The Arts as a Means of Increasing Emotional Intelligence in Teens

A Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Report

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Introduction

Artistic expression, be it dance, painting or spoken word, is universal across countries and nationalities. In fact, art, and perhaps food, are the perfect encapsulators of culture – an instant short-hand for understanding identity, history, heritage.

I have a psychology and research background, rather than an artistic one. Perhaps because of this, I naturally approach art with the aim of deconstructing meaning and understanding the process behind it. Arts practitioners often talk about the process of art creation versus the product or the by-product of art, itself. Debating if process or product is more important, is a popular, if outdated, pastime amongst some arts practitioners. Leaving importance to one side, I certainly feel that art can be more meaningful if you have participated or witnessed the process behind it.

In the course of my day job as a researcher for the educational consultancy, EdComs, I worked on an evaluation of the youth theatre, Chickenshed. Chickenshed is an inclusive theatre that has been operating in North London, since 1974. They had been chosen as BSkyB’s patron charity for three years, which meant they gained sponsorship and access to business support. One element of the business support was our evaluation of the impact if their work on participants, theatre-goers and the local community.

We worked closely with Chickenshed over the course of several years evaluating what it was about their approach that had such a beneficial impact on the young people that took part. Young people spoke of Chickenshed, literally, changing their lives, giving them a place in the world, and an identity and a purpose. They have a very specific ethos which is based on inclusion and equality and purposefully aims to serve those who are disadvantaged in some way. During the course of the evaluation, we were able to observe social impacts such as increased:

- Confidence
- Empathy
- Motivation
- Engagement with education.

Key to these impacts, was the concept of ‘a safe space’ which was fostered by a consistent use of encouragement, inclusion and rewards and, as a result, facilitated success.

I remember watching one of their standout performances, As the Mother of a Brown Boy, as part of audience research we were conducting. I was supposed to be handing out questionnaires and conducting immediate intercept-style interviews with audience members immediately after the performance finished. The play, based on the true story of the life and death of one of their members, Mischa Niering, was spectacular, and when the lights went up, I found myself very uncharacteristically, in floods of tears, and definitely not in ‘work mode’. It is hard to witness both the
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process and product of art and remain unchanged for the experience. It is also hard to visit a place like Chickenshed and not become a fervent supporter of community arts.

When the chance to apply for a Winston Churchill Fellowship in the field of arts, education and young people appeared, I grabbed it with both hands. I was particularly interested in the field of emotional intelligence, a term I had first heard in relation to Saveloy and Mayer. Emotional intelligence can be described as the ability to effectively understand oneself and others. They further sub-divided emotional intelligence into:

- Perceiving emotions
- Using emotions
- Understanding emotions and
- Managing emotions.

Educators today spend so much time, money and resources in measuring academic intelligence, but what emotional intelligence? How do young people gain the social and emotional skills needed to navigate an increasingly fragmented, changeable and complex world?

Garner’s theory of multiple intelligences neatly divides emotional intelligence into:

- The interpersonal (empathy, sociability), and
- Intrapersonal (self-evaluation, anger management).

This tallied nicely with what I had witnessed at Chickenshed – young people saying that they had friends now because they were aware of how others felt and could act appropriately (interpersonal) and parents saying that their teenage son was no longer getting into fights because he had learnt to stop for a second and ask himself why he was feeling angry (intrapersonal).

Howard Gardiner, a well-known education theorist, writes that:

“artistic learning grows from children doing things: not just imitating but actually creating, whether it be drawing, painting, or sculpting on their own.”

Many educators support this theory, adding that art activities contribute to children's capacity to make and understand meaning. In other words, artistic endeavor can be used as a prism in which we make sense of the world around us.

Australia has always fascinated me because of its size and its remoteness. Despite the distance, we have a language in common and a fair amount of shared history, not all of which makes for easy reading. They also have an innovative and experimental approach to community arts. Lastly, I had heard about some fascinating work that was being carried out amongst some of the most deprived communities in Australia, that of the indigenous Aborigines.
I started to research and contact a range of arts initiatives in Australia, with the aim of interviewing arts practitioners and participants and observing their work. Before travelling to Australia, I decided to focus my mind on the following three questions:

• How consistent are benefits realised in Chickenshed’s approach across other arts initiatives?
• What are the fundamentals needed to positively impact emotional intelligence in young people?
• To what extent could they be more widely adopted by arts practitioners and educators at schools or outreach programmes in Australia and the United Kingdom?

