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Youth arts as popular education: Cultural Studies at the edges of the creative industries

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ABSTRACT

Youth arts is a form of education that operates primarily through affect and, perhaps because of this, has not received attention in terms of its capacity to develop young people's employability. In this paper we identify and discuss the much vaunted and highly desirable '21st century skills' learnt in youth arts settings. Drawing on arguments first advanced by Dick Hebdidge and Raymond Williams, we show that while 21st century skills are learnt through affect, the processes through which this learning proceeds produces skills that are seen as valuable commodities. Taking the everyday seriously as a site for learning, we explore youth arts projects as a site for skills development and argue for a framing of micro-credentials that at once recognizes and problematizes this modality of training. We do so by outlining how our reading of cultural studies scholarship can provide a foundation for understanding the everyday spaces of youth arts as critical sites of knowledge production. Examining the intersections of identity, being and culture as pedagogical, we outline how the everyday experiences of diverse youth participating in arts might be captured so as to build pathways into the future based on competency in 'the now'.

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Introduction

The subject of young people and arts practice is rarely mentioned in national education and training frameworks. However, we do hear about 'skills for the future of work' and, more specifically, the notion of '21st century skills' (WEF 2016). Welsh cultural theorist and adult educator, Raymond Williams, famously argued that university education needs to embrace and respect popular culture:

> [F]or conservatives and reformers alike [film] is shorthand for depravity and cultural decay. Many fear that if education touches it, the taint will be indelible. It is a pretty fear; but if adult education cannot handle and access an institution which weekly serves the leisure of twenty-five million British adults, and which deals well or badly, but at least *with great emotive power*, with the values of man and society, then adult education deserves to fade. (Williams 1993, 186, emphasis added)

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We echo this argument advanced by Williams, and, for the purposes of this paper, assert its relevance to the cultural activities of young people. In calling for the 21st century skills learnt in diverse young people's creative practices to be recognized, we take seriously the 'great emotive power' that is construed as superfluous to the operations of economy and industry.

Elsewhere, we have argued that young people's arts practices are both popular and public pedagogies (Hickey-Moody 2013). That is, arts practices are a way that young people enjoy learning about and producing their identity. Diverse young people's arts practices are also public pedagogies in that they *make publics* (Hickey-Moody 2015) and teach specific ideas about young people to their audiences. They are also a means of giving social visibility to marginalized young people.

To put this another way: pedagogies can hinder or reduce what one can become, or they can open up the ways in which one becomes.

Yet, diverse young people's arts practices, and popular cultural representations of these practices, often reproduce stereotypical ideas about socially marginalized young people. However, these practices also have the capacity to create new figures of such young people and to re-work community sentiments surrounding them. Building on this theme of liberation and constraint, we argue that micro-credentials can be a way of demonstrating the 21st Century skills that diverse young people develop – both valorizing and codifying those skills all at once. Micro-credentials can 'capture', or represent the skills learnt and developed in youth arts and can facilitate a broader understanding of the utility of youth arts practice.

The language of '21st Century skills' is constituent within popular neoliberal discourses about the workforce of the future; however, it also names a series of popular literacies that are taught through affect in youth arts settings. For those of us in higher education, 'micro-credentials' is a term synonymous with the brittle edge of the neoliberalization of the university sector. Exemplifying the triumph of individual self-improvement discourse, 'micro-creds' can now be earned in almost any field or discipline, from engineering to human resources to medicine. We argue that while micro-credentials can be a vehicle for furthering the commodification of higher education, they also offer means of widening participation in higher education. Indeed, micro-credentials can be a means of making visible the often feminized and ignored skills that young people develop through their work in the arts.

We focus our attention in this paper on the theoretical and political implications of micro-credentials for young people entering the world of work. We also situate youth arts practice in a cultural studies framework of 'infra-structures of feeling' (Coleman 2018) that produce young people who operate within 'the now', linking Coleman's reading of infra-structures of feeling to earlier concepts in cultural studies, such as Williams (1977) 'structure of feeling'. In doing so, we position youth arts as a site of popular education that teaches 21st Century skills and conceptualize the ways that micro-creds might express these skills to industry.

Community making and the commodity form

The process of making and being involved in art is complex, and is a pathway through which young people simultaneously herald and make the communities to which they

belong. Many young people develop expertise in arts practices that are part of their communities of practice and, alternatively, others develop methods of practice that are clearly part of their imagining of a globally 'popular' realm. In what follows we discuss young people's art practice as both a form of community making and a means of creating commodities.

