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Re-engaging At-Risk Youth through Art – The Evolution Program

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Abstract

Many studies have highlighted the capacity of community arts programs to re-engage those young people considered at-risk of disconnection from future education and/or employment. *Evolution* is an artist-guided visual arts program established for young people challenged by mental health and social issues that aims to foster re-engagement in education and training. It was founded by a community-based youth arts studio, Signal, and in a partnership with a youth support service, has developed into an effective, strength-based model of practice that focuses on the young people's existing capacities and positive qualities rather than setting out to improve perceived deficits. Central to the success of this program has been the commitment to relationship-building, mediated through art practice, and the opportunities afforded to connect positively with others. This paper reports

on research during the formative years of this initiative and outlines the conditions that framed and impacted upon participant engagement in the Evolution Program.

Background

Despite Australian schools prioritising engagement and providing programs to support retention, “one in every four secondary school entrants drops out of school before Year 12” (Lamb, 2011, p. 328). These young people can be challenged by a variety of issues such as family circumstances, learning disabilities, and mental health problems, but without a clear pathway, these individuals become at risk of isolation, marginalisation, and disconnection from future education and/or employment. It is no surprise that these “early school leavers experience the most difficulty in making the transition from school to productive activities in adulthood, particularly post-school education, training, and employment” (Rumberger & Lamb, 1998, p. 1).

Numerous studies over the last decades have highlighted the capacity of arts programs to engage young people as well as reengage those considered at-risk (Chapman, 2003; Catterall, 2002; Deasy, 2002; Ellsworth, 2005; Hunter, 2005; McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras & Brooks, 2004). Using four large national databases in the United States as the basis for an analysis of the relationship between arts involvement and academic and social achievements, Catterall, Dumais and Hampden-Thompson (2012) concluded that intensive and deep arts programs could narrow the gap in achievement for at-risk youth from diverse backgrounds. Even when facing complex social problems, young people’s interest in art can help them to re-generate confidence and reconnect with others (Thiele & Marsden, 2003). Other research such as that of Brice-Heath and Soep (1998) refers specifically to the impact of out-of-school arts experiences, indicating that such experiences can “build affective, interpersonal, managerial, and thinking habits that can support any vocational choice” (p.16).

Young people are attracted to arts programs that ‘make a difference’, ‘tap into their passions’, provide career-building experiences (Fuller, 2009), and engage them in tasks with near-term value where they have a recognized stake in the outcome (Schlechty, 2001; Brownlee, 2003). Further to this, Fuller proposes that, “producing something meaningful and gaining a sense of contribution has a positive effect on youth self-esteem and feelings of belonging” (2009, p.14). A positive emotional climate and safe place to work; one conducive to individual preferences, creative risk-taking, and self-directed learning, is also essential to youth engagement (Donelan & O’Brien, 2008; Fuller, 2009; National Guild for Community Arts Education, 2011). Larson (2000) proposes that the contexts well suited to promote engagement are those of “structured voluntary activities such as sports, arts and participation in organisations in which youth experience the rare combination of intrinsic motivation and deep attention” (p.170). Similarly, Hoffman Davis (2010) argues that non-pressured

community arts centres, guided by holistic goals that include creative thinking, self-discipline, confidence and respect, provide young people with opportunities to engage deeply with experiences that are intrinsically motivating and personally valued. She draws attention to the multiple benefits of such environments which,

provide arts training that enriches or exceeds what is offered in schools. They serve artists who need space for work or performance, students who crave instruction and direction, and the broader community that enjoys attendant cultural enrichment. At the core, they create safe havens for arts learning that has been marginalized elsewhere (p.82).

Young people experience transformative socialisation processes as they transition into adulthood (Brice Heath, 2004), and during this transition they have a need for relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), benefitting from positive relationships with other adults (Zeldin, Larson, Camino & O’Conner, 2005). This is especially the case for youth who have become isolated and disconnected from others. Engagement in community-based arts activities can have a positive effect on social connectedness by facilitating interactions amongst people with shared interests (Mulligan et al., 2006; Newman, Curtis & Stephens, 2003; O’Brien, 2004) thus “relationships are a core component of effective youth engagement and creating a youth-friendly and welcoming environment” (Fuller, 2009, p. 16).

