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Anarchy vs Academia: The Art of Protest

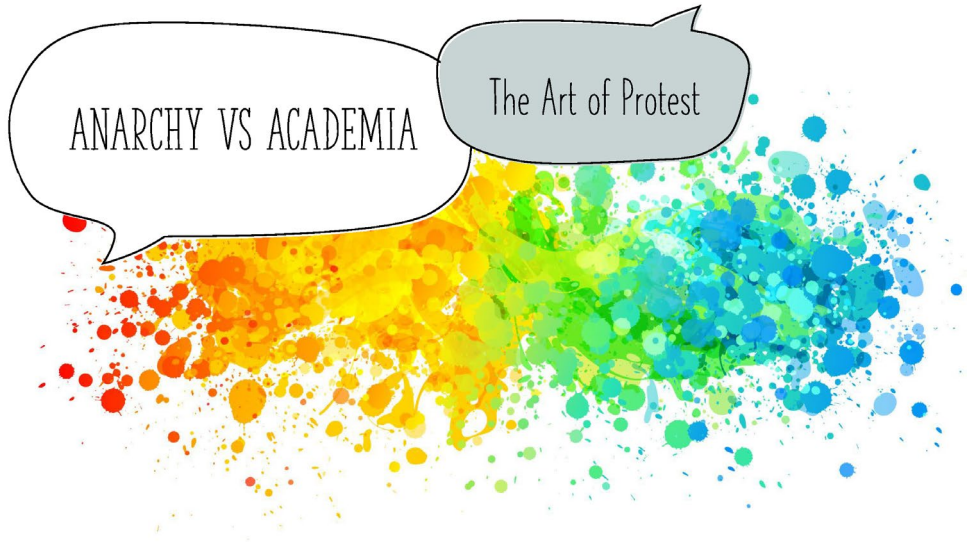
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Keywords: *social activism; community art; wellbeing; recovery, education*



Arts-activism for young people

My PhD by Portfolio reflects on 25 years of project work with young people and the challenges that youth workers and artists face in creating the necessary foundations for inclusive and productive activity, in diverse settings ranging from working on the streets, painting murals, to developing a whole school approach for educational impact on selected themes. My research explores the question, *What are the necessary foundations for facilitating authentic arts-based co-production with young people?* with a particular interest in projects that are rooted in solution-focused, social activism. The main themes of the research focus on:

- **Power;** determining the impact of stakeholder agendas,
- **Impact;** including an exploration of the definition of a 'solution focused' approach,
- **Authenticity;** ensuring the values represented in the work are inherent to the individual and Safe Space, looking at how this can be facilitated and the importance of ensuring inclusion.

Co-production in creative learning necessitates a collective and collaborative approach when working with young people. This research moves away from traditional, didactic approaches in education, towards a more facilitated experience for the learners and the leader. Dynamic inclusive groupwork leaves Darwin at the door, in the corridor even, there is no space for the selfish gene, or survival of the fittest. Inclusive safe space is essentially an anarchic space, a democratic space where cooperation outweighs competition, where diversity is a strength and is not viewed as problematic. This research aims towards being non-hierarchical. It is facilitated rather than led, the young people are the experts on what they think, and the leader is there to support them to express and potentially actualise their ideas. My portfolio research will culminate in an exhibition produced by young people, and will invite their chosen audience to reflect on their issues and artforms.

Project 1. Ryelands Mural Project



Before

Figure 1. Tom's Cabin,
Ryelands Estate: Lancaster
Youth and Community Services
and Louise Andrews (1996)

After



RYELANDS SHOP PROJECT AUGUST 1997

This first retrospective project involved the co-production of a mural on a shop front on a council estate in Lancaster where I lived, which was notorious both locally and nationally for economic deprivation, crime and racist attacks. It formed part of my BA in Visual Art and was the first time I had designed, funded and managed a community arts project. When I moved to Ryelands in 1992 I had no idea about the reputation of the estate or the stigma attached to living there. I found a thriving community of women invested in creating social opportunities for the children and families who lived there, supported by local Youth and Community services. The project attracted a small grant from the Council for materials and I was well supported throughout the project by outreach youth workers.

