

How can we help young people improve their local environments? How can they become agents of change?

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Abstract

This article explores some innovative research conducted at an urban university and a secondary school in the United Kingdom. It shows how young co-researchers (aged 11-14 years) used creative research methods to explore the ecology and culture of the local park, situated next to their school. They worked with university students and academics at the university (also situated nearby), and researched the park by writing poetry, drawing pictures and making collages and films about it. The research shows that the young co-researchers found these research methods highly motivating and that the research generated powerful ‘affective flows’, whereby their creative outputs affected local councilors, community health groups and park managers at a research presentation. This led to changes being made to the park, i.e., improved lighting, a water fountain, improved litter picking schedules, and a community garden set up. The paper shows how these creative research methodologies created lines of flight, or new ways of thinking (Fox and Alldred 2015: 401), which helped the research team bring innovative solutions to old problems connected with the park. The creative research facilitated the generation of rhizomatic connections (401) whereby different generations – children and adults – came together to improve the park. The success of these research methods suggests they could be used in other contexts as well.

Introduction

Young people derive great benefit from local green spaces, yet once they have grown out of the playgrounds often situated within them, many feel alienated from them (Aalst, I-van & Brands 2021). This research project, created at Goldsmiths’ university, sought to re-engage young people with their nearby green spaces by encouraging them to use art, poetry, film and photography to engage with and research their local parks. A tutor at the university brought together eight Goldsmiths’ students and researchers to work with a local school and foster these ecological creative research methodologies. This led to the local school children meeting up with councillors, park management, park user groups, community health organisations and the police, thereby bringing multiple stakeholders together in order to improve the local park. As the project progressed, it ignited a commitment to both social and ecological justice in all of the young participants. This enthusiasm resonated with local councillors and park groups and the creative and innovative contributions of the young co-researchers (YCR) illuminated fresh perspectives and fostered lasting transformations within the park.

Research questions and rationale

Our introduction outlines some outcomes from an ecological research project which took months of co-ordination, involving multiple stakeholders. This article intends to show what and how such outcomes were achieved, and explores what might be future steps for the project. It seeks to answer these research questions:

How can academics, university students and teachers help young people improve their local environments? How can young people be assisted to become co-researchers into their local parks and become agents of change for them?

In order to understand the purpose of the research, it is important to consider why research should be conducted into the connection between young people and parks. Put bluntly, our parks have a problem with young people. While English (UK?) parks - and many worldwide - cater for children aged 0-8 years with playgrounds, they frequently make older children feel unwelcome, particularly poorer young people who can't bring play resources to the park. This is because young people struggle to find their own spaces and activities in parks, often feeling they are unfairly blamed for anti-social behaviour in such spaces (Aalst & Brands, 2021: Brown, 2013).

This article aims to explore ways in which creative research methodologies can be mobilised to help young people become researchers alongside academics, undergraduates and postgraduates. Its structure explains how these research methodologies were successful.

It offers a literature review of relevant research conducted into parks; the use of creative research methodologies applied to parks and young people; and discusses the methodologies and findings of the research project, arguing that these creative research methodologies have a significant impact on the experiences of young people and the ecologies they practice in parks.

Literature Review

The rationale of the proposed research is based on post-humanist, new materialist theories (Fox & Alldred, 2015) premised on the assumption that human and non-human entities can enter into interaction and generate affective forces (Gilbert & Matthews: 2021). These can stimulate participation, identification, and new meanings, enabling new forms of connections through engaging with digital technologies (Toohey et al. 2015) and space/natural environments ('critical place inquiry', Honeyford & Watt, 2020)¹. This study combines the two angles and investigates connections/bonding and the consequences for knowledge, self/environmental awareness-building in young co-researchers (YCR) whilst exploring urban green spaces and interacting with developing technology.

