



### **Episode 3: Arts for All: Unlocking Access with Artwork**

In this episode of *Let's Go Further*, we continue our exploration of equity, diversity and inclusion across the skills and education sector, focusing on how art and creativity support learners' development, confidence and accessibility.

With creative subjects historically being squeezed out of the traditional curriculum, this conversation examines how a foundational belief in creativity can empower thought and drive meaningful change. Inspired by the seminal work of Sir Ken Robinson, the discussion highlights why limiting education to just literacy and numeracy risks damaging the future of the economy and stifling innovation.

Host Joe McLoughlin is joined by Annabel Cook, Co-Chief Executive Officer at the charity Artwork. As Co-Chief Executive Officer, Annabel strives to empower young people to work and lead in the arts and creative sectors. Evelyn, a young person who has directly benefited from the programme, now serves as a member of the Artwork and passionate advocate, helping to shape the future of the charity by ensuring the regular input of young voices into organizational plans.

Together, they explore the realities of turning good policies into good practice, the challenges facing educators and employers in under-pressure sectors, and the opportunities to create lasting, accessible environments that allow young people to thrive in whatever form suits them best.

#### **Episode Guests**

##### **Annabel Cook**

Annabel Cook is Co-Chief Executive of Artwork, a charity supporting children and young people across England to build skills, confidence and creative pathways into the future.

With a background spanning performance, education, local government and cultural leadership, her career has followed a non linear path that shapes her commitment to recognising learning beyond formal qualifications.

Today, she leads programmes that support young people, particularly those facing disadvantage, to develop real world, transferable skills through creative projects. She works closely with educators, employers and the arts sector to create routes into further learning, employment and creative careers.

At the heart of her work is a belief that young people already have valuable skills. The key is helping them recognise them, build confidence, and use their voice to shape what comes next.



## Evelyn

Evelyn became involved in Artswork's Youth Board at the age of 14. Now 17, she remains a passionate advocate for the organisation and for creativity more broadly. She loves performing and is busy carving out the next step in her journey, with a growing interest in developing her voice and confidence through creative opportunities.

Through her involvement, she has contributed to collaborative projects, helping to represent the views and experiences of young people and shape the direction of Artswork's work.

## Episode Transcript

**Joe McLoughlin:** Hello and welcome to series five of Let's Go Further, a podcast from the skills and education group that challenges the way we think about skills and education. I'm your host, Joe McLoughlin. In this series, we'll be exploring the range of ways that equity, diversity and inclusion policy and practice shapes the sector and helps change lives for the better. Across this series, we'll be joined by key voices from under pressure and in-demand sectors to explore how employers and educators can best work together to deliver life changing results for learners, their families, and their communities from the challenges of turning good policies into good practice to broadening our understanding of what inclusive education looks like. Our conversations will provide a platform for and celebration of the myriad opportunities that further education provides. Joining me are Annabel Cook and Evelyn from the charity Artswork. Annabel is the co-chief executive officer of Artswork and strives to empower young people to work and lead in the arts and creative sectors, and. Evelyn is a member of the Artsorks Youth Board and helps shape the future of the charity by ensuring the regular input of young voices into organisational plans. Welcome to you both.

**Evelyn:** Hello.

**Annabel:** Hiya.

**Joe McLoughlin:** So, to begin at the beginning. Can you tell us a little bit about where Artswork came from? What was it responding to and what goals did it have in mind?

**Annabel:** So Artswork, we've been going for about thirty-five years, and the charity really came about a lot in response to what was happening in the education system at the time. It was at the time when we were on the process of creative subjects being squeezed out of the curriculum. Sir Ken Robinson was quite instrumental at the starting points of Artswork and of course, his kind of



seminal work, All Our Futures, set out this idea that actually, by limiting education to literacy and numeracy. It was going to damage the future of the economy. It was going to stop that kind of creative thinking. And so Artswork has always had this belief that creativity empowers thought, empowers change and we work to empower young people.

