

PB YOUTH ACCELERATOR LEGISLATIVE THEATRE ZOOM MEETING, Held online on 22ND April 2020

Overview of the workshop.

The youth participatory budgeting Legislative Theatre workshop was a 1.5 hour online creative experiment, using the Zoom platform. With around 30 participatory budgeting youth accelerator partners from across Europe, our aim was to explore the potential for Legislative Theatre to be a creative way to engage young people in participatory budgeting experiences.

We used Zoom break out rooms, polling and a live Legislative Theatre experiment involving 3 young people connected to the Participation People youth empowerment organisation. The meeting was hosted by Jez Hall of Shared Future CIC and facilitated by Katy Rubin, who enabled us to achieve a high degree of participation and new perspectives on the barriers to youth engagement.

After an introduction to the theory and practice of Legislative Theatre, based primarily on her work with Theatre of the Oppressed New York City, Katy led a participatory online game to energise and involve the zoom participants.



Following this was a drama, conceived and performed by Olly, Phu and Lerryn, who agreed to be involved following an invite by Antonia of youth engagement specialists Participation People. We explored multiple barriers they had faced in real life. Issues of rurality and access to transport, the timing and venue of meetings, a perceived 'hand-picking' of young people, over expectation of what is possible in terms of their participation, lack of financial incentives and even how migration and asylum seeker rules all combine to prevent equal participation of young people.

Participants were invited to propose policy changes that might overcome these barriers. These were refined in breakout rooms and debated in open plenary. The process mirrors how Legislative Theatre operates face to face, and though inevitably limited by time and the online platform some powerful discussions and proposals emerged. Participants valued the experience and were interested in finding out more about the Legislative Theatre approach, or applying the techniques they had experienced in their own practice. As well as having had a lot of fun.

The Challenge: A drama prepared by young people

The drama involved a group telephone conversation between three young people involved in a six month young researchers project, within which they took a leadership role. In their calls they discussed how they were to present the results of their youth engagement work to a meeting of councillors and officers. However they were only given a few days notice of when this would take place and of the venue, which was a central urban location. One participant was unable to attend as they lived in a rural location without access to bus or other public transport, and their parents were unable to offer a lift into the local town due to work commitments. As a result they were unable to take part despite their central role in the engagement project.

On the day two members of the group did present and the work was well received by local councillors. Subsequently they invited young people at the meeting to represent the council at a European Youth Work conference, but only those previously presenting to the council would be invited. One of those two young people was an asylum seeker and as a result of national policy they would be unable to obtain travel documents to enable them to leave the country, and faced the risk of being prevented re-entering the UK if they went. Despite living in the UK for years and taking a positive leadership role as chair of a youth forum they were unable to take up the invitation.

This ultimately meant that from a group of three young people who worked together over an extended period in a voluntary capacity we found that only one member of the group, typically the one who already had additional 'privilege' (of living in the major conurbation, with family resources that facilitated their participation, and not an asylum seeker) came to represent all young people of their local authority at a European youth engagement conference.

The Response: Legislative Theatre audience participation

After seeing the play, there was a short breakout session in which people talked about how these problems are relevant in their own lives and what they might do if they were in the young people's shoes. When we reconvened in the main zoom room someone improvised their idea with the actors and we witnessed how it changed the situation. This step is key, as it brings more clarity to the policy problems, inspires structural solutions, and ensures that all the audience members are thinking in solidarity about how it impacts their own lives. In subsequent improvised drama, including archetypal power holders, more barriers were identified, such as a lack of a travel budget, lack of digital equipment in council offices that might enable remote participation, the importance to the council of presenting a safe, sanitised and inclusive public face to the public (it didn't like to see its reputation as an inclusive council challenged), the difficulty of influencing national policy on a one off basis, and so forth, led to some positive opportunities for new approaches.

It was identified that having a dedicated youth advocate present at internal planning meetings with officers could enable better planning and preparation. It was discovered that there were indeed budgets for council communications and corporate public relations that might be re-assigned to cover costs for youth participation if that also created positive news stories for the council, and that using the equalities duties that the council had already signed up to might ensure that youth participation work of the council would not in fact add barriers to the inclusion of minority or disadvantaged groups. Based on our short online experiment we uncovered and debated many issues and two firm proposals emerged and were backed through a vote by those at the online meeting. (See Appendix Three).

Legislative Theatre



Extracts from Legislative Theatre report of Theatre of the Oppressed New York City:
<https://www.tonyc.nyc/legislativetheatreport>

The core idea of Legislative Theatre is that theatre is a means of political activity, in which voters are given the opportunity to realize their desires for political change and engage in deep discussion with legislators on their opinions, field counterarguments, and share responsibility for governance. This practice was a later development in the Theatre of the Oppressed canon.

