Article

"It's Like Being Back in GCSE Art"—Engaging with Music, Film-Making and Boardgames. Creative Pedagogies within Youth Work Education

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Abstract: Creative pedagogies within youth work practice are well established. Practitioners working with young people are often called upon to utilise their own personal and professional 'toolboxes', as a way of supporting 'Creative Arts Youth Work'. However, within Higher Education (HE), creative methods for teaching and learning within the university context are often overlooked. The problem posed by this article is: how can HE 'catch-up' with more advanced pedagogies in the field of practice? Despite a recent focus on the personalisation of learning within HE, how can arts-based pedagogies, including digital storytelling, be drawn upon to enhance the learning experience? This article reports on three areas of pedagogical innovation engaged with by students undertaking the Youth Studies degree at Nottingham Trent University. Three experimental initiatives are explored, which assisted in educating informal educators, through creative learning techniques. Engaging with music, film-making and boardgames are given as examples of creative pedagogy, reporting on both my own practical experience in organising these activities and student feedback. Results showed that the symbiosis of creative pedagogies with relational and experiential learning, key tenets of youth work practice, offered expressive and authentic conditions for learning that are based upon student's experiences. Therefore, there is much to learn from youth work courses within HE, not only in terms of engaging and encouraging students through creativity, but also setting the scene for the future of creative youth work practice.

Keywords: youth work; creativity; pedagogy; youth; arts; popular music; film-making

1. Introduction

This article reports on three areas of pedagogical innovation undertaken by students on the BA (hons) Youth Studies degree at Nottingham Trent University. Three experimental initiatives are explored, which assisted in educating informal educators, through creative learning techniques. I report on an educational action research project which sought to capture the value of (1) storytelling through popular music, (2) documentary style film-making and (3) creating and playing boardgames as examples of creative pedagogy. An evaluative account is given drawing on both my own reflective practical experience in facilitating these activities and student feedback. Exploring gamification, relational and experiential learning theories, I argue that creative pedagogies within Higher Education (HE) are vital for 'setting the scene' for future youth work practitioners. Therefore, I conclude that there is much to learn from youth work courses within HE, and beyond, in terms of encouraging, engaging and inspiring students pedagogically.

Creative pedagogies within youth work practice are well established. Practitioners working with young people are often called upon to utilise their own personal and professional 'toolboxes' as a way of supporting what Beggan & Coburn term as 'Creative Arts Youth Work' [1]. Whilst current research clearly articulates the benefits of creative pedagogies within youth work, less attention has been paid to how these pedagogies are propagated within a HE context. This study aims to increase our understanding of the

educational impact of creative learning techniques for informal educators. Building on existing knowledge in relation to creative and arts-based pedagogies, this article highlights effective practice with the potential to augment student learning experiences across HE.

2. Research Background

Whilst young people are frequently overheard saying that they "can't draw" or "don't see themselves as artistic", creative pedagogies within youth work are an omnipresent strategy of pedagogic engagement [2] which is skilfully facilitated by informal educators. Youth work that engages with artistic practice enables a 'pedagogy of the here-and-now' which can serve to challenge more instrumentalist versions of youth voice [3]. The Stories from Practice collection of case studies created by In Defense of Youth Work [4] draws on the particular theme 'from improvisation to creativity' within youth work practice. The exploration of qualitative data from both youth workers and young people highlights an off-the-cuff approach of youth workers to use the arts as a tool to approach sensitive subjects with young people. From these case studies, it is clear that the arts are a valuable vehicle for carrying young people on testing personal and emotional journeys, that are process, rather than product led. However, the emphasis on youth workers bringing their own personal 'toolbox' [5], which may involve some activities around the arts, has implications for unequal practice. This reliance on individual inclinations, if not addressed within HE contexts, may actually restrict a more creative approach to youth work.

