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Résumé de l'article

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circonstances économiques ou environnementales difficiles. D'une durée de
trois ans, le projet a commencé par le recrutement des jeunes en passant par
des organismes communautaires reconnus. Cette démarche a été suivie d'une
première exploration créative et interdisciplinaire au cours de laquelle des
jeunes ont travaillé de près avec des professeurs de l'Université du Cap Breton,
de même qu'avec des aînés de leur communauté. Cette première étape s'est
conclue par une vitrine publique de projets menés par des jeunes en théâtre,
en musique, en cinéma et en arts visuels sur le thème de la violence lente. Au
cours de la deuxième étape du projet, les jeunes artistes ont travaillé de
manière plus autonome pour créer un long métrage et deux documentaires
courts. Si le modèle de partenariat employé à la deuxième étape du projet a mis
en lumière des défis liés aux dynamiques de pouvoir, aux responsabilités et
aux attentes, il s'est avéré plus efficace que le modèle de mentorat employé à la
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Youth as Subjects and Agents of Artistic Research: A Comparison of Youth-Engagement Models

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Le projet pilote iCreate Cape Breton cherchait à cultiver des réseaux intergénérationnels d'artistes et de praticiens dans la communauté et avait pour objectif à long terme d'autonomiser les jeunes confrontés à des circonstances économiques ou environnementales difficiles. D'une durée de trois ans, le projet a commencé par le recrutement des jeunes en passant par des organismes communautaires reconnus. Cette démarche a été suivie d'une première exploration créative et interdisciplinaire au cours de laquelle des jeunes ont travaillé de près avec des professeurs de l'Université du Cap Breton, de même qu'avec des aînés de leur communauté. Cette première étape s'est conclue par une vitrine publique de projets menés par des jeunes en théâtre, en musique, en cinéma et en arts visuels sur le thème de la violence lente. Au cours de la deuxième étape du projet, les jeunes artistes ont travaillé de manière plus autonome pour créer un long métrage et deux documentaires courts. Si le modèle de partenariat employé à la deuxième étape du projet a mis en lumière des défis liés aux dynamiques de pouvoir, aux responsabilités et aux attentes, il s'est avéré plus efficace que le modèle de mentorat employé à la première étape du projet en ce qui concerne la responsabilisation des jeunes partenaires de recherche et la promotion de la résilience et de la transformation sociale à long terme.

Mots clés : jeunesse, intergénérationnel, engagement, mentorat, partenariat, changement social, recherche sur les arts, risque, résilience

The iCreate Cape Breton pilot project sought to cultivate intergenerational networks of community artists and practitioners, with the long-term goal of empowering youth who face challenging economic or environmental circumstances. The three-year project began with recruitment of youth through established community organizations, followed by an initial phase of multidisciplinary creative exploration, during which youth worked closely with Cape Breton University faculty, as well as elders from their own communities. Phase One culminated in a public showcase of youth-led artistic projects, including theatre, music, film, and visual art, centred around the theme of slow violence. During Phase Two, young artists worked more independently, creating one feature film and two short documentaries. While the second-phase partnership model illuminated challenges around power dynamics, responsibilities, and expectations, it was more effective than the first-phase mentorship model with respect to empowering youth as research partners and facilitating long-term resiliency and social transformation.

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The iCreate Cape Breton pilot project (2015–2017) brought youth, elders, and resource experts together to conduct interdisciplinary research creation around the theme of slow violence. Marcia Ostashewski and I managed the project, and collaborators included university faculty from both the arts and sciences, community members, the local school system, and youth groups. Our goal was to foster intergenerational networks that could use both scientific and artistic practices to address local challenges. We modelled our project on Edmonton's inner-city iHuman Youth Society, seeking to adapt their approach to the large but sparsely populated region of the Cape Breton Regional Municipality.[1] Our SSHRC-funded pilot aimed to facilitate engagement of "youth facing challenging circumstances," a status held by most youth in Cape Breton, given the region's economic, environmental, geographic, and demographic challenges. This frame of reference shaped our initial approach, a mentorship model that inherently aimed to "rescue" youth from their circumstances despite our intention to collaborate with youth participants; by contrast, later in the project we adopted a partnership model, an approach that better supported youth participants' agency, but which partly undermined our goal to foster intergenerational networks. Our experiences demonstrate a tension arising in projects that intend to both educate youth participants and amplify their perspectives. Funding models and partnerships that prioritize outcomes and evidence of impact further exacerbate this tension. Our very desire to teach and elevate, and to do so visibly, can silence youth, but a hands-off approach has consequences as well.

When we drafted our grant application, we were advised to describe our target audience as "youth facing challenging circumstances." This phrasing reflects that risk is not inherent to people; rather, risk arises out of circumstances that act as obstacles to resilience. Defining youth participants in terms of the challenges they face helps secure grant funding, especially in light of Tri-Council commitments to ethics, justice, and welfare. However, it also risks positioning our work as interventionist. When combined with the practical realities of grant-funded academic work, particularly the emphasis on short timelines and clear deliverables, this interventionist spirit made less space for youth to engage with the project's theme and express their own perspectives. Instead they either made use of the project's resources for their own ends, developing pre-existing artistic projects and skills, or engaged in projects shaped by the adult participants.

