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Strategies for connecting low income communities to the creative economy through play: two case studies in Northern England

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Strategies for connecting low income communities to the creative economy through play: two case studies in Northern England

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Biographical notes

Jessica Symons is an urban anthropologist working at the University of Manchester. Her research interests focus on creativity and idea development, particularly how organisational structures affect people's ability to realise their ideas. Previously she was Research Fellow on the flagship multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral AHRC-funded research project, Cultural Intermediation: Connecting Communities in the Creative Urban Economy at the University of Salford.

Ursula Hurley is a creative writer with an interest in experimental and innovative applications of practice-based methodologies. She has a particular curiosity about creative processes and their potential to open up new ways of accessing and deploying technology. Previously she was Principal Investigator for a ground breaking AHRC Connected Communities project, 'In the making', which worked across sectors and disciplines to explore digital fabrication and its potential to empower

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Abstract

This ground-breaking research defines a new approach for engaging low income and disenfranchised communities in the creative economy. The authors propose that demystifying creativity and reframing it as an adaptive productive process can lead to a flourishing of aspiration and potential among target communities. Through research in a low income community and among disabled people in Northern England, the authors found that focusing on rubrics of exploration, play and ‘purposeful meandering’ tackled anxieties around creative production and a lack of confidence and self-belief. This emphasis on all people as cultural producers however needs to connect with clearer pathways into the creative industries.

Keywords

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Disclosure statement

No financial interest or benefit has arisen from the direct applications of this research.

Introduction

We are in a design workshop in a cafe in [X], UK. It is quiet; a weekday afternoon. 3D printers sit on tables at the far side of the room. They are lit up, humming, ready to make. They can transform computer files into plastic objects. They can, subject to technical realities, make anything. But first comes the process of imagining. The workshop participants wait in the cafe, apprehensive. They are invited to generate ideas for objects to print using the 3D printers. Many avoid eye contact. There is a sense of fidgety discomfort. 'I'm just not creative,' repeats one young woman, defensively. 'Well, don't look at me,' laughs an older man, nervously. [author], field notes, September 3, 2015.

In the UK, government initiatives situate the country as a 'global leader' in creative industries claiming it brings £84bn annually into the British economy (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2016). CreateUK's mission statement is: 'Using British creativity to inspire the UK and the world' (Creative Industries Council 2015). However the 'use' of the creative industries to achieve economic agendas is problematic (Oakley 2014). Narratives of success on these terms reinforce perceptions of creative practice as exclusive, associated with particular companies or individuals. Too often, disabled people

¹ and those from communities high on the ‘deprivation index’ are not recognised as potential creative producers and miss out on opportunities and development initiatives. Instead they are encouraged to become consumers of creative work produced by others.

In this paper, we argue that for ‘Britain’ to be recognised as a truly creative nation, there needs to be a cultural shift which acknowledges and tackles self-perceptions of creative failure. This proposition is particularly timely as it tackles issues around British productivity, a key concern for policy makers as they seek to re-establish Britain as an innovative nation in a post-Brexit context (Crafts 2017). Bringing more people from different socio-economic backgrounds into the creative economy can widen and deepen the British cultural offer.

Our argument addresses two existing representations of cultural and creative policy that either promote particular activities as creative (such as music, theatre and art) or which represent daily activities as creative (the everyday ‘flow’ of life), but do not seek to connect these together. We present a third way of developing policy which suggests encouraging all people to recognise themselves, with the right training and support, as potential creative producers. This argument taps into the growing emergence of social media and the ‘Youtube’ generation as cultural self-producers (Smehaug 2016; Vella 2016; Singh 2016). It provides a conceptual reframing of creative practice that enables pathways between community activity and the cultural and creative economy.

1. ¹ We follow the advice of Disability Rights UK in using the term ‘disabled people’. For a critical account of how such terminology may contribute to the reclaiming of the term ‘disabled’, please see Wexler and Derby (2015).

