

The engagement of young artists: shaping the future, or today?

The status of arts and culture has changed dramatically over the last decade. For many, arguably, this has been the catalyst for an increase in funding. Although for some, funding hasn't been so easy to come by. In my experience, a lack of funding is often given by organisations as a reason not to involve children and young people in decision-making. However, I have noticed more programmes, projects and organisations emerging from the roots of the community that manage to do just that without huge resources.

These projects can be run by local communities or by organisations that are aiming to engage local people. Two such organisations I admire are Cirque Nova (www.cirquenova.com) and Youth of Creative Arts (www.youthofcreativearts.co.uk). Both are pioneered by their respective Artistic Directors as community ventures, even as they struggle to keep them afloat. In Cirque Nova's case, the company faces periods of shutdown despite the amazing work it does to inspire and 'skill up' young people and the wider community.



Image courtesy of cirquenova.com

In both Cirque Nova and Youth of Creative Arts, young people play a part in the direction of the organisation's development. So, is this involvement developing artists of the future, or artists of today?

Are these young artists being trained now just so they can perform later in life? Arguably, again, they are the performers of today, in addition to being trained by, and developing skills and experience from, those who love their craft.

Does the involvement of young people stop at their participation in performances? Many cultural activities are not just about the final performance. And if you ask most engagement consultants, they would agree that "participation is a process where someone influences decisions about their lives and this leads to change" (Treseder, 1997). What about young people leading the whole process of creating events like art installations, music gigs and the curation of museum tours? All such occasions can involve children and young people (CYP) of all ages, given the opportunity and training to do so.

Research suggests that children know what they want and can indicate this. For the very young this can be based on non-verbal terms like preference and touch, whilst slightly older children can vocalise their desire and talk about what they consider to be great art, music or any other form to influence programming and the image of the organisation.

One-off events being led by CYP could be considered as a start in the participation of young people. But does this mean they have been allowed to grow and develop? Where and how is this progression measured? And more importantly perhaps, has this collaboration of CYP highlighted that young people are designing and creating cultural activities for today, or for the future?



Image courtesy Bury St Edmunds Youth Council

A great example, recently, of youth involvement in the production of community events is the Bury St Edmunds Youth Council (www.bseyouthcouncil.co.uk). The Council is not artform specific, but allows young people to engage at the highest levels of decision-making

to affect change – not only for future local policy, but also for the community of today. Recently, they worked in partnership with sponsoring private-sector organisations like <mdkwebmedia /> (www.mdkwebmedia.co.uk) and CEG Productions (www.cegproductions.co.uk), and with community support, to successfully produce events like Mix 'N' Blend and UV Bury for sell-out audiences. This kind of group set up within the community can easily be replicated and developed upon in venues, and be involved at a regional and national level.



It's Our Theatre (<http://www.itsourtheatre.com>) is another excellent example of training cultural entrepreneurs who go on to be 'artists of the future' – but surely the fact that they are putting on their own events aged 16 makes them creative practitioners today?

So how about applying these ideas – of children and young people both performing in community events, and actually creating them – to how they can influence and develop venues? Simply put, my view is that children and young people can be involved in any opportunity that is meaningfully presented. This means any opportunity which is appropriately planned and supported by an organisation that is willing and open to allow the participation to take place. The participation shouldn't only be driven by the goals of the venue.

Consider this. A young person may get involved in the technical creation of an activity, such as how to light an exhibit or show. They could then get involved in marketing the venue and events by posting online, distributing flyers and even talking to existing audiences to gain their ideas. But how does this progress? By treating CYP as artists of today, and giving them the same value and respect you would any other member of a team, they can provide a valuable source of information and eagerness.

Take the involvement to the next level; make it on-going; allow CYP to inform the strategic direction and programming of the venue. Suddenly you are building a brand, building a supportive organisation, and building your audience base! Why? Well, involving young people from the start, in the planning stages of a wider programme, ensures that the programming is relevant and appealing to that age group, and can result in better word-of-mouth marketing and arguably a more satisfied audience eager for more.

Now develop this principle further. Take it to a regional level. Then take it to a national level. A co-ordinated set of activities planned with and for CYP can provide the platform for sustainable culture, and activities that integrate across venues, across regions and across age groups. At this point, are those young people who are involved in strategic direction as key stakeholders still artists (practitioners, facilitators, producers) of the future, or are they acknowledged as artists of today who are helping to determine policy and practice?

Society seems ready to accept talented young people as artists if they are found on reality TV shows. Is it ready to do the same when they are working to develop more opportunities for everyone at the grass roots in communities, or at strategic levels?

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