



Filed under: Partnership, Research

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Reaching the hard to reach

Are terms such as 'hard to reach' and 'socially excluded' useful or damaging? What happens when we mobilise them in funding bids, partnerships and project work with young people?



This week a youth programmer from a well-known London gallery showed me a series of statements penned by members of the gallery's youth group in answer to the question: why do you come here? One girl had written that attending the youth group stops her from doing crime. The youth programmer described her surprise at having read this statement, because the girl in question was hard working, dedicated, and never likely to commit crime. Even though she was not recruited into the group as part of an anti-crime programme, somehow she had internalised a narrative that reflected her likely perception of the gallery's agenda: to engage with 'hard to reach' young people and to turn their lives around. She had expressed what she expected the gallery would want to hear, and gave herself less credit as a result.

Reaching the 'hard to reach' is the elusive task of marketers, educational establishments, health centres, political bodies, law enforcers, commercial businesses and arts organisations alike. In the eyes of different institutions, we might all be cast as part of a 'hard to reach' community at some point in our lives. However, when used in a youth context, the term takes on specific associations with social

disadvantage, and 'hard to reach' is frequently interchangeable with equally contested terms such as 'at risk', 'vulnerable', 'socially excluded' and 'NEET' (Not in Education, Employment or Training). In youth studies there are numerous texts debating the ethics of imposing such categories on young people. Despite these arguments, the terminology is not going away. The sticky subject of who or what constitutes 'hard to reach' prompted the Manchester-based Whitworth Young Contemporaries programme and the bridge organisation Curious Minds to convene a discussion involving youth workers, cultural producers, researchers, council engagement workers and other professionals including representatives from the police and an electricity company. Paul Mayers from Curriculum Plus chaired the event.

Paul began with a caution to avoid the typical pitfalls of discussion related to 'hard to reach': in other words, getting caught up in semantics, or in a debate about whether we (organisations) or they (young people) are in fact hard to reach. If we were going to get a productive dialogue going, we agreed, we'd need to base opinion on real experience and steer clear of jargon.

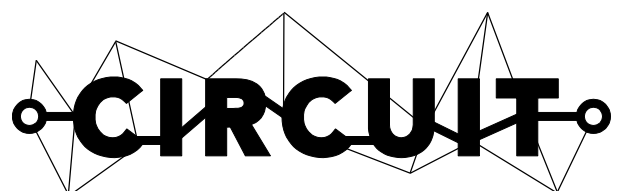
Inevitably, the conversation turned towards a wider discussion on partnership, and what it means to collaborate with other organisations working with so-called 'hard to reach' young people. Below are some of the key points that came out of the day:

Hard to reach doesn't boil down to being economically deprived – it is part of a cycle.

- In the cultural sector, we talk a lot about 'offers' and not enough about removing barriers.
- 'Being there' in a community is vital if we are to identify barriers.
- Some youth sector organisations are bombarded by arts organisations seeking to collaborate on projects. Youth organisations can be regarded as suppliers of hard to reach young people, and young people can be perceived as a form of currency for organisations.
- Some organisations are running month to month, jumping onto different projects and chasing pots of money. This can lead to tokenism.
- Time needs to be built in to develop relationships. This might involve making the tea on a regular basis at a partner organisation! But how do we get funders to recognise the value of this activity?
- When arts organisations write bids for funding, they rarely account for partners' motivations and needs/interests.
- Collaboration should start with a conversation, not a project outline.
- We should be discussing what could we do, not defining what we do do.
- The arts sector is good at talking to itself, but not so good at talking to other sectors.
- We should acknowledge and communicate that arts organisations can offer something unique.
- We need to be clear about the motivation for defining who we want to work with.

- What does success look like? This may differ across organisations. We often talk about success in terms of partnerships rather than organisational change.
- We should be clear about our drivers for partnership. E.g. personal, social, financial, ethical, emotional.
- When you work out the why, you can focus on the how.
- Integrity, honesty, empathy, trust and confidence are essential features of partnership with young people and other organisations.
- The impact of engagement is sometimes not measurable straight away. Consider the extended life of evaluation (e.g. 3 years after a project has ended).

This discussion was refreshingly frank, in large part I think because it was not dominated by one sector, but was populated by people from a range of different professional contexts, even beyond youth and arts. As the organisers admitted at the beginning however, it was missing the perspectives of young people, and I do wonder whether conversation would have been even richer (or perhaps more censored) had these voices been included. What the example at the start of this post shows is that young people are often deeply aware of the trade-off between the gallery as provider of opportunities and the young person as a target achieved. Conversations about 'the why' may sometimes be awkward, but what are the consequences if we don't have them?



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