




“Radio Is a Blank Canvas for Youth Work”: Communication, Creative Agency, Compassion and Empathy

Frances Howard¹ 

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Abstract

Youth radio projects are firmly rooted in young people’s cultural and everyday experiences. Aligning with the open access, dialogic and participatory nature of youth work, youth radio programmes represent an ‘asset-based’ endeavour, which builds on young people’s cultural funds of knowledge. This article draws on data from two youth radio projects: Bolt FM, based in North East Glasgow, Scotland, and YMCA Digital, based in Nottingham, England. Youth workers and young people were interviewed about the affordances of radio as an outlet for creativity in their lives. In combination with youth work practice, radio as an art form can enable young people to tell stories, offer alternative narratives and more authentic modes of cultural production. Exploring creativity, this study theorises this mode of youth arts practice through Paul Willis’ *Common Culture* (1990). In the case of youth radio projects, communication, creative agency, compassion and empathy manifested. These findings strengthen existing research which highlights the value of youth work and radio programmes for young people.

Keywords Youth work · Radio · Creativity · Culture

Introduction

Many youth work settings have access to rudimentary recording and transmission equipment. However, youth projects that host industry standard radio equipment are few and far between. Previous research has demonstrated that community radio stations are crucial spaces of development for young people’s identities and a space of creative learning outside of a more formal environment of school (Wilkinson 2015). Creating content for radio builds upon young people’s cultural funds of knowledge, as a form as ‘asset-based’ education (Green 2013). Opportunities such as these, for

✉ Frances Howard
Frances.Howard@ntu.ac.uk

¹ Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

young people to engage with Common Culture (Willis 1990) in youth work spaces, enable creativity, self-efficacy and self-identity Howard (2022a) and should be nurtured.

Today, radio is produced and consumed in many forms: live broadcasts, journalistic pieces, weekly shows and pre-recorded podcasts, which can be downloaded and listened to at any time. This array of creative outputs is appealing to youth workers' adaptive capabilities, techniques of improvisation and responsiveness to the young people with whom they work. Youth radio, as a form of 'community media', supports communication production that is accessible to a broad range of participants (Huesca 2008). Accommodating both critical pedagogy (Chávez and Soep 2005) and a pedagogy of the here-and-now (Batsleer 2013), there is a synergy between youth work practice and radio as an art form, which this article will further explore.

The data analysed in this article is drawn from two specialist youth radio projects: Bolt FM, based in North East Glasgow, Scotland, and YMCA Digital, based in Nottingham, England. Youth workers and young people were interviewed about the affordances of radio as an outlet for creativity. In order to theorise the benefits of participation in youth radio projects, this article explores both creativity through Paul Willis' Common Culture (1990) and the alignment with youth work practice. Building upon a limited field of research into youth radio, this study aimed to investigate longer-term engagement with radio projects, through two case study projects which offered intensive creative work within youth settings. Data that supports three key findings of improved communication, creative agency, compassion and empathy will be shared, in order to strengthen existing research which highlights the value of youth work and radio programmes for young people.

Youth Work Practice

Youth work contains four interweaving aspects: informal educational opportunities, working with peers and local communities, valuing the here-and-now and trusting relationships between young person and adult (Davies 2011). Key principles include voluntary participation, the importance of conversation and dialogue, as well as supporting young people's decision-making, agency and voice (Batsleer and Davies 2010). More recent shifts in the nature and purpose of youth work in the UK have seen the re-emergence of pedagogical expectations, where youth work becomes a more 'organised' sessional approach, whereby young people are expected to participate in positive developmental activities (Van de Walle et al. 2010). However, youth work remains to offer social education and democratic practice, which posits itself as an alternative to outcome-driven targets and prescribed curricula of mainstream schooling (Coburn 2011; de St Croix 2018). As de St Croix and Doherty (2023) argue, youth work offers a relational, educational and potentially liberatory 'third place' beyond home, school and work. Youth workers retain a practice centred on the values of informal education, ethical and value-centred practice (Slovenko and Thompson 2016).

Youth work can open up new spaces for young people to develop relationships and shared identities, using fun activities where different young people can mix and create common ground (Miller et al. 2015). Young people and youth

workers collaborate, through critical and reflective dialogue, in the construction of knowledge through an individualistic approach to learning that focuses on the conditions and interests of the young person. As well as facilitating the emotional connections in young people's lives, youth workers can become skilled facilitators of creativity (Howard 2021). Working with a wide variety of art forms has been regarded as vital tools from the youth workers' 'toolkit' (Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi 2014). Youth work practice is responsive to young people's creativity, interests from popular culture and the social connections resulting from these. As well as being known as 'gatekeeper', youth workers are also seen as 'door-openers' (Batsleer et al. 2020). For example, youth workers' connections and experiences with radio were vital to the projects in this study due to accessing local industry professionals to work with the young people.

