Teacher, mentor or role model?

The role of the artist in community arts work with marginalised young people

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This paper emerges out of the interim findings of the Risky Business research program, an interdisciplinary study of the use of the creative arts as an intervention for young people at risk. Over the period of the program nine individual arts-based projects are running in three geographical areas in Victoria, Australia – an outer Melbourne suburb, inner Melbourne suburbs and the rural town of Bendigo. Each of the programs runs between twelve and twenty weeks and operates out of a resource centre for young people aged 16-22. This paper addresses some of the issues that have arisen during the project about the differing style and approach of artists working on the various projects. The approach of the artists has varied with relation to their discipline, their training, and their work orientation, their background and, possibly, the gender mix of participants and artists working together. This paper draws from data, primarily interviews with artists, gathered across five case studies. The paper considers whether particular styles of artistic leadership, including the variables noted above, are more effective when conducting arts programs with marginalised young people.

INTRODUCTION

This article describes some interim findings of a study about the impact of arts involvement on marginalised young people. The focus of this paper is limited to a consideration of the role and approach of the community artists working with young people on the various arts programs that make up the study. Other aspects of the interim findings have been reported elsewhere (O’Brien 2003, O’Brien 2004). The final report will be presented late in 2005. This paper draws on data, primarily interviews with the artists, collected across five case studies. Quotations from interviews are italicised. The paper introduces the project and provides a brief description of the selected case studies. It offers a comparison of the artists involved in the case studies in terms of their
background, expectations and intentions, approach and art form. Implicit in this comparison is whether the artists are working as teachers, individual mentors or role model artists. The paper concludes by drawing from these findings to identify some qualities which are required by artist/teachers to work effectively with young people who are “at risk” in our community.

RISKY BUSINESS PROJECT

Risky Business is a three-year cross-disciplinary investigation into the use of the creative arts as an intervention for young people in urban and rural Victoria (Australia). The study is funded by the Australian Research Council through the Industry Linkage scheme and there are ten Industry Partners supporting the project, including the Department of Human Services – Juvenile Justice, the Department of Justice, Magistrates Courts in Melbourne and Broadmeadows, Whitelion, a youth support agency for young people who are serving or who have served a custodial sentence, Arts Victoria, VicHealth, three youth support agencies, Visy Cares (Dandenong), B-Central (Bendigo) and The Junction (Footscray). Since the program began in 2003, the research team has developed additional partner relationships with other youth service organizations and B-Central and The Junction are not yet in operation. The three Chief Investigators involved in the project draw on backgrounds in Creative Arts (Associate Professor Angela O’Brien), Arts Education (Kate Donelan) and Criminology (Associate Professor Christine Alder).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Over the period of the research project, nine creative arts programs are being established and investigated in three broad geographical areas in Victoria, Australia: Dandenong, an outer suburb in south-east Melbourne; Footscray and Parkville, inner urban suburbs and Bendigo, a country town north of Melbourne. Each of these areas has a low socio-economic profile, moderate to high unemployment and a high proportion of marginalised youth exhibiting a complex combination of risk factors. Parkville is the site of two youth custodial centres for young men and women, Footscray and Dandenong contain diverse communities with high proportions of first generation immigrants; the Bendigo region and Dandenong both include significant indigenous communities. Each of the arts programs is designed to run for at least twelve weeks and is based around participation in a creative writing, visual and/or performing arts program led by one or more professional community artist/s. Young people are recruited through the partner youth support agencies that also operate as geographical locations for the programs. Youth detention centres at Parkville (Melbourne) and Malmsbury (Bendigo region) are both sites for projects. The target group is between 16 and 21 but arts programs to date have included both younger and older participants. Participation is voluntary and flexible.
Young people participating in the programs become artists in training with the opportunity to develop a range of arts based skills through experiential workshops. Most programs culminate in a public performance or exhibition. To date five projects have been completed, a further three are currently in progress and two are in development. Young people are given the opportunity to participate in several of the research programs, ensuring continuity. Two programs begun last year have been continued beyond the completion of the research.