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), Melbourne

I started my fellowship in Melbourne. First on my list of places to visit was Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) to meet with Dr Jennifer Bryce. I had learnt about her work when conducting desk research on arts education evaluation. In particular, my fellowship owes a debt of gratitude to her paper ‘Evaluation of School-based Arts Education Programs in Australian Schools’ (Research Developments, 2004). Dr Bryce is a Senior Research Fellow at ACER and a leading voice on learning through the arts.

I wanted to meet with Dr Bryce to share the aims of my fellowship, my hypothesis on the impact of the arts on emotional intelligence and to gain direction, contacts and to further refine my thinking. She was kind enough to set up a meeting for me to share details of my fellowship, in which she invited her department to attend. It was a little intimidating presenting my hypothesis to a room full of extremely experienced academics, who had graciously taken time out of their working days, but it was invaluable in sharpening my thinking and questioning my rationale.

In particular, it made me acknowledge the limitations of my approach – that being the lack of quantitative data, the short time scales I was visiting places and the vastly different approaches of the arts programmes I was visiting. I also decided to view the range and variety of arts programmes as a positive – that being that if I could draw genuine commonalities out the way they were implemented and consistencies in the impacts garnered, then I could be one step closer to capturing the essence of what made arts education so impactful.

One question that was raised during my presentation that I vowed to keep in mind was ‘could these impacts been achieved through other means, for instance, sports?’ This gave me food for thought; having evaluated several excellent sports programmes during my time at EdComs. Although sports programmes are clearly extremely impactful, to me there is something about the fluidity of the arts and the way in which it can reflect a culture, or construct an identity that makes it the ideal tool for addressing social impacts. It was invaluable to set my thinking in context before ‘going into field’ proper commenced.
Western Edge Youth Arts, Melbourne

Western Edge Youth Arts is a non-profit organisation established to provide positive arts and performance experiences to young people from different cultural and social backgrounds living in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I was partially eager to speak to arts practitioners at Western Edge because on paper, they had the closest affinity to Chickenshed in terms of ethos. They aim to provide high quality arts experiences to culturally diverse young people and local schools experiencing hardship.

Their artistic process is described as “a play building process that involves the exploration and negotiation of character and plot by artists and students in an artistic dialogue.”

They describe their process as the following:

- It is based on a dialogic relationship between artists and young people
- It is about the creation and exploration of meaning through narrative
- It is about the exploration of meaning therefore it privileges content over form
- It is about creating performances that are of social relevance
- It validates young people as artists and respects young people’s aesthetics
- It is pedagogic in that it aims to create artistic contexts that enable young people to learn about the world
- It works from the premise that art is powerful and can be a catalyst for social change
- It values the exploration of intimate knowledge and relates the personal to the political.

They acknowledge that much of their process has been influenced by Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy and the work of Augusto Boal, in particular, *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, a theatrical form originally used in radical popular education movements. Here, theatre can be used as a vehicle for questioning and challenging societal conventions. It is also a way of examining your own life, hopefully leading to increased self-knowledge.

I met Artistic Director, Cymbeline Buhler at the Western Edge theatre in Footscray. She was busily pulling together a show, Frolic, and invited me to join rehearsals in their theatre and later, in their show space, Signal Youth Arts Centre, a spectacular location on the banks of Yarra River. It was great fun taking part in the rehearsals, although I had initial typical researcher fears about how my involvement in the process could change or affect the process. However, this approach meant that, by standing in for missing people, and generally making myself useful, I was actually some value to them, rather than a shadowy figure in the corner. Additionally I learnt much more from being a part of their creative process, rather than just observing it.
Frolic was a high energy performance which incorporated interaction from the audience. It was described as a mixed media, theatrical performance exploring the theme of celebration. The performance had been created collaboratively by young emerging artists, and established professional artists working with a group of culturally diverse young people. They had created Frolic to operate as an adventure trail, as the audience travels through each section of a party, they journey around the world, experiencing aspects of celebratory events from Melbourne’s diverse cultures. These were representative of the performers and included those with origins in Sudan, Nigeria, the Philippines, Vietnam, South East Asia and Europe.

