

Challenge Podcast #1

Transcript

Key

Interviewer – I
Respondent – R
s.l. = sounds like

Transcript

Host: Welcome to the Challenge podcast. If you have downloaded this podcast, like us, you must be interested in supporting young people's creativity. In late February, leaders involved in A New Direction's Challenge sat around a table and shared their experiences. We talked about testing new ways we can enable all young Londoner's to shape the culture of our city. I'm Corinne, the partnerships manager at A New Direction and I have managed the Challenge over the past three years. Youth engagement is central to all the challenge programmes. If young people are involved all the way through, we can make sure the work is as relevant as it can be and adapting to their needs. When we met, here's what our leaders had to say.

Speaker 1: What stands out for me is access to support and to resources, and the social creative network is a platform that connects 15-25 year olds all over London, so it doesn't matter which kind of schools they are placed in, what area, what borough they are from. They are all connected on this platform to either share their skills, the work that they are doing, or to collaborate with other young people that they have met on this platform that may not particularly be in their area or their borough. We kind of step back. We created the platform, and then they all kind of connected and then we offered the space, which was Croydon Arts Store and said you have this opportunity to create work, share your work and exhibit in this area. For some of them it was the first time ever being part of an exhibition, or even curating. It was great to kind of see the growth of the group, which is now up to 600 creative young people are part of this platform and its still growing. We have had some obstacles and troubles at the beginning but it's kind of getting that feedback from the young people to know that it is going to keep growing and there are more young people that are joining the exhibition and meeting other people to make those links, which may be determining their futures, right? They are meeting people that really could be future career paths, something they may be doing eventually when they are like in their late 20s, 30s. So it's kind of knowing that I was part of the process to creating that platform and people will still be benefitting from that platform when I am no longer kind of part of the organisation is something that I am proud of.

Speaker 2: We had a culture congress recently in Croydon in January and I worked with a group of young arts ambassadors called The Croydon Youth Arts Collective and they have been doing lots of advocacy work since Creative Croydon began three years ago now I think, 2015. At the culture congress they sort of facilitated a space in the central library in Croydon where they were asking lots of cultural movers and shakers that were coming to this event to make pledges about how they are going to improve the arts offer for young people. And it was just a really memorable moment for me thinking back to when they formed in 2015 and the sort of journey they have come through. They didn't start as like, you know, meek young people who couldn't public speak or shout loud and proud about why the arts are so important but they

have just grown so much and seeing them...we didn't really need to step in as staff, they just sort of took over and were quite ballsy going up to these adults who have a lot of clout and power, asking them to sort of make a change.

Speaker 3: Actually I wanted to comment that I saw a lot of the work that you did in Croydon with the young people when they performed that play you know, I think it was the Council Chambers. So obviously that was at the end and I saw how the young people were and also coming to Ovalhouse and working with some young people who have been through kind of like a lot of the programmes we have done and now we are working with them on new projects, and the fact that they are now assistant directing on some of the professional plays that we are doing in schools and they are developing a programme with me, that's really exciting. So seeing what two organisations with Croydon and Ovalhouse have done. I wasn't there at the beginning, but I have seen how it has ended and how amazing the young people have been. And I know there have been challenges but the young people have still benefitted. The young people have still produced amazing work and gone on to do even more amazing things. It was definitely a moment where I am excited to see what more we can do, what more the young people are contributing to our programme. There's so many young people that are not engaging but when they do, oh my gosh it works so well. So for me coming in kind of at the end of both projects and seeing how the young people are working is actually amazing, really really amazing.

Speaker 4: For our programme we supported young people to run their own creative projects. So there were moments very similar where young people had taken ownership of what they wanted to do. They weren't told by any cultural institution this is the work you need to create; they had made a decision about how they used their own creativity to benefit their community. Whether it was talking about autism or mental health, or colourism or various issues that young people might face today and how they used their own creativity through zines, through film, through events, through theatre, or workshops to say what it was that they needed to say to express themselves creatively and then you could sort of see them develop through their projects. They had these initial ideas which were a little bit...you know, great ideas but to actually see those ideas coming to fruition and making them happen and to see the end results and to see them...both them grow, but the benefit that it did to other people in society was brilliant.