Contemporary and Creative Use of Radio

From radio dramas to radio art, broadcast entertainment such as music, quizzes and more informational podcasts, radio as an art form has a long history of supporting creative and artistic work. In the early days of pirate radio and the activist spaces of community radio, as an art form, radio encompasses DIY (Do-It-Yourself) practices and digital arts performances, which are widely accessible and listener-created. Mitchell's work on community radio, for example, indicates that for minority groups, radio provides important public spaces for a social and political voice and markers of history and culture (Mitchell and Lewis 2018). In addition, a year-long ethnographic study of a Transnational Youth Radio project by Walker et al. (2021) demonstrated how young people developed their imaginations by drawing on their own cultural funds of knowledge as well as shared cultural experiences that formed a collective imagination. These new adaptations of 'radio' have become a well-used tool by youth workers.

Radio broadcasting engenders forms of creativity within the charisma of its presenters (Dupuis et al. 2016; Vokes 2007), imaginative compositions (Valkenburg and Beentjes 1997) and appropriation of technology (Hartley et al. 2003). For young people in particular, previous research on Youth Arts programmes has demonstrated that those that engage with radio as an art form are more likely to be responsive, engaging and ultimately impactful, for the young people involved (Howard 2022b). This is due to the way that radio projects can be firmly within the young people's cultural and everyday experiences, through being dialogic and participatory. Furthermore, previous research has highlighted the domain of youth radio as a rich space for critical pedagogy, consciousness and dialogue (Cooper 2016) and also as a 'social occasion' where young people can speak about their own problems and be visible in public (Glevarec 2005). These programmes offer a space which can be used symbolically by young people, as a significant site of cultural production and Youth Voice (Wilkinson 2015).

Common Culture as Creativity in the Lives of Young People

Youth culture ethnographer, Paul Willis, urged us to ‘look to the streets, to the Common Culture, not to the towers, for what is to be learnt’ (1990). Willis suggested that Common Culture is a process, whereby young people draw on their available cultural resources as an input for their own cultural productivity in the contexts of their everyday lives. This shift in what can be considered ‘culture’ enables the recognition of creative activities that can be accessible to and of real interest for young people. Understanding Common Culture opens the gates for new cultural media, digital technologies and leisure-time pursuits that enable young people to be artistic producers, rather than passive consumers. The use of technology is significant for the young people in terms of opportunities to create work, get inspiration and get their work out there (Manchester and Pett 2015). Art forms such as radio, which are rooted in digital production, are common within youth settings and are rarely taken into consideration when exploring creativity (Livingstone 2007). Previous research on young people’s artistic production has highlighted the value of arts programmes within youth settings as enablers of common cultural dispositions (Howard 2022a).

Young people have a clear and unfiltered consciousness of the world around them, and this is often represented in the creative work they chose to make. Willis argues for an identification, recognition and support of existing creative experiences and activities not at present regarded as ‘artistic’ but which are now part of our Common Culture (Willis 2005). Radio is a prime example of this, whereby young people, who would not go to a gallery to see art, but would spend time learning new skills, teaching themselves digital practices and engage in alternative spaces for creativity, can flourish (Howard 2022b). Common Culture, therefore, is taken up by this article as a framework for recognising the everyday and non-elitist forms of culture and creativity that are appropriate to engage young people. In addition, viewing creativity within spaces of informal education highlights young people’s agency and the production of cultural artefacts from within their own repertoires of Common Culture.

Study Sites and Methods

Based in North East Glasgow, Bolt FM offers young people the opportunity to develop skills in radio, train with professional standard equipment and the chance to use these skills. As Scotland’s longest running youth radio station, Bolt FM’s mobile programme is able to connect small communities through visiting different locations: youth clubs, drop-ins at partner organisations and schools. The programme is funded 50% through Glasgow City Council’s communities fund and draws the remaining funding from charitable and arts funding sources such as Children In Need.¹ Young people are able to plan, present and record podcasts, radio dramas,

¹ BBC Children in Need is a charity whose vision is that children and young people in the UK have a safe, happy and secure childhood and the chance to reach their potential. They fund programmes that make differences in children’s lives that help prevent or overcome the effects of the disadvantages they face.

documentaries and sound art, alongside an annual 2-week take-over of the radio station for live transmission. They are supported by youth workers from a range of different backgrounds—radio, arts, youth work—who each bring a different set of skills. The organisation’s main aim is to give young people a voice using radio. Participants get to work with the same standard equipment as commercial radio programmes: microphones, faders and computers that play music. The programme also has links with other radio stations where young people can take up apprenticeships.