As a resident on the estate I was aware of the negative impact that mainstream media reports were having on attitudes towards residents, especially young people. My aim was to engage local young people to create a positive visual image to challenge these attitudes, as Tyler (2021:197) points out, ‘when you’re experiencing poverty, what really grinds you down is the way other people perceive you’. Young people on the estate were viewed as juvenile criminals, they were discriminated against through negative stereotyping, especially at school. As a student I was influenced by arts movements and writers such as Suzi Gablik (1995:138) who commented how, ‘many artists are creating a more participatory and interactive kind of art, trying to get it off the walls, so to speak, and make it happen in places other than in the studio or the gallery’. I had been studying and making art for around 4 years by this time, mainly for myself or with my own children, and I could see the potential of engaging young people in a visual project that could potentially change the way they thought and felt about living on the estate as well as challenging ‘outsiders’ attitudes towards Ryelands.

The aim of the project was to create a vibrant and colourful shop front by painting new board displays and to raise the profile of not only the area but the young people who lived there. It was a hopeful and ambitious project and entailed me learning from other local community artists about their work and co-designing with children for the first time. Although I had 3 children of my own, who also got involved in the project, this was the first time I had run workshops for art and social development. I learnt about risk assessments, consent forms, using water based non-toxic paint for outdoor use, how to use a jigsaw, put up scaffolding and most importantly how to engage with local children and their parents, Youth and Community services and the Local Council. I was very much a ‘resident’ when I undertook this project, my relationship with the children was cemented by my own children’s friendships with many of them, however I worked with over 20 young people on this project, many of whom I didn’t know previously, in the role of Youth and Community Artist and this was the beginning of developing my own practice and using art as a tool for solution focused activism.

I had been involved in protest for around 20 years by 1996, campaigning for animal rights and the banning of nuclear weapons from a young age and later living off-grid on small land-based communities. The Ryelands Shop project, however, was the point when my activism became focused on co-creating a solution rather than purely protesting. My practice started to become rooted within contemporary arts theory and practice and connected me with my immediate community, in particular the young people who lived on the estate; rather than marching to demand the change I was actively trying to create.

Project 2. *What Do You Think?*



Figure 2: Peace Tent: Parbold Girl Guides (Louise Andrews, 2019).

In 2017, working as a Partnership Development Officer for Lancashire Boys and Girls Clubs, I decided I wanted to give young people a platform to explore what was important to them and to share their hopes and concerns about the future. *What Do You Think?* ran in local schools from 2017-2019, was funded in part by The Ragdoll Foundation, and enabled me to develop and adapt original arts-based, co-produced qualitative methods to consult with young people. My aim was to enable authentic participation by young people, to highlight their thoughts and solutions around local and world views. As Bourn (2022:77) pointed out, ‘social change can no longer be seen purely from a local or national angle. Global forces influence all aspects of life including education’. I worked with 400 young people aged 5yrs-14yrs across Lancashire, which culminated in my developing an ambitious full-school approach for the *What Do You Think?* initiative, through a cross-curricular theme around social wellbeing and personal development. My workshops aimed to create a more democratic foundation through focusing on inclusion and accessibility, adapting each time to suit the needs of the group/class.

Delivered over 8 weeks, each workshop informed the next through rigorous evaluation with the young people and the workers who supported the delivery. There was an emphasis on being solution focused, born from a belief that young people should not be left feeling overwhelmed, powerless or bogged down in the issues they had identified. I was really humbled during this project, engaging in serious, solution focused discussion with children as young as 6 years, who had strong opinions about poverty, equality, plastic pollution, life on earth, climate change - among other subjects. Homelessness was one of the biggest concerns young people had, leading to many discussions around why people were left to sleep on the streets and beg for food in an age when empty buildings and waste food is being thrown away by supermarkets. One of the successes of the project was the co-production of educational tools that supported the UN Sustainable Development Goals to be embedded into the primary curriculum.

Good relationships with the children and young people were central to the quality of conversations and final submissions so I devised a workshop called the Chatter Café, which I used in every project. The Chatter Café entails placing a key question on 5 or 6 tables, covering the tables in cardboard or paper and working in small groups for 5 mins at a time addressing the question by talking, writing and drawing. After 5 mins we move to a different table. At the end we have fruit, juice, crackers etc and look at the findings from each table, opening up the floor for further discussion. Prior to this workshop the children and young people may be involved in setting the questions or deciding what the important topics are that we will discuss.