The post-humanist, new materialist methodology which we follow and is outlined below perceives parks to be 'assemblages', the bringing together of the human and non-human, park users, trees, grass, paths, litter bins etc. (Fox and Alldred 2015: 401). These park assemblages are often 'territorised' in popular discourses: i.e., taken for granted, not interrogated, simply assumed to have an existence. The research aimed to 'deterritorialise' them through the creative research: the researchers' poems, photos,

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films and more traditional research tools such as surveys sought to enable us see the park through fresh eyes, to generate new ‘affective flows’ whereby the creative outputs would affect their creators and their audiences and generate new, productive ‘lines of flight’ (Fox & Alldred 2015: 401; Gilbert & Matthews 2021: 3) and new ways of thinking and caring for parks. The research aimed to be ‘rhizomatic’ seeking to position all researchers and subjects of the research on an equal footing, so facilitating new and ever-evolving connections (Fox & Alldred 2015: 401; Gilbert & Matthews 2021: 9). The findings section discuss the difficulties and affordances of achieving this.

Methods and methodologies

Recent decades have seen a growing movement towards arts-based research (Smith & Dean 2009; Ingram 2014) which utilises the creative arts to empower young people to be researchers, as opposed to research subjects. Using a methodology called Photovoice (Ingram 2014: 311) Ingram and her researchers helped teenage girls research their own attitudes towards citizenship, schooling and their bodies. They created montaged, digitally manipulated photographs of their feelings about the world and their relationship with it. Ingram (2014) writes:

The methodological approach was intended to create a space where girls could represent their own lives, become participant-researchers through the process, and recognize their own active citizen engagement. (317)

The Parklife project aimed to build upon such research by using similar creative approaches. Connecting with the British Academy and Students Organising for Sustainability UK (SOS-UK), Dr Francis Gilbert brought together undergraduates and masters’ students from a local university with pupils from a nearby secondary school, both situated in a deprived urban area, and helped them work together.

Some of the data for this paper was generated by two one-hour semi-structured group interviews with the YCR in their school. They were joined by the teacher involved with the project, who also offered comments. All the students had parents’ permission to be interviewed and recorded. Other data studied was:

- The creative outputs produced by the YCR and their university mentors, i.e., films, photos, pictures, poems, stories
- Field notes from the hour-long meetings between the YCR and their university mentors, teachers and other parks people such as parks management teams, park user groups, community health organisers, local councillors, climate-emergency education facilitators
- Results from surveys and evaluations carried out during the project

Findings

Generating affective flows

All the young people interviewed reported it was their creative work they found most enjoyable and that most motivated them. They also felt, by implication, that this creative work led to some park improvements. One pupil reported:

I enjoyed the most the creative aspect, and how we got to express things about how we want the park to change. And also the fact that we actually got to talk to people who could make a change. Like our voices were actually being heard. And that people might actually do something because we were speaking to the right people for the job.

It appears that it was the creative work which gave the YCR the most space to ‘express things about how we want the park to change’. In other words, the fact that they were being asked to write poems, draw pictures, make films etc about the park ‘affected’ their relationship with the park: they began to see it in a different way. Their creative work provided them with some sense of agency; they began to internalise and reflect upon what the park meant to them (Gilbert & Matthews 2021: 3).

Poetry and affective flows

Let’s look at this ‘assemblage’ poem a young co-researcher and a student at Goldsmiths made together about the park:

