

THE VOICE OF YOUNGSTERS AND PROFESSIONALS IN ACTION RESEARCH EXPERIENCES FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH THROUGH ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

As part of the European project "E-TFU – Empowering the Future" for the transfer of innovation carried out from 2011-2014, we present here some of the results of this research experience developed by a team of professionals from diverse cities such as Amsterdam, Antwerp, Berlin, Postdam and Barcelona. The main purpose of this project was empowering young people through arts and new media developing and implementing a vision, strategies and innovative tools for trainers and organizations that wanted to evaluate and improve their practices, and of course, to transfer those good practices to other contexts. In order to do so, one of the main tools we used and contextualized to our practices was Action-Research which was adapted in creative ways in each city to systematize the reflection process and the gathering of valuable information from the experiences with youngsters, professionals and the arts and media.

During the research process we learned a lot about how to develop best practices with youngsters and the arts and media to empower them, and then in this paper, we want specially share the voice of the youngsters and the professionals that participated in the 'Powerlabs' (PL), as we called each one of the enriching experiences in each cities; therefore, we did in-depth interviews with youngsters and professionals from each PL and asked them about their experience on participating in the PL, their experience in working and participating in 'action research' (AR), and their reflections in their empowerment process. In this sense, we want to share some insights on the reflections the youngsters and professionals made during the interviews that give us their personal point of view on empowerment and the value of arts and new media to accomplish their goals.

At the end, the goal of this paper is to distil some 'good practices' out of all the PL's in working with youngsters towards empowerment through art and media.

Keywords: Youth empowerment, arts, new media, action research, etc.

1 INTRODUCTION

E-TFU is a network of social agencies and universities from four European cities. All partners share the same drive: promoting new perspectives in empowering youngsters, using arts and (new) media. Based on best practices (Wachelder, K; Czaniecki, M; Seitz, H. and Vogt, Ch., 2010) carried out by practically the same ETFU project members around the focus on youth at risk and culture in its broader sense (including arts, sport and ICT), E-TFU builds a series of products and tools for an innovative and modular Training Program addressed to professionals that work with youngsters using arts and new media. The partnership of this project specially promotes a method of action research that enables trainers to plan, guide, evaluate and improve their work with youngsters.

The E-TFU project is part of a EU - Life Long Learning program "Leonardo da Vinci - Transfer of Innovation" carried out between 2011-2014 (<http://www.etfu.eu/>). The main partnership is represented by AP University College Antwerp / Antwerp, Belgium; SCVO HBO5 Antwerpen (SCVO Pestalozzi) - Centre for Adult Education & Vocational Training / Antwerp, Belgium; DE VEERMAN vzw, Art Education / Antwerp, Belgium; FHP University of Applied Sciences / Potsdam-Brandenburg, Germany; SCHLESISCHE 27 - Youth Art Centre / Berlin, Germany; UNESCOCAT- UNESCO Centre of Catalonia / Barcelona, Spain; UAB - Universitat Autònoma Barcelona, Faculty of Applied Pedagogy / Barcelona, Spain; ClickF1 - Empowering the Future / Amsterdam, Netherlands; HVA - Hogeschool van Amsterdam, University of Applied Sciences - Society & Law / Amsterdam, Netherlands.

2 PROJECT GOALS AND VISION

Viewed from an international perspective, besides our differences in our local contexts, we share common ideals, goals and a common vocabulary. Empowerment, talent development, participation, reflection, creative processes are all concepts that a central role in our everyday practice. We all work with (or conduct research on) youngsters, we aim to empower them, and we are working towards this goal by using inspirational and creative vehicles such as art and media. This common ground is the main focus of the E-TFU Vision and goals.

The E-TFU Vision is divided into six central components: People, Profession, Practice, Process, Place and Power. The first five components represent the different aspects involved in our everyday practices: professionals and participants (People); professional knowledge and professional intuition (Profession); methodology (Practice), social processes, creative processes (Process); and environment (Place/Physical context). The sixth component is what we see as the main strength of the way we worked in the E-TFU project: reflection on and in action (Power).

3 METHODOLOGY

The main methodology followed in the project was Action-Research (AR). Though in literature on the matter reveals that there are multiple definitions and explanations of this methodology, most of these centers around...

"...the relationship between 'action', the doing and 'research' including informed, critical thinking (Winter & Munn-Giddings, 2001). Other authors place emphasis on improvement, through people understanding their situations better and changing them to reflect more justifiable, moral practices (Elliott, 1991; Greenwood, 1984; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Greenwood and Levin (1998) add the notion of 'self-direction' to action research processes that requires the conjunction of three aspects: research, action and participation. The purpose of the enterprise is fundamentally social, with social change that enhances communities or peoples' ability to act autonomously and constructively and to 'keep improving their capacity to do so' (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 6). In what is regarded as a seminal text, Reason and Bradbury (2001) acknowledge that there is no short answer or definition of the term, and that it has been used in many different ways. They understand and use the term action research to describe a broad range of approaches to inquiry which are participative, grounded in experience, and action-oriented" (Carroll; Jenkins; Woodward; Kop and Jenkins, 2011).