By attending rehearsals and watching the opening night performance over a two week period, I was able to see the performance develop and refine. Cymbeline was dedicated and drove her team to achieve their best. She also treated every participant the same, regardless if they were an experienced art professional or a local teenager. On the opening night, they did not let her down. This was despite Melbourne’s changeable weather turning fiercely thundery, which meant that they had to relocate the mostly open-air performance inside, with hours to spare. It was a pleasure to join their party and I thank them for inviting me.
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The Song Room, Melbourne

In Melbourne, I was also able to visit the Song Room’s national headquarters. The Song Room vision is that all Australian children have the opportunity to participate in the music and the arts to enhance their education, personal development and community involvement. The Song Room is a national not-for-profit organisation, and was set up because three in four Australian school children at government schools do not have access to a music teacher.

The Song Room targets exactly the sort of demographic I was interested in:

- Socio-economically disadvantaged communities
- Indigenous communities
- New arrivals with English as a second language
- Disengaged children with behavioural problems and
- Areas with high juvenile crime.

Core to their offer was a six month programme of weekly music tuition and in the last academic year, the Song Room had targeted 250 schools nationally.

Here, I was able to interview the Research Co-ordinator Alice Tinning and Chief Executive Officer Caroline Aebersold. She said that key to the programme’s success was a developing good relationships with between the music teacher and the students. The programme itself was very flexible and so it was important that the students had a consistent point of contact in the form of a single music teacher who could tailor their offer to suit their needs.

The Song Room had comprehensive on-going evaluation methods in place and very kindly shared their available research with me. Unsurprisingly, the programme has garnered extremely positive quantitative and qualitative feedback:

- 100% of schools stated that there had been immediate uplifts in student learning outcomes, confidence, motivation, concentration, engagement in class and participation
- 96% indicated that they would have had no access to music or art programmes without The Song Room, evidencing that the programme was servicing the most needy demographic.

Qualitatively, positive impacts could be grouped into the following segments:

- **Learning outcomes** (language and music skills, goal setting and music knowledge and so on)
- **Social outcomes** (cooperation, communications, enthusiasm for learning, team work, participation, improved class behaviours and so on)
- **Personal outcomes** (confidence, self-esteem, self-expression and so on).

It was the last two outcomes that are of most interest to my scope of work. In particular, I was interested in seeing this teaching in action and meeting some young people involved. I was granted permission to visit an English Language school in an
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economically deprived area in the far-east suburbs of Melbourne. My inordinate thanks go to Alice Tinning for granting permission for me to visit, organising the trip and finally, accompanying me to the school!

Australia has a fairly unique way of integrating the children of non-English speaking economic migrants and refugees into mainstream government schools; via six or twelve months stints as designated language schools. Once these students receive a certain level of English language proficiency, they join mainstream government schools. Language schools are full age-range and the intake is broad, and ever-changing, reflecting migration patterns. When I visited, the intake was principally from Burma, Vietnam, Sudan and Somalia.

I observed music lessons with a secondary class of students (ages ranging from 13 to 16 and a primary class (with ages ranging from 5 to 8). The same fully-qualified, music teacher took both classes and had very different approaches in each class. In the first, they were practicing a modern version of Romeo and Juliet. In the second, they recited songs complete with actions and movement. In both, all students were utterly engaged in the activities, despite the vast differences in the student intake in terms of language proficiency, age and culture. A key reason for this was the relationship the teacher had with the students and her excellent classroom management style. This was further illustrated whenever we walked down a corridor together; each student passing her would acknowledge her in some way, from shouting out her name, to a shy smile to one over-amorous boy’s full running hug. She acknowledged them all by name – a trait common in many excellent teachers - underlying the importance of a consistent relationship.

When interviewing the teacher after these observations, she highlighted the ability of music to cut across cultural differences. She also stated that music and drama had many therapeutic benefits for these children whose families were claiming asylum, some of whom had experience trauma in their countries of origin and on arduous journeys to Australia. One point she never let go of, was that these children wanted to be children; to play, and to be boisterous, so she encouraged a high-energy, productive atmosphere in her classroom.