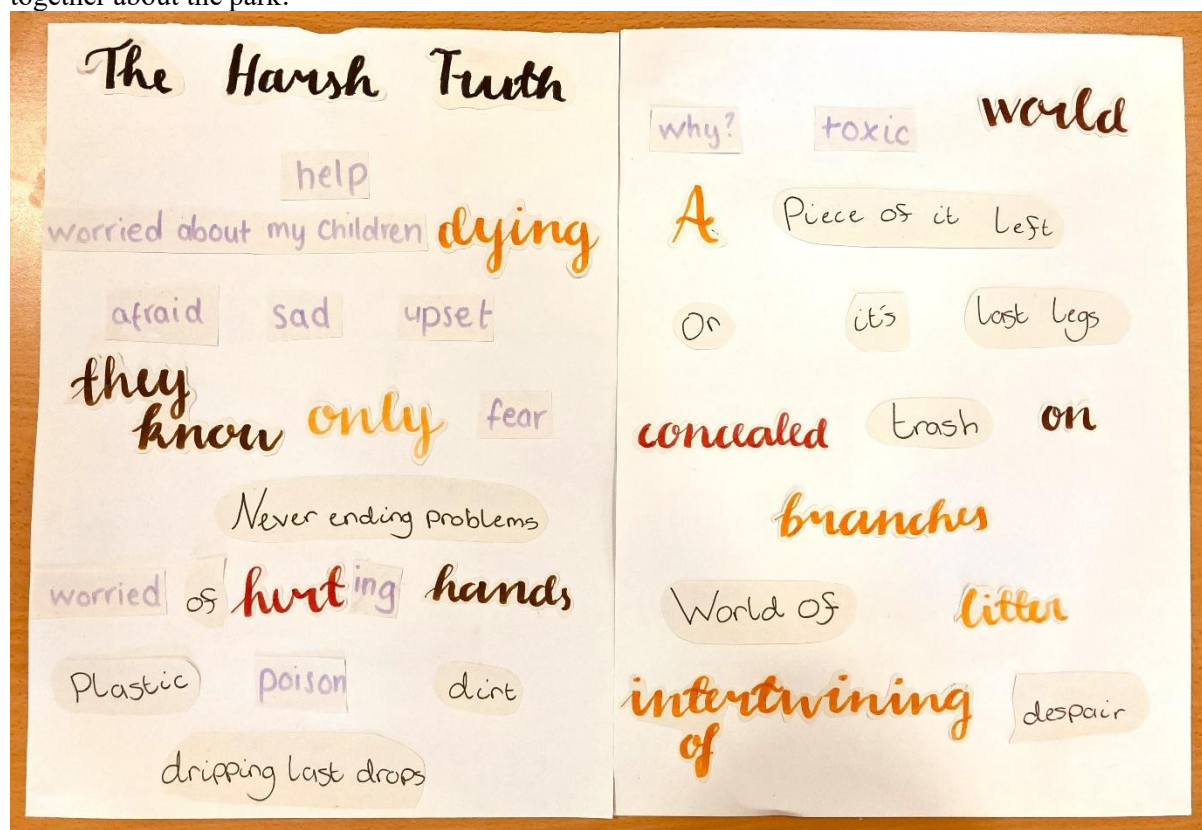


Figure 1 A cut up poem about the park

The YCR went on ‘learning walks’ around the park, and would then respond creatively. This poem was generated, in part, because a young man had tragically recently been murdered in the park. This tragedy provoked much discussion within the project (see section on safety issues in the park). The YCR were also saddened and depressed by the litter and environmental degradation of the park when they observed it closely and reflected upon it. Their learning walks generated an ‘affective flow’ (Fox & Alldred 2015: 401; Gilbert & Matthews 2021: 3) which led to the poem above ; drawing upon the words they handwrote, words cut out from a magazine, they wrote this emotional poem. The poem was read out by the young co-researcher to at the Advocacy Day where the young researchers shared their findings with a local councillor, a member of the park user groups, some members of the park management company, two representatives from a community health organisation and the local council’s schools climate emergency co-ordinator. The group were visibly moved by the poem, and the park’s management representatives pledged to facilitate more litter picking in the park by involving the school, and the local councillor said he would seek to improve the lighting and safety of the park. In such a way we can see how a powerful ‘affective flow’ was generated by the creative research; the writing of the poem, in a way, led to action.

Safety issues

Similarly, the YCR found it very helpful to draw and paint about the park. This generated some powerful emotional affective flows. This painting is particularly striking:



Figure 2 A painting by a young co-researcher about a young man who was killed in the park recently

Here the powerful use of colour and symbols shows how stunned and upset the pupils were by the murder of a young person in the park. The research methodology followed the affective flow of the murder: the ways it affected people's feelings about the park. As part of the project, the YCR interviewed a park user group member and the police about this murder and general safety concerns. They learnt that the chances of being attacked or killed in the park were statistically small. This led to some reflections about contrasting perceptions of the park. Even though the YCR accepted the statistics, they still did not feel safe. The combination of the shocking murder, the poor lighting in the park, the ongoing presence of street drinkers (who sometimes urinated in public places in the park) and the stories people told about the park made the young people feel scared when in it alone or in the dark. One young co-researcher explained:

You want to make people feel safe even if technically they are not that unsafe. You want people to feel safe. I feel like if I was with people I would feel safer. If I am with someone, if I am with people, something bad is less likely to happen, especially being a girl. There are people who are out there who could do some crazy stuff. Being around people...adults patrolling...it does make the feeling of safety more I guess announced pronounced? because of the fact that they are there...especially with the fact that the park is so big, and in certain people there is very little lighting, you can't really see what is in front of you. I have this thing where I am scared of what is in the dark, and if I can't see it really, really scares me, not being able to see my surroundings. Because the park is so open and is more like a field, open, not really much in between you.