The project design is based on a case study approach using a conceptual ethnographic framework (Burton 1997, Janesick, 1994, Taylor 1996). The project involves field based data collection and analysis, an emergent design, grounded theory, community and stakeholder input within a community research context. Researchers observe the program sessions; interview artists and young people before, during and at end of each program, conduct focus groups and undertake follow up interviews where possible, after the programs are completed. The research is participatory and collaborative with complex multi-faceted outcomes, which are intended to inform the multiple sector end-users of the research.

AIMS OF THE PROJECT

Broadly, the project addresses two interrelated critical problems: the identification of effective diversionary programs for marginalised young people and an analysis of the social impact of creative arts activity. Through case study analysis, the research explores the participants' experiences and conception of the program, varying approaches of artists assigned to the projects and the ways in which differing arts forms and approaches affect personal and skill development and social integration.

The issue of risk is central to the project. The research builds on findings that young people’s transitions into adult life are “uncertain, complex and risky in the current social and economic climate” (Hughes and Wilson, 2004, 58) and explores whether youth with a background in harmful risk-taking behaviour are more likely to respond to intervention programs which focus on creative expression and involve excitement and risk, but within a safe framework. A desired outcome of a positive arts intervention is a decline in self-destructive behaviours as a corollary to improved self-esteem and social integration. The project operates from an assumption of latent or unrecognised potential in marginalised young people and argues for the exploration of creative rather than corrective diversionary programs.

OUTCOMES OF INVOLVEMENT IN CREATIVE ARTS INTERVENTION

The claims made for the positive outcomes of art-based programs for marginalised young people are consistent across a range of documented programs and include, amongst other things:
• an increase in self-esteem, motivation and commitment;
• the establishment of new peer networks;
• finding mentors and role models;
• the development of new ways to communicate;
• the experience of success;
• a valuing of identity, both personal and cultural;
• community integration;
• improved skills associated with risk factors, including securing accommodation and cessation/reduction of drug use;
• improved literacy, oracy, numeracy and computing skills;
• work ready skills, including communication skills, goal setting and task focus.


THE SELECTED CASE STUDIES

This section of the paper introduces the five case studies from which data has been drawn for this interim analysis of the role of the artist in arts intention programs with marginalised young people.

Case Study 1: Real to Reel, Bendigo site

Real to Reel is an ongoing writing and music program that involves young people in writing and performing songs using their own lyrics and a music composition computer software program. The songs are recorded on to computer and transferred to a CD Rom. The participant group of highly disadvantaged young people has been small across an age range of 14 to 18; the initial cohort of seven dropped to four by the end of the research period. The program has been conducted in partnership with St Luke’s Anglicare, a youth support agency, which established the project and recruited the participants. The location is a former YMCA building, now the temporary premises of B-Centre Bendigo. Risky Business researched the first stage of the program in the second half of 2003. Two male artists have worked with the participants. The first artist (R), who has since left the program, is a trained teacher and was a full-time St Luke’s employee. The second artist (S) is a musician who also works in the local College of Technical and Further Education. Both have advanced music making skills.

Case Study 2: The Art of Movement, Bendigo site

The Art of Movement is a continuing circus skills and drama program which was researched between March and September 2004. The first half of the program was circus
skills development led by an older artist (T) who works as a clown and teaches circus skills in a wide variety of community settings, including adult custodial institutions. This part of the program was very skill based and involved a range of circus-based skills, including juggling, unicycle, stilts, rolling boards and diablo. The focus was on skill development rather than creative development. The second part of the program has been led by an experienced drama teacher (J) and involved some basic actor training and videotaping of dramatic scenarios. The two artists worked sequentially rather than as a team. The program was conducted in association with the Youth Arts Network, which comes under the auspices of the City of Bendigo Cultural Development Program. There was an initial cohort of 10 mixed gender young people from highly marginalised backgrounds. Most weeks around 6 or 7 attended along with at least two youth workers. Initially the location was the gym in the former YMCA building in Bendigo. During the second part of the program, the activities moved to a classroom at Future Connexions, a youth welfare organization.