In general, Action-Research is used mainly to improve practice and, specifically, we have chosen this research methodology because it:

- Implies the transformation and improvement of an educational or social reality.
- Comes from the practice; from practical problems.
- Implies the collaboration of people.
- Implies a systemic: reflection-in-action and reflection on-action.
- It is carried out by the people involved in the situation or reality.
- "Training" is essential in the AR process: it is continuing training.
- The AR process is characterized as a spiral of change.

Therefore, we see AR as a powerful way to engage youngsters and trainers in creating knowledge (throughout practice) that is meaningful to them and altering their existing situation into a liberated state through action. These means that youngsters, trainers and researchers involved in this kind of research methodology, reach a common understanding, it is to say, an agreement on shared actions, which, then, reenter into the process as inputs to foster new action rather than to develop self-contained theories (Gustavsen et al., 2001).

Action research is then a form of research in which practitioners reflect systematically on their practice, implementing informed action to bring about improvement in practice and add to a body of knowledge. *Action* (that is, change) *Research* (that is, understanding) Dick (1999). Then, our driving forces when conducting AR in the four cities were: election, adaptation and use of multiple research strategies through AR; Cyclical nature of action research; Focus on participation.

3.1.1 E-TFU main research question

Which are the fundamental conditions that make possible that good practices on empowering youth with arts and media become a success in other contexts?

3.1.2 Power labs and action research approaches

Having common understanding and agreement, the empowering experiences of the project were carried out intensively in each city of the partnership, and to do so, these four different contexts set up their own way of conducting AR, resulting in four different experiences with youngsters and professionals called 'Powerlabs' with their own approach to AR for each one of them, according to their context, professionals and youngsters' needs:

1. **ARTLAB | Antwerp.** Youngsters who want to work on an artistic project. In an open system they are working on their own artistic projects of which they retain full responsibility. Art educators coach the youngsters on the level of their creative processes. The ARTLAB consists of two different time blocks: working time and reflection rounds. Youngsters meet each other at the ARTLAB once every fortnight. At the ARTLAB the youngsters are coached using a specific methodology, which consists of a road map and a creativity disc. The road map contains the different phases of an artistic project. The road map defines the long-term steps that have to be taken in an artistic project. The creativity disc guides the youngsters in their creative behavior. The creativity disc defines the short-term steps that have to be taken in an artistic project. After each working time block comes a reflection round. The initiative for and the decisions about the artistic process and the results are entirely in their hands. Youngsters have gone on record stating that to them, this way of coaching is unique, inspiring and motivating. In this power lab the **reflection rounds** are investigated as **an artistic translation of action research**.
2. **YOUNG TENANTS | Berlin / Potsdam.** In the project "Young tenants" youngsters and young adults from Berlin receive empty locations in the urban space to implement a cultural program and perform their idea of cultural praxis. The tenant-rooms are being realized in six different districts and are time-limited. Professional art organizations provide mentors for the young tenants, offering their skills and advices if required. In this context the power lab **adapts the action research methodology** and calls it "**Pärflexionstreffen**". This so-called "**Pärflexion**" is an encounter of the tenants as the main actors of the project, together with professionals. The encounter offers space and time to look at the practice, discuss next steps and plan these steps. Apart from supporting the self-determined process of the young practitioners, we give thematic impulses to the reflection process to stimulate and provoke the discursive level. The aim is to investigate and improve praxis, to develop other perspectives and broaden the options for action. The youngsters challenge their practice; find solutions and plan actions - perceiving themselves simultaneously as actors, creators, experts and co-researchers. The goal and achievement of the Pärflexion encounter changes, depending on who is involved, in consideration of the given place, the organizational arrangements and most importantly the content. Our understanding of action research and interventional practices should endow future practitioners with the ability to develop project frames and conditions that initiate interdisciplinary, contextual, informal and self-determined learning processes.
3. **KABUA 2.0 | Barcelona.** "Kabua 2.0" is a Virtual Learning Community created by and for youngsters, between 12-30 years old. The project aims to provide youngsters from formal, non-formal and informal contexts with learning opportunities throughout Challenge-Based Learning experiences in order to enable them to empower themselves with others to participate actively in society. "Kabua 2.0" is embedded within the **Critical Action Research (CAR)** methodology. We established that working with youngsters in a virtual environment needs to factor in: the appropriate collection of data, the critical analysis of data and making improvements and innovations, all in conjunction with the participants (youngsters and trainers). In "Kabua 2.0", CAR is seen to emphasize participation, democracy and critical reflection to improve practice. CAR problematizes assumptions about knowledge and reality and seeks to challenge oppressive social structures and create conditions for a fair and equal society.
4. **UCEE station | Amsterdam.** Is a media project for youngsters in place in neighborhoods and at secondary schools in urban areas around The Netherlands. The www.uceestation.nl website contains radio shows, movies, clips, articles, interviews, columns, etc., created by and for youngsters aged 12 to 23. These media items are created during the media classes and

activities at various locations around the city. In tailor-made educational programs youngsters are trained by professional media coaches to become media producers at various levels, working with radio, video, photography and copywriting as the media disciplines of choice. Within each workshop or series of classes, they work on specific learning objectives, competencies and skills, gearing the activities of UCee station to school activities, community projects and urban events. In this power lab the concept of needs articulation is investigated, in observance of the principles of action research.

