

# Complex Creative Communities: A Youth Participation Case Study

## Abstract

This paper explores the idea of a creative community as a complex adaptive system. Using a case study of the Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board, the research has employed concepts from Complexity Theory and cultural ecology models to describe the underlying dynamics of the group, its relationships with the Roundhouse charity and the wider environment in which it operates.

*Key words: Complexity, creativity, youth participation, creative industries*

## Introduction

The idea of the creative community is in danger of becoming an oxymoron. Two complex concepts - double the scope for governmental interference and twice the potential for contradiction. Through successive industrialising policy cycles aimed at boosting creativity, and a persistent assumption that community can be physically constructed, the collaborative and open relationship through which both creativity and community should be co-evolving is under threat. The research builds on a body of work exploring the organisation of creativity and cultural expression through small voluntary groups who govern or organise creative practice. They are found everywhere: in villages and towns, in virtual and in real environments and working in the pursuit of all kinds of art and creative activity. They are sometimes supported by larger organisations and sometimes are entirely grown from the grassroots. They also provide, through their small scale and rich conversation, a wealth of insight into how communities operate as complex adaptive systems. These examples are in contrast to Richard Florida's creative class theory, a strong influencer on creative clusters and urban development policy.

This case study of the Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board as a creative community nested within an arts organisation uses Complexity theory and cultural ecosystems as a framework to explore the underlying conditions and dynamics which sustain the group and the role which feedback loops play in power relationships between the organisation and the youth board. The case study is situated in a complex environment of national and regional government policies relating to the arts, creative industries and education which despite the focus on the small group inevitably seep into observations and interactions.

I write in the first person in journal style vignettes throughout the paper. The use of autoethnography is partly a methodological decision and partly a statement of creative activism. In conducting research using Complexity theory in which the system is defined from the perspective of the researcher, there is a need to account for the influences on the particular gaze of the observer. Why was I drawn to the themes I highlight? Do my values, education or upbringing confer greater access to the ideas or spaces which I am exploring? Or greater barriers to understanding which limit the validity of the research? Age is a theme which surfaced in the data and linked resonantly with the concerns of previously studied groups

In advocating for Complexity and ecology models as useful tools for understanding challenging topics like social impact, I need readers to be aware how immersion within the group is key to interpreting community dynamics. Stories are far more powerful routes to understanding for me and possibly

for the intended audience for this research – cultural professionals, volunteers and members of creative communities. Through Complexity thinking –which systemises and models lived experiences – I see a possible bridge between the type of quantitative, metric-based research by which arts and cultural organisations are required to measure impact and engagement and the deep qualitative research through which meaning and nuance emerge. Navigation through complexity requires a guide and my intention is to account for the direction of travel which I select.

## Research Design

*...neither action research nor complexity theory arrive 'complete'. Rather, both are understood as plastic and open to elaboration. In terms of an idea already developed, both are oriented toward and by the complicity of the researcher. One does not take up a complexity frame; one takes part in and inevitably contributes to understandings of complex happenings.<sup>1</sup>*

The starting point with this exploration is to think of human systems and thus human communities as a Complex Adaptive System (CAS). Within the Complexity paradigm, human communities are viewed as organisms which co-evolve over time with their natural and social environments. The transdisciplinary nature of the paradigm allows thinking from the biological and natural sciences to lend understanding to how social systems behave like organisms – growing and communicating with an external environment. The use of Complexity Theory as an analytical tool is still underdeveloped in the social sciences and particularly in relation to the concept of community<sup>2</sup> – perhaps reflecting the challenges in both objectively defining community and in the selection of manageable case material.