As the young co-researcher notes, ‘you want people to feel safe’. This became a vital element of the research, particularly after the YCR interviewed the police and pupils. In particular, the YCR conducted a survey about perceptions of safety in the park amongst pupils in January 2023.

The results from the survey found overall more students felt unsafe in the park than safe. 92% of Year 7s (total 95 pupils), 69% of Year 9s (total 64 pupils) and 65% of Year 11s (total 107 pupils) answered they felt unsafe in the park. This shows a clear trend that it is the younger students who feel most unsafe in the park.

The underpass was reported the place students felt most unsafe followed by the grassy areas, paths, with the playground reported as the safest place.

This research led to the young co researchers devising an interactive assembly for the school on perceptions of safety in the park, where they used the quiz format of ‘Who Wants to be A Millionaire’ to question students about what proportion of students felt safe in the park and where they felt least safe. Thus, they presented Tables 1 and 2 in a fun way by getting their audience to predict what the results might be, and then revealing them. They then followed up the revelation of the results with some statistics about crime connected with the park which indicate that crime is relatively low in the area (Metropolitan Police 2022). The research was presented ethically in that it was not mobilised to shock or scare the pupils, but rather to inform them, and address issues connected with perceptions and reality of the park.

The young co researchers also set about revivifying an old initiative whereby local shopkeepers, businesses and organisations advertised the fact that they were ‘safe’ spaces where people could go if they were feeling unsafe (Axis Foundation 2018). The people running these safe spaces were re-interviewed and got ‘back on board’, and then posters were produced which advertised these safe spaces. Further research indicated that children in the school felt safer because of this poster campaign and the revivification of the publicity about safe spaces.

The research process followed and tracked a complex affective flow, which included these elements:

- People feel unsafe when alone or in the dark in the park
- The murder of the young person
- Lack of lighting or visible responsible adults
- Surveying pupils about perceptions of safety
- Educating pupils about perceptions of safety and the reality of crime in the park
- The revivifying of advertising/promoting safe spaces

New technologies providing lines of flight

The university students on the project helped the YCR film and photograph the park using a ‘360’ camera. This piece of technology can provide new perspectives by capturing a circular picture of its environment - front, behind and from the sides - a ‘360’ degrees shot of an area. This creative work provided insights into the ecology of the park. Here is one still from the film which the students made of a small animal’s view of the park:



Figure 2 A picture of an animal's perspective of the litter in the park

The YCR and the university students who made this film believed it served a vital purpose: it provided a vital insight into how animals might perceive the park. One young co-researcher said:

It's like you can say all you like about the environment and how litter is bad for it, and you can show lots of statistics and stuff about how bad life is for animals, but when you watch this film, when you look at this photograph, you can feel the pain of the animal, you know what I mean? For an animal it's a world of danger created by people's carelessness.

The new technology (at the time of writing) of the 360 camera afforded a 'line of flight', provided a new insight into the ecology of the park because it viscerally shows an animal's perspective. The research process which was facilitated substantially by the 360 camera is 'post-human' to the extent that it affords perceptions of the non-human. Similarly, another photograph taken by the 360 camera shows a bird's eye perspective of the park and school.

Figure 3 A bird's eye perspective of the park

One young co-researcher said of the 360 photograph which is viewable here:

<https://sites.gold.ac.uk/educational-studies-blog/how-can-we-help-young-people-improve-their-local-environments-how-can-they-become-agents-of-change/>

What I like about "the photograph is that you get the whole of the park in it. It's a rectangular park but the camera squashes it all into a circle, and you get sense of how it's quite small really. The sky is much bigger, and it's surrounded by buildings, but it's beautiful somehow. You feel like a bird looking at it, floating high above it. It makes you think how precious it is, how delicate somehow.

