



Spotlight  
Queen Mary University London

# Creative Youth Work Report

Increasing inclusivity and relevance for young  
people accessing cultural provision

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## What we found out

Creative Youth Work is a process where Creative Facilitators / Youth Workers build relationships with young people through creative activities, supporting them at their own pace and ensuring that their voices are heard and responded to. Combining artistic and youth work practices, it equips them with a range of skills and knowledge, empowering them to pursue future pathways.

New ways of working that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, innovations in technology and evolving communication channels are offering young people opportunities and platforms to creatively express themselves. However, socio-cultural and economic factors continue to remain a root cause of inequality to access.

When young people are allowed to experiment with and/or participate in a range of art forms, this leads to a range of positive personal and social outcomes. A boost in; self-esteem, empowerment, confidence, creativity and wellbeing.

Creative Youth Work, alongside formal education, sports, wellness and health programmes, has the potential to develop a young person holistically and help build local social networks.

Inclusion is central to Creative Youth Work. It creates welcoming spaces where young people feel comfortable, listened to and accepted.

**This report invites artists, creative facilitators, youth workers, youth centres and cultural organisations to reflect on their own practices and relationships with young people and their communities.**



## Introduction

Creative Youth Work: Increasing Inclusivity and Relevance for Young People Accessing Cultural Provision (May – November 2022) was a six-month research project led by Spotlight, in partnership with Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) and Arts Council England (ACE). It brings together creative facilitators, youth workers, cultural organisations and young people to explore the intersection between creative facilitation and youth work practices. This study emerged from ACE's observation that youth centres have historically struggled to gain funding and support, but engage large numbers of diverse young people. Furthermore, issues such as serious violence, declining mental health, increased social isolation and limited employment opportunities in recent years have left young people vulnerable.

The project actively engaged with four industry partners – The Yard, The Albany, Roundhouse and Rich Mix – who helped shape the research agendas and offered critical insights into the Creative Youth Work that happens in their settings. This report documents some of the initial findings of the project and raises questions about the value and dilemmas of Creative Youth Work as an evolving practice. In doing so, it invites other youth centres and cultural organisations to examine their own practices and reflect more broadly on the relationship between the arts, young people and their communities.

## Research Methods

Creative Youth Work is an ever-evolving and creative process that is open to trial and error. It is flexible and adaptive. Responding to different aspects of the project, the research team employed varied approaches – mainly sensory ethnography at Spotlight (e.g. participation, conversations with young people, youth workers and creative producers), consultations with academics from QMUL, and fieldwork conducted in different youth settings. Central to the project was a group of five “Creative Youth Work Advocates”. These young people - aged 19-25 - drew upon their lived experiences of creative youth work to bring new perspectives to the research, challenge assumptions, and raise new questions about the practice. They supported the researcher to conduct peer research and facilitated roundtable discussions with Spotlight and the partners.

Evidence of the impact of Creative Youth Work is best illustrated through consideration of personal narratives and individual experiences, such as those woven throughout this report.

## What is Creative Youth Work?

This research revealed that there is no single definition or approach to Creative Youth Work. And it is not our aim to promote one approach over another. Instead, Creative Youth Work needs to be understood as a set of principles and practices that responds to context. The following details aspects of what Creative Youth Work is:

- It gives young people the tools and resources **to freely express themselves, create identities and imagine alternatives and futures**; through the arts and creative activities.
- It is a **relational-driven encounter** that involves young people choosing to be involved. The Creative Youth Worker works alongside the young person; focusing on the needs, experiences and interests of the young person.
- **Participation, experiential learning** and inclusion are central to Creative Youth Work
- **It is a non-formulaic/open creative process** where young people are empowered to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings based on personal experience; and where the content and form are guided by young people.
- It is a practice that **develops people, before artists**. Focusing on the person, not the outcome.
- It is a **values driven practice**, as much as it is a creative one.
- It is valued for the **opportunities** it gives young people to build confidence in their ability to make decisions, express themselves creatively, take responsibility, and solve problems.
- An important aspect of Creative Youth Work is the **continuous and ongoing awareness of, and response to, young people's feelings** as part of the process – supporting, intervening as necessary, challenging assumptions and offering guidance as appropriate.
- Creative Youth Work takes **place over time**, in part because the process and relationship need time to develop.

