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Engaging Educated Islands: An Examination of the Collaborative Process of Creating the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource for Australian School Students

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Abstract: This paper describes the process of creating an electronic national art education resource based on the 2009 Venice Biennale for K-12 students throughout Australia. Australian artists have been consistently represented for over thirty years at the Venice Biennale with the support of the Australia Council, the Australian Government's premier art and advisory body. The collaborative process of creating the national art education resource is based on Community Cultural Development (CCD) practices advocated by the Australia Council. This process has brought together a range of people from the field of art education under the CCD guiding principles of: self-determination, sustainability, access, diversity and cultural democracy. This paper will describe the journey of three researchers involved in the process of creating the resource and how they experienced and engaged with the guiding principles of community cultural development. In addition it will examine the aims of this resource in providing young people with electronic access to a diverse range of Australian artists and their practices and in the process creating a site for critical and reflective engagement concerning a range of contemporary issues such as increased awareness of environmental issues.

Keywords: Art Education, Community Cultural Development, Collaboration, Australia Council for the Arts

Introduction

THE 2009 VENICE Biennale Art Education Resource was the result of many people's hard work and dedication to the arts in Australia (Collins, Sudmalis, Snepvangers, McDonald, 2009). The involvement of the College of Fine Arts (COFA) at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) was an important contributing factor to the success of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. Ms Kim Snepvangers (Head of School, School of Art History & Art Education) and Dr Gay McDonald (Senior Lecturer, School of Art History & Art Education) provided valuable mentoring to the following COFA/UNSW students: Ms Jane Cleary, Ms Jessica Haly, Ms Sally Leaney, Ms Lisa Rumble, Ms Tali Seidman and Ms Elizabeth Thorpe. This guidance enabled four of the six students to compile information they had gathered through completing extensive research and inter-

views with the artists in order to construct well written and informative narrative accounts of each of the artists and their work. The remaining two students, Ms Sally Leaney and Ms Tali Seidman completed extensive research in consultation with Mc Donald and Snepvangers to write accounts of the history of the Venice Biennale and Australia's presence within that larger account.

This information was then used in two key ways to create a section titled "Further Ideas" for taking the content into both the primary and secondary school settings. Dr Ros Kitson and Dr Peter Whiteman from the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University, Ms Melissa Smith from Scotch Oakburn College in Tasmania and Dr Margaret Baguley from the Education Faculty at the University of Southern Queensland created interesting and appealing K- 6 primary activities in the "Further Ideas for K-6". "Further Ideas for 7 – 12" were created in conjunction with Collins, Snepvangers and McDonald and Mr Lance Hopper, Head Teacher Visual Arts, Baulkham Hills High School. This group contributed to the development of well considered and engaging suggestions for mobilising the content of the resource within the secondary visual arts classroom. The final draft was then sent to the Advisory Panel consisting of the Chair, Dr Margaret Baguley (USQ), Ms Tess Allas (UNSW), Ms Marina Grasso (James Busby High School), Mr Lance Hooper (Baulkham Hills High School), Ms Kate Ravenswood (Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland) and Ms Melissa Smith (Scotch Oakburn College) who considered various sections of the education resource and its relevance to primary and secondary students and teachers in Australian schools.

The final layout of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource (Collins, Sudmalis, Snepvangers & McDonald, 2009) which is available online at: <http://www.australiavenice-biennale.com.au/images/stories/files/vb2009edu.pdf> is as follows:

