delivered', and the need to 'provide quality cultural opportunities'<sup>1</sup>. But what if a different approach is used? Instead of concentrating on mapping provision and discussing curriculum content, why not shift the emphasis towards the lived experience of children and young people, and think about cultural learning from their standpoint. Rather than treating cultural education as a mechanism, we should think of cultural learning in terms of growing a cultural ecology.

An ecological approach to culture combines two strands of enquiry. One treats the *system* of culture as an integrated field, concentrating on the quantity and quality of relationships between the creators, producers and participants who are involved in cultural activities, and studying the networks that they inhabit. Here, the stress is on interconnection and looking at culture in the round. The other ecological method is to look at culture as a *process*, concentrating on how culture comes into being, flourishes, disappears and regenerates.

Combining these two ecological approaches generates fresh insights when we come to look at cultural learning and education, because they introduce a number of concepts that are directly relevant to the way that a child's cultural life develops, in turn prompting questions about the effectiveness of the current system. These include *emergence* (how is the child's cultural life formed and shaped; where does it begin?); *growth* (what does a child's cultural growth mean? How are growth and development nurtured?); *evolution* (is there such a thing as cultural evolution, how do young people contribute to it?); and *resilience* (how is individual cultural confidence promoted, and how does the system of cultural learning develop its own resilience?).

A new publication from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, *Understanding the Value of Culture*, draws attention to a 2013 study into arts participation, based in the different settings of school, home and community.<sup>2</sup> The educational psychologist Professor Andrew Martin sees 'the benefits of applying ecological systems theory to education' because that in turn addresses 'the bi-directional processes by which the individual and contexts affect each other ... If we are to speak of valid inferences and reliable effects with respect to the wider benefits of arts learning, we need a better understanding of the processes involved, as well as the contextual elements that might contribute to positive outcomes.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Culture, Media & Sport, *The Culture White Paper*, March 2016, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Martin, A., et al. (2013). The role of arts participation in students' academic and non-academic outcomes: a longitudinal study of school, home and community factors. *Journal of Educational Psychology* 105 (3), 709-727.

<sup>3</sup> Crossick, G., & Kaszynska, Patrycja. (2016). Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project, Arts & Humanities Research Council, 117.

A further advantage of an ecological approach is that it treats all forms of life within an ecosystem as equally important. An elephant is bigger than a flea, but in ecological terms, both are necessary to the functioning of their ecosystem. Within the cultural ecosystem, policy concentrates on the elephants – the big buildings and major companies – and neglects other parts. But an analysis of the cultural ecology can start anywhere, and looking at the system from the point of view of a particular child in a particular place will produce a different set of understandings to those that are gained from concentrating on organizations, agencies, schools and local government. A related question of equality is highlighted in the Arts and Humanities Research Council report mentioned above, where the authors question ‘the hierarchy of subjects that means we’re interested in whether studying music improves ability in maths, but not whether studying maths improves ability in music.’<sup>4</sup>

What, then, does the ecology of culture look like from a young person’s perspective? One way of approaching this question is to look at how children interact with the three main parts of the cultural system – the publicly funded, the commercial and the homemade.

When it comes to publicly funded culture, young people have wildly varying experiences, something that is recognized in the recent White Paper, which says that: ‘the network of provision remains patchy, with geographical and social barriers stacking the odds against those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.’<sup>5</sup>

Three obvious and evidenced factors affect whether a child is able to engage with publicly funded culture: first, whether this form of culture is actually within their reach. Here city centres in general, and London in particular, score highly, because that is where most funded culture takes place. Second, a child’s willingness to engage with funded culture is linked to their social networks – if their family and/or their peer group go to the theatre or to concert halls, then they will tend to as well. Third, high educational attainment correlates with the enjoyment of funded culture. It follows from all of this that the role of schools in partnering with funded organisations, and creating the conditions where children see funded culture as a normal and regular part of their lives is crucial. It also implies that cultural organisations need to engage with children through their families and peer networks as well as through formal education and extracurricular activities.

Most children and young people spend a large amount of their time, and often their money, on enjoying commercial culture. For the vast majority of teenagers, music and fashion choices are important markers of their identity; they show who they are, and the social groups they identify with. There is a marked contrast between an all but universal thirst for commercial music, film, games and so on, and the relatively low numbers of young people who undertake formal study in these areas.<sup>6</sup> Cultural policy does not take much account of young people’s cultural development through commercial culture, but there are questions to be asked about access to, availability of, and pricing of, those examples of commercial culture that form part of young people’s commonly shared experience. In addition, debates about cultural quality should not be confined to the publicly funded sector – there are obvious gradations of quality within commercial culture that young people should be encouraged to discuss.

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<sup>4</sup> Crossick, G., & Kaszynska, Patrycja. (2016). Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project, Arts & Humanities Research Council, 8

<sup>5</sup> Department for Culture, Media & Sport, The Culture White Paper, March 2016, 22.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/426646/A\\_level\\_subject\\_take-up.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/426646/A_level_subject_take-up.pdf).

The third area of culture that young people engage with is the informal and self-generated activities that happen in the homemade sector. This ranges from getting involved in traditional cultural activities such as singing in choirs, performing in amateur groups and learning the cultural practices of particular demographic groups, through to recording songs and making videos to upload onto social media platforms. It is this area of cultural life where the practices and prospects for young people have been transformed over a very short space of time. Not only is so much cultural content available to them either free or very cheaply, but young people are able to make work to professional standards, share it, collaborate with other people, and even make money in ways that did not exist even a decade ago. Cultural learning should address the needs of young people not only to play instruments and paint pictures, but to get their work in front of an audience.

