

HCP-C

MODULE 8

Arts Engagement



OVERVIEW

Housing First is an approach to ending homelessness through providing both permanent housing and additional support and services. The framework lists self-determination as one of its core principles– this encompasses not only the ability to find housing, but also more generally to overcome the limitations of homelessness and choose one’s own path forward. Another principle, social and community integration, refers to the importance of socially supportive engagement and opportunities. Moving out of homelessness can be very isolating and can include the loss or change of what was once one’s community. Securing housing often accompanies saying goodbye to friends or changing social behaviours; all of which may result in feelings of isolation and disorientation.

In addition to challenges associated with securing stable housing, youth require the capacity and skills associated with keeping housing, returning to, continuing or completing education, and gaining supplemental income to gradually move towards financial self-sufficiency. All these demands come at a time when youth are also making ‘home’, facing trauma experienced pre-homelessness or while navigating homelessness, and going through the developmental transitions of adolescence to adulthood.

Young people living homeless are diverse, as such no singular approach will suit all young people. It is essential that creative tools and innovative strategies be developed with young people to best determine their interests, needs, gifts, and talents. Contributed by artists with SKETCH, this chapter explores arts engagement with young people and outlines activities that can contribute to the strengthening of identity, capacity, opportunities, and community.

1. What does making art have to do with getting and keeping housing?

In [a study on the value of art making for youth experiencing homelessness](#), young people attributed art-making to: stress reduction and relaxation, mental health recovery, trauma healing, and self-expression, discovery, and confidence. These transferable skills all work to directly support managing the transition out of homelessness.

Honouring, celebrating, and creating space for young people’s creativity and imagination is critical to transformation. Said transformation **not only applies to the lives of young people**, but also to communities in which systems exist that also need transformation. Engaging the creativity and imagination of young people who navigate poverty, homelessness, and the multiple oppressions and exclusions of marginalization, therefore goes beyond service to the individual. Engagement in the arts is a community development strategy that when done with young people, can impact us all for the better.

At SKETCH we seek to celebrate the stability young people achieve for themselves, in the midst of great precarity and often hostility, as a result of their creative capacity and imagination. The culture and resilience derived from young people compels us to create space, offer tools, programs, projects, mentors, and opportunities to make – alone and together – processes that confront obstacles in the system, and innovate new ways to solve them.

In this chapter we use ‘art’ to refer to multiple forms of expression, modalities, or disciplines. This includes, but is not limited, to: **visual art** – painting, drawing, chalk, collage, craft, sculpture, pottery, fabric art, screen printing, **music** – song-writing, jamming, recording, performance, **movement** – dance, theatre, spoken work, **creative writing; digital media** – photography, film, video-making, and so much more. The chosen mediums matter, as they all consist of differing elements which require attention. Facilitators must consider space, time, materials, and the way arts engagement processes will be hosted.

2. WHY – it’s about creativity

The benefits associated with creative engagement and demonstration, in navigating the challenges of homelessness and marginalization, convince us to put artistic media into the hands of young people whenever and wherever possible!

- **Creativity is inherent to everyone.**
Creative expression, engagement, and storytelling all support youth in developing a sense of self and community. They offer healing and relief for traumatized minds, bodies and identities. Creativity is primal, it defines who we are.
- **Creativity develops skills essential for survival.**
Imagination and the ability to analyze, problem solve, and produce are all skills essential to managing everyday challenges as they arise. Space for arts activities enable practice opportunities for imaginative young people who rely on these skills, to keep them honed, sharp and ready for action at any time.
- **Creativity allows young people to discover**
capacities, likes and dislikes, work on skills to increase employment, connect with career opportunities or possible educational pursuits, and most importantly develop agency to be part of a community. The soft skills developed from fostering creative opportunities play a large role in the livelihood of young people. These skills include cooperation, patience, goal setting, and self-acceptance. The arts can aid in one’s health and overall social inclusion, especially as people collaborate in creative community projects or spaces.

- **Creativity and artistry awaken pleasure, desire, and possibilities.**

Through providing young people with agency, youth are able to dream for themselves. They're able to visualize the ways their participation, ideas, knowledge, and identity can find a place in culture and community. Through the arts, young people can become knowledge producers, not merely receivers of service or instruction.