To make this case, we present our experiences of working within one youth-arts collaboration. *Far Flung: Connecting Intergenerational Families* was a community engaged art project funded by Creative Suburbs, Creative Victoria, and held with the Doncaster and Manningham community in Melbourne's East. Run in 2019, the initiative targeted new immigrant children (aged 8–12) and their parents from neighbouring Asian countries, most of whom were of Chinese heritage. The aim of the project was to widen participation in community arts, and to facilitate the development of a collaborative art work with a 'social-artists-in-residence' team. The creative team consisted of a group of artists with various creative skill specializations including video, photography, ceramics, performance and sound art capabilities and educational experience. Eleven families were invited to take part in the project based on the children's interest in artistic activities as determined by art educators at Birralee Primary School, Doncaster. Birralee Primary School had experienced enormous growth in the five years leading up to the project, increasing from 100 to 500 students between 2014–2019 as a result of increased Asian immigration. The school recognized that extra-curricular socially orientated, collaborative and creative artistic activities would be of benefit to these students and their families in the development of building their social relationships and creative skills.

The final outcome of this three-month collaboration was a co-created multi-disciplinary installation presented in the Manningham Art Gallery. Through a process of collectively interrogating local place, histories and identities through creative workshopping, studio practice and considering the art practices of local and international artists, the creative team were able to collaboratively engage, reflect and creatively problem solve best how to represent the participants' shared perspectives and their place in the Doncaster and Manningham community.

For example, in undertaking their investigations of local place, the participants' recognized they were underrepresented as new immigrants in the local community and their artwork expressed this perspective. The exhibition reconceptualized the community gallery as their imagined 'shared home'. This shared home featured both local and global characteristics of the participant families, for example, the front room was configured as a 'lounge' presenting the participants' creative journey into interrogating their place in a new society through video and sound documentation of creative studio processes and interviews with the participants. The second gallery space, 'the dining room', was where the families physically created a metaphorical place for themselves in society. Here, they were both absent and present. Their seats at the dining table, set for themselves, were empty, but they were present via their family portraits which adorned the walls of the 'dining room'. The exhibition was launched publicly by the greater local community, embracing the emerging cultural diversity of the local area. The narratives presented contributed new voices of the immigrant community in the Doncaster area and are now a part of the local history of the place.

By making the time and space to develop this creative collaboration, the project brought together individual families with shared perspectives as new immigrants and

supported the process of deeper engagement with varying intergenerational perspectives of the children and parents, recognizing their fluid and adaptable intercultural skills as a transnational community. These creative and collaborative processes encouraged teamwork and co-learning between the children, parents and the artistic team, building self-awareness, creative leadership, and critical thinking. These creative processes also taught problem solving, strengthened social relationships and built a sense of belonging in the local community.

It is possible to frame such capabilities under the banner of 21st Century skills, and link these highly sought after skills to industry and those seeking dynamic employees. The fact that this project's young participants were from diverse cultural backgrounds was also central to the richness of this learning experience, providing the basis for cross-cultural learnings and development. An example of intergenerational learning through arts practice in a community setting, *Far Flung* provokes further thinking about the relationship between cultural participation and 21st Century skills, and the ways in which knowledge developed in diverse cultural contexts might be better valued – or seen *as* capital – and so better communicated to industry.

Diverse young people and skills for 'cool' jobs

The pressures and insecurities that structure young people's pathways to work are particularly acute for those from culturally diverse backgrounds. Migrant young people in particular are less likely to be employed and more likely to be 'underutilized' in their jobs than the general youth population (Wyn et al. 2018). Such disparities support the view that the attributes, skills or forms of 'experience' that are valued by employers are unequally ascribed to different cohorts of young people, in ways that are marked by race and ethnicity (VicHealth et al. 2017). Creative industry jobs, to which young people who participate in the arts may aspire, are especially problematic in this regard, as the industry is dominated by white, middle class workers (Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013; Saha 2018). It has been argued that 'cool' jobs in these industries are characterized by their demand for particular embodied, subjective capacities that privilege whiteness, such as 'autonomy' (Warren et al. 2019) and the capacity for social and professional performance 'unencumbered' by 'stereotype threat' (Boulton 2015). At the same time, global activist movements being led by young black or Indigenous people or people of colour, combined with the expansion of media markets, content creation across platforms and national boundaries, are prompting some organizations to value diverse employees as a strategic form of capital.

