

Broken Pathways – Youth Cultural Practices and Strategic Issues for the Creative Sector

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Introduction

On October 10, 2014, the Coalition for Cultural Diversity and the University of Ottawa organized a seminar that was held in Ottawa as part of the international conference on Social Theory, Politics and the Arts. In the presence of group of cultural scholars, a broad range of presenters from the cultural, educational, municipal, and federal sectors explored the policy challenges posed by youth cultural practices. Out of their presentations and discussions a central paradox emerged: despite youth's increased access to the internet and all the digital content available on it, barriers to cultural participation continue to exist and, in some instances, appear to be growing, both for young people who are producing cultural content and young people who are consuming it. As the keynote speaker, Alan Brown (Principal, WolfBrown Associates) observed, traditional ways of producing and exploring various art forms are becoming less effective and, in many cases, "the pathways seem to be broken".

In their presentations **Charles Vallerand** of the [Coalition for Cultural Diversity](#) and **Michael Sullivan** of [The Strategic Counsel](#) reminded the audience that there were two sides to the youth cultural practices coin – consumption and production. Sullivan presented statistics on youth arts and culture participation and stated that more evaluation was essential. For example, it would appear that YouTube is the primary internet access portal for children, but we do not yet know what impact this is having on other forms of cultural participation. Vallerand noted that the complexity of the policy environment is increasing and that surveys conducted in Toronto and Montreal have shown little support for arts education, except for youth at risk. Teachers are already overburdened, and he stated that encouragement of arts participation cannot be left to the marketplace - i.e. simply relying on the "supply side", such as YouTube, to guide youth's choices. Linking youth cultural consumption practices to the future of cultural production, he also referred to an article by [McCandless et al \(2010\)](#) which showed the extremely negative effect that consuming music from streaming services was having on artists' incomes.¹

This short paper will outline the main strategic issues raised by the speakers under three headings:

- Youth practices and cultural consumption
- Youth practices and cultural producers
- Youth cultural practices and their implications for public policies

¹ NB: This information has been challenged in a more recent article by Justin Colletti at <http://www.sonicscoop.com/2013/07/31/op-ed-spotify-payouts-revisited-how-much-does-it-pay-now-and-how-much-should-artists-demand/>

It will conclude with a brief reflection on what these issues might mean for the future implementation of the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*.

Youth practices and cultural consumption

The session featured several participants who were actively involved in programs to encourage youth cultural participation. Their interventions focused on the how such participation enriched both individuals and communities and promoted social inclusion.

Enrichment of individuals and communities

Alan Brown, a researcher who has explored the creative impact of youth arts engagement, spoke about how the traditional pathways to participation seem to be “broken”. He described the [Thriving Minds program](#) in Dallas, Texas, that explored multiple ways of delivering creative education, noting that arts and culture institutions were often much more effective in engaging youth than the school system. While the partnership between the City of Dallas and over 100 arts, cultural and community organizations has shown great promise in enriching the lives of children, supporting and engaging families and building cohesive, safe and vibrant neighborhoods (Wolf and Denson 2009), he added that there is very little foundational understanding of the cultural tastes and interests of children, which makes it difficult to assess how such tastes are acquired and transmitted.

Audrey Churgin described how her organization (Multicultural Arts, Schools, Communities - [MASC](#)) raises about \$1 million a year to pay artists’ fees for work in schools. MASC's work with artists from diverse cultural backgrounds helps address some of the biggest challenges in the schools today. She also commented on the difficulties in evaluating artistic programming in schools. Often evaluators have to rely on anecdotes rather than data to judge the impact of these programs.

In a similar vein, **Patty Jarvis** of [Prologue to the Performing Arts](#) (an organization dedicated to enriching the lives of young people by connecting them to high quality performing arts) asked the question: what does youth engagement mean? Does it mean voice? Or does it mean success in creating new audiences? Although many arts organizations believe that the latter is the goal, there are many youth who may not want to participate in traditional ways. She also insisted on the need to clarify our intentions when discussing arts education.

