

Expanded Performance Research Reflections

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This was written in April 2021 by **Gill Simmons** with support from **Katie Chalk**.

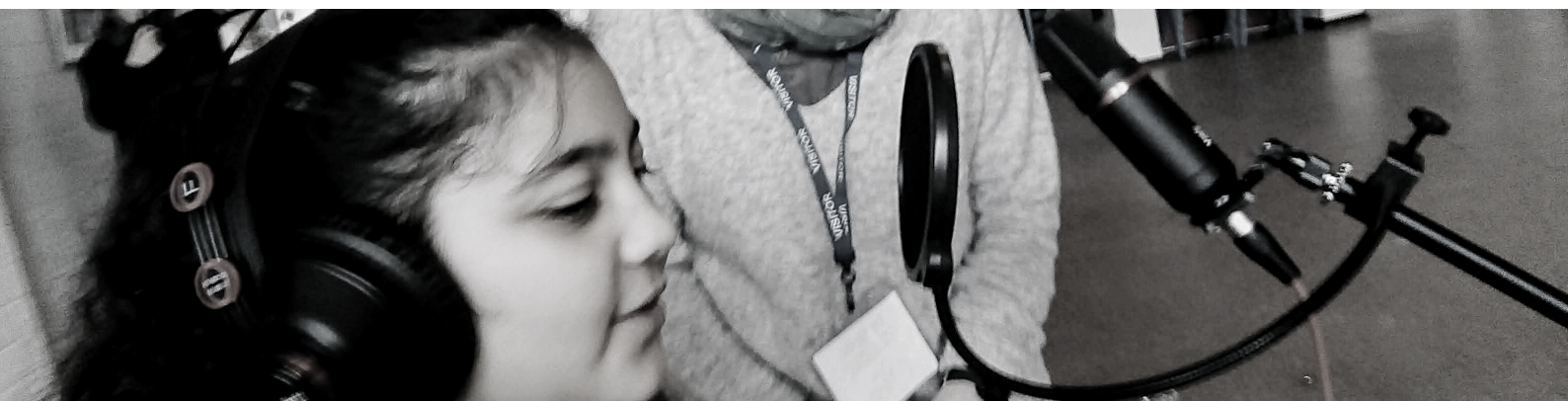


Key words: transparency, knowledge-sharing, lower-socio-economic, arts engagement, outreach, young people, community arts, secondary education

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These reflections are in addition to **this blog** which is was written in early September 2020. We advise you read that first.

These reflections will cover:



successful creative tech outreach projects
for young people



transparency and knowledge-sharing
within community arts engagement



young people's access to
creativity within secondary schools



spoke to us on 11.9.20 on zoom about a non public facing remote lockdown engagement project with young care-leavers called 'Plus One'.

The project hung off an Online Book Club. A favourite read was 'Homegirl' by Alex Wheatle, himself a care-leaver.

The digital engagement was combined with socially-distanced deliveries of food and creative resources which the participants could use online. Plus One also blended online platforms: Zoom but also sometimes the 'Live' feature on Instagram and a closed WhatsApp group.

In addition to reading the book together, they led other creative activities inspired from the book e.g. cookery, arts and crafts and poetry-writing.

Whenever they finished a Zoom or Instagram live, they ensured the WhatsApp group remained active immediately afterwards, to avoid participants feeling suddenly abandoned and bereft of company.



spoke with us on 27.8.20 about a podcast project called "The Female Voice", curated and delivered by young female members of their youth theatre, and responded to questions over email.



The facilitators called out for volunteers to be interviewed by the young people, did all the producing of arranging dates and sending zoom links, but the interviews were conducted by young people.

Bounce Theatre said: **"The opportunity to work online gave a number of the young people structure, which positively impacted on their well-being."**

Their advice for anyone planning creative tech projects for young people: **"Think about a hybrid model of work that allows access for non digital audiences & a break from digital engagement for young people. "**

Gill was interviewed as part of the podcast series. Listen [here](#).

fellow Expanded Performance research artist Tanuja Amarasuriya spoke to us about a Sleepdogs project called Stonehenge 3019 and also responded to an online survey we shared with artists and arts organisations.