The research is framed around two main questions:

- **What are the conditions that sustain the Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board as a creative community?**
- **What role do feedback loops play in the impact of the group on the organisation?**

To address these questions, I built upon my previous experience researching creative communities employing the following methods:

- A review of relevant research literature and policy relating to youth participation and complex communities
- Observations of Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board RYAB meetings and youth participation activity at the Roundhouse (undertaken through a secondment into the organisation through the Clore Leadership Programme).
- Focus groups with members of the youth advisory board
- Interviews with key staff
- A Complexity analysis using pre-identified essential conditions for sustainability

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<sup>1</sup> Sumara, D. and Davis, B. 2009 pp 366-7

<sup>2</sup> Crow, G and Mah, A. (2011); Barabàsi, A-L, (2002) p 225

The research was deductive in approach making use of a set of conditions identified through inductive research with previous studies of creative communities and tested in similar contexts. Part of the motivation for wanting to develop a case study of the Roundhouse was that it provided a contrasting environment in comparison with previous studies in rural Cornwall. The young, diverse members of the group were brought together in a structured programme organised by a leading urban arts organisation. In Cornwall, the case study communities were typically white and middle aged or older and self-organised their activities. The Look Groups had some commonality with RYAB. They have a relationship with professionals and are able to access resources through Tate St Ives art gallery. Tate St Ives is part of the Tate group an executive non-departmental public body and an exempt charity which exists to increase the public's enjoyment and understanding of British art from the 16th century to the present day and of international modern and contemporary art.<sup>3</sup>

As the opening quotation to this section suggests, the application of Complexity Theory and methods which give voice to participants, must be accompanied by considerations about the impact of the research and researcher upon the system. In a complex adaptive system, causality is non-linear, meaning that a small change to one of the elements could have a disproportionately large impact on the rest of the system. As one of those elements is me – as a researcher entering the system - I need to be sensitive to and account for the impact that my values, experiences and expectations could have on the system. With permeable boundaries that are socially constructed there is no standard sense of either “inside” or “outside” of the system and hence no position of objectivity for the researcher. Building reflexivity into the research methodology is one way to ensure accountability and reduce bias. Also, in keeping with the ethnographic methodology and use of participant observation, reflexivity helps to determine and define the relationship between the participant and the observer. Ledwith and Springett describe this process as becoming critically reflexive to gain greater insight from the research process. “Inner criticality is in symbiotic relationship with our outer perceptions, continually questioning and exploring meanings, possibilities and purpose in relation to life experience”<sup>4</sup>.

## **What is a creative community?**

This section will contrast two different examples of creative community: one economic and spatial policy driven model which has been used to shape community development in the urban context and a complementary civil society model which through observations in a rural environment has come to exemplify the creative community as a complex adaptive system.

### The Creative Class

Achieving the kind of cross-political adulation that perhaps only social capital can match, Richard Florida's creative class has become the dominant tract around which discourse on creative community revolves. His theory asserts that human creativity has become the “defining feature of economic life [...] because new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other good

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<sup>3</sup> [www.tate.org.uk/about-us](http://www.tate.org.uk/about-us)

<sup>4</sup> Ledwith, M. & Springett, J. (2010) pp 215-6

economic things flow from it”<sup>5</sup>. His broad notion of the creative economy includes a range of sectors from engineering and technology-based industries to legal and health care where workers are talented and use creativity to drive innovation<sup>6</sup>. This view is supported by the idea that everyone can be creative. Creativity, he argues, is an innate property in every one of us and as natural as thinking itself<sup>7</sup>. The application of the theory to regional and urban development projects is where community concerns emerge as local government and regional planners looked to attract a certain kind of citizen to overcome social problems as well as economic ones. The Memphis manifesto<sup>8</sup> – a document signed by the Creative 100 who are “dedicated to helping communities realize the full potential of creative ideas”<sup>9</sup>. Pledges include this one:

*Embrace diversity. It gives birth to creativity, innovation and positive economic impact. People of different backgrounds and experiences contribute a diversity of ideas, expressions, talents and perspectives that enrich communities. This is how ideas flourish and build vital communities.*