Culture is not just about sectors

The facilitator begins a gentle exercise, asking people to select an object from a purse or pocket and to tell someone else the story of its significance. 'Oh, I can't tell stories,' says the young woman. 'It'll be boring!' Gradually, each participant feels comfortable enough to share the story of his or her object. Several stories are about keys to cars or front doors. Their owners speak eloquently about freedom, choice, independence, and the offer of a sanctuary to which one can return after doing battle with the world beyond. The young woman tells of her dog's name-tag, which she carries in her purse since the chain broke. She becomes animated as she speaks about the dog, its antics, what it means to her emotionally. She shows photos on her phone.

[author], field notes, September 3, 2015.

The structural role of British government departments, funding streams, strategies and policies significantly frames perceptions of 'culture' in the UK. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) is the UK national government body that supports the development of the 'creative industries'. Their representations, documents and funded activities explicitly and implicitly represent 'culture' as produced by sectors relating to activities such as art, music, theatre, performance, digital media and sport. In this context 'culture' has become a shorthand way of describing the sectors. The so-called 'creative

industries' are the businesses and organisations which support activities in these sectors (Livingstone and PwC 2015).

The recent UK government Culture White Paper sets out a future strategy for DCMS. The opening sentences emphasise a key objective to 'increase participation in culture, especially among those who are *currently excluded* [italics added]' (Vaisey 2016, 8). The proposition to 'increase participation in culture' is repeated throughout the document, identifying 'marginalised groups' and emphasising the need to 'engage them more closely' in cultural activities. This document reveals in-built prejudices in government perceptions of certain groups of people in the UK – the 'marginalised'. The implication is that these 'poor' marginalised people should want to participate in government defined categories of 'culture' assumed to be art, music, theatre, performance and sport. As Alex Woodall (2016), Head of Learning in Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, asks of the White Paper, 'where is the dialogue, the shared understanding, the letting go, the community reaching in and out of the organisation, the empowerment?'

Here 'culture' is ideologically constrained to particular practices and the document pre-supposes that marginalised groups will want to engage with such activities. It ignores what Silvia et al. (2014, 183) characterise as 'everyday "little c" creativity, the common hobbies and passions of ordinary people who want to do something creative' and overlooks 'the sheer mass of ordinary creative activity' which has been under-investigated in terms of 'what it looks like in people's natural environments as it happens'. It ignores anthropological understandings of culture as 'webs of significance'

through which people make meaning (Geertz 1973), and recent models of the creative process as a 'lattice' linking diverse social and economic networks (summarised by Feinstein [2017, 25]). Instead, the White Paper only identifies marginalised groups as recipients of a prescribed set of 'cultural' activities produced by others.

Skeggs (2004) argues that notions of 'culture' are caught up in the class dynamics of British society where certain aspects of cultural activity are deemed to be suitable for government support and funding and others are left to develop for themselves. Skeggs suggests that working-class ideas of cultural activity in particular are devalued by a hegemonic middle-class. This argument is made manifest in the Cultural Strategy White Paper. Its admirable aim of wanting to support disenfranchised groups ends up perpetuating middle class notions of what 'culture' is and who gets to define it as such.

Another interpretation of culture is also missed out in the paper. In his analysis Nigel Carrington, Vice-Chancellor of University of the Arts London, finds 'culture as delivered by museums and theatres, not the broad-based culture of film, of gaming, of interactive design and graphic design' (2016). Here Carrington is interested in the 'digital economy', also part of the DCMS remit. His 'broad-based' culture may be extended to include a digital component but it still takes a sector-based approach to defining culture.

These assumptions matter because they filter out of government into funding calls. In 2016, the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), released a major call entitled Content Creation and Consumption in the Digital Economy, which specifically asked applicants to incorporate 'disenfranchised communities' in their bid proposals to stimulate the 'development of creative content for the digital economy'

(EPSRC 2016). Again this call demonstrated an inherent assumption that people from these communities should engage with pre-defined categories of the creative and digital sector and that they should want to engage with the digital economy. Here there is a narrowing of scope in what constitutes 'creative' content and activity.