Brice-Heath and Soep (1998) also make the point that a focus on achievement, rather than on the young people as ‘needful clients’, is one of the key organizational features of an effective learning experience for at-risk young people in out of school programs. The Fuller report into youth participation in out-of-school arts programs (2009) identified a need for attention to both the process and outcome, and ‘incremental’ engagement that caters for diverse levels of involvement and diverse ‘points of entry’. The artist in this context needs flexibility and an ability to adapt activities to the individual needs of the participants. Further to this, Donelan and O’Brien (2008) emphasise that when working with at-risk young people, artists need to present themselves as skillful and credible professionals who are capable of developing supportive relationships.

The research to date indicates that community arts programs have the potential to engage at-risk youth in experiences that

- build confidence,
- promote positive connections with others,
- develop positive habits that support vocational choice,
- foster intrinsic motivation and focused attention,

- encourage creative thinking, self-discipline and respect, and
- provide opportunities for deep engagement.

To achieve these outcomes engaging community arts programs

- provide a safe haven,
- require responsibility and respect of others,
- provide skillful, flexible and credible artists,
- focus on participant capacity to make art, and achievement rather than personal issues, and
- include incremental and final tasks that are meaningful, engaging and authentic.

It seems logical that the capacity of community-based arts programs to meet the diverse and complex needs of disengaged young people could only be strengthened by partnerships with other non-arts organisations with similar ambitions. The challenge is to generate partnerships capable of providing programs that are not only effective in enabling young people to re-engage with further education and training, but also sustainable in terms of secured funding for ongoing resourcing. One program that aspired to do both was Evolution.

Evolution

In 2009 the City of Melbourne, with support from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, applied for an Australia Council for the Arts Creative Communities Partnership Initiative (CCPI) grant. The focus was a whole-of-organisation approach to cultural and community development informed by the evaluation of four arts projects strategically selected to involve diverse groups of children, youth, artists, arts and non-arts organisations. At the same time, the City of Melbourne's 2010–2013 youth policy (City of Melbourne, 2010) outlined a plan to enhance the status and wellbeing of twelve-to-twenty-five year olds, and the Capital City Local Learning Employment Unit identified that Melbourne's marginalized, homeless or at-risk youth were especially in need of short-term programs to reengage them in further education, training and employment¹. The successful CCPI grant application provided seed funding for a partnership between Signal², and the Melbourne City Mission Frontyard

¹ The Capital City Local Learning Employment (City LLEN) *Evolution program proposal*, June 2010, www.cellen.org.au

² <http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/Signal/Pages/AboutSignal.aspx>

Youth Services³, and generated *Evolution*, a free, artist and youth worker supported, visual arts program, which aligned with the City of Melbourne's youth policy directions.

Offered to young people aged fifteen-to-twenty-two years, *Evolution* focusses on individuals who are not currently studying or employed, and are hindered by diverse, sometimes severe, health and social issues, with an aim of facilitating re-engagement with a vocational pathway. As a dedicated youth arts studio, Signal was well placed to support an art program of this type. Located in the heart of the city, it presents a wide variety of free, artist-guided workshops for young people that emphasise creative development and social engagement. Initiated in 2010, *Evolution* is a two-day per week (10am-3pm), eight-week program, which affords participants the opportunity to explore diverse forms of visual art, design, film/video, animation and photography. The youth worker, Heather, manages referrals and recruits young people identified as dis-engaged and potentially interested in art, informed by the knowledge of young people's case histories and, as a part of the program, provides free public transport cards and lunch. She also participates in the workshops and is a regular point of contact for the young people, both before and after each workshop, and for several months after the completion of the program. Art materials and resources are provided and in small groups of up-to-eight, the young people work alongside an artist, Jessica, to develop individual artworks. At the conclusion of each program a public exhibition is held at Signal, with artworks made available for sale.