**Case Study 3: Modern Arts, Dandenong site**

*Risky Business* began researching the *Modern Arts Program* in September 2003. This project was not established by the *Risky Business Project* but is part of an ongoing “Work for the Dole” painting workshop coordinated by a community artist (Ja) who has been running the workshop for a number of years. The program was conducted in the Dandenong Community Arts Centre, sponsored by *Your Employment Solutions* and the Visy Cares Centre. The target group for this research study were young men and women 16 to 20, coming from culturally diverse backgrounds who have been disengaged from formal education and vocational programs. A few older participants, in their twenties and early thirties, were included in the cohort of 9.

**Case Study 4: Beyond the Barrier, Parkville site**

This program was a 17-week multi-faceted arts project for young women between 16 and 22, conducted in the second half of 2003. It involved the use of personal and shared narratives to devise a theatre piece. The program was coordinated by a psychologist and artist (H) and involved three participant groups: young women in custody at Parkville Youth Residential Centre, young women in transition from the custodial environment and living in community housing, and post-custodial participants. The coordinating artist was supported by three other artists, two women (M and L) and a male musician (K) for the production week. Given the difficulties associated with custodial regulations and mixing custodial and post-custodial participants, the program was conducted at three sites – the Parkville custodial centre (custodial participants), a centre for young women in transition run by Whitelion, one of our research partners (transitional participants) and a drama workshop room in the University of Melbourne (post release participants). The project culminated in public performance, *Beyond the Barrier*, at the
Open Stage Theatre at the University of Melbourne and during the production week custodial participants were given day release to attend the University. In all, 24 young women were involved at some stage but only 5 were involved in the final performance.

**Case Study 5: Four Walls for Boys, Bendigo site**

This program was similar in content and structure to the *Beyond the Barrier* program. It was conducted from May to September 2004 at Malmsbury Juvenile Justice Centre, a regional custodial facility for young men aged from 17 to 21. The program culminated in a performance, *Four Walls for Boys* at the Open Stage Theatre at the University of Melbourne. There were three artists working on the program, two of whom had experience with custodial clients, a woman (M) who coordinated the program and a male artist who worked on the musical aspects of the performance (K). Both these artists had worked on the Parkville program, *Beyond the Barrier*. A third male younger artist (A) who had limited experience in community theatre, and had not worked in custodial settings was recruited for his writing and performance skills.

**RECRUITING ARTISTS**

*Risky Business* has had minimal involvement in recruiting artists to run the five case study arts programs. The artists used had either a long-term involvement with arts activities within the institution or were recruited through our industry partner organizations. This was a deviation from our original intention to select our own artists when establishing the arts programs. The process of entering into established communities was challenging and it took longer than originally anticipated to establish trust with both the young people and their complex support structures. This was particularly the case with the custodial centres, which operate within restrictive structures and with very fluid personnel.

For this reason we opted to begin research with a program that was already established in Dandenong, another that was in the process of being developed in Bendigo and a program where there had been previous similar related activities in the Parkville custodial centre. In each instance the artists were in place or ready to begin. The original artists identified support artists to work with them in the programs. For the *Art of Movement* project, artists were selected in consultation with the local industry partners, which meant they were effectively partner nominations. In the Malmsbury project two of the artists came out of the earlier project and *Risky Business* consciously selected the third artist as an “outsider”, because of his youth and professional skills as performer and playwright.

*Risky Business* has also taken responsibility for consciously selecting the artists for the three projects that will be run between October and December in 2004. The approach has been to engage artists currently working professionally. For one of these projects we will be working with *Snuff Puppets*, a professional puppetry company.
BACKGROUND OF THE ARTISTS

Despite early intentions to recruit artists from a range of cultural backgrounds, all the artists discussed in this paper are from Anglo/European backgrounds; there are no first generation Australians in the group. This was another deviation from our initial intention to involve diverse artists who would reflect the diversity of the client group. The ethnic background of artists has not been an issue for the young people, including those participants from diverse backgrounds. The personal and professional qualities of the artists, and their familiarity with the special needs of the particular cohorts appear to be of more significance than ethnicity.