YMCA Digital is a community project designed to inspire, support and develop young people to fulfil their potential through creative arts and digital media. The programme boasts a range of new media platforms and performing opportunities for young people aged 13–19 in Nottingham. Delivered by experienced industry professionals and trained YMCA youth workers, the project engages aspiring artists to harness their creativity in workshops and open sessions. The project takes place at a state-of-the-art studio in NGY myplace in Nottingham city centre, where they provide attendees with the latest equipment and technology. The project aims to engage young people in learning whilst equipping them with the skills they need for life such as communication, IT and media literacy, planning and team work.

The two projects were selected through purposeful sampling (Suri 2011) due to the Author’s prior connection with the organisations. Youth workers were recruited initially, some of whom were known to the Author. Youth workers then recommended young people who may wish to be part of the research, who were fully briefed and gave consent to participate voluntarily (Alderson and Morrow 2020). Youth workers were also able to gauge the longer-term involvement (between 1 and 5 years) of the research participants. The names of both the youth workers and young people have been withdrawn and participants are listed by number and project—please see table in the “Appendix” section.

The full sample consisted of two youth workers from each setting, four in total, who were all male and white British/Scottish. This homogenous sample could be seen as a limitation of the study, however, should not be seen as representative of the diverse cultural contexts and communities where youth radio happens—see previous research by Green (2013), who explores a Black youth radio collective. In terms of young participants, there were ten in total, five from each project. The gender of these participants varied with five female, four male and one non-binary young person. The young people’s ethnicity was also diverse with six white British/Scottish, two Black British and two Asian. Other protected characteristics included one neurodivergent young person and two LGBTQI+ young people, details which were ascertained through details given in interview, rather than information requested through the participant consent form. All young participants were aged between 14 and 21, and for those under 18, parental consent was sought.

Following consent, all participants undertook a semi-structured interview, conducted by the Author. Questions were developed around the principal theme of ‘creativity’ encouraging participants to think about how radio supports creativity within young people. Subsidiary themes included questions about skills and attributes developed through radio and the alignment with youth work and support of the youth workers. Final questions considered barriers for accessing radio provision and

what the future would hold for the young people who had been involved on a longer-term basis with the projects. Some data was captured for a previous study (Howard 2022b), which drew on Bolt FM as a case study for accommodating Common Culture. However, the incorporation of data from a second project is new for this article to enable more depth.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and initially divided into the themes structured through the questions. Following a grounded theory approach (Charmaz and Belgrave 2012), initial iterative coding was undertaken, and emergent themes were noted and data from across the two projects. Following this coding, the framework of Common Culture was applied to identify everyday art forms, alignment with young people's existing cultural experiences, accessibility and youth cultures of broadcasting. These emergent themes and parities with Common Culture are shared in the findings of this article.

Findings: the Value of Radio Within Youth Work Practice

This research generated data on the alignment of radio with youth work practice and the value of radio as a 'tool' for youth workers. There were four aspects that both young people and youth workers reported as valuable within the programmes that are further explored in the following subtitles: communication, creative agency, compassion and empathy. Additionally, there are engaging elements of radio, as an art form, which aligned with the concept of Common Culture. For example, when asked about the affordances of radio for young people's creativity, this youth worker commented upon the innate nature of creative work within the 'culture of broadcasting' that growing up in today's society offers:

Young people are creative beings. It's something that's in their culture. As well as being something that they can listen to, radio can be something they can actively do. They can pretend to be the DJ's that are on the different radio shows and then they can add their own twist. We've got the YouTube generation and the Tik T.O.K generation and if you asked young people 10 years ago: 'what do you want to be?' They'd say they wanted to be a footballer. But nowadays, they want to be a YouTuber. So, there's a culture of broadcasting that's both accessible and creative for young people.

