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Top tips :

Facilitating digital co-creation and arts activities during lockdown

Eloïse Malone / Creative Director / @eloisemalone

COVID 19 is on the rampage, and young people are in lockdown; but they are telling us that they need – almost more than ever – high quality creative group work to make sense of the issues and experiences they are facing right now; including fearing the future, worrying over school work and qualifications, loss of friendship groups, and loss of agency and autonomy.

There are lots of brilliant offerings online for listening, watching, making, and copying... but considerably fewer opportunities for voicing the unusual experiences many children and young people are having right now, or for creating art works, adverts and campaigns that give hope, guidance, and reassurance to other children and teens.

We've been asked by Co-op Foundation to work on a campaign about youth loneliness for release later this year, by collaborating with children and young people. We devised this year's strategy by working with twelve young people in UK and Europe over the internet. In this article we share our top tips for how youth workers, teachers, and arts practitioners can set up and hold creative space for meaningful, authentic, exciting creative practice with children and young people.

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Before you start:

- You'll need permission forms, medical forms, emergency contacts, and image consent forms before you start.   Not everyone has a printer at home so consider using an app like docusign; or otherwise give yourself at least two weeks to print forms, send them, get them signed, and receive them back again.   Be sure more than one of the facilitators has access to these.

- Be certain that you have a thorough safeguarding strategy for online working, including how to ensure only the right people get the invitation to the conferencing facility; how to communicate when not in the creative session; and to remind young people that wherever they choose to work from is now fully on view to everyone else in the session and to be careful about privacy. If you're new to this way of working you will need to debrief your staff and check whether the safeguarding policy is doing its job until you get into a regular pattern and have something you are sure is robust.

- Be sure all of the young people have a dedicated and suitable device which they can use throughout the project.   We often lend iPads to young people to ensure nobody is excluded.   Check if young people have decent wi-fi at home.   In your permission letters to parents, ask them to consider prioritising wi-fi usage to the young person during the project hours.

- Consider carefully how many people you can meaningfully work with at once.   If you are using breakout rooms (and we utterly recommend you do – they're an incredible tool) ensure you have enough staff in the workshops to facilitate and video-record them.

- As with all face to face work, be sure your team are present, emotionally ready, and in the zone before you let the young people in from the waiting room so that they all receive a warm welcome and a strong start each day.

- Send everyone a beautifully wrapped resource box that arrives in good time to start the workshops. Ours typically include: headphones; warm fluffy slipper socks or fingerless gloves; an artist's notebook; pencils, pens, crayons, and crafting materials; hot chocolate sachets and little boxes of fruit tea; biscuits; chocolate; lollipops; strips of gaffa tape, glue dots and blue tack; post it notes; and popcorn. We also send hand cream because everyone has dry hands during Covid-19; and the smell creates a positive connection which anchors the memory of the workshop and the milieu of the work into everyone's minds.   When you see the group another time, using the hand cream will instantly connect them back to this positive experience and help re-anchor them into the project vibe so you can start where you left off more easily.

- As with face to face work, remember to use text messages to count everyone down to the first day of the project. This helps them get over their nerves and any last-minute fears or uncertainty.

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During:

- When you set up your conference, set the meeting to automatically record. This is for safeguarding reasons and because it's great to go back to reference any material that may have got lost…as well as for the 'making of' film later on.

- As with all face-to-face sessions, ensure you set out your group promises and group goals early, so you can adapt the workshops to the young people's energy and needs. Establish group signs and symbols so that you can draw someone's attention to their mute button being on, or someone can let you know they need a quick chat about something that's come up.

- As people arrive on the first day, draw a seating plan and show them who they are sitting next to.   The apple sidecar function works really well for this as you can have a live feed from a second screen; but simply photographing and sharing our drawing works fine as well.   Once you have your seating plan, keep it throughout the workshops so that as you do circle time activities everyone knows who they follow and it's easier to ensure you don't lose anybody.

- Activities involving jumping about, dancing, and singing or shouting simultaneously all work really well. People don't want to sit and concentrate for hour after hour – so intersperse your dialogue-based activities with energisers.   Just be careful that you don't all yank your laptops off the table with the headphones cord during a dance off, and remember to share your computer sound if you're the DJ.

- Use breakout rooms in your conferencing app to facilitate small group dialogue or creative activities just as you would in the studio.   Find out what the talents are in the room, and use them: make sure your video editors, sound editors, and shameless exhibitionists are evenly spread throughout the group.

- The moments where you look at creative group work together are really important. Remember to structure feedback carefully, just as you would in face to face studio practice.   We use an adaptation of Liz Luhrmann's Critical Response Method.

- Always have a backup comms channel aside from your video-conference software, so that young people can communicate if they get booted out by their wi-fi.   Have one member of your staff team – who isn't the lead facilitator – monitor the second comms channel and provide tech support if needed.

- Have all the emergency contact details printed and to hand, or on a second screen, so that in an emergency nobody is rummaging about for the crucial documents.

- Count down the young people to the project's last day. It's easy in lockdown to lose track of days at the moment, and when you're all having fun the last day can rush up unexpectedly. Be mindful of the Tuckman Group Formation stages and that young people will need the mental and emotional preparation to adjourn - or even to mourn - especially if they have invested emotionally in the creative process.
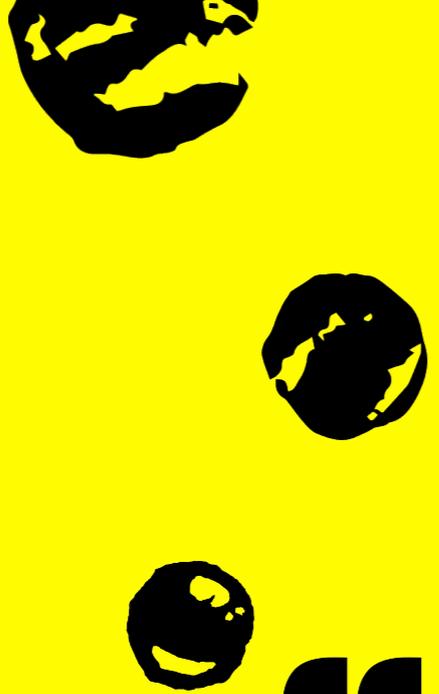
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After:

- Remember to send the young people a thank you, a reminder of homework, or a sneaky peek of what's happening tomorrow after the session to keep them feeling cared for and valued

- A staff debrief is crucial after every session, but online working is very tiring: give your team a rest before the next day - don't keep them in debrief too long.

- Look after yourself. Don't be tempted to fill your diary with extra non-project activities after each session. If I'm online with young people for 4 – 5 hours, and have a 30-minute prep meeting and a 30 minute debrief; by the time I've logged the meeting video in the data bank, planned the next day and posted something to social media, I'm done in. Go get some sunshine and water your plants.

I have twenty years' experience of studio practice with children and young people, but I'm new to translating it to online working - so I hope this helps. If you need some support with strategies for creative development with young people, drop me an email ellie@eff.org.uk *or contact me on twitter @eloisemalone.*

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