Connecting community to the creative economy

Other government initiatives are not so binary in their approach. There is a long tradition of community arts in the UK aimed at stimulating wellbeing and community engagement (Lowe 2001). Originally the 'poor relation' of the arts sector, there is an emerging trend for 'socially engaged art practice' which focuses on 'communities' in the development of artwork (Froggett et al. 2011). This approach allows a blurring between 'culture' as defined by the Cultural Strategy White Paper and culture as denoted by community-facing activity. The UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) facilitated the development of this elision through their Connected Communities programme aimed at 'communities in their historical and cultural contexts' (AHRC 2014). This programme supported projects defined and led by 'creative citizens' (as defined by Hargreaves and Hartley [2016]). The initiative came out of the British university sector and predates the Cultural Strategy White Paper.

The AHRC describe this programme in their report, Cultural Value, which takes care to consider 'the cultural practices to be found in supposedly excluded populations and communities' (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, 34). The report authors state that 'we need an expanded understanding of what might constitute cultural participation, one that does not start with the presence or absence of social groups from specific forms of

culture' (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016, 34). While there may have been a prevalence of arts, performance, theatre and music-related activity as part of the Connected Communities programme and Cultural Value report, there were also projects exploring a wider notion of cultural practice such as community journalism, D/deaf community spaces, and bee-keeping.²

So-called 'everyday' culture was a policy approach adopted by New Labour in the 1990s which focused on recognising and widening understandings of culture as people's everyday practices as well as 'high Culture' practices of art or theatre that are more traditionally associated with this term among British policy makers (Miles 2013). Gilmore (2013) also argues that sensitivity to place and local dynamics is critical for widening and developing engagement in and enthusiasm for a broadened understanding of 'culture' amongst policy makers. Miles and Gilmore led a Connected Communities project, 'Understanding Everyday Participation – Articulating Cultural Values' in 2013-2016, which explored how people value and participate in everyday activities and how these constitute cultural practice.

In this paper, we describe outcomes from two other 'Connected Communities' projects. In both cases, we found people keen to engage in cultural activities on their own terms but in need of confidence boosting to pursue their ideas. Some were trained artists unable to make a living from their work or creative practitioners on limited incomes.

2. ² Full details of these projects may be found as follows: community journalism <http://creativecitizens.co.uk/> , D/deaf community spaces <https://lostspacesdeaf.wordpress.com/> and bee-keeping <http://www.bees.eca.ed.ac.uk/> .

Others were local people with creative aspirations but little idea of how to develop them. As we spent time working alongside people helping them to develop ideas into tangible outcomes, we identified their challenges in connecting to the creative economy. In particular, we found that when encouraged to draw inspiration from their own lives and priorities, people became excited and productive in their activities. The approach of emphasising the connection between people's own life experiences and activities associated with creative industries worked effectively for engaging people from these so-called disenfranchised communities. This paper builds on this original insight to discuss how to make such connections.

[author] worked as an anthropologist with local people in a 'hard-to-reach' area of [City] on the AHRC Connected Communities project [x]. The overall project research objectives focused on the role of cultural intermediaries in relation to the creative economy. In [City], the research strategy was focused on setting up 'panels to commission cultural activities' according to preferences of 'local people' using £50,000 in research project funding.

During the initial stage of the project, people resisted traditional representations of culture as constituting 'art, music, theatre and digital sectors'; these were expensive activities that other people attended. Instead, local people talked about spending time with friends and family, local history, community events and shared interests. In the course of discussions and taking an adaptive and flexible approach to the project design, [author] designed a novel approach to the research project that emphasised supporting local people to realise their own ideas for cultural activities as part of the research

agenda. Most academic projects ask participants to perform certain activities according to the research objectives (e.g. set up panels, participate in focus groups, interviews, questionnaires). This project stage, renamed [x], was designed to accommodate local interests and priorities. Community intermediaries were commissioned to identify individuals with ideas to develop which produced a flourishing of community engagement. People were excited by the freedom that came with identifying their own areas of creative activity, developing their own ideas and working with people they already knew. People set up craft, bike, cooking and photography workshops, they created an art collective and festival. They produced social history plays and activities. The rich outcomes emerging from this project can be directly attributed to how the project was redesigned to drop references to ‘culture’ and ‘commissioning outside artists’ and instead focused on supporting individuals to ‘give their ideas a boost’ ([author] 2017)

During the same period (2015-6) in a different part of [City], [author] used creative methodologies with a network of disabled people to develop ideas for 3D printing. [Author] worked with a third sector organisation, [x], to set up [project name]. This project responded to a vision for disabled people as described by [x]. He aspires for disabled people to become leaders in emerging digital fabrication technology. Not only do disabled people have bespoke needs and issues that 3D printers could help resolve, but they also face considerable prejudice and stereotyping about who they are and their role in society (Briant et al. 2011). [X] wants to reshape perceptions of disabled people by demonstrating their creative and productive potential.