(Youth worker 1, Bolt FM)

Youth projects that provide the opportunity for young people to engage with broadcasting skills are viewed as beneficial. However, there was a lack of consensus between youth workers concerning the longevity of radio as a form of communication and an art form. One youth worker even argued that 'radio was dead to young people' for the principal reason that listening live, or listening whilst driving the car, were not practices that young people took part in. However, young people negated this by arguing that it is important for them to have the opportunity to experience radio-making as a way of opening up vehicles for both communication and listening:

Maybe when some young people think of radio, they think that because they don't listen to it, maybe it's not a 'thing'. But when they realise that they can make radio about whatever they want, I think then they realize it's really engaging for them because originally I don't think they would have thought it was accessible. Maybe because our generation aren't used to having the radio as their main form of entertainment but I think if more young people had that opportunity and experience of having people to do a radio show, they would talk about what they want, that would kind of open them up more to listening to radio.

(Young person 1, Bolt FM)

Other youth workers were more positive about the value of radio as a tool for youth work. Activities they listed that radio facilitated included live music, broadcast journalism and music quizzes. Youth worker 2 suggested that the art form was an effective 'blank canvas' for youth work due to its malleability and responsivity to young people's interests. Youth workers from Bolt FM reported the value of giving young people a place that they spend time with a trusted adult, who is a positive adult role model. Youth workers highlighted the importance of young people having control over what they wanted to learn and what they wanted to create, as a key factor in both keeping them engaged but also being offered praise for their work.

For youth workers at YMCA Digital, radio was less of a vehicle for support work or social development, but for expression of voice:

Young people talk all the time, even those that aren't that confident. When you've got young people at home, at school or whatever, they just never stop talking. They've all got something that they want to say. And there's so much division in society and young people have always been 'The fire in a society' I mean, that's nothing new. But radio, essentially, is just a 'voice' speaking and youth work supports that. So, it would just makes sense that those two things go hand in hand.

(Youth worker 3, YMCA Digital)

Youth worker 4 argued that with radio, young people 'got out of it what they put in'. That youth worker felt that their role was to give young people the tools to create their own radio shows, but also gave young people freedom to explore issues that mattered to them. Some young people shared how youth workers had introduced them to new people and new environments as inspiration for their radio-making—for example, Bolt FM young people reported visiting Holyrood² and interviewing politicians. Young people described these environments as 'where the creativity starts'. Different kinds of creativity were reported by both youth workers and young people, which were coded as *communication* such as interviewing skills, *creative agency* including coming up with ideas, playfulness and *compassion and empathy* such as the skill of listening and working collaboratively.

² Holyrood is an area of Edinburgh, Scotland, where the Scottish Parliament Building resides.

Communication

Youth workers referred to the ‘power of the mic’ indicating that when young people were given a microphone they would ‘come alive’ in a different way. Young people attributed this to radio giving them the opportunity to ‘get what they wanted to say across’ as a significantly different pedagogical approach to that of their school experience. Working with radio afforded the opportunity for both Youth Voice and ‘being listened to’, opening up non-hierarchical means of expression, which is valued as part of Common Culture. One young person described their most memorable experience with Bolt FM in attending the COP 26 Summit in Glasgow and interviewing people in the crowd who were protesting in support of action against climate change. Young person 1 describes how this ‘pushed us outside of our comfort zone’ in terms of communicating in a public space with a wider range of young people. She argued that:

It’s not often they get to hear young people voices. It’s usually kind of adults that dictate the conversation. This is our platform and I finally found that I could talk about things that were important to me and know that other people felt that way too.

(Young person 1, Bolt FM)

For the YMCA Digital project, youth workers described ‘throwing a few young people in the studio together’ in order to facilitate conversations in a ‘safe space’. Through the act of ‘plugging in the microphone’, young people would learn new skills in how to communicate with different people on a wide range of topics. Youth worker 3 reports on a nightly radio show, where young people would learn how to speak on the radio:

We would train young people how to use the radio equipment and how to plan a show and most importantly, how to speak on the radio. That’s the most important thing, and it’s something that people take for granted. When they see someone on the stage, even doing something like a pub quiz for example, they see someone speaking and think they’re literally just speaking. And in my opinion, that’s one of the most important skills for let’s say an extroverted or confident or opinionated young person to be able to do. You know when you’re young, you’ve got so many opinions and thoughts on what life might be or whatever, and to be able to channel that into actually saying it is very important.