Speaker 3: For me what is important personally is that a lot of these young people are actually young people of colour. Being a person of colour myself, having young people able to have paid work on their CV's really strong to be able to go out there and say you know, they were part of this programme but also they are now part of a professional body you know and they are producing professional work, that's very important to me because as we know there is also a lack of diversity in the arts and especially things like behind the scenes. I am really glad that we have a young woman of colour that is assistant directing another young woman of colour that is stage managing, so that's quite important as well.

Speaker 5: The project has to be bigger than the people who are leading it, it can't just be person led. It has to be everybody having their stake. Everybody being invested and have ownership at all levels from the top to the bottom, from the bottom to the top and all across. We are not the gatekeepers of young people and I think that is really important. It's about ensuring that young people have valuable experiences that they can learn and progress with but then they spread their wings and they soar. So you know, I think that's also key. They can't just stay with us forever; we are not holding their hands you know.

Host: One of the things we have learnt is that the challenge thrives on strong partnerships. If you are thinking of setting up a local project, having the right people around the table is essential.

Speaker 6: What has been really I think successful about some of the ways that we worked around the programme has been a very distributed leadership model, in which all the strands of work are being delivered by different organisations. And now as we are kind of coming to the end of this current phase, we are seeing increased leadership from those partners. So Stratford Circus is increasingly taking on that leadership around the kind of future ambition of the programme and the partnership in building that momentum, so I think that feels, you know, like how big organisations can support other organisations and can work to kind of catalyse and bring in their resources to do that. But the role of leadership may not be the right role forever and other organisations may be better placed to kind of lead some of that in different ways as you are evolving the programme. So I think that's been a really interesting question for us.

Speaker 7: I think I want to make a shout out for the adults really. Bellingham is an area that is...it's a very deprived area, it doesn't have much infrastructure either and it doesn't have a lot of opportunities for people to come together. So many diverse organisations have started to work collectively, and think collectively and although we are starting from a very low base in some ways, you know, the same old questions come up. You know, we don't know what each other is doing. How can we inform each other better, what vehicles can we put in place to do that? It's still really exciting that people are still coming around the table.

Host: And there is an enthusiasm for collaborative working you are finding?

Speaker 7: Yes. I don't know how yet. We don't quite know how yet but we are getting there.

Speaker 6: I would definitely agree in East London, just the number of partners that have been involved in the programme in some way over the two and a half years, it still feels there is a real value and need for that to continue and I think just looking back on all the conversations we had, all the meetings and the events and the ways that different people have engaged and come together around those things that we can do collectively in a bigger and different way, than we can do as individual organisations or individual schools, feels really strong I think and it feels like with all the challenges that we are facing as organisations, as schools and young people, one of the ways to find solutions is to work more closely. So I am very proud that we have gone on the journey from that launch event that I remember two years ago at Redbridge Drama Centre that felt like the first moment when the programme was kind of landing off the page of planning and becoming something real. All the way up to you know, our symposium event that we had in November of last year and how things have changed and momentum has built over those couple of years. It's really brilliant.

Host: And without meaning to put you on the spot, are there ideas that you can think of where there are some solutions that have come up from those collaborative conversations about how we can work better together?

Speaker 6: Absolutely. And I think having those conversations and understanding what the shared challenges are, bringing together a really vast range of organisations of different sizes, of different ambition and different ways of working with young people does feel a little bit daunting but I think there are certainly intersections where we all have a shared sort of ambition for how young people can access this incredible asset of London and the incredible arts organisations that are based here. So I think one of the biggest ways that I feel we have been able to test in Creative Schools, if you look at the map of partners that have been involved the cultural organisations - often very centrally located, and young people as we know often aren't always based in central London. You know, how can we change that relationship between what is based in the central boroughs and young people who are often not there. So I think being able to tackle that as individual organisations often feels really daunting and all of the things we have to do, so I think those things that we can do collectively to address that or to think

about, you know, the kinds of schools we are working with. I think that there's certain questions that are almost impossible to do even for big organisations on their own. Having a collective remit or ambition around that has really helped us to start to answer some of those questions.