The key challenge for this project involved tackling the impact of lifelong diminishment and negative attitudes which affect the confidence of many disabled people. [Author] developed and refined creative engagement techniques that responded to the particular needs of the different people involved. A workshop accommodating and stimulating people with diverse and often quite profound challenges required a responsive and adaptable approach. [Author] designed an approach which supported project participants to generate their own ideas for 3D printing. These strategies stimulated enthusiastic engagement in the design and development process.

In both projects individuals' confidence and belief in themselves affected their ability to access and develop creative work. We worked together with local intermediaries to tackle an almost continuous stream of anxiety and worry about whether people's activities were 'right', 'looked good', 'were good ideas', would 'work'. 'Oh, I'm not creative' was a commonly used phrase. It was people's perceptions of culture and creativity that acted as the most significant barrier to cultural engagement.

Our key insight in this paper focuses on how we tackled these perceptions directly. We played down 'culture' as being associated with certain sectors such as theatre and art and instead emphasised culture as how people make meaning. We argued that a Saturday barbecue with friends was a cultural activity as much as a visit to the opera.

As both projects sought to re-frame culture away from particular sectors, we needed to demystify notions of creativity itself. The creative industries underpin the cultural sectors and rely on depictions of 'creative geniuses' whose ideas are God-given

([Author] 2015). Instead we needed to emphasise the everyday, routine nature of creative work.

Tackling perceptions of culture and creativity as exclusive

The following day, this young woman is emphatic – she will design and print a new name tag for her dog using the 3D printer. Assisted by the technical facilitator, she creates a design with 3D hearts and the name, Jorgie, in relief. When offered a choice of colour to print the object, she selects a bright pink filament. The design takes a few trial prints before it emerges accurately. The 3D printer is not entirely reliable and there can be glitches in the translation from software to object, such as omitting the heart on the left-hand side of the design. The young woman is anxious and disappointed by these problems. She says it doesn't matter, 'it was silly anyway'.

[author], field notes, September 3, 2015.

A body of psychological research supports 'the generally accepted belief that self-confidence and creativity are positively related' (Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 57). The core traits identified by psychologists as being associated with creativity are 'independence, self-confidence and a view of oneself as creative' (Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 47). The characteristics of the creative person are described by Stein

(1968) as 'self-assertive, dominant, aggressive, self-sufficient ... [the creative person] leads or possesses initiative' (cited by Goldsmith and Matherly 1988, 48).

Such qualities are likely to be less common in people experiencing marginalisation, and/or disabling circumstances. As a route to fostering the development of creative individuals, people need to be equipped with techniques which 'give permission' to be creative. Such techniques encourage people to see themselves as cultural producers, who just need tailored support to help overcome practical and perceptual obstacles to creative practices. This approach sends a message that they too are cultural producers, they also have the potential to be creative, working with a wider perception of what culture is. This requires a re-imagining of creativity as something accessible to all rather than being innate to particular individuals so that 'any activity can be done in novel ways with creative intentions' (Silvia et al. 2014, 187).

Research into everyday creativity provides important groundwork for wider participation in the 'creative industries' and cultural sectors such as music, theatre, art, performance, graphic design, advertising and digital. If people recognise creative practice in their day-to-day lives, they are more likely to imagine themselves as having the potential to produce creative work: 'With our everyday creativity, we adapt flexibly, we improvise, and we try different options, whether we are raising our child, counselling a friend, fixing our home, or planning a fundraising event' (Richards 2007a, 26).

