Facilitating youth participation: Concepts, Challenges and Contradictions

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Facilitating Participation: some questions

How can we hear, understand and respond to the realities of young people on the margins?

Is listening to young people enough?

What do young people really want to say?

What might 'meaningful' participation mean for a Young Offender or unemployed yp?

Whose agenda is participation for?

"Participation for effective services or for human flourishing" (Fielding 2007)

Participation is as much about people's ability to act – choices actions and behaviours of individuals …. and their sense of empowerment and self determination in dealing with reality as it is having a say in public sector decision making

How do we ensure outcomes from yp's participation?

"What if you unleashed your self-expression?"
~ Anjou MacPherson
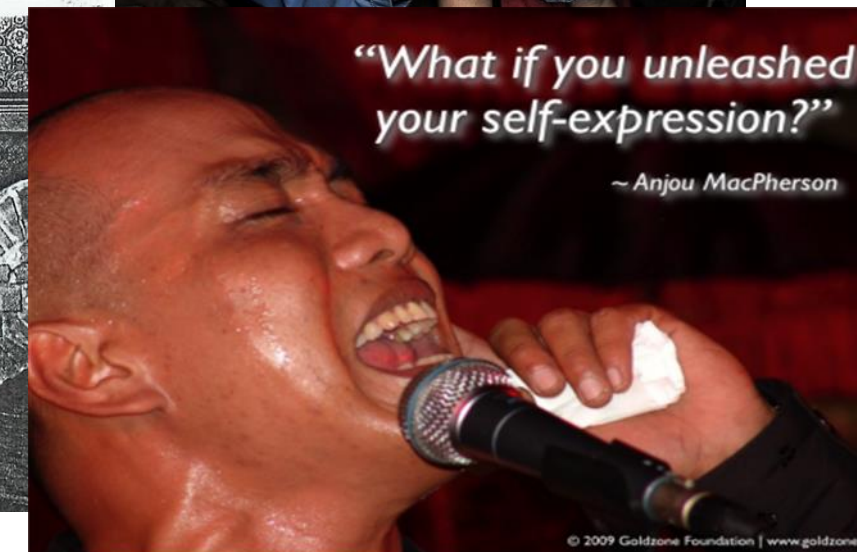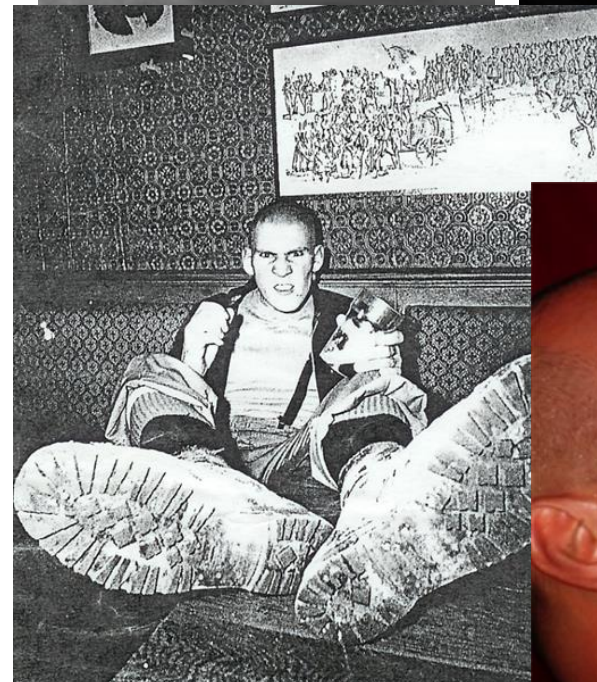
Reconciling adult systems and yps lifeworlds