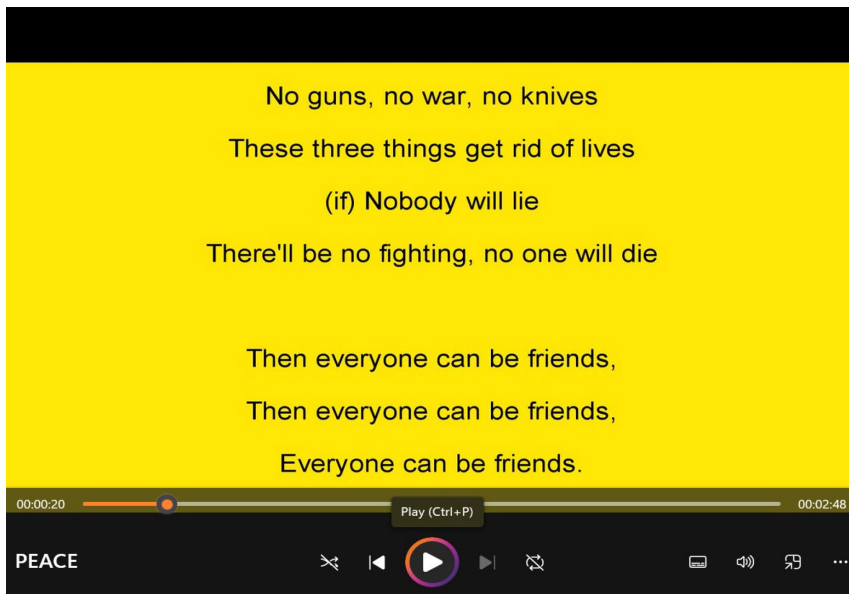


Figure 3: Barrowford Primary School: Song for Peace
 (Louise Andrews and Leroy Lupton, 2018)

During this project I really felt the impact of listening to the ‘authentic voice’ of the young person.



Developing my expertise, the *What Do You Think?* project went on to involve a wide range of arts-based tools including stop frame animation and digital story telling alongside photography, creative writing, spoken word, song writing and audio recording. It was rooted in the philosophical underpinnings of *The Art of Hosting*, by Corrigan (2017:4) who encourages, ‘a practice ground for all who aspire to bring out the best in others... based on the assumption and experience that every human being has enormous untapped creativity and resilience’.

In 2018 I secured European YIPPEE funding (Youth In Progress and Partnership for Equality and Exchange) for Digital Story Project to continue this work in schools. The project was on the topic of PEACE – it is a story of how ‘creativity and communication can lead to a more peaceful world’ (Andrews, 2018).

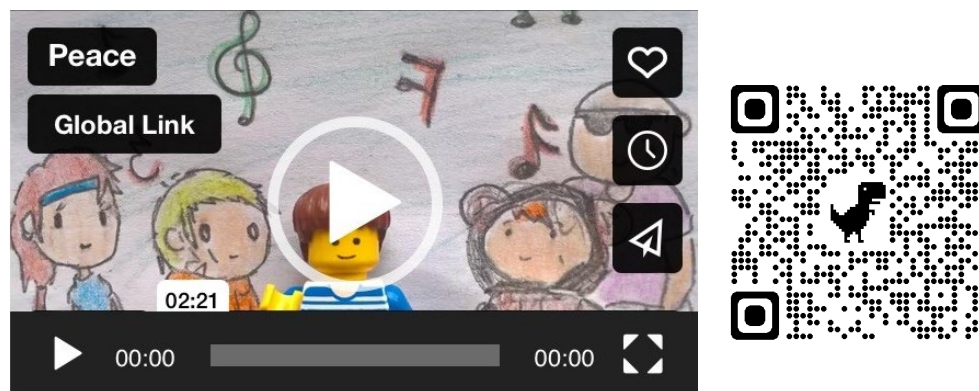


Figure 4: PEACE: YIPPEE Digital Story Project (Louise Andrews, 2018)