One point I was left with, was that of sustainability. Whilst this programme is to be commended for the commitment to ongoing relationships and use of consistent teachers, there is little existing information on how the school changes its strategy to music education when the programme ends. This is, of course, something that The Song Room are all too aware of, and hopefully an evidence base can be gathered to show change over time at schools who have benefited from The Song Rooms. I know from my day job as a researcher at an educational consultancy, that schools are all too happy to buy (or receive for free) experts piecemeal but this does little to fundamentally change what the school is capable of, both in terms of skills and time. Despite the vital service The Song Room provides, it seemed to me that the commoditising of arts education is as much of an issue in Australia as it is in the United Kingdom.
After my stay in Melbourne, I flew to Tasmania’s state capital, Hobart. Tasmania is by far the smallest of the six territories and and lowest relative levels of deprivation in Australia. Hobart is an attractive town with distinctly English architecture and a colonial, slightly sleepy feel. Compared to mainland Australia, it is a prosperous, cohesive society with few social problems. I was visiting TMAGgots, a group of young Tasmanians who are interested in actively supporting the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. The TMAGotts were formed in 2005 by the friends of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, who recognised that young people were the most unlikely visitors to the museum.

I interviewed Kelly Eijdenberg who chairs the board of TMAGgots about the role of the organisation in Hobart. She explained that her role was to encourage the younger community to connect with culture in their society. Unlike the other projects I visited, TMAGgots was run entirely by volunteers, something that is testament to the energy and community spirit displayed by those that ran the organisation.

Kelly was naturally enthusiastic about the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and felt that a lot of the disconnect between young people and museums was down to marketing, pr and branding – that museums and art galleries are not seen as relevant for the youth – or that it does not accurately reflect their world or culture. She felt that younger people locally needed a bit of encouragement to attend events and much of what the board of TMAGots did was look for relevant and interesting angles in upcoming events to appeal to young Tasmanians. They also organised specific events and in a large part, saw themselves in the role of cultural educators, by providing exclusive access to key exhibitions as well as enabling interactions with curatorial staff.

As well as being passionate, organised and extremely talented, Kelly Eijdenberg was also young – a distinct advantage given that a key part of her role was being able to tap into the sort of events that would appeal to young Tasmanians. She acknowledged that their work was very different to the other programmes I would be visiting and said that to a large part, Tasmania did not have the same social problems as the rest of Australia. TMAGgot attendees tended to be middle-class and in no way materially or socially deprived – however, it was a positive thing, in her eyes for there to be a more mainstream appreciation of culture amongst young people. Few people would disagree with this rationale, however, I think activities such as this, goes deeper than nurturing an appreciation of cultural events. To me, it seemed that the TAMGgots were connecting the youth of Tasmania to their culture and communities in a very relevant way.

I was able to attend the Christmas event that Kelly had organised at the museum and art gallery. This involved free drinks and nibbles and a retrospective display of leading Tasmanian artists Ray Arnold and Geoff Parr who both talked about their career and work in a very accessible way. Of particular interest to me was Geoff
Parr’s talk on a subject close to his heart, that of environmental destruction. Much of his photography had captured tension between forestry companies and the environmental factions. This debate is very current and ranges on in Tasmania, home to one of the most unique and precious eco-systems, and also a lot of valuable timber. It occurred to me that events such as this could provide the necessary impetus to attract young people to the debate; a debate which fundamentally alters their home, with both environmental and economic implications. In this sense, young people are exactly the sort of people who should be getting involved in decision-making as politicians and logging companies are not going to be the ones who have to live with the ramifications of the decisions being made today.

