YouthWorx Media: Creative media engagement for 'at risk' young people

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Abstract

This paper offers a descriptive account of the development, operation and management of the youth media program YouthWorx Media that engages disadvantaged young people in media creation. Through the combined perspectives of the project manager and researcher working on the project, we reflect on the actual, on-the-ground practices. A provision of intermediary pathways for reconnection with education and employment via media training for Melbourne 'youth at risk' is the key objective of the project, against which the project's 'real world' social outcomes are being documented and measured. However, we recognise also the 'messiness' of the program's delivery process, and its uneasy documentation through ethnographic research. The implementation of projects like YouthWorx involves a series of calculated strategic decisions informed by a set of shared values and underlying philosophies (e.g., a pedagogy of working with 'youth at risk' via media presented here), but also—and equally important—numerous ad hoc responses to 'real' situations at hand. This paper emphasises then an inherent process of translation of the project's original conceptions or ideas, constantly tested and re-visited, into on-the-ground educational and media activities. It underscores a value of exploring connections between theory/philosophies and practice, social work and academic research, hoping to contribute to a wider discussion of the role of community media/arts initiatives in stimulating positive social change.

What is YouthWorx Media?

YouthWorx Media (YWX) is a collaborative youth media project that combines the creative, distributive and social service capabilities of Melbourne youth community broadcaster SYN Media, the Salvation Army and the Centre for Creative Industries and Innovation based in Melbourne. The YWX project was set up as an extension of the arts approach to social change that utilises *individual* artistic expression as a form of therapy and empowerment. YWX also emphasizes the value of creative self-expression yet places this within a socially interactive process of media training conducted in collaboration with the real world youth media organisation SYN Media. The access to and intended integration within the particular organisational structure of a youth community media organisation arguably makes YWX different from numerous other arts community initiatives. It creates an opportunity for 'youth at risk' to express themselves—'have a voice', but also - importantly - to be listened to. This social process of 'being listened to' is realised on a few levels: as a connection with an already established SYN audience via radio output, with other SYN volunteers through collaborative media work, and finally with YWX teachers and social workers who are prepared to listen to young people beyond what by the mainstream may be considered 'unrefined' linguistic expression. Adult-engineered, the program offers a supportive social work environment for young participants to acquire a set of interpersonal and media skills to allow them to reconnect with education and employment. In this, it is motivated by the well-established discourses of the politics of recognition, education, and creative industries. YWX emphasises the right to communicate and be understood (Couldry 2001), as well as the use of media training, production and distribution, with a view to acquiring interpersonal, media, and possibly entrepreneurial skills (Bloustien et al. 2008). Equally important is an open-ended, long-term 'learning to learn' pedagogic approach (Black 2007), which

Woolfolk defines as 'develop[ing] in our students the trait of being motivated to learn so they will be "able to educate themselves throughout their lifetime"' (Woolfolk 1998: 378-9).

The combined perspective of the project manager and researcher offered here draws on our collaborative research engagement in the program. While YWX's social outcomes are still being explored and documented through an ongoing long-term ethnographic study which includes regular participant observation, focus groups and one-on-one interviews, this paper reports on YWX's work in progress, recounting its development in material and philosophical sense. The paper opens with a brief presentation of young people targeted by the program, their motivation for getting involved and the creative activities in which they engage in the YWX studio. We proceed by providing the material and conceptual context to the project's aspirations, management, and delivery. This description is enriched by empirical material from our interviews and conversations with young people themselves. Names of young people quoted throughout the paper have been replaced by pseudonyms. The paper concludes with an outline of immediate management concerns, future work plans, and a call for a sustained conversation between practitioners (teachers, social workers, media facilitators) and cultural researchers involved in similar arts/media youth projects.

Who are 'youth at risk', why are they here?
Generally, young people referred to YWX are either homeless in the sense that they are in some sort of residential or foster care or they have become disengaged from mainstream education—quite often they have been expelled or spent significant chunks of time simply not attending any formal education program. Most of them have very low levels of literacy and many have drug, alcohol or juvenile justice problems. They are at risk of not being able to share in the economic prosperity and job security that most of us aspire to, and do not necessarily have the skills or desire to access a conventional work or study path. Almost universally they have had a highly disrupted education, many having dropped out of school by Year 8 or having had long periods of absenteeism. In some respects they can be seen as 'refugees' from mainstream education where they have become almost completely disengaged from their own learning and where the stain of failure sits like an exclamation mark in their schooling experience.