1. Welcome (Dr Margaret Baguley)
2. Introduction (Dr Gay McDonald, Kim Snepvangers, Dr David Sudmalis, Carli Collins)
3. Engaging Children in Artworks: Ideas for Generalist Primary Teachers (Dr Margaret Baguley)
4. Venice Biennale: Introduction to La Biennale di Venezia (Talia Seidman)
5. Australia at Venice: Overview of Australia's presence at the Venice Biennale for the last 30 years (Sally Leaney)
6. Shaun Gladwell – Explore the artwork of Shaun Gladwell (Lisa Rumble)
7. Vernon Ah Kee – Explore the artwork of Vernon Ah Kee (Jane Cleary)
8. Ken Yonetani – Explore the artwork of Ken Yonetani (Elizabeth Thorpe)
9. Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro – Explore the artwork of Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro (Jessica Haly)
10. Image Credits
11. Acknowledgements
12. Feedback Form

In addition the Australia Council for the Arts website, which is hosting the education resource, <<http://www.australiavenicebiennale.com.au/education-hub>> contains additional features such as recorded interviews with the Venice Biennale artists which have also been transcribed, a blog, a facebook site and a national schools competition. These have all been created to enhance and foster visual education in Australian schools. This desire to distribute the education resource on a global scale enhances Australia's profile on the international arts stage

and also challenges the perceived physical and philosophical isolation associated with its geographical location. The hosting of one of arguably the most prestigious art exhibitions in the world at Venice, another geographically isolated island, has resulted in an education resource which, due to its electronic presence, is able to facilitate connections between geographically dispersed people thereby promoting access and diversity.

The recent National Review of Visual Education conducted in Australia (Davis, 2008) noted that the current global shift of communication to the visual requires educators to prepare students with the skills to “create, process, critique and appreciate the spectrum of visual phenomena in the individual’s external and internal environment” (p. 11). Arts educators are at the forefront of this process to enable students to evoke meaning from visual images from a diverse range of sources in an increasingly visually saturated world (Burmark, 2002; Danko-McGhee & Slutsky, 2007; McDonald & Fisher, 2006; Moore & Dwyer, 1994). Due to the complexities of globalisation and the subsequent inclusion of a variety of languages, visual symbols are being used in creative ways by sectors, such as advertising, to appeal to as many people as possible. Creativity is therefore being seen as a new economic driver for international competitiveness and is particularly evident when applied in a visual way (Davis, 2008; Robinson, 2001; Sawyer, 2006, Wind, 2006). Davis (2008) notes, high-level creativity is becoming an essential skill for students, particularly in an increasingly competitive society.

Many educators have advocated the value of arts-based pedagogies, multiple ways of knowing and multiple intelligences (Bamford, 2006; Eisner, 2002; Gardner, 1993; Wright, 2003) in enhancing the effectiveness of learning environments and increasing the opportunities for creative thinking amongst students. Sawyer (2006) claims that the elements of improvisation, collaboration and communication, which are central to performance, are intrinsically linked to creativity. He also acknowledges that the creative process is unavoidably collaborative, and that research into group creativity must consider group dynamics. Therefore, in order to obtain a richer and deeper understanding of the complexity of bringing the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource to its current form, the methodology of narrative inquiry has been used to focus attention on the collaborative journey undertaken by three of the participants who provided their expertise in practice-based research towards its creation. In this process the community cultural development principles of: self-determination, sustainability, access, diversity and cultural democracy will be examined. The insights afforded through this paper will provide important information regarding collaborative initiatives in providing arts access and education to a diverse range of people in order to enhance aesthetic understanding and increase creative and lateral thinking.

Context

This study was conducted during an eight month period from December 2008 – July 2009. The participants in this study are three higher education lecturers, one (1) from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and two (2) from the College of Fine Arts (COFA), University of New South Wales (UNSW). The participants first met one another in Sydney at the invitation of the Australia Council for the Arts, the premier funding body for the arts in Australia. This initial meeting was organised to discuss the extent of their participation in the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. Each of the participants has a background in art education with Baguley from USQ having taught in the primary/secondary art education

sector for fourteen (14) years and commencing her sixth year in tertiary teacher education. McDonald from COFA/UNSW had worked in the secondary sector for eighteen (18) months and eight (8) years in the tertiary sector with extensive additional experience working as a curator and education officer at a notable Australian regional gallery. She also had been awarded a post-doctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution's American Art Museum. Snepvangers from COFA/UNSW is currently the Head of the School of Art History and Art Education. She has worked for eleven (11) years in the secondary art education sector and twelve (12) years in the tertiary sector teaching art and design education students. The participants had not met each other before the study commenced.