"Stonehenge 3019" is a short film created by Sleepdogs in collaboration with young people from in and around Amesbury. It was a A Shout Out Loud project commissioned by Ginkgo Projects and English Heritage.

Tanuja felt that the draw of using film & audio-making technology played a big factor in the young people wanting to engage. "Some of the young people fed back to us directly about how it improved their confidence (including one young person for whom this workshop was key in making them feel confident again to return to formal learning environments), and a number of the young people talked about how proud they were of the work they were part of, that they were happy to have been encouraged to push themselves to do things they didn't think they could, and some of them were already talking about making their own films after this."

Tanuja's advice: "Make sure there is a range of tech, with different types of interface, so that young people can find what suits them rather than being put off by something that doesn't work for them. Make sure there is enough tech for everyone to have a go. Working with tech often involves a lot of setting up/programming/uploading/downloading/rendering time etc, so make sure you have scheduled time for this into the project delivery."



"Shiney" is a film project written and directed by Hartcliffe-based, award-winning film maker Paul Holbrook, supported by BFI Network.

Paul felt that the draw of being in a film as an actor was massively appealing to local Hartcliffe young people. He cast the film entirely from Hartcliffe residents. But, as Paul says towards the end of "Shiney, like" a short about the making of "Shiney", he could not find any working-class film crew, because those other roles in film-making are not visible to young people from working-class estates. "And that identifies a problem."

Paul's advice is: **"Keep it real, find and engage with people the kids relate to. Don't preach."**

Our takeaways:

technology can make creative projects more appealing to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, but don't lead with it. Build the project starting with the young people, their experience, and their emotional and practical needs. Work within existing structures and in familiar spaces. Use ranges and blends of technology and include non-digital ways to engage too.

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Photo: Adrian Mantle



Our blog refers to us meeting a lot of barriers, and experiencing a lot of reticence with some larger arts organisations about sharing information and knowledge about their outreach projects for young people. This is about power, image, status and funding.

Here's my thoughts about those Big Four:

Power: being big doesn't mean you're the best at everything

Image: being honest about not getting things right is less damaging to reputations than pretending you never put a foot wrong

Status: community doesn't equal low quality, and art for adults isn't inherently better or more complex than art for children and young people

Funding: large arts organisations right now could easily obliterate small grassroots arts organisations and individual community artists, and this mustn't be allowed to happen. Local artists have expertise in community engagement that large organisations should value, learn from and support, long-term.

Because if the only kind of artist young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds meet are ones associated with huge impressive arts organisations, they aren't going to think that career is for them. Young people need to see people **who are from their area** being artists.



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Photo: Dougie Allward

Things those with more power, status, image and funding could do about improving knowledge sharing about community arts engagement (summarised from the blog with a few extras):

accessible project evaluations downloadable from your website

show your workings: be honest in these project evaluations about what went wrong and how you overcame that. Then others won't make the same mistakes.

build in windows: make knowledge and resource sharing part of your remit. Have windows of time on your website that show when your staff have capacity to book 60 minute research interviews

nurture the local ecology: don't obliterate local artists as you parachute in for your once-a-year high profile engagement project. Offer paid consultancy to local artists before you plan your engagement project. Work them into the delivery. Include them in your funding applications to continue with engagement work long-term in the area once you've left. If you actually want a world of diverse artists and audiences, nurture local artists.

Check your language: they aren't the 'hard-to-reach', they're the 'currently-not-interested-in-what-you're-offering'. And finally, lower socio-economic communities don't have 'low cultural engagement'. These communities engage in culture because they're humans. What they lack, due to structural inequalities, is 'access to a wide range of cultural opportunities.'

young people's access to creativity within secondary schools



"Nothing is Impossible"
mural design project with young people from Hartcliffe & Withywood

The picture at the top of this page is rare. It's a secondary school student, during school hours but off timetable in order that they may to participate in a community arts project. It was taken in 2018. **More about "Nothing Is Impossible."**