(Youth worker 3, YMCA Digital)

This perspective was also corroborated by the young people. Many reported augmented communication skills, such as turn-taking, ‘padding’ to take up time and responding to questions and issues raised both within everyday situations and the radio studio, for example, building on skills in keeping a conversation going on the radio and judging when to ‘pass the conversation to others’ in order to change topic. Introducing themselves to new people was also challenging as the young person below describes:

Introducing yourself to people on the radio was just weird. I love talking, I love the sound of my own voice, but I used to hate meeting new people. If it's someone that I know, I could talk for hours, but as soon as I'd have to introduce myself to new people, I would struggle. I guess the project helped my normal social interactions in that way.

(Young person 9, YMCA Digital)

The benefits for young people of this experience were relayed by one of the Bolt FM youth workers, who expressed the value of young people understanding how to ask and how to respond to questions, particularly later in life, for example with job interviews. Youth worker 2 described the 'honing of the craft' of asking and answering questions as important for interview techniques. Young people also acknowledged that communicating through interviews was sometimes challenging and that some had assumed that 'flipping on a microphone and talking' would be easy. But in reality, it was a 'real skill that young people had to learn, just like public speaking'.

Youth worker 1, from Bolt FM, described the importance of the radio, not just for playing music and chatting, but getting to the heart of issues that really matter for young people. Below, he reports the past successes he has seen with young people speaking to local politicians:

What we love about young people engaging with politicians, is that they are getting to ask whatever they want. Getting to ask the stuff that they actually think is important and about the stuff that's genuinely affecting them. And then they see that their opinions matter and that they can put their point across and that can be engaged with. We love doing that and we love that radio can give us that opportunity.

(Youth worker 1, Bolt FM)

With the practice of youth work being based upon a voluntary and dialogical relationship, the youth workers interviewed for this study were able to draw upon the conversation methods with young people. Youth workers at YMCA Digital felt that it was an important space to facilitate debate and to informally educate young people on how to debate. This included communication skills of interpreting information given, planning a response and 'not being angry about it, if this opinion differs to yours'. Youth workers felt that politics was not debated enough in schools and took the opportunity of learning radio to encourage young people to communicate what they had learnt about the political system, with the 2019 general election, being given as an example.

Creative Agency

As well as being a vehicle for creative communication, the youth radio projects also facilitated young people's creative agency. This manifested through content creation as young people could devise their mechanisms for communicating and shape their material to be used on the radio. Creative agency positions young people as the creators, as the creative agents, who have power and freedom to be creative. The synergy with Common Culture is clear in terms of grassroots artistic

production. These opportunities varied across the two projects with YMCA Digital offering weekly slots and regular events following an 8-week series of workshops and Bolt FM hosting a 2-week FM broadcast with around 200-h live radio in March each year. With YMCA, young people did ‘radiothons’, live gigs and regular shows, as well as making jingles and preparing other pre-recorded materials, which was live streamed through YMCA Digital’s radio station. With Bolt FM, the majority of the year was spent making podcasts or other pre-recorded elements such as radio plays and documentaries, which edited different interviews together, in the build up to the 2-week live broadcast. Young person 5, from Bolt FM, describes the process of negotiating content:

Young people have their slots, they can pick what slots they have. They can pick up what they want to do within that. They might want to just be themselves or their friends talking. Do they want it to be Interviews? Who do they want to interview? Who to contact to ask if they will come? So young people have clear control.

(Young person 5, Bolt FM)

Young people described creating content for the radio as ‘much more than making lists of music’. Young person 8 recounts planning and writing up things to talk about, getting ideas and thoughts ready and preparing a show so that it would run smoothly. For some, it was about sharing stories, learning and finding out new things. This manifested in informal conversations, as if someone were ‘listening in to talking between friends’. But for other young people, radio as an art form enabled them to take on whole new personas. These opportunities to ‘take control’ and ‘be someone completely different’ were valuable for young people’s agency. Youth worker 1 from Bolt FM explores this sense of freedom further by highlighting the different kinds of Common Culture that the young people are invested in:

Radio is in the eye of the beholder. It’s about bringing out in the young person, what they’re actually interested in and what they find entertaining. So, for some young people Bolt FM could be an outlet for us to try out some kind of journalistic type work. For some young people it’s about a passion they have for music and trying to communicate that. Or for some people it’s just about having fun. And that’s validating to them, you know, that you think the things that they care about are valuable and worthwhile. So, if a young person is the world’s biggest expert on Fortnite, that will be interesting for lots of other young people.