The research

The research was conducted during the first two years of delivery, and covered five eight-week cycles involving thirty-one young people aged fifteen to twenty-two years (19 females and 12 males). The aim was to identify what enables these young people to participate, what engages them during the program, and what effect the program has on their re-engagement in further education and training. The use of multiple data sources was designed to layer, correlate and consolidate the analysis. The data collected included

1. pre and post program participant information, including prior case histories and education/training taken up by participants three months following the program,
2. interviews with the artist, youth worker, the artist and youth worker together, participants, and parent/guardians, and

³ Frontyard Youth supports young people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, disengaged or requiring support <http://www.melbournecitymission.org.au/services/homelessness/young-people-25-years/frontyard-youth-services>

3. researcher observations of a representative sample of workshops.

Conceptualised as a descriptive, explanatory, and naturalist case study (Willig, 2008) the research focused on description of the participants and their interactions with others and explanation of what factors impacted on participant engagement. Undertaken in a real-life setting, the study involved the immersion of a single and unobtrusive researcher who gathered, through in situ interviews and observations, information representative of multiple perspectives (Simons, 2009). The researcher, herself a young person, was experienced working with young people in visual arts programs in and out of school contexts. During the practical workshops she positioned herself as a non-participant observer who informally communicated to the participants in-situ. Establishing a positive relationship with the participants, which included showing interest in their art achievements, was important to building trust and rapport, necessary to make the participants comfortable to contribute to the research.

The information for the case history of each participant included their prior education, family circumstances and mental health issues, and was provided by the youth service organization. This organization, via Heather, also tracked the participants' re-engagement in further education and training three months after they had completed the program. Informal, in-situ interviews were conducted with twelve of the participants, who were generally reluctant to participate in formally scheduled and recorded interviews. Five parent/guardian interviews were conducted as the opportunity arose during the final public exhibitions held at the end of each cycle, and three interviews were undertaken with the artist, Jessica, and Heather, the youth worker. These conversation-style interviews focused on planning, strategies adopted to promote engagement, and general reflections on what aspects of the program were working or could be improved. The researcher observations involved over thirty hours (up to eight hours during each program cycle), and were guided by a previously developed engagement framework, focussing on indicators of motivated, receptive and on-task behaviours (Jeanneret and Brown, 2013). While the tools developed for this project were grounded in previous research involving young people, the researcher had to be sensitive to the particular profiles of participants and ensure her presence and interactions were not intrusive or alienating.

The data was analysed through a process of 'progressive focusing' (Stake, 2000) framed by a hermeneutic model of inquiry (Hammersley, 2011 with reference to Gadamer), a method that seeks to 'know something from the inside' through a dialogue between the researcher, specific questions, and those aspects of reality that are available and relevant to the study. The resultant interpretations were constructed and reconsidered in light of subsequent analysis, with the aim being to crystallize (Richardson, 2000) the key meanings inherent in the

phenomena researched.

Participant Profile and Participation

To understand the conditions that framed and impacted upon participant engagement in the Evolution Program it is important to understand the backgrounds of the young people involved and challenges they faced, including motivating themselves to attend each workshop as the following vignette indicates.

For some young people, the beginning of another day of *Evolution* workshops starts with an encouraging phone call from Heather. Eventually individuals arrive at Signal, a public arts studio housed in an old train signal box, situated amongst the comings and goings of white-collar professionals, skateboarders and busy train lines. In the studio several tables are pushed together to create one large workspace, surrounded by windows on three sides, and looking out on the nearby Yarra River and cityscape. As the young people arrive they move laconically, some with headphones on, to their usual spots in the studio. Greeted casually by both Jessica and Heather, slowly everyone gets back to art making. (Researcher Observation)

Evolution involved young people who faced serious life challenges that included multiple mental health conditions and homelessness. Such involvement could have been short lived, given the fragility of those involved, but over the course of the five cycles researched, thirty-one of the thirty-five enrolments completed the program. From the perspective of the Frontyard Youth Services Manager, who was experienced with working with disengaged youth in a variety of programs, the *Evolution* attendance and completion rates were very high with an average attendance of 70% (Table 1). Of the 31 who completed the program, 25 went onto further education or employment.