Jacqueline Lawrence shared the Ottawa Carleton District School Board’s journey to explore the intersection of diversity and creativity. She highlighted the Board’s action research study report: [Unleashing Potential, Harnessing Possibilities: An Odyssey of Creativity, Innovation & Critical Thinking](#). Various initiatives at the intersection of diversity and creativity are helping the Board to create inclusive, safe and caring environments that welcome, value and respect diversity of thinking and foster a culture of engagement and belonging. As diversity increases in the Board, the intention is to continue to harness the creative tension generated by diversity to foster well-being and engagement, to generate expansive, relevant and meaningful learning and self-expression, and to unleash and maximize the potential of students and staff.

Denis Bertrand agreed that we need to go beyond curriculum measures to engage educational personnel in arts and culture. Otherwise, they will not be able to guide their students. Arts and culture should not be just another school subject but should be fun for the students – something in which they can be involved, rather than something that is dictated to them by others. One way to do this would be to involve students in community institutions, such as arts organizations, in creative ways. He cited the Ontario program [“Aménagement linguistique – A Policy for Ontario's French-Language Schools and Francophone Community”](#) as a model.

Social inclusion

Nadia Duguay described the work that her organization ([Exeko](#)) does to promote social inclusion of marginalized youth through the arts. She noted that many of these youth are quite engaged in creative practices, but these practices are not recognized by the mainstream artistic disciplines. In her opinion, there is a need to better understand the interdisciplinary nature of current youth cultural practices and to engage in a more equal dialogue with youth in order to understand this participatory culture.

Robin Higham described the work being carried out in Ottawa by the Orkidstra program (<http://leadingnotefoundation.org/>), based on the Sistema program in Venezuela which empowers marginalized youth through music. He indicated that children in the program have two motivations: belonging and fame. He said that there is a huge demand to join this program, which is always oversubscribed. The Orkidstra program emphasizes community development in a diverse setting.

Douglas Sturdevant of the [National Arts Centre](#) indicated that Sistema was not a musical program but a social program, and in his opinion, the delivery of this program in a public school arts environment was critical to its success because it builds community within the school. While all the elements of this musical training could be bought using private resources, this community development would be lacking if such a program were not delivered publicly.

Patsy Aldana of the [National Reading Campaign](#) spoke about how reading builds equity in schools. She pointed out that reading is now taught in schools as a technocratic skill (i.e. as something that aids in future employment) and that many students have no interest in reading for cultural purposes. She also noted that reading programs in schools have been negatively affected by funding cuts and that the compulsory reading lists in schools are dominated by foreign content and by books that were on the best-seller lists in the 1950s.

Jimmy Ung is a program officer for the [Youth Advisory Group of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO](#). He described some of the international initiatives undertaken by UNESCO to engage youth in cultural life. For example, a 69-school network participates in a global citizenship education program to develop a sense of belonging beyond borders. Another example is a youth poetry contest on human rights and refugees that encourages the exploration of social issues via artistic expression.

Youth practices and cultural producers

Several of the presenters on youth participation observed that youth are not simply consumers of cultural content but are also becoming increasingly active as producers of content through a variety of channels and technologies. Several other speakers explored the impact that this is having on cultural policies to promote access by youth, to accommodate new forms of creativity, and to support young arts professionals.

Supporting youth access to traditional cultural offerings

Marc Lemay, the Director of Arts Policy at the [Department of Canadian Heritage](#), set the stage by describing several departmental programs that encouraged arts participation by youth (e.g. festival funding, support for Culture Days). He presented [statistics](#) showing that attendance at live performances was actually on the rise among the younger generation when compared to older ones, including at classical music and opera performances. He noted that public engagement was a key concern of the Department's arts programs.

Engaging young people in the performing arts is also a central concern of many working in that sector, and **Frédéric Julien** of the [Canadian Arts Presenting Association \(CAPACOA\)](#) examined best practices in the presenting sector for encouraging youth participation. Many of these practices involve the [use of social media](#) and the creation of venues where youth feel welcome and valued.

Audrey Vermette of the [Canadian Museums Association](#) indicated that while funding is a key issue for museums, the audience remains at the heart of their work. She pointed to three major projects in Canadian museums to encourage wider youth participation. The first is a “[cultural access pass](#)” for new Canadian citizens, which is valid for one year. The second is the “[Defining moments](#)” project, a national digital media arts and citizenship venture aimed at encouraging youth across Canada to explore, express and showcase their diverse perspectives on Canadian identity. The third is a creative artwork contest for “youth at risk” where the winning artwork is displayed online and at a travelling exhibit.

