

Creating Characters as an Approach to Facilitating Learning from Lived Experience with Young People

Dr Jenny Penton, Brisbane Youth Service

The value of lived experience is widely acknowledged within community services, and co-design is increasingly recognised as a tool for building stronger and more effective services. Whilst there is much research into these approaches in health contexts, there is a significant gap in the literature around lived experience within homelessness services, particularly in the context of young people.

While several studies about lived experience of homelessness have been documented, these often acknowledge the challenges and barriers involved in this engagement, noting the complexities of people's lives,¹ the high incidence of mental health issues, substance misuse and other health problems,² and the perception that this demographic is hard-to-reach and unable to meaningfully contribute.³ In the context of young people who have lived experience of homelessness, the challenges are even more apparent.

A study by Mullins⁴ acknowledges that despite extensive efforts, they were unable to recruit any young people for their co-design project. These challenges around engagement and the barriers to participation for young people, perhaps lead to an assumption across the sector that this hard-to-reach group is simply too hard to reach. Furthermore, a lack of engagement from young people can often be understood as a lack of interest or a lack of capacity to participate in co-design or consultation opportunities. However, projects such as *What's Important to Youth?* by Melbourne City Mission⁵ demonstrate that young people do have both the desire and the capacity to

participate and contribute their lived experience in meaningful ways.

Brisbane Youth Service (BYS) has delivered two recent projects that sought to learn from young people's lived experiences of homelessness. Both projects also implemented creative workshop techniques that served to mitigate the barriers around youth participation and support meaningful contribution from young people.

The first project was a youth consultation process focusing on the re-design of the BYS website. Approximately ten young people voluntarily participated across two workshops. Each participant received a gift voucher and food was provided during the workshops. During the session, young people gave feedback on the concept for the new website and the content, layout and functionality of the design.

The second project was a more extensive co-design process with young people to design a new service delivery program within the organisation. Twenty young people in total voluntarily participated across four workshops, with each young person receiving a gift voucher, food during the session and a participation certificate outlining skills demonstrated in the process for their CVs. The young people were provided with an outline of a new service concept that has been funded, based on it being co-designed, and were asked to design the core components of the intervention, identify the priority mechanisms of change to achieve the intended outcomes, and critically reflect on the overall program concept.

The workshops across both projects were designed to be interactive

and engaging for young people. Underpinning the workshops was a strengths-based position that young people can contribute meaningfully to these processes. The workshops positioned young people as experts and were underpinned by the idea that the sharing of lived experience is mutually beneficial for organisations and participants. These values were coupled with an understanding that workshop content needs to be accessible for young people, with scaffolded activities that support discussion and ideas development. To achieve this, several creative approaches were introduced, one of which was the development of fictional characters within the workshops. This idea is drawn from a technique called *Role on the Wall*, a character creation exercise taken from the fields of Applied Theatre and Drama Education. The outline of a body or face is drawn on a large piece of paper, with the group then collaboratively brainstorming details about the fictional person that is 'like them' but not them. This may include their name, age, some past experiences and current circumstances, interests, challenges and support needs.

Applying this approach within a co-design context also draws on the work of Sustar et al,⁶ who created imaginary Facebook profiles in their co-design work with young people, and Nakarada-Kordic et al.⁷ who created a fictional, relatable persona to explore young people's lived experience of psychosis. In both of those examples the characters were created by the workshop staff and presented to the young people. Within the BYS workshops, however, the groups of young people themselves actively created each character's name, age, family context and housing situation.

Young people creating their own workshop character not only integrated a more fulsome commitment to co-design principles, it promoted each young person's sense of ownership and connection with the character. There was some contextual alignment guidance in the character design from workshop facilitators. For example, in the website workshops young people who were not themselves in crisis were prompted to design crisis circumstances for the character, to facilitate the workshop aim of exploring how a young person in crisis would engage with the BYS website.

Similarly, the facilitator encouraged the young people towards a character age that would align with the average age of the group and general BYS service users. There was a deliberate focus on only specifically defining the broader character elements so that each young person could have their own diverse version of the character in mind, as this would allow for a broader discussion of the character scenarios, rather than narrowing to a single or limited perspective relevant only to that character.

The character technique intentionally supports workshop participants to share their voices, experiences and ideas through the fictional lens of the character. Facilitated discussion focusses on the experiences of the character, rather than the experiences of the young people themselves. Questions and discussion can be framed as *'what does the character do/think/say/feel'* rather than *'what do you do/think/say/feel'*. This approach distances the young person from the narrative that they are sharing, supporting their personal safety, confidentiality in the group, and reducing the risks of distress associated with self-disclosure. It facilitates young people putting themselves in another's shoes — for example, a young person in crisis, rather than imagining themselves in that position. But, perhaps most importantly, this approach enables young people to open up and share ideas or thoughts that they might not feel otherwise safe or confident to reveal. They can say, *'I think that the character might/would feel...'*, rather than *'I would feel...'* or *'I do feel...'*. In this way, young participants are able to



Focus group at Brisbane Youth Service

share their lived experience, ideas and feedback with reduced fear of personal judgement or vulnerability. It also opens the possibility that they can share from knowledge of their peers' experiences, broadening the scope of lived experiences included.

This was especially evident in the first website workshop. Initially, some young people seemed reticent to actively join the discussion. As the character — a young man named Jez — was created, and the discussion shifted to how Jez would use the website, the young people who had initially remained quiet began to speak-up and offer their ideas and input to the group. In particular, there was one young person who started the session with very closed body language. Once Jez was created, however, this young person's body language immediately shifted and he became one of the most vocal contributors to describing Jez's interaction with the website. The character provided a vessel through which the young people could channel their own lived experience, enabling them to meaningfully contribute to the workshop, whilst still having a choice and sense of control over what they revealed about themselves.

Both the BYS website workshops and the program co-design process resulted in rich and insightful information from the young people. The participants also voiced how much they enjoyed the feeling of helping other young people, and participating in a workshop where they were able to contribute from their experiences of homelessness in a positive way. These young people who were accessing homelessness support did want to engage in co-design and consultation opportunities, when it felt safe to do so and, despite their challenging circumstances,

they demonstrated a rich capacity for meaningful contribution. It is important, however, to creatively develop workshop activities that provide options to share experiences outside of standard self-disclosure-based feedback processes.

The character technique offers a creative option to support young people's opportunities to safely and meaningfully experience having valuable, and valued, ideas and stories to share. Creative approaches such as these can be a highly effective tool in enabling a positive and comfortable framework through which young people can share their lived experiences of homelessness to directly improve the design and usefulness of homelessness support services.

Endnotes

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3. Mullins R M, Kelly B E, Chiappalone P and Lewis V J, 2021, 'No-one has listened to anything I've got to say before': Co-design with people who are sleeping rough', *Health Expectations*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp.930-939.
4. Ibid.
5. Cataldo M and Fewster D, 2016, 'Young People's Vision of Systematic Co-Design', *Parity*, vol. 29, no. 3, pp.23-24.
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