(Youth worker 1, Bolt FM)

This theme of encouraging young people to explore their own cultural interests and find out what motivates them ran across both projects. Young people reported that they felt like they had ‘creative power’ in terms of coming up ideas for shows, scripts and radio features. Youth workers highlighted that underneath the presenting aspect of radio resides a lot of research, planning, detail, practice and patience, and these are the aspects that they supported young people with.

With YMCA Digital, youth worker 4 recounts the transformation of young people's 'smallest ideas' into simple games that could be played on the radio:

I was encouraging sections of the show, where young people were coming up with all these random games. Something simple like coming up with 'Alphabet Cereal' or Doctor Who facts of the week, but they were fun and people would tune in each week to hear them. In terms of this creativity, it's not revolutionary, as long as you care about it and it's an idea from your head and just one person in the crowd will laugh at it or be interested in it, then that's important. It's playful, it's fun and there will be other people who want to know these things.

(Youth worker 1, YMCA Digital)

Young people also recounted stories of ideas for particular radio shows that they remembered fondly and the pride they felt in being able to realise these ideas. Young person 9 spoke at length about the many interviews with local bands they had conducted as material for their show. Young person 6 was part of a neurodivergent youth group that attended the project one evening a week. They recall how their group was 'so good at coming up with ideas' and that they came up with the idea of calling their show 'spectrum' based on the autistic spectrum. Young person 7 attended an LGBTQI+ group and reflected how their group wanted to 'take over the radio waves' as a way of celebrating and increasing awareness of gender diversity:

Another project we did, we named 'Glow Cloud', was a great way to group together all of our creative ideas. We wanted it to be a safe a nurturing space as well and I think the openness of this projects inspired me and other young people to speak about things that maybe they have thought about but never verbalised, or shared with others.

(Young person 7, YMCA Digital)

There were several examples of show names and other creative material such as 'features' or jingles that young people across both projects shared had a positive impact upon their sense of agency as well as raising awareness of diversity. Having the ability to talk about weird and wonderful things encouraged young people to think and consider things they would have never thought of. Being able to 'delve into things deeper' because they are listening and they are debating enabled a quality of informal learning that was reported as impactful for the young people involved.

Compassion and Empathy

Compassion is an important element of youth work practice in an ever-changing world which seems to lurch from crisis to crisis. Youth workers play a vital role in challenging negative perceptions and bestowing empathy through facilitating important conversations. Within this research project, young people had previously referred to the radio projects as 'safe spaces'. This was in relation to connecting with like-minded young people, learning about other people's experiences and introducing new topics, which might have been difficult to talk about

in other settings. For young people to be able to share their own personal experiences, as well as putting themselves in ‘other people’s shoes’ afforded a significant emotional connection. For example, with YMCA Digital, young people reported being able to talk about gender identity and sexuality more openly than at school or at home:

In terms of talking about things like gender issues, which was a central talking point with the group, I was listening to others and still learning things. Just about how they see the world. I mean, you can read BBC News and read about all these things that someone like JK Rowling is saying, but you can never talk about it. But here there’s actually people that are trying to talk. Young people, you know the next generation of people, who never get their opinions on the news... and if you do, they’re always token.
(Young person 8, YMCA Digital)

For young people, being able to talk about topics in a different and often more positive way, they felt ‘could just be like a drop in the ocean’ but also could impact their day in a good way or make them think about things in life, which they felt was ‘really powerful’. For example, young person 9 reported being able to talk openly about their dyslexia on the radio and how they were able to feel a bit easier about describing their emotions. This sense of building understanding and compassion through the radio projects was echoed by the youth workers. Below, youth worker 1 from Bolt FM describes an exercise he facilitates with groups of young people called ‘Following the Money’, where young people are encouraged to think about a particular issue in society that is resulting in inequality:

One of my favorite ones is ‘following the money’. I ask young people ‘What’s the story and why is this happening? Why’s the issue come about and who pays for it?’ Seeing the issue in a particular way, that makes it seem unfair, and so particularly challenging some of the prejudices in the media. I’m making young people very aware of that, so that fits in with a whole lot of stuff we’re doing about it gender based violence and media image at the moment. Young people have created a number of podcasts that and about how people see themselves, as well as topics such as porn and sexting. So, there’s a whole lot of issues that you can tie in to radio and have young people discussing.
(Youth worker 1, Bolt FM)