4 RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

As McNiff and Whitehead pointed out (2010), the 'research' of action-research is about offering descriptions, explanations and analyses for action. In other words, we will be 'generating theory' throughout our practice for improving our practice. This new knowledge is intended to be 'original knowledge', not just the recycling of the existing knowledge. This is one of the most valuable assets of our action research; it shows the relevance of designing and using the most adequate research instruments to let us generate our practical theories and knowledge from our experiences with youngsters, art and media.

The process of data collection is therefore one of the key issues in any research. Specifically in action research, because data collection should provide valid information to respond to our research questions and goals. It is the moment when teachers, trainers and work field partners, as researchers in AR, make direct contact with youngsters in a real situation. It is research conceived and carried out mainly by 'insiders', by those engaged in and committed to the situation, not by 'outsiders', not by 'spectators' (although outside facilitator may also, indeed, have rather an important role to play) (Winter, 2002). Therefore, this process should be carefully planned having in mind what we need to evaluate, who has this information or where can we find it and when, who is going to collect it, how, with what instruments and in which conditions.

In the context of our research focused on identifying the essential conditions for empowering youth through arts and new media, "action-research data" collected through research instruments could be defined as factual records from our practical experiences with youngsters (numerical scores, textual records, images and sounds, audiovisual records, etc.) used as primary sources for research, and that are commonly accepted in the scientific community as necessary to validate our research findings.

It is very important to notice that in action research we work with real people interacting between each other in real scenarios or situations that are difficult to repeat as in a laboratory. Then, "reflection takes more time that is generally available during an event, so researchers depend heavily on data that give indirect access to events" (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch and Somekh, 2008). A research data set constitutes a systematic, partial representation of the subject being investigated; as the same authors mentioned above point out (2008), they are "material traces or representations of events, and therefore are given in a physical sense which can be passed on, stored and made accessible to many people. Also, they are regarded as relevant by a researcher, providing evidence with respect to the issue investigated".

In each one of the AR experiences and approaches, we designed and implemented a wide variety of research instruments, both quantitative and qualitative, as well as traditional instruments used in AR processes and else, new creative research instruments such as Reflection meetings; Research journals with blogs; Most significant change technique; Documentary evidence (Youngsters' products-portfolios, diagrams); Storytelling; Video recordings; Audio recordings; Photographs, among others. In this paper we are presenting just one of them, in-depth interviews, to focus and get deeper into comprehension on the voice of youngsters and professionals that participated in the research process and experiences with arts and new media in all our different cities.

4.1.1 *In-depth interviews*

When using in-depth interviews we established a basis of topics or main dimensions and from them, we identified a series of indicators of each dimension to help us to develop the specific questions that would tackle all the aspects we wanted to know and comprehend in-depth during the interviews. The interviewee was able to get into deep as much as he/she considered, nevertheless, the interviewer guided the conversation to know about the fundamental topics of interest in the script. The basic methodology followed up by all cities for administering the interviews was the following:

1. Arrive to a consensus of a basic script for the general in-depth interview and then we adapt the script for youngsters, professionals and researchers.
2. Every one adapts the script according its PL (it is not necessary to ask all the questions or to do it in the same way).
3. Agree in a common codification system based on the developed indicators.
4. To conduct the interviews, transcript audios in mother tongue.
5. Arrive to a consensus in a content structure for the research report to fill in the key information (citations and research conclusions) in English.

The main dimensions and indicators for the developing of the interview script are shown in Table 1:

COMMON CODIFICATION SYSTEM FOR INTERVIEWS IN-DEPTH	
DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS
GENERAL INFO	MOTIVATION to participate in the project
CONTEXT FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH	OWN PL CONTEXT -CHARACTERISTICS
	ENVIRONMENT FOR COMMUNICATION, PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION IN OWN PL CONTEXT
	INSTITUTIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT for developing the project & PL (Power Lab)
	BASIC PRE-CONDITIONS IN THE CONTEXT FOR EMPOWERMENT in order to implement best practices in other/similar context
EMPOWERMENT Involves supporting people to develop all the three FORMS OF POWER Youth empowerment is an attitudinal, structural, and cultural PROCESS whereby young people GAIN the ability, authority, and power to make decisions and implement CHANGE in their OWN lives and the lives of OTHER people, including youth and adults. Youth empowerment is often addressed as a gateway to intergenerational EQUITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT and DEMOCRACY BUILDING, COMMUNITY BUILDING.	POWER WITH: 'finding common ground to build collective strength' (PL PROCESS)
	POWER TO: 'potential of each individual to shape their own life and their own world' (PL PROCESS)
	POWER WITHIN: 'relates to a person's self worth' (PL PROCESS)
	POWERLESS: 'sensation of being out of control/ complete lack of authority,.... or lack of strength, competence, skills'
	GAIN THE ABILITY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER TO MAKE DECISIONS
	EQUITY
	CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
	DEMOCRACY BUILDING
	COMMUNITY BUILDING
	ATTITUDS OF PROFESSIONALS TOWARDS CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT
ACTION RESERACH METHODOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERMENT	BASIC PRE-CONDITIONS TO SET UP AN AR PROCESS IN OWN & SIMILAR CONTEXT
	AR AS A TOOL FOR EMPOWERING PROFESSIONALS FOR WORKING WITH YOUTH
	AR AS A GUIDE FOR DECISION MAKING
	RESEARCH TOOLS AND INSTRUMENTS FOR SUPPORTING AR PROCESSES FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH
AR inquiry-based research conducted by teachers that follows a process of examining existing practices, implementing new practices, and evaluating the results, leading to an improvement cycle that benefits both students and teachers. AR is then, a research methodology oriented to the improvement of the educational practice (action).	AR AS A TOOL FOR SYSTEMIC REFLECTION towards the personal and social change and improvement
ARTS (FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT)	ROL OF ARTS
NEW MEDIA & ICT (FOR YOUTH EMPOWERMENT)	ROL OF ICT AND NEW MEDIA
ETFU EXPERIENCE: RESEARCH/PROFESSIONALS	Focus of the research will be on: the input, the process, the output and the outcome
RESULTS / OUTPUTS	

Table 1

5 RESULTS: THE VOICE OF YOUNGSTERS AND PROFESSIONALS

5.1.1 *Different youngsters ask for different realities: the importance of the context*

First of all it is important to take into account the background and the motivation of the youngsters for participating in the PL. If we look at the motivation of the youngsters in these PL's, they all have an **intrinsic motivation** to participate:

- *Peers*: they have friends who already join the PL; or they have the will to do 'something' together.

However, this can be a **fragile** motivation. A group knows different intensities: sometimes they are really active and come together a lot. But groups change, new people come in, other people leave, sometimes they are less active for a certain period. This can influence the youngsters with a peer-motivation.

- *Artistic content*: some have an artistic motivation; learn more or evolve in their creative/artistic being or learn more about the use of media.

These are mostly youngsters who already have an artistic background.

- *Social motivation*: some youngsters have a focus on society; they participate from an ideological motivation.

For these youngsters it is the social commitment that gives them the motivation to participate. This certainly applies to the youngsters participating in the PL of Barcelona. Although the PL used new technologies to create their "Kabua Project", the youngsters didn't have a special interest on technology. The technology is more the way to get to the social commitment that is creating a platform where everybody can benefit from. The group is together because of the social commitment they share. They want to do something useful.

This intrinsic motivation is important, because it means the participation of the youngsters is on a **voluntarily** base. The choice to participate lies with the youngsters, they make their own choice; the PL can only provide the opportunity. So although participating in the PL demands an active participation of the youngsters, they make the choice of participating because of their intrinsic motivation. Although, we can wonder if this intrinsic motivation will be enough for a continuous participation. We can also see some differences in the **nature of the PL**: the nature of the PLs (arts, media) gives some common characteristics, but some differences too.

- *Art – Media*

Some PL's are more art-based and others more media-based. Art demands for some specific characteristics: room, physical, space, material; for media this is important too, but asks for also other different characteristics like the group: confidence in the group.

We found that art can be more individual, where media is more collective.

- *Collective – individual*

Some PL had a focus on a collective project, where others focused more on the individual projects of the youngsters. Of course also a combination of both is possible. This also has an influence on the commitment of the youngsters. These different contexts ask for different realities. Youngsters pose different demands, based on their intrinsic motivation.

Youngsters with an artistic content motivation ask for an experimenting room with a lot of materials to discover and innovate. Youngsters with a peer motivation want to do things together, and want a 'stable' group to work in. Youngsters with social commitment ask for consistency in the project and democratic transparency in the participation.

5.1.2 *The importance of art and media*

Both the youngsters and the professionals from the PL's see the value of working with art and media to empower youngsters. What values do they see?

- *Learning (social) skills through art and media*

According to the professionals working with art and media provides a tool to work on empowerment of youngsters in an indirect way. Working with art and media brings informal learning, without the youngsters even noticing they are learning something.