*'I was always getting into trouble, you know... if you had nothing to do after school, trouble will come looking for you...Here, I can be myself. I have friends, I can make music the way I want. I feel supported and safe, you know what I'm saying?' (Young Person, 17)*

*'I'm not very good at talking [to people] and coming here has helped me open up. I'm more comfortable saying things I wouldn't usually say. Before, I'd usually keep to myself.' (Young Person, 20 SEND)*

## Key Principles in Creative Youth Work

Creative Youth Work is values driven and needs to be framed and understood in relation to principles, as opposed to a fixed definition. Understanding the principles that Creative Youth Workers embrace can be useful to centre critical reflections, thereby raising questions about what creative programmes might look like in practice.

**Open:** Programmes should be easily accessible and made free of charge (if possible, or at a low cost).

**Inclusive:** Young people should be made to feel welcome, seen and included.

**Equity:** Young people are not a homogeneous group. It is crucial to work with flexibility, adapting approaches to ensure equity of access.

**Non-judgemental:** Young people's ideas and perspectives are treated with dignity and respect.

**Agency:** Opportunities are provided for young people to make decisions.

**Wellbeing:** Young people's physical and mental wellbeing is supported alongside their creative practice.

**Participation:** Creative Youth Work empowers young people to become active participants.

**Care:** Young people feel safe, and their physical and emotional safety is a priority to Creative Youth Workers.

*'I come here because I feel really safe. Everyone accepts me for who I am here, not like in school. I have friends here and I really like that....Oh, and I like that there is free Wi-Fi.'* (Young Person, 12)

*'She finds [Spotlight] a really safe and comfortable place to be. When she first came, she didn't really say much. But now she is more open. She stays here for hours and utilise the space, and takes part in the activities. Being here has definitely made her a more confident person.'* (Youth Worker)



## Insights from Young People

Creative Youth Work responds to young people's needs, ideas and feelings in relation to their everyday lives and the society they live in. Below, in order of importance, are some attributes of Creative Youth Work that young people valued:

**Friendship:** Young people spoke fondly of a sense of community within the group. Discussions about their participation and engagement included comments about the connections developed – both amongst peers, and with creative youth workers.

**Sense of belonging:** For some, youth centres have become a 'home away from home'. Young people felt safe and secure to express themselves without judgement. Personal connections also appeared to be important in developing this sense of belonging.

**Transferable Skills:** Many young people expressed they gained useful skills that can be applied in their everyday life (e.g. problem-solving, creativity, confidence, socialising)

**Mental Health and Wellbeing:** Young people expressed that they felt happier and more positive after engaging in creative activities.

**Intercultural learning:** Young people said that engaging in creative arts with participants from different cultural backgrounds provided them with the opportunity to learn, respect, appreciate and better understand others.

## Themes

Through conversation, observation and reflection the research team identified four broad themes surrounding Creative Youth Work: Space and Place, Moments of Encounter, Participation and Impact. The themes provided a conceptual framework for the research and often overlap with one another. They were used to structure discussions in roundtable sessions, with partners and participants. Rather than offer solutions, the themes aim to provoke discussion, capture significant moments and support conversations about what is valuable and important to young people.

The themes are accompanied by the following questions to consider.



## Themes

### Space and Place

This theme reflects on how spaces and places (physical, mental, digital, and metaphorical) might inform the form, content and outputs of creative activities for young people. It raises questions about the 'where' in relation to Creative Youth Work.

- How do we create a safe and inclusive space for Creative Youth Work to happen? What do we need? What are some practical steps to get there?
- How do we make a "creative" space for young people?
- How can space engage and empower young people?
- How do we get people in power to understand how important space is to young people?
- How do we get people in power to understand what's important to young people when planning spaces?
- How can we improve existing space for young people?
- How can Creative Youth Work happen beyond physical spaces, for example, virtual spaces and social media platforms?

### Moments of Encounter

This theme responds to the moments of tension and resistance between the creative youth worker and the young person, and asks how creative interventions can offer opportunities to build positive relationships. It takes into account who they are, what they want, demand and need, and, to a significant degree, their feelings and experiences of the creative process. It refers to what the creative youth worker can do to engage them.

- How do we commit to valuing and attending to the here-and-now of young people's experience rather than just focusing on their 'development'?
- What can the creative arts do and where do they come into play in those moments?
- How do we balance agency/freedom of expression with Youth Work practice? (e.g., a young person writing offensive lyrics in a music session)
- How do we negotiate the power dynamics between the creative youth workers and the young person? (e.g. what physical and emotional boundaries need to be put in place?)