Compassion and empathy engendered by the process of radio-making represented a common bond, between both young people and youth workers, who reported on the value of radio-making for listening to and learning about others. Here exists a parallel with Common Culture as a ‘shared’ youth culture and an opportunity to share experiences and develop perspectives about the world. Many young people reported enjoying listening to someone as a presenter or a young person organising features on different cultures and experiences. A youth worker from YMCA Digital referred to ‘the art of listening’ as something that develops

awareness, responsivity and compassion. The job of a radio presenter is to listen to the presenter of the interviewee and respond in such a way that they show they have been understood and ‘listened to’. This aspect was echoed in importance by young people across both projects:

Even when we’re talking, when we’re doing groups with younger kids and stuff, no-one feels talked down to. We all feel listened to and that’s because of the youth workers making us feel like we are part of something, and not like they are telling us what to do. They’re all very encouraging and you can like open up and share your ideas, because they will listen.

(Young person 3, Bolt FM)

Youth workers also shared examples of situations where the radio conversations required reprimanding or ‘reeling back in’ after getting out of hand. Youth worker 4 from YMCA Digital gave the example of swearing and inappropriate language towards others and how he dealt with it, arguing that ‘it is really important to let young people know that there are people that may not agree with your ideas or may take offence to something’. One further example was during lockdown when the Black Lives Matter movement happened. YMCA Digital continued to host radio sessions online, and this was a big topic to debate with the young people. Young person 9 reflected:

We learned a lot from each other and I feel like if it wasn’t for the radio, we wouldn’t have been able to do that because it was such an emotional topic. So this topic taught the young people how to be empathetic, but also understand from other people’s point of view. Radio teaches us how to debate these issues and how to be respectful of others.

(Young person 9, YMCA Digital)

Youth workers and young people agreed with this perspective of the opportunity of radio to ‘discuss important things that we are seeing in the world right now’ and ‘things that young people are seeing on the news and not understanding’. For example, youth worker 4 stated that ‘radio is their opportunity to have a say and to have that debate and to even protest in a healthy, peaceful way and to communicate with other young people’. These experiences, described by both youth workers and young people, supported a compassionate view of others. This alignment with youth work practice and the values of youth work signpost radio as a valuable tool for youth work.

Discussion: Valuing Common Culture

The analysis and display of data within this article has sought to make visible the practice of youth radio in valuing everyday creative practice. In order to further explore manifestations of creativity within the radio projects, I return to Willis’ work on ‘Common Culture’, so that the value of these projects for young people can be captured. Not surprisingly, as with previous research (Howard 2022b), when asked,

young people did not necessarily rate themselves highly in terms of creativity ‘in the traditional sense’. For example, young person 9 did not consider themselves a creative person because they were not good at music, but they did consider themselves a social person who was good at interviewing people and relating to others. When questioned further about what creativity is and how this may manifest in youth radio projects, young people demonstrated a much broader approach than that of the ‘high arts’:

I think creativity really comes in lots of different formats. I think there’s lots of different ways to be creative... you can be creative and you can be inspired by things around you in the world, or you can be creative and come up with your own things. I think creativity is using your imagination to influence things, whether it’s making art, making a film or song-writing. All these things are different.

(Young person 8, YMCA Digital)

This approach aligns with Willis’ concept of Common Culture in the regard that for young people, culture is not about going into a place where they may be expected to experience cultural, such as an art gallery, but culture lies in our everyday experiences and those that we create for ourselves, as demonstrated by the youth radio projects in this study. Radio as a digital platform is well-placed to facilitate young people’s ‘culture of broadcasting’ as an accessible vehicle for creativity in many forms, such as those explored in the thematic analysis of this article: communication, creative agency, compassion and empathy. For example, as well as developing skills in communicating with different people, young people working with radio appreciated the non-hierarchical means of expression, which is valued as part of Common Culture. In addition, the affordances for creative agency, positioning young people as creative agents, who have power and freedom to be creative, clearly align with the grassroots means of artistic production, as represented by Common Culture. Furthermore, the duality of Common Culture as a ‘shared’ youth culture, but also one that is found within the everyday lives of young people, enabled the development of compassion and empathy between both young people and youth workers.

The youth workers interviewed across both projects recognised that young people brought their own culture. They were bringing music they were interested in, stories that they wanted to tell or things from the news they wanted to talk about. From this starting point, young people were creating and curating different forms of radio that demonstrated creativity through Common Culture. Youth worker 2 argues for the importance of this process:

You can be talking about football, and that is your main thing, and we might even get you hooked up with commentating in a match. But it may be that actually you’re talking about something that you’ve less experience in, like baking or ballet or gardening. These different things that young people are interested in, they understand that the broad range of art is something that you’re creating rather than something that is fixed on a wall that you’ve got to go and look at... So, the main thing is that it’s their creation.

