

YOUTH WORK INFORMAL LEARNING AND THE ARTS: EXPLORING THE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE AGENDA

DESIGN + MAKE: CREATIVE COLLABORATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an apprenticeship-style approach to a workshop-based project that provides a safe educational environment for young ex-gang members to explore their personal potential and creative ideas within a set framework. This collaborative project commits to working 'Beyond Fashion' to develop a meaningful relationship with young people affected by knife crime and facilitate an opportunity to build upon their own sense of personal identity, respond to change and continue their journey of creating a positive future for themselves and their wider community.

INTRODUCTION

London College of Fashion (LCF) has fostered the development of fashion and its relationship to social responsibility over a number of years. Past and current projects highlight the need to recognise and invest in the many issues and challenges within our local communities. Fashion permeates our everyday lives and has a subliminal connection to the world that we live in.

We cannot underestimate the influence of fashion within society or the messages that it sends out as it becomes more intertwined with music, popular culture, politics and our everyday lives. It is precisely this connection and its diversity that has prompted LCF to explore this unique ability to move fashion beyond its known boundaries of association. We can use "fashion" to connect with those who are disconnected from society and use its potential to become a transformative vehicle for those whose lives have been affected by crime, unemployment, lack of opportunity and deep-rooted social issues that have led to a cycle of offending.

Knives are the most common weapons used in the killings of young people in the UK. This violence could stem from deep-rooted social issues such as youth disengagement, unemployment and a lack of opportunity. The attitudes in society towards disenfranchised young people can be negative and fearful which adds to the difficulties that these young people have to face within their community (Portes 2000). Young people may have to face challenging personal circumstances, such as poverty, parental substance misuse, domestic violence and exclusion from education, all of which contribute to their dysfunctional background. It is not difficult to understand why some young people may gain a 'sense of belonging' through their association with the 'family' that a gang may appear to give (Klein and Maxson 2010). It is also no surprise to learn that most young people who come into contact with the Criminal Justice System are from the most disadvantaged communities and have experienced frequent neglect and abuse (ref). For example, 50%

have experienced time in care or substantial social services involvement (Nacro 2003); 25% have a statement of special educational needs and 29% have difficulty with literacy and numeracy (Youth Justice Board, 2006); 88% have been excluded from school (Tye 2009).

The charity, ART AGAINST KNIVES (AAK) was born in 2009 out of the unprovoked violent knife attack of a young fashion student who has since been left to cope with life in a wheelchair. AAK started as an exhibition to raise money and awareness of the incident a year after the student was attacked. Many well-known names of the art and fashion industry: Tracy Emin, Banksy, Christopher Kane and Rankin donated work to support this event that instigated a dialogue between London's creative community and some of the inhabitants of the most deprived London boroughs.

AAK was able to begin the process of understanding the local community by working with young people whose lives have been devastated by knife crime and who needed support and help towards changing and making a difference to their difficult and vulnerable situations.

Design + Make: Creative Collaboration comprises AAK and LCF's MA Fashion Artefact Course led by a practicing artist who is an expert in historical hand leather skills, supported by an Accessories Technician. Design + Make: Creative Collaboration provides a commitment to encouraging and supporting a small group of AAK project participants to experience and engage successfully within an educational environment with access to industry workshops, tools, resources and professional expertise. The project inspired the young participants to explore and communicate the positive and negative aspects of their own circumstances, and the consequential impact on their lives and that of others. The positive aspects included skills development, creative thinking and knowledge-based discussion providing a platform for the participants to experience and learn traditional craft skills, and evaluate the potential to learn more or envisage a possible route to employment. Creative collaborations such as this also serve to create a culture of social and environmental awareness in order to develop and integrate sustainable and ethical practice throughout all aspects of our life and work.

METHOD

The Project workshop was delivered over a period of two weeks of structured daily activities focusing on learning new techniques, tools and the assembly process, which reflected an apprenticeship-approach to the skills of historical British craftsmanship required for the hand production of traditional leather hide goods, as opposed to leather sewing machines. The aim was that this would enable continued skills development after the

project finished. Eight participants worked with the MA Fashion Artefact Course Leader and Technician. Each participant was given a set of hand-knives, and expected to learn the name of each tool, understand necessary safe workshop practice, consider the safety of others as well as adhere to a respectful use and practice of the knives and tools. Transcripts from the conversations during the workshop and interviews afterwards were analysed and findings are presented below. Attendance was monitored throughout the two-week period.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Attendance monitoring showed that eight out of nine participants remained actively engaged throughout the two-week project turning up on time, often working throughout their lunch-times and staying late in order to complete their work. The participants became increasingly engaged as they learnt new skills, and slowly developed their confidence working with leather and their own capabilities. The participants were observed during the workshops and later interviewed about their learning and personal value that they placed on this experience.



Figure 1: Participants outside the studio

Some quotations from the transcripts are presented below. No attempt to analyse these has been made at this stage.

“When I was younger, I wasn't really good at hand-making and all that fiddly stuff...I just wanted to do something new you know...”

“I chose to take part in this project 'cause as I've got older I've realised that you need to try to do stuff that you're not good at and....push your boundaries...”

AAK commented that the project had made a noticeable impact on the participants' communication, confidence and agency, planning and problem solving, relationships and leadership, creativity and resilience and determination.

