CultureCase

Thinking about cultural engagement in terms of capabilities and ecologies

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Summary

This paper proposes a new way to think about the role and purpose of cultural policy and arts administration: the fulfilment of people's cultural capabilities. This proposal comes out of a critique of existing ways to think about cultural policy (which tend either to be paternalistic or market-driven). It is also inspired by research during the Get Creative initiative (which at the time comprised 'a website, nested within BBC Arts, in which people could share examples of their creative activities and outputs. [And] several hundred Get Creative Champions – organisations or individuals who put on Get Creative events'). The paper proposes that policymakers and researchers begin to approach the business of cultural policy by asking how human flourishing can be supported by giving people the means and opportunities to make art or music, to express themselves and learn for themselves (rather than being on the receiving end of what "the market" or "the arts establishment" serves them).

The researchers deployed a range of methods to reveal the importance of cultural ecologies

These methods included semi-structured interviews with members of the Get Creative Steering Group; focus groups, questionnaires and interviews and four ethnographic studies. One of those ethnographies (at a site where people were dancing in the street) revealed 'a cultural ecosystem in operation: a developing set of interconnections and interdependencies between a shopping centre, a church, a children's theatre company, a secondary school, a freelance dance

teacher, [an Arts Council funded organisation], a local authority and a network of young men who dance'.

Cultural ecologies work at multiple scales

Big-picture politics and economic conditions can enable or constrain cultural capabilities. The amenities and organisations alive in cities, towns and villages also shape communal and individual lives. Therefore, sustaining a cultural ecology is not going to be the responsibility of one individual, one organisation, or one government agency.

Keywords

UK **capabilities** **ecology** **participation** **capital**

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