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“In the Beginning”: Establishing a model for a transnational, interdisciplinary, Arts education project

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Abstract: *This paper describes an interdisciplinary project involving lecturers and undergraduate students from early childhood education and communication information and new media, staff and children in three Adelaide childcare centres, three artists (musician, dancer, visual artist) in residence in childcare centres, Windmill Performing Arts, Department of Education, and early childhood final year undergraduate students. The project provided a unique opportunity for the undergraduate students from the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, and the School of Communication, Information and New Media to work with professional artists in settings for the under-fives and to learn how arts curriculum can be constructed with visiting professional artists. de Lissa students assumed a leadership role in the project as teacher/facilitators of arts learning experiences with the children in each centre. Students enrolled in Internet Broadcasting, an undergraduate course offered within the School of Communication, Information and New Media's Arts program, filmed these interactions, capturing these unique opportunities in a 'real' classroom situation. The video material was subsequently edited and converted into formats suitable for video, CD and streaming via Web delivery. The completed resources are used in face-to-face, teaching and online learning for students undertaking de Lissa programs and students in transnational programs in arts education. This paper reports preliminary outcomes from this interdisciplinary project for both early childhood students and communications students, and describes the implications for replicating the project in a transnational setting.*

Keywords: *Early childhood; arts education; multimedia; interdisciplinary; transnational; industry partnerships.*

Introduction

A society in which arts practice is not endemic risks its future. The support of professional artists is a laudable policy but far more important is offering all citizens, and their offspring, the opportunity to actively participate in arts practice – to make

their own culture. Creativity, engagement, cohesiveness, well-being and respect for difference will be inevitable outcomes (Hawkes, 2002). *Australians and the Arts* (Costantoura, 2000), a research report for the Australia Council, concluded that “while some Australians love the arts, others don’t feel so positive about them”(p. 8). Such research has led to education becoming a priority for the Australia Council, offering considerable potential for advancing the arts in education across the country in the next ten years. Therefore, tertiary education students need to engage in a renewed understanding of arts in education and their purpose in society (National Affiliation of Arts Educators, 2003). This paper describes an interdisciplinary teaching and learning project that encourages undergraduate students’ understanding of arts learning for young children.

It is well-argued that arts offer ways of knowing for young children using the body as a base for meaning-making (Edwards, 2002; Wright, 2003). Abbs (1987) reclaims the term *aesthetic*, re-locating its meaning within the Greek *aisthetika*, to mean sensing, feeling, perceiving and apprehending. Using the body as a sensory tool for active exploration, young children use their senses to see, move, touch, smell, hear, make sounds, respond and construct meaning from experience. Abbs’ concept of an “aesthetic field” is the basis for the arts. It is the role of early childhood educators to nurture artistic development and growth.

A longitudinal research study in USA (Fiske, 2001) identified the impact of the arts upon school-aged children as follows: “When the arts become central to the learning environment, schools and other settings become places of discovery” (p. ix). The arts also provide opportunities for young children to use multiple-intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and multiple literacies from different art forms (Livermore, 1998). Although there has been a strong focus on artists-in-schools projects in Australia, Britain and the United States of America, reports of such projects with the under-fives are limited.

“In the Beginning”

“In the Beginning” is part of an arts education partnership formed in 2002 between Windmill Performing Arts and the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies (University of South Australia). Windmill Performing Arts (established in 2001) is a national performing arts company for children and families, which produces and presents high quality work across all performance genres for family audiences. The company has received two prestigious Helpmann awards and acclaim for seasons in New York, the Sydney Festival 2003 and Adelaide Festival 2004.

“In the Beginning” was a project designed to provide opportunities for final year undergraduate students at de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, to work with professional artists in childcare centres with the under-fives and to learn how arts curriculum can be constructed with visiting professional artists (funded by Windmill Performing Arts). As part of the de Lissa/Windmill industry partnership, the early childhood students worked collaboratively to observe children interacting with the artists, requiring them to:

- document children’s sensory responses to the arts;
- examine young children’s learning in and exploration of the arts;
- consider implications for teaching and learning using multiple intelligences and multi-literacies in the artforms;
- develop team leadership and management skills in an early childhood project;

- provide Windmill with recommendations and data to support the company's understanding of young children's learning in the arts;
- appreciate that children's early experiences with arts can be part of everyday experiences in early childhood settings (Eisner, 1998; Schiller, 2000).