So while the technology of the camera can powerfully convey the horror of an animal's perspective of litter on the ground, it can also provide us with a deep sense of beauty. The young co-researcher quoted above felt that it showed how 'precious' and 'delicate' the park is: this insight into its ecology was created by the camera's ability to capture a bird's eye view.

The process of using the 360 camera to record video and photographs is explorative by nature and using it can create new lines of flight. For example, one can see in real time a depiction of what the

camera is shooting but there are numerous possibilities for shaping the final view of the photo/video into something completely different from the original shot with the use of editing tools. Within these shots different meanings can be derived. Although the students may have had an idea of what they wanted to portray in the film, it took encountering different elements in the park and placing the camera at different angles, testing, and trying creative shots to form the final ideas. For example, one young student saw a bush with litter and thought to put the camera inside not knowing how it may turn out and it was not until the editing stage that it became apparent this could create a non-human perspective, thus becoming “the picture of an animal's perspective of the litter in the park.” This generated new affective flows such as thoughts, opinions and further research ideas to be integrated into the project.

The creative research process here did not necessarily lead to ‘hard’ actions in any tangible sense (i.e. pledges by the adults at the Advocacy Day) but it did ‘affect’ all the research participants, many of whom reported being deeply affected by the photos and film of the 360 camera. One of the attendees at the advocacy day, a member of a community group, said that she felt very ‘moved’ by the film, and its offering of different perspectives of the park. ‘It made me see it in a light I had never seen before,’ she said. ‘It made me want to treasure it more.’

Rhizomatic connections: connecting the human and non-human

The organisation of the project was innovative in that it brought together many different stakeholders connected with the park, but not in a hierarchical fashion, rather in a rhizomatic way. There were no clear ‘chains of command’ like you might find in a hierarchically structured research project, with ‘supposed’ experts being in charge of less ‘expert’ researchers. The research project was not ‘arboreal’ in this sense: it did not have a tree-like structure with so-called important people being the trunk of the tree and the ‘lesser’ people being its branches and leaves. Rather it was ‘rhizomatic’ in that processes of connections were established and networks created which were non-hierarchical.

One young co-researcher said:

I really liked working with the university students because it felt like they were adults, but they were also our equals. They really listened to us.

This notion of equality is central to the idea of rhizomatic connections: the YCR reported that they felt their knowledge of the park was as valued as the university students’ more academic knowledge. This created a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and ideas.

This said, the YCR valued the university’s academic knowledge. Another young co-researcher said:

I thought the research process was really enlightening. I feel like the university students really helped, especially since they were university students, they knew a lot more than us, and that they helped us learn, and they helped with the research, because as university students they’ve probably researched a lot more things. They’ve probably made a lot of essays, talked to a lot of people about certain issues. They had a lot of experience, I feel like they were a bit like mentors in order to help through the process.

The comment here about the university students knowing ‘a lot’ more than the YCR needs to be taken in context: what was meant here was academic knowledge. This is an important point because the YCR really valued how they learnt about research processes from the university students and the other adult helpers on the project. The YCR felt safely ‘held’ by the university students: they appreciated the university students’ ‘experience’, their ability to write ‘essays’, and their discussions with other people. This respect for their embodied academic knowledge led to them being able to co-construct some important short and long -term goals for the project that were split into three themes: safety, litter and engaging young people. This was presented as a chart within the project. Under the theme safety, the short-term goals were a need for more lights at night as well as finding local places to show ‘safe haven’ stickers and to publicise this. Long term goals were to introduce a bike lane, safer play

area and more security around the park such as unmarked police and emergency buttons, which are alarms that people can press if they feel unsafe in areas such as parks or on streets. Under the theme Litter, short term goals involved creating a school litter picking group, placing more bins and signs around the park and creating more community based initiatives to combat litter in the area, particularly if there's a re-occurring theme of certain types of litter that is being dropped (cigarettes, cans, bottles). Long term goals were introducing a gardening group for schools and the community, reusable bottles at the school canteen and lessons about littering in the park for primary and secondary school students. To engage young people with the park, short term goals were creating a gardening area, placing more benches around the park, and creating a sport equipment storage area. Long term goals were building fountains around the park, introducing games such as table tennis and basketball, a nature study club and promoting research on local wildlife to raise awareness among children and young people.

