

Harnessing young people's voices in powerful partnerships

By Lawrence Becko for A New Direction

Youth voice is a term used to describe the collective ideas and opinions expressed by young people. We use the term in the arts and cultural sector to describe the action of eliciting views from young people about their creative and cultural participation, and involving them in deciding what it will look like. This is particularly important when we are working in cultural education and what we broadly call youth arts because young people are at the heart of what we do. If you are in the process of setting up a cultural partnership, the following information will help resource you to better involve and include young people in your work.

Why consult young people in your partnership?

A powerful driver

The process of consulting young people is increasingly recognised as a powerful mechanism for driving cultural development, and has come to be seen as an important consideration when setting up a new strategic partnership or initiative. Putting young people at the heart of the partnership enables all stakeholders to better focus on the needs and opinions of their beneficiaries. Just as commercial businesses consult their consumers before launching a new product, so the cultural sector can harness the voice of its 'end users' to deliver activities that will improve their experience. It will therefore make your partnership more focused and targeted towards its ultimate goal.

A human right

Listening to young people (and acting on what they tell us) goes far beyond service improvement: young people have a human right both to cultural participation and to influencing decisions that affect their own lives. Youth voice is therefore a matter of citizenship and participation in a democratic society. As the future creators, consumers and custodians of culture, it is vital that young people are consulted and decision-making shared with them, in order to build a brighter creative future for all. To this extent, it will make your partnership more accountable and representative.

An eye-opener

Consulting young people is also an eye-opening and mind-expanding experience. We all care deeply about advancing arts and culture but sometimes we can forget to look up and question what we are doing. Talking to young people about their experience of participating in arts and culture is a fascinating process that can inspire new ways of thinking, bring up hidden challenges and lead to new solutions that no one was thinking about before. In this way, it will make your partnership more visionary and innovative.

The origins of youth voice

The process of consulting young people and involving them in decision-making is rooted in the concept of democratic participation which is defined as “a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change” (Treseder 1997 cited in Kirby et al., 2003). The Children and Young People’s Unit (2011) stated that participation should occur where individual decisions are being taken about children’s own lives, where services for children are being provided or where national policies are being developed. The rise of interest in youth voice and participation was driven by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and enshrined in Article 12. At the heart of this approach is Roger Hart’s Ladder of Participation, introduced in a [report for the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre](#) in 1992. The ladder is used to describe the phases that projects may go through – from manipulation and tokenism, to a position of shared decision-making between adults and children.

A growing sense of the importance of young people being heard led to the formation of [Participation Works](#), an alliance of partners led by the National Children’s Bureau. The guiding document for this work is [Building a Cultural of Participation](#) (Kirby et al., 2003) which outlines the theory and practice behind embedding youth voice. This was followed by the National Youth Agency’s [Hear by Right](#), a framework for participation with young people, and the Young Foundation’s [Taking The Lead](#) (2009). Participation Works went on to roll out training across the UK which became widely accessed by members of the cultural sector around 2008-2010. Subsequently, London developed its own infrastructure for youth participation through organisations such as [London Youth](#), [Partnership for Young London](#) and the Young Londoners’ Participation Network, and most recently in the form of the [Mayor of London’s young advisors](#). The [British Youth Council](#) continue to actively promote youth voice across the UK. Youth boards operate across many London boroughs, giving young people a voice on local issues.

Youth voice in London’s cultural sector

In the cultural sector, and in cultural education especially, we make decisions that affect children and young people’s lives every day. As a result of this, cultural organisations are increasingly adopting the principles of democratic participation to consult with young people about their cultural experiences. Over the last ten years, we have seen a groundswell in youth voice across the arts and culture, both inside organisations and in the form of youth boards, councils and leadership programmes.

Youth voice in the culture sector usually incorporates a variety of inter-related approaches. There is no one-size-fits-all answer and it helps to remember that youth voice is more an ethos or mindset, than a methodology. As Cultural Education Partnerships have launched, we have seen examples of young people being involved in their formation and steering. The approaches that resonate most with partnership formation are:

- Youth consultation: This involves asking young people what they think about activity, policy or issues but not necessarily involving them in making changes (although this is an obvious

next step). The approach employed to produce the [Creative Croydon](#) report (Croydon Music & Arts, 2015) is a useful starting point for running a consultation and highlights some of the challenges and opportunities of the methodology. AND's work with King's College London, [Caring for Cultural Freedom](#), describes an in-depth consultation with young people in Harrow about their creative engagement, exploring how they spent their time, what they liked about it, and where these activities take place. Barking and Dagenham Cultural Education Partnership have also held sessions hear young people's views which fed into decision-making about the [INSPIRE Festival](#).

