

# Creating ‘one big masterpiece’ – Synthesis in Creative Arts Youth Work

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**&**

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## **Introduction**

The creative industries contribute £4.6bn to the Scottish economy and support 73 thousand jobs (Creative Scotland, 2017). Creativity sits at the heart of Curriculum for Excellence, where it is ‘fundamental to the definition of what it means to be a ‘successful learner’ in the Scottish education system’ (Education Scotland, 2013, p 2). Creative learning and cultural participation offer a means for people to improve their understanding of themselves and to achieve individual and collective well-being (Creative Scotland, 2014). Yet, in questioning whether our education systems do enough to enable learners to flourish, Putnam (2015) argues for improvements in the use of methods, like digital technology, to develop learning, creativity and innovation, where the streaming of short films, plays, animation and documentaries create ‘educational assets’ (p.122) for transformational education (Mezirow, 2009).

Understanding the importance of creativity in a context of shifting youth work methodologies (Harland and McCready, 2012) inspired us to consider a range of ways to improve young people’s experiences of, and access to, creative education outside of schooling. This article draws on findings from a multiple case study that examined use of creative arts in two youth work projects. It argues for educational synthesis in the application of professional youth work methodologies that can

complement school based learning, to strengthen cohesion and collaboration in Scottish education. In this research, combining creative arts with youth work developed an authentic and participatory means for young people's expression of voice (Beggan & Coburn, 2017).

### **A view of learning and education in Scotland**

A review of literature identified benefits in the use of creative arts as a focus for development of critical youth work (Coburn and Wallace, 2011) which offers a counterbalance to contemporary social and corporate contexts and can be a catalyst for emancipatory practice (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). The literature also identified concerns about the 'learnification' of education in shifting focus away from questions about the 'content, purpose and relationships of education' (Biesta, 2015:17). Biesta asserts:

'...the question of purpose...[as]...a *multidimensional* question because education tends to function in relation to a number of domains...[which recognises that]...in addition to qualification and socialisation, education also impacts positively or negatively on the student as a person'

This learnification of education is consistent with commonly-held views in community education and youth work whereby a 'learning' discourse is critiqued as reducing education to a superficial, tick-box, skills-based, delivered form of knowledge acquisition (Batsleer, 2008; Martin, 2008). In youth work, this has involved a shift from open access contexts towards more formalised practices aligned with, for example, outcomes-focussed 'employability' hubs, or in targeted interventionist work, which seeks to promote particular kinds of 'pro-social' behaviour. The prevalence of 12-20 week 'interventions' offers a standardised formula for successful learning of skills but lacks depth and innovation in taking

forward a Curriculum for Excellence that ‘...offers a blended and flexible approach...which meets the needs of every learner’ (Scottish Government, 2014, p4). While recognising achievement in the development of ‘transferrable’ skills as important, the learnification of education as a standardised formulaic response to the condition of being unemployed, or labelled as ‘anti-social’ or ‘under-achieving’, can limit flexibility and creativity within educational youth work.

The formulaic, proposed as a means for learning aligned to skills development, is short term and solution specific. Set within a wider commodification of education as producer of knowledge, sold to learners in a depressed labour market as a means of securing employment, suggests that knowing ‘how to’ do something will bring about desired results. This negates understanding of complex domains of education that are aligned to socialisation and subjectivities, which are proposed by Biesta as intrinsic to the purpose of a normalised education system where ‘excessive emphasis on academic achievement causes severe stress for young people particularly in cultures where failure is not really an option’ (Biesta, 2015, p. 78). Drawing on the socialising purpose of education, through which young people develop their own understandings of the world and themselves led us to consider creative arts youth work as an alternative educational methodology.

Traditionally, there were two discrete perspectives on engagement with creative arts. Carey (2005) noted that Aristotle perpetuated a typically elitist view of art as a means of improving the lived experience of poor slaves and labourers, while Plato suggested that this privileged view of art was not connected to the realities of people’s lives and so challenged the idea of high-brow art, seeing it as a means of promoting negative passion. More recently, the work of Bourdieu in discussing creative arts, offers a useful means of considering cultural divisiveness, in terms of class, for example, where the purpose of ‘taste’ was to ‘register one’s distinction from those lower in the social order’ (Carey, 2005 p.118).