The project's first phase was heavily mentored: youth recruited from local organizations met weekly for six weeks with faculty and elders. The youth enjoyed materials and resources they could not otherwise afford (recording studio, paints and canvas, cameras and audio recorders), but they did not engage much with the project's academic discourse and priorities. Our short timeline left little room for them to develop their understanding of the theme or the modes in which they wished to work. For the sake of efficiency, we formed

research groups based on location, while the resource experts' availability determined the modes of research-creation. As a consequence, there was little opportunity to foster collaborative interests within the groups. While youth and elders helped to direct the content, each group relied heavily on resource experts' mentorship: the theatre practitioner devised a theatre project, the music faculty member facilitated access to a recording studio, and the radio broadcaster and film instructor led a documentary team. Resource experts tried to accommodate a range of interests, with one group also engaging in visual art, photography, and creative writing, but the short time frame and arbitrary group formation made mentorship the most efficient way to proceed. The public showcase at the end of Phase One also reinforced a top-down mentorship approach, since participants were aware of the need for a finished product within a fixed timeline. Youth contributions to the showcase were only tenuously connected to slow violence, while the more directly relevant documentaries were shaped by the adult participants. The main outcomes of this phase—the public showcase and two documentaries—were excellent examples of what can be achieved with mentorship and did help to foster intergenerational relationships, but were less effective as examples of youth-led research-creation.[2]

During our initial capacity-building weekend, Sandra Bromley shared the story of iHuman's beginnings: she and Wallis Kendal were working on an anti-violence art installation when they were approached by a group of youth who wanted to help. Since Bromely and Kendal's project involved deactivated weapons, they instead encouraged the youth to start their own project, offering space and mentorship, but largely leaving the youth to decide their own approach. Bromley's story highlights the importance of youth agency in effective engagement; agency is the defining quality that shifts mentorship from intervention to facilitation. As our project continued, we experimented with modes of engagement that could strike a more effective balance, an approach that would honour youth agency and initiative while supporting youth-led research-creation. The opportunity to do so arose when a student wrote a mock grant application to support a film project, and I invited him to adapt the application into a proposal for iCreate. We offered to partner with his youth-organized film collective, providing equipment, training, and some financial support in exchange for documentation of and commentary on the production process. We hired research assistants as a production manager and a documentarian, and eventually we agreed to pay the production team for blog posts.

From one perspective, this engagement model was highly successful: we trained one research assistant in documentary film and another as a production manager; we provided mentorship for a production team of fifty people, both youth and adults; and we produced both a feature length film and a documentary. From another perspective, however, the results were mixed. The film produced is best described as gritty and raw; while I remain a supporter of the film and can argue cogently for the ways in which it speaks to our project, others are less enthusiastic and the audience for the film is limited.[3] As well, relationships did not go smoothly during production. There were tensions over how far academic authority extended over a youth-driven artistic project. The youth team pushed for more financial support than was originally agreed upon, asking for salaries or honoraria for the production crew in addition to the already funded research assistants. Since we had emphasized at the start that additional funding was the team's responsibility, the team's lack of consideration

for the initial agreement and for the pilot project's dwindling budget crossed boundaries for the academic team. There were tensions over the application and interpretation of research ethics, and there were also communication difficulties that made academic mentors feel disrespected and mistreated. Tense relationships and combative attitudes made academic mentors reluctant to work with the film collective and led to further breakdowns in trust. The project met our goals to have youth engage in research-creation on the topic of slow violence and even helped to build and reinforce intergenerational networks within the community, but at the cost of straining relationships between the members of the film collective and academic partners.

The outcomes of these two models were distinctly different: the mentorship model creations were politically tamer, more aesthetically polished, and showed the impact of adult mentors, while the youth-led partnership model's project was raw, occasionally offensive, and more clearly the expression of the youth involved in the project. There is no one model that works best to engage and collaborate with youth. What the iCreate Cape Breton pilot project demonstrates is that youth collaboration requires time to build the relationships that support a research partnership with youth. Participant-led research is most effective and focused when participants have opportunities to be partners and shape projects from the start. Mentorship that is focused on skills-acquisition and opportunities to learn by doing under the guidance of resource experts can certainly happen in shorter projects, but facilitating youth-participants' own engagement with the research question requires a more significant investment of time and energy from all partners. As well, involving youth as research partners requires careful negotiation around power dynamics, responsibilities, and expectations. Youth partners are not always aware of or concerned with the institutional expectations around academic research, including budgetary restrictions and research ethics requirements. A partnership model has greater potential for conflict but can also more effectively bring fresh perspectives to critical social issues. Both mentorship and partnership models can positively impact youth: at least two youth involved in the initial documentary group went on to further film and radio work, and most participants from the first phase appreciated the chance to use professional resources. It is worth noting, however, that the youth-led film collective went on to produce another film, whereas most projects from the mentored sessions faded once the pilot project ended. Empowering youth as research partners may be more effective than interventionist mentorship in achieving long-term resiliency and social transformation.

Notes

1   The CBRM has less than 100,000 people in an area of 2471 km², whereas Edmonton has over 972,00 in 684 km².

2   Youth filmed *Shooting the Drag* during the workshops, but a research assistant did the editing after the showcase; *Dominion* was similarly produced after the showcase. *Shooting the Drag* is available at https://youtu.be/1FOaqu5bvDY, while *Dominion* can be found at https://vimeo.com/206512288. Both films reflect the adult participants' interests and skills.

3   *Bigsby* and the documentary, *The Making of Bigsby*, are available from YouTube (see the Works Cited list).

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