As this discussion makes plain, the creative industries in particular provide opportunities to build on young people's embodied selves and lived experiences as a way of creating commodity forms. Arts practices also provide ways of situating selves in community, understanding and presenting one's identity to peers and diaspora. Although these aspects of young people's creative arts practice have arguably been understood for many years (see for example Hebdidge 1979; Bublitz et al. 2019), no one has yet institutionalized a way of acknowledging or rewarding young people's skills as developed in youth arts.

Naming and problematizing the popular in 21st century skills

There is an increasing focus in policy, education and community discussions on the apparent skills and capabilities that young people will need to develop and demonstrate in order to 'thrive' in the complex, changing, precarious and uncertain labour markets of the 21st century. The idea of 21st century skills has emerged over the last two decades in different contexts and in different ways, to address, at different times, the challenges and opportunities that various international, national and local agencies and actants imagine in relation to the future. This is in response to the disruptions associated with the climate crisis, the so-called 4th industrial revolution, the 'future of work', and the challenges and opportunities that emerge from the recognition of difference and diversity in various contexts, settings and relationships (including work places and marketplaces) (OECD 2019; WEF 2016; Carbajo Padilla and Kelly 2022).

In a 2018 report that canvases a number of challenges for Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems, Anne Jones (2018) outlines both the context of profound changes in labour markets, especially for young people, and the sorts of capabilities that young workers need to develop in order to be employable in these labour markets. Jones touches on important elements of these debates in suggesting that there is significant uncertainty in terms of:

> how work and employment opportunities will change in the near future. Predictions range from "forecasts that nearly half of jobs in advanced economies may be automated out of existence" to confidence that high-level vocational skills will be more important than ever in the digital world (Jones 2018, 2).

These sorts of projections and predictions are widespread and have had significant influence in shaping youth education, training and employment policies in Australia and other OECD economies during the last four decades[1]. In the face of these predictions and uncertainties Jones argues:

> What we do know is that people will need educational breadth as well as occupational depth to adapt and thrive as industries and society change. Researchers who have looked specifically at how vocational education can prepare people for digital disruption emphasise the importance of acquiring broad technical skills that can be adapted and applied in novel contexts, complemented by what have become known as twenty-first century capabilities (Jones 2018, 2).

For Jones and others (ACER 2013; WEF 2016; Lamb, Jackson, and Rumberger 2018), 21st century skills and/or capabilities comprise the 'knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions individuals must acquire to adapt to complex and unknown circumstances' (Jones 2018, 4). Citing a European Commission (EC) report from 2012, Jones suggests that European Union (EU) countries have identified 21st century skills – a combination of 'high-level technical' and 'core' skills, and 'transverse capabilities' – as the 'capabilities they consider necessary to remain globally competitive and to best prepare individuals for lifelong employment' (4). These so-called 'transverse capabilities' include 'the ability to think critically, take initiative, problem solve and work collaboratively … [and] … entrepreneurial skills' (Jones 2018, 4).

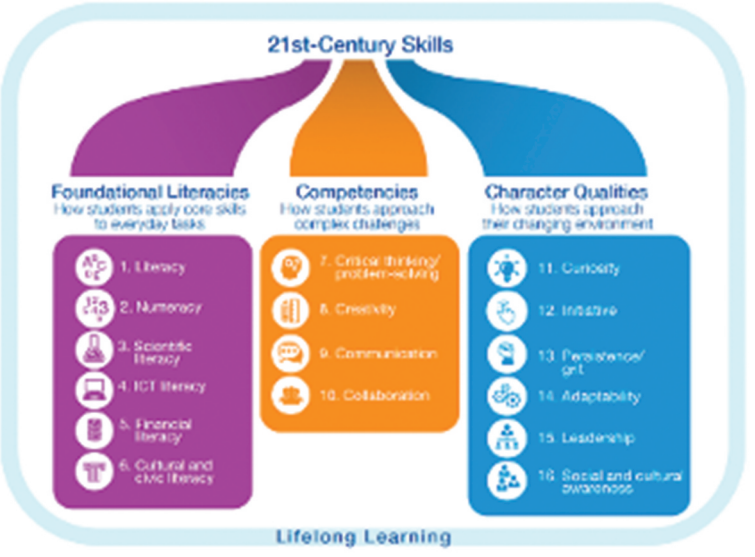

Figure 1. World economic forum: 21st century skills (source. WEF 2016, 4).

