‘Conceptualizing the amateur’ – Perspectives from the Get Creative Research Project

1. Context – Get Creative
   - Get Creative: initially a 12-month campaign. Now it is moving into a second phase, and may operate on an ongoing basis. It’s *modus operandi* is still evolving.

   - It was developed out of the *Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value* – one of the recommendations of which was: “A popular campaign should be mounted to celebrate Britain’s arts in order to make our cultural landscape more visible to the public and to reconnect the public with culture at national and local levels.” (p.39)

   - Through the Get Creative Research Project, we conducted interviews with 28 Get Creative Champions, two rounds of a Champion questionnaire, six focus groups with *What Next?* chapters, and four ‘mini-ethnographies’ – with a community theatre company, the music team at an evangelical church, an inclusive theatre company, and a network of break dancers.

2. A Case Study from the Get Creative Research Project
   - Network of break dancers in East London.

3. Conceptualising the amateur
   - From our work on the Get Creative Research project there is evidence to suggest that we should conceptualise a continuum between the amateur and the professional. (This builds on the work of Ruth Finnegan in *The Hidden Musicians*, 1989.) Our research participants were involved in creative practice through combinations of skill, remuneration and commitment at many levels. A dichotomy of amateur and professional appears difficult to sustain.

   - However, it is possible that thinking about amateur / professional as a continuum rather than a dichotomy doesn’t go far enough in emphasising the *dialectical* character of some amateur practice. Stephen Knott’s work, for example, and the chapter from Nicholas Ridout’s book that we read in advance of this session, indicate ways in which amateur practice needs to be understood - in some cases at least - as characterised precisely by its relationship to (and interdependent distinction from) paid work / labour / professional practice.

   - Through the Get Creative Research Project we have not primarily employed the term ‘amateur’ but have instead developed our use of the term ‘everyday creativity’. With the term ‘everyday creativity’ we draw attention to the ways in which cultural creativity:
     - takes place in every space, location and context imaginable.
     - is part of our everyday lives, as well those ‘special’ occasions of performance or exhibition.
     - is something that everyone can exercise, rather than a capacity only some people have.
     - takes place not only through the most well recognised, legitimate or commercially successful ‘arts’, but through an enormous range of practices including, for example, crafts, tattooing, DIY and cooking.
     - is exercised across boundaries of amateur / professional, and/or presentational / participatory.
     - ‘is less about Activity A or B, than a way of approaching life which can expand our experiences and options, and even deeply affect who we are-and can become.’ (In this final point we are quoting Ruth Richards, *Everyday Creativity: and New Views of Human Nature – Psychological,*
At first we were introducing the idea of everyday creativity as a unified field of practice. This is congruent with the idea of amateur / professional as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. But through the developing work of the Get Creative Research Project - including a series of sessions through which we have shared some of these ideas with cultural practitioners and researchers - we found that there is a danger that speaking in terms of everyday creativity potentially reinstates a false dichotomy and a dubious hierarchy of value between the professional and the everyday.

Our usage of the term has therefore developed. We invoke everyday creativity as a part of our developing account of cultural creativity (see below) as ecological. In other words, everyday creativity sits alongside the legitimate, recognised ‘arts’ and the commercially profitable ‘creative industries’ as part of interconnected cultural ecologies. Here our work connects with, and builds upon, John Holden’s (2015) research on cultural ecologies as part of the AHRC’s Cultural Value project. In that paper he speaks of ‘subsidized’, ‘commercial’ and ‘homemade’ culture.

Our research on the Get Creative Research Project suggests that cultural creativity takes place across and between the arts, creative industries and everyday creativity. And cultural practices can at one time fit into one of these categories and at other times another – depending on the kinds of recognition and support they are or are not receiving. In this way, we suggest moving towards a way of conceptualising the amateur that is both a continuum and dialectical.

4. Why is the question of how to conceptualise the amateur important?

This kind of conceptual work will play an important part in developing new understandings of:

- **cultural creativity** - what we identify through the Get Creative Research Project as ‘making and contesting versions of culture’
- **cultural wellbeing** - the active capacity to make and contest versions of culture, involving particular kinds of confidence, agency, knowledge and skill. And,
- **cultural democracy** - the ability of all to make and contest versions of culture.

With each of these terms our conceptual work - building on the Get Creative fieldwork - identifies important areas for further empirical research. And the new understanding of amateur practice developed through research in these areas has the potential to inform future practice and policy: identifying how cultural creativity, cultural wellbeing and cultural democracy can be more fully realised and supported.

These ideas are set out in our forthcoming report, *Towards Cultural Democracy: Cultural Wellbeing for All* (provisional title). It will be published as a King’s Cultural Enquiry in the coming months. The authors are Dr. Nick Wilson, Dr. Jonathan Gross and Dr. Anna Bull.

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