**Joe McLoughlin:** And from your side, Evelyn.

**Evelyn:** I mean, absolutely, obviously, I don't know as much about the founding of the company, but I've been in Artswork actually since twenty twenty two. So four years now, which feels crazy to say, but even from then, you know, things have definitely developed like the accessibility. There's a lot of push for accessibility and meeting loads more people from across different parts of the country. And, you know, you can see the goal that Artswork has in every single meeting. You can see that, you know, it's pushing us to be creative, to be ourselves kind of in whatever form suits us the best.

**Joe McLoughlin:** And so when you say your work there, Evelyn, what's kind of your capacity with the organisation? What do you do? And how does that work week to week or month to month?

**Evelyn:** I mean, I'm only so much a part of it as any other member. So, I'm very grateful to be invited. Thank you. So yeah, every two weeks or so or maybe once a month, we will have an online meeting, and we will work on a current project. Or we might discuss something topical, or we might try and arrange a creative workshop. It's all just about pushing creative arts for young people. So, for example, last year we as an ensemble made a zine together and we printed it out and we distributed them, you know, around the country and they're still available. And it was just showcasing kind of the work of everyone in the group, everyone's talents, you know, whether you can draw, whether you can write, whether you want to write an article, whether you're good at design. There was a page for everyone and there was a theme. So, it's kind of creating interest in topical things that are creative while providing opportunities for young people.

**Joe McLoughlin:** What was the effect of that? In two ways. In terms of practically, in terms of what skills you developed or what things you learned. And then versus, say more personally or more qualitatively, like what was the outcome of it for yourself or the rest of the team?

**Evelyn:** Practically, I learn a lot of kind of physical new skills. So, we did a lot of the work on Canva, which I'd never really used before. And we were working in a collaborative space, you know, on a collaborative whiteboard, it was called, and everyone could pitch in and we were all on live speaking to each other as we were editing each week. And just like making sure we were working as a team, you know, really pushing that teamwork, which was amazing, getting to know



each other. And what is each person good at? How can we complement each other's skills? I learned a little bit. I was assigned with writing an article. I wrote an article about a relatively unknown artist. I had to do some research into that. I had to do some research into how do I write an article that's concise, that grabs people's attention? You know, it pushed me outside of my comfort zone, but it was really, really good. It was a little challenge and then personally, you know, it was just really a lot of pride when the zine came through the door and, you know, all of the team members, our names were on the back. You could see everyone's designs. Like I'll be like, oh my gosh, his designs on there and how our artworks on there and her poems on there, you know, it really felt like we'd done something amazing together.

**Annabel:** And from an organisational point of view, the zine was also shared with our main board of trustees, and it enables them to really understand what young people are thinking about right now. And that's hugely helpful for us and for the for the board to see those kind of ideas coming through, but not just being told them coming through in a really lovely creative way.

**Joe McLoughlin:** That's really lovely. And when you say young people, Annabel, who are they kind of what sort of demographics are you working with? What sort of patterns might you be seeing amongst the people that work with you most regularly?

**Annabel:** So, I mean, in the last three years, we've worked with over fifteen thousand young people and the backgrounds range. We work anything up to age thirty, we call a young person and we, we change that quite deliberately in response to what we saw post Covid because, suddenly we had a lot of young people, older young people who were showing real signs of stress, mental health issues, lack of confidence, which had really been born in those kind of lockdown scenarios where young people had been told all their lives, you're working towards your GCSEs or your A-levels. And then suddenly the rug had been pulled out from underneath them. And, you know, that still has a legacy now. We work, you know, kind of we target quite disadvantaged areas of young people. So, we work with young people in care, a care experienced young people. We work with areas of deprivation across our patch, because what we're trying to do is redress some of the balance. So, you know, kind of there's some really shocking statistics about the fact that ninety three percent of children in state schools are now excluded from arts education due to funding cuts. And that's really shocking because that's ninety three percent of young people not being able to express themselves and not being able to have that kind of creative outlet. So, what we try and do is redress that through our programs.