Augusto Boal, [the originator of the process] felt that while sometimes solutions could be generated exclusively by the people and their efforts, equally many oppressions could be found in the law itself. He sought to create a form of theatre where the “citizen makes their law through the legislator. Katy Rubin’s desire to spread this blend of interactive theatre and activism led to the founding of TONYC. Her primary goals in founding TONYC were 1) raising awareness about pressing issues through theatre 2) building solidarity by identifying how everyone is implicated and affected by the problems presented in the plays and 3) generating concrete ideas for responding to the problems in the plays. These goals inform the current practices of TONYC

TONYC partners with community members at local organizations to form theatre troupes. These troupes devise and perform plays based on their challenges confronting economic inequality, racism, and other social, health and human rights injustices.

Katy Rubin

I’m an artist and facilitator, working with cities across the US and internationally to develop and scale Legislative Theatre: a participatory democracy process that’s joyful, creative, transparent and accessible. I’m passionate about community-driven policy change to move the needle towards equity and justice.



I am the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, a non-profit organization that partners with communities facing discrimination to spark transformative action through theatre. After 8 years as executive director, I stepped down to become a friend and fan of TONYC, motivated by the belief that change is both possible and necessary.

I’m now focused on advancing the Legislative Theatre methodology, which changed NYC policy and practice. #WatchActVote!. My website is at: <https://www.katyrubin.com/>

APPENDIX ONE: LIVE CHAT CONVERSATION

Participants identified a wide range of issues in response to the question “What barriers did you perceive the young people were facing?”

access	Relying on the same young people all the time	Inequality of transport
Failure of authorities to cover expenses of citizens inputting into policy making	Transport	Accessibility to building
Discrimination	Time of the day	Relying on someone else to take them to venue
Barriers to access- transport	Staff not advocating on behalf of young people	Barriers for asylum seekers
Inequality of citizenship	Migrant/asylum seeker discrimination	Transport restrictions for asylum seekers
Excluding someone for not having been able to attend	Inequalities and rights	Barriers not always apparent
Not valuing young people’s contribution	Poor public transport	Barriers for asylum seekers
Family work-life balance	Rural transport issues	Pressure on the one person always taking on most responsibility
Opportunities dependant on parent's ability to be flexible with their work.	Burn out and fatigue	Etc

One of the young people then commented: this group is “*very effective if they've fixed every problem in that scene*”, leading to highly engaged and emotive comments such:

“100% agree”, “this is a typical thing. decision makers demanding and putting too much on young people!”, “Decision makers/organisers not flexible/adaptable enough”, “It’s been planned 2 months before but they only found out about it a week ago”, “Can’t the folk PAY for the lassie to get there?”, “Lack of empathy”, “Offering the opportunity to participate is seen as the same as being participative”, “why a venue that is not going to allow everyone to take part”, “council buildings are stuck in the past”, “They need to know that the young person can't make it and ask for support to get them there?”, “Why not use ensure using an accessible venue that young people can join online”, “Not very empowering process for young people”, “how much are adults being paid to be there... shouldn’t there be a transport budget set aside for this...!!!!... Grrr”

Breakout sessions enabled people start offering solutions and more detailed critique;

- “Film the presentation with all involved and make sure the other two can also attend”
- “Budgets are designed for adults, not young people”
- “Access needs are not being considered”
- “Democracy is designed for adults not young people.

- “Restrictions on travel for asylum seekers not inclusive – not everyone allowed to travel”
- “Budgets are designed without input”
- “Training / CPD for adults is adult led. Young people don’t have that training or experience to be fully involved”
- “Group work is transformed only into individual praise”
- “Cities structure are adult-centric”
- “Assumptions are that young people will be flexible. No flexibility of policy makers.”
- “Young people seen as different... they are citizens too”
- “Young people’s input is often, not celebrated, instead seen as a complaint or grumble.”
- “projects often led by staff - not young people - so goals established by staff - e.g. you have to be there to continue to be involved”
- “Complaint and compliment processes aren’t youth friendly”
- “There needs to be greater recognition for young people’s skills”
- “The labour of the young people is not valued”
- “Complaints are not taken seriously”
- “Institute inclusive transport possibilities (to town hall meetings)”
- “Have Young people involved in decision making at the very beginning.”
- “Temporary travel visas for Asylum Seekers”
- “At least 2 months before an event, an organiser needs to engage with young people where they are to talk about content, access issues etc”
- “Involving young people in every decision that is made - each organisation or council area to have a Youth Engagement Strategy - co-created with young people”

A prompt about who should be involved in resolving problems there was a flurry of suggestions:

Youth workers, Home Office staff responsible for asylum policy, someone from the Town Hall, politicians, councillors, leaders of young people organisations, local media, budget holders, community movers and shakers, young people, community liaison officers, local youth networks, immigration officers.

Including more detailed replies such as:

“Existing laws on access should be used to introduce a new policy of the council providing an advocate whose job it is to consult with young people to find out their access needs and so schedule the engagement in a way that is accessible, including paying the young people for their time.”

