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Innovation and Youth Work

I am a PhD student undertaking a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership with Tate and the University of Nottingham. My research focuses on investigating partnerships between visual arts organisations and the youth sector.

I found the conference *Innovation in Youth Work* to be a very revealing event on perceptions of the current position of youth work nationally, and wanted to share my notes.

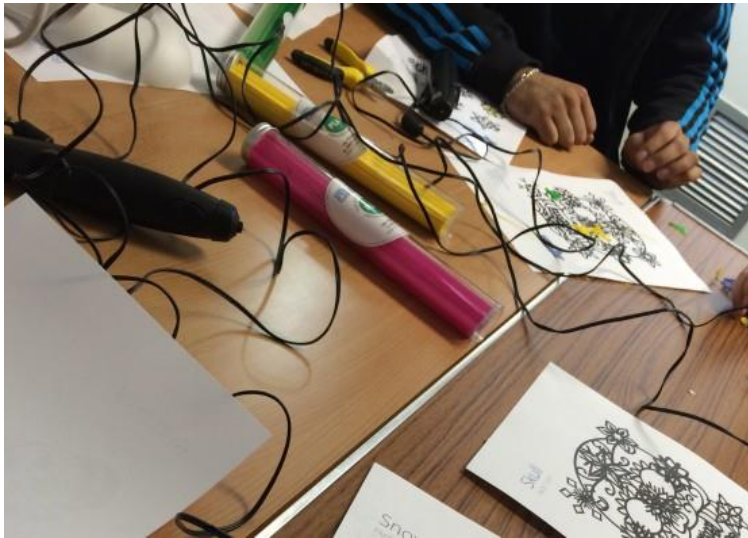


The general feeling seemed to be that youth work has recently been dominated by accreditation and box-ticking; that the sector has not defended itself adequately and is now paying for managerial failures and abuses of the past. Core costs are a central issue in frontline youth work. The problem of defining and measuring impact affects the entire sector, and there remains a fixation on quantitative evaluation rather than longitudinal, qualitative research. There was a collective agreement that the sector needs to reform, innovate and prioritise the voices of young people.

One of the workshop sessions I attended focused on digital youth work and new technology, and the current lack of engagement with technology communities and opportunities in youth work. James Dellow (@JamesDellow) led this session and

invited everyone to attend the launch of the Dragon Hall Tech Hub in London on 17 June.

Image from the Digital Youth Work and New Technology Workshop at the Innovation in Youth Work Conference



Digital Youth Work and New Technology Workshop

Youth work practitioners from a workers' cooperative (Tania de St Croix), local authority youth service (Louise Doherty) and Young Mayor's project (Malcolm Ball) led a workshop on creating spaces for radical practice in youth work – addressing the need to disrupt market-driven value systems and discuss how radical work is understood and challenged today. Participants also debated issues raised by the campaign group In Defence of Youth Work.

Here is a basic summary of some of the key points from the day:

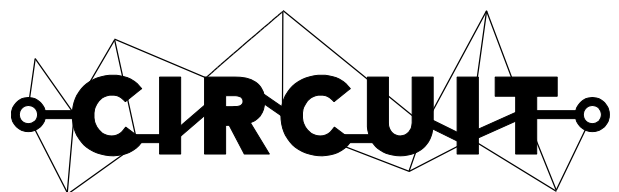
Maxine Green (Principal, YMCA George Williams College):

- Youth work has seen dramatic changes over the last few decades
- The identity of youth work is now very dispersed
- Youth work now takes place in various environments
- Monitoring and evaluation is now a major feature of youth work
- The core mission and vision of youth work (to strive for a better world for young people) is still shared
- In this changed environment, collaboration is key

Tony Jeffs (Founding Editor of Youth & Policy):

- Central and local government are withdrawing from direct involvement in youth work and the youth service
- Michael Gove has removed responsibility for youth policy from the Department for Education to the Cabinet Office “dustbin”
- State interest in the youth sector is unlikely to return in the future (the government’s focus is on extending formal education opportunities and on services for the ageing population)
- Even the riots failed to spark wholesale investment in youth work
- The faith youth sector and uniformed youth sector (scouts etc.) are the ‘success story’ of youth work – they are healthy and growing
- The ‘youth work crisis’ relates predominantly to statutory and secular sectors
- This situation reflects the long-term decline in usage of youth clubs, youth centres and detached work
- The faith and uniformed sectors have a self-confidence and clearly defined purpose which is lacking in the statutory sector
- Currently the sector relies on begging for pots of money which has generated a competitive rather than collegiate landscape
- There is awareness that others can do certain problem-oriented work better and in a more targeted way (e.g. policing, surveillance, case-work, social psychology etc.)
- The sector justifies itself via the language of others therefore it loses every argument
- Innovation is needed alongside a complete re-evaluation of the core purpose of statutory/secular youth work
- The sector should reflect on the ideas of the Child Study Movement (1890s) which focused on studying the life experiences of young people, and asked: what are young people interested in?
- Look, Listen and Learn. Avoid “pointless lament” regarding what has been lost and focus on what young people need in order to live as free autonomous citizens and full, contributing members of society
- If you’re serious about innovating, you will not be everybody’s friend. Let’s start upsetting! Fail better!

See Tony Jeff’s essay ‘Running Out of Options: Re-Modelling Youth Work’ (2011), Youth & Policy, No. 106, for more details.



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