Conference Essay: Exploring Spaces of Opportunity for Everyday Creativity
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Conference Essay:

Everyday Creativity Research Network: Home and Placemaking Sandpit. Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, England, September 7, 2023, organized by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Everyday Creativity Research Network

Abstract: In this conference essay, we reflect on a sandpit, organized by the AHRC Everyday Creativity Research Network on the theme of place-making and everyday creativity. We begin by introducing the Everyday Creativity Research Network and the problems faced in defining everyday creativity, which was a key objective of this sandpit. We then discuss the program and major themes identified during the event. We distinguish between the concepts of "space" and "place," with particular consideration into how these concepts shape policies on everyday creativity. "Spaces of opportunity" is proposed in this context as a potential term that offers a framework to understand subjective and collective uses of creativity. We also identify constraints that hinder everyday creativity, including limitations on resources and lack of access. We explore how present models of creative initiatives are restricted by bureaucratic procedures that necessitate a focus on output as a measure of impact. We conclude by reflecting on future actions for this Network to propose alternative models of creative initiatives that encourage everyday creativity in a way that minimizes judgments and barriers while respecting local understandings of creativity.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Everyday Creativity Research Network

On September 7, 2023 the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Everyday Creativity Research Network (ECRN) hosted the second of four sandpits aimed at exploring understandings and applications of everyday creativity (EC), and developing an international, interdisciplinary, cross-sector network of academics, creative practitioners, and others with an interest in this endeavor. The network aims to: broaden the academic base for the field; develop existing understandings of EC through a transdisciplinary lens; develop, articulate, and interrogate the potential of creative methods in the context of EC; and inform policy in relation to EC (ECRN, 2023, §14). Its work is structured around four guiding themes:

1. enriching creative research methods;
2. EC in the home and placemaking;
3. EC in health and wellbeing;
4. interfaces across arts, science, and technology. [1]

The network committee planned a series of sandpits, which are intensive discussion forums, on each of the themes. Participants at this day-long sandpit, at Edge Hill University focused on the second network theme. We participated in this in our roles as postgraduate representative (MITRA) and principal investigator of the AHRC Network development project (JOHNSON). JOHNSON also organized the first sandpit, a large, hybrid event at the University of Brighton in April 2023, which considered the intersection between EC and creative research methods. The possibilities, considerations and challenges of arts-based research methods have been previously extensively covered in *FQS* (see for example JONES et al., 2008). The "creative methods" sandpit showcased key voices in poetic inquiry (such as Sandra FAULKNER and Helen JOHNSON; see FAULKNER, 2022; JOHNSON, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; JOHNSON, CARSON-APSTEIN, BANDEROB & MACAULAY-RETTINO, 2017), feminist autoethnography (including Liz MACKINLAY; see MACKINLAY, 2019, 2022) arts and creativities in education (including Pam BURNARD; see BURNARD & COLUCCI-GRAY, 2020; RANDLES & BURNARD, 2023) and creative evaluation (Jane WILLIS & Norma DAYKIN; see DAYKIN, WILLIS, McCREE & GRAY, 2015), as well as from across the creative, community and public policy sectors. Participants drew on this work to explore three core provocations:

• What is the role of EC within creative research methods?
• How can creative research methods be mobilized more effectively to democratize research and engage/empower local communities?
• What would it mean to decolonize creative methods in the context of EC? [2]

The "home and placemaking" sandpit was a much smaller, more focused meeting than the first, comprising fourteen invited participants from higher education institutions, local government and the third sector. In this second Network event, we concentrated on how EC may be connected to specific places and what policymakers and arts funders need to consider when formulating strategies to support EC. We also picked up on challenges raised in the April event, including the difficult task of creating a working definition of EC. [3]

1.2 Towards a working definition of everyday creativity

In the invitation letter for the event, Owen EVANS, event organizer and co-investigator for the ECRN development project, outlined the nature of the challenge represented by defining EC: "It is clear that the challenge is in finding a useful definition of what everyday creativity is, a definition in other words that might be useful and practical for different people or bodies in different contexts." This sense of "context" was central to the conversations at Edge Hill, where we wrestled with the complex connections between people's everyday environments and forms of EC. [4]