Outcomes from the first project in 2002

The de Lissa students participating in the initial "In the Beginning" project in 2002 identified several key points, namely that:

- Caregivers/childcare staff members were vital in providing a "bridge" to familiarise children with the artists and develop safe, supportive relationships;
- Children
 - (a) enjoyed participating actively in the experience with the artist;
 - (b) responded well to familiar ideas, clear contrasts (loud/soft, high/low, quick/slow) and variety within a session;
 - (c) were actively engaged and thinking as a result of:
 - artists listening and talking with them, explaining and discussing features of their own work
 - seeing their ideas being accepted and used by the artists
 - being given opportunities to respond and express their own ideas by making their own work;
- When the artists had departed, children responded by repeating, re-creating and adapting what had occurred when the artists were present;
- The success of artist-led thematic work was stimulating for those interested or a deterrent for those not interested in the subject;
- Safe procedures prepared children for art-form conventions in working with a range of media (eg. paint, clay, adhesives), environments (eg. tables, easels, floor space), using the body (eg. appropriate clothing, footwear) and using props/instruments.

The 2003 project

The second "In the Beginning" project conducted in Semester 2, 2003 involved de Lissa early childhood education undergraduate students again taking a leadership role as teacher/facilitators of arts learning experiences with the children in each centre.

Documentation and observation are crucial in early childhood methodology, but the transient nature of art-making by both young children and artists in childcare meant that observation was often difficult for students. Video provides a highly effective tool for documentation, and the use of videotape to revisit learning experiences enables observers to focus on different aspects of the situation (Billman & Sherman, 1996; Genishi, 1982). Therefore, the 2003 project also involved collaboration with university students enrolled in Internet Broadcasting, an undergraduate course offered within the School of Communication, Information and New Media's Arts program. These students filmed the child/artist interactions, capturing important moments in real classroom environments. This enabled both communications and early childhood students to improve their skills in the use of digital technologies for documenting, observing and recording, and provided early childhood students with an opportunity to reflect upon their own practice and observe artist/teachers co-constructing arts curriculum with children (Dockett in Schiller, 2000; Kolbe in Schiller, 2000). Communications students also worked with the early childhood education undergraduates to edit the footage, assist in the creation of "voice-over" and present the finished material in suitable formats for video, CD and streaming via Web delivery.

The project coordinators included Windmill's Arts Education project officer, responsible for linking the visiting artists with centres, a lecturer supervising the de Lissa students and coordinating their study, and a project officer from the School of Communication, Information and New Media, responsible for filming supervision and production. The three coordinators met weekly to monitor the project and facilitate students' learning. Meetings were also held with the project originators to check that progress was consistent with the conceptual framework for the project.

Aims

The aims of this second project were to enable students enrolled in early childhood education or Internet Broadcasting to develop;

- an understanding of the importance of the arts in the curriculum for the under-fives;
- an understanding of the role of artists and art making;
- an appreciation of the transnational application of the arts;
- skills in interviewing, filming and editing footage taken from "real" life situations with young children and artists and;
- an understanding of the technical complexities in rendering footage in media suitable for video, CD and online delivery.

Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes of this second project were as follows;

1. Internationalisation/ transnationalism:
 - a. production of educational resources for arts curricula in Australia and for students in off-shore programs;
 - b. understanding of cultural issues in relation to arts curricula;
 - c. a suitable framework for a further project in 2004 involving the filming of arts interactions in early childhood centres in other countries.
2. Online Teaching and Learning:
 - a. completed materials made available as a series of video and online resources for students enrolled in de Lissa early childhood programs, other arts courses, and students undertaking studies transnationally;
 - b. skill in streaming media content suitable for online delivery.
3. Graduate qualities – undergraduate students enrolled will develop skills enabling them to:
 - a. explain the social, economic, political and ethical contexts of educational leadership, management and administration in early childhood services;
 - b. identify key features of the early childhood professional's role in educational leadership, management and administration;
 - c. enter into critical philosophical debates in educational leadership, management and administration in early childhood, through an understanding of the issues and the ability to articulate a position on arts curriculum in early childhood;
 - d. demonstrate professional self-confidence and the ability to work effectively in a team in the community;
 - e. know when, where and how to seek appropriate personal and professional advice and support;
 - f. demonstrate understanding of the intercultural issues when working in a transnational context and creating online teaching and learning materials for an international audience.