Developed mainly by psychologists and anthropologists, such approaches argue for recognition of oneself and others as inherently creative individuals and therefore help to demystify creative processes (Richards 2007b; Su 2009; Barron, 1969; Ingold and

Hallam 2007; Leach 2002). This reconceptualisation of creativity encourages people outside the so-called 'creative sectors' to consider themselves as having creative potential. This can be done by situating creativity as 'an adaptive and productive process working towards a tangible goal' (Symons 2016, 3) and framing creativity as a procedure that individuals can learn to 'consciously manage and successfully reproduce' (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014, 4).

In a recent paper, Symons (2016) compares two parades in Manchester, one devised and produced by Jeremy Deller, an internationally respected artist, and the other devised by the city council and produced by events company Walk the Plank. Symons argues that while the underlying process for developing the parades was the same, the emphasis on Deller as an artist and the parade as his artwork was the distinguishing feature. The civic parade, on the other hand, was 'community-led'. Here artists 'helped' make the parade but did not lead on it like Deller. This distinction produced two very different representations of the parades among parade participants and observers – the former an artwork, the latter a community project. Yet the process for making the parade itself was still community groups working with artists in the development of a parade. It was the framing of the work which affected how people understood the creative process involved.

Drawing on this analysis, Symons (2016, 13) argues for representing artists as 'creative agents of a productive process' as well as 'producers of specific cultural artefacts'. This approach helps people understand what to seek when they commission artists to work on projects. In addition to their making skills, artists are sought out for

their ability to develop ideas into tangible outcomes using an adaptive and productive process. Emphasising ‘creativity as an adaptive practice’, Symons (2016, 13) challenges perceptions of creativity as an innate attribute that a few people are supposedly born with and which the ‘uncreative’ majority cannot access.

Building on notions of creativity as an adaptive process, we suggest that pathways into the creative industries are best developed by tackling confidence and self-perception of creative activity. We focus here on the so-called cultural sectors of arts, theatre, performance and on the ‘creative industries’ but we use insights from our research to show how people from disenfranchised communities can participate in the creative economy, if they are supported effectively and encouraged to identify their creative potential through their everyday interests and activities. We approach the issue of lack of confidence and self-belief by directly addressing anxieties about failure in these communities.

Tackling notions of creative failure

Eventually the technical facilitator identifies the problem and a perfect version prints. The young woman is clearly delighted with her creation. The facilitators share her pleasure in having created such a vibrant and meaningful object. But, as she shows the new dog tag to her peers, she becomes dismissive, saying: 'It's only a dog tag. What a shame I couldn't make anything useful!' The workshop facilitators reassure her 'the object is valuable because it is unique'. It expresses the emotional value of her

relationship with her pet dog. But she goes home seemingly judging herself harshly in relation to her creative outputs and their value.

[author], field notes, September 3, 2015.

'Error is the permanent contingency [aléa] around which the history of life and the development of human beings are coiled' (Foucault 1998, 477). In the creative industries, failure is a necessary part of the creative process. It is embraced and explored rather than avoided (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014). A 'fail fast' approach is also typical among entrepreneurs, particularly in the US (Babineaux and Krumboltz 2013; Hall 2007). Here the mantra helps identify which products or services are likely to succeed in the long term and avoids wasting time. Digital fabrication practices, the focus of [project name], provide a mechanism for 'failing fast'. A 'draft' object can be printed for minimal cost (once the 3D printer itself has been purchased). Plastic filament is not expensive so trial runs and adjustments are commonplace.

Often, the physical act of printing demonstrates a 'theoretical' problem with the digital version. 3D printing technology is still developing so glitches and unexpected errors are commonplace in the processes of translating data into things. [Project name] participants were visibly distressed and vocally expressed their disappointment when a 3D print did not work perfectly the first time. Their responses were frequently framed along expressions of 'trust me to get it wrong' or 'of course it didn't work, I'm no use at it'. An experienced community arts practitioner working with the project cautioned that:

'Disabled people have had a lifetime of damaging negativity. We have two days to build them up.'

Similarly on [project name], people became stymied when obstacles emerged in the development of their ideas. As one of the intermediaries who worked in the community and supported the project indicated, 'failure for us is not an option'. The people in the 'hard-to-reach' communities targeted by the project had so many difficulties in their lives already that she felt an ethical imperative to ensure that participants would not experience yet another failure. Entrepreneurial philosophies of 'fail fast' were to be avoided rather than embraced. Both projects needed to ensure that the community engagement and facilitation of activities were carefully worked through because negative experiences would add to a life-long narrative of limiting events. Facilitators needed reassure people that glitches were nothing personal; just part of the process.