Table 1. Attendance rates over five cycles

Cycle	Age Range	No of completions	Attendance Rates
Cycle One	17 – 20	5	81%
Cycle Two	15 - 22	7	64%
Cycle Three	17 – 21	7	64%
Cycle Four	15 - 20	5	81%

Cycle Five	17 - 22	6	59%
Total		31	Average attendance: 70%

Cycle 1 involved five young people aged 15 – 20 years who were considered relatively low risk for the start of the program. The Cycle 2 participants were considered by Heather as ‘higher risk’, with most living in crisis accommodation, including one in transitional care and one in resident care. Two young people lived with family members who had been diagnosed with mental health issues themselves. These young people (15 – 22 years), who were slightly older than the participants in Cycle 1, had been disengaged for some time from work and education contexts. The individual and, at times, high needs of the participants required personalized planning. Cycle 3 involved seven young people aged 17-20 years, and included several who were attending an alternative school in inner Melbourne. Each member of this group was required to sign a contract agreeing to attend school four days a week while they attended *Evolution* on Wednesdays only. Their *Evolution* artworks also fed into their Year 12 school art folios. The challenge noted by Jessica for this cycle was to manage the individual and group dynamics, created by the participation of an existing group of peers. The group size for Cycle 4 was kept deliberately small on advice from Heather who had identified one member as having potentially challenging and complex needs evident in his past disruptive behaviours when attending other support services. As predicted this participant, who was at times verbally abusive, required particular attention from both the artist and youth worker. By the end of the eight weeks he was much more settled and focused on his personal art making. The focus on this individual reduced the one-to-one support given to the other members of the group, who were nevertheless tolerant and accepting of the more difficult member of the group. Cycle 5 was slow to start, with Heather struggling to gain referrals of young people she believed would respond well to the *Evolution* program. Compounding this challenge was the unavailability of Heather during a several week period of personal leave. Eventually seven 16-20 year olds came to participate, including several young women who had experienced similar bullying issues at school.

Table 2 provides an example of the participants, their barriers, their attendance rate, and the outcome of the program.

Table 2. An example of the participants in the program and the outcomes

Participant	Barriers	Attendance	Educational Outcome
Female 20 years old	Aspergers; homeless; family conflict; Year 9 education	91%	Hospitality course

Cycle 1			
Male 22 years old	Schizophrenia; Alcohol or drug problem; homeless. Year 9 education; involvement in justice system.	80%	None
Cycle 2			
Female 20 years old	Socially isolated; conflict with family	43%	Part time administrative internship
Cycle 3			
Male 15 yrs old	Aspergers, Pervasive Development disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, ADHD; expelled from many schools/programs: approx. Year 7 education; poor literacy; involvement in justice system	86%	The Mirror Program 2012 (film)
Cycle 4			
Female 16 yrs old	Alcohol or drug problem; history of abuse; conflict with family; Year 9 education; minor involvement in legal system	73%	Hospitality course
Cycle 4			
Male 22 yrs old	Homeless; alcohol or drug problem; chronic health problem; disability pension	60%	Artful Dodgers Studios (creative industries)
Cycle 5			
Female 20 yrs old	Anxiety/panic disorder/psychosis; long history of self-harm; alcohol or drug problem; involvement in justice system.	53%	Youthworx, Brunswick (youth media training program)
Cycle 5			

Identifying those who might benefit from the program and encouraging them to attend was largely the role of a youth worker who reviewed referrals and met with each applicant to consider how the program matched their interests. Heather's ability to connect young people to the program was vital, especially when, for some participants, simply travelling to Signal was an achievement. With many of the young people accustomed to little or no routine, Heather often had to make wake-up calls on the workshop mornings.