Criticisms of the Creative Class theory are widespread. Academics mistrust the methods underpinning the approach. Mould highlights the “curiously narrow set of empirical data”<sup>10</sup> which Florida uses to measure diversity<sup>11</sup>. The creative class is measured against the working and service classes which sends out the message firstly that “[c]reative work is good because it encourages growth and all other work is not because it is boring and ultimately unfulfilling” and in so doing, asserting that one class should step on others to achieve their economic ambition. In other words, a rewind to “Marxist class divisions that created the systemic inequalities and injustices of capitalism in the first place.”<sup>12</sup>

There is general distaste in both the academic literature and activist platforms<sup>13</sup> directed towards the vast payments Florida has reportedly attracted for his consultancy work with councils and urban planners. The reason that Florida’s interpretation of a creative community finds its place in this account is because the critical literature around it raises issues about how you measure diversity and creativity something I return to in the concluding section. Another challenge it raises is the question of how to uphold equality so that everyone can truly be creative. This is with particular reference to young creative people who may pay their bills through work in the service sector whilst they are developing their creative practice or volunteering to expand their networks and knowledge, like those who are part of RYAB. Florida’s influence also feels very relevant to my own work in Cornwall where the local authority, one of our key funders has in the past brought in expensive consultants to advise on place shaping, overlooking endogenous expertise within the region and, unconnectedly, is now proposing a manifesto for the cultural and creative sector relating to impact.

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<sup>5</sup> Florida, R. (2002) p 21

<sup>6</sup> Florida, R. (2005) p 3

<sup>7</sup> Florida, R. (2005) p 4

<sup>8</sup> Seen in Peck, J. (2005) p

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.creativeclass.com/rfcgdb/articles/manifesto.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Mould, O. (2018) p22

<sup>11</sup> Ibid (equated to the proportion of gay people in the location)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p21

<sup>13</sup> <https://creativeclassstruggle.wordpress.com/mission/> Creative Class Struggle is an online “clearinghouse” for news and information about ‘creative city’ strategies and policies, with an emphasis on Toronto. It lists 13 co-sympathetic organisations in North America and Europe.

## Complex creative communities

I have spent time over the last decade studying examples of volunteer led groups who organise cultural activity. Cornwall, where my research and practice is based, is a rural region in the far south west of the UK with dispersed communities. It has many manifestations of small groups brought together in learning about and organising culture. I was drawn to them through looking for small-scale examples of people who came together through their passion for different aspects of creativity. The small size of the meetings of these groups (usually 8-12 from a pool of 20) gave the community a clear identity and the many interdependencies between members of the group and between the group and the wider cultural ecology were readily observable. Relationships such as those with the local authority who provided funding or the professional arts organisation who designed programmes that connected the groups to learning opportunities, exemplified this rich ecology. Through the metaphors of the culture ecology, I was drawn to Complexity Theory for its potential to provide greater depth in theorising and understanding complex phenomena like self-organisation, resilience and emergence. Inspired by the work of the Health Complexity Group and informed by research in complex human systems (Capra (2002), Mitleton Kelly, (2003), Stacey, (2003), Durie and Wyatt, (2007), Sumara and Davis, (2009); Zellermyer and Margolin, (2005)); the research used qualitative empirical data to understand the complex dynamics of the sustainability of these groups.

My first study focussed on The Look Group Network. Set up by Tate St Ives, the Look Group Network are interconnected adult learning groups who meet regularly to talk about art. As the name suggests, Look Groups are “like book groups” but use artists, exhibitions and ideas as inspiration for discussions. Topics are democratically agreed and organised by anyone willing to lead. I found that a set of essential conditions were observable in each of the groups which had managed to self-organise over a number of years with little intervention from the founding body. It also found an absence of one or more those conditions in those which stopped meeting.

In the next iteration of the research, the underlying structure and dynamics were further tested with organising committees for arts festivals, this time with an emphasis on public engagement in the science of complexity. Also distributed across Cornwall and representing very different models of festival - from a commercial music festival in Looe and a West Cornwall community arts festival that had evolved from the town carnival -the study drew the participants in to understandings of emergence, self-organisation and adaptation as a means to support their continued survival.

