This network helps creative pros mentor students from under-represented backgrounds

Earlier this year we spoke to 24 leading designers and creative directors to find out what they were expecting for 2017 – and many touched on diversity, or rather the lack of, within the creative industries. This sparked an in-depth look into practical ways some leading creative agencies aim to facilitate a team made up of ethnic, socio-economic and gender diversity.

This is how we met Isabel Farchy – ex-teacher and founding director of Creative Mentor Network; a programme which pairs creative professionals from top London agencies with under-represented school students from greater London. The 16-week programme helps students gain connections, understand what it looks like to have a career in the creative sectors such as graphic design, advertising, music, illustration and fashion – and how to get there.

In this feature find out what impact the Creative Mentor Network has made over it's two-year life span, and how you can get involved.

Senior Strategist at M&C Saatchi Jasper, and his mentee, Mark

How it works

"From the outside, the [creative] kind of world can seem really elusive, and by going in on a regular basis you get to see what people wear, how they talk to each other, and [the student] meets their mentor, but also meet the team the mentor is working with, and it breaks down that wall," says Isabel, who's moved into a full-time role of heading the Creative

Mentor Network which began two years ago.

Creative Mentor Network is a non-profit organisation working directly with 25 schools across outer London (and is hoping to expand this to 50), and respected creative agencies such as Wieden + Kennedy, Lucky Generals, WCRS, M&C Saatchi and Havas Group to make sure students with diverse backgrounds pair up with a mentor to gain access to the networks they need to build a career in the creative industries. Alumni from the programme have gone on to take opportunities at creative organisations such as M&C Saatchi, Warner Music and Monocle Magazine.

Agencies have to opt in and sponsor its employees to go through a 16-week Mentor Development Programme in order to mentor a student, and Isabel and her team work with teachers to identify and select 16 -19 year olds who come from a background of poverty. The mentor training explains the background that the students come from and how important social capital is in building a career. The students listen to Isabel speak in assembly and choose to sign up online if they're interested.

Mentors can show the students around their working space, show them creative briefs and introduce colleagues so the students get an idea of what each role involves – while building connections at the same time.

Creative Mentor Network's fundamental view on the importance of social capital is mounted on the statistic that young people are five times more likely to become employed if they make at least four professional connections before they leave school.

Katy Eelsten and Chloe Cordon are a creative duo who work for Wieden+Kennedy. They're currently mentoring two students, Gifty and Jasmit, for the Creative Mentor Network.



Katy Eelsten (left), Chloe Cordon (right)
Katy and Chloe showed the students around the building and meeting rooms, the different departments to give them an idea of what actually goes on in each one, and spoke to them about future pathways to get there.

One meeting room in particular was exciting – 'The Padded Cell'.

"They were super polite and didn't question the motives behind wanting meetings in windowless rooms with bright green padding on every wall at all," says Chloe.

"Then we kicked back, had a couple of lemonades (this time in 'The Love Lounge', which is very intense and red and velvety) and spoke about what they want to do with their futures, but in a less terrifying what-am-I-going-to-do-with-my-life-I'm-only-seventeen way, and more of a lemonade-is-nice-so-is-art-maybe-I'll-go-to-art-school way."

For some students, it's the first time they've entered a creative agency, or even central London without the primitives of a school trip.

"A lot of it is demystifying the jobs market and there is research – when students and their parents know what jobs are out there, how much they get paid, what skills are required – that has an impact on their aspiration," says Isabel.

How it all began

Isabel is passionate about providing marginalised young adults with the chance to imagine a career as a creative. For some of them it's the first time it's ever been considered.

While BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) representation in the creative industries is at 11 percent, the sector's London weighting and the city's ethnic make-up means that figure should be closer to 17 percent, showing a lack in

representation results.

Isabel was an English and media teacher, who noticed her year 12 students were finding it much harder to gain work experience than when she was at school. With the notion that exams aren't all that matters, and the encouragement of an innovation hub, Isabel was able to launch her social enterprise idea.



Founding director of Creative Mentor Network, Isabel Farchy

"I realised that my focus as a teacher at that point had been so much on helping students to pass exams and helping them to go to university, and even though those things have an impact on their future, there's still the missing piece to the puzzle," she says.

She applied for different grants unsuccessfully, but the process for applying for grants helped her to cement the idea of the Creative Mentor Network.

How do students qualify?

Isabel works with teachers from selected schools to find out who stands to benefit the most from the Creative Mentor Network. When Isabel visits schools in outer London, who often have less access to central London businesses, sometimes her visit will be "the only whisper" of the creative industries some students have had.

"Of all the students that apply, we don't want to just take the top five percent from middle class backgrounds," she says.