During the study the researchers/participants from COFA/UNSW worked with six art and design education students to complete extensive research and conduct interviews with the selected five (5) Australian artists: Shaun Gladwell, Vernon Ah Kee, Ken Yonetani, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro for the 2009 Venice Biennale. COFA/UNSW curator Felicity Fenner organised the exhibition of emerging artists, Ah Kee, Yonetani, Healy & Cordeiro for the Venice Biennale exhibition *Once Removed*, a series of installations unified by themes of displacement, Indigenous and environmental issues. The data generated from these various activities was used to develop accessible and engaging content for students and teachers. The researchers/participants from COFA/UNSW were also both editors of the final product in conjunction with two Australia Council personnel, Dr David Sudmalis from the Community Partnerships section and Ms Carli Collins from International Market Development. The participant from USQ was the Chair of the Advisory Panel and also wrote a chapter for generalist primary teachers to assist their understanding of children's cognitive and physical development with a specific focus on art activities that would be appropriate yet challenging.

Methods and Techniques

In order to examine the experiences of creating the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource the researchers utilised the qualitative Narrative Inquiry method, and more specifically Critical Event Narrative Analysis (Webster & Mertova, 2007; Woods, 1993). Narrative Inquiry uses a storytelling method in order to describe, through reflection and discussion, why the subject/s of the inquiry has acted in a particular way. The data is often co-constructed through the experiences of both the researcher and the participant (Chase, 2005; Clandinin, 2007; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) resulting in an opportunity for the reader to develop an understanding of the different ways individuals have been affected by various events in their lives (Dunn, 2003; Kelchtermans, 1993; Trzebiński, 2005).

Woods (1993, p. 102) describes a critical event as having the "right mix of ingredients at the right time and in the right context." Bohl (1995) notes that the most important qualification for an event to be considered critical is that it has an impact on the person telling the story, and is usually a change experience that is not recognised as such until a certain period of time passes. The Critical Event Narrative Analysis Method was utilised in this study in order to investigate the complex challenges involved in creating a national art education resource underpinned by the guiding principles of: self-determination, sustainability, access, diversity and cultural democracy.

Theoretical Background

Community Cultural Development refers to the “philosophy, practices, intentions and outcomes of community based cultural and artistic practices” (Community Cultural Development in Australia, (n.d.)). The Community Cultural Development field is situated globally and is in direct response to communities struggling to cope with modernisation and the forces of globalisation (Goldbard, 2006; Graves, 2005; Sonn, Drew & Kasat, 2001). Community Cultural Development or CCD gives a voice to individuals and groups who have cultural values imposed on them which they feel they cannot resist. This can result in feelings of isolation and the creation of ‘island communities’ within larger communities. Therefore, the opportunities afforded by CCD practice enable communities to feel empowered and valued. There are five guiding principles that lie at the heart of CCD practice. These are as follows: *Self-determination*: the rights of communities to determine and self-direct their own cultural development; *Sustainability*: a commitment to developing a capacity for sustainable cultural development; *Access*: equity of access to community cultural development opportunities and resources; *Diversity*: recognition of and support for community diversity that distinguishes the varying needs of different groups of people; and *Cultural Democracy*: Recognition and support for cultural and linguistic diversity and, in particular, Indigenous cultural practices.