Most of the artists do not have professional training as artists, although all have extensive experience in the arts and most in working with difficult client groups. This is particularly the case with the artists who worked on the programs attached to the custodial centres at Parkville and Malmsbury. The three women involved in these programs all have personal histories involving a period in custody, substance abuse or homelessness, which helps them to understand the life challenges facing the participants. H, the coordinator of the Parkville project has early musical training. The two more experienced women, H and M, developed their drama skills with Somebody’s Daughter, a professional theatre company initially established by Maude Clarke in the 1980s with women undertaking custodial sentences. H is also a clinical psychologist and M has undertaken some training as a graphic artist. L has completed a two-year TAFE course in community theatre and is currently studying multi-media. All three women indicated that their personal experiences assisted them with the work:

H: Certainly the psychology training. This is one of the things missing with pure arts people. They don’t have any of the counselling or any of those sorts of skills, particularly with these client groups. You’re often working with them on private things, you’re not just rehearsing a play or doing that sort of stuff… it’s really been helpful to me having that institutional background to be able to understand why it happens like that. If you had just worked outside you’d probably get really angry or just disillusioned perhaps, doing that sort of work in here.

M: I’ve worked with youth now since 1999. (The) workshops involved script development on the floor improvisations one on one skills development and also on the welfare side of things. It’s always coupled. If you are working with kids that are specifically outside the unit there is a cross over of welfare work, whether you’ve been qualified in the area or not.

L: Well I guess I was once a young girl at risk. I actually don’t talk to them about it in any sort of depth or detail. But I found that the fact that they know, just in their knowing lets down a whole lot of barriers for these women.

Of the two male artists involved with the Real to Reel program, one, R, is a trained teacher and has worked with indigenous youth in schools, the VET sector and at the University in Darwin, and was employed as an outreach worker for St Luke’s when he established the program. The other artist comes from a complementary background:
S: Basically I’ve been a muso all my life. When my son was born 7 years ago I looked at what I was doing and I was thinking about how could I be a good father and stuff and I decided I wanted to work with music ... so I started working at Sternberg Support Service (mental health centre). I basically waltzed in there as a muso ... they had little bit of equipment and there were a lot of people interested in working with music and I just walked in and started jamming with them...

The male artist working in the Art of Movement project has a degree in psychology and teacher training:

T: I guess I did psychology with the naïve intention of making the world a better place. And, I worked as an educational psychologist for three years and then slowly I drifted into being a performer ... Over the last twenty years I’ve been doing workshops. So I’ve worked in the Artists in Schools program a lot, maybe at 40 or 50 primary schools, maybe 20 or 30 different secondary schools.

The female artist on this program is also a trained teacher who has worked in Western suburbs schools. She now works as a producer and director in “contemporary performing arts” but recognises the relevance of her teaching background in working with marginalised youth.

J: For me the needs of those kids are based on my understanding of pedagogy with a layer of my professional practice. It’s not me as an arts practitioner walking in, never having had pedagogy practice. A producer or director walking in here, I think, would never have the tools to work with these kids.

Of the artists discussed in this paper, only one lacked extensive experience in community theatre and marginalised youth. The male artist (A) working in the Malmsbury custodial program (Four Walls) graduated from a Creative Arts degree about five years ago and is now an award winning playwright, actor and director. He has had two experiences of working with marginalised communities, both as an artist; in one he was working with Arena Youth Theatre Company and in the other he was “interviewing a lot of young men at risk”.

AIMS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE ARTISTS

The aims and expectations of the artists vary considerably depending on their orientation. In the main the artists agree that personal and developmental issues are more significant than achieving high art product, but it is of interest that the women artists focused more on the importance of personal growth and development, and this was particularly so for those working in custodial environments.