In seeking to understand whether and how this approach could be applied to different contexts, I was keen to explore creative communities in an urban setting. Another preoccupation that had surfaced in previous research was the idea of age. In the Look Group communities, members were keen to introduce more diversity to their group by a great gender and age mix. I wanted to also connect with a creative community with a different age profile. My secondment to the Roundhouse through the Clore Leadership Programme provided an opportunity to build the necessary networks and trust with staff and young people to facilitate the project.

## The Roundhouse Case Study

### Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board – an introduction

The Roundhouse is a registered charity based in the London Borough of Camden with an objective to provide a “space to create” for 11 to 25 year olds. This space includes the major live music and performance venue housed in a former railway engine repair shed, the self-access studios on site which young people can use to for a wide variety of creative practice including making music, developing spoken word performance or radio broadcasting and, through an extensive outreach programme, schools and other community buildings.

The Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board (RYAB) is made up of young people aged 18-25. Each member of the group has taken part in a creative project run by Roundhouse ranging from being part of a choir to exploring their own digital creativity in the complex of self-access studios – a strand of programming called Young Creatives. The group represents the views of Young Creatives and informs decisions relating to policy, projects, facilities and future direction. Two places on the main Roundhouse board of trustees are reserved for RYAB members. The Roundhouse has a consistent message about the positive outcomes of their youth governance strategies. Not only does involvement with RYAB help to give young people skills and confidence to take on new challenges in the creative industries, and through the prioritisation of work with disadvantaged young people – help to diversify this sector – the organisation also cites the benefits of new perspectives that the young people bring that provide an essential service to the organisation. In a blog for the Arts Council website, Chief Executive Marcus Davey explained that participation has brought tangible benefits:

*Young people have brought with them exciting ideas and instigated positive change at the Roundhouse – and, without years of business experience behind them, have pushed boundaries in terms of business decisions and suggestions for artistic content. Young people have a different – a new – way of looking at things and for organisations to discount these ideas simply doesn’t make sense.<sup>14</sup>*

The expertise of the Roundhouse in engaging young people in the governance of the organisation led to the development and publication of the Guide to Youth Governance in 2017. This was a timely reminder to the cultural and broader charity sector that despite accounting for 12% of the population, 18-25 year olds were represented on just 0.5%<sup>15</sup> of charity boards in the UK. Roundhouse are now supporting other arts organisations to diversify their boards and introduce advisory roles for young people. This work has included advising on a major cultural project in Gloucester – a first foray into the regions for the organisation.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/putting-our-trust-young-people-0>

<sup>15</sup> CAF (2012) *Mind the Gap*

## Findings



*Picture caption: The image shows the Roundhouse common room. In the background are dark red exposed brick walls. A red poster on the wall has white and blue with partial text exposed reading "People with the imagination to create it". Red and black seating and a brown leather sofa are positioned around a circular red rug with the word Roundhouse in white lettering. A light brown, oval coffee table is situated on the rug and is covered with blue and red pizza boxes and fruit.*

The focus groups and interviews sought to uncover evidence of the underlying conditions supporting the sustainability of the youth advisory board. These conditions, identified through previous studies with similarly constituted groups are:

- Structure
- Resources
- Connectivity
- Diversity
- Asymmetry

In this section I introduce each condition and provide evidence from the discussions and interviews to illustrate how each are present and contributing to the sustainability of the group.

## Structure

Themes which have surfaced in previous research with creative communities have included the focus for the group and how it contributes to formation of its identity, rules, routine and formality. Structure also relates to the boundaries of the system – defining the outer limits of the group’s interest and influence and how it interacts with adjacent systems.