The Community Partnerships committee of the Australia Council for the Arts aims to develop and sustain a wide range of partnerships to support culturally vibrant communities through engagement with, and participation in, the arts. This committee offers a range of programs to support community based arts and culture, including community cultural development. The priority areas for its programs of support cover a range of geographic, demographic and social contexts including: regional Australia, disability, young people, cultural diversity, emerging communities, Indigenous people, remote Indigenous communities and specific critical, social and cultural issues requiring attention. The following website contains further information regarding the Australia Council for the Arts Community Partnerships Committee: <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/artform_boards/community_partnerships>

Sudmalis and Collins from the Community Partnerships and International Market Development sections respectively of the Australia Council for the Arts were instrumental in bringing together various ‘critical friends’ to help provide a range of expertise in order to bring the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource to fruition. These people were sourced across Australia and although chosen primarily for their expertise also represented a national approach rather than an isolated focus from one particular state or territory.

The Critical Event

The three researchers agreed that the invitation to participate in the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource constituted a critical event due to the alignment of their research interests, expertise and experience in addition to the substantial impact it has made on them. The resource now exists independently of those who created it and can be described as a ‘third entity’. The third entity is both a process and a product created from a collaborative process resulting in a physical manifestation of the group’s common goal. Although created by the participants the third entity is also independent of them, therefore “as the project intensifies, the third entity will seemingly become more important than their own needs”

(Pullen, Baguley & Marsden, 2009, p. 217). The documentation of the project and conversations with the participants who worked on the Venice Biennale Art Education Resource reveal that this was indeed the case.

CCD Principles Evident in the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource

Due to the focus on CCD principles the three researchers agreed on the themes of: self-determination, sustainability, access, diversity and cultural democracy as the framework for their narratives. The narratives were compared for commonalities and differences in how the participants perceived of the implementation of CCD principles during the creation of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. These CCD themes are discussed below with quotes from the three participants signified by italics and drawn from their respective narratives about the project.

Self Determination

The participants agreed that the freedom and flexibility afforded the researchers/participants by the Australia Council for the Arts contributed to feeling a greater sense of responsibility and ownership for the direction of the resource. The range of highly experienced individuals which included artists, teachers, academics, a curator and gallery professionals were carefully selected to contribute to this collaborative initiative. Mc Donald stated that *when a number of agencies are involved in a collaborative project such as this, there are a variety of perspectives to be accommodated, requiring participants to bring an open mind and a generosity of spirit and above all a desire to work towards the common good*. The selection of these individuals was articulated to reflect CCD principles, in particular, the capacity or the perceived capacity of these individuals to share their knowledge and expertise within a project, not for individual aggrandizement but to develop an Education Resource that would enable others to engage productively and in unique ways with the content (Snepvangers & McDonald, 2006). As Baguley noted at the post-launch of the resource in Sydney at the Australia Council for the Arts *it was evident that many people had given generously of their time to ensure the resource was as professional and as educative as possible*.

Sustainability

Sustainability was evidenced during the project through the importance of the connections that were made both at a professional and personal level. Including a range of art and education experts was identified in the initial brief. As Snepvangers revealed *it is important to have a well-established relationship based on mutual respect, reciprocity and transparency* and that a project has to have a *purposeful* approach. Snepvangers and McDonald ensured the students received academic credit for their involvement in an authentic learning project. In this way they were able to link theoretical material from their course work to an industry-based application. Co-construction of learning occurred through the altruistic mentoring provided by art world professionals and educational experts in the creation of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. The quality of the relationships established during such a project can make enduring links which can be utilised in future collaborative projects.

In addition, the students were aware that the texts published in the resource would have a “real world” target audience and this knowledge enabled them to progressively create and own their material whilst simultaneously developing their own “voice”. The confidence which they gained in their ability to research, write and publish this type of information also increases their skill set in a competitive arts sector.

