



# ANIMATING THROUGH ANIMATION

**Marianne McAra** on how artistic practice gives voice to young people living in poverty

**RESEARCH** has found that young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) suffer disproportionately high levels of social adversities and are at greater risk of involvement in crime. Whilst policy-makers across many European jurisdictions have made NEET a focus for intervention, it is only very rarely that the voice of young people flows into and shapes such interventions.

In this article I reflect on my experience of working with a group of young people, living in one of Scotland's poorest postcode areas who were identified as highly vulnerable and *at risk* of falling out of education post compulsory schooling. We collaboratively produced experimental 16mm videography as a means for the participants to explore, translate, and narrate their experiences. The aim of the study was to better understand young people's sense of identity and factors that encourage or discourage their sense of agency and inclusion in society. A key objective was to explore whether co-production in research can promote democratization and empowerment, as a way of informing policy development.

The fifteen young people I collaborated with were aged between fourteen and fifteen and part of a Prince's Trust class.

Through weekly workshops, the young people learned about the process of direct animation (a technique where illustrations are made directly onto celluloid film using materials such as marker pens, Indian inks, nail varnish, or dental tools for etching). After demonstrating techniques, I left all materials out for the participants to self-select what they wanted to experiment with. Each week I would present them with their artwork from the previous workshop as a completed film so they were able to view the fruits of their labour and learn which shapes and textures had most visual impact.

We had many sophisticated conversations surrounding the emotive connotations of colour and music. Focusing on the emotional impact of education, participants drew up mood boards, music playlists, and a timeline tracking the different developmental and transitioning phases of schooling, beginning at nursery. I was struck by degree to which the pupils identified with highly abstract and metaphorical colour definitions; using them to symbolise feelings of loneliness, hatred, determination and fascination; as well as assigning colours to represent childhood, growth and safety.

The teacher suggested we enter our film into an inter-school competition that was taking place. This inculcated a notable shift in participation, with the pupils treating the process very much as a team, self-selecting roles for themselves including Director, Assistant Director, Producers, Music Editors and Artists. At the awards ceremony, their film was showcased on the big screen at an Imax cinema. Out of 71 entries, they came joint second.

Reflecting on the process, the use of Direct Animation enabled the young people and me to develop a shared visual language (Schön, 1983); their engagement and agency augmented as positions shifted from pupils to co-researchers. The method enabled them to explore emotions and experiences through a lens of their own making, thus allowing them to be in control.

The students often made defensive and self-deprecating disclaimers about their lack of artistic ability. Paradoxically, this seemed to be a strategy to permit creativity to flourish. During several interactions, participants commented enthusiastically on the artistic nature of animation, whilst proclaiming that they 'do not do art'. One participant, Hailey, compared what she was doing to a nursery activity. Hailey experimented with the inks and demonstrated these to me, enthusiastically discussing her findings. However, whilst engaged and excited, she assured me that what she was doing was childish 'finger painting'. Describing the activity as infantile actually permitted Hailey to be more fully involved, expressive, and explorative, whilst safeguarding against critique as she attempted to lower my expectations of her skill level.

Unpacking the possible motivations for such devaluation, my hunch is that such downgrading was instinctually adopted to disguise insecurity and low self-esteem. Taking second place in the competition was a measure of how far short the pupils' estimation of their abilities fell below their actual abilities. It was reassuring that the use of a production process could heighten an autonomous, and somewhat empowering environment. The challenge for policy-makers is to create interventions which can sustain these moments of insight and transformation.

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Schön D A (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner; How Professionals Think in Action*, Basic Books Inc.