Participants' feedback

Some weeks after the conclusion of the 2003 “In the Beginning” project, teachers from the participating childcare centres, de Lissa early childhood students, School of Communication, Information and New Media students, and project coordinators who supervised the student placements and assisted in the recording of “voice-over” and final editing of the video material, were asked to provide feedback.

Teachers

Teachers reported positive outcomes for young children as they observed and participated in a variety of artforms. Despite some initial hesitation from some of the children, teachers reported that by the end of the project all children participated in the activities. One teacher reported that, overall, girls tended to be more involved, and boys required more encouragement and modelling of what to do (also noted by de Lissa students). There were differences of opinion about the benefits of three artists coming together in each childcare centre for the final session. One teacher commented that this was overwhelming for the children and that having just one artist in the centre was a more effective strategy. Another remarked on the richness of the experience for children in what she described as a “feast for the senses”. The effectiveness of this approach may have been influenced by adults’ perceptions that the number of people present was too daunting for children. All teachers commented positively about the effective strategies that were used to address this situation. One teacher recommended that the project be extended because children often need time to observe before feeling confident about participating in new activities. This teacher felt that children were just becoming comfortable with the artists at the point at which the project concluded.

Students

De Lissa students commented on their developing appreciation of the role that the arts play in early childhood education based on the interactions of children with artists. They had observed that children were initially hesitant about joining in activities but later became more comfortable with the artists and activities. Boys tended to be less active than girls (particularly in dance-related activities), but were more inclined to join in activities when invited to explore objects as part of an activity. Children were more likely to become involved in activities when the artist accepted their ideas and utilised these in performances. Students reported that children benefited from participation in the session involving all three artists in one location even though initially taken aback by the presence of several unfamiliar adults.

A common theme emerging from de Lissa students’ participation in the project was the importance of teamwork and collaboration in childcare settings. Students commented on various aspects of teamwork developed through their involvement in the project including improved communication and interpersonal skills, an understanding of the need for clear role definition, regular briefing and debriefing sessions and an awareness of the importance of clear goals from the outset of a project. Students elected as team leaders within their respective groups further commented on the management skills that they had developed in the project. Several commented on difficulties associated with working in large teams, and described effective strategies developed for dealing with these problems.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of benefits through participation in the project was that, as result of their experiences in childcare centres, de Lissa students felt more confident about introducing arts activities into their own teaching programs as practising early childhood educators. As one student said, “As an early childhood professional I am now inspired to take my students to a deeper more meaningful level of exploration”.

The supervising lecturer at de Lissa noted in critically evaluative feedback from the students that the opportunity to see artists playing with ideas and creating work had provided the students with fresh insights into how they might approach the arts curriculum with young children. The students were surprised at, and stimulated by, some of the ways that the artists worked, such as opening a piano and inviting children to explore sounds, or by following children's ideas in creating magic baths and beds for teddy bears from wide-ranging found materials, or by seeing a dancer use simple gestures of hands and feet to create a simple dance. Students applied their observation skills through well-planned teamwork, reflecting upon their roles and responsibilities as team members and their confidence as early childhood educators leading and managing a partnership project for the early childhood community. They were able to guide their peers from the School of Communication, Information and New Media to capture on video important responses from the children as a result of their interaction with the artists. Their full engagement as early childhood professionals in their final year was evident in high quality presentations in tutorials to the project stakeholders from both Windmill Performing Arts, the Department of Education and Children's Services, the childcare centres and invited university staff.

The students from the School of Communication, Information and New Media who participated in the project also reported positive outcomes from their involvement in the project. These students echoed the comments of de Lissa students noting that the project helped them to develop skills in teamwork, collaboration, communication and an understanding of the importance of role definition within teams. Commenting on the impact that observing and filming the interactions between children and artists had on their own appreciation of the arts in early childhood, one student said "... there were a lot of magical moments between the artists and children which were a joy to record".