They join the program for diverse reasons. While both the project and ethnographic research are ongoing, we have noted that many YWX participants hope to build on their prior experiences in multimedia (often informal, a product of 'messing around', but occasionally also school-derived) to 'learn more about this area', 'to open up some more pathways', and consequently improve their job prospects. For many, it's a purposeful life strategy in 'opening more doors for the future', for another group, their own motives are less clear. While some admit they are here because their friends 'told them to', some drop-in waiting for other opportunities to come up. Their media background and aspirations differ significantly as well. For example some of the enrolees in the accredited training course offered on site, Certificate II in Creative Industries (Media), are quite skilled in audio recording and editing software, or at mobile phone video recording, but lack practical experience in radio making. Others, on the other hand, have already produced live radio programs at SYN but are yet to try their hands at film making.

Offering a blend of experiences and ways of accessing learning through YouthWorx is paramount. YWX managers quickly recognised that not everyone is ready or wants to create media a few days a week but many, many young people can benefit from one-off

positive radio or film workshops or just time 'hanging out' in the studio or playing on the software. These experiences can act as a seed for the future, creating the possibility of a slow accumulation of skills and knowledge without the make or break of a structured course. YWX engages youth across different media-related activities, including radio, film and music-making, in the form of open access, free-of-charge, mostly one-off training sessions, independent media support, and the Certificate II course run in cooperation with North Melbourne Institute of Technology (for which the tuition cost of $133 is borne by participating individuals themselves or covered by their supporting organisations, e.g., Centerlink, Anglicare, etc.). In addition to providing an important accredited certificate-based training, a calculated decision was made to continue with YWX's non-accredited forms of training as well.

With YWX's operation expanding beyond the initial focus on radio production training to include multi-media content production and distribution, the participants can now engage in a range of media activities. Driven by their interest in music, a number of kids write their own songs, put together rap songs, or compose radio jingles. In fact, a number of them want to be rappers, music producers, and someone mentioned being a 'sound technician for big concerts'. Nineteen year-old Thomas is determined to work towards being a 'concept artist for a gaming company', while seventeen-year old Agnes loves video clips and wants to be a personal assistant at a promotional or modelling agency. While it is impossible to generalise, many participants express a desire to try out various things and to 'open up some more pathways'. Thomas, who has done a short multimedia course with a TAFE provider, and was involved in YWX activities prior to his enrolment in Certificate II admits: 'I'd like to get an overview about different aspects of multimedia and that and then make a decision for the next semester, like where I want to go next from here'. As mentioned earlier, a couple of kids, however, are open about having no education or employment plans whatsoever: 'I don't know what I want to do with it [multimedia training]. I just wanted to do it, cos it's just something to do'.

The physical environment and YWX's setting has been shaped by a number of decisions made to create a context that inspires the kids to get engaged and learn. These have involved numerous small arrangements, such as the selection of the burgundy colour of the chairs, the choice of large-screen Apple Mac computers, and professional video cameras to 'evoke respect for YWX ICT gear'. As an education program, YouthWorx is quite distinct from the traditional classroom setting characterised by a row of tables and chairs, a black/whiteboard and a teacher at the front. A factory finish studio located just off the ethnically diverse Sydney Road in a northern suburb of Melbourne, Brunswick YouthWorx is housed in a semi-industrial zone and borders a graffiti laden alleyway. The space was chosen as much for reasons of geography as for its inherent suitability to house a media studio. Its proximity to the Salvation Army's Brunswick Youth Services, directly across the road, was a key factor that meant that YWX could tap young people who were accessing that service. Being walking distance to public transport facilitated the flow of traffic (young people), which would be a much more difficult to engineer otherwise. Geography is important: community-based projects can struggle to work effectively almost purely because of geography, as there is often no existing pathway to their door, and hence they cannot attract the people for whom they were created.