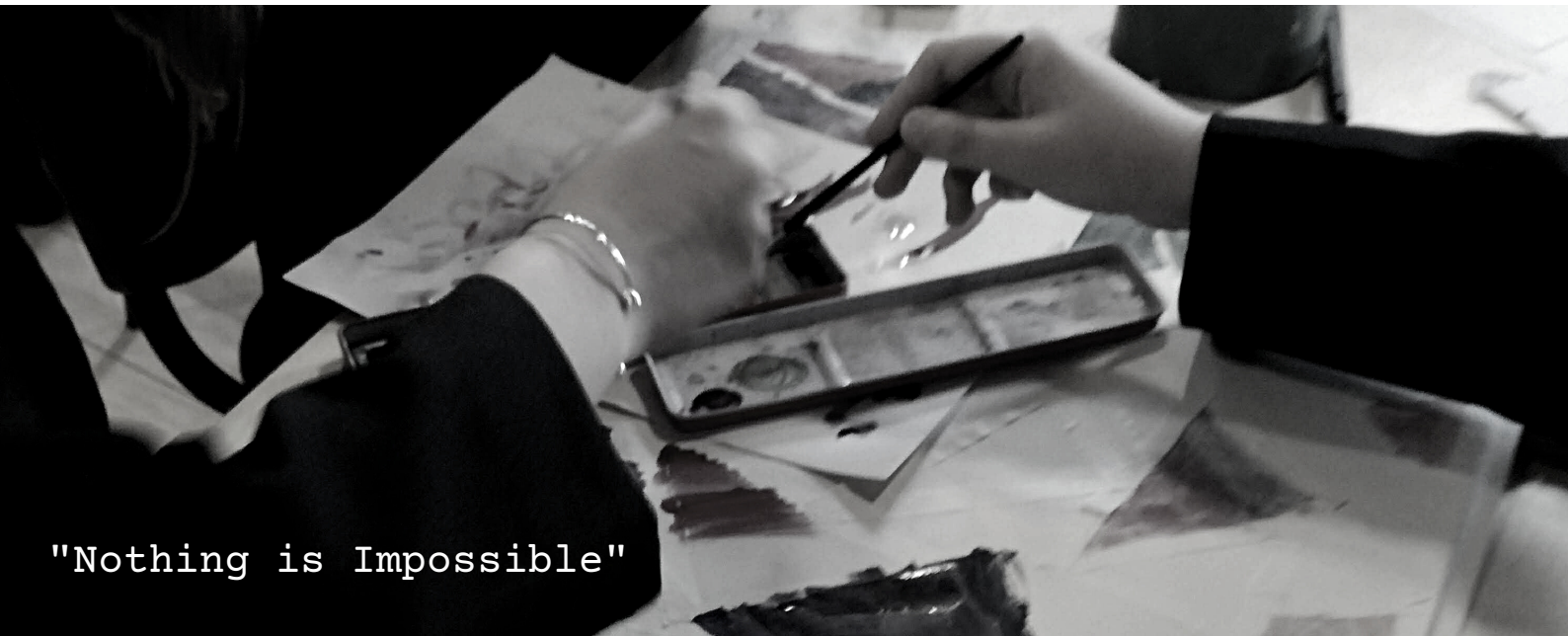
We ended our blog with a final question about accessibility of arts within secondary schools. All the projects mentioned here happened either during extra-curricular hours, weekends, or school holidays.

In many state schools, there is an invidious pressure to squeeze creative subjects out of the curriculum in Years 7-9, which means numbers opting for creative subjects in Years 10-11 are, unsurprisingly, falling.

Plus, those who do take creative subjects at GCSE are often unable to access enriching engagement opportunities with artists because of limitations of money and timetabling restrictions coupled with an unwillingness to overcome timetabling restrictions.

Recently, we became aware of more research happening on exactly these issues. It's a nationwide project called **Think Tank**, led by Theatre Centre, who have been making work for and with young people and touring to secondary schools for 70 years. These days, 70% of their touring is to independent schools. They know from their touring stats that creativity in state sector secondaries is in crisis, and they want to do something about it.

young people's access to creativity within secondary schools



"Nothing is Impossible"

Gill has very recently applied to be the south west Think Tank artist. Here is her video application, which is about a past dance theatre project with a Withywood secondary school, Gill's views on how creativity should be embedded within the education system, not just in extra-curricular contexts, and why she's excited that the Think Tank research is happening.

It seems a fitting place to end this reflection.



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