**Joe McLoughlin:** Yeah. You mentioned that you've worked with fifteen thousand young people. What is it that's so attractive? What sets it apart from other spaces or activities for young people?

**Annabel:** I think from my point of view, establish a non-judgmental, open forum where everybody's voice is equal. It's not a kind of teacher pupil dynamic that goes on. The young people are very much experts in their own lives, and we treat them as such. And so, it's that allowing them to safely express what's happening for them. And part of what we're helping young people to do is to find ways of changing situations that are in their local communities. And so, it's that feeling of ownership over. We recognize this as the problem. Okay, let's come up with a solution. And that's very empowering. And it builds the confidence. And I think once you put your toe in the water, that confidence grows and grows and the engagement grows. But it's really about that safe, equitable space that allows young people to be heard. But Evelyn, what's your thought on it?

**Evelyn:** I agree with everything you're saying, especially the kind of there is no hierarchy. Like even when I joined in twenty twenty two and I was like quite young, there was still no hierarchy. I didn't feel like a kind of teacher pupil environment. It felt like, you know, sitting down at a coffee shop and everyone's got a coffee and there's a big piece of sugar paper and everyone's like, right, so what are our ideas? What are we thinking about? Very, very kind of friendly. I was excited to meet other young people who had this interest because I mean, like you said, Annabelle, it just does feel like the arts are dying in schools. And it's something that I'm really passionate about and I can see happening. So, it was just really good to meet some other people, get to know some interests. Another thing that attracted me to the board was there are so many opportunities to try new things. Like I'd never made a zine before. I'd never written an article before. We've done lots of kind of workshops. There was a watercolor workshop one time, it's really safe and cosy of an environment. And although there are so many young people who are being reached out to, like, it does feel like a kind of small, safe circle of people. Great.

**Joe McLoughlin:** That's really lovely.

### **Advertisement – Skills and Education Group – Membership**

*Our membership program offers discounts on key awarding fees and training services, access to charitable funding that will help in the classroom, and much more. To learn how you can join us and the positive difference it can make for you, please get in touch today.*

**Joe McLoughlin:** So, getting ready for today. I've kind of prepped and I've done a bit of reading around the materials and the kind of the history of the organisation and a lot of the voices from participants. I think the thing that I noticed alongside the kind of challenging of hierarchies was the importance of



A podcast from



like affordable spaces. In that it's really hard between, you know, I would say fifteen and twenty, but realistically between fifteen and thirty to find spaces that you can go for long periods of time for relatively little money. I wonder what the question is. All of the bigger things that you're talking about, all of the wider benefits about challenging hierarchies and empowering people about identifying new skills or new careers pathways. Do you do you think that first step is firstly providing like a material base, providing it by providing an accessible space, providing a free space, letting people know they can come, they can visit, they can stay. It is cosy. And I suppose then the follow up questions that would be, if that is so important, how would you recommend or what would you say to colleges or training providers who wanted to recreate that on their grounds, say, or in their communities?

**Annabel:** Yeah, I mean, yes, I think it is very important what we're seeing. So, uh, recently we opened a building in Portsmouth called Playland. And that is absolutely that. It's a space that is free to access. And the young people that come there, come for the community, for the sense of belonging. And I think that's something that's really key as well. It's belonging in a group. Many of the young people that we work with, are neurodiverse or come from sectors of the population, which perhaps feel a bit more isolated. And it's an opportunity for them to meet different people and find a community that's around creativity. And I think in terms of what advice we would give, it would be about ask the young people, make the young people in charge of it, because the young people know what they need and want. And, you know, kind of It wouldn't be right for me to be sitting and designing what Playland looked like or what it felt like. I'm there just literally to support the ideas of the young people so that they can bring it to fruition. And I think that would be my advice if colleges want to do that, is that the young people should be in charge. They need to be in charge because they're the ones that know what they want. Great.