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Knowledges shared in art creation

Factual knowledge – specific details and elements (about what things mean like a brush mixed with paint and applied to a page give you a stroke of paint on a page)

Conceptual knowledge – principles, theories, models, etc. Youth can draw on their own ideas and connect them with theories of other art makers.

Procedural knowledge – how to do certain things – skills, methods, processes, and where to apply them

Metacognitive knowledge – strategic, contextual, conditional and self-knowledge, knowledge of identities, knowledge of systems, etc.

This is critical in a heteronormative and settler colonial society, where culture is often presented in relationship to Whiteness. The dominant narrative guiding most economic, political, and social systems severely impact the everyday lives of young people through repeated discrimination, exclusion, violence, hunger, disadvantage, stigma, isolation, and general lack of understanding. Particularly for young people who are affected by unchanging colonial systems and services, engagement and learning through the arts offers new ways for their knowledge (new and old) to counter dominant voices and powers that stand to oppress them.

1. There are so many incredible resources about Arts and Health. Read [Beautiful Trouble in Mental Health and Addictions for Youth Experiencing Homelessness](#) for more about learnings through SKETCH.

We are in a time of recognition and reparation. Art and culture encompass both of those things – validating and realizing histories, languages, cultures and diverse ways of knowing that have been actively oppressed or erased. We want to support young people’s reclamation of their cultural expressions and experience. Art acts as a tool for liberation and the curation of new realities, inverting and subverting power and privilege, and upsetting the status quo. The arts lead to emancipation!

3. “Not everyone is creative”

We’d love to confront this common misconception, that not everyone is “into the arts”, nor able to participate. This is a limiting, ironic and uninformed belief that prevents young people from discovering themselves and their creative potential. The idea that *creativity* or the *arts* is only for a specific few, or only presented in through a ‘fine art’ lens is narrow minded and ill-informed. We’d be happy to talk more about this in person.

At SKETCH we see young people who navigate the margins as culture makers, perception-changers and collaborators in building creative and inclusive communities. We believe that as young people engage and develop in the arts they increase their capacity and resilience to live well and lead in community.

Assumptions

We are assuming that you’re approaching arts engagement with young people from a capacity-focused equity-informed lens. Not all learners are the same. Considering the imbalances of power and privilege in our systems and societies, it is necessary to determine what works for a diverse group of learners and to facilitate an active dialogue with the learners themselves. Let us know if you want to talk more about how working from an anti-oppression framework impacts art engagement.

WARNING

Once you embark on a creative journey that encourages young people to develop their agency and leadership through the arts, you need to be ready to change. Be willing to walk through your own creative process, and allow yourself to see things in new ways. Be open to getting messy and love the process as much as the product. Be ready for new ideas or suppressed knowledge to challenge old ideas and fixed knowledge. This is not about art therapy – that’s a whole clinical field! This chapter is about facilitating creative discovery, skill development, and arts engagement to create identity and community.

Creativity begets creativity!

Ideas propagate more ideas. SKETCH² grew out of a small community arts project and is now a full-blown creative hub. Sometimes, almost working like an arts deschooling initiative. Training and resources are required to create a space where your art making is available on a constant basis. Youth in leadership roles alongside artists and partners engaged for the long haul are essential. We'd love to talk about that further anytime! If you want to go the distance, let's connect.

4. The Role of the Artist

Artists play a foundational role in activating art for social engagement. Not all artists are interested in directly engaging with individuals on the margins and/or have the skill set to do so. Organizations looking to facilitate socially focused art activities should seek artists that share a practice and intersection with marginalized communities, while maintaining a rich knowledge and practice of at least one technical art medium.

The optimum set up would be that you would have **artists paired with social workers** to support activities. If you don't have access to this pairing, the next best thing is to engage an artist-facilitator with a particular analysis and engagement style informed by community arts practice. Frontline workers with artistic backgrounds are awesome, but it is important to recognize the potential tension for those workers in both providing youth support while also trying to facilitate an arts experience. Sometimes, one has to make way for the other. For frontline workers with no-artistic background, we strongly recommend hiring and partnering with an artist who works in community. In fact, so many young people themselves are being prepared to facilitate arts activities amongst their peers. We'd be happy to connect you with talented young artist-facilitators with lived experience. We favour lived experience and technical skills working in tandem to facilitate the best arts engagement experience.