The term "everyday," in itself, holds a dual meaning. On the one hand, it alludes to the ordinary and quotidian aspects of life, while on the other, it embodies a democratic and non-elitist ethos. Thereby, EC as a concept has the potential to transcend exclusionary boundaries, enabling us to remove creativity solely from the domain of the "creative genius" (MANSFIELD, DAYKIN, GOLDING & EWBANK, 2022, p.3). Creativity can be further understood in three dimensions: the act of creating, observing creative work, and experiencing creativity within a particular space. These dimensions apply to both individual and collective contexts, highlighting the multifaceted nature of creativity. As MANSFIELD et al. observed, to fully unlock its potential, it is essential to deconstruct limiting binaries that impose constraints on creative expression. [5]

The term "EC" is thus still very much in development. Broadly, however, it can be said to refer to day-to-day activities that are experienced by those who engage in them as being both novel, and useful or purposeful. The term further focuses on creative processes over creative products, on active creative participation rather than passive consumption, on creativity in the amateur, or grassroots rather than professional sphere, and on intrinsic over extrinsic value (ECRN, 2023). [6]

2. The Home and Placemaking Sandpit

2.1 Summary of the sandpit

The organizer of the home and placemaking sandpit garnered a diverse cross-section of voices, including creative and healthcare practitioners, academics, doctoral students, representatives of local government, and people working in the third sector. We began the day by each sharing an image of a place that was important to us and our sense of creativity. Although intended to be an icebreaker, our conversations during this exercise proved to be rich, emotive and deeply thought-provoking, setting the tone for the whole day. Each place had a story attached, stimulating wide-ranging interpretations from participants. Some focused on places that offered sanctuary and separation from others, while others were spaces presented in terms of connectivity and relationality. Sharing our personal connections to creative places in this way demonstrated how our backgrounds shape our understandings of EC, and its role within our communities. The activity also evoked for us MASSEY's (2005) contention that space is alive, dynamic and a point of connection with others or with one's place in the world. [7]

In the session that followed, we broke into smaller groups to discuss five core provocations:

1. What types of places and/or spaces does EC need to thrive?
2. What characteristics and qualities do such spaces and places possess?
3. What obstacles might exist for EC?
4. Is EC something we engage in as individuals or can it also be collective?
5. In "Making is Connecting," David GAUNTLETT (2018) posited that creativity, practiced everyday in a shift back to a "making-and-doing culture" (p.24), derives particular meaning from the way it fosters connection, but does this mean that for EC to have impact it must necessarily have social meaning or be collective? [8]

Each group recorded the discussions that emerged from these provocations as mind-maps, and we have used these to construct the word cloud shown in Figure 1.
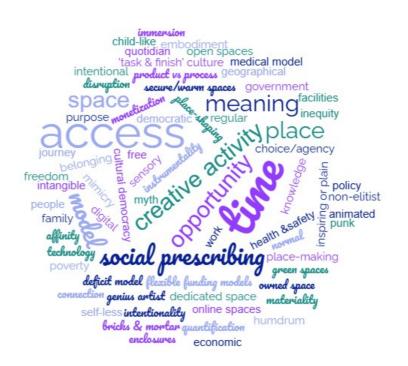
Figure 1: Provocation discussions Word cloud (The size of each word corresponds to the number of recorded mentions.) [9]

As indicated in this figure, a number of common issues were highlighted in the discussions. One core concern that arose was that of "access" as something which played a significant role in enabling or restricting the extent to which people are able to engage in EC (JOHNSON & MONNEY, 2021). The problems identified around access were closely tied to availability of "time" and "place" as essential resources for creativity, both of which also appear large in the word cloud. [10]

As a counterpoint, we considered what it means to build "opportunities" for EC that supports its accessibility across different contexts and communities. We explored the role that policy-makers play in creating these opportunities, with some critical discussion around the present models of cultural support that are dominant in the UK context. This led smoothly into a talk from James WINTERBOTTOM, Director of Strategy and Innovation at Wigan Council. WINTERBOTTOM considered how policymakers can support EC in their local communities and the challenges inherent in making the case for EC in a policy setting. As he highlighted, different organizations and local authorities have different approaches and priorities that need to be taken into consideration and it may not be possible or desirable to adopt a "one size fits all approach" to EC policymaking. Some participants in the sandpit were opposed to instrumentalizing EC in this way. This echoes broader debates in the arts and creativity literature. LADKIN in his contribution to the Cultural Value Project (CROSSICK & KASZYNSKA, 2016, p.63), for example, argued that a focus on demonstrable outcomes could result in less tangible outcomes being obscured, and the

potential and integrity of arts and culture being suppressed, by forcing practitioners to predict outcomes in funding applications. [11]