For the Heather, the “selling” point of project to the young people was that it didn’t “feel like school and they are treated like adults”. Her role was to be an immediate contact for young people, available throughout each day. She kept abreast of individual needs and issues by communicating with the various youth services that were providing case support to the participants outside of the *Evolution* program. Involving herself as a co-creator, making artwork and participating in discussions, Heather supported the young people through modeling rather than monitoring, which gave emphasis to creative arts practice rather than therapeutic recreation. She also exhibited her work at the end of each cycle. As Heather noted, “My particular role is to try and get them here. Once they are here I have chosen to participate. If I am expecting them to try it, I need to try it too!”

Each young person signed a contract committing themselves to the full duration of the project and appropriate behaviour. If interest in the project wavered, Heather would remind the participants of this contract. Jessica commented that in the first week of a program the young people would often push the boundaries and she had to make it clear that it was ultimately up to individuals what they achieved and that they needed to make an investment in their participation and act respectfully towards others. Importantly, the young people’s entitlement to autonomy and respect was inter-dependent on them showing respect to others and accepting responsibility for their actions.

Engagement

The role of the professional artist and access to a dedicated studio space were also central to the success of *Evolution*. As Heather explained, her organization didn’t have the facilities needed for the program.

If this ran at Frontyard, it wouldn’t run as well. I don’t think young people would turn up, even though they feel comfortable at Frontyard. They behave slightly differently in this space. I think they respect the [Signal] space. You get to see the other side here.

Art practice, with the opportunity to work alongside a professional artist whose attention was not on the young people’s personal issues, but instead on their capacity to make art, was emphasised throughout the program. Adopting a dialogic approach to questioning and discussion, commonly referenced to critiques of developing artworks, Jessica drew out the young people’s aspirations and uncertainties, encouraging them to explore their ideas through media experimentation, art image searches, and photography undertaken in the nearby city environs. She observed that, “rather than standing in front of them and talking about the colour wheel or talking about how to use their pencils, I let them experiment”. These

interactions gave emphasis to young people leading their own learning, and trusting in their capacities to determine and meet their own goals. Through encouragement and modeling, Jessica worked hard to establish and develop relationships with these young people.



Figure 1. Artist (far right) working with young people

Evolution also stressed a youth-led art practice modeled on artist processes. The young people were conceptualized, enabled and validated as artists, and considered capable of generating and making quality artworks. As one of the participants commented, “I’ve been showing some people my work back at the refuge and they were saying how good it was and could I draw some things for them and that felt really good”. This sentiment was reflected by another young artist in the program who said, “after *Evolution* I want to continue my art and develop new skills to eventually create quality work that I can make a living off it and exhibit”, thus “producing something meaningful and gaining a sense of contribution”.

The diverse backgrounds and complex needs of participants required Jessica to be flexible and to negotiate individual learning programs, ones that engendered confidence to create, share, and express personal ideas. Jessica gave attention to both process and outcome, with the young people given freedom to lead their own learning and work at their own pace.

Throughout the program the participants were encouraged to set short-term goals every two weeks that enabled them to gain an interim sense of accomplishment that helped to sustain engagement. The culminating final exhibition fulfilled an identified need young people have to engage in something ‘real’ by generating accomplished and recognized outputs that are subjected to public viewing and criticism.



Figure 2. Artwork created by Evolution participant Kara

Connecting with Others

The ambition of the *Evolution* project was to assist young people to develop their artistic capacities, and in doing so, build their confidence to re-engage in further training and education. This goal was supported by opportunities to positively connect with others. Working with unknown others, and frequently insecure in their own social capacities, the young *Evolution* artists frequently worked independently, although over time they did informally connect with others. Throughout each program, individuals related to their peers by acknowledging each other's efforts with comments such as "you are very talented", "I wish I could do that, they are wonderful", and "I have never made anything like that before". Non-art focused story sharing also occurred, which at times focused playfully on past misdemeanours and exploits. The informal, relaxed and non-hierarchical atmosphere engendered by Jessica, Heather, and the Signal studio-environment, supported these frank exchanges, enabling the young people to connect comfortably with others who, despite their differences, shared the common experience of being classified as dis-engaged or deviant.

