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## Peer Led approaches and ensuring parity

During one of my visits to the Kettle's Yard and Wysing group, a really in-depth, open and valuable discussion took place between the young people involved in the *Circuit* programme, which has led me to reflect at length on what we mean by peer led.

Peer led processes are widely understood as being key to effective forms of engagement through which young people develop skills in independent and autonomous learning as well as a sense of confidence in what they themselves can achieve and the difference they can make to their world. However, what we actually mean by 'peer led' seems to vary in subtle ways that are hard to pin down or articulate.

We can easily agree that peer led processes are about young people leading a decision making process. We can probably also agree that a peer led programme demands that there are systems and structures in place to support young people to be able to have a role in defining the direction, scope and focus of that programme.

Our roles, as people involved in supporting peer led processes and developing peer led programmes, are about ensuring that these structures are sufficient for young people's needs. Our roles are not about defining what happens or how it happens, but how young people decide what happens. This means we need to 'let go.' We need to let go of any pre-existing idea we may have of what something might look, smell or sound like. We need to let go of imagined outputs and products and we also need to let go of the fear we may have about what might happen.

In the foreword of the Engage project 'envision' toolkit, Christopher Naylor wrote:

*"...to engage young people effectively means going into the unknown, letting them help shape the project, sharing or even losing control..."* (Naylor, C. 2005)

What I find interesting about this quote is the idea that we need to be able to let go of control. I would agree, that we have to be prepared to lose control of what happens, but I think it is important to stress that this does not mean that we can simply sit back and watch what happens.

During one of my visits to the Kettle's Yard and Wysing group, this summer, a really in-depth, open and valuable discussion took place between the young people involved in the *Circuit* programme. The following extract from my journal outlines the crux of that conversation:

"...the artist didn't want to be controlling, but wanted it to be based on their (the young people's) voices, but she could have been a little more directive and controlling. We agreed that this is one of the creative challenges of peer led practice, knowing how far to direct and how far to be led by the group's own priorities, ideas and voices.

Everyone agreed that it was important that voices were managed rather than being directed, but that voices did need to be managed, as there were concerns that some voices are louder or stronger than others.

The group agreed a need to clarify amongst themselves, what the parameters of peer led practice are, in principle and in practice and they talked about the fact that there is always some kind of restriction, such as budget or other priorities, including those of the Circuit programme.

The group suggested that the parameters for them might be that they have a role in deciding what the focus is for projects and then hand over some of the control for decisions made in the process, but that they need to be clear about where the 'handover' points are and decide this themselves, for it to still be peer led.

One person said that he was concerned that it was often difficult for the team and the artist to respond consistently to what the whole group wanted to do, because of some voices being louder than others and that there had been many ideas that hadn't been pursued or followed up, but got lost in the discussions. In this way it wasn't necessarily everyone's voice that informed the project direction, so this meant that it was led by a few rather than being informed by the whole group. In this way there may be a need for greater directive roles amongst the team and artists to ensure the work is truly peer led, rather than being led by a few." (Critical Friend's Journal, July 2014)

This conversation, in itself, is testimony to (and evidence of) the extent to which the young people have a keen sense of control, as this is obviously an important foundation for them being able to discuss such issues. Furthermore, the conversation indicates the sense the group have of their own potential to inform, not just the focus or scope of the project, but the approach being used within and across the programme.

What this conversation highlighted, to the Wysing and Kettle's Yard team and myself, was the need to develop, use and make explicit, strategies to ensure parity between, and an equality of input from, all the young people involved.

This conversation informed and was beneficial to ongoing project development and learning, as it led to changes in the way the group was supported to make decisions. New strategies were developed and implemented by the team to ensure a greater equality of input across the group. This example can therefore be seen to be indicative of ongoing reflective practice and an effective and sophisticated peer led action research process.

Amongst most groups across all the Circuit galleries there are young people with differing levels of confidence. The young people from the Wysing and Kettle's Yard group felt confident enough to voice their concern and were secure in the knowledge that this would bring about a useful development in the approach being used across their programme.

Our roles, as people involved in supporting peer led processes and developing peer led programmes, mean we have a responsibility to young people. Our responsibility is to ensure that all young people feel that they can have input, even if there are young people with differing levels of confidence, and who are differently able in terms of how they articulate their opinions, in the same group.

It therefore seems to me that it is important that we have enough control of the process to ensure this happens. The skill in supporting and nurturing peer led practices can perhaps be seen to reside in an ability to reflect on each unique situation (Schön, D.A. 1983) to reach conclusions about where and how we need to have control and where and when we need to let go. I would therefore argue that peer led practice isn't as simple as losing control. As is implied by the word 'even', in the quote from the Engage project 'Envision' toolkit, 'losing control' is something that we are able to do sometimes.

Peer led practice is not simply about 'losing control', it is more sophisticated than that and is about knowing how to work out when to lose control in ways that actually support "the flourishing of individual persons and their communities." (Bradbury, H. 2001)

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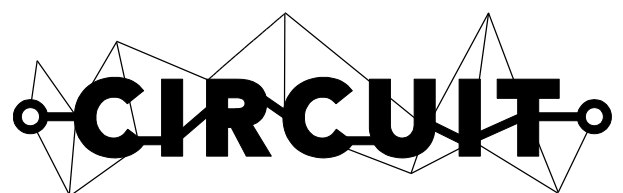
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**phf** Paul Hamlyn  
Foundation

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