Another point that occurred to me during my time in Tasmania was the battle between intrinsic and extrinsic value systems. Intrinsic values in young people are commonly thought to be under threat due to an eroding of the role of the family, communities and sociality cohesiveness. Modern youth society places more onus on extrinsic values such as a materialism, consumerism and instant gratification. People with value systems heavily weighted to extrinsic rather than intrinsic values are known to score lower on scales of happiness, wellbeing and mental health. Having said this, culture and the arts give young people a means of expression that is not solely reliant on material wealth. It also potentially gives them a means of conceptual understanding and access to an intrinsic value system which has the potential to framework how they view their lives in very different ways.
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Carclew Youth Arts, Adelaide

The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands Project; run by Carclew Youth Arts, was a three year project that addressed alcohol and substance misuse (and other contemporary social issues) affecting 15 to 25 year old youths in the APY Lands. The APY Lands are 1,600km from Adelaide and include some of the most remote and inhospitable land in rural Australia. It was my original aim to visit this project in action but the prohibitive cost, the length of the trip (two weeks as an absolute minimum) and the fact that few visas were given to non-aboriginals, meant that I was unable to visit this project in person.

Instead, I was able to interview the project director, Lee-Ann Tjuanypa Buckskin, and the CEO, Tricia Walton about the project in their Carclew Youth Arts offices in Adelaide. I also used my time in Adelaide to explore and immerse myself in Aboriginal history and culture, as this was the first place I had visited in Australia where Aborigines made up a significant proportion of the population. The Aboriginal population in South Australia, as in Australia as a whole, was that they tend to suffer from lower life expectancy, employment levels, school retention rates and higher rates of imprisonment and rough sleeping.

The South Australian government has a strategic plan in place to combat these statistics and this project gained funding to put on high quality arts and cultural workshops that were focused on the education, health and wellbeing of young Anangu. Specifically, the project had been set up because of the widespread epidemic of petrol sniffing in the aboriginal communities in remote communities, such as Anangu. At the heart of this project, was a wish to renew the connection the young Anangu people had with their culture and their heritage. At its core, the project took on 18 people aged 15 to 25 for song writing, film, dance and digital media workshops. By the end of the three years, substance abuse among participants had dropped by 80% and 94% of participants were in school, training or work. At a fundamental level, this project aimed to turn these young people’s lives around and Lee-Ann sites one of the main benefits by bringing the entire community closer together via forming new links between young people and their elders.

Speaking to Lee-Ann was a privilege; her passion, energy and drive were inspirational. She said that core to this project’s success was an ideology that truly listened rather than dictated. Having an Aboriginal director was also integral, as it gave young people a strong role-model of an Aboriginal person in a leadership position. This is an example of the sort of integrity that is required in order to make a lasting difference in the young people lives. One of the key ambitions of the project was that “young Anangu people would be able to take control and agency within their lives.” What better ways to illustrate this, than to have the project lead by an Aboriginal director? There is a marked difference in solely espousing the values you wish young people to adopt, and actually embodying them.

The team also had intensive cultural awareness training, worked closely with the community and maintained culture and the arts at the heart of the project’s
programming. One example Lee-Ann recounted to illustrate this, was early on in the programme is when starting work with the young people and trust had not yet been established. A community elder had died, which meant that the workshops had to be postponed because according to Aboriginal custom, the community (which is spread out over a large area) must travel to meet and pay their respects. Rather than create friction by trying to still host the planned workshops (which had been months in preparation) the arts facilitators asked if they could travel with the young people and join in with the paying of respects. This ability to adapt to changing circumstances and acknowledge the community’s traditions and obligations, engineered real trust – and forged the start of a productive relationship between the art facilitators and the young people.

As written in their evaluation report, which Lee-Ann shared with me:

“The young people explored their sense of belonging throughout the project, which was pivotal to the outcomes achieved. This included contemporary social issues such as health, wellbeing, loneliness, vulnerability, petrol sniffing, the dangers of risky drinking and the impacts these behaviours have on the individual, their family and community.”

This, coupled with genuine, hands-on skills development, increased confidence and encouraged leadership amongst these young people, to allow them to envisage and access futures for themselves. They also performed at several high profile state events.