The impact of these perceptions of failure cuts across these communities and affects how people make sense of the world around them. Anthropologist Gillian Evans (2007) observes that such disadvantage in working-class communities is perpetuated through ideas about failure that are built in to how people engage with each other. She argues that the educational system is structured to reinforce failure for people from particular disadvantaged backgrounds. The cultural sector and creative industries have a similar effect – only people with money can pay to attend cultural events and only people who have particular mysterious 'creative' attributes can be cultural producers.

Both our projects were based in [city], identified as one of the most deprived areas in the UK (Department for Communities and Local Government 2015, 10). Mental and physical health conditions affect many residents, unemployment figures are high, criminal activity is common. People struggle for basic resources – accommodation, food, travel. For [project], participants' status as disabled people compounded these existing challenges since 'disabled people remain more likely to live in poverty, to have fewer educational qualifications, to be out of work and experience prejudice and abuse' (Cabinet Office 2005, 3). The project participants' self-perceptions were negatively affected by prevalent media narratives of disabled and unemployed people as burdens, a drain on public resources. In the UK popular press, 'The period in 2010-11 saw more discussion of disability benefits in terms of being a claimed drain on the economy and a burden on the state [...] some articles even blaming the recession itself on incapacity benefit claimants' (Briant et al. 2011, 9).

Such narratives become powerful influences. They shape identity, the self and how we relate to others. In these community settings, a common phrase was: 'I'm just not creative', echoing eighteenth century poet William Blake's concept of 'mind forg'd manacles'.³ Literary critic David Gross (1986, 3) identifies such perceptual manacles or restraints for the mind as self-limiting thoughts, which are 'a powerful cultural force'. By

3. ³ The poem 'London' by William Blake was written @ 1790: 'In every cry of every Man, / In every Infants cry of fear, / In every voice: in every ban, / The mind-forg'd manacles I hear' Full text available at: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43673>

extension, such thoughts also affect people's abilities to consider themselves as worthwhile and valid creative practitioners.

Project facilitators on [project name] spent a lot of time using creative writing techniques to offer people more positive and assertive narratives of the self and the community. As Charles Weingartner (1997, 21) describes, 'A shift in metaphors can produce a dramatic shift in the options and choices we perceive, conceive and then act on'. And nowhere more so than when we are approaching creative practices.

People in [City] identified their circumstances and opportunities as restricted by others. During [project name], a locally employed 'community researcher' asked people about their 'cultural activities'. One immediate reaction was for people to ask 'what culture? They've taken our culture away' and then make observations about the new influx of people with non-English accents. The community researcher quickly learned to refocus discussions on what people liked to do in their spare time, with their friends and to relax. People seemed to relate the concept of culture to 'official' structures and restrictions rather than activities relevant to their own lives.

While there was some funding to support community projects – through police initiatives or the local Council – these focused on 'delivering' activities rather than encouraging people to act themselves. There were also concerns about 'suits' coming into the area, asking people what they wanted and then 'taking away our ideas'. For local people, this demonstrated a 'lack of trust' in the community to develop their own initiatives.

These factors combine to present significant barriers to people considering themselves to be 'creative' and to willingly access and engage with cultural and creative industries. Yet when encouraged to participate and to understand their activities as their own productive experiences, based on their own narratives of self and community, we were able to engage initially uncertain people in creative cultural practices. Both projects, therefore, sought to establish an atmosphere where creative failure was embraced as a useful experience and where cultural activity was born from local experiences and priorities.

Strategies for stimulating creative production

In this section, we describe a framework for supporting creative engagement and developing confidence in creative practice by focusing on play as a creative enabler. We situate exploration and play as an adaptive space where no answer is wrong, no idea is 'rubbish' and no particular approach is the right one. We present this approach as a 'Creative Development Framework' to engage with the ontological realm of the creative economy, providing a bridge between 'community activity' and 'the creative industries'. Such a framework approach resonates strongly with Feinstein's (2017, 25) emphasis on linking 'economic models of creativity and innovation with the field of knowledge representation'.

