

‘The Real Me’: a co-creation project between Box Up Crime and University of the Arts London (UAL) to develop self-esteem and confidence for young people who are vulnerable to localised gang violence

Seed Fund Award 2021

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The UAL Social Design Institute (SDI) launched a new Seed Fund Award initiative in January 2021. Academic staff were invited to submit ideas for small-scale social design and design for sustainability projects to be co-developed with the Institute over the coming months. Of a total of 17 diverse entries, two projects were selected for SDI support, tackling the timely and urgent issues of youth violence and Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy.

Contents

Summary.....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Contextualising Your Project	5
2.1 Social and Cultural Context.....	5
2.2 Previous Studies.....	5
3. About the Project	7
3.1 Approach	7
3.2 Insights and Implications	9
4. Discussion.....	11
4.1 Outcomes and Value	11
4.2 Social Design Learning at UAL.....	13
References	14
Author Biographies	15
Appendix	16

Summary

This collaborative project between social youth organisation Box Up Crime and University of the Arts London (UAL) was made possible thanks to a seed fund award of £5,000 from the UAL Social Design Institute. It enabled the provision of a series of three co-creation workshops involving young people of school age who are vulnerable to the potential violence of localised gang activity in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. Box Up Crime is an organisation founded by Stephen Addison BEM in 2017. Initially set up as a boxing club for local youngsters in Barking and Dagenham, it has developed into a vital social and support system for young people, with a commitment to “rebuild misguided dreams”. One of Box Up Crime’s programmes is their ROADS initiative – Real Opportunities, Advice, Direction & Support. This initiative supports youngsters who are having problems that are flagged up by their schools. They can subsequently be referred to ROADS, which aims to help them re-assess their young lives. The UAL workshops enabled a group of seven to eight young people to be involved. Each participant had an existing, trusted relationship with Box Up Crime, which invited them to attend. All were between the ages of 16 and 18 and predominantly of colour or mixed heritage. Their input was vital to help UAL graduates co-create the visual format of the new ROADS workbook to be used in schools as a core part of the programme. The workbook is entitled The Real Me and comprises three modules. The overall project’s objective was to provide three hands-on workshops (one for each module) in Barking and Dagenham. The workshops were designed to develop the young participants’ awareness, self-esteem and confidence by

showing them how their experiences, ideas and aspirations have currency within the creative sector. By building awareness of their abilities, the workshops introduced the idea of potential future paths into education and employment, and a viable alternative to the lure of gang culture.

Crucial to the success of the project was the involvement of three UAL Graphic Design graduates who were all of colour/mixed race heritage. They were supported to develop, deliver and document the co-creation workshops. Although, initially, the project sought to support the vulnerable young people associated with Box Up Crime, the UAL graduates also became beneficiaries, developing heightened self-esteem, presentation skills and design competencies. Through the series of three workshops, the graduates were employed to encourage and enable the youngsters to co-create a new visual workbook template for the ROADS programme to re-engage with young people who have started to experience conflict, struggled at school or been excluded from mainstream education.

Feedback from the participants has validated the project's workshop ambitions, with the youngsters reporting that the experience had opened their eyes to future opportunities and built up their confidence. It also enabled them to feel part of a process that could benefit other vulnerable youngsters like themselves. Significantly, they talked about the impact of the graduates' involvement, and how important it was to have identifiable role models that not only looked like themselves but were also from similar backgrounds.

1. Introduction



Figure 1: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Val Palmer

‘The Real Me’ project was initiated through a collaborative exchange between Stephen Addison, founder of Box Up Crime, and Val Palmer from Central Saint Martins (CSM), University of the Arts London (UAL). In part, it was inspired by Palmer’s ‘Refresh’ research trip to Detroit, where she was introduced to Erik Howard’s ‘The Alley Project’, a youth-focused street art initiative that transformed a southwest Detroit neighbourhood plagued by gang activity – Palmer was astounded that a simple creative intervention could have such a significant impact on local crime rates. When she was introduced to the work of Box Up Crime, she and Addison identified an opportunity for collaborative exchange. Together they conceptualised a project to redesign the workbook used within Box Up Crime’s ROADS programme, which needed to visually appeal to a young demographic. The Graphic Design graduates from UAL worked together with Box Up Crime participants in a series of co-creation workshops that encouraged them to see design as a positive force for change, while harnessing the power of their ideas to develop a more engaging workbook for its young audience. The project had significant benefits for both stakeholder organisations, while also directly supporting the young users of Box Up Crime, and recent UAL graduates.