The World Economic Forum (WEF 2016) has been especially influential in identifying 21st century skills and shaping the popular discourse of 21st Century Skills as a route to employability (see Figure 1).

For the WEF (2016), a young person's range of possible embodied capabilities, behaviours and dispositions can be disaggregated and reduced to a set of six 'Foundational Literacies' (Literacy, Numeracy, Scientific literacy, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) literacy, Financial literacy, Cultural and Civic literacy); four 'Competencies' (Critical thinking/problem solving, Creativity, Communication, Collaboration); and six 'Character Qualities' (Curiosity, Initiative, Persistence/Grit, Adaptability, Leadership, Social and Cultural awareness). In a 'technical' paper from the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Victoria University in Melbourne, Stephen Lamb, Jennifer Jackson and Russell Rumberger (2018, 4) build on this sort of 'taxonomy' to develop a model that seeks to identify what they call 'clusters' of 21st century skills and their 'associated cognitive abilities and personality traits'. They name these clusters as Cognitive Competencies, Intra-personal Competencies, and Inter-personal Competencies (see Tables 1, 2 and 3).

Table 1. Cognitive competencies (source. Lamb, Jackson, and Rumberger 2018, 4).

Cluster	Terms used for 21st century skills	Main cognitive ability/ personality factor
Cognitive processes and strategies	Critical thinking, Problem solving, Analysis, reasoning/ argumentation, interpretation, decision making, Adaptive learning, Executive function.	Fluid intelligence
Knowledge	Information literacy (research using evidence and recognizing bias in sources), ICT literacy, Oral and written communication, Active listening	Crystallized intelligence
Creativity	Creativity, innovation	General retrieval ability

Table 2. Intra-personal competencies (source. Lamb, Jackson, and Rumberger 2018, 4).

Cluster	Terms used for 21st century skills	Main cognitive ability/ personality factor
Intellectual openness	Flexibility, Adaptability, artistic and cultural appreciation, Personal and social responsibility (including cultural awareness and competence), Appreciation for diversity, Continuous learning, Intellectual interest and curiosity.	Openness
Work ethic/ conscientiousness	Initiative, Self-direction, Responsibility, Perseverance, Productivity, Grit, Type 1 self-regulation (metacognitive skills, including forethought, performance and self-reflection), Professionalism/ethics, Integrity, Citizenship, Career orientation.	Conscientiousness
Positive core self evaluation	Type 2 self-regulation (self monitoring, self-evaluation, self-reinforcement), Physical and psychological health.	Emotional stability (opposite end of continuum from neuroticism)

Table 3. Inter-personal competencies (source. Lamb et al 2018, p.4).

Cluster	Terms used for 21st century skills	Main cognitive ability/ personality factor
Teamwork and Collaboration	Communication, Collaboration, Teamwork, Cooperation, Coordination, Interpersonal skills, Empathy/perspective taking, Trust, Service orientation, Conflict resolution, Negotiation.	Agreeableness
Leadership	Leadership, responsibility, Assertive communication, Self-presentation, Social influence with others.	Extraversion

Despite these formal taxonomies, there remains much debate and even confusion about 21st Century skill and capabilities. What exactly are they? How do we understand these so-called 21st century skills/capabilities? Are 'soft skills', 'employability skills', and 'enterprise skills' the same thing? (see Walsh 2017) Where/when/how can they be developed in different parts of compulsory and post compulsory education (primary, secondary, further/technical/higher education), or in non-traditional, more informal education and training settings. In turn, there is significant debate about how these capabilities, once identified and then developed, can be measured. For example, Stephen Lamb and his colleagues suggest that 'there may be general agreement in the literature that 21st century skills are important' (2018, 2). However, 'there is far less agreement as to what these skills are; whether they are malleable; whether they have any effect on other outcomes; and how they might be measured' (Lamb, Jackson, and Rumberger 2018, 2).

