Getting Up: Graffiti and the Curriculum

CONFERENCE PAPER

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Abstract

This paper serves to inform the reader of an innovative project being conducted by Swan TAFE, Midland Campus called the 'Learning Legends' SG project which primarily seeks to engage and retain socially isolated youth in appropriate curriculum activities. This project bridges communications between many community groups, many individuals and a multitude of organizations. This paper builds upon research conducted by the author focussed on aerosol art forms in curriculum delivery, feedback from youth on their aerosol art activities and prompts the reader to consider aerosol or graffiti art forms as a creative mechanism for curriculum delivery.

Introduction

The 'Learning Legends' SG project is located in an off-campus location at Swan City Youth Service, Midland, Western Australia. Clients engaging with this Youth Service live in metropolitan areas of Perth and travel regularly to outlying rural areas.

The project titled 'Learning Legends' is a Building Diversity initiative funded by the Department of Education and Training. The 'Learning Legends' project imbeds the key elements of the Certificate of General Education for Adults curriculum with that of artistic and creative enterprise including aerosol art forms, life skill training including a cooking program and a Spanish language program. The 'SG' part of the title is the add-on that a number of the clients/ students have coined for their own identification purposes ie. 'Swan Graf'.

Building Diversity

This Building Diversity 'Learning Legends' project was originally funded only until December 2003, carefully designed to address the needs of clients already accessing services delivered by Swan City Youth Service in Midland, Western Australia. The project has been extended for a further year dur to the success of the project and program in conjunction with SWAN TAFE College,
Midland, Western Australia. The youth service operates under the mission statement of "striving together to secure a better future for young people".

The predominant age range of clients that access services through this center falls between 15 years and 25 years. The presence of Youth Workers on a constant basis in the same delivery site as the TAFE project has many benefits due to the nature of the clients needs.

In general the clients:

- experience with education is very negative;
- majority of the client group did poorly at school and left school at an early age;
- the clients have low literacy and numeracy skills;
- mental health problems relating to alcohol and illicit drug use are common;
- all have been exposed to varying degrees of verbal, emotional and physical abuse;
- many are known to the Justice system;
- a large proportion of clients accessing services (60%) are Aboriginal;
- are often referred from a range of government and non-government agencies

**Learning Legends Focus**

The primary focus of the 'Learning Legends' program is to engage socially isolated youth (ie. young women and men) from socially & economically disadvantaged backgrounds in a range of positive & challenging activities.

Priorities addressed include:

- Delivery of Introductory, Certificate 1, 2 & 3 in General Education for Adults through a flexible 'art' project;
- Development of a trusting relationship with course facilitators and other participants;
• Provision of a familiar and safe environment;
• Participants have a sense of ownership of the project and hence the course;
• Flexible and responsive delivery;
• Literacy and Numeracy support;
• Social contact and positive interactions;
• Team and individual work programs;
• Opportunity to participate in and produce works of creative enterprise.

Achievements

Quote;

"...many of the achievements of the students who attend this program could only be defined as 'social dividends' where outcomes and competencies play second fiddle to real life benefits, life changing decision making and positive risk taking initiatives". - Manager and Project Director, Chris Hannan, SWAN TAFE, Midland, Western Australia

To date, achievements include;

• students gaining employment by various organizations in local community;
• students gaining entry to tertiary and further education services;
• students gaining entry to armed services training;
• students accessing documentation of past educational training;
• an internet web site showcasing results being developed by students;
• students gaining paid tutor / educator roles with local council projects;
• artist portfolio development;
• funding to complete a large public sculptural work for the new cultural precinct of Midland;
• an exhibition of students works being granted for September 2003.
Challenges

Difficulties with clients include violent and aggressive behavior, erratic attendance and lifestyle issues which preclude them from access to service. The development of a cooking program and language based acquisition service has encouraged clients otherwise not engaged with the CGEA program. Assistance with Curriculum Vitae development and small business advice has also enabled and encouraged clients to continue accessing the CGEA program irrespective of gaining short term employment.

Off Campus

A number of students have previously been enrolled in TAFE related courses and for many reasons choose not to engage further. These reasons include medical issues, mental health issues, drug use issues, behavioral issues, community correctional order issues and lifestyle issues.

A vast proportion of students had difficulty with secondary education settings and many did not complete Year 9 secondary education. Students for the above mentioned reasons prefer to access education services in a youth center due to the other support mechanisms available to them whilst accessing education services.

Aerosol Art

The 'Learning Legends' project initially set out to engage clients in any creative activity that would provide the incentive for further project related enquiry. A number of students engaged in 2002, creating mosaics and scale models as well as drawing, painting and an exterior mural painted on the front section of the youth service itself.

