Performance-based Environmental Learning: What Makes The Difference?

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Overview

• **16 inner city schoolchildren** participated in the Auckland Fringe Festival, March 2017, called ‘Lookout’ where they worked with professional performers to prepare and deliver a show that involved a one on one conversation with an adult about their ideas/issues of a past, present and future Auckland.

• This research focused on the learning outcomes for both performers and audience, seen through an environmental education lens.

Identifying what you like and don’t like about Auckland.
Performance-based learning and environmental education

- Engages participants physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially (Caldwell, 2011)
- A means to explore complex issues in a non-threatening way, while developing confidence in themselves (Caldwell, 2011)
- Participants must put themselves in others’ shoes potentially leading to more active citizenship (Wilson, 2011)
- Has similarities to ‘play’, well accepted as a learning platform (Farquhar, 2003)
- Encourages imagination, presents material in a non-confrontational way, a holism of skills is demanded, develops effective communication skills, and revives the cultural art of storytelling (Adcock & Ballantyne, 2007)
- Affective learning is more likely to influence attitudes than a knowledge-based approach alone (Wilson, 2011)
- This participatory learning approach resonates strongly with EE pedagogical principles (Gale, 2008)
- However, it is difficult to ensure that learning translates into intentional change once the event is over (Gale, 2008)
- Two modes of performance art in education (Curtis et al., 2014)
- This process uses process theatre (pedagogical theatre)
  - Trained performers work with non-trained participants (students) to develop a piece that they perform (Curtis et al., 2014).
Andy Field

- English performance artist
- Develops interactive projects to bring people and places and people together in unique couplings
- ‘Lookout’ project example
- Performed in Auckland, several UK & world cities
- One-on-one conversation between a child and adult
- Overlooking a city

Image: https://www.liftfestival.com/lift-playlist-forest-fringe-co-director/
Philosophy of ‘Lookout’ performances

Understanding cities as a kind of network of human relationships as politics but also as a physical geography
How performance can be a strategy for better understanding those spaces

Having 2 people of different ages looking out on a city and seeing very different cities as a space for sharing

Children get some sense of the adult world, participate in the political and social discourse of adult world
Adults get a sense of relationship to the city that extends beyond their own lifetime

Equipping children with adult conceptual skills and knowledge to participate in discourse and a space that they aren’t normally invited into

Involves transformation of:
  • People’s relationship to the city and how it functions
  • People’s conception of the future – people tied to immediacy of present day living, put off tomorrow in favour of present
Sequence of Auckland ‘Lookout’

- 2017 Auckland Fringe Festival – CAB Building
- 40 children in an initial workshop with Andy and his partner Becky
- Children took the parts of objects encountered during a person’s journey to work (e.g. toaster, wardrobe) & projected this both backwards and forwards in time.
- From this 16 children were chosen to participate
- 5 days of 2 hour workshops
- 2 days of rehearsals
- 3 days of performance
- Each child performed 3 times in 3 days (144 adults as audience)

“… they were really thinking about where the city had come from, what it’s like now and where they want it to go in the future.” (Teacher)

“… she could project herself to that end of her life [90yrs] and look back and wonder what I will remember, what I’ll miss – which is pretty powerful.” (Teacher)
Research design

- Ethics approval
- Initial workshops & performance
- 16 children participated
- Aged 8-10 years
- 2 focus group interviews with 16 children total (12 girls, 4 boys)
- Individual interview with teacher
- 4 individual interviews with 4 adult participants
- Individual interview Andy Field
- Data analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Image: http://aplacetolowerlookout.co.uk/location/auckland/
Findings from the children

Emotions:
"The performance because it was fun" (FG2)
Your ideas had to be “ ... like candy floss converted your ideas” (FG1)
“It gets you confident” (FG1)
“It makes you do stuff to help relax” (FG1)

Their interactions:
“It changed my life when I met one of the Auckland Councillors” (FG1)
“I liked talking to different people because they all had different ideas” (FG1)
“... trying to get people to walk away with your ideas”
“Meet strangers and hear their stories”

Their concerns:
Pollution, rubbish and graffiti
Insufficient transport
Expensive living in the city
Ugly buildings (drab colours)