In the discussions with the Roundhouse Youth Advisory Board (RYAB), the group were clear about their identity and purpose:

*“We are a little focus group of individuals that have used the Roundhouse space and are under 25 and we are speaking on behalf of anyone involved in a project.”*

*“It’s a vehicle for ideas from all over Roundhouse to be enacted. And it makes it easier for people who want to hear the ideas to get them in one place and get things started.”*

There was a strong collective agreement that their motivation for being part of the group was “giving back” to the Roundhouse (RH) after the investment made in them through the different programmes they had taken part in:

*“The RH already give us lots. [...] It’s about giving back.”*

The formality and rules were developed between the group and RH team at the inception of each new intake of members which happens annually. Staff put together an agenda incorporating requests from teams within the organisation who want to consult on a new area of activity. Communications tools, policies, frameworks and decisions about funding were all cited as recent topics for consultation. Insight from staff interviews revealed that the RH are trying to align the work of RYAB more closely with the business planning cycles so that consultation with young people is at the heart of the organisation.

*“Roundhouse staff ask if there is anything we want to bring up or add to the agenda.”*

*“The rules side was made up before we started. There was a code of conduct.”*

The routine of the group was built around traditions of eating and socialising at the start of each meeting before beginning the agenda. This familiarity and the welcoming environment was a strong motivator for members to return each month:

*“So everyone arrives and everyone chats and then we start eating pizza together. There’s such a system, a structure that we’ve put in that we all know how it’s going to run.”*

In defining the edges and boundaries of the group’s identity there was some initial resistance to the idea of being a “creative community”. The focus for this group was distinct from the artistic programme and their individual creative projects, it was felt. They were not creating new work or organising an event, they argued, but recognised they were definitely a community and that they were all creative people and this influenced the way that they worked together.

*“I don’t know if the output is particularly creative [...] It’s like a hive mind of different ideas and there’s a lot of creativity happening and bubbling.”*

Another sense of boundary was expressed through the frequent use of the word “space”. Space was used interchangeably between describing the physical facilities of the Roundhouse studios, the group meetings and a virtual space that the group occupied and maintained on behalf of their peers in the consciousness the organisation.

### Resources

This broad reaching condition for community includes material resources and property but also people – key individuals who make things happen – and skills and knowledge which are employed collectively by the group.

As already referenced, food was part of the group’s routine and so is an important resource:

*“It really helps that there’s pizza.”*

The physical resource requirements of the group were very minimal and the emphasis was placed firmly on the idea that group itself was a valuable resource for the organisation:

*“We don’t use lots outside of this room. Just paper and pens. And people. We’re more like the resource. They come in to have a conversation and gain something else through that conversation.”*

The skills most cited in the discussion and which play a role in maintaining the success of the group were communication and decision making. Debating was a skill that they hadn’t necessarily had before they joined RYAB but got lots of practice in putting forward their views and listening to those of others through the monthly meetings:

*“Having difficult conversations without getting defensive and calling someone out. Trying to hear people’s opinions.”*

*“We work a lot with consensus decision making.”*

Reaching consensus was not something the group were explicitly trained in but members felt there was a culture of working through a problem together using debate in order to reach a collective decision. Quick hand votes were observed in use in meetings.

### Diversity

*“The age range is quite interesting. So 18 to 25 - seven years is quite a big learning curve. [...] I’m at the other end of that now and have a totally different opinion of the world.”*

The theme of diversity in age holds significance as it surfaced in both the RYAB discussion and interview with staff members. In the second negotiated feedback session clarity was sought in relation to the above quote and for other members to comment. The participant who made the comment talked about joining RYAB as a university student and how her needs and understanding of the structures and processes underpinning Roundhouse activity had developed over time. Another spoke about her experiences living in a different country and how it provided a much needed social and environment when she was 19. Those members who volunteered their age in the discussion

were all in the upper age bracket. Recruitment was underway and the newly selected members would join the group in a few months' time.