With pedagogical advances within the field of youth work practice, HE teaching and learning need to adapt to keep pace. Beggan and Coburn's [1] recent framework of Creative Arts Youth Work (CAYW) denotes the combination of creative arts and youth work as an effective participatory means for young people's expression of voice. As a form of critical youth work, young people are encouraged to tell their stories using newly acquired arts-based skills developed through informal education practices. Benefitting from the creative pedagogies within youth work, young people are free to express thoughts and feelings based on their own personal interests and experiences. Whilst the current literature clearly evidences these kinds of affordances of creative pedagogies within youth work practice, such as CAYW, less is known about how these pedagogies are engaged with and nurtured within those training to be informal educators within HE. One example is Purcell's [6] study on creative pedagogy within a Youth and Community Work course, which highlights how this approach embraces the transformative agenda of the youth work profession. His exploration of LEGO modelling in particular was designed to enable students to overcome a particularly complex concept and drew on both the creativity of lecturer and students. A further example is recent research focusing on digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool for sharing ideas and feelings as a way of presenting students' personal experiences to others [7], which aligns with the current focus on 'new literacies' within HE [8].

Building on this body of evidence, on the benefits of creative youth work practices for young people, this article takes a step back and instead focuses on the value and potential of creative pedagogies for youth workers 'in-waiting' through their experience of youth work courses within HE.

3. Theoretical Framework

Arts-based pedagogy has a rich history, stemming back to the 1960s and the Community Arts Movement in Britain [9]. Developments in informal education practice ran parallel with the publication of the Albemarle Report (1960) [10] and [11]. Whilst these historical roots are framed within the English context, arts-based pedagogy has international significance for strengthening the effectiveness of teachers through quality learning experiences and 'authentic' leadership [12]. As a pedagogical framework, arts-based learning has an impact on both students' personal and professional identities [13]. For example, arts-based pedagogical strategies have been successfully applied within a range of subjects in HE, such as business studies, as a way of fostering students' creativity and stimulating new

ways of thinking and working [14]. Arts-based pedagogy, therefore, has global significance for educators and informal educators alike.

In addition to the focus on arts-based pedagogies within youth work education, I draw upon relational learning and experiential learning in the analysis of the educational action research conducted. Relational learning refers to the 'social' aspects of learning, which is about building relationships and new connections within students' social and emotional lives, which encourage co-operation rather than competition between young people [15]. Taking a more individualistic approach to learning, when creative pedagogies are combined with relationality, the conditions for learning become based upon the students' interests, experiences and relations with others. The experiential learning offer of creative pedagogies manifests not only in the hands-on approach to learning, but also the 'secondary reflective experience' championed by the American educational reformer John Dewey [16]. Extending beyond a simplistic cycle of plan-do-review, experiential learning supports a purposeful engagement of the individual with the environment [17]. Before sharing the results from the creative activities in this article, firstly I shall give further details on this study.

4. Educational Action Research

This article shares the findings from an educational action research project, which sought to test out and adapt creative learning activities based on the interests and responses of the students. The action research methodology was qualitative and methods such as questionnaires and interviews offered 'thick description' [18] of student's different experiences. The participatory approach taken as part of the action research cycle was designed with a concern for student voice [19]. Three groups of students (42 in total) undertaking the BA (hons) Youth Studies degree at Nottingham Trent University took part in the activities. Data were collected at the university setting, and often within seminars over a period of five months, November 2019 to March 2020. As Course Leader for the Youth Studies degree, I had good access to potential participants. Ethical approval was sought and granted from the School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Nottingham Trent University, prior to commencing this study. Informed consent was sought from the student cohort as a whole initially and then on an individual basis, depending upon which students wanted to take part in the activities. In particular with the film-making activities, consent was sought to share the recordings with the rest of the group. Participation was voluntary and no incentives were offered to take part.

