

Cultural Learning Alliance Advisory Group | Blog

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What is covid-19 teaching us we can do differently in arts and cultural education?

This pandemic is teaching us to think about things differently, to act differently and to work together to solve extremely complex problems on behalf of society, the world. The crisis is creating exceptional circumstances and causing a massive yet creative disruption in education. Social justice and creative learning continue to be crucially important to children's wellbeing.

The common threads that run through the current lived experiences of our children and young people, are loss and anxiety, loss of freedom and social contact, loss of daily structure, and anxiety about family and friends. Some also feel a loss of identity at this time - their peers confirm the person they want to be and these meaningful human interactions are now absent. Daily, young people are listening to news reports of the death toll internationally. Collectively, we are flooding social media with digital content, with an overwhelming choice of ways to engage with the arts and home learning.

We will not return to any sense of normal but this may be a good thing, particularly in relation to schools and our current education system. There is a renewed focus on community, on the experience of time and space for artistic creation. We have the opportunity to create new and alternative models of education. We need to re-think.

This [film poem](#) commissioned by our charity, written by the spoken word poet Toby Thompson as a gift for our Patron Sir Ken Robinson (and the world) is still pertinent today. The current crisis helps to crystallise the important role of creative learning and teaching, striving for equality and inclusion - we need to re-imagine the kinds of schools or learning spaces we want to provide for our children.

Human beings have an infinite capacity for creativity. So maybe this is the time for drawing on our collective imagination to rethink our education system in response to this crisis, to place children and young people at the heart of this process, rather than national performance-led data. All children, no matter what their background or circumstance, deserve a high quality creative and cultural education.

Ken's recent [podcast](#) invites such systemic change in our education system – he shares his perspective on how we can seize this moment to change how we teach children and think about the world they will inherit.

'People flourish when the culture is right ... children are full of boundless potential.'

This is where the arts have a significant role to play. Engagement with the arts, creativity and culture plays a crucial role in our cognitive and affective development. Creating art invites a unique way of seeing and being in the world to make meaning, embracing creativity and critical thinking to express our thoughts ideas and feelings, our personal and cultural identities. Each art form has its own integrity and characteristics - the arts provide ways of saying things that often cannot be said in other ways. Arts experiences enable children to understand that the imagination and its development are not marginal but central to the development of the individual and society. Habits

of mind are developed through learning in and about the arts – to be curious, playful, intuitive and sensitive. Children spontaneously and creatively connect different forms of thinking and expression, in [‘hundred languages’](#).

Care, compassion and empathy developed through respectful relationships are essential conditions for creative learning, happiness and well-being. Investing in creative learning and children’s wellbeing surely means we will have happier adults and a happier society. The attitudes, values and skills that we learn in childhood stay with us for the rest of our lives - they are vital ingredients in the well-being of children and adults alike, but we need to protect the special place the arts have in children’s lives. We need to invite children to follow their fascinations, to find their intrinsic motivation to learn through self-directed enquiry, alongside adults that care.

New spaces are opening up to do things differently in the light of the current tragedy, with a shared purpose to offer an alternative, creative approach to learning and researching experimental sites for pedagogical innovation. In our partnership work, our creative methodology, with everyone an artist, drives the ambition for artistic excellence. These new spaces of creative resistance engage artists, researchers and educators in creative and reflective practice that pushes the boundaries of art and education, alongside young people. These zones of connection and difference can be interrogated to distil a repertoire of creative pedagogical characteristics that optimise freedom, agency, choice and imagination. The current issue of [FORUM](#) carries an article about our partnership projects [School Without Walls](#) and [Forest of Imagination](#) alongside work with colleagues in London and Cambridge: [Creative Activism – learning everywhere with children and young people](#). Writer and campaigner Melissa Benn offered the foreword and Professor Sue Rigby, Vice-Chancellor of Bath Spa University the afterword here, which says it all:

‘Creative Activism offers us a different solution, and one that is not only sensible but joyful. In a world of rapid change and uncertainty, we need to unlock the full potential of all of our children, and enable them to attain in ways in which a previous generation could not. The consequences of failing this generation, or of failing to bring this activism into the mainstream of teaching in the UK, will be severe’.

So now is the time to reconceptualise education. The [Durham Commission](#) on Creativity and Education is soon to announce a national network of Creativity Collaboratives, in which schools will collaborate in establishing and sustaining the conditions required for nurturing creativity in the classroom, and across the curriculum. This aligns well with the Arts Council’s new Let’s Create Strategy 2020-30. New perspectives about teaching, research and practice in arts education are urgent, with a need to respond creatively in an uncertain future. We need to act with integrity, alongside children and young people, to ensure an authentic and creative experience of arts education for all.

Biography

Dr Penny Hay FRSA, FHEA is an artist and educator, Research Fellow, Centre for Cultural and Creative Industries; Senior Lecturer in Arts Education, School of Education, Bath Spa University and Director of Research, House of Imagination (formerly [5x5x5=creativity](#)). Signature projects include [School Without Walls](#), [House of Imagination](#) and [Forest of Imagination](#). Penny’s doctoral research focused on how we support children’s learning identity as artists. Penny is a member of the RSA Innovative Education Network, Crafts Council Learning Advisory Group, Visiting Lecturer at Plymouth College of Art and Co-Investigator on the AHRC Global Challenges Research project ‘Rethinking Waste’ in Mumbai.

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