Policy & programme intentions

Young people's realities
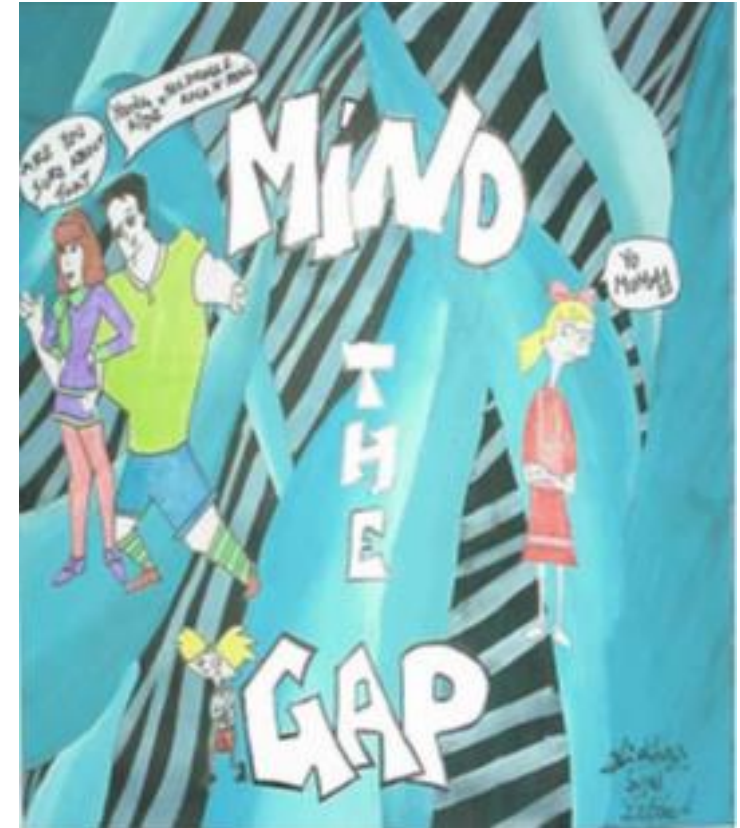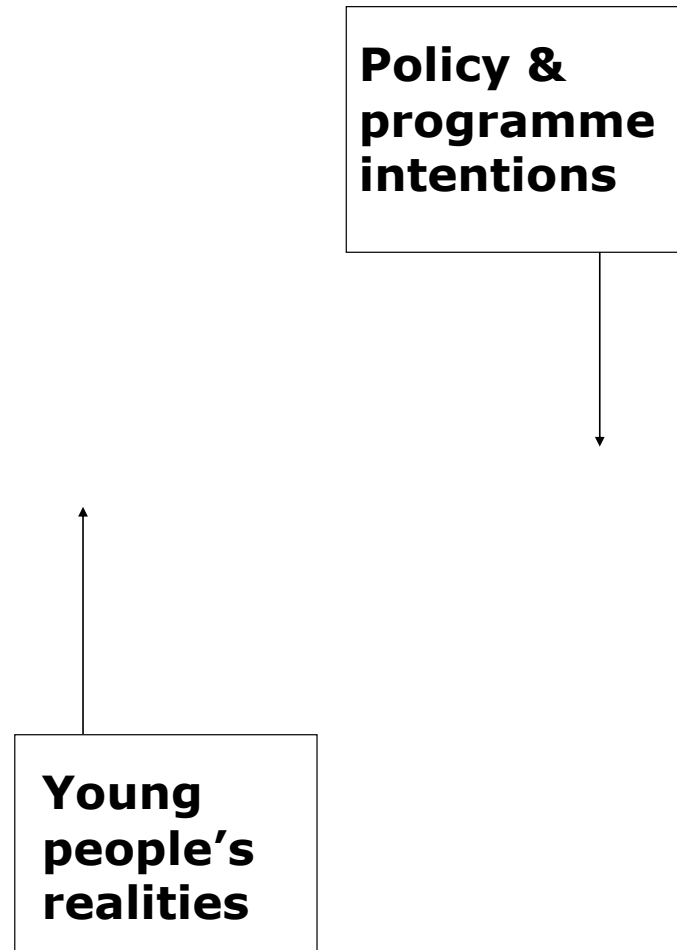
Considerations for facilitating youth participation

1. Assumptions about what participation means in practice …beyond voice

2. What is meaningful for young people?

3. How do we create spaces for joint working / opening communicative action spaces with yp?

4. Implications for professional/adult roles

5. Participation is a social learning approach

6. Linking participation to system change /outcomes

1. Participation and Participatory practice: an epistemological disjunction?

PARTICIPATION: The right or act of being involved /making a contribution/having a say   [Participation in ....]

PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE: Concerns the way in which people are involved:

- An ethic defining the democratic way in which people may engage in a process of learning for change with others as equal partners on issues of mutual concern   [Participation with ...]

