

Promoting a Creative Generation

Children and Young People in the New Media Landscape

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Introduction

Young people in Ireland are increasingly engaging creatively with new media. With the convergence of art and digital technologies young people are actively creating and sharing their creative works both locally and globally. Perhaps the most significant development in the last decade has been the increased use of the internet by young people. According to the EU Kids Online Survey, in 2008, 81% of 6-17 year olds in Ireland used the internet. This is an important statistic, as the internet has become a key place where young people can access, create and share artistic works. In terms of youth arts, practitioners are also engaging with the internet and new media. In many youth organisations, practitioners are facilitating projects with young people in digital film and music making, animation, digital photography etc. While the youth arts sector in Ireland is certainly embracing the new media landscape, it is important to keep abreast of international best practice in this area. This will help ensure that we can support the best quality experiences for young people using new media in the youth sector. It was in this context that NYCI's Youth Arts Project Officer, Emmet Sheerin, took the opportunity to attend the Swedish Cultural Ministry's conference, *Promoting a Creative Generation: Children and Young People in the New Media Landscape* from 28th-30th July 2009 in Gothenburg, Sweden. This article provides an overview of some of the most important parts of the conference, highlighting key points and issues that arose, which are relevant to how young people's creative engagement with new media and the internet can be developed and supported in Ireland's youth arts sector.



The conference

The focus of the conference was the creative and cultural habits of children and young people and how public policy and the exchange of best practices on a European level, can help guarantee children and young people's right to access culture.

It was very much framed by the fact that young people are increasingly using new media (particularly digital media) and the internet to access, create and disseminate creative work. The conference was attended by delegates and speakers from arts, cultural, education, youth and youth arts sectors across the EU (and outside the EU).

In her opening address, Adelsohn Liljeroth (Swedish Minister for Culture), mentioned how EU political discussions on young people and culture have tended to take technological developments as a starting point, but that it would be better to focus on the needs of young people first. While young people are often more technologically savvy than older generations, they may lack the experience and knowledge and life skills that adults possess – particularly in terms of the opportunities and risks that new technologies bring. She also described how the arts are becoming increasingly recognised as important for the development of more competitive and creative societies. However, she importantly noted that young people are not small adults and that keeping creativity fun, enjoyable and interesting is key to maintaining and supporting creative participation in the arts. Odile Quentin (General Director, DG Education and Culture, European Commission) echoed some of the Minister's points. He expressed the idea that the 'soft' skills (e.g. innovation and imagination), which can be developed by young people through creative activities, will feed into how they work and contribute to society in the future.



Perhaps the most relevant presentation in terms of youth arts, on a practitioner level, was delivered by Anne Bamford (Director of the Engine Room, University of the Arts, London). She noted that there was a lack of understanding and acknowledgment about the importance of experimentation in arts education. According to her there needs to be synergy between knowledge, skills and creativity when it comes to engaging young people in the arts. According to her, there are key characteristics to best practice, which are:

- Partnership and collaboration
 - Flexibility
 - Accessibility for all
 - Professional development opportunities
 - Time for reflection and evaluation
 - Relates to the local [subject matter]
 - Research based (encouraging the young people to be researchers)
- Containing creativity as well as performance/ exhibition
 - Literacy of the arts
 - Risk taking...being brave

Over the course of the conference, participants had the opportunity to attend some smaller seminars. The first seminar attended by NYCI's Youth Arts Project Officer was *Cultural Institutions – Dinosaurs or Leading the Way to the Future?* This seminar attempted to illustrate some of the present initiatives being done by cultural institutions to engage with young people. The speakers represented a number of organisations and initiatives from around Europe and elsewhere.

The key points that arose in this seminar were:

- While we are now operating in an increasingly digitized world, there should still be great importance put on the authentic arts experience i.e. visiting galleries, and theatres as opposed to simply accessing the content on line.
- The answer to participation isn't in the technology i.e. the computer, but in the way the young people and the educators/cultural institutions engage with it.
- Cultural institutions should be communicating the idea that young people belong in their spaces and that they speak for them.
- A fully rounded arts education experience should also encompass behind the scenes elements of the arts. For example, educators and the young people get to go 'back stage', meet the artists and see the various aspects of what brings it all together.