**Joe McLoughlin:** So, if I was to play devil's advocate, then for the time being and say, that's a lovely idea, it sounds very, very utopian. It sounds very, very idealistic, practically in, you know, educational settings where the teachers have to get information across, where there are assessments, where things have to be done to deadline or how would you counter that? Or how would you come back against that.

**Evelyn:** As somebody in a college environment? I think the thing is, you have to get to know what students actually want. So, it all starts and it's going to be different everywhere. So just start by taking some initiative, you know, and maybe put out a little survey or invite people to chat to you about what they want in a third space. So somewhere, like you said, where no money has to be spent, you know, it's welcoming and it's just all around for everyone and getting



that into colleges, obviously you have things like the library, but obviously there's the social rule of you shouldn't talk, you should be doing your work, etc., etc.. So like just discussing it, I don't think there's going to be a one size fits all. And that's what I agree with you when you say it's difficult because it sounds utopian and kind of unrealistic, idealistic. We'll find out what each person wants and take that initiative as an adult like it is your responsibility to do that.

**Joe McLoughlin:** So that even if it's a step in the right direction, like one step in the right direction, however flawed or however limited, is better than nothing. Right?

**Evelyn:** Exactly, exactly.

**Joe McLoughlin:** Okay. Brilliant.

**Annabel:** I think I'd be a bit more radical in my response.

**Joe McLoughlin:** Okay.

**Annabel:** Because you. Here we go.

**Joe McLoughlin:** Here we go.

**Annabel:** Uh, because, you know, you asked the question, like in this context where colleges have to demonstrate pupil attainment against certain criteria. I think therein lies the challenge for us as we move forward in the future, because what we know is that young people, just like Evelyn, was describing at the beginning of all the different skills that she learnt through the zine making, I think that there are ways that skills should be being acquired in different ways. So the young people who are working on our projects, they develop project management skills, budgeting skills, self-confidence, teamworking, all these real hard skills for employment, but it's not recognised formally in the education process. The education process is about can you write an essay? When did you last write an essay? Joe for work would be my question.

**Joe McLoughlin:** Uh, if a funding application doesn't count, the last time I wrote an essay was twenty eleven. So that's, you know, a fair while ago. So thinking about, thinking about those hard skills and thinking about the things you develop through the process, you know, not accidentally, but kind of additionally to the core activity of, you know, writing or drawing or whatever it is. What impact do those development of harder skills or kind of more employability skills have in the wider community? Like, are you seeing improved employment rates with the young people you work with? Are you seeing less mental health referrals, lower crime rates, kind of what's the benefits that we're talking about?



**Annabel:** Well, there's been a study by the Education Endowment Foundation, and they've shown that kind of participation in the arts increases cognitive abilities by up to nineteen percent. So that's a kind of statistic from what we see on the ground. Our breakthrough program, for example, which places young people who are less likely to be successful at an interview, we place them in workplaces for six months and they get paid to do that. And at the end of that program, the vast majority of those young people then either are kept on by those employers. And in this cohort, we've got twenty nine already have secured those roles and they haven't even finished yet. And others will go on to get further employment. So, we see that there is definite links to the employability sphere. We you know, there's a fascinating book by Daisy Fancourt called Art cure. And in that she argues that arts participation, any kind of participation, even as an audience member, boosts dopamine production. So, there is a scientific link between engagement in the arts and reduction in mental health outcomes. And we see, you know, kind of our young people. We had one young person on a programme who had been electively mute for a year, and the young person came on just a six week program working, you know, on this amazing creative project for six weeks. And at the end of that six weeks, this young person was out on the streets because it was a walkabout theatre piece. They were out on the streets talking to members of the public, whereas six weeks prior they had been electively mute for a year. So, we're seeing direct impact.

**Joe McLoughlin:** And Evelyn, how about yourself? How is it? How has your involvement benefited you in your own your own life?