Working with people is best understood as a mutual exchange, void of "saviour" mentalities. We often catch artists, youth workers, and ourselves falling into this kind of behaviour. Depending on the group, the artist taking residency within community or clinical settings needs to practice flexible guidance through *light touch*. This looks like maintaining boundaries that recognize young people can solve their own problems. Participants needing higher levels of attention, that would otherwise take away from the group dynamic and learning in an arts process, should be provided with support personnel specific to their needs. This is not the role of the artist.

SKETCH would be happy to share templates about how to develop or to co-develop workshops, engagement activities, space, or projects with you.

2. SKETCH is a community arts enterprise based in Toronto engaging young people navigating poverty, homelessness or the margins, ages 16-29, coming from across Canada, to experience the transformative power of the arts, build leadership and self-sufficiency in the arts and cultivate environmental and social change through the arts. Over 23 years SKETCH has engaged with over 13000 young people from across Canada to inform the creation of a placed-based, anti-oppressive and transformative justice relational practice, and constantly iterating framework of engagement, using the arts to address and enact social change. www.sketch.ca

WORKSHEET 1

Engagement Opportunities

Easy-to-Engage Art Making activities can be done in any space. **Skill Building Workshops** require a bit more investment in space, storage and resources. Finally, while requiring more time and investment, **Socially Engaged Arts Projects** can be done anywhere at anytime. Each activity has different outcomes.

Easy-to-Engage Art Making

These activities include small art projects that yield pride-making results for non-artists and artists alike. They require little skill in execution, from both the facilitator and the participant. They are easy to setup and can engage artists for short sprints of time. While they can be done alongside any other activity, they are best if they have at least a small dedicated space set apart from those other activities. Setting up a corner for art making in a non-arts space can be good for everyone. Even just watching people make art can be stimulating.

You can make this a theme-based activity, offering artists a prompt to create collages around specific experiences and ideas, or allow it to be free-form. Instruct participants to cut out shapes, images, or letters and reconstruct them in their own layout on a page, like laying out a magazine page. If they make more than one page it can be folded, stapled, or sewn together to create a book/zine.

These activities can include but are not limited to: card, sticker or button-making, paper art, collage, shaving foam art, chalk drawing, and even first-time experiments with watercolour painting.

Outcomes: Stress reduction, distraction, arts discovery, pride, fun, peer rapport, and eased connections amongst participants.

Example Activity: Collage Zine-Making

Set up & Materials:

- Table and chairs
- Magazines
- Glue
- Scissors (or just tear paper if it seems safer and more accessible)
- Tape
- 8.5x11" paper or larger, bristol board or card stock

Engagement Notes:

Do not hover, but make alongside as this is not art therapy! Host conversations about the process. Allow for quiet making time. Notice and have conversations around the *art of it* – the colours, the lines, the way the pieces connect together on a page, what the art itself makes you think of, etc. Encourage artists to connect lines, colours and shapes in different configurations. Talking technique awakens different parts of the brain and allows people to forget *what* they are creating, and instead focus on *how* they can create. Have example images of other people's collage work to inspire, guide, and maybe even copy to some extent especially for first-timers. The things people make have an intimate relationship with their capacities and limitations. Encouragement and support to realize those and keep going may be needed.

It's great if you can invite makers to sign their work and with permission, show work in a common space once completed. There's something declarative about signing a piece of artwork. But space should also be allowed for making quick things that are free to be thrown away. This process will get messy, and will require lots of clean up regarding scrap paper and glue.



Skills Building Workshops

Facilitated skill-building activities have a beginning, middle and end, which will take makers through the process of understanding and implementing specific art skills. These workshops aim to result in products, or simply increased ability to practice the skill independently. They foster precision and the formulation of an original message. Importantly, they incorporate accessibility – meaning anyone can do these and they don't require previous skills. Artists with technical art skills can lead people through workshops on how to draw, how to paint, how to move, how to write creatively, etc. The focus here is on the technical elements and skill acquisition, making accommodations along the way to meet participants where they are at.

Outcomes: Hard skills in art techniques that can be eventually repeated independently, soft skills of 'slow thinking' and process work, planning, patience, material care, pride in creating something from nothing, and self-confidence in achievement.