This led to the enquiry by students to continue this mural based project using aerosol cans. After much discussion with Center management and the owners of the building it was agreed to permit supervised graffiti related painting on the whole of the exterior of the building. This led to the indoors
due to inclement weather and so on. Gaining access to funding to purchase these materials has led to students actively placing orders for paint, calculating costs inclusive of GST issues, ordering, faxing, traveling to and from suppliers and chasing the best possible price for their product needs. This all fits perfectly into mathematical and numeric related competencies. Students/clients are encouraged to speak openly with center management and work in a team environment, negotiating a working safe space with drawings to demonstrate forward thinking for a planned art work.

Students have scope to initiate new works provided they can demonstrate that what they propose or seek help with meets the competencies set out by the CGEA curriculum. The General Curriculum Options unit at all levels of certification are conducted as projects including;

- involvement with the life skills cooking program;
- learning to speak Spanish;
- conducting and completing initiatives such as snooker competitions, debates, computer generated publications and other hands on activities.

A number of students have shown a great deal of interest in developing enterprise based business initiatives involving aerosol art forms and have been granted ABN status by the taxation department. These students regularly engage in work related activities returning to the center to get assistance with proposals, curriculum vitas etc. This in turn is linked with their curriculum competency assessment.

**Issues**

A number of issues arise with the use of aerosol spray cans. The most important and easily addressed issue is that of safety. All students using spray cans must undertake occupational health and safety training (basic) before engaging with their planned pieces. This training equips them with the understanding that safety equipment including fine filtered masks must be worn whilst painting.
Secondly students are actively encouraged to discuss and act upon the legal ramifications of their preferred art forms. Anecdotal evidence suggests that illegal tagging and graffiti is on the decline in the immediate areas proximate to this site for legal aerosol art.

Thirdly, the community regularly gives feedback to students and educators alike (as well as Centre management) for and against the use of aerosol art forms as an educational engaging mechanism. Students actively advocate for positive inclusion in community projects and proof of the worth of such a teaching strategy lies in the feedback students provide for it's inclusion in ongoing curriculum activities.

**Aerosol Art: The Related Debate**

The following data was compiled to augment the reader's understanding of how graffiti can be incorporated and serve as a focus for positive numeracy and literacy learning experiences as evidenced by the 'Learning Legends' SG program.

*What is graffiti?*

- graffiti pl. > Italian for "to scratch"

1. a scribbling on a wall, as ancient as Rome;
2. a drawing or writing scratched on a surface such as a train or a shed, a tree or an exposed piece of skin.

*What is the difference between graffiti and aerosol art forms?*

There will always be the tendency for the conservative few to be more concerned with denouncing and attempting to obliterate something before they even attempt to understand or relate to it in any way shape or form, none more so than that of ‘graffiti art’ or ‘aerosol art’. The presence of its’ forms are
global in proportion, encompassing every language and present in every culture.

Sonik (2002) who is a world renowned international graffiti Artist believes that by creating these public art works, graffiti writers experience a level of risk and adventure, artistic and otherwise, citing that anyone outside the circles responsible for its creation would have great deal of difficulty comprehending. Wz.One (2003) an Australian national graffiti Artist believes that this is further propounded by the art curriculum at secondary and tertiary levels being focused on students retaining historical narrative and practical activities centered around egalitarian crafts. These pedagogical activities exclude aerosol art sidelining its significance as simply a folk phenomenon and socially suspect.

Paco Alarcon (1998) places the desire of youth to experience by adventure and misadventure as more deeply connected to “humans continually perfecting capacity for altering environment, from the prehistoric struggle for the control of fire or the appearance of archaic languages, to the present-day massive contamination of surroundings.”

What role does language play in the development / framework for aerosol art?

According to Phase 2 (2002) international graffiti Artists, the notion to:

“...appropriate and create a "verbal atmosphere" is attached to the action (bombing, racking, biting, piecing, hitting, etc.) as well as letter styles (softie, hump, mechanical, bar, soft bar, wild style, wak, wicked, fucked ,etc.) and is as old as the notions to spray as it has been to say it.”

Alarcon, as cited in Personal Advertisement on any Surface (1998) succinctly concludes that these languages and methods of deciphering social code;

“...are part of the message that evolved and gave form to words, to the construction of ideas, of sounds, signs and letters".
The curriculum for education is entirely composed of these same ideas, also impregnated with sounds, signs and letters and most importantly pointing youth to engage in an epicenter impregnated with obscure information dissemination, profuse with unwritten rules, initiations and most importantly creative code making.

**Graffiti and the Curriculum**

A recognition of the magnitude of what's taken place over time and what has been created by the existence of writing in all forms including graffiti is the key to understanding how culture can harness its codes as an effective educational strategy inside and outside of these educational institutions. Within this cultural institution there is a requirement that youth be initiated into maturity through a process that graduates personal freedom, earned by the ability to ‘sign’, to make a mark that is valued and identifiable.