*There once was a poor boy –
his home life was poor*

*He was a happy child –
that's what everybody thought*

*His mother struggled in life –
to pay bills and more*

*Where his life would lead –
even she was unsure*

*Abused by his father –
confused by the drama*

*His thoughts turned darker –
that was only the start*

*His nan was his role model –
but she passed away*

*So he played up at school –
and began to run away*

*Knowing his life was different –
his friends weren't the same*

*Every day got harder –
in every single way*

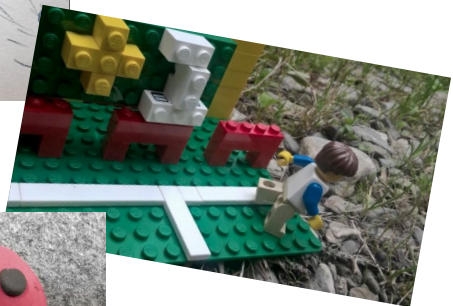
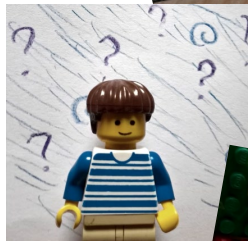
*His mother could not cope –
and woke up one day*

*And the little boy –
he could not longer stay*

*She moved him into care –
but why, he never asked*

*He began to take drugs to us –
that as his mask*

*Over sixty foster carers –
and four different homes*



*So many people to talk to –
but he still felt alone*

*To feed his habit –
he then turned to crime*

*And ended up in prison –
so he began to write*

*Seeing everyone around him –
lovin' this life*

*Four walls was not his destiny –
that he would ever like*

*For what he could not say –
he could only write down*

*And all the negative thoughts –
began to come out*

*As he walked out of gaol –
looking back on his past*

*He knew he had to make change –
and he had to make it fast*

*So he volunteered at a youth club –
for disadvantaged young people*

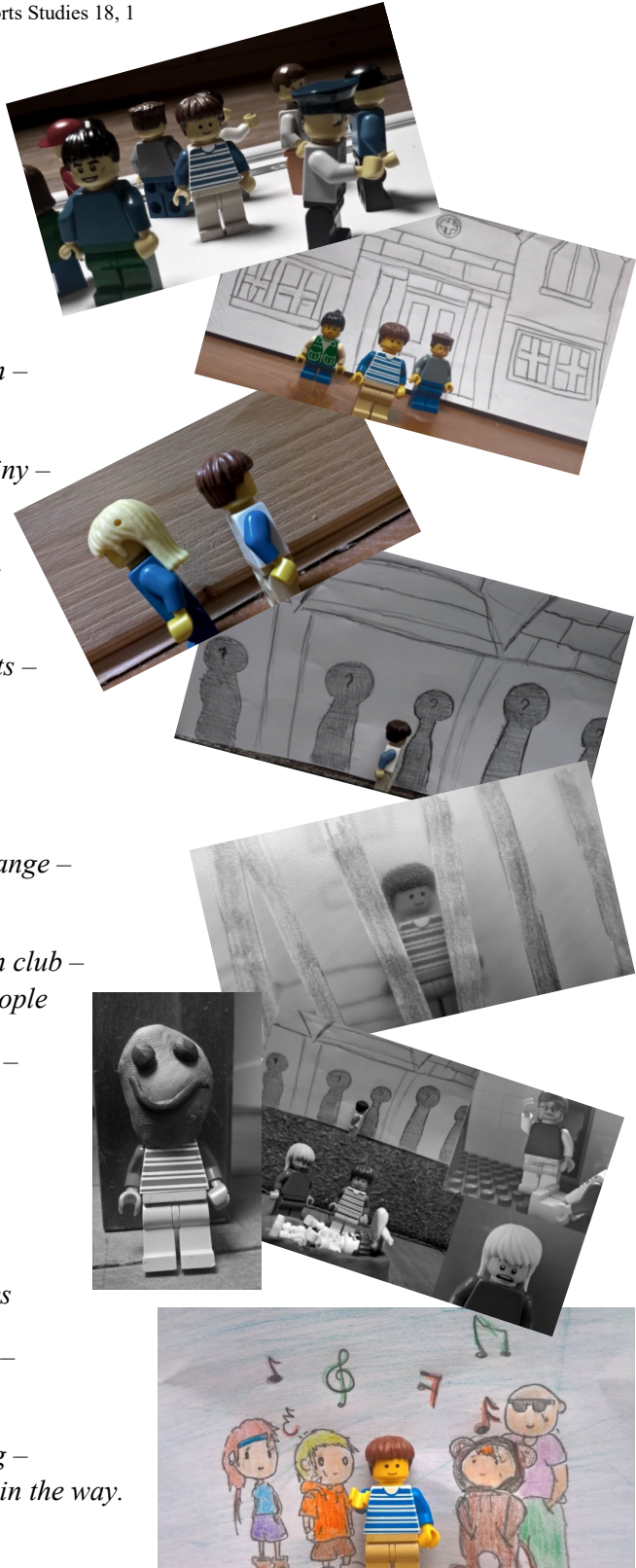
*It was a start of his new life –
of defeating the evil*

*He used his negative past –
to make a positive change*

*To the young people –
in so, so many different ways*

*As he thought about his life –
and all the dark days*

*He knew this was his calling –
and nothing would ever get in the way.*



Project 3. 'Speak Up!!'