Based on conversation so far a second drama was improvised with volunteer ‘power holders’ commenting on their own concerns, issues and constraints. This provoked further good natured ‘heckling’ and other audience responses, such as:

“Oh dear! Boo! Oh crikey, that’s so incredibly realistic and typical!! Ha!! and “Vote for teaching young people they are solely there to benefit the elderly aristocracy”.

The newly developed participatory budgeting youth accelerator website:

<https://youthpb.eu/>

New participatory budgeting youth accelerator Facebook group:

<https://www.facebook.com/youthpbaccelerator/>

More information on youth work and its link to Theatre of the Oppressed at:

<https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/tool/theatre-of-the-oppressed-resource-manual.1475/>

Participation People website: <https://participationpeople.com/>

More information about the PB Youth Accelerator Project



We know young people wish to be good citizens, as has been seen by the recent climate change school strikes happening across Europe. This project will harness that energy and help make democratic participation a lifelong learning opportunity.

This Erasmus+ funded project will provide opportunities for youth workers, educators and teachers to explore how to implement a participatory budget (PB) processes. We seek to develop capacity and competency towards ensuring the participation of young people in the civic life of a city, a community or a school. It aims to be an innovative project that gives opportunities to experience democracy in action, especially at the local level.

The project consists of 5 partners from 3 countries – Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. All involved in activities that seek to develop civic participation and who share a particular interest in the empowerment of young people.

APPENDIX THREE: THE PARTICIPANTS, THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS AND ONLINE EVALUATION

A number of live polls were run during the meeting.

Who Participated

33 people were on the zoom call at the start, and they identified themselves as:

Local Authority Worker	1
PB Expert / Consultant	10
Researcher / Academic	6
Young Person	3
Youth Worker	3
Other (e.g. creative practitioners)	10

Participants identified themselves as coming from the following countries

England	5
Northern Ireland	2
Poland	4
Scotland	6
Spain	3
Other	1

For Proposal 1: “In this local authority we will create a youth engagement board that works directly with the local authority to shape the design of youth participation from the very beginning, that advocates for best practice, with access to funds to pay for travel and directly compensate young people for their time and participation costs.”

Number of people who agreed	25
Number of people who disagreed	1

For Proposal 2: “This Local Authority and the charities and agencies they work with will take a leadership role in convening a national event or conversation on the impact of travel policy (and other policies) on youth asylum seekers, especially when involved with youth engagement representing this country in international participatory democracy activities.”

Number of people who agreed	21
Number of people who disagreed	4

To the closing online poll evaluation question:

“How useful was this zoom call... Did it meet your expectations?” (Out of 5, where 5 is top marks!)

5: Excellent	18
4: Very Useful	4
3: Useful	4
Total Responses	26

APPENDIX FOUR: WORKSHOP PROGRAM (AGENDA AND TIMING OF THE MEETING)

2.00	Jez Hall started with a brief introduction to zoom etiquette and the first two online polls (who was present and where participants came from). Then Agnieszka Maszkowska of SocLab Foundation, Poland, briefly outlined the aims of the Erasmus+ funded PB Youth Accelerator programme
2.10	We handed over to Katy Rubin, for a presentation of the main features of Legislative Theatre, as well as running the energiser activity.
2.20	Katy facilitated the scenario with our invited young people. This was followed by a brief discussion on the barriers young people were commonly experiencing when involved with policy making.
2.35	Short randomised breakout sessions of 2 or 3 people to get us to talk to our 'virtual neighbour' about what they had learnt relevant in their own lives and what they might do if they were in the young people's shoes.
2.40	Moving back into whole group format someone improvises an idea with the actors and we witness how it changed the situation and develops ideas for policy proposals, before moving back into randomised breakouts of 5 people to develop more specific policy proposals.
2.55	We moved back into the main session to share our policy proposals which were sifted, refined and condensed into two firm proposals. During this session participants volunteered to play the role of policy makers and influencers, to receive and rebut proposals, leading to further refinements.
3.10	The final proposals were then polled online to come up with our final recommendations, which were presented back to our symbolic 'power holders'.
3.15	We entered our final group based question and answer session. Before a closing poll to evaluate the meeting.
3.25	Wrap up and thanks.

Process notes agreed by the facilitators

Katy facilitated the policy proposal process, also using the ZOOM whiteboard function. We didn't use a live google document, instead using the chat function to share and develop policy proposals.

Facilitators (Jez, Katy and Jayne) weren't assigned into breakout rooms but did drop in and out of them. There was a pre-meeting of the facilitators and the actors to iron out any technology issues.

We used Zoom recording of the session. We told people before we started to record to change their zoom name (e.g. to just initials) or blank their video if they don't want to share their identity or for safeguarding reasons.

Youth participants received a small financial reward to recognise their time commitment.