What makes an effective participatory process?

- Is not just about expressing a view, it is about the way in which people **work together** to solve problems and make decisions

- **Collaborative / relational** - young people and adults in dialogue, learning and action – hearing and reconciling different perspectives. Cooperative inquiry (Heron)

  > "The idea is simple: fundamentally it is that people work together as co-researchers in exploring and changing their world"   (Peter Reason 1988: Human inquiry in action)

- A **learning process** – achieving a better understanding through co-inquiry & reflection from which new possibilities can emerge

- **Critically reflexive** – challenging assumptions and practices

- **Empowering** – develops agency/builds capacity for action

Beyond voice: From perspectives to power in decision making

Start

Problem identification

Analysis

Planning

Evaluation and reflection

Action

Successful end of project

Further planning or new problem identification
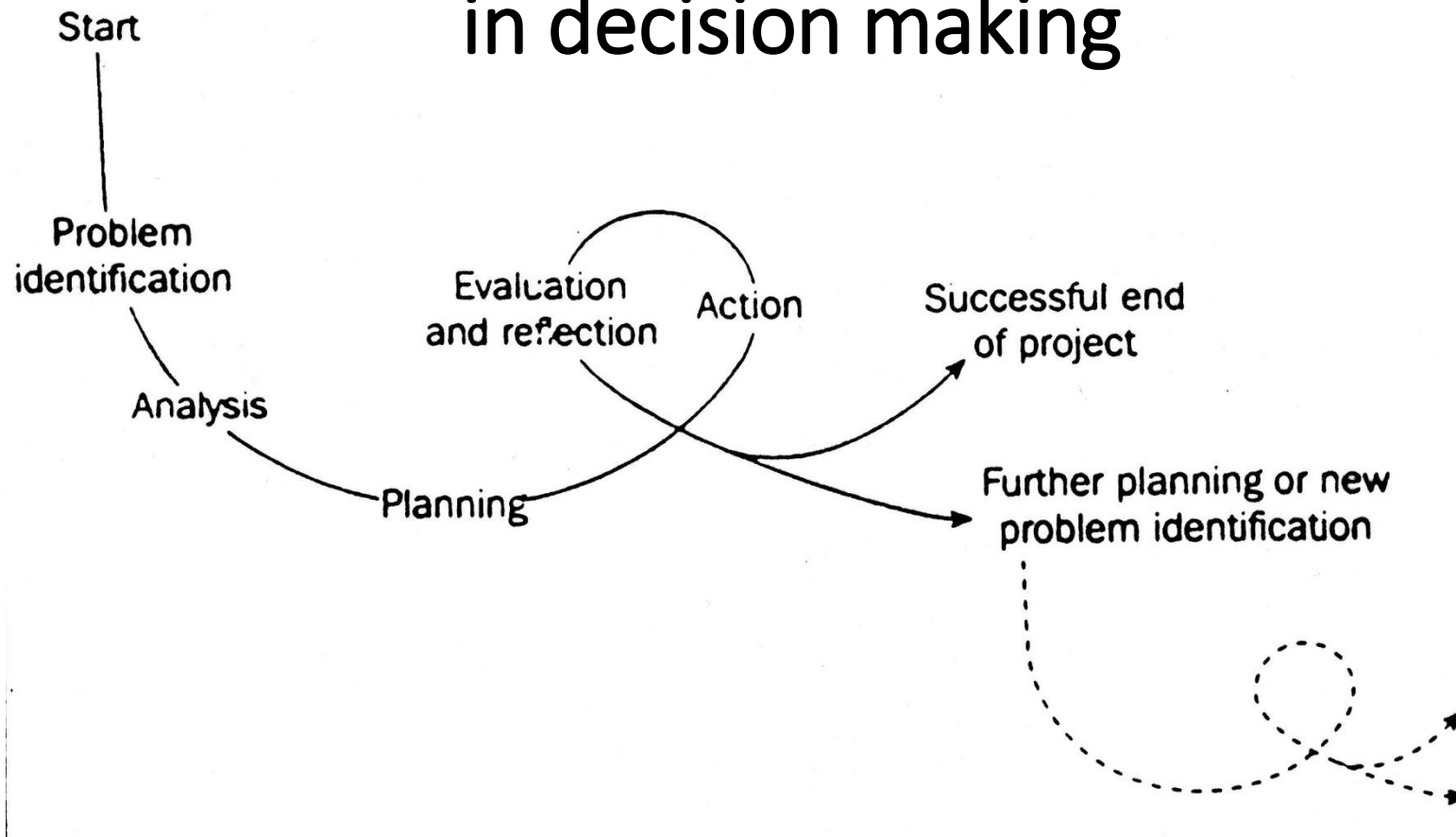
For participation to be effective young people need to be involved and have influence at **all stages of the decision making cycle**

Participation as a 'struggle for recognition' (after Honneth) ....