Graffiti is purported to begin with a ‘tag’, a signature and proceeds into a visual masterpiece hence its association with youth. This is brought about in various stages culminating in the ultimate ‘piece’ the throw or 'lay up'. The term 'Getting up' is the notion that by having an identifiable mark the 'writer' has a place in the group, the crew, the community and has rights of passage as identifiable as any other social integration.

**Tagging - The Sublime**

Artistic justification or where in fact graffiti art is placed in the context of culture is not entirely aesthetic, rather relationally esthetic. Tags are key examples of this desire to relate, to engage the spectator and for the work to be 'complete' by virtue of the audiences revolt, horror, desire or feigned ignorance.

Tags according to Paco Alarcon are like “...designs for personal advertisement...repetitive nicknames by means of which their authors may see themselves reflected on any surface. For the great majority they are
nothing but caricature-like figures, chaos on the grey of the city. Their impenetrability is part of the charm of the tags, the tribe's secret code."

Nicolas Bourriaud (2001) likens the ‘bomber’ crashing symbols and signs into the path of culture and the ‘passers by’ by way of youth needing to ‘play culture’. Using signs and notes is that of the practice of semiotics, Bourriaud believes, where people are determining a way to travel or establishing routes through life and graffiti or aerosol art is simply another journey and an exciting yet relatively dangerous one.

The sheer immensity and use of bright colors aerosol artists use, according to TASK (2003) an acclaimed Australian graffiti Artist is indicative of the desire by these individuals to create and relate in the highest level of emotive code. The scale and repetitive nature of such activities has scope, he believes, to be viewed from a philosophical perspective as opposed to a psychological or psychosocial critical examination.

Educational Institutions

With the ever increasing number of youth not engaging in formal education as a means to bettering their potential in life, arrives the recognition that the concept of mainstream education produces alienation for a sector in our communities with its perceived treadmill of repetitious, demoralizing timetable of restrictions. Constructing, creatively re-constructing and engaging existing centers for youth related informal curriculum facilitation surfaces time and time again as imperative to encouraging a return by this sector to the more formal setting of secondary and tertiary institutions.

Successful facilitation of a learning environment where the education strategies encourage self reliance, responsibility, empowerment through encouragement, non threatening methods and a sense of permanency in creative relativity is an obvious key to developing a young person’s positive desire to relate with the world.
The fact that economic and educational disadvantage drives teams, groups, gangs, pose’s etc. into aerosol art could be simply explained as humans needing to survive by relating to and through a contact network. Networks are fast pushing these groups into enterprise that befits the thrill of economic self reliance as opposed to formal education qualification - none more so than interactive online media and related merchandising. The relationship that aerosol art has with the Hip-Hop music scene is also widely documented. Offending behavior is also simply a downside to an otherwise strong cultural and community identity.

**Aerosol Art in Curriculum Activities**

The following are answers to the question: How can an educator incorporate graffiti and aerosol art into the curriculum;

1. Don’t endorse the stereotypes;

2. Type in 'graffiti' into the search bar of your computer internet search engine and see how many sites are dedicated to the endorsement of product related to aerosol art forms. How many of the youth you know are interested in anything derivative of popular culture?

3. Travel from one side of a metropolitan suburb to another and record how many instances of graffiti exist. None? You’re not looking closely enough - irrespective of your social status.

4. Have you ever walked the streets at 2.00 am? Who did you meet? Do you agree with curfews and why?

5. When was the last time you signed your name? Did it take you a while to perfect it when you first started out?

6. A thousand initiatives, a million ideas and none more simple than asking youth what they want, where they want it and why. Negotiating the
boundaries is the easy part - accepting them as 'family' is the hardest. Acting on it is the right way of going about it;

7. Adults have a simple responsibility - lead and act as an adult should;

8. Let youth be youth. That's where 'getting' up becomes curriculum!

Conclusion

This paper provides an account of how important it is to incorporate contemporary art forms as a means to engaging young people in educational attainment. This paper presents an account of the 'Learning Legend' project and outlines the successes, challenges and issues that arise with engaging young people using a contentious art form in a legal space.

The relevance of association has again primarily risen by 'crews' forming in a network of dance related activity, creative engaging others in dialogue, 'battles' for identity, place and the notions of cultural space. Addressing the needs of youth to relate is possible providing permanency for their expression, venerating difference of opinion and promoting active engagement by means decided by youth themselves. Allowing youth to build this network in an environment fostering self esteem, leadership and relatedness is the forum for success coined as flexible curriculum delivery.

This paper positions the role of facilitators as providers of opportunities for permanent arenas for this relatedness (embodied as graffiti art or aerosol art) which the beginnings of culture opening doors to success via a healthy sense of communal ownership. Itv is evident that numeracy and literacy is inherently embedded in everything associated with aerosol art from dealing with time, space, measurement, communication, debate etc. hence its effective use as a mechanism to open dialogue in a creative manner.
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