**Creating ‘One big masterpiece’...?**

Participants in this research were not students of art appreciation nor did they have a knowledgeable concept of the intricacies involved in deciphering ‘the arts’. Rather, they were young people, routinely labelled as disenfranchised, marginalised or excluded, who did not routinely participate in creative arts. Yet, they were encouraged to tell their stories using newly acquired arts-based skills, developed through informal education as practised in two community arts in youth work (CAYW) settings. One research setting, ‘Quicksand’, offered a range of creative arts methods to engage young people in different projects and activities that enabled them to develop confidence in articulating ideas. The other setting, ‘The Road’, operated on two levels. Firstly, a core group of young people at ‘The Road’ was directly responsible for introducing, devising, scripting and physically creating short scenes that invited groups of young people ‘walked through’ to create a shared experience of ‘performed’ scenarios. Secondly, the core group were also peer educators who facilitated discussion of scenarios, using these as prompts to examine issues such as discrimination, drug use, mental health or violence that young people encountered in their everyday lives. The focus of this research was on the core group. When asked about why they participated in CAYW, they said:

Ah, like, ah to come to Quicksand because you can express yourself...you don’t get judged for what you do. Whatever reason you come here for you can just let skills flow through you and just create this one big masterpiece. (Penny)

Ah feel that I’m not very good at talking to people and coming here’s helped me to open up to people and say things I wouldn’t usually say...Before I wouldn’t usually do that, I’d just keep to myself. (Richard)

Ah started ah started off when ah left school. Ah came to The Road for an employability course and then, obviously, I got like involved in the stuff eftir ma course 'n' when I left the course ah just stayed on and done volunteering youth work here. (Melissa)

These extracts provide evidence in terms of acquisition of knowledge, socialisation and in becoming responsible for their own subjective actions as distinct from being objects of the actions of others. For example, Penny talks about letting 'skills flow', and suggested that knowledge acquisition, and development of new skills were achieved through a process that involved freedom of expression, without being judged, which then led to the creation of 'one big masterpiece'. This was consistent with Richard's experiences of opening up and expressing his ideas with others. Further, Mellissa's participation in an 'employability' course had led her into volunteering at the project as an extension of the original course about helping her to secure employment. In this way, Mellissa demonstrated capability to act independently of any requirement to attend the employability course, and made a conscious decision to stay on at The Road. This suggested that the young people's experience of CAYW engaged them in activities that aligned to all three domains of education outlined by Biesta (2015). The evidence here also chimes with Webster's (1997) recognition of the importance of participation in community based arts work, where the level of artistic skill is not the main purpose of practice and where groups can develop a collective identity that becomes more important than the art form itself.

In this research, participants had not previously been inclined to access artistic activities. Yet having found their way into the projects, they seemed to thrive in this environment and it exceeded their expectations:

Ah came tae The Road ‘cause there wis nothin’ else tae dae. Ah used to go tae a youth club a while ago...ah stopped an’ ah started comin’ here, cause ah enjoy it. (John)

Quicksand is like a place to get away from anything that’s troubling you, or whatever, and you still have, like, friends here as well. (Samuel)

Ah don’t know, ah just started ‘cause it was something to do. Then everybody left and I came back ‘cause it was a big part of life. (Abigail)

Em, ah really enjoy being here. Like, I think the purpose of The Road's really good. A lot of people, they'll come...an’ have a laugh an’ things like that but The Road does actually change lives. (Emily)

The above comments show a multiplicity of purposes for participation that, in addition to offering something to do that was enjoyable, included social aspects of meeting and making friends but also suggested a transformational potential that was life changing.

Webster explains that community based creative arts assists people to understand and know ‘how to’ undertake creative activity but also includes a process that enables them to gain insight into the nature of oppression that underpins how society functions, and facilitates use of creative arts as a tool to do something about it (Webster, 1997 p.9). This perspective informed our analysis of practice in these two CAYW settings that synthesised two distinct methodologies to develop creative educational processes that facilitated the articulation of ideas and voice on issues that were important to the lived experiences of the young people involved. In

development of voice, Slade & Dunne (1997) also noted that, among people who typically accessed such projects, there was a danger of censorship that could lead to, for example, situations where their use of language was described as inappropriate or likely to cause offence, due to a lack of awareness of what was generally acceptable in specific contexts.