**Evelyn:** I mean, I'm just starting to think about employability. But I really think that being part of the youth board in a subtle way has kind of increased my confidence. I mean, I've genuinely in my life, I've probably always been an extrovert nevertheless. But I think it's just knowing like your opinion is valued, your voice is valued, you're allowed to speak, and you deserve to take up that space and that time. You deserve to be listened to. And sometimes, you know, start talking first. Be the one who goes up to someone. Believe that you are worthy of being listened to, whether that's by an employer or someone on the board or someone at school. And I definitely think it's increased my confidence in speaking up, especially about creative ideas, but just generally speaking up and promoting myself as a young person hoping to go into a creative career, you have to promote yourself. That's all you've got to do. And, I think that's really given me some more confidence. So that's from a personal perspective, what the evolution has been.

**Advertisement – Skills and Education Group – CPD Events and Training**  
*At the Skills and Education Group, we know the value of excellent professional development more than just adding a line to your CV or meeting an obligation. High quality training helps improve retention, deliver better outcomes for*



*colleagues and learners, address skills gaps and more. That's why we offer a varied programme of events throughout the year, delivered online and accessible to all, as well as tailored training packages designed for your team's unique needs. Please visit our website or contact us to learn more.*

**Joe McLoughlin:** Great. So, throughout the chat you've. You've both used phrases like the arts and education are at risk, or the arts and education are dying or, you know, there's a sense of peril, right? There's a real sense of loss. What would you say kind of from your own experiences to government? Like if randomly, the secretary of state for the was it the culture, media and sport were to ring up, uh, to you and say, look, I've got I'd like one piece of advice or like one thing that I should do differently. Money's no object efforts, no object energies, no object. What would you ask them to do that would that would change the learning landscape, kind of that would have the most impact on, you know, learners, their communities all across the country.

**Evelyn:** I think I would just start by giving a reminder that no matter how many people we push into STEM or we push into careers that are considered more academic, the public still consumes art and music every day. And there need to be people who do that, who create that. So, we watch TV every day. You know, we listen to the radio every day because aren't invisible people who are creating these magical things. And these are real people who have created what we consume. And we can't underestimate the importance of that. These are things that we use every day. Like you might see art in an art gallery, or you might have a painting or a picture on your wall. You know, someone designed the frame or, you know, someone I don't know, designed your coaster or something. Like there's a person behind everything and art is everywhere. And you can't just, you can't take the people out of the art. You can't. So, I would advise them to rethink their priorities.

**Annabel:** I think I would say to them, you know, kind of the push on **STEM**, for example, you can't have an original idea without creativity. And I would argue you can't have creativity without imagination. And imagination comes from play. And that's where the arts come in. So, I would be encouraging the government to completely overhaul the education system to embed creative learning across every subject. We do a program which is creative careers in primary schools, and that programme takes children off timetable and they form their own film company, and then they play every role in that film company to create their film. So, we have young people who are producers, so they use their math skills. We have some of the young people will be writing the script, so they're using their creative writing skills. So, through programs such as that, you can deliver all of the outcomes of the curriculum. But the young people are far more engaged because they understand why it's not learning for learning sake. It's engaged,



active learning. And the other thing I would add in is, you know, that as we get further into, you know, higher education, further education, again, the narrowing means that we lose our sense of imagination and play. And as soon as you do that, you lose original ideas. So that would be my piece of advice is to look at different ways of learning.

**Joe McLoughlin:** Brilliant. So, I'd like to finish the conversation with a two-parter question that starts positively and then potentially risks going towards the negative, but hopefully we can save it. So, I'd like to ask both of you, what do we get when we get the empowerment of young voices and the embedding of arts in an educational process? Like, what do we get when we get both of those things right? And then as the alternative, what's at stake if we do nothing or if we get it wrong? And, Evelyn, I'd like to start with you, please.