A variety of co-productive roles existed within this project between Lecturer/Facilitator and Student/Creator. For example, it was my role to propose the activities as a creative catalyst for learning, whereas the shape, direction and outputs of the arts-based work were led by the students. The action research cycle was brought full circle when ideas and artefacts could be shared amongst the group as a springboard for reflection and discussion. With the music and boardgame activities, these were introduced as part of a groupwork session, and the film-making activity, 12 students came forward to take part. Following the activities students were asked to give feedback on the experience of both contributing to and learning from the activity. Paper-based questionnaires and individual interviews were used to gather these data. In addition, with the 4 film clips created, these were shared within a pedagogical context to enable discussion and reflection as a teaching and learning resource.

The analytical framework for this research was based upon Lewin's 'Action Research Cycle' [20], more recently adapted by the Higher Education Authority [21]. This dictated that planning, implementation and review should happen collaboratively and that reflection should happen throughout the research process, not just at specific points. In contrast to reflective practice, which is a key tenet of youth work pedagogy, action research is more structured, involved data collection and is designed for an 'outward audience'. The findings of this small-scale study were disseminated not only with the course team but also with the students themselves as a way of completing the action research cycle [22]

and 'closing the feedback loop' [23]. In the following section, I give a reflective account of facilitating these activities, which is supported with student feedback such as the title of this article: "It's like being back in GCSE art".

4.1. Storytelling through Popular Music

Previous research has demonstrated that utilising music within lectures is an effective way of engaging students [24] and addressing issues of social justice [25]. With this in mind, I decided to deliver a music listening and discussion activity with a Year 1 cohort. At the end of the lecture, I played the track *Miami 2 Ibiza*, by Swedish House Mafia. I selected the YouTube clip with the lyrics rather than the music video as I wanted students to focus on the words (see Figure 1). I introduced the track as a cultural perspective of youth depicted by consumerism and discussed the cultural signs and signifiers within these lyrics, in particular the use of acronyms. I then closed the session by inviting students to select their own tracks of cultural significance reflecting their youth experience at the start of the session next week.
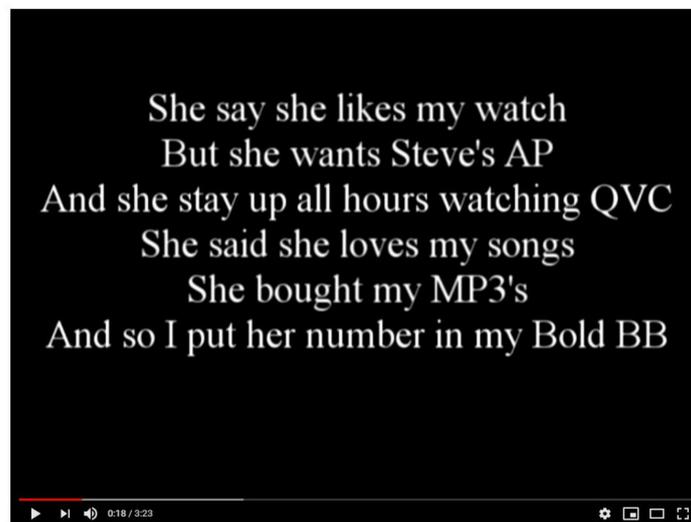
Figure 1. Screengrab of lyrics from *Miami 2 Ibiza*, by Swedish House Mafia.

The following week, I re-introduced the activity by asking for suggestions for songs students had thought of to reflect their cultural experience of youth. One student, a regular contributor in discussions, volunteered a song—'stressed out' by 21 Pilots. I found the track on YouTube with the lyrics and we watched it and listened together. This led to a brief discussion around social media, reminiscence and the particular smell of being young. Following this, another student, who did not usually contribute to discussions, chose the track 'Sirens' by Dizzee Rascal. I was unable to find an annotated version of the track with lyrics on YouTube, so we watched the full music video and read the lyrics on a webpage alongside. Showing this music video sparked an interesting discussion of race and the experience of 'black' youth—one which I could never have predicted for this session. In particular, this student was able to relate and communicate his own personal experience. A key challenge for me as facilitator within this was being able to respond to the different songs and lyrics chosen by students and relate those back to the module content, i.e., race, gender, mental health.