Students reported on benefits they gained from participation in a "real world" situation involving negotiation with key stakeholders in the project and problem solving to meet the client's requirements. They benefited from experience they gained in editing the footage gathered during at the childcare centres and from working collaboratively with the project officer in the production of the final video and Website to be used in curriculum courses with early childhood students from de Lissa and in overseas locations. The knowledge that the curriculum resources they produced would be applied in a variety of settings and used by students in a transnational context contributed to their motivation in the project. Students reported that the project helped them to develop an appreciation for the international audience viewing their work and excitement that the next stage of the project may involve filming interactions between artists and young children in Pacific or Asian countries in University degree programs.

One student commented that she had developed lifelong skills, in particular, the ability to communicate and collaborate in the work place. "As a communications major, I do feel that this subject rounded and deepened my range of skills and suitability for the workplace. I take pride in the fact that it has given me knowledge in print, radio, video and multimedia to draw on in the future".

Project officer

The project officer who supervised filming on location and assisted in the editing of footage and production of the final video was also a tutor in the Internet Broadcasting course. He noted that the applied, real world exercise provided the students with invaluable experiences in project design, execution and delivery. Students also developed skills in filming, editing and production, including:

- basic digital camera technique;
- interview skills;
- creating, uploading and updating a website using authoring software;
- editing using a professional video editing application;
- media management;
- version control;
- working individually and collaboratively;
- presenting and reporting to a committee of stakeholders;
- working to timelines.

In summarising the benefits of this project for Communications students, the project officer said “the unique opportunity the project provided for students to work with a real client meant that the outcomes of the project would be both useful and visible”. Students agreed that their motivation derived from the client’s passion for the project and from understanding the project’s significance to arts in early childhood education.

Outcomes from the 2003 project

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, the 2003 project has improved the confidence and skills of students from de Lissa Institute and the School of Communication, Information and New Media who participated in the project. The project has also contributed to the field of arts in early childhood education through the production of a Website (Figure 1) and video resources (Figure 2) that will help to inform Windmill Performing Arts about the kinds of interactions involving the arts that are most likely to have positive memorable experiences for young children. These materials will also be used as curriculum materials for students undertaking early childhood studies at de Lissa and in transnational programs.



Figure 1: In the Beginning Website’ developed by students participating in the project



Figure 2: Scene taken from the “In the Beginning video” produced by communications students

The curriculum materials developed through the 2003 stage of the project are now being trialed with undergraduate early childhood students in Asia and the Pacific, and the findings from that trial, together with the outcomes reported from the project involving students from de Lissa and the School of Communication, Information and New Media will be used to inform the next stage of the project which will involve replicating the 2003 project transnationally. The major outcome from this project will be the establishment of a model for a transnational, interdisciplinary arts education program.

Conclusion

This paper describes a unique interdisciplinary project involving early childhood and communications students participating in an arts project in which they observed and recorded artists interacting with children in three childcare centres. The project provided students with the opportunity to work in teams within the childcare settings and enabled them to develop their understanding of the importance of the arts and art-making in early childhood education, as well as skills in the use of digital technologies for documenting, observing and recording. The project generated new understandings, new questions and new practices among the range of collaborating students, artists and teachers.

The students developed important teamwork skills and improved communication skills, and the early childhood students further developed skills in leadership and management as a result of their participation in the project. Communications students also developed applied skills in conducting interviews, capturing video footage, editing and compressing video footage suitable for a variety of media, and developed skills in working with real clients in an organisational context. As a result of their participation in this project, all students developed an appreciation of cultural issues when creating online teaching and learning materials for an international audience.

Challenges in the project included a number of issues identified earlier in Nixon and Comber's (1995) report on documentary-making involving student teachers and children. Whilst the final video edit of "In the Beginning" focused on children and artist interactions, other voices could have been represented (i.e., those of the students and the teachers from each centre). As with the Nixon and Comber (1995) project, educating students for media literacy and documentary as art form is an important issue with considerations of questions of aesthetics and ownership in final decisions about selected video material. Another important consideration is that of ethics with informed consent and author responsibility in the context of child protection and the use of on-line images of young children.

An important outcome from this project has been the development of educational materials for arts curricula in Australia and overseas. Finally, the project has provided a framework for interdisciplinary education in field work for arts education in a transnational context that can be applied to a range of education, arts and social sciences undergraduate programs.

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