Safe play

The first task for the creative facilitator is to create a safe and nurturing atmosphere in which perceptions of risk and failure are re-positioned as part of a playful process in which we can 'mess about' without consequence. As Jackson (2003, 7) puts it, to 'recognize emergent unanticipated outcomes' with calm curiosity rather than dismay at a plan going awry. A communal, preliminary act of making tea and sharing biscuits, for example, helps create a group identity. Apparent small-talk, eliciting the stories of people's journeys to the venue, or their reasons for being there, initiates creative sharing and introduces storytelling as a core activity. 'Guerrilla creativity', where the intention or nature of the activity is not pre-announced, can be an effective way of getting around initial anxieties and preconceptions. For example, recording group responses to a series of simple questions, and then revealing that participants have created a poem. This may continue with activities involving elements of meditation, visualisation and relaxation. The effects of such activities are intended to shift the group dynamic into a more creative and receptive state, engaging imagination, daydreaming, and transcending the constraints of the everyday.

Open play

To function effectively in a late capitalist society, we are schooled to be logical, rational and reasonable. We have routines, appointments, schedules and reminders. We write lists and complete tasks in linear fashion. To engage with state services such as health and welfare, such behaviours are expected and necessary if support is to be accessed successfully. A welfare service would understandably take a dim view of someone who

was late for an appointment because they had a great idea and stopped to think about it. Therefore, most of us find our rational, critical faculties to be strongly developed, perhaps to the point where they allow the speculative and the imaginative little room to exist. 'Society has overvalued rationality and technology at the expense of losing from consciousness a fundamental sense of “authentic being”...' (Childers and Hentzi 1995, 103). We argue that this overvaluing of rationality in fact does not serve the knowledge economy, where lateral thinkers and radical innovators are future wealth generators. Indeed, this pressure to get things right 'can result in a risk-averse attitude that does not allow for exploration and discovery' (Naray-Davey and Hurley 2014, 6).

Creating a space in which people are freed, temporarily, from the constraints of conventional logic, reason and sense, is therefore necessary if new ideas and imaginative responses are to be accessed: 'openness to experience had the largest effect: as openness increased, people were much more likely to be doing something creative' (Silvia et al. 2014, 185). The means to creating that openness, we argue, are to lower the stakes by encouraging provisionality, play and peer support to try things out. 'Just having a play' became a phrase in the 3D printing workshops that allowed participants to experiment without the pressure to succeed with a tangible outcome. This resonates with Baker's (2004, 199) findings on 'serious play' and her critique of the 'western positivist view [...] which sees play as trivial'. Baker (2004, 199) uses Schechner's (1994) work on performance to reconfigure play as 'serious, real and privileged – “the divine process of creating”'.

Within the overarching ethos of safe and open play, our creative development framework may be specified in more detail as follows:

Ideas first

‘Let’s try to not say no to anything’. As we worked with the local intermediaries in the area to identify local people with ideas, we determined not to dismiss anyone. No matter what was suggested, we considered it carefully and encouraged the person to develop their idea further. As Einstein said, 'No problem can be solved by the same kind of thinking that created it.' We established an approach of ideas first, parameters next to encourage dialogue and creative thinking about possibilities.

Parameters next

Too much choice can be overwhelming. To posit the question: 'if you could make anything, what would you make?' is just as likely to shut down creative responses as it is to elicit imaginative triumphs. Applying established models of creative practice, in which various parameters or restrictions actually stimulate more innovative responses is therefore likely to make the task more approachable. This is where strategies borrowed from innovative and experimental creative writing practices (e.g. Oulipo) offer ways of narrowing down possibilities. The application of simple incremental procedures and parameters proved effective in engaging a 'ludic mode' for negotiating such barriers (Gallix 2013).