Feedback from students on this short activity included how they had found the form of music, written lyrics and YouTube accessible, but also appreciated having the time to think about their music track. Generating a personal response to a cultural artefact, such as a popular music song, enabled students to "learn in a better way" about the experience of young people within society. However, the most striking feedback for came from the student who had chosen the Dizzee Rascal track who came into my office the very next day and thanked me for making the content relevant and including him in the discussion.

On first reflection, I had felt a level of anticipation about the activity, as sharing music can feel quite personal and leave individuals vulnerable to criticism due to diverse tastes within popular music. However, what was encouraging was the reaction of the second student, who was normally disinterested in the lectures. Music both shapes (through agentic autonomy), and is shaped (by social and cultural structures) by a particular kind of learning self-identity [26]. Therefore, engaging with music listening, discussion and critique is an effective way of encouraging students to think about sameness and difference. The pedagogical value of this activity demonstrates encouragement for students to think about the deeper cultural significance of music, as well as enabling usually unheard voices in the group to be heard.

Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum, with activities such as this, enables potential, belonging and engagement [27], as well as fostering good values which preserve and respond to diversity [28]. A key asset of creative pedagogies, and youth work curriculums in particular, is the process of self-reflection which would provide opportunities for understanding their cultural biases through learning and teaching [29]. Engaging with popular music, as just one example, enables students to engage with a range of different theoretical perspectives, including gendered, international and cultural approaches. As an introduction to post-war British youth subcultures, students can engage with popular music, such as Stormzy, to understand the present-day relevance of cultural and political figures today. In this way, and through engaging with creative pedagogies, students can explore their own reactions to their own cultural heritage and practices within the context of the world around them. This, in turn, is a key affordance of the practice that youth workers then take out with them into the field.

4.2. Documentary Film-Making as a Pedagogical Resource

Film-making has been used previously in teaching and learning as a way to encourage students to think for critically about the world they encounter and their place within it [30], with short and high-impact clips being used as a tool for learning and an opportunity to enhancing student understanding [31]. The production of digital stories, in particular, can stimulate affective learning [32] and led to higher levels of both reflection and understanding of the topics under focus [33]. I was able to engage students in film-making across two different modules: one where students volunteered to be interviewed about how a young person is defined and their experience of being a young person (see Figure 2); and another where students interviewed youth workers about their role and the value of informal education within their local communities (see Figure 3). With the first group, I acted as a discussant posing the same set of questions with eight different students: How do you define a young person? Do you think young people are free to choose or constrained by society? Do you think young people are a problem for society or is it society's view of young people that is problematic? The finished film edited together all the diverse and often contradicting responses from the eight students and I was able to use this film as a resource for discussion with the rest of the cohort of students.

Figure 2. Screengrab from concepts of youth film.

Figure 3. Screengrab from student interviewing a youth worker.

With the second group, I encouraged students to devise their own questions that they wanted to ask the practitioners that would be of value for them in their future roles. With this group, I was able to make a series of three short films, which we watched together as part of a workshop following the visits and were uploaded to the learning room as a future resource for students to access. Through these film-making activities, I was able to draw on my youth work practice prior to teaching HE, where I would often work with groups of young people to create issue-based film. These films were an engaging process which developed skills of reflection upon various social issues, as well as a sense of pride in the project the young people were working on. However, I do recognise that I was drawing on my own personal 'toolkit' in these endeavours. On a practical level, I already had the film editing skills and access to equipment to be able to undertake this. Also, this activity did take extra time with planning and post-production, but there was the potential to extend these skills to the students in more of a collaborative practice.