Evolution helped the participants to feel connected to a larger community. Many of the young people involved were reclusive and had little broad contact with others. In this respect,

participating with the *Evolution* group was a positive step forward. Friendly and relaxed interactions with the Signal staff established a link with the place and people who shared the site. Throughout the program there were other Signal activities taking place, which provided opportunities for the *Evolution* participants to mix with other young people from diverse backgrounds. The public exhibition brought together friends, family members and representatives from each of the partner organisations sponsoring the project. This was a significant event for many of the young artists, as indicated by one family member at the final exhibition, who said, “I think it’s made her feel she is good at something, has some skills. It’s been good to see her feel so proud of the work she has done”. This opportunity to exhibit their work was a transformative experience for some of the young people.



Figure 3. Artwork created by Evolution participant Kara

Conclusion

It’s such a huge accomplishment for her to stick with a course for the whole time and see it through. Normally after one day, she will simply refuse to return. I can’t tell you how many times she has dropped out of programs but I know she felt really comfortable and welcomed here. (Parent)

This comment indicates a key measure of the success for a program aimed at re-engagement, namely for a young person to ‘stick with’ a program. Most of these severely isolated young

people were re-engaged in some way by the *Evolution* program. This was evident in the high attendance rates and the entry of twenty-five of the thirty-one participants into further study or employment. For example, even with extensive pre-program youth worker support, Xavier, who suffered from severe anxiety, struggled to enter the Signal studio. Once he did, he came every week and motivated by the work he generated for the final exhibition, went on to enroll in a creative VCAL program⁴ working with sound and visual art. The sustained participation of young people such as Xavier didn't come easily.

Crucial to youth program quality are opportunities to engage positively in a safe and well-supported environment that promotes high expectations for young people (Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2009). *Evolution* provided a safe place for these young people to develop a positive connection with others and, by focusing both on artistic and personal strengths, it re-ignited self-belief amongst these young people who were at risk of becoming deeply dislocated from education and society at large. An aspiration to realise potential, rather than remedy perceived deficits, encouraged self-efficacy, social co-operation and outcomes that were relevant and concrete. This aligns with what Callingham (2013) advocates as a 'strength-based' approach to working with young people, one that is a "more optimistic orientation that turns the focus from disengagement to engagement, from young people contributing to the problem to young people as contributing to the solution" (p.49). Building on the capacities of young people, a strength-based approach focuses on developing resilience and achievement (Maston, 2009).

Central to this achievement-orientated environment was the collaboration between the artist and youth worker, a communicative partnership that created a positive emotional climate, supported relationship building, and encouraged young people to challenge and build confidence in their abilities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Personalized relationships were enabled by the youth worker who encouraged young people to attend, co-created alongside them, and maintained communication with them after the program, supporting their transition to further training and employment. Also pivotal to youth engagement was the opportunity to work in a dedicated and well-resourced art studio with an artist who modeled and gave emphasis to artistic practice. This authentic reciprocal and dialogic exchange between the artist and young people (Fuller, 2009) engendered positive relationships and aspirations, with art practice being the primary point of connection.

⁴ The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a hands-on option for students in Years 11 and 12. The VCAL gives you practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work. VCAL is an accredited secondary school certificate. <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vcal/index.aspx>

Since its inception, there has been a growing interest and demand for the *Evolution* program that has also been identified as a model of best practice.⁵ With attention given to high expectations, creative risk taking and responsibility, process and outcome, plus a personalized program that caters for diverse interests and entry points, the *Evolution* initiative aligns with the characteristics of an engaging community arts program, outlined at the beginning of this paper. Whilst participation was a key indicator of the effectiveness of the program, such involvement would have been short-lived if the young people were not interested and invested in the experiences afforded to them. Our observations, informed by an engagement framework (Jeanneret and Brown, 2013) indicated that the young people were motivated, receptive and on-task throughout the program. What underpinned the success of the program was a whole-of-organisation approach (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling, & Carson, 2000), that sought to promote resilience and re-engagement by connecting with the past, present and future lives of the young people involved.

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⁵ Department of Human Services (2011) Good Practice. A Statewide Snapshot. 2011. Melbourne. P.99
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