Purposeful meandering

Announcing that 'we are now going to create X' can put people under pressure to achieve and may be counter-productive in shutting down the thought processes upon which creative outputs rely. Engaging participants in familiar activities which build gradually and organically into an emergent creative process can relieve such pressures. Offering people the opportunity to develop ideas at their own pace and in their own way, according to their need for rest or stimulation, was strongly welcomed by participants, who valued the informality and the fact that a strict timetable was not imposed. Even though we left open the opportunity to change ideas, few changed from their original plan. By providing an option to change their minds, people were not restrained by the choices they made and did not perceive themselves to be under pressure.

Failing Gladly

Facilitators in the digital fabrication workshops developed what was almost a comedy routine in which banter and joking were encouraged. They would deliberately get things ridiculously wrong to show participants how easily it could be fixed. 'All you need is the "undo" button.' Laughter dispels anxiety and encourages people to 'have a go' because a precedent for creative failure has been established. If the 'expert' gets it wrong, then it must be OK to mess up. In both projects, as circumstances and obstacles arose, we encouraged people to think about alternatives. As people gained confidence in their ability to negotiate setbacks, and became familiar with the experience, they were able to handle the next problem much more easily.

Summary

Our proposed Creative Development Framework transfers to any creative process. The provision of spaces supporting safe and open play allows for demystification, ‘bitesize’ incremental activities, simple choices, ludic modes and attention to usually unconscious processes, which widen access to our common creativity.

Conclusion

In this paper, we argue for developing more explicit pathways between community projects and government definitions of ‘culture’ and the creative and digital economy. It is through a nuanced recognition of where people are, where they need to get to and how, that will produce greater engagement with the creative economy. Fostering human talent and digital creativity outside formal school or workplace environments will favourably nurture societal and cultural values – promoting not only an innovation culture and economy but an inclusive society (Burgess, Foth and Klæbe 2006, 13).

At the moment, there is not a strong relational link between creative industries and low income communities. These are different aspects of government policy. Yet as both these Connected Communities projects show, people can be engaged in creative activity when the mystique of creativity is removed and instead the activity is normalized by reconnecting people to a sense of play and self-exploration. This involves people

developing, responding, adapting their own ideas, whether as finding words for poems, creating key rings or collaborating on a social history play.

The removal of emphasis on ‘creative’ as relating to theatre, arts or television enables stronger engagement in so-called ‘creative economy’ activities. People were much more comfortable with an emphasis on doing things relating to their community or building on interests related to their existing activities or hobbies. Trained artists can help enable and support this development process, aligning their art practice alongside what people in the community want to achieve. This symbiotic relationship facilitates learning and knowledge exchange in both directions and opens up the potential for engagement in the creative industries.

This reclamation of creativity from its assignation as part of particular industries can be situated as part of a wider reclaiming of the public commons. By tying together ‘creative’ + ‘industry’, the notion of public ownership and engagement with creative practice has been diminished. There are attempts to reclaim it through ‘everyday creativity’. There is a difference however between everyday creativity and supporting people to make the transition from ‘the originality of everyday life’ (Richards 2010; Barron 1969) to participating in the creative economy. This step requires a demystification of what goes on in the creative industries - access to expert advice, or signposting to further sources of support (e.g. a local FabLab) is a necessary link in this opening sequence, which enables people to embark upon meaningful explorations of their creative potential, be that as a hobby or a career.

The democratisation of creativity can happen by situating the so-called creative industries on a continuum with creative practice as a hobby or pastime and ‘everyday’ adaptation to changing circumstances. Creativity becomes a process that can be taught, developed using practical techniques. The presentation of a ‘sliding scale of creativity’ might help people embrace it more easily. If they see themselves as having the potential to be creative, if they just had the right training, then they may be more willing to engage in creative activities as learning opportunities, rather than just dismissing them altogether as ‘not for me’. The interrogative challenge for them becomes – what kind of creative person am I? How can I identify and develop my creative potential?

The opening up of possibilities enables people to think about ideas that they may have for their community and, with the right support, to develop those ideas unselfconsciously. They no longer need to worry about whether they have the ability or the capacity to deliver on all aspects of their idea and would be willing to seek out help where they have gaps in their knowledge and competence. By recognising their own creative potential, they can be comfortable in asking and supporting others to develop further.

Biographical notes

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Geolocation information

This research took place in [city] in the Northwest of the United Kingdom.

7559 words including references

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