NYCI's Youth Arts Project Officer also attended the seminar *The Creative Generation On-line*. The aim of this seminar was to discuss media habits and online activities for children and young people across Europe as surveyed in the EU Kids Online project (2006–2009). The seminar also aimed to discuss the implications for media literacy and education, as well as what impact new media consumption will have on the audiovisual industry. Key points from this seminar were:

- There are still technological barriers to participation on-line. Broadband access is an issue for many young people.
- While internet sites like YouTube are accessed by many young people, the amount of young people who actually create/generate their own material for these sites is not huge. The reasons for this are: not being interested, feeling that they have no ideas to publish/create, lack of skills and lack of time.
- Research has shown that the peer group is the biggest influence over whether or not a young person is creative on-line.
- Adults often presume that young people are internet experts. However, on the other hand young people often feel that their creative works go unnoticed by adults, particularly leaders and politicians.
- Many young people don't view breaching copyright as being unlawful.

The conference was brought to a close with a panel discussion on the role of the EU in promoting a creative generation in Europe. The discussion revealed the need for there to be a shift in the focus of information collected on arts participation in Europe. Instead of focusing on 'attendance', there should be more concern about the 'quality' of experience young people have when they access and participate in arts and culture. The need for a greater synergy between education (formal and non-formal) and culture in Europe was also expressed. For this to happen, the training of educators and artists is important. Also a partnership approach between educators and artists needs to be promoted. There needs to be more consideration given to how artists work with not only young people, but also with teachers and youth workers.

Key issues from the conference

Some of the key issues that arose during the conference were:

- While young people are often thought to be the experts of digital technology and media literate (particularly with new media), there is a significant value in quality facilitation of creative projects by formal/ non-formal educators and or artists. Young people may lack the experience and knowledge of life that adults possess – particularly in terms of the opportunities and risks that new technologies bring. Furthermore, experienced artists and practitioners can help young people realise their ideas and creative potential.
- Media literacy among young people is a fundamental part of them understanding the creative potential of new media. Learning the 'language' of media (e.g. the creative language of film) is very important.
- In this new media landscape there can often be an over emphasis on the role of technology and software in terms of facilitating the creative potential of young people. However, the answers aren't in the computer or the new technology! Emphasis needs to be put on the way young people engage with it and how educators work with young people and the technology.
- Peer to Peer influence is a key factor in how young Europeans are engaging with creative technologies. Young people are accessing and participating in arts and culture outside of formal and non-formal education structures. However, the number of young people creating and publishing content individually might not be as high as presumed. Education structures, both



formal and non-formal, are important places where young people can work together to create and publish creative work in a safe environment. Arts activities must be delivered at a point where the young people can engage in it with interest, enthusiasm and ownership.

Conclusion

It is certainly encouraging to see that many of the approaches to

engaging young people in new media, that are being called for across Europe, are already promoted by youth arts practice in Ireland. These include a young person centred approach to practice, encouraging a positive relationship between the artist and young people, as well as the teachers/ youth workers in organisations. The emphasis on quality of experience is important, with a significant focus on the role of the youth arts practitioner in facilitating these experiences.

While the speed of technological developments may intimidate some youth arts workers, it is important though to remember that updated/ new hardware and software don't hold the key to raised standards of engagement. Best practice should not rely on or be hindered by advances in technology. Keeping it fun, creative and group orientated is important. Also, youth arts workers shouldn't feel intimidated by young people's knowledge of new media. Remember, adults have a wealth of experience and skills which can help facilitate a positive engagement with new media. This is particularly important when it comes to promoting the safe and responsible use of new technologies. Digital technology presents both opportunities and risks for young people due to the increased permanency and global circulation of recorded material via the internet.

Youth arts workers also play an important role in helping young people realise their ideas and creative potential. As mentioned earlier in the article, some young people feel that they have no ideas to develop or that they lack the skills or time to engage with new media. Education structures (whether formal or non formal) provide necessary support and encouragement to young people to be confident and creative. Resource organisations also have an important role to play in supporting those who engage young people in new media, and promoting best practice in this area.

As the coordinating body for the annual *Artist in Youth Work Residency Scheme* (on behalf of the Arts Council and the Youth Affairs section of the OMCYA), NYCI has witnessed a steady increase in the number of youth organisations seeking funding for digital film projects. In 2008, 36% of all applications to this award were for arts projects with a specific focus on film/ documentary production. In early 2009, NYCI's Arts Programme brought together a working group of experts in the area of digital film in youth work and media literacy. The group have been working with NYCI over the year to develop a resource for youth workers on engaging young people in digital filmmaking. This resource will provide best practice guidelines, techniques, ideas and starter exercises on particular aspects of the filmmaking process that are important to consider when facilitating projects in a youth work context. The resource will consider the 'whole-life' process from the initial ideas through to ways to promote the finished product.

NYCI will be seeking 3-5 youth groups to pilot this resource over the coming months before it is finally published. So watch this space!!