(Youth worker 2, Bolt FM)

Radio as an art form, within youth settings, develops a range of creative skills that can merge with young people's everyday lives. Several of the young people interviewed reported barriers to other creative projects, because they did not feel like they were talented in drama, for example, to be able to join a theatre group. Projects, such as Bolt FM and YMCA Digital, that support young people to engage with culture, through an accessible format, such as radio, create a new kind of art, in a new kind of space. As youth worker 3 describes:

Radio is probably the first art form that young people hear that is accessible to them, because of listening to the radio in the car. And a lot of them wouldn't feel put off by it as art form because, well, it's just music and people chatting, that's just what happens on a normal day. But when you think back through the cultural history of music and story telling, whether that is community gatherings and family events, where stories were told round the fire, or whether it was songs sung as a way of handing traditions on, then people will start to recognize this new kind of art. This is a cultural experience where young people have a microphone, and quite often a screen put in front of them, so they're able to talk about the issues that they want to talk about and play the music that they want to play.

(Youth worker 3, YMCA Digital)

Youth radio, as a space where radio as an art form and youth work practice collide, provides important opportunities for young people to meet new people, experience new environments and share their own Common Culture. For the young people interviewed in both projects, whether their content 'made it to the air or not' was not important, but rather it was what they had gained these informal education opportunities, skilfully facilitated by the youth workers. A common cultural approach to content creation proved more agentic, inclusive and responsive to young people's cultural interests and created a 'blank canvas' for youth work.

Conclusion

This article has explored young people's longer-term engagement in radio programmes as an outlet for creativity. Two case study projects, Bolt FM in Glasgow, Scotland, and YMCA Digital in Nottingham, England, were featured as examples of intensive creative work in youth work settings. The experiences and connections of the youth workers were vital to the informal education affordances for the young people, where data captured opportunities for augmented communication, creative content creation and compassion, aligning with youth work practice and values. Adding further to research on community radio practices, these sites have demonstrated technological practices of creativity, which respond to and support young people who live within a 'culture of broadcasting'. Within this socio-cultural landscape, Common Culture was suggested as a valuable framework for recognising the everyday creativity practices of young people, outside of the school setting and expectations of a formalised 'high arts' curriculum. Data gleaned from both youth workers and young people has highlighted radio as an important tool for youth work,

encompassing a significantly different pedagogical approach to that of mainstream school. This spectrum of affordances ranged from group support work, personal and social development, to a concern for voice and creative expression.

These findings are timely as youth work spaces continue to disappear across the UK. With funding for youth and community projects becoming more scarce, more short term and more instrumentalised, opportunities for young people to engage with radio as an art form are becoming increasingly rare. Understanding the importance of radio-making as a creative practice, for both youth workers and young people, helps us to advocate for the value of these programmes. Understanding the possibilities of youth work practice for developing communication, creativity and compassion adds further to the growing field of research exploring the value of youth work. And, understanding the different perspectives and lived experiences of young people accessing creativity through informal education is worthy of future research and investigation. Youth policymakers must recognise that as much as society would benefit from educated and economically contributing young people, it would also equally benefit from those that are creative and compassionate. Supporting youth radio would be one way to support this in future.

Appendix

Table 1 Participant information

Participant	Project	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Duration with project
Youth worker 1	Bolt FM	Male	White Scottish	45–56	
Youth worker 2	Bolt FM	Male	White Scottish	20–35	
Youth worker 3	YMCA Digital	Male	White British	20–35	
Youth worker 4	YMCA Digital	Male	White British	20–35	
Young person 1	Bolt FM	Female	White Scottish	18	4 years
Young person 2	Bolt FM	Male	Asian	14	18 months
Young person 3	Bolt FM	Female	White Scottish	21	3 years
Young person 4	Bolt FM	Female	White Scottish	20	2 years
Young person 5	Bolt FM	Male	White Scottish	17	18 months
Young person 6	YMCA Digital	Male	White British	20	3 years
Young person 7	YMCA Digital	Non-binary	Asian	19	2 years
Young person 8	YMCA Digital	Female	Black British	18	2 years
Young person 9	YMCA Digital	Female	Black British	19	2 years
Young person 10	YMCA Digital	Male	White British	21	4 years

Table 1

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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