2. Contextualising Your Project

2.1 Social and Cultural Context

Youth violence, particularly knife crime, has been at the top of the social concern agenda for more than a decade, yet shows little sign of abating. Human rights solicitor Nazir Afzal (2019) argues that many children and young people simply do not know how to communicate effectively and are unable to de-escalate situations of conflict. The isolation brought on by the coronavirus pandemic has fuelled further the toxic mix of postcode wars and social media threats, which have become normalised through the music culture of 'diss tracks'. While several laudable schemes are in place to support ex-offenders back into the workforce, schemes that take a more preventative approach to issues of youth crime remain limited. Founded in 2013, Box Up Crime is one such initiative, offering vulnerable youngsters a foundation of discipline through boxing training, educational programmes and a mentoring system of 'positive elders', where for example, an 18-year-old may mentor a 15-year-old. Supported by the London Mayor's Office, Box Up Crime seeks to "rebuild misguided dreams" by helping young people to discover a sense of their self-identity as well as guiding them to develop self-motivation. Box Up Crime's strategies help to make a successful crime-free life more accessible and decrease the chance of vulnerable youngsters becoming victims of senseless violence. 'The Real Me' focus of the ROADS programme intervenes at a crucial point when youngsters are becoming excluded from schooling and aims to help them recapture their aspirations.

2.2 Previous Studies

Detroit's 'The Alley Project' provided a powerful case study for how creative practice can mobilise community groups across all age groups, to empower disaffected youngsters. Further discussion of creative practice as a 'diversion' from knife crime can be found in the work of Frater and Gamman (2020), who argue for a human-centred public health approach to social innovation. They explain how small-scale youth projects focused on co-production and creative learning can have transformational impacts on change-making within community settings. For Frater and Gamman, the co-production process must be genuine and engage the people most affected by the issues at hand. If these conditions are met then the activities are likely to be enjoyed and valued, resulting in self re-evaluation and improved personal resilience. Pinkney and Robinson (2018) discuss the increasingly powerful role of social media in youth violence, particularly knife crime. Pinkney's work with Solve, The Centre for Youth Violence and Conflict, also addresses this issue in detail. Also relevant is Open Book, an initiative from

Goldsmiths University which seeks to break down barriers that discourage vulnerable people from entering higher education. Meanwhile, Global Purpose Enterprise's mentorship initiative is a powerful example of how the mentoring process can be transformational for young black lives, thus emphasising the importance of positive role models of colour. Additionally, Onwards and Upwards UK, founded by Stefan Jones, strives to develop business opportunities for ex-offenders through mentoring and training. Here again, the intervention of positive role models — particularly for young black males — can be as Jones (2021) describes, "profound and defining".