As Karel (PL Antwerp) says: *"You don't talk about change and participation. Change and participation develops because you are working artistic."*

Also Mirjam (PL Utrecht/Amsterdam) states: *"Youngsters like to work with art and media, and at the same time they don't notice they also learn other (social) skills. By example: if you say to youngsters: 'We are organizing a training day on how to communicate with people' not a single youngster will participate. But if you say: come we will make media together, then they are interested, and in the mean time they learn about ways of communication but they don't really notice it."*

Youngsters refer to more specific (social) skills they learned in working with art and media, namely:

- Critical (self-) reflection

As Lotte (PL Antwerp) said: *"You learn to look different to things. By example if you look at a painting, you ask yourself: Do I like it or not? You learn to look critical to certain things."*

- Learn to work together

You also learn to work together in a bigger project. You want to make something together and learn to collaborate on making the product.

- **Broadens the realities of youngsters**

Or as Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin) states: *"Art speaks different languages."* Art and media bring new perspectives on things and broaden the knowledge. Art and media show the youngsters new insights, new perspectives.

- **Success experience**

Going to the process of making an art or media product, and the realization of the product itself, brings positive confirmation.

In PL Barcelona all these reflections were mixed with the difficulty of working with new technologies and young people had to be trained and get into dialogue with technical professionals to understand how far they could use new digital technologies in the project.

5.1.3 Good practices... on the PL

5.1.3.1 "Conditional easy access participation"

Three of the PL's – Antwerp; Potsdam/Berlin and Barcelona – worked with an open group, that is: people could come and go whenever they want (with some different rules). The PL of Utrecht/Amsterdam worked with an already existing and fixed group. The idea behind the open easy access is to give the youngsters the responsibility; the professionals should not take the responsibility for them. The youngsters can come whenever they want to come, and how often, so the responsibility lies completely with them. But, this can also be difficult for the youngsters, some youngsters ask for more structure. They describe it as a double feeling.

A too structured way of letting youngsters participate scares the youngsters away. So it is important to have an open easy access, but this alone is not enough. In order to get some continuity in the participation of the youngsters, they have to feel some sort of commitment to the project. The open easy access needs to be brought to a higher level: the youngsters need to take up responsibility or need to feel responsible to a sort of commitment. Here lies the importance of the intrinsic motivation, because based on this motivation a certain commitment can be attained.

Youngsters with an artistic motivation have their art competence and the will to produce something. This happens when the PL works on an individual level. Working in phases towards a show moment or a product – so make some product demands – can get the needed commitment of the youngsters, in order to get a long term base.

The Kabua project of Barcelona provides an example of this social commitment. The youngsters see the value of their project and act on an ideological motivation. The youngsters are working for a new virtual space, and although this demands an active participation they want to do it because they see the value of what they are constructing together.

So the difference in a collective or individual commitment asks for a different continuity in time. In an individual project youngsters need to search more for an intrinsic commitment to a product/show moment. In a collective project, the group depends also on you, so there is a collective commitment.

Why do we think this 'conditional easy open access' is so important? If you want to reach for a certain empowerment through art and media with youngsters, continuity is very important. To have a certain impact on empowerment of youngsters, the PL should be on a long-term base.

5.1.3.2 *Experimenting as a way to empowerment*

Youngsters see the PL as an **experiment room**: a room where you can just be; a place to create, to innovate, and to search your own path. The PL brings innovation.

Also the professionals see the need for a space with a lot of materials to offer like computers, visual art materials, printer, etc.

5.1.3.3 *"Structured autonomy"*

The term 'structured autonomy' refers to self-regulation/self-control – youngsters need the feeling that it is their project – going hand in hand with youngsters asking for steering – guidance in organizing their project. It is again a very double feeling.

Lotte (PL Antwerp) gives a good example of this double feeling. On the one hand she says: *"They always listened, but there was nothing 'stated'."* But, on the other hand she also says: *"Now we got only feedback on our process, never on the product. It would be nice to have a combination, and to also have feedback on the content. By example an artist who comes by once in a while, to give his feedback on what you are making.. ."*

The focus on self-regulation is present in each PL. This again is linked to placing the responsibility with the youngsters, instead of taking the responsibility as the professional.

On the other hand youngsters also ask for active support of the professional, they ask for guidance and they ask for specific knowledge of the professional. So as a professional you also need to know when an intervention is needed. So as a professional you have to see how you deal with this: it means waiting but also acting on the right moment; it means intervening but not entirely.

This duality can result in a conflict. The PL of Barcelona gives an example. The coordinator of the PL took some decisions that the group felt that had to be more deeply discussed with them. This situation broke, in somehow, a little bit the confidence. The group felt weak. The frequent reflections held in the PL helped building the confidence again. The youngsters and the team reflected together on the position of the team and the sense of the project, and in the end the youngsters understood better the position of the coordinator. Although it remains a fragile balance, especially when it is a long-term project.