### Participation

This theme views participation as 'attending' or 'taking part' in an event, as well as a larger concept that addresses issues of social inequality, decision-making processes and citizenship.

- What does participation mean in Creative Youth Work?
- Is the 'lack of participation' e.g. hanging out with peers, actually a form of participation? How do we justify that?

***'We need to give young people agency, so that at the end of the project they are informed and inspired to act.'***  
***(Programme Manager)***

- What does including young people's voices look like in practice?
- What are the dilemmas of working with young people as partners?
- How can the creative arts strengthen young people's community engagement?
- What are some strategies for encouraging active participation?

## Impact

This theme broadly explores the effects of Creative Youth Work on young people and how the nature of such work can be evaluated and measured. More often than not, these outcomes 'emerge' from the process of doing rather than are 'produced'. It opens up questions of recalibrating/rethinking our measures of 'success'.

- What does this term mean in the context of Creative Youth Work? How can we better articulate what this means?
- What are the wider implications?
- How - and in what ways - can we meaningfully (and creatively) capture and present impact/success?
- How do we know if a young person is benefitting from a programme?

## The Creative/Youth Worker

Integral to Creative Youth Work is the role of the Creative Youth Worker. While Creative Youth Work mostly focuses on the development of a young person, it is equally important to consider the identity and skills of the Creative Youth Worker as they are the keys that unlock the potential of the young person. They are the facilitators of change, holding the group by their skilful management of the group dynamics. In our study, we discovered that many youth workers/facilitators did not identify as being 'creative', despite their involvement in a range of creative activities. Below are some useful questions to reflect on:

- What is the difference between a youth worker and a creative youth worker?
- What support do they need? How can we support and empower them to be 'creative'?
- What can the 'Creative' Youth Worker learn from youth work and vice versa?
- What are some things to consider at the start of the Creative Youth Worker's journey?

*'I am just a youth worker. I don't see myself as an artist. I am not a good singer, but I like to be part of the creative process... I feel joy whenever I can help a young person achieve his or her creative potential.'*  
(Youth Worker)



## Dilemmas in Practice

In seeking to understand what Creative Youth Work is, there were concerns and questions raised about the scope and limits of its practice.

- **Creativity is not just limited to the arts** and is connected to other aspects of everyday life. By extension, Creative (Arts) Youth Work needs to be viewed as a joined-up approach with, for example, sports, health and other social activities for it to be effective.
- **Factors such as funding** and the working practices of the organisation play a role in shaping the direction and ethos of Creative Youth Work. Perhaps it might be useful to reflect on which takes the lead: Youth Work or Creative Arts?
- **Spontaneity versus Structure**: Young people, on some occasions, did not know what they were doing in sessions that were open or youth-led. How can organisations constructively balance the benefits of a structured programme and an approach that places artistic risk-taking, creative freedom and young people's agency at the heart of the process?
- **Creative learning is not linear**. And the outcomes cannot be reduced to specific inputs. In this case, how do we measure intangible attributes such as 'confidence' and wellbeing' in Creative Youth Work?
- **Most creative programmes are targeted at young people aged 11-19** (up to 25 for those with special educational needs and disabilities). As the process of learning and developing is never-ending, it is often difficult to find endpoints. The question remains: How - and in what ways - can organisations and Creative Youth Work help young people safely navigate these transitions?
- **Digital Futures**: Technology and new media can be a big draw to attract young people to engage with the arts and can add a new dimension to Creative Youth Work. With the online and offline worlds colliding, how can we better connect digital tools and platforms with creative arts and youth work practices?

*'Sometimes creativity isn't the most important output. It could be connecting with others, testing out a new idea, a new identity or something else.'* (Arts Manager)



*'We also need to consider how staff in the wider organisation can 'participate' in a youth-led way in producing and managing projects'.* (Creative Producer)



## Conclusion

This report provides insights into various aspects of Creative Youth Work and raises broader questions about the arts and young people, particularly in youth and community settings. Through our roundtable sessions, we have also fostered a community of practice which advocates for the arts to be made more inclusive and accessible to young people. Our findings underline the richness, diversity and possibilities of Creative Youth Work as a practice and the ways it can connect individual development to community well-being. It also reveals how this approach can provide opportunities for young people to participate in the kind of art-making they value.