H: I could basically run a therapy group and not an arts group and they would gain something from that but I think if you can utilise the arts then you can exposing people to the arts, particularly the drug using population who are often quite creative people who haven’t had (any)
opportunity…. So it’s really a good way of engaging young people who wouldn’t normally want to be involved in a therapy group. … For me, with this particular group we’re working with, I’m really happy if I can provide a safe space for a couple of hours where they can have a bit of fun.

M: You don’t just do drama. You work out workshops to couple what exists within the drama workshop and what is existing in the individual to cope on a daily basis. So we do have workshops that address personal issues that kids are looking at within themselves.

J: The basis of intervention, for me, is to give the kids a sense of the world and how they address the world through an art form and I focus on that.

The male artist working in the Modern Arts Program also stressed personal development, but as an outcome of making visual art works:

Ja: They re-build themselves, give themselves confidence and empower themselves, through gratification through art and communication and interaction with the group. It’s a form of therapy. It’s gratifying and it’s empowering. Empowerment is one of the key factors in everyone’s life.

The two male artists working on the Real to Reel program share equal concerns for personal development and artistic development:

R: It’s got a couple of different goals that probably are all equally important…. exposing people to having the option to express themselves as young people as much as anything… for kids who aren’t necessarily sporty but maybe have got incredible talents, things and ideas that they want to express…to do something and feel good about it.

S: The program running at the moment is basically about sharing music. It’s about giving people a chance to have a voice, to learn new skills and to have another focus in their lives.

The young male professional artist working on Four Walls for Boys, provides an alternate view in that he is adamant about the need for an artistic focus:

A: My role is as a professional artist and a young man. To be uncompromising in the sense that it is potentially unlimited and I want to illustrate for them that this hippy therapy thing is a crock of shit as far as I am concerned. I’d be more interested in them holding the possibility that they could be a professional artist. That’s what I’m interested in.

DIFFERENT ART FORM APPROACHES

A comparison across the projects demonstrates that some art forms lend themselves more readily to individual skills development, and that this often became a focus for the work, and an opportunity for participants to achieve immediate artistic success. A skills based focus also allows less time for participants to focus on personal issues. It also involves a degree of mimesis. The Art of Movement circus skills workshop relied on this approach.
T: I guess my plan involved the range of skills that I cover. The actual physical skills of juggling scarves and balls and rings and clubs, and then spinning plates, diablos, roller bollers, stilts, unicycles so the whole gamut of those skills. I guess they are tools; they are the medium that we use. Hopefully then to use those as some way of building self-esteem and ways of co-operating with each other.

In the Modern Arts Program, the particular skills based approach, which involved reproduction of images and a high level of artistic guidance ensured instant success for the majority of participants. The artist worked with each participant in identifying an image to work from and his teaching style included transferring the image to the canvas and then modelling the technique on the participant’s canvas, which they, in turn, painted over:

Ja: I treat everyone in the class as an individual and teach on an individual level so it eliminates competition because everyone is at different levels of their creative experience with different outlines and not teaching on a pack mentality. I show them a physical approach to their artwork by showing them how to approach something then they can mimic through visualisation instead of verbalisation.

In the music program a focus on technology with one-to-one support assists skills development, but it is significant that this program combines skills development with creative development as the young participants write their own lyrics and create their backing music rhythms:

R: Well at the moment it is definitely IT skills, just communication skills, working with adults, within a context, we’re not their case managers or something, much more a collaborative role where everyone’s ideas are equal … they want to do their music and I want to help them do their music and we work together to that end.

S: So basically at the moment the kids can come in and are taught basic computer skills with the basic program we have and they can build up raps themselves and that’s the basic hip hop program. They can record their vocal and learn to do all that stuff with it. That’s a great introductory tool that requires no previous music experience. It just requires dedication and love of music and after that it goes on to more detailed recording processes.