The staff interviewees talked about their plans to introduce a new model to engage younger members of the RH community in advisory roles. It was felt that there wasn't enough diversity of age and that the group would prioritise the needs of younger members. The new model was unlikely to be another group, it was thought, and would depend on the securing of additional funding.

Another aspect of diversity that was important to the success of the group was the representation of different artistic practice from across the programmes on offer to young people. As well as representing different forms of creativity it was also important for knowledge and learning:

*"It's important, as the Roundhouse have such diverse things going on, to have people from all aspects - so radio, circus, producing, music [...] It's really cool ... having a better understanding of the amount that goes on in the space."*

Diversity of perspective was also expressed through the experiences of members who didn't work in the arts. This was a motivational factor in encouraging them to stay involved with creative practice through volunteering at RYAB but also had the potential to bring new viewpoints and information into the group and the way that they approached decision making and communication:

*"I don't work in the arts in my full time job and it's a really nice way for me to stay within the arts world and listen to poetry and hear choirs. I just love all that stuff so I get to satisfy that part of what I like here while being actively involved in shaping this place."*

## **Connectivity**

The theme of Connectivity provides evidence of the group's location at a heart of a complex network of communications. It is also the means through which the group has the ability to reproduce itself and survive through the recruitment of new members and relaying information about needs and interests to those in control of resources.

The RYAB members described a range of different communicative channels through which they send and receive information. At the heart of their network were their positive social relationships. They were well-connected to each other's artistic projects and had formed supportive friendships. Other peer communications described were with the other RH studio users.

*"There's a lot of things, when I'm on a project, that people will tell me that they wouldn't feel comfortable telling someone that works here. So I have the privilege of listening to those things and then bringing them into this space anonymously."*

Staff had revealed their concerns that there was a resistance or "inhibition" on the part of RYAB members to go and consult with their peers and a feeling that they were more comfortable talking to staff or external contacts. Those taking part in the negotiated feedback countered that they weren't lacking in confidence talking to their peers, but their reluctance to go and talk to studio users was because they didn't want to interrupt creativity. One member described the process of knocking on studio doors as "like selling insurance" and the group agreed that they needed to find a

way of encouraging their peers into their space in the common room rather than disrupting them in the studios to suit the RYAB schedule.

There was also agreement that promoting recruitment to RYAB worked better through more informal connections and representing the group through their involvement in creative projects rather than actively seeking out conversations about recruitment.

*“Just by talking to someone who might do another project and you say you are a part of RYAB. You might not consciously think you are promoting RYAB but actually you kind of are.”*

Connections with the RH teams came through invitations to join working groups like the Diversity and Inclusion group, health and safety or green team. Not every member could take part in these regular groups as they met during the day and this was a source of disappointment for some.

Beyond their regular channels with the Roundhouse board and staff in the organisation, one participant talked with enthusiasm about being encouraged to talk to donors. Roundhouse Members are regular donors to the Roundhouse charity who in return receive a range of benefits. Some are offered access to a Members' bar at which informal networking with RYAB members can take place.

*We are getting more of a relationship between RYAB and Roundhouse members. [...] They want to know what you are doing. Seeing where their money is going.*

The range of contacts which RYAB make over the course of their involvement was also seen to have global impact as members described being involved in meeting representatives from cultural organisations who visit the Roundhouse for inspiration. One such visit involved a delegation from Baltic states:

*“...we may have helped the Baltic countries!”*

## **Asymmetry**

*Non linearity, asymmetry, power and competition are inevitable components of complex systems. It is what keeps them going, their engine. If there were a symmetrical relationship between infants and adults, infants would never survive. If there were a symmetrical relationship between teacher and student, the student would never learn anything new. If the state had no power, it would have no reason to exist. If women and men were all the same, our world would be infinitely less exciting.<sup>16</sup>*

Asymmetry and non-linearity are underlying properties of complex systems. They are the most difficult condition to measure and evaluation relies on subjectivity. It refers to the way feedback loops either maintain or transform systems. Assymetry is also, as the quote above suggests, about power dynamics and how the lack of obvious hierarchy keeps agents in the system locked in a relationship of co-evolution where a small change in one could result in a disproportionate change in the other. From both an evidence and a public engagement perspective, this is the most challenging

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<sup>16</sup> Cilliers P. (1998) p120

condition to observe and to describe. Often I have found myself focussing on visual clues and intonation to justify my sense that a small cause has had a disproportionately large effect.