If you were developing from a strong need or evidence base, you can always return to that you know as your kind of core values. So I think when you are working with lots of different partners who have different needs and different ambitions, that can all provide a kind of cornerstone to kind of return to and not drift too far into everybody else's individual objectives.

Speaker 8: It was interesting what you were saying about things not needing to be dependent on individuals because when those individuals go, that connection is gone, that work is gone and I think I have sort of been doing this for nearly a year now and we are already seeing some of that happening so it's about trying to work around that, in a place that is changing so much. There's new organisations emerging, buildings appearing, disappearing left right and centre. So it's a really sort of shifting landscape physically and culturally. So trying to embed a culture of collaboration so that it goes beyond just a couple of well meaning individuals just so that...to try and enable that to keep going is what we are sort of working on at the minute.

Host: The leaders of the programmes are right in the middle. They have to act as conveners, brokers, project managers, as well as making sure everyone is talking the same language. Here are some of the lessons they learnt about taking on that role.

Speaker 2: At the first point getting young people in a room telling us what they want, what they would like. Using that as a sort of springboard to go on and respond to. Also getting young people to share that with people that might not normally engage with them. So like testimonials from young people is an extremely powerful tool to get people say from businesses that we might not have heard things like that, about how important the arts have been for young people and why they should invest in it or create opportunities for the arts to sort of grow. So they were two really important things.

Speaker 7: I'd say to think about the goodbye, what happens at the end. We are quite fortunate in that even when we started in Bellingham, we knew that as a borough we were thinking about well what does a Cultural Education Partnership look like in Lewisham. That it might not look like some of the other models that have already been operating elsewhere, then this was a chance to trial some things and learn from it. So it's also something we can take from this relationship down in Bellingham and the borough is also writing another cultural strategy. This can all feed into that too. So we don't really have to say goodbye but it is about thinking about what happens if it can't continue in quite the same way.

Speaker 9: I think there is a key role around brokerage and giving time for those relationships to be brokered and understanding those different partners' agendas, being as honest as you can within that can help to avoid difficulties further down the line.

Speaker 10: We have remained committed to the mission if you like, which was about realising goals for the benefit of young people and increasing interest and awareness in the aims of engaging young people positively in creative opportunities.

Speaker 2: I'd also say like patience. I find strategic work you know, it's really necessary but I also find it quite frustrating because I am someone who needs tangible outcomes like right we know this needs to happen, so how are we going to make it happen and obviously that's not realistic. You know, there's lots of things that depend on making things happen, responding to needs but for example very early on one of our consultation findings with young people was that getting to opportunities is really difficult. Transport, not feeling safe in certain areas, Croydon is vast, it is a huge borough, very different pockets, very different communities in the

different areas. A lot of young people weren't travelling across the borough and now we are at a point where we can actually buy a bendy bus, which sounds a bit bonkers but basically set up a mobile arts room on a bendy bus and we can drive it round. And that's kind of two and a half years after hearing this very kind of poignant need that young people literally cannot travel to certain parts and we were able to respond to it. So my point is let those responses come organically and you can't rush it, you've just got to be really patient and flexible.

Host: A New Direction brought £900,000 to the Challenge and through partnership, almost one million was added to that fund. We used that money to fund programmes reaching half of London's boroughs, involving 10,000 young people and 200 partner organisations. In 2018 The Challenge continues and we want you to be involved. You can visit the website anewdirection.org.uk.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

Transcribed by Tamara Rivard at Fingertips Typing Services.