Learning:
“You got to use your imagination more than you usually use it at school” (FG2)
“We got to do more colourful buildings” (FG2)
“It extended your thoughts and how reality really is” (FG1)
“I got to teach what the city was” (FG1)
“... find out how children think of the future and share it” (FG1)
Children’s vision of the future

- Flying rubbish bins fuelled by trash
- Bird taxis
- Underwater tunnel
- Sky tram
- City in the clouds with a slide back to earth
- More public activities (e.g. pools, libraries, concerts, playgrounds)
- More vegetarian options in restaurants
- No smoking
- More homeless shelters

Homes in the clouds
Adult Participants – Parents of children

Value for children:
“Wonderful experience ... the whole journey she just loved it all ... had pride in self, validated what their contribution was and what they could do in the future ... sense of influence over their city” (L)
“Given space to think ... creatively think about your world ... quite an empowering thing ... confidence in his views” (O)
“She was really good at it ... she enjoyed all the different elements” (B)
“They were totally enthusiastic and quite absorbed in it ... really interesting and challenging” (M)

Value of performance for self
“Looking at a world that these children had ... internally created ... while seeing a current world” (O)
“Space where they were taken seriously ... paying attention to them” (O)
“Authentically letting the children’s voices come through” (B)
“It was quite a magic spot ... a piece of history really ... offers a nice vista” (B)
“I found it quite emotional and moving ... I liked the mystery element of it ... something about the child’s voice that really tugs at your heart ... empty and a bit ghostly ... the soundscape that went along with the voice the kids helped design that I found that was quite emotive” (M)
“Kids are so good for making you wanting to do things better” (B)
“Have it coming from a child ... someone who what I do is going to have a direct consequence on their lives” (O)
Changes in behaviour as a result of participation

Children – definite changes named
11/16 identified a change in behaviour
“Once we finished like our apple cores ... in the car we just threw it out the window but now we ... stop by a rubbish bin” (FG1)
“It changed my mum’s thought ... and now she goes around and she picks up other people’s rubbish and she has been putting up posters like don’t litter it will cost you” (FG1)
“Using the car less ... and we are not using like gladwrap” (FG2)
“I walk to more places ... to the library” (FG2)
“I think about how people treat things like rubbish ... and how we can make it better like stuff for recycling” (FG2)

Parents – growth in awareness
“I found myself talking about it with other people ... so it generated to a wider kind of family discussion” (M)
“Kids go home and they do have an impact ... get their parents at least thinking about it” (B)
“Lately we’ve been doing walking school bus ... not wanting to be stuck in the car so much” (B)
“How am I conscious about what I’m doing in the place that I live in ... how am I contributing to my city?” (M)
“It actually made me feel really guilty for not doing more ... I’m going to go and join something because I feel I am not contributing ...” (L)
“Sown some seeds ... on an everyday level I think it just sort of made a little incremental change in us” (O)
Outcomes

Children found the experience valuable in terms of growing their confidence and emotional connection to their city
“... super engaged and excited and proud of themselves” (M)
“It started me thinking more about ... the way we could make our city a better place” (FG2)

Raised children’s and parents’ awareness of the possibilities for a future Auckland:
“I liked that you should try and make the city a better place because lots of people in Auckland just think it is fine the way it is but ... we kind of learned that it is possible to make it an even better place” (FG2)

Empowered the children in terms of having their ideas validated and valued by adults:
“Just lovely to be able to quietly discuss something with a child ... in a space where they were taken seriously ... we were paying attention to them ... validated a child’s worldview” (O)
“I think children’s ideas should be noticed more because some adults just don’t pay much attention to children’s ideas because they think they are not as good” (FG2)

Encouraged active citizenship:
“Having a bit of ownership in your environment and city rather than just existing in it” (M)
What made the difference?

**Creation of a space** where an adult listened to a child’s ideas in a considerate way. Conversations had an integrity to them – not patronising.

**Workshops** to prepare the children:
- Concrete starting point – identification of what liked/disliked about Auckland.
- Discussion of utopia – a perfect city (includes values and choosing 5).

**Careful consideration of notion of time:**
- 30 years in the future – present city and their relationship to it.
- 60 years in the future – global ecological problems and their relationship to them.
- 90 years in the future – about them and their own personal hopes, dreams, ideas and values.

Illustration: Era Whittaker-Powley