*“These people know so much more than me but they want my views.”*

*“You get to see an output from it. You see things that you’ve suggested coming through. You have a conversation and then six months later “it’s a thing now””.*

One participant alluded to the power which Roundhouse holds as a big organisation with reputational clout. By being part of a small group, she felt she could influence decisions and direction which would be multiplied into greater impact:

*“It feels like a small amount of activism because you are making decisions about a place like the Roundhouse which can change the arts and society.*

*“...we’ve got the youth board but actually being on boards with rich white men and being able to challenge that space is really cool.”*

The idea of space again surfacing and reinforcing the idea of permeable boundaries which RYAB members are able to cross into different places of power, where the rules and relationships are different.

From this thematic reporting using the essential conditions of community which responds to the first research question, I move to a deeper complex systems analysis which looks at specific feedback loops identified through the data and their relationship with impact.

## **Complexity analysis**

From a complex systems perspective, RYAB can be viewed as a nested system within the Roundhouse. The environment which the group responds to is a tangle of interdependent conditions from those resources provided by the Roundhouse charity – the venue, studios and staff support to the political, social and economic environment in which the organisation operates – austerity, political instability, competition for public funding. Each individual member is shaped by the values of the communities of London to which they belong, their family heritage, the education system of which they are product, the technology they use and cultural and social stimuli that they experience. But they navigate the Roundhouse system through a shared set of explicit rules – like those devised when each new cohort of members join - and implicit structures like the feedback loops discussed here.

### The art of the feedback loop

Whilst examples of positive feedback loops which create a change to the organisation were cited and observed – the introduction of gender neutral toilets for example – there was also evidence of negative feedback loops where the knowledge and expertise provided by RYAB was potentially maintaining the current status quo or that the structures they operated within were unable to enact change. The debate about the acceptance of a controversial donation offered towards the campus project, which was observed at a RYAB meeting, resulted in a vote by a narrow margin to

accept the gift. This consensus decision was taken into account by the full board but it was decided to decline the gift<sup>17</sup>. Having witnessed the debate, it was clear that members of the group felt conflicted as they weighed up the possible outcomes which accepting or rejecting the donation might entail and which bore the greatest risk. It was an impressive debate with every member contributing a very different and important concern.

In one case RYAB members described incremental change through continued iterative action. This relating to how the continued pleas from studio users to soundproof the facilities is something they are unable to change as Roundhouse is a listed building but that they use their learning about the organisation to explain the situation and the iterations of these messages being fed to staff and the board has helped bring about change in the organisation through the current Campus project which will create new purpose-built creative spaces that address some of the challenges of the old building.

*“we don’t do youth takeovers, we don’t have separate social media accounts”*

Another area of frustration that has yet to produce any real change for those wanting it is bringing a youth voice to outward facing Roundhouse communications. It was something that I had noted in my secondment project that Roundhouse social media was overwhelmingly weighted towards promoting ticket sales for shows rather than social impact and that when these stories were occasionally made public, that there was a lack of youth voice. Staff members who are supporting the youth programmes were very aware of the issue and showed weariness in trying to challenge other departments to flex their policies to accommodate this activity. At the same time, however, they shared some of the organisational concerns regarding the loss of reputational control, the quality of content being shared and possible safe-guarding issues.