Access

The digital format of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource facilitates engagement with a geographically remote but key art event and allows equity of access by diverse audiences (K-12) across Australia whether in rural or urban environments. This is a national project aiming to bring high quality writing about contemporary art, as well a range of educational resources to every school in Australia, with a diversity of media suitable for use within all states and school systems. The resource also complements the National Declaration on *Educational Goals for Young Australians* adopted by ministers in December 2008. The National Declaration commits “to supporting all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens” and to promoting equity and excellence in education (National Curriculum Board, 2009, p. 6). Snepvangers revealed that participation in the resource also *allowed students to make professional connections and establish networks in industry*. Involvement in the resource enabled the students to have access to national industry figures in the arts and this was reinforced by the students meeting at the Australia Council for the Arts to receive feedback on the research they had completed. In addition, the students travelled to Venice to view the artists’ works first hand and as Baguley noted at the post-launch *the students were extremely enthusiastic and evidently inspired by their travel and the relationships they had established with the artists and curator* [Ken Yonetani, Sean Cordeiro and Felicity Fenner were at the launch] *through the research they had undertaken*.

Diversity

The diversity amongst the artists chosen in relation to their cultural backgrounds and arts practice reflects an important CCD principle. Providing students with information about contemporary artists from a range of cultural backgrounds who are innovative in their use of materials, increases tolerance for alternative ways of viewing the world. As Adams and Goldbard (2001, p. 20) contend “investigations of cultural difference often reveal deep commonalities within diversity: every culture has ways, however distinct, of encountering the universal in human experience from birth to death and many of these resonate across cultural barriers.” The artists included in the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource investigate a range of human experiences such as movement (Gladwell), environmental issues (Yonetani), displacement (Ah Kee) and life spans (Healy and Cordeiro). As Snepvangers (COFA/UNSW, 2009, p. 23) states: “The notion of how you engage audiences in contemporary art in an exhibition like this is challenging, everyone wants to know about it, but contemporary art is at times, confronting, and this is why it’s such an interesting project.” In addition, including a range of educational sectors in the resource also provides teachers with opportunities to see the links and expectations between, for example, primary and sec-

ondary activities. This was also a new approach for the COFA/UNSW students including Elizabeth Thorpe who revealed:

I've found it really challenging to have to start from scratch and turn our research into a useful resource for teachers and students and those without an arts background. It's been a real eye-opener. You have to think very differently because it's nothing like writing an art essay or a critique of a show.
(COFA/UNSW, 2009, p. 23)

A range of experts were chosen from around Australia to provide diversity to the education resource so that it was not solely focussed on the predominant capital cities but was able to reflect a more comprehensive overview of the artistic and educational views of the nation.

Cultural Democracy

The researchers/participants acknowledge and value the necessity of working within the initial program brief designed by the Australia Council for the Arts. In addition, the agents from the Australia Council empowered the researchers/participants through allowing them a high degree of freedom and flexibility in choosing key consultants from a range of fields to collaborate with at various stages on different facets of the project. Baguley noted that *suggestions were enthusiastically received and it was evident that the aim of achieving the high quality resource possible outweighed the need of any individual ego*. Consequently, key contributions were made by representatives from across Australia, from diverse cultural groups, and from the sphere of the museum, education (K-6, 7-12, tertiary), and the arts. This project encompassed the work of Vernon Ah Kee, an Indigenous artist whose art practice encompasses Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture. The COFA/UNSW student researcher/writer who devised Ah Kee's profile in the Education Resource, consulted with Ah Kee as well as an Indigenous member of the Advisory Board who has extensive knowledge of contemporary Indigenous art. McDonald revealed that *the students felt they 'owned' the area they were responsible for and during the progress of the resource felt comfortable and confident enough to challenge other viewpoints and were concerned about not misrepresenting their artist's vision*. The student who was representing Ah Kee was aware that he was keen not to be seen differently because of his cultural background. A member of the advisory panel who works at COFA/UNSW consequently fulfilled a coach/performance role between the student and Ah Kee to ensure that his information was presented fairly and accurately.