These debates are significant, particularly in terms of their focus on young people and the skills they have developed, or not, and what this means for their 'employability'. This focus on individual skills often disregards the structural and demand side of youth labour markets, and/or the employment practices and conditions that shape young people's experiences of education, training and employment pathways. Our interest here is in examining the ways various understandings of the cognitive, psychological and relational dimensions of the human are identified, measured and evaluated in increasingly granular ways under the rubric of 21st century skills/capabilities. This interest is related to identifying and problematizing those processes in which the capabilities of the material human body are rationalized in order for those bodies to be 'disciplined' in ways that make them productive and 'docile' (Foucault 2008; Brook 2008; Hickey-Moody 2013), and where 'docility' and 'productivity' are elements of cycles of commodification and exchange. Indeed, these 'skills' speak to different forms of material embodiment; and through the

operationalization of the 21st century skills discourse, particular modes of embodiment become rationalized and valued (in terms of their 'exchange value') in shaping young people's education, training and employment pathways. As we have suggested elsewhere, the orthodox, mainstream, and supply-side focussed discourses of 21st century skills provoke new forms and intensities of self-knowledge and self-reflection on the parts of learners to recognize themselves, to work on themselves, in ways that are demanded by what are claimed to be 'new worlds of work' (Carbajo Padilla and Kelly 2022).

Our concerns here are extensions of the point we make above, that education can be a form of liberation *and* a form of constraint. We ask how it is that marginalized and disengaged young people can be brought into pedagogical processes to develop capabilities that are understood to be of value. How can education be capable of creating further value through exchange and labour processes? We ask these questions at the same time as we make these pedagogical and exchange relations problematic. There are clearly significant gaps and oversights in the 21st century skills discourse. As we have suggested above, an interdisciplinary perspective shows us that when problematized within cultural studies, it is a vocationally focused educational version of discourses that appropriates cultural capital as a commodity form (Hebdidge 1979). As such, the 21st century skills discourse can be seen as a way of commodifying young people's expertise and experience at the same time as it is a way of training young people to become who they are in ways that benefit capitalism and industry.

Micro credentials and widening participation

There has been an increasing amount of interest in micro-credentials as a contemporary form of education. Micro-creds are a fairly recent, digitally enabled approach to skills development, an approach which has both been thoroughly critiqued (Ralston 2021) and employed as a means of widening participation (see, for example, Digital Promise 2021).

Put simply, a micro-cred is a digital badge (like a logo) that shows the accreditation of skills and training outcomes. They are increasingly used in informal or non-traditional training contexts (Business Council of Australia 2018; Learning Vault 2020), and in many universities. Micro-creds can be 'stacked' like Lego blocks, to build up to equal a university subject.

The recent Australian Government's Education Council review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education, and training (Shergold et al. 2020) argues that micro-creds capture skills development in pertinent ways. The review defines a micro-cred as 'a certification of assessed skills and knowledge that learners have demonstrated or acquired through a short course of study or training' (Shergold et al. 2020, 109). These courses 'focus on smaller elements of learning and may stand alone or be additional, or complementary, to other certified training. They may also be a component part of a formal qualification' (2020, 109). The review highlights a number of positives related to micro-creds, including their 'efficiency, cost-effectiveness and flexibility' (2020, 110). Citing a number of peak bodies – including the Business Council of Australia – the review suggests the need for micro-creds is 'increasingly well established in business, where they are used to address particular skill requirements in new or emerging occupations, provide evidence of workplace capabilities, or warrant the currency of existing skills' (2020, 110). The 'potential of micro-credentials has come into further focus as a result of the impacts of

the COVID-19 pandemic', as the pandemic 'has shown the value of being able to pivot an economy in unforeseen ways' (2020, 110). Prior to the 'economic shock of the pandemic, the market for micro-creds was growing in both higher education and the VET sector . . . with 36 of Australia's 42 universities currently either offering or developing some form of micro-cred' (2020, 111).

We propose a different approach to these framings of the micro-credential. Rather than continuing the marketization of education through micro-credentials, we ask if micro-credentials might be seen as means through which a widening participation agenda might be advanced? To put this another way, micro-credentials offer a pathway *into* university for students who do not meet formal university entrance criteria.

Micro-credentials can offer pathways to university for young people without a university entrance score, or without the financial means to study at university. Indeed, our initial empirical research suggests that pathways into existing degrees are preferred by urban students with significant barriers to higher education, while those in regional and remote locations prefer direct access to work[2].

Luckman and colleagues (2019) have shown that we need to 'support collaborations between industry and creative micro-enterprises' (10) and foster business skills development in young creatives. These goals inform our current research on education and employment pathways for young people and industry. We aim to investigate the opportunities, translatability, applicability and viability of micro-creds across different contexts in Australia as a means of widening educational participation.