Another way of looking at the place of a child in the cultural ecology is to look at his or her position within a network of cultural opportunities, experiences and organizations. Such an approach would examine the connectedness of different individuals or groups and expose the gaps that need to be addressed and the connections that need to be made. This relatively easy exercise could be carried out by schools, to see the degree to which children are aware of what exists in their neighbourhood, and also to find out where they connect to cultural experiences through family encouragement, broadcasting or the internet. Network mapping from the point of view of the child will reveal a different set of networks to that arising from mapping 'provision'. The child's connectedness to culture is a fundamental factor that is barely researched and needs urgent attention. Every school should understand the cultural networks that its pupils inhabit.

Looking at the cultural ecology in terms of processes rather than systems and networks prompts further questions. Creative acts do not appear from the ether, but are born out of reactions to experience, whether those are acts of imitation, homage or revolt. In order for creativity to take place, a young person needs the stimulus of experiencing the culture of the past and the present, the confidence to make new work of their own, and the relevant skills to create whatever it is they want to create. Cultural learning needs to focus on past and present culture, not only as a means to the appreciation and enjoyment of culture, but as the springboard for the creation of new culture by young people themselves.

Putting the child at the centre of the cultural ecology begs the question of what cultural learning is trying to achieve. Almost all politicians, of whatever party, would agree with the Education Secretary Nicky Morgan when she says: 'I want every single young person to have the opportunity to discover how the arts can enrich their lives. Access to cultural education is a matter of social justice.' But are 'opportunities to discover' and 'access to education' enough?

If we ask what the ends of a cultural education should be, it will help answer the question of what kind of cultural ecosystem will serve young people well.

One of the aims of cultural learning is to promote the cultural wellbeing of young people, in other words equipping them with a high level of cultural knowledge, confidence and creative ability. Cultural wellbeing for young people must include extending their knowledge; honing their critical skills; promoting social, participatory and communal opportunities, and helping them to become creative individuals. This in turn suggests a three-fold approach:

The basic underpinning of cultural wellbeing rests on knowledge about the culture of the past and the present. The government's recent Culture White Paper says that 'Knowledge of great works of art, great music, great literature and great plays, and of their creators, is

an important part of every child's education.'(p21). The question of who decides what the 'great works' are – and what is excluded – is of course highly political, but without some foundation to build on or to demolish young people would be culturally adrift. But a young person would be equally impoverished if their cultural education consisted solely of being told to perform, or act, or learn about a pre-selected list of 'great works'. Objective criteria – being told what culture to admire and how to reproduce it – are not enough.

The second level of cultural education and learning helps young people to develop subjective understanding, enabling them to make critical choices for themselves. They should be able to decide questions of cultural quality, and have the capacity and confidence to determine what culture they enjoy, so that they develop their abilities to critique the canon, explain their preferences, and argue in favour of them. But again, this is not sufficient.

The third level of cultural learning introduces the concept of the young person as creator. The ultimate goal of cultural learning is to promote a society that confidently makes its own culture. The culture of the future will be created by default, but if cultural education stops at the first level (where people are told to admire the great works of the past), culture will stagnate. If it stops at the second level (developing critical faculties) culture will develop a 'them and us' relationship between artists and audiences, between cultural professionals and the public. It is only by taking cultural learning to the third level, where every child develops their creative potential to the fullest extent possible that we can produce a culture where everyone is involved in making and defining a democratic culture.

In practice then, all three types of cultural learning are necessary for young people's cultural wellbeing, and if the cultural system in London and elsewhere is to serve young people effectively, it needs to address all three levels. This means that connections must be made across the system, so that people involved in one activity know about the young person's other activities. At the moment a young person can experience a set of uncoordinated and sometimes random cultural activities, rather than a rounded and considered learning experience that encompasses and inter-relates all types of cultural wellbeing.

The operation of the cultural ecology depends on the existence of three different roles: Guardians, who look after the culture of the past; Platforms, that provide the places and spaces for the culture of the present; and Connectors, who make things happen and bring together other parts of the system.

In each case, these roles can be carried out by funded, commercial or unpaid amateur people or organisations. For instance Disney, the V&A, and volunteer heritage groups act as Guardians; the publicly funded Southbank Centre, the performance space at St John's Smith Square, and the commercial website Vevo are all Platforms; and Connectors range from Local Authority arts officers to commercial film producers to the organisers of amateur choirs. Some organisations carry out multiple roles, but most only one.

Looked at from the child's perspective, they have contact with Guardians, Platforms and Connectors across all sorts of organisations in the funded, commercial and homemade spheres of culture. But little is known about the connections that those organisations have between themselves, or the extent to which better co-ordination between them could benefit the child.

Here again, understanding a young person's cultural networks would be a helpful starting point towards knowing where the cultural system needs to strengthen its own connectivity.

Our questions should not be about cultural organizations are doing in the field of cultural learning, but rather, what kind of ecosystem serves young people well?

We should be asking what the cultural needs of young people are, and whether they are being met, because ecological approaches do not treat children as passive units that exist within an environment that acts upon them. Instead young people are seen as actors who shape their own cultural environment at the same time as they are being shaped by it. In contemporary British society, a great deal of cultural change is driven by young people's enthusiasms for music, clothing, styles and fashions. Young people are creators of culture – on the street, on the internet, in the home – and their creativity and their thirst for new experiences drives whole industries. We should think of them not only as pupils being taught about great works and learning to play instruments, but also as equal partners in the making of contemporary culture.

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