In these case studies, the group devised performance based programs appear to lend themselves more to personal development and less to skills development. The process of developing a group script from a basis of personal stories appears to have been a complex and frustrated process in both Beyond the Barrier and Four Walls for Boys, although the data suggests that the boys remained more focused on a polished performance outcome through which they developed an aesthetic distance from the personal base of the stories enacted. The young women addressed issues close to their own experiences and spoke directly to the audience about them. Their performance demonstrated a high level of ongoing emotional involvement in the stories and in the relationships that developed throughout the workshop, including those with the artists, two of whom performed in Beyond the Barrier.
There is little doubt that the group devised performance process with young people in custody is complicated by the transitory nature of the participants and the necessity for them to work collaboratively. In order to achieve a finished performance script, artists worked individually with the young people on developing songs and monologues, which were subsequently shaped into a final performance by the artist. While the poems or lyrics were developed by the young people, the music for these two programs was written by the artists. For the final performances artists were not sure who would be available to perform until late in the program, so there was a need to maintain flexibility. The artists varied their approach to include both group based work and individual mentoring.

H: I imagine the way we’ll do it is with lots of individual monologues, which we will link together with a story line. Then if someone drops out it will not muck up the whole performance and we will still be able to link it together I hope.

The clients in this group are easily distracted and it is unlikely that any performances would have eventuated had there not been a “captive” cohort. One artist in the Beyond the Barrier project gives some indication of the challenge:

L: OK, one of the things I’ve found difficult is that because I’m not really a firm, stern dominant character, I’ve had times when I’ve been doing a dance with them when they have all started mucking around and things have started to get out of hand.

It is interesting that this artist was one of the performers in Beyond the Barrier, because some participants dropped out. Her role was convincing and most audience members assumed she was one of the participants. The drama aspect of the Art of Movement program encountered similar problems:

J: You are never sure from one week to the next who is going to be there, so you have to accommodate that. It’s really chaotic so you have to accommodate chaos.

It is evident from the case studies above that arts sessions need to be carefully managed to be successful, and this may be through a skills based approach or, as is the case with the young women’s custodial project, because of the confidence and communication skills of a teacher/artist highly experienced with the cohort.

J: Now where you have a situation where the team is never the same, from one week to the next, it is very difficult to build that sense of a team, but I still try to do that, and a part of building of the ensemble is allowing people to have their input. So I suppose I make the rules, I move the machine along, I provide the foundation for the ensemble to work together and to have a sense they are building something together.

H: I think that sometimes they come and have a bit of a laugh and a bit of fun. Sometimes they come because you’ve got chocolate. I’m fine with that and that’s why I bring (chocolate) in because I don’t care what brings them in. I’d be very interested to know what they come for
because it's not quite clear and there's one or two in this current group that do not seem to be interested in performing. I think some of them might have a cuddle, in that sense they get to know you, they know you are going to be here every week.

**ARTIST-PARTICIPANT RATIOS**

At the beginning of the *Risky Business* Project, we had hoped to facilitate groups of 15 to 20. Across all the case studies outlined above, numbers have been considerably smaller. In part this has been because of the transitory nature of the participants, but it is also because the client group is high need and requires an approach that combines group work and individual mentoring. It was rare to find more than ten participants in any single session for any of the programs. The numbers tended to be between four to seven, and on some occasions no participants arrived for a session. The nature of the cohort demands a low participant / artist ratio:

R: We've got two workers. We initially thought, you know, five or six kids would be enough and I think we're actually thinking four is fine now.

In most instances, the involvement of other adults, both youth workers and *Risky Business* personnel, has been important, particularly where sessions have been run by a single artist.

J: There are some key members (in the group) who if they are not there, that can have catastrophic consequences, and I think the ambassador (youth worker) who is in fact the link between the kid's worlds and the professional world, is a very very important person.

The Malmsbury *Four Walls for Boys* program involved three artists and a researcher with between six to twelve participants at any time. This ratio allows for both group and individual work. Early in the project it was agreed that the youth workers would not sit in with the program and this may have facilitated involvement. For one project, which involved only one artist at a time, *Art of Movement* in Bendigo, evident tensions developed when participants became distracted or unruly. Two particularly successful programs were characterised by a complementary team of artists, including at least one with extensive experience with the cohort and one with professional artistic practice. The *Modern Arts Program* in Dandenong was successfully managed by one artist, but in this case the cohort was older and over the years the artist had developed a formulaic approach for ensuring the participants were kept engaged and experienced success.