At both CAYW settings, facilitators encouraged participants to voice their own opinions and views but it was important for youth workers to guide participants to take responsibility for their expression of voice in sharing their experiences with different audiences. Rather than constrain all use of colourful expressive language the projects involved in this case study accepted that a particular kind of language added authenticity among participants, to reflect the realities of their world. However, the youth workers explained to young people that while acceptable in this particular circumstance, this level of acceptance was different to accepted normalities in other contexts such as a school or workplace. The view taken was that this type of language reflected, and was typical of, the conversations young people engaged in when ‘hanging with friends’ and in trying to get a point across.

We have to stay within their comfort zone, so their comfortable with that the noo, an whit we’ll dae...[is]...we’ll then get on top of them and say “drop some of that, you need to drop some of that swearing”, but whit they dae is they put the swearing in, cause their nervous and they forget words...we let them go OTT, and then we get them tae peel it back. In terms of the script, its their chat no’ oors. (Edwina, Youth Worker, The Road)

It has been suggested that critical youth work could be aligned with Freirean pedagogy where education is student centred and starts from where the young person is starting (Coburn and Wallace, 2011; Davies 2015). In youth work, young people are learners in a voluntary participative sense. However, as suggested by Edwina in

this extract, starting where young people are comfortable can be difficult and compromise is often important. Edwina suggested that youth workers acceptance of young people's use of colloquial language was part of an on-going transformative educational process whereby young people came to recognise their use of offensive language as being inappropriate in some contexts.

Providing a safe space for young people to push the boundaries of acceptance was part of the learning process at The Road. The youth workers were more than aware that the use of such language was extreme in some cases but also recognised that this was sometimes due to being nervous. This also suggested that being outside of their comfort zone, in a safe space, could affect how young people reacted, especially among those unfamiliar with being in a creative arts learning space, where freedom of expression was valued. Although they may have prepared scripts and used the words that were agreed upon, Edwina suggested that their emotional state had an influence on their feelings of discomfort and so they became nervous, which in turn caused them to revert to language that was more comfortable and also expressive. Throughout this process, workers and young people negotiated relationships that were important to their engaging in deep level conversations about aspects of life that prompted thinking beyond simple skills acquisition.

Mclean (2011) suggests that 'creative arts can offer unique opportunities to embody and re-illuminate the human story, stage human vulnerability, foster citizenship and give voice to narratives of human experience'. Finney (2005) also asserts how the arts can help to convey and interpret the human condition that can turn negative experiences around, and has led in shifting young people from being disengaged towards more positive outcomes. In researching young people's participation in the arts, Harland, Kinder and Hartley (1995) also found that participating in creative arts, such as drama, music or visualising activities, had an impact on the young people and demonstrated that the majority of pupils in schools would welcome such



activities as memorable. When asked about learning, Emily compared her experiences of CAYW to schooling:

...see how like...at school like yir going into school, your teachers are teaching ye what they need to teach ye whereas in here yir getting tae learn fae yir own mistakes, in a non-judgemental environment. (Emily)

Again, Emily suggested an educational purpose in self-expression and in learning from experience that reached beyond the creative arts process but she also offered a rudimentary distinction between formal and informal methodologies. In her own words, Emily shows understanding of an educational context that requires teachers to teach to a particular curriculum while in CAYW the learning was more experiential and set within a curriculum that is less constrained by formal syllabus requirements.

In proposing a synthesis of arts education and critical pedagogy, Yokley (1999) identified this as a way of highlighting injustices and enhancing people's lives. Arguably, this synthesis offers a means of questioning the extent to which the purpose of formal education, as schooling, is to perpetuate a dominant, and often elitist discourse or if its purpose is to help people to understand the oppressive nature of contemporary societies. For example, the young people in this study identified the importance of being free to express their ideas. Although more concerned with unpacking existing art, which tells a story, Yokley's idea of using creative arts to help people to become more conscious to the world they occupy, prompted questions about whether CAYW helped to challenge or to accept the orthodoxies that sustained prejudice and inequality.