With both groups, I invited feedback on both the process of making these films and the end product in relation to their learning through an online form which elicited short responses. One student commented that watching the videos back was useful for reflection, but also how "more creative tasks that are set really help to apply what we're learning to real world context". Another participant commented on the process of being involved in creating the film clips, that it enabled them to develop their interview technique and the experience of presenting as a potential practitioner in the field, stating that "I really like how everything we learn is linked back to practice and put into real life scenarios". Feedback included comments about recognising shared experiences with others, which enabled a sense of connection to the course and peers. One student commented that some of the prior life experiences he had shared in fact could be used as a springboard to generate discussion as it linked to some module content. These comments show that not only were these documentary-style films a pedagogical resource through aiding memory, stimulating discussion and preparing for assignment writing, but that they were also useful tools in capturing the social capital conferred through meeting with practitioners who worked in the field. Making the film clips represented students' engagement in the intervention, but also the creation of student-centred learning resources [34] as film clips created sought to acknowledge and celebrate the diverse perspectives.

Creating the short documentary-style film with a small group of students from the Youth Studies course was an opportunity to represent and celebrate non-traditional transitions to university. Taking the form of 'digital stories', the film clips offered a transformational learning experience in relation to meaning-making and identity [35]. This enabled other students to recognise the different starting points of their peers but also to realise the benefit that different life experiences brought to the group. Within youth work education, in particular, the diverse perspectives and range of prior knowledges students bring, are celebrated. University curriculums should accommodate by generating pedagogical resources using film-making. In relation to creative pedagogies, film-making activities such as these draw on a student-centred approach, which encourages students to 'practice what

they teach' [36]. Interactive, inquiry-based and problem-based learning approaches such as this enable students to interact creatively and critically with course curriculums.

4.3. Creating and Playing Boardgames—Structure vs Agency

Sociological debates on the constraints a young person may have on their ability to possess and draw upon their own personal agency through institutional, political and economic structures, is key learning for all Youth Studies students. Previous feedback when I had approached this topic in a year 1 module had been that students found the theoretical elements dry and unengaging. In response to this feedback, I adapted an activity that was published as a blog in The Sociological Review—Undisciplining and the Board Game Workshop. I decided to set the students a challenge of creating a boardgame based on the journey of a young person's life and the intersections of Structure and Agency, as key concepts we were learning that session. Having presented a few slides on the sociological underpinning of the concepts, I asked students to create a list of opportunities and social advantages that young people face, alongside a list of disadvantages and constraints. I then showed the group a prototype I had made and showed them two different styles of board games—snakes and ladders and a grid formation. Students then worked in groups to design their own board game and I brought dice and counters so that they could play each others' games and give feedback. Examples of two of the simple designed games are below (Figures 4 and 5).
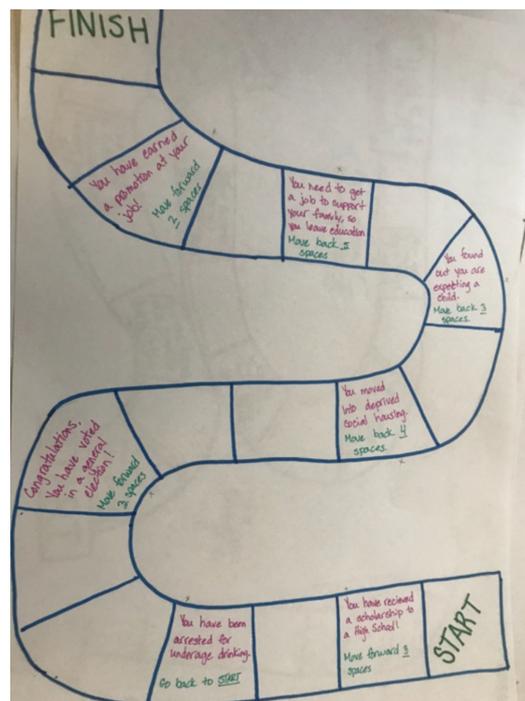

Figure 4. Photograph of life journey style board game.