Inside the building, YWX has been setup like a mini media production studio characterised by an open plan central working/meeting area, a pod of computers, desks and the radio recording studio. Graffiti and tagging are not permitted in an attempt to make the YWX venue aesthetically different from the street environment that surrounds

YWX and with which participants are generally most familiar. The idea has been to make the environment comfortable yet 'not too comfortable'—to allow for a level of ownership while setting a tone that says 'this is a work space and the work we do here is important'. This look, feel and finish are meant to reflect a different type of pedagogy carried out with 'youth at risk': 'hands-on' practical learning, and arguably more horizontal relationship between students and their teachers and media facilitators while still having a professional industry edge.

While the YWX purpose-built radio studio is a replica of the studios at SYN, participants cannot broadcast live to air and staff have made a conscious decision to leave it that way. It has been felt that it was important that YouthWorx becomes a gateway to broader experiences rather than a destination: a 'safe' supported space to re-engage with education through creative media projects but not an end point. Going off to SYN to broadcast live to air is also about broadening young people's geographic and narrative possibilities, exposing them to new experiences both materially and conceptually. The YWX space is a training 'haven' but the journey into SYN either on public transport or by car is also about mainstream mingling, rubbing shoulders with other students and volunteers at SYN, as well as the actual broadcasting experience. This geographical travel becomes a metaphor for what is possible, about the young people having positive creative experiences in new environments, getting a sense that they can contribute and positively change their lives. Indeed, the concept of a journey by a young person, or what in evaluation literature is referred to as 'distance travelled' (Dewson et al. 2000) begins from acceptance of where the young person is at present, and seeking to broaden and extend that world through ongoing support and guidance.

How do we then tell a story different to formal learning that often fails disadvantaged students? How does YWX seek to teach? How do we re-engage young people who have learnt (ironically) to actively reject or oppose mainstream education?
YWX has been established in recognition that for many 'at risk' young people, experiences of mainstream education have predominantly been of disconnection and failure. For some of these young people education has been a harrowing and desolate narrative in which they cannot find a stable, lucid and connected story. YWX's brief is to:

> Use media and non-institutionalised learning to engage extremely marginalised, disadvantaged young people and youth at risk, in a process of participation and development that will reconnect them to education and society.

The underlying philosophy of teaching becomes critical within this context. This pedagogic ethos extends to establishing and maintaining social relationships in a broader learning environment, as well as developing relevant material resources. The YWX 'youth at risk' demographic requires an ongoing comprehensive social support (e.g., housing, counselling, etc.), which in this case is provided by the Brunswick branch of the Salvation Army, Brunswick Youth Services (BYS). In direct collaboration with the BYS social workers, YWX teachers advocate a model of 'power alongside' as opposed to a 'vertical' power structure in working with 'youth at risk'. This approach is, according to Craig Campbell, Programs Manager of The Salvation Army Brunswick Youth Services, based on a philosophical perspective of 'relational engagement' (Campbell 2008). It seeks to remove conflict-based patterns of working by attempting in part to minimise conditioned oppositional behaviours. Building relationships of trust, and putting the onus of

responsibility for their behaviour back on to the young person are its key principles. As William Glasser states in *The Quality School*:

> When we are coerced, we usually refuse to take ownership of the work we are asked to do. But for students to do quality work, it is crucial that they see that it is for their benefit, not the benefit of the teachers, the school system or parents. (1990: 96)

YWX teachers' role is then to lead, guide, encourage, and push, the main goal being the facilitation of 'learning to learn'. In accordance with TAFE teaching guidelines, the starting premise is that YWX is an 'adult learning environment', which means that it is ultimately up to young people whether they take up the opportunities on offer or not. Naturally, on paper this assertion might sound straightforward, if not somewhat simplistic. In reality, working with these principles requires constant daily adjustment, refinement and flexibility.

The project has begun to tell a different story. The educational setting is more studio than classroom, and SYN's radio studio embeds young people's work within the real world setting: YWX participants' radio output is listened to by real people of SYN audiences, and their practical media skills potentially transferable to the real world employment sector. However, because YWX participants are young people with complicated biographical circumstances, there are different expectations of them in terms of participation. Some can be seen as 'successful' leaving with a certificate II diploma, some with a noted increase in self-confidence, others with concrete plans for further education and training in the media sector, and others not ending up in a lock-up again. Craig Campbell captured this by observing, 'the kids come here [YWX studio] to *learn to learn*, which doesn't mean there will necessarily be outcomes in the media industry' (Campbell 2008).