3. About the Project

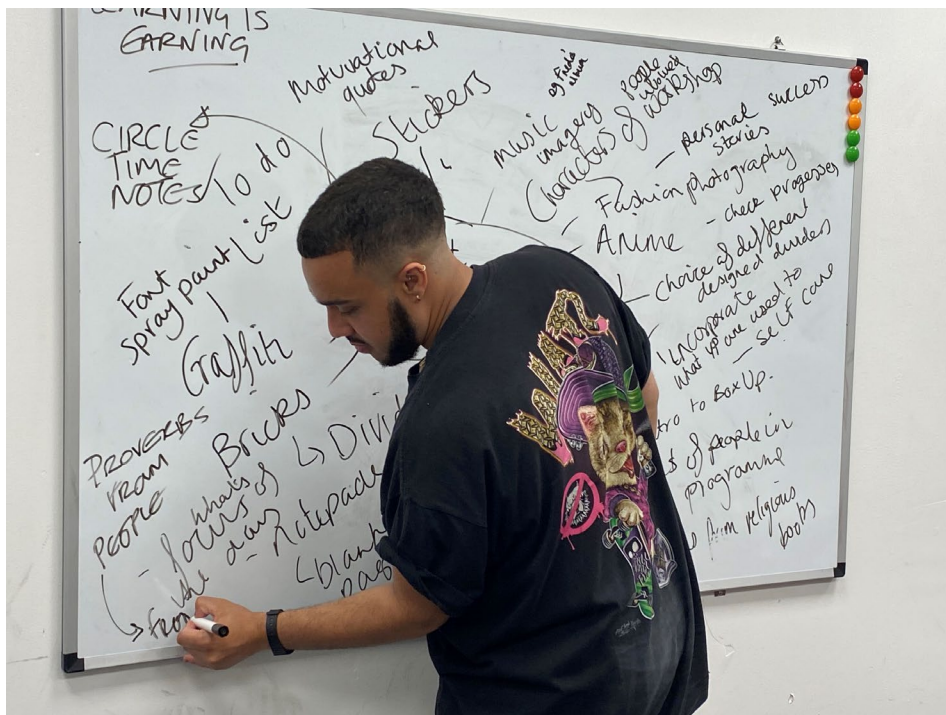


Figure 2: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

3.1 Approach

'The Real Me' project followed the human-centred approach to social innovation championed by Frater and Gamman (2020). Deploying co-creation methods, a select group of school age young people were supported by UAL graduates to co-design a new workbook template for the ROADS programme. Three workshops, lasting between three to five hours, were held at the Box Up Crime Development Centre in Barking, during June and July 2021. The UAL alumni (Cade Jolley, Aimee Hogan and Zach Delarue-Marno) were all graduates from BA Graphic Design at Camberwell. The resulting co-designed template, 'The Real Me', which also functions as a journal, will be a critical pedagogical tool. It will be integral to the engagement of youngsters enrolled on the ROADS scheme who need to be stimulated in a distinctive way, given that they may have struggled within school education.

Although the young participants possessed little prior experience or knowledge of graphic or communication design, the workshops enabled them to see design as an avenue for educational development and potential employment. Meanwhile, the UAL graduates played an essential role in bridging between the two distinct cultures of UAL and Box Up Crime, presenting themselves as positive and recognisable role models of colour.

Workshop one began with introductions and a summary of the project goals, after which the graduates gave presentations about themselves and their work, explaining how they came to study at UAL. The session was emotionally charged and had a noticeable impact on the participants who saw their own experiences reflected back at themselves through the graduates' personal stories. These graduates took agency in steering the workshop, which enabled them to develop a rapport with the participants. The youngsters were asked to show examples of visuals that inspired them (from music, fashion, sports, films, social media, etc.) and encouraged to discuss how various styles could be incorporated into the design of the workbook. Once they understood that their opinions were considered important, the participants' confidence began to grow, and they became more relaxed and talkative (figure 1, 2).



Figure 3: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Adam Razvi

In workshop two, the UAL team shared some examples of newly designed workbook layouts based on the youngsters' ideas from the first session. They were clearly impressed that their suggestions could be transformed into actual designed outputs, leading them to feel valued. Addison also introduced some of the written content for the new workbook, which became a major point of discussion for the rest of the session. The

participants disagreed with certain phrases and wording, and an animated debate followed around how much vernacular/slang could be used and whether it would disproportionately ‘dumb down’ the ‘This is Me’ content and its message. This conversation led to Addison re-visiting the texts and making substantial changes, which has delayed the completion of the visual workbook.

During workshop three, a variety of designs created by the graduates in response to the youngsters’ ideas were openly discussed. By this point, the participants were comfortable giving feedback and were unafraid to say if they disliked something. They collaborated well as a group and had got to know each other throughout the duration of the workshops. CSM graduate Simba Ncube also attended the session and talked about his experiences as a BA Graphic Communication Design student, which were often challenging. For example, this included a difficult period following graduation, his perseverance through lockdown and subsequent employment as an art director for Burberry, which made a deep impression on the participants. UAL graduate and London College of Communication (LCC)-based photographer and filmmaker Adam Razvi was also engaged to record the participants giving individual feedback on the project (figure 3, 4).

On completion of the workshops, the graduates are continuing to collaborate on developing the workbook template in liaison with UAL lead, Palmer, and Box Up Crime lead, Addison. Razvi also produced and edited a short film to document the project, which enabled the participants to give verbal feedback on the workshop experience. The interviews with the young participants took place following the final workshop on 14 July 2021. All those interviewed reflected on how much they had enjoyed the workshop process, what they had gained in terms of confidence, and how the UAL graduates had been such inspirational role models. Most importantly, they all expressed their genuine happiness in helping other young people improve their prospects by developing the ROADS programme (see 4.1 “Outcomes and value” and *The Real Me* film).

3.2 Insights and Implications

The primary aim of this project was to inspire young, vulnerable people and make them aware of their potential through the process of co-creation. The workshops enabled this to happen, but the mechanism revealed wider ramifications for all involved. As anticipated, the attendees benefitted largely and were inspired by the graduates as positive role models of colour. However, the graduates gained in ways that had not been envisaged. On completion of the project, they reported increased confidence levels, a heightened sense of purpose and value, as well as the development of new and transferable skills.