Whilst facilitating the session, students expressed their enjoyment of being able to work with large sheets of paper, coloured pens and design materials, with one student gleefully exclaiming that this was "like being back in GCSE art". Having the opportunity to focus on making something with their hands, discussing and sharing designs was an enjoyable experience for the students, as well as developing their learning around the sociological concepts. Feedback on this activity included "I like that we do interactive tasks instead of just listening and writing notes" and that "the physical aspects, creating games etc really helps the way I learn, as I learn more by doing things". Gauntlett [37] argues that the making of 'external things' can 'impress the seal of their inner being' and that there is value in giving participants something to do or something to make, while they are thinking

about their responses. With the boardgame activity, the process of making and playing together gave students an opportunity to explore the concepts within their own worlds and enabled them to spend time being playful and creative as a form of pedagogical practice.
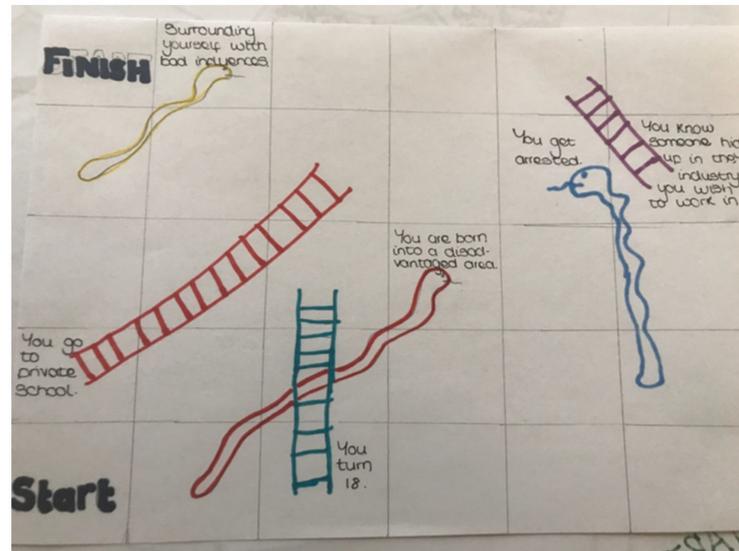

Figure 5. Photograph of Snakes and Ladders style board game.

Creative activities such as this are designed not only to encourage students to express opinions and form arguments, but also to introduce game-like elements in order to keep students engaged. Whilst gamification has been shown to positive benefits, these are dependent on the context in which it is being implemented [38]. Designed as a springboard for discussion and small group work, these student-designed boardgames create a playful environment where students are encouraged to express their own perspectives [39]. Curriculum approaches of gamification uphold a particular view of games as learning activities that are both personally meaningful and experiential [40]. These pedagogical innovations, frequently found within youth work courses, are effective in apprenticing students to be able to replicate these progressive and expressive pedagogies with young people in their work beyond HE.

5. Discussion

Within HE in England, there has been much focus on the personalisation of learning as a way of developing more inclusive curriculums. However, many initiatives have been critiqued as a weak version of personalisation which positions the student as consumer and customer, learning only to consume [41]. Johnson [42] argues that it is not so much the content of learning (curriculum) in courses which is attractive, but the method of learning (pedagogy) and that students are engaged more by pedagogical style than content. Therefore, this article brings attention to creative pedagogies within the university context, which are often overlooked. Purcell [6] argues that educators should provide catalysts for developing creativity in others, and that youth work courses are best positioned to take this up. The examples given in this article of engaging with music, film-making and boardgames as creative forms of pedagogy within a Youth Studies course, have highlighted the value of relational and experiential learning approaches, which are encompassed within creative activities.

Within the popular music activity, students were able to build connections with their social and emotional lives and then in turn be able to relate to the lives of others and their different experiences. Creative pedagogies encompass students' personalities, own interests and prior knowledge within learning scenarios [13]. To be able to de-code the meaning of lyrics, to be critical of diverse youth perspectives and to think about how students may encounter young people in these situations is a valuable process. Therefore,

this relational learning approach builds upon the core values and principles of youth work practice [43]. Another example was the student-created film clips, in particular where students were able to interview youth work practitioners, and engage with the films created as a way of envisaging themselves in those roles. Playing the Structure vs. Agency boardgames, based on the opportunities and constraints of the students own lives, exemplified relational learning within the context of socioecological pedagogies [44]. Creative activities such as these afford co-operation and relationship building, which are key skills and attributes developed by students on youth work HE courses.