Laura Cyr, of the [City of Ottawa](#) indicated that youth initiatives are included in the City's *Renewed Action Plan for Arts, Heritage and Culture (2013-2018)* (<http://ottawa.ca/en/liveculture/cultural-planning>). One of these is a two-year pilot program with the city's cultural organizations to develop and provide cultural training opportunities, internships, apprenticeships, and work placement programs for youth. However, given the discussion at this special session, she felt that a number of questions could be raised, including what kind of training is needed and for what?

Supporting new types of youth cultural practices

Devin Beauregard, a graduate student at the University of Ottawa, suggested that the cultural industries have approached digital technologies in a reactive way with the result that most of what artists produce is downloaded for free. While this has had negative implications for professional artists, it has opened the doors to young people to participate in digital cultural

production in a proactive way – e.g. through the creation of “fan fiction” and through sampling and remixing of existing content. Among many other policy implications, this is contributing to a new environment where intellectual property rights may also apply to so-called “audiences” or “users” as well as to artists.

Shannon Litzenberger, an arts advocate and consultant, spoke about her study [*Choreographing our Future: Strategies for Supporting Next Generation Arts Practice*](#), which explored how creative arts practices are increasingly misaligned with funding policies. Her study found that a new generation of artists is moving away from traditional organizational structures and ways of working. She indicated that not only new ways of engaging audiences are needed, but also new structural models and funding practices that are more focused on building flexible collaborations and relationships among disciplines and with audiences.

Youth cultural practices and their implications for public policies

While the session provided an overview of how youth cultural practices were changing, there was no consensus among the presenters about how these changes could be accommodated within the educational and cultural sectors. Many “broken pathways” were identified, but ideas about “new pathways” were not yet fully formed. However, a number of strategic issues emerged, which may help to point the way to new directions in future public policies to accommodate and encourage youth cultural practices.

What do we know about new youth cultural practices? What do we need to know?

Much of the discussion focused on how arts and culture participation contributes to youth success, well-being and self-esteem, building on well-known research by Bourdieu (1986), DiMaggio (1982) and others on the role of cultural capital in the creation of successful lives. Yet, as many of the participants noted, very little is known about how youth acquires this cultural capital and how they use it. To return to the example cited several times during the session, does the fact that young people are increasingly accessing and producing cultural content through internet portals such as YouTube mean that they will lack appreciation for and understanding of content presented in other ways? Or, does it simply mean that this is another way of appreciating it (see, for example, the YouTube videos posted by children of Orkidstra performances - <http://leadingnotefoundation.org/kids-page/video-gallery/>)?

Another question, raised by Nadia Duguay and Patty Jarvis, was whether traditional forms of transmitting cultural capital really fit with the reality of youth cultural practices today. Many of these new practices are interdisciplinary, crossing traditional artistic disciplinary lines and often combining the visual arts, music, film/video, and performance with an online or street presence (see, for example, a selection of Exeko’s artistic residency projects at <http://exeko.org/en/artistic-residencies>).

As was noted by Alan Brown, Nadia Duguay, Jacqueline Lawrence, Douglas Sturdevant, and Audrey Vermette, there appear to be strong links between cultural participation and inclusive communities. While little research has investigated how youth cultural participation fits within the profile of sustainable, inclusive communities, interesting work is being carried out in Toronto

on the impact of youth engagement in neighbourhood revitalization (see, for example, Charlton et al. 2013, pp 22-23 and ArtReach Toronto 2008, p. 5).

The “elephant in the room” during most of the discussion of youth cultural consumption was the impact that some practices, such as free or very cheap downloading of cultural content, was having on the ability of arts, heritage, and cultural organizations to earn enough revenue to remain viable and active. As Colletti (2013, p.1) has observed, new delivery mechanisms, such as music streaming services, are paying such low rates to artists that “you’d need about 230,000 spins each month – about 7,700 plays every day – in order to earn minimum wage for just one person”. If the record companies can no longer be counted upon to subsidize musicians as they work on albums, and governments are cutting back on support to the arts and heritage, what impact is this having on cultural workers, particularly young cultural workers? Again, we have only anecdotal evidence, but some authors (e.g. Campbell 2013) see a very precarious future for young people wishing to work in the creative arts. Many are now doing creative work almost as a hobby while they support themselves with menial and low-paying jobs (Campbell 2014). As opportunities for traditional employment wane, youth appear to be placing increasing value on individual entrepreneurship in the creative arts and other fields (Hire Prospects et al. 2008). However, current policies and programs continue to be geared toward creative activity as it is currently practised in established institutions.