This chart led to more rhizomatic connections (Deleuze & Guattari 2013: Chapter 1: Gilbert & Matthews 2021:9). It was shown to the local councilor, community group representatives, the parks' management team, and the environmental educators on the Advocacy Day, and acted as powerful incentive for these people to act upon what they learnt from the research presented. During the Advocacy Meeting, these various stakeholders 'adopted' different aspects of these goals. The parks' management team took on the job of assisting with improving the littering of the park and its lighting, the local councilor promised to address wider safety concerns and the community group said it would work with the parks' management to set up a community garden. During the next year, all the pledges in the chart being acted upon and achieved.

There were not only human rhizomatic connections, but also artistic, creative and literary connections made. There were some interesting rhizomatic connections between the creative and more formal elements of the research: the pictures, collages, films, poems (creative elements) 'kick-started' and then intersected with more 'traditional' research outputs such as surveys, interviews and the establishment of short-term and long-term research goals. This intersection between the creative and the more established research strategies is nicely captured in one co-researcher's observations:

I enjoyed the same things as everyone else, and also I enjoyed working with the 360 camera, something I've never done before. It was all about learning new things. I liked how when we were doing the creative research, we were focused upon what we wanted to change. And then we were doing the research like surveys, and we were looking at people's views on what they wanted to change, and then we were doing research to make that change happen. We gathered the information about what the situation is now, and how we can change it to make it what we want it to be. We did a storyboard of the park, and what the problems were, like the bins all overflowed, and then we went out, and we actually saw what the problems were. And then we devised solutions, to do things like put in more bins

This young co-researcher saw that the creative research was a good way of understanding what their own attitudes and desires for the park were, while the more formal research strategies such as devising surveys helped them understand what other people's attitudes were. They also understood it was important to research how they might make change happen.

From the psychology postgraduate university student's perspective, the research provided lines of flight in the form of a new research assemblage. Contrary to the standard psychological research methods of forming and testing hypotheses, there was no formal hypothesis for this research. Such research led the student to come out of their 'comfort zone' and approach the research process in a different light from taught studies. This research process meant forming research questions along the way, updating, and creating rhizomatic connections not usually encountered within experimental psychology settings where variables need to be controlled and procedures planned out. This also led the university student to be open to developments, to form connections between the human and non-human, and to think of new ways of integrating inter-disciplinary practices into future research projects.

Additionally, the university student noted the adaptability displayed by the YCR throughout each stage of the project, and how they approached creative and traditional methods of research alongside the more serious topics such as safety and crime within the park. As time passed, a noticeable transformation took place, with the YCR growing increasingly self-assured in articulating their ideas which in turn helped the university student's sense of confidence and direction for the project. This two-way dynamic is again an example of the rhizomatic, non-hierarchical nature of the project which is beneficial for all individuals involved.

Conclusions

The Parklife research project's innovative positioning of creative responses to the park as research created new affective flows which led to park improvements in terms of its upkeep, ecology and publicity. The poems, paintings, collages and films that the young people made enabled them to better understand the park: their feelings towards it, its ecology, layout and geography, and its place within the wider culture of the borough. These creative outputs generated lines of flight (Gilbert & Matthews 2021: 5) - new thinking about the park and how it might be improved, leading to the YCR speaking to significant adults connected to the park. As a result, a new water fountain, better lighting, better litter picking schedules and a community garden were established in the park.

This creative research enabled students at the university to communicate and mentor the YCRs in a motivating fashion, offering a powerful psychological space for discussion about the park. It proved a great starting point for more traditional types of research too, with surveys, questionnaires, interviews and literature reviews 'sprouting' out of the creative research in a rhizomatic, organic fashion. The YCR and university students were able to learn from each other. The YCR learnt how to use new innovative creative research methods as a means of voicing their opinions about their local park and speaking about issues that they may not have given much thought to before. As for the university students, they were able to disseminate their practices to the YCR, developing ideas along the way and learning what both motivated and challenged them, and the YCR, as the project progressed.

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