In relation to experiential learning, the approaches details in this article offer hands-on inquiry-based activities that could be replicated within any HE degree, within any university. Creative pedagogies effectively enable students to apply their learning to real-life situations [12]. The symbiosis of creative pedagogies with experiential learning sets the scene for a powerful and at times transformative learning experience. For example, within the student-created film 'Concepts of Youth', being able to share their experiences as a young person and see that juxtaposed to a different experience of a student within the same cohort was an expressive and expansive undertaking for year 1 students. Taking the time to think deeply about popular music song lyrics, or a simple story shared and recounted through film, offered students the time to fully reflect on the significance of something that may have passed them by in everyday life. As key tenets of John Dewey's *Experience and Education* [16], being able to engage with the 'secondary reflective experience', for example within the narrative of student's own pathways to the point of university, was valuable for students. In this way, the creative activities shared in this article demonstrate conditions for learning that are based upon student's experiences, whilst acknowledging expressive forms of knowing.

These findings are not without limitations, which should be carefully considered. For example, important questions have been raised about the ability of educators to support any 'emotional fallout' from issues raised and their own capacity to manage the rigours of witnessing students' stories [45]. Whilst informal education approaches are best placed to deal with emotive issues, there are implications for the application to creative pedagogies across wider HE. In addition, with increasing pressure on university staff due to personalisation objectives, there may be limited resources in terms of time for all educators to maintain this approach. Despite the positive outcomes for students demonstrated in this article, some HE educators who adopt creative pedagogies may face difficulties in justifying time spent on designing the learning within a 'workload' model. Whilst supporting wider decolonialisation and diversity agendas, these findings do seek to challenge and push back upon narrower and more instrumentalised conceptions about what counts as 'learning' in HE. Therefore, the recommendations for practice that stem from this research are that each student should be able to express their own life experiences, cultural knowledge and have the opportunity to reflect upon this within their field of practice, whether this be youth work or not. My main argument within this article is that creative pedagogies provide an effective vehicle to do just that.

6. Conclusions

Creative Arts Youth Work [1] is a growing and expanding participatory practice and there is a need for these creative methods to be supported and nurtured within HE. This article has presented a reflective account of three experimental initiatives which assisted in educating informal educators through creative learning techniques. Varying degrees of student participation were explored, which served as both discussant and pedagogical resource. Within this study, creative pedagogical practice encompassed sharing and interaction as a form of productive collective endeavour. Therefore, this article makes a particular contribution to the emerging field of youth work pedagogy and its intersection with creativity.

Creative pedagogies within HE are an important (and commonly used) experience for future youth work practitioners. These pedagogical approaches of applying learning to 'real

world' scenarios are regular practice within youth work courses and should be expanded elsewhere in HE. Looking forward, it is clear that course curriculum design should take into account the possibilities of working across modalities to stimulate discussion, support engagement and maximise the potential for responsivity. Building a 'learning community' through creative pedagogies offers an alternative to the 'transmission of knowledge model', which fails to be inclusive. Research tells us that students are more likely to succeed in environments where they feel that their needs are being met and the course content is challenging yet responsive [46]. Where students are able to 'see a part of themselves' within the curriculum [47], whether this be applying theory to recent examples of their relevant experiences, or thinking about how their backgrounds have driven them to where they are today, the diverse knowledges that all students bring can be celebrated. Whilst the reflections offered in this article may represent a common understanding and experience for other lecturers within this field, there is value in championing and disseminating good practice to a wider audience. HE, and beyond, has much to learn from the creative pedagogies of youth work courses in seeking to be responsive to, engaging with and inspiring for future generations of students.

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