In striving to fulfil its youth development role, the challenge for projects such as YWX is to work within the principle of 'power alongside' while being able to lead and maintain a functioning dynamic that honours the group as well as the individual. There is also the challenge of meeting the reality of what is before you—on a daily basis—given that from one day to the next, from one hour to the next, you cannot always predict who will be present. Re-engaging with education, facing the challenge of fronting up and taking on the responsibility of learning and creating a future is difficult for the young people accessing the programs. It often does not happen in a linear fashion and the attendance patterns reflect this.

In conversations with a number of young people who have been involved in YWX and related BYS programs such as LinkEd, a community VCAL course, it is apparent that there a number of things that distinguish their present learning experience in these settings from past experiences in other environments. Although it is often hard for them to articulate, some have described YWX as 'a place that is not like school but it doesn't feel like a youth service either'. Seventeen year-old Sascha referred to YWX media activities as a mix of 'recording, filming, singing, rapping', and, compared it to a standard classroom: 'It's just that whiteboard shit that you've gotta, you know…it's just doesn't work'. Someone added that a positive difference between teachers at mainstream schools and those at YWX and the participating BYS is what makes this project valuable for 'youth at risk' generally: 'Smaller class sizes…flexibility…sense of individual

recognition…treated like a real person'. These comments made by young people are also reflected in a conversation with eighteen year-old Andrew:

> Interviewer: In terms of the [YWX] project, do you think it is useful for young people to come here?
>
> Andrew: Yeah, like if they have trouble with school…Teachers, like they don't get along with them and all that. Well, these teachers, you do get along with them. It doesn't matter how pissed off you get, you could still get along with them. They are easy going. Even practical work, with school work and all that, if you find you have trouble with that it is still easy working, pretty much.

Conclusion

For YWX 'youth at risk' who are given access to the educational and cultural resources of the YWX studio and a youth community radio station, there are measurable impacts. There has been an increase in social and cultural capital through the acquisition of concrete media skills, but also improved social or family relationships and a boost in personal confidence. In fact, several studies indicate how an improved self-esteem coupled with real-world capacities can lead to entrepreneurial activities (Bloustien et al. 2008). Some young people have received recognition for their media creation within a wider media sector. For example, a short film called 'Spawn of Evil' based on a script by a YWX student has been picked up by community TV Channel 31 and broadcast in September 2009. The writer of the film is currently attending an advanced media course and mentorship program in filmmaking offered at YWX, while preparing a portfolio for a tertiary degree in screen-writing. The task of the YWX researchers is, then, to elaborate an evaluation methodology that captures both tangible and intangible social outcomes of the project. Elizabeth Soep observes that more research needs to be done on 'the extent to which the benefits carry over into measurable social and educational capital outside a short-term program' (Soep 2006: 200). The longitudinal nature of the research project, employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, is a crucial part of the ongoing empirical study at YWX studio in Brunswick and SYN studios in Melbourne's Carlton.

The immediate concern for the project's managers is to investigate ways of sustaining and developing YWX in terms of ongoing support for YWX participants outside this program. Creating and articulating further pathways demands attention as well as thoughtful, coherent action. Already, one month into the first intake of the Certificate II program, some students are expressing anxiety around 'what next?'. From a management perspective, YWX is determined to build further internal pathways around traineeships, development of a socially engineered business and a range of ongoing projects that can be accessed beyond the certificate program. There is also a need to forge pathways with other providers so YWX does not become a destination but rather a doorway.

Finally, apart from the real life outcomes that social initiatives like YWX demand, there is a need for a sustained conversation between the practitioners (teachers, social workers, media facilitators) and cultural researchers involved in the project. It is important that our research methodologies take account of the translation of the project's original conceptions or ideas (that are constantly tested and re-visited) into on-the-ground educational and media activities. The project's actual, often complex and messy administrative, management, and educational practice is as important as the critical engagement with theoretical categories of 'voice', and 'empowerment' that community

arts/media projects like YWX invoke. Practitioners' and researchers' perspectives brought together into dialogue can produce insights about embedded experiences on the ground, while productively advancing our critique of youth media engagements.

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