What should be the aims of new policies and approaches?

There appeared to be a divide between educational and cultural decision makers and practitioners on the objectives of policies and approaches to encourage youth cultural participation. A significant number of the educational presenters gave priority to the objective of promoting personal enrichment and development of young people and, as a corollary, strengthening their families and communities. On the other hand, the cultural sector presenters were more focused on sustaining their organizations by building new audiences. While they were not indifferent to the benefits derived by young people from participation in arts and heritage activities, they tended to report on this as something that is delivered to young people by the cultural organization’s programming, rather than as an opportunity for the organization to benefit from the input of young people and their families. The dilemma for the cultural sector was summed up by Patty Jarvis when she asked: what does youth engagement mean? Does it mean voice? Or does it mean success in creating new audiences?

Under the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, there is room for the achievement of both types of objectives, but it must be said that they are frequently viewed as separate “boxes” with few links between them. The discussion of youth cultural practices illustrated that “voice” and “new audiences” may need to be considered as two sides of coin or, perhaps, two of several ingredients in the mix.

The proactivity of youth in utilizing digital technologies to produce and consume cultural content at the same time has, as Devin Beauregard pointed out, muddied the definition of “intellectual property”, which may require a major rethinking of copyright and ownership as this blending of roles becomes more common. On the other hand, as digital content becomes cheaper, the value of the live performance has increased. As Leyshon (2014) observes in his study of the

transformation of the music industry, the idea of the music network, dependent on access to social and certain kinds of economic capital, may presage similar changes in the cultural sector as a whole. In a similar vein, Campbell (2014), critiques the notion of creative hubs in cities, noting that youth are “changing not only the way they are working, but also the way they are living their lives, and this is in conflict with the way pre-existing systems have been set up” (p. 4), adding that young people are not interested in “large, formal, single-use facilities” but in “multidisciplinary facilities and smaller spaces” (p. 5). Different types of cultural investment policies, aimed at promoting social capital and more supple forms of financial support, may be required in this new and emerging cultural environment. There is some evidence that public funders, such as the Canada Council, are moving towards a more multidisciplinary approach (Tucker 2015), but this is still at an early stage.

Looking at the leading edge example of the sound recording industry, it would appear that democratization of digital technologies has made it cheaper and easier for young musicians to set up their own recording facilities or to access cheaper “home studios” operated and managed by peers (Leyshon 2014). Paradoxically, this is leading to more value being placed on the “festival economy”, which is place-based and dependent not only on financial capital, but also on networked social capital that activates interest and supports talent through media such as Facebook and Twitter. Crowdfunding of music performances, sound recording ventures and venues is also a growing phenomenon (see, for example, the [campaign to support the Lincoln Park Music Festival in New Jersey](#) and Harris 2014). All of these phenomena build upon the ease with which young people (and increasingly, not so young people) navigate in an online world and use it not only to consume content but also to support and create the content that is important to them. One interesting side effect is that the artists who are already using these interactive technologies are learning a great deal through them about what their fans think about their art – which may help to answer the questions posed repeatedly by our presenters about how youth acquire and transmit their cultural tastes.

Public policies in support of the diversity of cultural expressions would do well to consider how these developments can be harnessed to support both wider youth engagement with existing content and increased investment in new content being produced by young people, particularly young people who aspire to become professional artists. Such policies should cut across artistic disciplines and work much more actively with educators and with communities. Public funders should consider how their investments can be harmonized with new crowdfunding techniques and with entrepreneurial venture capital in place-based creative clusters. They should examine ways of engaging young people in the creative activities of both existing arts and heritage institutions and in non-institutionalized activities taking place in a variety of social settings. In short, there are many new potential pathways to youth arts and cultural engagement, but it will require determined and visionary explorers to find them and to use them to their greatest potential.

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