The relationship that Carclew established with this community had sustainable outcomes build into its foundations. Lee-Ann and Carlew are currently seeking further funding opportunities to continue their working relationship with the Anangu people.
Darwin Community Arts, Darwin

Darwin Community Arts (DCA) in the Top End in the Northern Territory was my final stop. DCA was in based in a partly disused shopping precinct in the Northern suburb of Malak and was the best example of I came across of grassroots community arts enriching a diverse and fairly deprived local community. Here I met arts practitioners; Bong Ramilo, Brenda Logan and Nic Borgese. They ran a diverse and ever-expanding programme of activities, shaped by community need and opportunity for a largely recently arrived immigrant population. Darwin's position as the most Northerly city in Australia and its proximity to Asia means that it has a high immigrant and refugee community. It is also the capital of the Northern Territory, the state with the most populous aboriginal community. Malak has a high proportion of social housing and as such, is a mix of a diverse and fairly transient, migrant population and the indigenous Aboriginal population. Interestingly, in a previous incarnation, DCA used to be based in the city centre. Bong had taken the decision to move to a relatively deprived neighbourhood, close to where he lived, in order to (in his words), ‘truly be in the community’.

DCA ran a variety of projects for local teens, such as video and photograph courses, centred around the concept of identity through the title “My Malak”. Looking at some pieces, I was struck with how giving young people space to make sense of the journeys they had come on (some of which were long, arduous and traumatic) would be a vital step in developing a cohesive sense of self. In addition, the conversations I had with the young people underlined the feeling that an integral part of ‘their Malak’ was the friends they had made through DCA.

Bong has an IT background and a keen interest in technology. In addition to numerous other projects, he runs a free-to-use internet cafe (Telecentro) for the local community; no mean feat, given the fact that lack of online access has been identified as a key barrier in enabling both Aboriginal and refugee communities to thrive. He also runs laser tagging projects (akin to electronic graffiti) with local graffiti artists, something that has picked up national attention due to its potential to lower the incidence of unwanted graffiti in public places. In addition, he has organised community sessions in conjunction with the Melaleuca Refugee Centre to open communication between feuding groups of young Aboriginal and African men. He said that poor housing, a dysfunctional home-life, lack of opportunities and competition for local resources were some of the reasons for growing tension within the two communities. DCA represented a neutral territory and a shared space, where reconciliation could be attempted.

Although not strictly within the remit of my brief, I’d also like to digress a little to tell you about Brenda’s project, My Sisters’ Kitchen. My Sister’s Kitchen, a weekly cooking project open to all in the local community. Each week, (the currently mainly Butanese and Burmese women) cook a dish, which everyone in the community is invited to eat. I was lucky enough to try truly delicious Nepali food during my stay in Darwin, which some of the Butanese women had learnt to cook whilst living in refugee camps in Nepal. This fabulous project nails so many things; interaction,
understanding, cultural exchange, storytelling and an authentic link from our past to our present. Furthermore, it offers development in practical skills such as food handling, hygiene and enterprise.

Bong, Brenda and Nic also invited me to attend and help out at their celebration of the International Human Rights Day. Testy Australian weather intervened once again, in the form of a cyclone the previous evening and on the morning of the celebration, which took down several trees in the immediate area. Despite the somewhat inauspicious start, the day was a great success. Activities consisted of speeches, songs and dancing, as well as displays of previous art that had been created. As well as setting up, I helped run a prayer flag stall, in which attendees drew and wrote their interpretation of what they understood Human Rights to mean. It was great fun and a brilliant way to interact with young people. The welcoming, and inclusive approach to grassroots community arts at DCA was a fantastic way to finish my Fellowship on and one I will always remember fondly.
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Conclusions

So after six truly memorable weeks, innumerable interviews and observations, what conclusions can I draw? Firstly, I witnessed and discussed a number of positive impacts as a result of the arts programmes that I visited. Secondly, a significant proportion of these impacts were social, and in the arena of emotional intelligence.

Despite the differences in artistic objectives, intake, funding and attitudes, I did, indeed, see a number of themes and commonalities running through successful programmes. I believe these can be grouped into six over-arching themes:

- Authenticity
- Consistency
- A sense of belonging
- A sense of purpose
- Art as therapy
- Constructing an identity.

I’ve included some final thoughts and questions for arts practitioners and educators to consider when working with young people, under each of these themes.

Authenticity

These programmes worked best when there was a sense of authenticity in what was being achieved. Authenticity was evident in a number of ways. Kelly Eijdenberg’s youth and genuine passion for the arts inspired others like her is one example. Lee-Ann Tjuanypa Buckskin’s aboriginal heritage and leadership illustrating a certain type of success to aboriginal teens, is another. Bong Ramilo moving the Darwin Community Arts to a community of real need, is a third.