5.1.3.4 *Feeling at home...*

The presence of materials is one thing the youngsters value in a PL, another thing is 'feeling at home' in the community or place. Youngsters search for a safe environment, where they can feel at home. An open atmosphere – not feeling judged, not cramped – gives the possibility to experiment and look for your own interests and strengths. In a community/place where youngsters feel safe, they can create new things, discuss new things; without being judged in the value of what they are saying or doing.

5.1.3.5 *... the importance of the group*

This safe place the youngsters are looking for doesn't have to be a physical place. It can also be the group they are working in.

In order to let the group be a safe place for the youngsters, you need:

- Fraternity: you need strong groups in terms of human values; everybody is important as a person
- Companionship: you need a human dimension in the group; collaborative recognition
- Non-competitive atmosphere
- An openness to fragile people in the group

The importance of the group lies also in the necessity of the presence of other youngsters in the PL. We already referred to other peers as a motivation to participate in the PL. Other peers bring positive social control to get the youngsters committed to the project.

But, youngsters point also on the importance of peer-feedback. Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin) sees the value in the contact with youngsters in the tenant room she participated in and in the contact with the youngsters from the other tenant rooms. It gave new input and new knowledge. It is an open way and easy access to pass knowledge.

Nils (PL Potsdam/Berlin) sees it broader and mentions missing the contact between the youngsters from the PL from all the countries.

Not only the youngsters, also the professionals mention the importance of the group. For them the contact between the professionals from the own PL and the contact between the professionals from the other countries brought new insights, shed a new light on things and gave a positive confirmation about their work.

However, as important the group might be, it can also be a challenge.

For the youngsters it wasn't always easy to work together intensively. Both Fiona and Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin) say the same: *"It wasn't always easy to work together. We had some conflicts sometimes. Organizing a room together also brings some tension."*

Due to the open easy access the group is open. There are new arrivals and goodbyes. So the group needs to be flexible. They need to accept new people and new roles; everybody needs to find their own role in the group.

Volunteering is something that can be diffuser, but also it is seen as part of the force and the engine of the power of the group. This is possible when the action is well planned, the ambience is good and the project is shared from common goals.

In Barcelona, the temporary dedication of some members of the group was something that the new member deals with the others from the beginning. This enables not discourage the group. In the Barcelona group, the feeling of effort and timeshare, work intensity, was something well appreciated.

For Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin) the contact with the broader group – that is the neighborhood - wasn't always that easy.

Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin): *"We sometimes organize a workshop to repair your bike, but people see it more as an easy way to get their bikes repaired instead of learning it so they can do it themselves next time."*

"Gentrification" is also a term Rosa puts up during the interview: *"It gives me a double feeling. Thanks to initiatives like ours in the neighborhood, it gets a better name. Which is good of course, but then it attracts also wealthier people who wants to come live here, rental prices get up and eventually the people who live here now will have to move because they cannot afford their apartment anymore."*

5.1.4 The PL as an amorphous/unstructured learning space

The PL is an unstructured learning space. The processes of informal learning and change are unstructured and unconfined. Youngsters participating in the PL should have the freedom to follow different rhythms in their learning and the freedom to follow different learning paths at the same time. Nils (PL Potsdam/Berlin - professional) puts it as follows: *"I don't speak about a learning process, but rather a changing process. It doesn't mean we need to change, but it means searching and changing and find your own way, through experimenting, getting new perspectives through working with other people and meeting of new people. It means follow new ways, and to choose for yourself which path or who you follow, for how long and in what degree. The learning process cannot be dominant, not imposed from the top down. People are free to choose their own path; choose for themselves what they find important and what they want to learn. You can give little impulses, little stimuli, who can encourage the interest, but then still everybody is free to choose whether they continue with this stimulus or not. Our tenant rooms are like this amorphous spaces where you can experiment, search and find your own path. And also make changes in this path whenever you want."*

Linked to the importance of the group, some see the learning in the PL as a collective action; it is cooperative learning. Learning is an action that puts people together; it is social learning.

"Learning is a cooperative process, it is a knowledge exchange and we learn together."

Pep, PL Barcelona - professional

Besides these general reflections on the empowerment process, youngsters also have their individual stories on their empowerment process:

Fiona (PL Potsdam/Berlin) learned a lot on organization level: *"We organized a lot of activities, like poetry slams etc. and I learned a lot in organizing these things."*

Lotte (PL Antwerp): *"I got more conscious on the process I was going through, instead of only focusing on my product."*

Ino (PL Utrecht/Amsterdam): *"It was only one day, so I didn't learn so much. But it was fun, because you got to know each other better. Although we knew each other already very well, people felt they could be more open after this day because we get to know each other even better."*

Annelle (PL Utrecht/Amsterdam): *"After the day I felt more confident in the group. We knew each other better, and by doing the drama exercises and everything I felt I could more be me."*

Maria (PL Barcelona): *"And those moments of creation, they are what I liked the most and that is what stands out for me... You need to reach that point of confidence, of feeling capable of; of feeling that anything you can contribute with is very welcome! (...) I believe that each one of us has gained confidence... And everyone has felt ... everyone has felt they can contribute with something there. This has been clearer in the final phase of the project, you know? At the time in which everyone already knows their role in there so they can develop it better."*

Rosa (PL Potsdam/Berlin): *"When I had a question concerning a technique or something I wanted to use, I got a lot of different perspectives from a lot of different people in the room. So I learned a lot of these other people. So I learned what my strengths are. I also learned to work together with other people in a group, because that is not always easy. There were sometimes conflicts in running the room together, but we learned how to solve them."*

The individual stories are linked to the background of the youngsters. By example in the PL in Antwerp the focus lies on youngsters gaining insight in their creative process.