At the heart of Creative Youth Work is a belief in the transformative power of the arts to provoke the imagination and encourage new ways of living in and seeing the world, influencing attitudes and nurturing young people. As arts scholar, Cheryl L. McLean (2011) argues, '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'. Future research could investigate the sustained impact of Creative Youth Work and how young people can be made to feel supported. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how wider structures and material networks (e.g. funding, organisations, geographical location, etc) shape how Creative Youth Work is viewed and delivered. We hope this report serves as a provocation to think and an invitation to act.

2. McLean, C. (2011). The International Journal of the Creative Arts in Interdisciplinary Practice. Available: <https://www.brushededucation.ca/books/creative-arts-in-interdisciplinary-practice> (Accessed 9 Nov 2022)

## Contact

The youth and arts & culture sector can do more to create equal access to the abundant creative opportunities out there for young people.

Join the conversation. Tweet us your thoughts @weare\_spotlight

### Get in touch:

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Report as of 10 November 2022.



## Further Resources

This bibliography is a sampling of sources that cover Creative (Arts) Youth Work related topics including research projects, articles, case studies, industry reports, opinion pieces and resource pages. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather a starting point for further exploration.

## Research Projects

Building Understanding of the Value of Youth Work (King's College London)

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/spotlight/building-understanding-of-the-value-of-youth-work>

Centre for Youth Research and Dialogue (Ulster University)

<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/social-work-and-social-policy/research-themes/centre-for-youth-research-and-dialogue>

Creative Arts Youth Work: Investigating a Distinct Educational Approach (PhD, Nottingham Trent University)

<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/find-a-phd-opportunity/studentship-projects/creative-arts-youth-work-investigating-a-distinct-educational-practice>

The Agency (People's Palace Project, Queen Mary University of London)

<https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/en/projects/the-agency/>

The Impact of Community-based Universal Youth Work in Scotland (Youth Link Scotland)

<https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/5480/universal-youth-work-study-in-edinburgh-final.pdf>

The Impact of Youth Work in Europe (Plymouth Marjon University)

<https://www.marjon.ac.uk/research/research-areas/the-impact-of-youth-work-in-europe/>

The Verbatim Formula (Queen Mary University of London)

<https://theverbatimformula.org.uk>

Understanding the Value of Universal Youth Work (Moray House School of Education and Sport, The University of Edinburgh)

<https://www.ed.ac.uk/education/rke/making-a-difference/understanding-value-of-universal-youth-work>

## Reports

Arts as a Youth Intervention

<https://cdn.catch-22.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Art-as-a-Youth-Intervention-Report-16pp-DIGITAL-FINAL-1.pdf>

Looking Beyond Lockdown: How UK Arts Organisations Can Continue To Support Young People's Wellbeing During and Beyond COVID-19

<https://peoplespalaceprojects.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/fach-summary.pdf>

Open Access Youth Work: A Narrative Review of Impact (2020)

<http://www.youthworkunit.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Open-access-youth-work-review-Phoebe-Hill-1.pdf>

Review of Youth Work in England: Interim Report (2021)

<http://www.youthappg.org.uk/review-of-youth-work-in-england-interim-report/>

The Value of Youth Arts in Youth Work

<https://www.youth.ie/programmes/youth-arts/the-value-of-youth-arts-in-youth-work/>

Young People and Arts Engagement: What we need

<https://www.artshealthresources.org.uk/docs/young-people-and-arts-engagement-what-we-need/>

## Networks and Resources

Creative Arts East Youth Consultation 2021

<https://www.creativeartseast.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Youth-Resources.pdf>

London Peer Research Network

<https://www.partnershipforyounglondon.org.uk>

London Youth

<https://londonyouth.org/what-we-do/our-networks/>

## Open Access Journal Articles

Beggan, E. and Coburn, A. (2018) "Creating 'one big masterpiece' – Synthesis in Creative Arts Youth Work", *Concept*, 9(2), p. 15. Available at: <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2806>

Doherty, L. and de St Croix, T. (2021) "There's a cupboard full of pasta! Beyond sustenance: reflections on youth work and commensality", *Concept*, 12(3), pp. 1-11. Available at:

<http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/6631> *Journal of Youth Studies: Exploring Issues, Policy and Practice* <https://www.youthandpolicy.org>