In all cases, these people embodied what they espoused and their authenticity breeds, and sometimes demands, an authentic response of one’s own.

The implication here is to question your motives – do you embody what you hope to achieve? If not, what are you doing and how do you hope to achieve it?

Consistency

Unlike many interventions I’ve assessed in the course of my career, these projects were largely ongoing pieces of work. The Song Room had a real impact because each teacher committed to a six month programme of work. They were recognised faces in schools. Lee-Ann’s work in the APY Lands was three years long and that was viewed as the start of an on-going relationship. Unsurprisingly, commitment and sustainability is needed to engineer real change.

The implication here is how can you build sustainability into everything you do? If your programme has a specific time-limit, how can you make sure you leave those you impacted with resources for the future?
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A sense of belonging
A sense of belonging - of being part of something was evident across projects. When children and young people feel they belong, they being to trust and engage in activities. To feel you belong, you need to have a genuine welcome and some sort of role or purpose. This sense of belonging is exactly what Chickenshed achieves from its inclusive practices. I can relate to this sense of being able to offer something - even though I visited the various projects for a relatively short time, there were moments when I caught myself thinking ‘how is it that I feel so at home here?’

The implication here is how do you genuinely welcome someone? How do you genuinely include them, so they are enabled to give the best of themselves?

A sense of purpose
Building on the idea of belonging, I witnessed the creation of excellent art. This would not have happened without a specific sense of purpose. Instilling discipline via attendance, effort and the prospect of performance are all key to creating an artistic product of which to be proud. Cymbeline’s expectation that her participants attend and perform at their highest standard and Lee-Ann’s project culminating in a high profile performance gave the process a clear and directional purpose. Completing a performance in which all participants pull together and create something fantastic is a rush and more than that, it illustrates to young people that rewards come with effort, perseverance and discipline.

The implication here is how do you negotiate a balance between getting the most out of the process of arts creation, with maximising the end product when time is a fixed and precious commodity? And which will better serve the participants?

Art as therapy
I witnessed art being used as a tool for a subtle sort of therapy. The identity project at the DCA fascinated me as it operated on a number of levels. On the face of it, young people were taking photographs and making videos of their immediate environment. Underneath that, newly arrived refugees were given the space and the tools to make sense of their new home, to record their journey and hint at hopes for their future. They were able to do this in a non-threatening or invasive way. Similarly, the women in My Sister’s Kitchen were able to record a narrative and a celebration of the journeys they had travelled, through food. The beauty of using art as a sort of therapy is the control is utterly in the hands of the participant. It is completely up to them as to what they want to share and how far they wish to take this – possessing this agency is empowering in itself.

The implication here is, how can you find and use creative tools to identify, express or perhaps even, ease difficult and painful experiences?
Constructing an identity
The last of the themes I identified is possibly the most fundamental to the development of emotional intelligence. By taking part in the creation of art, the young people I met were able to construct an understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Sometimes this took the form of creating a shared identity. At other times, this was more about challenging the status quo. Finally, it was sometimes even about engaging with the present. This self-insight aligns itself well with one of Garner’s theories of intelligence, that of intrapersonal intelligence. As I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, current educational practice frantically tries to equip young people with the skills they need to become an adult. Despite this, precious little time or resource is ever allocated for helping young people better understand themselves and their place in the world.

The implication here is, how can we use art to create a dialogue about our place in the world? And if we could, would why would we want to?

I close this report with a well-known quote, attributed to Socrates –

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

To me, art, in all of its myriad forms, represents the best tool we have for ‘life examination’. Young people who do examine their lives, who think about where they’ve been and how they got there, and where they are going, are better equipped to navigate a successful path through life. Art offers a way of decoding meaning, of having a context for understanding how all the elements of their lives fit together. Increasing self-knowledge naturally increases life choices. This could be the very point at which young people seize control of their lives and begin to become the people they want to be.
Acknowledgements

The information contained in this report is accurate to the best of my knowledge. I take responsibility for all errors and omissions.

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