Griet (PL Antwerp) says: *"Some really gained insight in their own way of working and have found some barriers that stood in the way for their creative realizations. Or others learned more about what they really wanted to do."*

But the youngsters in the PL of Antwerp were mostly youngsters with an artistic or creative background, with an artistic idea of what they wanted to do. For youngsters who didn't have a clear concept, it sometimes proved difficult to structure their ideas: *"We didn't manage to structure our ideas. They kept on going all over the place; we didn't evolve in our ideas."* Griet, PL Antwerp – professional

5.1.5 Action what?! Action Research!

'Action what?!' this is a question the professionals asked themselves at the start of the project. Mostly, AR was new to them. So in the beginning the professionals didn't feel sure about working in an AR.

Professionals therefore asked for experienced researchers – and an experienced research group - to help them in the process of the AR.

5.1.5.1 "Make it your own": take the context into account

All the PLs started with the same idea of working on empowerment of youngsters through art and media – within the frame of on an AR – but everybody made a different journey. There was never a real consensus in the project on AR. It is difficult to give a uniform description of AR, due to the numerous definitions and distinctions between different types of AR.

There is need for an open vision on AR, in order to make it work in all the different contexts of each PL. Karel (PL Antwerp) says that at first he felt *"resistance against this AR"*, because the way AR was interpreted at first in the project didn't fit in the context of working artistically.

Also Mirjam and Mark of PL Utrecht/Amsterdam say you need to take the context you are working in into account when putting up an AR. You need certain continuity in the project/group where you want to do an AR. They see two reasons for this continuity.

First, you need a stable group: the youngsters have to come on a regular base. Second, when you work with fragile and vulnerable youngsters, they can get scared away when strange researchers suddenly join the group. Then all the hard work of attracting youngsters and build a group can get lost.

Besides this continuity in the group/project, there is also need for continuity in the relations with all the participants in the research. You need a sustainable base to start the research.

AR asks for a completely different role of the researchers. They are not 'a fly on the wall' as is the case in classical research; on the contrary they really participate to the project. In order to make this work, you need trust between all the participants, and this trust needs to grow. Hence, you need certain continuity.

5.1.5.2 Reflections on the reflections

Reflection was not new to the PL – it was already inherent in the working method – but due to working in an AR the way it was organized became different.

First, it happened on a more regular base. Although on the other hand it felt sometimes 'artificial'.

Also the youngsters sometimes felt restricted due to the reflection rounds; it could also act as a barrier for the youngsters. Reflection rounds, certainly with art, are very double: with art there is also need for spontaneous elements. An advice can be not to do the reflection rounds too soon in the process. The participants have to get the feeling they have sufficient input, otherwise the reflection round will only focus on what you don't have. When organizing the reflection rounds it is important to the context and the youngsters you are working in into account.

Second, in some PL's youngsters had the responsibility for the organisation. As said, the youngsters get the word during the reflection round. Peer-feedback is the main focus of the reflection rounds. Some PL's went even further, and let the youngsters organise the reflection rounds. So the role of the professional is important. The youngsters do the reflections, and the professional only helps the reflection somehow.

Third, it happened more conscious. The youngsters, who are doing the action, are the same youngsters who reflect about the action. Therefore the reflections allow the youngsters to go further in the action.

The reflection rounds can be times to discuss and have attention for possible crisis occurring in the PL. It is important to create an atmosphere that encourages dialogue, because through dialogue you can go in a discussion. Different moments of reflections allow going deeper in the differences. The reflection rounds offer a space and time to consider all the different points of view. This especially important for a collective action, because reaching a consensus is necessary when working collectively. Although also for individual actions, reflection rounds have an important value, because reflection rounds offer different perspectives and so youngsters can learn from each other.

Another important value of the reflection rounds in the PL Barcelona was that during the reflection rounds the doubts the youngsters have could turn into research questions.

Questions about the identity of youth, how we learn and how to motivate other youngsters in learning activities were questions the youngsters of the PL Barcelona asked themselves. The group spends a lot of time looking for answers on these questions, until they became real research questions.