Conclusion

The post-launch of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource in Sydney at the Australia Council for the Arts on 9 July this year provided many members of the education team with their first opportunity to personally meet one another. Although some of the team had worked on their section in physical isolation they were able to maintain contact with one another through technologies such as email, Skype, videoconference and telephone. These methods of communication also assisted in alleviating the 'island' isolation one can feel when working on a national project with a range of people located in many different areas.

It was evident at the launch that there was a sense of pride and achievement felt by all of the participants involved in the creation of the Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. The Australia Council for the Arts generously provided airfares and accommodation for geographically dispersed members of the education team, thus reinforcing the CCD principle of access. The COFA/NSW students expressed their delight at their intrinsic involvement in the resource and during one of the speeches acknowledged the unique opportunity they had been given and its effect on their future careers. Segments of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource were projected on the wall during the evening and hard copies of the resource and associated education packs containing photographs of the artists work were available for distribution.

The three researchers/participants involved in the writing of this paper were also present at the post-launch and acknowledge the remarkable achievement of bringing together such a range of people willing to submerge their own egos to create the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. A vibrant collaboration is one in which there are mutually beneficial outcomes for all and this was evident in the conversations during the post-launch. It was an invaluable opportunity for networking to occur as the visible outcomes of people's expertise was able to be viewed and discussed. There was also genuine acknowledgement of people's contribution which is also an essential element of collaboration. It was evident that clear lines of communication had been established and feedback was given generously and accepted graciously throughout the creation of the education resource. Each of the researchers/participants has expressed their desire to be involved in any similar opportunities and have consequently established an important research link which they wish to pursue in future endeavours.

The CCD principles of self-determination, sustainability, access, diversity and cultural democracy were certainly achieved and celebrated and are evidenced in the final format of the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. The researchers were aware of how the approach taken by the Australia Council, which respected and fostered a range of expertise, contributed to individual self-determination. The sustainable nature of the project is evidenced through the high level of activity being undertaken on the electronic site for the resource which has been created by the Australia Council. This has also occurred through the opportunities afforded to the participants to either establish or consolidate professional links. The blog and facebook page associated with the online site demonstrate that teachers and students are engaging with the resource due to its accessibility whether they are situated in rural or urban areas. The issue of diversity has been addressed through the range of artists, and subsequently their cultural backgrounds, chosen to represent Australia at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Cultural democracy was achieved through the invitation to various cultural and arts education groups to contribute to the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource. In addition, an extensive evaluation process of the journey of creating the 2009 Venice Biennale Art Education Resource is shortly to be undertaken by the Australia Council for the Arts in order to inform and value-add to future endeavours of this kind.

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About the Authors

Dr. Margaret Mary Baguley

Dr. Margaret Baguley currently Senior Lecturer in Arts Education, Curriculum and Pedagogy University of Southern Queensland. Her teaching and research interests are concerned with the role of visual art in the education of early childhood, primary and secondary students. She has an extensive teaching background across all facets of education, in addition to maintaining her arts practice. An interest in collaborative practice and exhibition underpins her teaching. Dr Baguley's research supervision encompasses studies in visual arts education, children's engagement with the arts, teacher development, museum studies and the value of the arts in the community. In 2008 Margaret received a national award to recognize her outstanding contribution to student learning from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC).

Kim Snepvangers

Kim Snepvangers' current research investigates the rich social and cultural narratives of what it is like to be an art and design educational professional, conducting assessment in contemporary visual arts and design contexts. Using qualitative and poststructural research methodologies she focuses on the rhetoric of assessment from the perspective of the practitioner, examining the motives behind the 'public face' of evaluative systems.

Dr. Gay McDonald

Gay McDonald's PhD is in art history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution enabled her to continue research on the French involvement in the launching of American art in postwar France. Gay has received competitive grants to support her current research and publication on the role of US art museums in promoting US foreign policy, US design and aesthetics abroad via international exhibitions.

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Mario Minichiello, Birmingham Institute of Art and Design, Birmingham, UK.

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