Fitzgerald et al 2010 state:

"In approaching children and young people's participation as a struggle over recognition, attention is drawn to the **relational and mutual nature of participation and to the dialogical space** within which norms of recognition and inter-subjectivity are constituted & negotiated."

They go on to state:

"This dialogical shift implies that children and young people's participation is not tied to the efforts of an individual child asserting a claim, but rather emerges within a **mutual interdependence, recognition and respect for children** and their views and experiences."

"What makes it work is staff ... compromising, working with you, helping you out .. But it's got to be vice verse as well. It's a two-way thing really. It's just the staff working with the individual and the individual working with the staff" (16 year old young homeless boy)

2. Meaningful participation for young people (from NYA 2008)

- **Benefits of participation** for adults: seen as clear messages for more effective services.
- YP place more value on *process* of taking part & immediate personal benefits
- **Benefits for young people:**

sense of personal achievement   learning new things

sense of belonging   new experiences

confidence building   having responsibility

realization of their own abilities   control over their lives

making a difference   just being involved

feeling their contribution is valued   opportunities for dialogue

Young people valued: having a range of opportunities to get involved in different ways, having support and guidance from workers and structures to work within…

But … did not want to be involved if they were not respected, not listened to, blocked in their initiative or if nothing happened.

Example1 : Learning from YP participating in PARTISPACE project

- Ownership and self determination
- Realising own sense of agency & empowerment
- Desire for doing (being active) rather than 'done to'
- Importance of relevance to immediate lives
- Importance of 'space' – autonomy, freedom to experiment and learn, be creative, etc.
- But ..also support
- Beware the adult-/youth-led trap!

"I like how we have the freedom, we don't get controlled by it.. The youth council can be a bit tokenistic like we have something on the agenda then someone high up puts something on the agenda ..we just want the chance of being independent ... it's important to have independence – it's a learning curve"

3. Creating spaces for participation as a shared endeavour

Children's Spaces – "Community spaces where children and adults engage together in a variety of projects of social, cultural, economic and political significance" (Moss & Petrie 2002)

- **Physical space** – a setting for children & yp

- **Social space** – a domain of social practices and relationships

- **Cultural space** – where values, rights and culture are created

- **Discursive space** – where dialogue, confrontation (exchange different views and experiences), deliberation and critical thinking takes place

**Situated social learning** (complementarity of participation & reification) "Participation in terms of learning and action is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.35)

Opening communicative action space with yp

'Communicative action space' (After Habermas, see also Kemmis 2001)