- Youth boards: This is the most common way to involve young people in decision-making, by using a formalised structure that is typically also youth-led, often with the input of a facilitator. These may be:
 - *Sector wide* – for example A New Direction's [Young Challenge Group](#) who are involved in conversations about investments made in local areas through Challenge London, and [Wired4Music](#), originally launched as the Young Londoners' Music Council by Sound Connections in 2009. Now functioning more as a youth network than a board, the group promote and advocate on behalf of young musicians. The formation and methodology are described in this [report](#) from 2014 which provides insight into how to set up a programme of this nature.
 - *Locally responsive* – Croydon Cultural Education Partnership began its journey by consulting young people in the borough (see above) which led to the formation of [Croydon Youth Arts Collective](#). The group are represented on the steering group, produce an annual youth arts festival and carry out consultations with their peers. Involving young people in this way has changed the way decisions about culture are made in the borough.
 - *Internal* – Many cultural institutions now have their own youth boards, for example the [Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board](#) or Southbank Centre's [Youth Ambassadors](#).
- Youth governance: involves inviting young people to take part in organisational steering groups and get involved in high level, strategic decision-making. [Roundhouse](#) have recently published a report on youth governance which is available by contacting them directly. This contains a range of interesting case studies demonstrating how other organisations have involved young people in organisational decision-making. Croydon now involve members of the Croydon Youth Arts Collective in the strategy group of the Local Cultural Education Partnership. Young people attend the meetings feeding in ideas from the group, and then report back to their peers on new developments.

An array of other approaches exist to increase the leadership skills of young creatives, particularly in the creative sphere. These include personal development programmes such as Kinetika Bloco's [Leadership Programme](#), or young producer schemes such as the one run by [Poet in the City](#). Sound Connections have also produced [Rewired](#), a national research project into youth voice in music – most of which is transferable to cross-artform working. The website offers a useful online test to determine your organisation's strengths in each aspect of youth voice, as well as a wealth

of insight on embedding youth voice in an organisation's work. Ultimately, it will be up to each partnership (and its beneficiaries) as to what will work best in the context.

Five top tips for embedding youth voice in powerful partnerships

1. Use the existing literature

Much of the literature produced since the 1990s is still relevant today, and by exploring both this and the many creative models and toolkits which have emerged since, it is possible to equip yourself, your organisation and your partnership with everything you need to involve young people in shaping the future of culture.

2. Share practice

Get in touch with other partners and start a conversation about embedding youth voice in your partnership. You might want to reach out to a partnership that is already working with young people in this way, or discuss youth board formation with an organisation that has already got a scheme up and running.

3. Make a start

You have to start somewhere: a focus group, a visit to a youth group, an invitation to some carefully identified young people to join a strategic meeting. Every action counts and each step you take will increase your partnership's confidence in listening to and working with young people.

4. Give it time

Embedding youth voice is a process: it takes time and resources so planning is helpful. Different stakeholders will be at different stages of understanding and readiness to engage with young people. By embarking on this journey, you are beginning a culture shift which will challenge the way that power is distributed through your partnership. Give everyone a chance to get on board, whether it's your young people or your senior partners.

5. Always feed back

No consultation is complete until the consultees have heard how their views and ideas have been acted upon. This doesn't mean acting on everything – but it is vital that changes and challenges are conveyed back to the young people involved. This can be done at a follow up event, through longer-term feedback structures such as steering group attendance, or through regular updates to a youth board.

Summary

Embedding youth voice in your partnership will make your work more focused, accountable and innovative. Not only will you be fulfilling an important civic role by enabling young people to shape decisions that influence their cultural participation, you will also benefit from fresh ideas and perspectives in your meetings and activities. Ultimately, partnerships are most powerful, when they empower everyone to collaborate, make change and shape a better cultural experience for everyone.