Example Activity: Stencils and Screen Printing

Set up & Materials:

- Stencils
- Paper/stickers/cloth/patches/T-shirts
- Printing ink/acrylic paint/fabric paint

Printmaking can range from making stencils on stickers or paper, to making silk screen prints on cloth patches and T-shirts. Stencils can be made with cardboard that provide a guide/boundary for paint that is either brushed into the stencil lines or squeegeed down a screen with a stencil on it. Either way, the paint should evenly fill the stencil outline. You can use printing ink, acrylic paint or fabric paint for this. These stencils can be simple and basic, or complex in design depending on dexterity and patience.

Engagement Notes:

Silk-screen printing is more complicated and is easier if it's demonstrated. SKETCH can co-develop a silk-screening workshop set up with you depending on your resources. Reach out if you would like to develop that.



Socially Engaged Arts or Community Arts Projects

These projects engage a particular group of makers to create work which examines and illuminates knowledge around a specific theme, prompt, or issue. They can be done in a one-week intensive, or over a longer period of time (4-8 weeks), and have the potential to result in the production and presentation of a body of work. These projects are very powerful as participants move through a process of discovery and collaboration that can immediately impact their sense of self and agency in the world. It's important to facilitate these with engaged curiosity, as well as caution to avoid pushing an *agenda* or exploiting people's experiences for the sake of the 'production'.

This can also be an activity that evolves from skill-building workshops discussed above, as it usually involves learning about particular artistic processes and techniques. Process and product are treated as equally valuable here. These projects rely on the strength of the artist(s), both in their art form and in the facilitation of a process-to-product experience. This is a growing field of practice with college and universities training artists and educators to engage communities in these arts processes.

There are four phases in every project process; a phase of getting to know each other, a phase involving examination of the chosen issue or theme, a workshop phase to begin making work together, and a design phase that results in a final compilation or product. Enough time has to be made for each phase. The best part is the production phase where people are involved in problem-solving and articulation of ideas through the artistic processes. They learn how to manipulate various mediums to communicate their ideas, which offers mastery and a tremendous self-esteem boost. These processes also foster a collaborative experience which challenges groups to work across differences and commit to a product where all voices are valued and included.

The examples are endless here, as so many projects can be referenced in engaging youth through collaborative work. Let's talk more if you want to engage in this design process.

Example Activities:

- **Photostory or Videostory** – much has been written about photostory and digital storytelling as powerful and accessible research and engagement with young people. Photostories can be easily done if people have access to cell phones, but if not disposable cameras can offer quality prints capable of telling stories. Digital storytelling is very powerful and can either lead to a print exhibition or an online exhibition that lasts well beyond the project itself. Cell-filmmaking is also an accessible medium that can be threaded together with multiple clips and other films, to make longer stories or presentations.
- **Theatre projects** – theatre can offer a platform where youth can address and rework scenes of real issues or challenges they/society faces. Participants can use voice, movement, and the creation of imaginative characters to illuminate ideas or move through a challenge to a resolution. Again, popular theatre educators are best as leads in this process as there are many things to pay attention to in theatre making. But the process can be powerful on many levels and the potential for final pieces to provoke new thought and change are limitless.

- **Group Murals** – these engage young people to design, paint or do image transfers onto large scale surfaces that can include large wood panels or interior and exterior walls of buildings.



CONCLUSION

There are limitless possibilities resulting from arts engagement with young people. Career paths emerge when young people become leaders of activities amongst their peers. These activities are not just for people who would define themselves as artists, nor are they necessarily focused on “making young people into artists”. In fact, supporting people to become independent artists requires more than the activities expressed here. The skills and capacities learned through arts processes however can be transferred to many other learning domains. They further support young people to discover what they like and what they don’t, what they’re good at and what they may want to learn, and what they do and don’t know about something. Relationships are formed through shared artistic processes, which enable young people to deeply share sometimes without conversation.

Seemingly unwieldy at times, engagement in the arts can bring up many things. However rest assured there are methods to it, and it is doable in various settings with varying levels of resources. We’d like to further emphasize the importance of including people who identify as practicing artists, with skills to share, and who would define their practice as connected to community. Young people respond best when those in leadership reflect or represent them and their experience. The full benefits of arts engagement are met when diverse practitioners with lived experience of homelessness or marginalization are working together with young people.

We’d love to go over possibilities with you. Let us know if you need anything. Reach out to us at info@sketch.ca.

REFERENCES

Schwann, Kaitlin. *Can Art Make a Difference? Mobilizing the Arts to Prevent and End Youth Homelessness*. Toronto: Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, York University, 2017