Space for: …

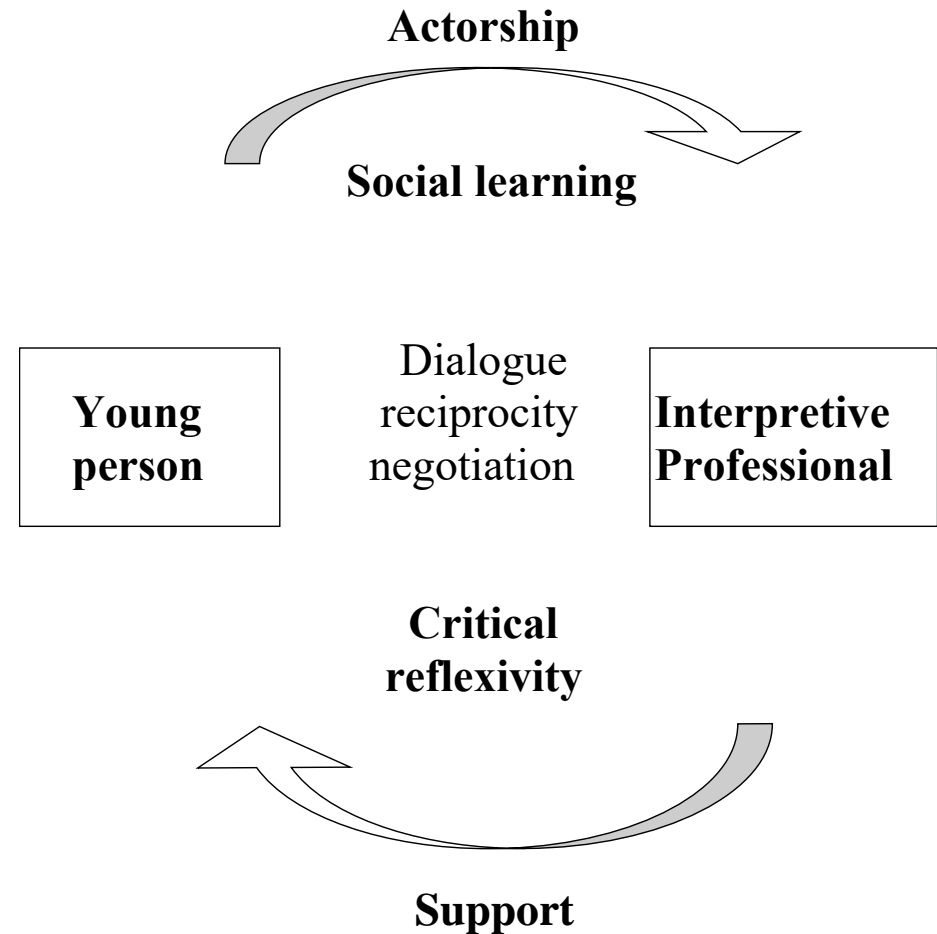- Enabling equitable and discursive communication

…. in a context of mutuality and cooperation

- Involving a deliberative process of reflexive learning

… with a disposition to seeing difference as an asset (Ref: Iris Marion Young)

- Where different parties seek coordinated action based on achievement of shared understanding of a situation

- Participation as a dynamic, generative practice of social significance

4. Reconstructing professional /adult roles – democratising the encounter space

"In a co-inquiry based relationship learning shifts from a directive, bureaucratic, professional-centred approach to the collaborative (re)production and (re)interpretation of knowledge that makes sense in the context of the lives of both adult and young person" (Weil, 2005: 163)

"In processes of social learning, power involves reciprocity manifested in autonomy and dependency in both directions. This means that … power is not given or taken away: it is always being negotiated" (Wildemeersch et al 1998: 262)

Actorship

Social learning

| Young person | Dialogue reciprocity negotiation | Interpretive Professional |

Critical reflexivity

Support

(After Percy-Smith & Weil 2003)