**Evelyn:** Okay. From a personal perspective, when you get it right, you end up with young people kind of walking with their head held higher. I would say, and that is kind of something that you need no matter what career you're into. That is an employability and personal skill. Having belief in yourself and value and knowing that your opinions deserve merit and are worthy of being valued. Also, kind of more people having an outlet for not only whatever emotions or like, for example, if they have poor mental health, uh, creativity can be an outlet for that, but also just an outlet to try new things. You know, if we're all veering in the same direction towards STEM, if we all go into the same direction, there's going to be no diversity. And that's part of what makes kind of humans so amazing is we're amazing, a variety of different things, and we're skilled at tons of different sectors. and it just ends up with an overall idea of, yes, the arts is valuable, the arts are valuable. And we can't take that away.

**Annabel:** I think from my point of view, if we get it right, we will have a situation where our communities are more cohesive. They feel safer because, there's a sense of belonging and a sense that everybody understands each other's perspectives and we can have healthy debate. There's nothing wrong with disagreement, but it allows if we're allowing young people to have a voice, then they can start to create a future for themselves, uh, and for the communities around them. And I think that's the really important key bit. I think, you know, kind of we would be able to have a creative industry that is diverse and reflects, you know, the population where needing to know someone in the business is not the for, you know, being part of the creative industries that's good for everybody. We know that the kind of GVA that's created by the creative industries is huge in this country. And yet we're seeing underinvestment left, right and centre. I think we would see generally more engagement from employers who want to employ young people. We've got a real crisis at the moment. We know of young, unemployed people. The unemployment statistics



are going up. It's almost a million young people out of work now. And it's because we're seeing that young people, their skills are not being recognised. So if we can allow employers to see through the lens of education that, you know, kind of the skills they might have gained on a project are just as useful as a qualification, then I think that would be a really great place to be.

**Joe McLoughlin:** And what's at risk if we don't do that?

**Annabel:** I think what's at stake is we are facing a mental health crisis for young people. I think we are facing a crisis of unemployment for young people. I think there is a hopelessness that is felt by young people about what is happening in the world. And I think if we don't allow young people to have voices around the tables of power and have the skills and confidence to be able to take those seats at the tables and be heard and heard confidently, then I think we risk a society that becomes even more divided between those who have being older people and those who have not being younger people who are stuck living at home because they can't get a job because, you know, kind of their skills aren't recognized.

**Evelyn:** Yeah, I completely agree. And I think there's a lot at the moment, and especially if we don't act, this is going to get worse. There is a lot of stereotypes. There are a lot of stereotypes relating to young people, particularly Gen Z. And you know that we behave in a certain way or that we're not as employable or that we're not aware of the world situation. You know, addicted to our phones. Whatever. ET cetera. ET cetera. But actually, there's not really an addressing of why. And there's not a lot of slack given to younger generations. And I think, I mean, like you said, Annabelle, there's, there is a hopelessness that people feel and that I feel like when you open your phone and you see what the government is doing, what is happening around the world in terms of conflicts, in terms of politics and just a feeling of like, there is absolutely nothing I can do about this. I just have to sit at home and watch all of this unfold, and then get on with my life and finding a job and etc. and it's really heartbreaking, to be honest. So if we don't prove to young people and do that by action as well as in words that their voices matter and take action to show that which then has the positive consequences of, you know, more jobs, better mental health rates, etc., better skills in the population. We will have a generation that are not motivated at all.

**Joe McLoughlin:** That's great. Thank you. That's a really strong point to end on from the both of you. Thank you to my guests, Annabelle Cooke and Evelyn and to you for listening. We hope you enjoyed the conversation and that it's got you thinking about how you can put different ideas of equity, diversity, and inclusivity into practice with your colleagues and your learners. If you have a question for us or a comment on what you've heard, please join in the



conversation on social media and remember to subscribe wherever you receive your podcasts to access earlier and forthcoming episodes of Let's Go Further.