However, in the practice it proves sometimes difficult to organize the reflection rounds in an 'ideal way'. As Mark (PL Utrecht/Amsterdam) states: *"In the practice it proved sometimes difficult to organise these reflection moments, and during these reflections really say what points we want to improve and to go further on these points in the next reflection rounds."*

5.1.5.3 Structural (in-) equality

Due to the structure of the PLs, which is a mix between youth organisation and older people in the role of coordinator/facilitator, the relation between the youngsters and the professionals were not equal from that point. But, in the PL you can search for ways to counter this:

- Focus on self-organisation: place where youngsters have their own access too, they control the space

As stated also the PL Utrecht/Amsterdam searched for ways to give the youngsters more freedom, let them own the project. In the beginning the youngsters felt out of their comfort zone, but then later they learned it doesn't always have to go according the view of the professional.

- Youngsters get the word during the reflection rounds

Peer-to-peer feedback – instead of professionals giving feedback on the youngsters – during the reflection rounds is another way of coping with the structural inequality. Let the youngsters do the talking during the reflection rounds, not the professionals.

Linked to this is really listening as equally important: this gives the youngsters power. It means also doing something with what the youngsters say; to really change the action, based on the input of the youngsters.

And in critical action research, which is another kind of action research and it is what try to develop the Barcelona's PL:

"In critical action research, (...) the people who think about the practice are the same people involved in it. It isn't a participatory action research where someone designs and theorises about the practice for others to practice, but it is the actors themselves who reflect, criticise and act on their own practices to improve them."

Pep, PL Barcelona - professional

And what happens to the role of professionals in this is, in that action research with critical surname?

"The professionals were there to moderate, to guide, to give support ... to coordinate... We were a kind of the lighthouse, you know, like someone who is guiding, I mean, we were there to say: "Hey, we're getting lost!""

Katia, PL Barcelona - professional

- Give it time – trust

Equity is not something that emerges from the beginning; you have to work to it.

Besides this structural inequality the PL in Barcelona also dealt with **social inequalities** in the group. The group was diverse in terms of social-economical and ethnic background.

To overcome these social inequalities, there were two things:

- Reflection rounds

The reflection rounds were used as a democratic tool; a way and space to achieve more equality. During the reflection rounds, everybody – regardless of their background – could speak on the same level as the others in the project. The actions are made by the different approaches. The reflections and debates are democratically rooted.

- Kabua values

These Kabua values are the frame they work in, it are the criteria to participate. Other criteria – e.g. educational degree – don't count. The group has decided on these values, and they apply to everybody.

6 INITIAL CONCLUSIONS AND INSIGHTS ON WORKING WITH YOUNGSTERS TOWARDS EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ARTS AND MEDIA

In order to reach empowerment with youngsters, you need, besides among all the aspects described and summarize above, good communication. That is good agreements on the content of the project, about the organisation and logistics, but also about 'the why' behind the whole project. All participants need to see the goal that they try to reach with the project. Everybody in the AR – all the participants – needed to be convinced of the value of working in an AR process.

- For the PL Utrecht/ Amsterdam – who had a lot of participants: the youth workers, media coaches, the youngsters, the student researchers and the professionals of Click F1 – this proved more difficult in reality.
- The professionals of Click F1 found it difficult to convince the youth workers and the media coaches of the value of AR.
- The media coaches felt evaluated and even attacked, because their way of working was being researched.
- The youth workers thought the AR demanded a lot of money and time.

So when you work with different participants it is sometimes difficult to get everybody in the idea of an AR. It would be helpful if all the participants were involved in the project and the process if AR from the

start of the project. Good communication and a good collaboration demands time. It is necessary to have certain continuity in the PL – to have a sustainable base – to avoid miscommunication.

(Re-)action in a future cycle: So, what's next?

Schlesische 27 organized a reflection round with the youngsters about the future. The youngsters talked about the possibility to start a cooperative.

Art@orner: wanted to start again with the project. They found a coordinator but the application for a grant still needs to be written.

But, they got a positive confirmation of their methodology and guidance. It also brought change in the organisation, because now they give artist the change to come and work in De Veerman for some months on their artistic work. It is a win-win situation, because the artists get a space to work and De Veerman gets an insight in the working process of an artist.

For Click F1 the projects are incorporated in their organisation, but they got more conscious about some improvements they can do. They got an insight in the importance of training for the coaches and organized two training days. They now put the focus more on the guidance of the coaches, and make time for training days and reflections with the coaches, and to bring them together more often.

It was written in a research report, which had a big impact because when it is written in a research report it is more confronting. It becomes actual again. It led to action.

In Barcelona, the economic crisis has meant a break in the dynamic work of Kabua because Unescocat has already been closed to funding problems. But the youngsters and the coordinators of Kabua had continued working to conclude the project.

Currently, Kabua is in the process of being incorporated as a virtual learning platform in the training for coaches of youngsters of the Government of Catalonia and of the National Youth Council of Catalonia (CNJC) which is the platform that brings together 95 national youth organizations and local youth councils.

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