Infra-structures of feeling and having a knack

In her 2018 essay titled 'Infra-structures of feeling: digital media, pre-emergence and infra-structures of feeling', Rebecca Coleman develops Raymond Williams' concept of structures of feeling into a contemporary version that reflects the impact digital media has on young subjectivities. She calls digital media 'infra-structures of feeling' and it seems to us that these infra-structures of feeling shape all contemporary engagements with creative processes. Put simply, in his discussion of structures of feeling, Williams (1977) argues that society, class, race, gender and educational opportunity – or lack of opportunity – create 'structures of feeling' in everyday life. To put this another way, feelings need to be considered as being symptomatic or expressive of different social conditions. So, for example, while 'depression' is experienced at a subjective level, it can also be read as a response to lack of opportunity, mistreatment, injury, or perhaps the seemingly irreversible effects of climate change with which we now live. In this example, depression is an expression of the *structure of feeling* created by contemporary society. Coleman (2018) brings affect studies to bear on this now famous thesis that feelings are expressions of social structures, and thus are inherently political.

Contemporary young people embody this being in, or working myopically with, 'the now' that digital infrastructures institute. Young people bring not only a particular temporal orientation ('the now'), but also a whole range of 'knacks', embodied know-hows, and ways of understanding subcultural forms that can only be possessed through the embodied labour of growing up as a young person today. These knacks are learnt through being in the know, through doing, through feeling, through being immersed, through being part of things, through growing up.

As we have suggested, the affective dimension of youth arts programs exists within the tension of civic and popular domains of culture. This agonistic play was foundational to the emergence of British and Australian Cultural Studies in the Centres for Adult Education and Colleges, where it was staged as a critical attention to the meeting of the ideological, and later disciplinary, effects of formal pedagogy, and the everyday uses of culture, especially by those marginalized from elite modes of cultural education.

Youth arts represents a form of civic education that involves peer mentoring and teaches civic competence and diversity awareness. Studies of arts programs in schools (Australia Council 2020; Dunn et al. 2019; Linzer and Ellen Munley 2015) have demonstrated the ways participation in creative projects can build young people's confidence and sense of community membership, even more so when those projects have been devised and driven collaboratively by the students rather than being assigned by a centralized curriculum.

Indeed, we suggest that participation in youth arts programs beyond the school environment often help young people to develop critical social skills and competencies. Cultural Studies has a place in this formulation, and as a discipline with institutional presence within higher education, holds capacity for the development of the sorts of micro-creds that emphasize the 21st century skills we discuss here. By providing platforms for play, imagination and ethical deliberation, Cultural Studies holds potential to provide space for the development of these ways of learning:

> Without imagination we learn only what is – "there is no alternative"; "it's common sense" . . . . With imagination we explore what might be which leads into the realm of criticality – "why must it be this way?"; "has it always been like this?"; "what would a just society look like?" (Prentki 2014, 15)

As such, Cultural Studies might engage youth arts provide an educational space of great importance for young people, and this is the case particularly in relation to young people who may not have access to formal tertiary education. It is because of this that we are working within contemporary digital infra-structures of feeling to understand and recognize the skills and attributes that young people develop through their work in the arts.

Conclusion: knacks that pay off

The long and the short of the various lines of argument developed here is that often youth art organizations provide amazing spaces in which young people can develop, refine and learn skills, but there are not necessarily any ways in which young people can derive future benefit from such work. Young people demonstrate in these settings that they have the knack, the capacity, and the competence, but at present an unclear sense of employment futures confront them. In an attempt to ameliorate this situation, we suggest that building micro-credentials that offer both a formal means of accrediting the 21st century skills that diverse young people develop through their work in the arts and that generate employment pathways are crucial. There is a place for Cultural Studies within this field to open opportunities for young people to demonstrate these skills; one that we suggest will also rejuvenate Cultural Studies and open capacity for the discipline to (re) define itself.

Notes

1. See the Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) New Work Order series for a prolonged and influential framing of the enterprise and 21st century skills young people need for the future of work - https://www.fya.org.au/our-research-2/.
2. As part of a 3 year research project engaged with the arts sector and industry partners we are surveying the needs of diverse young participants in the arts sector. We are assessing models for micro-cred stack-ability and pathways to work, and will then develop three micro-credentials in ways that best meet the needs of industry and youth involved in arts.

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