



Peer Mentoring: breaking down barriers to creative careers?

Examining issues of diversity and equality in the creative and cultural industries in the UK, O'Brien and Taylor noted in their recent report, 'Panic,' that most people working in the cultural sector still believe success is a result of 'hard work and ambition'; rarely taking into account the privilege and advantage that comes from having the income and background that offers the possibility of taking unpaid internships, gives access to social networks and creates appropriate cultural capital. 'Who you know' remains one of the principal guarantees of success while gender, ethnicity and/or social background are amongst the greatest barriers.

The growing elitism and lack of diversity within the creative and cultural sectors is not unique to the UK. Increasing youth unemployment has meant this is a picture mirrored across much of the rest of Europe. Young people who have not followed traditional pathways into training or education being particularly vulnerable to the impact of fewer opportunities and a greater need to be willing to provide unpaid labour; no matter what their creative skills. It was in response to this challenging context, that TME (Talent Matching Europe) brought together partners from six different countries, Collage Arts and Rinova (UK), CEPS (Spain), MULAB (Italy), ARTeria (Poland), EASP (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) and Prostor Plus (Croatia) to look at ways in which this prevailing model might be challenged. All but one of them had worked together previously, within programmes¹ exploring ways of validating and accrediting the informal and experiential learning that is very much part of development and growth within these industries. All of them were committed to uncovering ways in which young people from more disadvantaged communities and not engaged in formal education, employment or

training might be offered the same learning and career opportunities as their more privileged counterparts.

Recognising the additional support many of these young people may need to enter the creative and cultural industries and then pursue a meaningful creative career within them, TME began to explore the role of the 'vocational mentor'- that is, someone able to work with less advantaged young people to not only acquire the necessary skills and competences to work in the creative sector but, more importantly, to facilitate their access to the networks, structures and opportunities from which they are currently excluded. As the skills and competences needed for this role began to emerge across countries and across the life of the programme, it became increasingly clear that it was often a role best played by those from similar backgrounds and experience. Many of these potential peer mentors were themselves young people who had been supported by partner organisations to develop the resilience and tenaciousness needed to face the challenges of securing work and experience within the creative and cultural industries. Others were those who had chosen to follow alternative routes: acquiring entrepreneurial skills and gaining different kinds of knowledge and expertise by being encouraged to set up their own initiatives, particularly in specific social contexts. This was a new generation of creatives from more diverse, multi-cultural backgrounds; who now had the passion and commitment to support their younger or less experienced peers.

Many of these young creatives were, of course, already undertaking this role in a non-formal or ad-hoc way, although largely untrained, unpaid and without recognition within the sector. Working in collaboration and consultation with those who had been mentees in past European programmes, partners identified a range of knowledge, skills and attitudes that they felt would form the essential competences for anyone undertaking this role: from understanding, and being able to respond to, different learning styles to a strong commitment to social inclusion. The programme also recognised that many of the personal qualities required, such as active listening, empathy and dialogical and collaborative working patterns were not necessarily best taught through formal education structures.

¹ [Aspire2Create](#) and the [European Cultural Learning Network](#)



The young people engaged with the project were clear that what they were seeking were more experiential forms of learning: methodologies and approaches that responded to the shifting needs of employers and reflected the demands of creating their own initiatives and identifying new entrepreneurial opportunities. They wanted safe spaces where they could experiment, take risks, explore possibilities and begin to develop and realise new and innovative ideas. As part of this, they wanted the opportunity to consult, and work alongside, peers and mentors in their chosen fields. And, most importantly, they wanted these mentors to be people who would understand the challenges enough to mix on-going support with the encouragement to reach further, take more chances and stretch their ambition. 'We can fly', one young Macedonian noted, 'We just need help in growing our wings.'

Bringing a group of potential peer mentors together across national boundaries to test out how they might best support these ideas, TME realised the importance of creating opportunities for trans-European mobility and exchange as part of these young people's development and learning. Whilst recognising some of the knowledge required might be particular to the situation within one partner country, it quickly became clear that many of the attitudes and skills required are the same. This is a generation of young people who want to learn from each other and want to work collaboratively across national boundaries. Working with this group of potential mentors to identify important shared themes and synergies across Europe, the partnership has produced a number of tools, including a [diagnostic skills check](#), to assist mentors in assessing the needs of mentees. And identified possible pathways to accreditation, including the CLOCK² peer-to-peer programme, already validated at a European level.

As the need to respond to new working patterns across the creative economy becomes more pressing and the EU moves to a policy of equal opportunity across the creative industries, innovative approaches to creating that equality of access are paramount. Especially when young people, increasingly envisage the creative and cultural industries as pathways to a future they can make a real contribution to. In developing and

supporting the role of the peer mentor within this context, TME (funded through Erasmus Plus) has taken an important first step. What is now needed is further investment at an EU level. And greater investment in creating the kind of workforce that can match the passion and enthusiasm of its future generations. Diversity, as a recent reports from Harvard, Forbes and [McKinsey](#) have made clear, is at the heart of all creativity and innovation. If the creative and cultural industries really want to begin to attract a diverse workforce and the EU wants to support young people in acquiring the creative skills that are increasingly transferable beyond these industries, then supporting the development of a Europe-wide network of interested, enthusiastic and above all, skilled and knowledgeable, peer mentors seems to be an excellent starting point.



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² <https://www.kunstbedrijfarnhem.nl/pdf/clocktoolkit/>