

Reaching for the arts in unexpected places: public pedagogy in the gardens

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What constitutes public pedagogy? The term is broad and can be applied in so many situations and settings to the learning that occurs outside of formal schooling. In this article, the author explores how a community event – a painting competition held in a Melbourne suburb’s botanic gardens – constitutes public pedagogy. The event centres on appreciation of the gardens, and on fostering the arts in the community. Local schools and residents have shown their appreciation of the competition through increased participation over the past five years. However, there is much learning that is unexpected and far less tangible, which flourishes beneath the surface of the event. Capturing a collective memory of the suburb is one aspect of such learning that is historically significant. The author argues that the event can also be seen as activist in a political sense, through the way it has restored the arts to the community in a way that education in a neo-liberal climate is currently unable to do.

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Background

It’s been five years since the launch of the *Williamstown Paint the Gardens Art Competition*. The annual event is held in autumn in the elegant Williamstown Botanic Gardens, which were opened in 1856, and

are still a source of great pride in the community.

Paint the Gardens is a nostalgic event. It allows the community to return to a familiar space and be instantly re-engaged. Local residents might come in for the art, but they then remember what the Gardens are all about. This strengthens the locals' sense of ownership and brings delight in sharing all *their* Gardens have to offer. There is an element of reawakening in the encounter. A sense of belonging is fostered, or restored. It is like meeting an old friend, rekindling a friendship, or a romance, and a sense of *aren't we lucky?*

Behind the curly, wrought iron gates that are a hit with bridal parties all year round, the Gardens are a microcosm of the kind of grand botanic Gardens that were established in all the major Australian cities (and some of the smaller ones) in Victorian times. Separated from the beach by a plantation of tall Monterey cypresses, the Gardens are in summer a welcome relief from the heat and sun of the waterfront. There is a grand, central avenue lined with large palms, several meandering paths that curl their way around the separate lawn areas, which are bordered by a rich variety of trees and shrubs, many of them flowering.

As I stroll along the central avenue of the Gardens, where the adults' competition is on show, my gaze sweeps from side to side. The paintings are displayed on easels in two rows, flanking the palms. This is still a somewhat awkward feature of the competition. In order to properly view all the adult entries, one has to either zig-zag from one side of the path to the other, or view one row, then return to the beginning and start again. That is if one isn't keen on giving backward glances to each painting as they complete a return loop. Still, this organisational decision doesn't really pose a problem. At no time in the day is there ever such a crush that either zig-zagging, back-tracking, or returning to the beginning and starting again would not work. And being able to view the paintings in a non-linear, non-sequential way, adds something to the experience. You get to bump into people, this way, and start impromptu conversations, which are generally to do with the art, the Gardens, or the general wellbeing that's in plentiful supply on such days.

As a backdrop for an exhibition, the setting is sublime, radiating the kind of formality and grandeur you'd expect from an outdoor art gallery. There is a feeling of destiny and timelessness in the air. It is perhaps

because of the Gardens' 19th Century heritage, rather than despite it, that this modern event fits so well here. Grand old buildings lend a sense of dignity and style to contemporary events, and the Gardens are no different. Though a long time has passed since the Gardens' inception, it's as though they were made to host this event.

Getting the community to engage respectfully with the Gardens was an important consideration for the organisers. For visitors, and particularly the children, this means appreciating and learning about the space, the plants, and for them to become part of the ongoing continuum of the Gardens as an investment in their own futures. In terms of aims for the artists participating in the competition, it's about exhibiting, but to do so in a way that brings the community together subtly, away from the noise and congestion of other aspects of contemporary life.

In fact, a goal of *Paint the Gardens* was not to bring masses of people in, but to encourage engagement on a deeper level. In the event's narrative, it was reasoned that by attracting local artists to the competition, more time would be spent on site looking closely at the plants in order to represent them. Requiring artists to paint *in situ* facilitates a more intimate and reflective relationship with the Gardens. In turn, the resulting artworks would mirror the beauty and contemplative quality of the Gardens on the day of the competition.