In response to AAK's question "How has working with AAK and the LCF project given you the opportunity to develop your skills/ interest?" participants stated:

"It opened the doors to new places that I've never been before and provided me with a big opportunity"

"It encouraged me to want to do more. It really left a positive influence on me."

"The hand stitching, that was the main process. Without that process you can't construct the bag."

"I realised that I have a passion and a talent for design which I didn't know that I had and is making me reconsider what I want to do in the future."

"Learning different skills and finding things that I didn't know I was good at."

"Made me realise that now is my time to get everything rolling. I got used to being unmotivated, since doing this is made me look into degrees. It kicked me up the arse. It felt good knowing I'm getting up and doing something productive. I liked having something to talk about at the end on the day. I want to go into education so I can keep feeling like that."

"It's been encouraging. It's been a good example, XXX (AAK staff) are good examples of what you can achieve."

In response to AAK's question "What was the most interesting event/ topic covered in the project?" participants stated:

"Using the machines, and being good"

"The hand stitching, that was the main process. Without that process you can't construct the bag."

"Everything! All the skills and processes that we learnt were really relevant and I used them all. -I enjoyed learning about the lining."

"Seeing Dai's (Tutor) exhibition work was inspiring. Learning the traditional techniques"

"When Dai showed us the carcass in his office. He took us onto the roof and showed us this thing that he made and it really made me dream that I could make things like that. Inspired me to see things differently."

"Sharing ideas, with everyone who was there. When you're with creative passionate people it's really good to share your ideas. Made me realise that I'm not on my own."

How did you find the staff? (Give us one nice thing and one point that we could maybe improve?)

"I found them helpful and they wanted us to learn. They were keen to pass on skills so that they wouldn't die out."

"All the staff were really lovely and very hands on, they really helped me."

"Wicked- all lovely laid back people, I felt on the same level as everyone. There was no pupil/ teacher feelings. I felt like everyone spoke to me. I felt very comfortable. That's why I dropped out of college- I really struggled with it as I grew up so quickly. I didn't feel trapped."

"The staff were very understanding and that is a big thing. Everyone was friendly, approachable and interested. There was enough one on one time. The course did really work."

"Nothing to improve- they were excellent."

"Would have liked more one on one time."

Which task did you most enjoy?

"Dyeing the leather. Putting the bag together!"

"Painting the leather for the bag, I thought I would get it wrong but it went really well."

"Hand sewing was great. Seeing everyone's work develop was good."

"It was when the bag came to life- it was like woah hold on its not all talk now. It was the real thing."

"Stitching was really relaxing."

What was your biggest achievement over the past two weeks?

"Finishing my bag on time, being on time, not late not early- and I managed to help other people."

"Completing the bag within a short amount of time and being ahead of everyone. I had the most to do and I got the most done"

"Completing my bag. Nearly finishing the bag. Making a prototype design. I think that I didn't finished my bag because my design wasn't realistic within the time frame."

"That I done it myself. Woken up so many things in my brain. I feel much more positive about myself."

“I’ve learnt how to actually make a leather bag by myself, like all the equipment you use, techniques...”

“Starting and finishing the course. Finishing something is a big thing for me. “

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The LCF staff involved volunteered to work on the project because they knew that the skills development that they were delivering would have a significant effect on the lives of these young people and themselves. The project offered the chance to evaluate the teaching practice and its meaning within a community. It showed a personal commitment to the young people and the ability to influence change. The participants developed a bond to each other and established respectful relationships towards the tutors. Although not explicitly stated, anecdotally it was observed that the participants had no expectations or experience of working with leather before and had no idea what to expect. Their enquiry was open, intelligent and inquisitive and evidenced a genuine interest in the ‘learning by doing’ aspect of the apprenticeship approach. They were learning the value and respect of knives within workshop practice as well as honouring the traditional craft techniques of the leather industry.

The unique collaboration with the ‘grass roots’ approach of AAK and knowledge of their participants, combined with the much needed access to professional expertise, mentors and industry resources of LCF provides the unique position to make a lasting impact on those that we work with. The collaborative and contemporary approach to the apprentice-style workshop helped develop activities in fresh and innovative ways. It is important to understand what young people want to be associated with and the ‘learning by doing’ is a simple way to engage them and encourage a deep approach to learning. These opportunities build confidence and professional skills and have the potential to reach and inspire more young people to make a positive change.

The AAK infrastructure of support is designed to accommodate young people at different stages of their development, and ensures long-term provision. Through the creative workshops, it is possible to support young individuals with experience, provide the opportunity to access education and improve chances of employability and training. The industry experience, and exposure to organisations such as LCF, with its global reputation, helps to develop self-confidence in their abilities.

Young people are naturally creative . This paper demonstrates that collaborative projects such as that reported here, help to engage local young people and enable their stories to be heard. This information can be used to develop other opportunities within the community that could ultimately help to create lasting positive change. Through this process, the aim is to understand the past, present and future of the young people and the social challenges that affect them. Continued support to sustain these collaborations and activities would contribute towards developing a more positive community by supporting and mentoring the young people who have direct experience of the implications of violent crime. Projects such as these can affect a direct, positive impact on them and others around them.

In sum, LCF and ART AGAINST KNIVES – Creative Collaborations provides opportunities for those most at risk of gang culture by helping them access education, potential employment and training and in doing so make a permanent positive change to their lives. Giving opportunity to young people can instigate transformation and enable them to strive for a different future. We aim to continue to develop creative projects, encourage and engage London’s diverse communities.

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