Figure 4: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

This project shows clearly how co-creation workshops can benefit young people who struggle within mainstream education and are susceptible to crime through gang grooming. The size of the three workshops was kept relatively small, with the same participants, to maintain focus and ensure they did not feel intimidated. Usually, a maximum of 12–14 people were in attendance, including Box Up Crime staff, UAL graduates and a local council observer or invited visitor. The Box Up Crime Development Centre is a familiar place where the youngsters feel safe — it is their territory and Addison is a much-respected local community figure. It would be difficult to implement this model in other settings without the same careful planning between prospective partners. When it comes to vulnerable youngsters, projects such as this need to be undertaken at a local scale, in a safe environment with trusted people and in person, rather than online. As Addison (2021) is keen to stress, “we are passionate about making sure that success is *available*”. The participants were extremely enthusiastic about the possibility of follow-up workshops, particularly if specific design skills were to be taught. They were genuinely surprised by how a whole range of creative potential skills could be utilised to earn a living, and it opened new portals of possibility for them (figure 5).

4. Discussion

4.1 Outcomes and Value

In terms of outcomes and value, the project primarily benefitted four main parties, these being the young workshop participants, the UAL graduates, Box-Up Crime and UAL. Secondary beneficiaries are indicated on the benefits chart (see Appendix).

Through the course of the three co-creation workshops, the participants were introduced to genuinely achievable education and career prospects that they may have never considered. Working with relatable young role models of a similar background and ethnicity was critical, as it led them to understand that they could emulate the graduates' success. One participant reported: "I feel like because they've done it, I can do it too." Another highlighted how the workshops had made educational attainment more accessible, explaining that: "I personally don't have any connection with graduates", as if they were somehow perceived as an unreachable separate species. This reinforces exactly what US educationalist Marian Wright Edelman (2015) famously maintains: "It's hard to be what you can't see." The participants expressed pride in being associated with the project, with one reporting that: "with my background I'm not usually involved in big things like this". They recognised that their input and ideas were valuable for the development of the ROADS programme and understood how the act of helping other youngsters would benefit their community, with one participant claiming: "I feel like I've changed as a person just from knowing that I'm going to be helping other people by doing this." The participants expressed how much they had learnt in terms of teamwork, collaboration and cooperation.

The UAL graduates had an intensive learning experience and benefitted from the project in unanticipated ways. The three lead graduates reported that their self-belief had developed as a result, with one stating that: "being able to lead workshops was a big thing for my confidence". Another of the graduates identified teaching as a potential career path, which was notable given that they had not previously considered this an accessible career path for a young black graduate. Through their substantive role in helping to redesign the ROADS workbook, they have enhanced their design skills, developed new contacts and supported one another to develop their own career aspirations.



Figure 5: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

Box Up Crime has gained from this project in that the relationship with UAL is valued by Barking and Dagenham Council, which could trigger further opportunities for funding. It has enabled Box Up Crime to develop its visual material through the co-creation process with student graduates. Additional connections have also been made within the University, for example, the input of UAL Awarding Body (UALAB) into the ROADS curriculum design. Box Up Crime has now established direct contacts within UAL and, as a result, there is already an additional project under discussion with CSM's MA Industrial Design course, as well as the potential for further collaborative projects with student/graduate involvement, such as a social enterprise to develop sportswear and sports products. One of UAL's main priorities is to increase diversity amongst staff and students. The collaboration with Box Up Crime is one example of a targeted community outreach project that can be considered a part of the larger long-term ambition to redress this imbalance. Through this project, we have seen how UAL graduates can become inspirational role models for youngsters of colour who may have experienced difficulties within mainstream education. Through programmes like these, vulnerable young people can be supported to rebuild their ambitions. Arts- and design-led education can be introduced as a realistic future path to possible careers within the wider creative industries. Furthermore, through this project, we have identified an opportunity for graduates of colour to gain experience working within teaching and learning contexts. One consequence of this has been to encourage these graduates to consider their potential as future educators.

As a result of the intense workshop discussions, Stephen Addison began to re-evaluate his approach to the workbook. He decided to update the written content, which took several months to produce. In the ensuing period the graduates who worked on the re-design moved on to other employment. However, through negotiation, Here Design studio (founded by UAL alumni) took on the project and complete the production of the workbook on a pro bono basis. The graduates will liaise with the team at Here Design, so that the young workshop participants' ideas are adhered to and respected. The workbook should be ready for use by Box Up Crime for a ROADS pilot at a school in Redbridge, January 2022. Once the workbook has been piloted, Palmer has arranged for Addison to meet with UALAB to give input and advice with regard to expanding their programmes offered within schools.