5. From consultation to participatory social learning: a more robust alternative to co-production?!

"The learning through … groups, organizations and communities, …. emphasis is on the **optimal use of the problem-solving potential** of those involved. Social learning is action- and experience oriented, it is **critically reflective**, meaning that actors question the validity of particular … judgments …actions, emotions, etc. It is **cooperative and communicative**, which means that the **dialogue between actors is crucial**" (adapted from Wildemeersch et al. 1998).
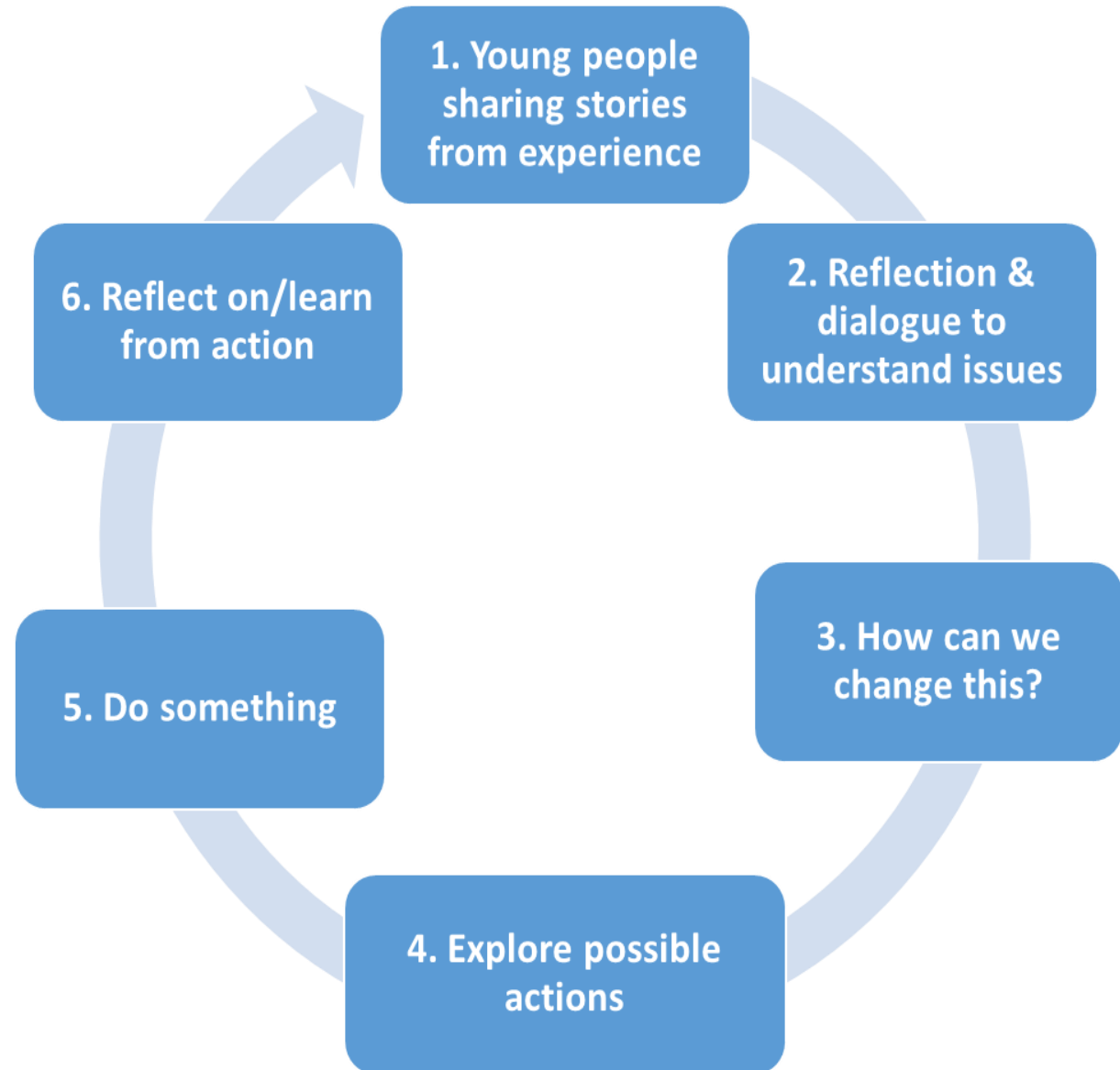
Different ways of knowing and communicating

- Starting from participant experiences:

    - collective reflection and sense making, generating questions and focus for inquiry/action

- Facilitating learning from different perspectives

- Multiple realities and ways of knowing

- Working with emotions (major driver of behaviour)

- Voicing the unspoken - expression of deeper values & experiences

- Visuals are a useful medium ..

- Critically reflexive Learning and empowerment through questioning realities

Example 2: Enhancing the participation of young Roma [EU DG JUST]

1. Young people sharing stories from experience

2. Reflection & dialogue to understand issues

3. How can we change this?

4. Explore possible actions

5. Do something

6. Reflect on/learn from action

Using photo-voice to deepen understanding of the roots of their disempowerment .. and identify possibilities for action

What affects whether we feel empowered and able to participate as equal citizens?

How can we support women to take more control over their lives? How can we deal with the powerful influence of family?

Identifying themes, issues and questions to focus action

6. Policy learning and bringing about change: the elephant in the room

- How do systems learn from young people's realities?

- Workers are often listening to young people but who is listening to workers?