Tavin (2003) asserts a more critical pedagogy, in a study of using visual arts, as a medium for developing human agency that positions arts education as a means to

address issues in everyday life. This resonated with research participants at The Road, who, when asked about learning there, suggested:

I used to judge people that took drugs but ye never know what goes on behind closed doors. I've just learned, don't judge anybody...everyone's different. Like people that take drugs urnae any different fae you. (Leah)

Further, John Francis, noted:

Ye get treated like wi' respect 'n' if yer older like ye don't need tae pit yer haun up n aw that ye can jist go oot, toilet, n suggest stuff instead ae huvin tae wait n aw ae that.

These ideas suggest that being in a non-judgemental environment and treated with respect, were important to young people in developing critical consciousness of the conditions that impact on their learning about formation of identity and the application of judgement or pre-judgement of others. It offers a counter narrative to a dominant discourse that routinely labels and limits young people as 'disaffected', 'hard to reach' 'marginalised' and 'disengaged'. A focus on respect and difference was consistent with arts based practice in Manchester (Batsleer, 2011) that focussed on youth voice and participation in creative arts based practice to offer 'new ways of participating in knowledge creation by virtue of shifting identities, opening up rather than solidifying them' (p.430).

At 'The Road', the use of local vernacular was acceptable in certain contexts. This included the enactment of lived experience that challenged routine practices and constructions of voice and also offered an alternative method of engaging young people in education that was different to their experience of schooling. It grabbed the young people's attention and engaged with their own knowledge base to make it

personal and real, to them. It offered a shock value that added to the performance when use of language or physical presence grounded the creative experience in the real world. It jolted the participating audience out of slumber and focussed attention on what was happening in the performance. Taking a critical pedagogical perspective it was important for young people to be free to choose how to convey their messages, even where this did not conform to expectations for a formal educational environment. Such creative means, 'enables a more explicit engagement with power and with the complexity and ambiguity of emerging voices' (Batsleer, 2011, p.432). Boundary crossing youth work practices challenge existing orthodoxies on how we learn and how we educate. Synthesising CAYW as informal education thus provides a platform for engaging young people in deep-level analysis of expressions of power.

As an alternative to the 'risky terrain' of measurable outcomes and structured activity in youth work, Howard (2017) asserts expressive arts as a means of 'demonstrating the value of young people's journeys, rather than outcomes' (p.1). This research suggests that there is room for a wider consideration of how new, and existing, alliances across youth work and creative arts might be purposeful in synthesising alternative educational practices. Drawing on the work of Freire (1996) and Giroux (2006), theories of education and critical pedagogy, can combine with understanding, knowledge and experience of creative arts practices, to sustain young peoples' engagement in education.

This research examined two CAYW projects, within Scotland, in order to explore alternative educational processes to that of formal schooling. Quicksand and The Road could be unique in their approach to creative learning and participation in that young people were equal partners in the learning process. This offered insight into what happens when young people are empowered and have control. The opportunity to engage in such practices seemed to have positive impacts on participants, by facilitating feelings of socialisation, purpose and well-being, where they are encouraged to voice and act on their own opinions and views.

**Conclusion**

Combining creative arts and youth work methodologies offers an alternative methodology for education. Being less formulaic, CAYW is more open to suggestions from young people who are free to express thoughts and feelings based on personal experience. Improvisation and flexibility are important and dependent on what participants envisage when offered the opportunity to be creative. This methodology might be troublesome when compared to conventional methods of formal education but changing from formal to informal can help to achieve desired outcomes for young people, particularly among those for whom the formal has been problematic. Sometimes change is feared and sometimes inevitable but it can also be a good thing. This is particularly cogent in contemporary society that persists in affirming, as Boal (2008, p.3) has stated 'the permanent condition of change is the only unchangeable thing'. Being open to change, even when it feels forced or inevitable can help create interdisciplinary synergies that enhance educational practices. CAYW is one example of how practices can combine to develop a fusion of informal educational practices that offer an alternative change process to the neoliberalised learnification of education.

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