Many of the students are receiving free meals (an indicator of poverty), and often don't have engagement with employers.

Although Isabel says it's not necessarily about who has the most creative talent – after all, everyone is creative right? – it's really important "to access students who stand to

benefit the most and students who are really motivated and want to be there.”

What’s involved for mentors?

The benefits for the students participating in the programme may be obvious, but it’s a little more sacrifice for designers, directors, illustrators and creatives to take time out of their working week, especially when the students aren’t guaranteed to work at the company or agency like an intern might.

But for some, the effort is more than worthwhile. After receiving an email at work, Katy and Chloe knew it sounded like something for them.

“If kids didn’t want to work in advertising then there’d be nobody new, no new exciting ideas, and everybody in the agencies would be old and advertising would never change or grow and we’d only be able to sell to old people (and they’d probably all be white and male let’s face it) and basically it’s the beginning of the end,” says Chloe.

She says it’s important for the agency to have diversity because it’s normal. The world is diverse, and agencies should represent that. Being two females in a predominantly male department, they feel the effects of the lack of diversity in very real terms.

“People don’t get our jokes, they get grossed out when we talk about period pains, and they don’t understand that we can’t knock back four pints in one hour 15 minutes. It’s cool, we don’t understand how they can do that, but when you’re massively in the minority, that’s when you realise how important diversity is for wellbeing,” says Katy.

Isabel says some students don’t have a professional female role model in their lives apart from teachers, so a mentor can

emulate that.


Creative Mentor Network mentee Momina
“I see a lot of some of the girls are very low in confidence, I don’t know why it’s specifically girls, but they can often be quite meek. It’s so nice to match them with a women and see that confidence grow and see themselves.”

Vickie Ridley is an account director at creative agency Lucky Generals. She mentored Rasheka, who now works as a broadcast assistant at the BBC. Her full blog post explains what it’s like to be a mentor and how mentoring has made her more motivated in her job.

How is progress measured?

Isabel says instead of measuring impact by how many students have gone on to work in the creative industries – although she says 80 percent of its alumni go onto further work opportunities in the creative industries – it’s about seeing how many have built a professional network, developed soft skills such as confidence and initiative, and learnt more about the roles than make up a creative agency.

By collecting surveys at the end of the programme, she says confidence is the biggest gain.

“Confidence is a big thing. One of the things mentors always note is at the beginning of 16 weeks, they set the agenda of meetings for example roles, creative brief but towards the end of the process it’s a lot more mentee led, and the students decide [on the topics], such as asking for apprenticeships or how to go to Ad School,” she says.


Creative Mentor Network mentee Na’lmah (left)
Katy says the students become more and more interested in

their next steps after school, and are thinking seriously about what's next and how to get where they want, such as researching about possible universities.

"School doesn't prepare you for the working world, at all," she says. "The most important thing we noticed is that it's literally just about drive. These kids get this experience because they volunteered themselves. They travel 1.5 hours each way on a Thursday night when it's blooming cold out to come listen to us jabber on."

You can request to see the impact report here.

How have agencies responded so far?

The idea of charging organisations for the mentor training didn't really exist before the Creative Mentor Network says Isabel. But the prospect of a third party organising everything is appealing for an agency that wants to improve diversity, but isn't quite sure where to start.

Isabel had the support and networks from a managing director of an advertising agency in South London at the time, who helped to put her in touch with people to get the idea off the ground. From there it's "snowballed" through word-of-mouth. The more agencies who are involved, the more people are inclined to get involved says Isabel.

Havas Group has agreed to sponsor an entire cohort in January, and the charity is doubling delivery from three to six groups in 2018, working 120-150 children into the programme.

"I've actually been really impressed, I can think of very few examples when I've met with an agency and they haven't been on board straight away.

"I think it's a thing agencies think about a lot but don't necessarily know how to put it into action. This programme has a clear benefit for the students and for them."



Matthew and Marc

If you’re considering whether to become a mentor with the Creative Mentor Network or not, all you need to do is send Isabel an email or sign up through the website.

How does this help to improve diversity?

Many students, and often their parents, perceive careers in accountancy, law, and banking will provide them with stable careers, because they are deemed within their community as successful, says Isabel.

What the Creative Mentor Network aims to do is tackle the root of diversity issues before they begin. Many students self-select a career away from the creative industries because of insufficient information, lack of connections of preconceived ideas.

Once students have learned more about opportunities in the creative industries through having a mentor, they are able to make much more informed decision with their parents about choosing a career in the creative industries.

“When I was a teacher, all my students were really smart, really interested in the world around them, good at problem solving and popular culture – and it would be such a shame for them to miss out,” says Isabel.

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/creative-business/this-network-helps-creative-pros-mentor-students-from-under-represented-backgrounds/