In social systems like organisations, feedback loops are sometimes unnecessarily limited by boundaries like tradition, history, identity and reputation<sup>18</sup>. These properties are essential for keeping the system together and recognisable to its environment – stakeholders, customers, policy makers and so on – but they also close the system off to new networks, knowledge and diversity.

## **Conclusions and recommendations**

Although very different in context, geography and focus, RYAB has much in common with my other examples of complex creative communities. I think it would surprise some of the members of the Tate St Ives Look Groups to know that there is a group of young people from all backgrounds who meet in the converted studio basement of a grade 2 listed railway building, snacking on pizza who record very similar experiences shaped by the struggle (albeit a very polite one) against a seemingly more powerful cultural organisation who both supports and potentially blocks their progress. And it is this struggle that I see as part of the success.

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/oct/31/two-major-london-theatres-reject-funds-from-sackler-trust>

<sup>18</sup> Capra, F. (2002) p 107

To see the age theme surface again with such a precision was interesting. The Roundhouse staff revealing that they were keen to offer some kind of advisory role – though probably not a group – to younger creatives particularly piqued my interest. Then I heard members of RYAB reflecting on a generational difference between those joining the group at 18 and those leaving at 25. And there was a sadness associated with there being an upper age limit that would eventually mean their membership would come to an end and with it the support and sense of community from which they had benefited. In the Look Groups and other rural cultural groups studied there was a yearning for more young people to come along and share their discussions. Diversity of age seems to be a condition which these groups seek out. Perhaps this is because its absence is most obvious in a social system. Age may give away the most visual or audible clues where there is no formal evidence to refer to – as is the case in natural, social groupings.

The group has been a useful lens through which to understand the work of Roundhouse and its impact. It is an exemplar model of youth engagement and Roundhouse's openness to pushing the boundaries of how young people can participate and have voice is reaping benefits in terms of having a place of truth, a source of ideas and the energy to effect change at all levels of the organisation. A pattern of struggle – a feedback loop which maintains the system at its equilibrium point – is seen in the examples shared by the group in which they had been unable to effect change because of rules imposed by the organisation. Reputational risk is the barrier impeding both access to social media platforms and what may have been seen as ready money for a project that would benefit the young people and their peers.

Like all charities the Roundhouse is bounded by legal, political, social and economic frameworks which create complex paradoxes. From the need to raise money to keep supporting young people arose the issue of having to debate whether to accept a gift from a private foundation whose endowment was created through sales of addictive and damaging pharmaceuticals. The kind of drugs which have a disproportionate impact on young people from diverse backgrounds which the Roundhouse support in inner city London.

The need for safeguarding and for RYAB to have some kind of intellectual parity with the main Roundhouse board requires a kind of formality and agenda setting on the part of the organisation which may inhibit some areas of creativity and activism. Without the Roundhouse creating the concept, developing a safe place and initial structure, the group would not exist at all. The artistic environment, cool brand, national reputation and opportunities to continue associations and friendships with other young creatives were further motivation to join in. RYAB have lots in common again with the Look Group Network who quietly raged against the power of the Tate, who told them not to meet at home or that they should be using an online tool that they didn't understand. But despite of this they were also immensely proud to be associated with a gallery of national significance, to access expertise and resources and ultimately to give something back through their voluntary organisation of the activity.

There are inevitable limitations to this research. The research methods used rely on a superficial documentation of diversity – that which is observable or that which was mentioned by the participants explicitly. This superficiality partly reflects the timescales and capacity to set up and analyse quantitative data. To properly interrogate diversity and go beyond the single indicator approach seen in Florida's work, requires a host of personal data from date of birth to postcode,

earnings to ethnicity. This is potentially intrusive data drain that may not yield any useful pattern or insight. When quantifying and profiling becomes the agreed approach, there is an immediate step away from experience and narrative and we lose the connection between individual micro stories which can change macro behaviour. The stories of young people being encouraged to step up and have their say through political debate, imaginative performance or coming into contact with a new social group and gaining a powerful – disproportionate – confidence boost.

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