Local policy → Practice → Young people's reality → Local policy (diagram)
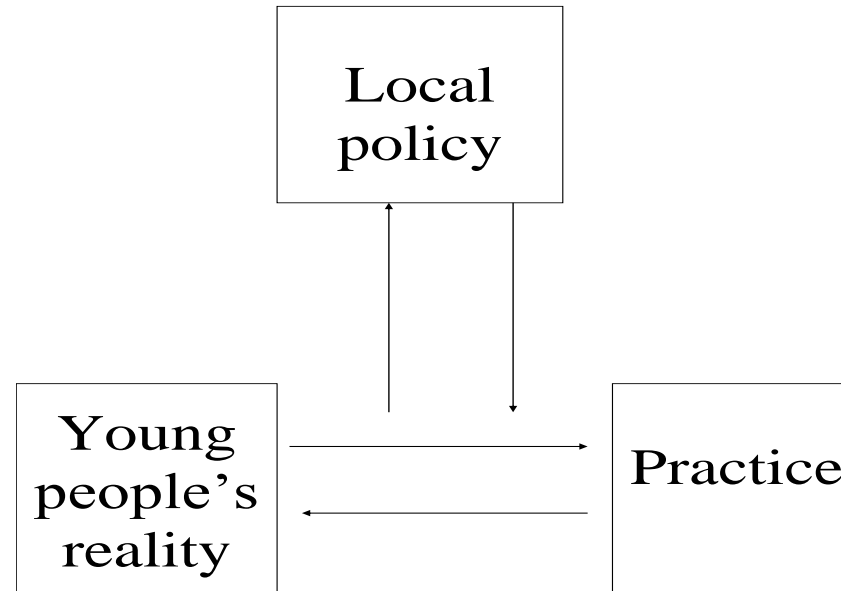
"If participation is about personal and social transformation, this will not happen whilst spaces for participation are confined to institutional structures and commodified as service use"

How can we integrate participation with systems for learning and change in services – pathways to impact?

" To develop meaningful participatory practice, organizations have to establish the infrastructure that will promote and support new ways of working, this means **becoming learning organizations** that experiment and reflect on practice. Change needs to happen at staff levels, at senior levels and in policy"

"The 'true challenge' of participation is in **organizations 'transforming themselves'**. This includes 'profound changes in an institution's prevailing attitudes, behaviours, norms, skills and procedures'".

(Kirby et al., Building a Culture of Participation, 2003 p.7)

• Dialogue and critically reflexive learning are key using learning with young people to challenge thinking & practice

Example 3: London Children in Care Councils Evaluation: Action inquiry workshop with young people, practitioners, managers and councillors

Reflection and inquiry in response to learning from evaluation to inform decisions about how to enhance effectiveness of participation

Example 4: Innovating youth health policy development with young people using a World café cooperative action inquiry approach

- **Dialogue with adult professionals** & community members to connect with young people's realities

- **Professional reflection** on what they are learning from dialogue with yp

"I was surprised that stress & problems concerning mental well being seemed to be more important than physical issues like diet and exercise" (Adult)

"We are beginning to understand that being healthy is a little bit about health services & lots more about the whole of your lives – education, relationships ...." (Adult)

-> Envisioning exercise - Exploring possible responses in light of learning.

To conclude ….

If participation is about empowerment and self determination isn't there a contradiction at play in seeking to 'facilitate' participation?:

Reflections on adult-led vs. youth-led: A red herring?

- Sometime young people lead … other times adults initiate and lead
- Sometimes yp want support and involvement from adults, sometimes they work autonomously

    Youth-led ----- Collaboration ----- Adult-led (Kirby 1999)

- What is key is that **participation and roles are negotiated** not prescribed by adults
- Even in youth led participation, adults have a role and a duty as a resource in **supporting young people** …And young people expect that!   (Hart, 2008: "Scaffolding participation")

    "But you guys have helped us in … about where we should be going and you know, when we meet and you know, having a dialogue with you guys, for these meetings, we talk to each other and communicate in terms of getting a space, so you've been very helpful with that. If we were to do it on our own and do it consistently, I think it would be challenging."
    (Manchester Young Researcher)

- The issue should not be whether adults are involved or not. The challenge is in **facilitating young people to be increasingly more proactive** in leading participation

"An understanding of democratic participation and the confidence and competence to participate can only be **acquired gradually through practice**." (Hart 1992: 5)

"To succeed at transforming the social order, we must be able to recognize **and facilitate the process of democratic self-development in the young** and to build educational and institutional settings in which their evolving characters and identities can flourish." (Jim Block 2008)