**ARTS OUTCOMES**

There is evidence in the data that “successful” artistic product was a significant factor in the participants’ achieving many of the positive outcomes identified above. Most of the artists were concerned to balance process and product. Artists working in the *Beyond the Barrier* program noted a significant increase in commitment and focus during the
production week. Both the Real to Reel program and the Modern Arts Program maintained a focus on producing digitalised music tracks or art works ensuring that most participants remained motivated. Focus and motivation were more problematic when the artistic outcome was unclear or too far in the distance.

H: I don’t think they often hear me when I say, "we are working towards a performance". I don’t think they really acknowledge that. I just think that they come each week to get something out of each session.

For the Art of Movement program where there was no consistently stated nor scheduled outcome, motivation waned and attendance became very patchy. The artists involved attempted to constantly adapt this program to meet perceived participant needs; as a result most participants lost a sense of direction and pulled out. There is emerging evidence to suggest that even highly marginalised young people are motivated by an expectation of high standards and an approach that assumes they are working as emerging artists. For both the Real to Reel project and the Four Walls for Boys project the art outcomes were quite sophisticated in production terms and this was certainly related to the artistic expectations of the artists involved, and may have been influenced by the gender of the participants and their focus on artistic outcome rather than affective development.

PARTICIPANTS RESPONSES

Participant responses in interviews confirm the finding that the young people appreciated both personal support and skills development, flexible but clear direction and artistic outcomes. They looked up to the artists as role models and mentors.

He helps see me through it and when I get frustrated with it he just gives me confidence and support to keep doin’ it somehow.

They make you feel that everything is achievable. So, yeah give you the confidence and stuff like that.

Teaching me how to develop my blending and just giving me hints and advice and just helping me when I’m stuck.

(She) is inspiring us and she’s helping us to write freely and honestly about how we feel and stuff that happens to us.

You guys have an initial plan of what we are going to do but we all partake in what we are going to do and how we are going to do it but with your advice.

I love (artist’s name). I think she’s demanding, very persistent because she won’t let me get away with doing nothing!

He’s very adaptable to everyone in the program. Everyone’s different and comes from different circumstances and he can just adapt to everyone perfectly.
It (the performance) made me feel good about myself and knowing that I have the guts to get up and do it.

I felt so proud of myself for doing it (the performance).

CONCLUSION

There are many challenges involved in conducting community arts projects with highly marginalised young people. Many of these are outside of the control of the teachers, youth workers or artists working in the programs. They may include the transitory nature of the cohort, continuing substance abuse, homelessness, peer pressures or lack of family support. Emergent research from the Risky Business programs suggests that the role and artist and the way in which they shape the artistic experience is crucial in ensuring a meaningful experience for the participants and supporting the personal and social outcomes outlined above. The psychosocial and educational skills normally attributed to good teaching and a high level of artistic knowledge and skill are both necessary but these qualities might be evident in an artistic team, rather than one individual.

There is also evidence that young people who do not have supportive adult relationships benefit from an individual mentoring approach. This has been further supported by a stand up comedy workshop project recently completed as part of Risky Business. In this program participants were given individual mentors, themselves emerging stand-up comics, who worked with the youth in developing a routine. While the data for this project is not collated, the development of the participants over the two-week period of mentoring was quite significant.

Effective programs provide opportunities for both skills development and creativity in a clearly structured “safe” environment where the artist is aware of the personal and social needs of the participants. Flexibility is essential but not at the expense of clearly identified goals. Motivation and self-esteem improve when participants achieve tangible artistic outcomes, either as individuals or within a group. A low participant to artist ratio is essential to ensure appropriate mentoring, a supportive safe environment and artistic outcomes. The interim findings suggest community artists working with marginalised young people need to balance good teaching, artistic modelling and expectations with individual mentoring.
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