4.2 Social Design Learning at UAL

In terms of key learning, this project has shown the potential impact of carefully targeted outreach projects. In a context where funding for creative arts education in schools is under significant threat, this project makes a strong case for the value of an education framed around creative practice. We have seen how a co-creation design approach has engaged a diverse group of vulnerable youngsters, some alienated by mainstream education. It helped them to rebuild their aspirations and develop their understanding of the potential within creativity. Central to the success of the project was the juxtaposition of the two groups at different stages of their educational journey. On the one hand, the successful graduates of colour entering the world of employment, and, on the other, the young participants, including some who had already been excluded from school and were trying to rebuild their lives. By matching up these groups, both parties gained in unexpected ways.

Innovation will be necessary if UAL's ambitious targets for increasing diversity amongst staff and students are to be met within a generation. Programmes such as this indicate one potential route towards meeting these targets, albeit at some point in the future. The project encouraged vulnerable young people of colour to take on the idea of creative education at FE and HE levels. Furthermore, it offered young graduates of colour the opportunity to re-evaluate their potential as educators of the future. Outreach schemes of this nature could help to identify suitable graduates who would be appropriate for fast-tracking with financial support onto postgraduate teaching courses. It is this aspect in particular that will encourage genuine progress with regards to student and staff diversity, as an achievable future for UAL.

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Related Websites

- [Box Up Crime](#)
- [The Alley Project](#)
- [Solve](#)
- [Open Book](#)
- [Global Purpose Enterprise](#)
- [Children's Defence](#)
- [Onwards and Upwards](#)

Photographs

Figure 1: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Val Palmer

Figure 2: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

Figure 3: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Adam Razvi

Figure 4: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

Figure 5: Workshop at Box Up Crime 2021 © Zach Delarue-Marno

Author Biographies

Val Palmer

Val Palmer studied as a mature student on BA Graphic Design (1993) and MA Communication Design (1998) at CSM. After working as a freelance designer, she taught on both BA and MA Communication Graphic Design at CSM for over a decade. She also gained a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching from Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (CLTAD) (2007). In 2011, Val moved into student recruitment as an international academic specialising in overseas recruitment across UAL, based at CSM. Throughout her career at UAL, Val has worked hard to promote genuine student diversity and accessibility both in the UK and overseas. This included the EU-funded 'City & Art' project with Mimar Sinan Fine Art University, Istanbul. She has collaborated regularly with the Design Against Crime Research Centre, where she is currently helping to develop a teaching programme for a young offenders' institute.

Dr David Preston

David Preston holds a BA in Graphic Design from CSM (2004), a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning from CLTAD (2011), and a PhD in the history of corporate design from UAL (2019). In his first full-time role, David worked as an Information Designer with the award-winning BBC News Interactive team. He went on to work for various boutique London agencies, including Kerr Noble, Studio Small and Praline. During this time, he worked with a broad range of clients, including large international brands, publishers, renowned cultural institutions and new start-ups. Since 2009, he has run his own studio practice specialising in publishing and branding. David has taught at CSM since 2005 and lectured on his research internationally. Currently, he leads the Strategy & Identity platform on the BA Graphic Communication Design course and is developing his portfolio as an Early Career Researcher at UAL.

Appendix

Organisational Benefits	<p style="text-align: center;">BOX UP CRIME</p> <p>Re-evaluation and creative redesign of the ROADS programme and workbook</p> <p>Pathways to educational attainment made more accessible for their users</p> <p>Potential funding boost due to prestigious association with UAL</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">UAL</p> <p>Access to UAL made more accessible for potential applicants of colour</p> <p>Graduates gain professional skills and experience enhancing their career prospects</p> <p>Potential to support graduates of colour into academic careers</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">YOUTH USERS</p> <p>Pathways to educational attainment made more accessible</p> <p>Increased confidence and sense of worth due to association with UAL and their positive role models of colour</p> <p>Psychological boost in helping other underprivileged youngsters from their community through their involvement in developing the ROADS programme</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">GRADUATES</p> <p>Enhanced design expertise and professional experience</p> <p>Development of transferable employability skills</p> <p>Increased confidence and sense of worth</p> <p>Development of supportive Community of Practice amongst graduates of colour</p> <p>Potential pathway to career in education</p>