'*Speak Up!!*' explores the agendas and foundations for co-production with young people using arts-based action research and peer-research. Working with 10 to 15 young people aged 12yrs-17yrs I will facilitate a peer enquiry and consultation that will lead to the co-production of new material for an exhibition, driven by the agendas of the young people and their ideas. 'Peer research' aims to empower people to affect positive change by participating in research on their own communities' (Peer Research Network, 2024).

Saunders (2000) identifies a continuum of participation ranging from young people as the 'object' of evaluation (no involvement in design or process) to young people as the designers, defining the focus, themes and undertaking the evaluation and dissemination of the results. My research will enable young people to be co-constructors of the evaluation and the subsequent new material. I will begin by exploring the foundations necessary for the collation of meaningful information including an exploration of the notion of 'safe space', where young people feel 'safe' to speak up and contribute in an authentic way to the discussions and design of the research. As part of this research, I will be asking if the facilitation of deep listening is a necessary tool for safe space, alongside maintaining non-hierarchical practices to enable young participants to find and express their own voice.

In this research I will:

- Form an exhibition where the audience is invited to respond to the work and the issues it raises.
- Test and trial new approaches to group work, positioning young people as holding the solutions to the issues that they perceive as important.
- Bring marginalised voices to the forefront through successful co-production of artworks that challenges social and cultural norms.

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Ethics statement: This research was conducted with ethical approval from UCLan.

JQRSS Author Profiles

Louise Andrews¹ graduated in 2001 with MA (Hons) in History and the Theory of Art, and in 1997 with BA (Hons) in Visual Art. She currently works as Head of Client Services, Research and Development at CancerCare, based in Lancaster. She is an Honorary Researcher at Lancaster University and a Trustee for Flynnes Barn, a charity that supports young people with cancer to enjoy residential activity breaks. She works as a Freelance Artist and Creative Consultant. In 2021 she commenced to postgraduate studies on a PhD registered at UCLan. Her research aims to investigate solution focused social activism with young people using art, focusing on issues of safe space, authentic contribution and the impact of stakeholders agendas on work with young people. Email: LDAndrews1@uclan.ac.uk

Clive Palmer² is a research supervisor in the School of Health, Social Work and Sport, and Doctoral Education Lead in the Graduate Research School for the University of Central Lancashire. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-2811>  Email: capalmer@uclan.ac.uk

Ali Roy³ is Professor of Social Research, and Co-Director of the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation at the University of Central Lancashire.

Collegial Review

The author asks an important question around necessary foundations required to better engage and co-create with young people. Her association of visual arts with activism is powerful and reflects her understanding of human behaviour and public perceptions. It is a reminder of how young people, no matter which generation they're from or their social status, seek 'inclusive safe spaces' to belong, be heard and express themselves. Despite the dominating power of technology and social media today, her projects illustrate how visual arts, murals, poetry, and the public street remain powerful communication tools for advocacy and raising public awareness. What I admired about her first project was the glimpse we got of the mainstream media's ability to create negative stereotypes and influence public attitudes, especially around young people and marginalized communities. I wonder if the mainstream media still has that ability today or not?

The shift from protesting to being solution focused is key in this research, as this allows ideas and tactics to have a lasting effect and be more inclusive. It also reflects the author's vast experience of modifying strategies to yield results. Given her many years of passionate work with young people, I remain curious to ask if there is an opportunity to engage and explore views from the young people she worked with during the Ryeland's Mural Project and how they perceive social activism and positive change for them today. I enjoyed her use of original content such as before and after images of the shop front, children's paintings, the peace tent, as well as the quotes she selected, all bringing her project closer to the reader. Enabling young people, especially vulnerable children, by giving them a voice and advocating for their rights, whether through listening campaigns, participatory dialogue and activism, visual arts, digital story telling such as *What Do You Think* and *Speak Up!*, is an enormous source of power and resonates strongly with me.