2.2 Placemaking and spaces of opportunity in everyday creativity

In exploring the intricate dynamics between space and place through our conversations, it became clear to us that these concepts are not interchangeable, but are closely connected through the act of placemaking. "Space" exists in a physical realm, including digital spaces, whereas "place" resides within people's minds. Placemaking then is a continuous endeavor to create meaning of spaces, either individually or as a collective. So, an individual may view a space as a safe space, or a local community may view a space as a heritage site. This links to the Welsh concept of "cynefin," which event host, Owen EVANS introduced. BROWNETT and EVANS (2020, p.2) defined "cynefin" as reflective of "the sense of local pride and belonging emanating from history and heritage within communities, as well as the memories and stories of those who live there." With this broader discussion on language and terminology in mind, EVANS proposed the concept of "spaces of opportunity," as something which enables us to focus on subjective meaning and active placemaking within and beyond specific physical places, and to capture space as fluid potentiality. [12]

Within the context of spaces of opportunity, creativity emerges as a potent instrument for enhancing a place, through official or unofficial means, whether intentionally or unintentionally. However, as alluded to previously, several significant constraints can hinder people's capacity for creativity and participating in placemaking. One such constraint is time, as people increasingly juggle multiple responsibilities in their everyday lives to cope with ever-mounting pressures. As one participant noted, in a capitalist society that demands productivity of all participants, many people are struggling just to survive. Indeed, the prevailing "task-and-finish" model of creativity within today's capitalist framework encourages us to fixate on an end product which can stifle the creative process (see for example LADKIN in CROSSICK & KASZYNSKA, 2016, p.63). [13]

Thus, while local government officials may recognize the value of creative and arts-based initiatives for fostering the wellbeing of their local communities, in the context of the UK at least, they are constrained by brutal budget cuts in the current cost-of-living crisis. Furthermore, officials work under a burgeoning legacy of standard of evaluation and bureaucratic procedures that restrict the shape of these creative programs. Even programs laid out with the best of intentions may lead us to unintentionally instrumentalize the creativity of communities by measuring the success of these initiatives in terms of a reductionist focus on end products or outputs. Moreover, as these measures are flattened across contexts, regardless of the needs and specificities of local communities, they inevitably privilege the communities that produce only "recognized" or "legitimized" forms of creativity. To promote EC, it is important to implement strategies that open doors for all individuals, transcending the constraints imposed by capitalism and resource disparities; but, as the discussion at this sandpit revealed, this can be a deeply challenging prospect. [14]

3. Conclusions and Next Steps

The ECRN's home and placemaking sandpit proved to be a rich and stimulating event, provoking wide-ranging discussion on issues related to EC, place/space, and policy making in the creative sphere. Central to our discussions were the opportunities and restrictions that impact the extent to which people are able to engage with and benefit from EC. Many of us spoke fondly about the revival of a childlike creativity that allows for free expression without fear of judgment. This sentiment drove much of our conversation, as we questioned what makes creativity flourish in our everyday lives. We recognized a need to consider alternative models of creative initiatives that limit barriers to access, and are informed by local individual and collective senses of creativity, rather than values and judgments that are imposed from outside. We left the sandpit too with the challenge to consider the potential of the term "spaces of opportunity" in generating new models of working with communities that break away from place-based restrictions, and with the ongoing task of providing an effective working definition of EC. [15]

These are considerations for the ECRN, going forward, as they work towards building an adaptable framework that policy makers can refer to when designing, supporting and evaluating creative programs. Any such framework clearly needs to avoid becoming a top-down model that can become oppressive and exclusionary including the methodological approach that these frameworks may be based on. This is no easy task, and requires drawing on the expertise of creative academics, practitioners, and community leaders to provide policy makers with a wide range of solutions to address their constituents' needs across the board. We look forward to seeing how these discussions evolve through the continued development of the ECRN, in particular the two remaining sandpits on "EC in health and wellbeing" and "interfaces across arts, science and technology," and in the concluding conference which is due to be held in autumn 2024. [16]

Interested readers can find out more about the ECRN's activities, including the 2024 conference, and sign up to join a Jisc email discussion group on the [network website](#). [17]

Acknowledgments

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Citation