The words *benign*, and *low-key*, are mentioned in reference to the nature of the event, and I agree they provide an apt description. Standing here among the palms, with music from a string quartet floating across the lawns and easels lining the great palm avenue, I cannot think of a more benign way to spend an afternoon.

Enacting public pedagogy

Whilst the idea of public pedagogy is not formally in the minds of the organisers of the *Paint the Gardens*, it is very much a presence in spirit. It is defined and evidenced in the many positive facets of community engagement and learning that are enacted in the lead-up, in the immediate aftermath, and which filter into the community's year in non-linear ways. Whilst public pedagogy is not officially a guiding principle of the event, the organisers are united and steadfast about their purpose. Their singular vision of the benefits of *Paint the Gardens* easily

transposes to the inclusion of other collaborators, which has resulted in the expansion of the event.

One example of a project that has joined the art competition is *Voicing Our Gardens*, an oral history project initiated in 2014 by the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens Inc. and supported by a grant from the local council. As part of the project, many older residents were approached about sharing their memories of living in Williamstown. Interviews were subsequently recorded, photos and artefacts collected, and the resulting narratives were shared with the community. Thus, a treasure trove of memories and important objects were brought out of private possession and into the public sphere. The project is about re-igniting the passions; re-introducing the narrative of the Gardens in the shape of a formal voicing of collective memory. On the day of the competition, a trestle table has been devoted to the oral history project. As one gazes at the old photos, it's easy to become immersed. The Gardens are instantly recognisable in their formality and majesty; a perfect setting for casual leisure times, formal events like weddings featuring ladies in long dresses and intricate up-dos.

As an event, *Paint the Gardens* has expanded and developed over the past five years in ways that appear rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari 1998; Honan & Sellers 2006). The inclusion of the oral history project on the day of the competition is but one offshoot. Another is *Art in Public Places*, a city-wide event that sees the work of artists from the west of Melbourne exhibiting their work in local businesses and various venues around the municipality over the space of a month. Its launch takes place in the Gardens on the day of the competition. Using critical mass, a number of activities that share a common agenda are thus brought together in one place.

The support and collaboration that is evident between the different groups and individuals on the day is a remarkable example of community growth and strength. Those who work to make this happen are not just doing so perfunctorily. They are committed, enthused, and passionate about what they are providing to the community. The most striking feature of my informal conversations with four of the organisers on the day was their shared sense of purpose, their common ideology.

The council funds the hire of marquees, trestle tables, and the sound system, whilst from the *Friends* group, there is a lot of *hands in pockets*. On the day there are a number of fundraising initiatives: botanic artists have donated cards, a group is raising money for cancer research, and there are stalls selling plants and garden books. Other community groups also tap into the event, some with a focus on fitness, others on providing refreshments. In addition to the competition, art classes are held, and an artist is at work on a painting. There has been suggestion of establishing a mural-making activity on the day, though this is still in the planning stage. And literacy has found its way into the zone, with a book corner set up where primary aged children and their parents can enjoy some contemplative reading time or participate in the more performative story time.

'A staged public event becomes pedagogical and pedagogy becomes a public event when, together, they create a space between that reforms both the self and the other, the self and its lived relations with others.

Taking a closer look at several places of learning through the lenses of these ideas, we can see how the designs of particular objects, environments, and social gestures do just that: They actualise, in objects, spaces, and event times, the abstract pedagogical pivot point that sets inner realities in relation to outer realities' (Ellsworth 2004:48).

In terms of different groups of people using the Gardens (young children, students, adults, artists, lovers of art, and the elderly), a richer demographic element is introduced. Engaging the community in a more connective and meaningful appreciation of the Gardens is hence embodied creatively through the production and exhibition of the works of art. It is not unusual for institutions to use arts based methods as a way to reinvigorate their operations. Sabeti (2015) has written about the public pedagogy of museums in the UK. The focus of the article was a creative writing project that was initiated by staff in a museum with the aim of injecting new life into the institution's identity and role in the community. *Paint the Gardens* adheres to a similar public pedagogy; the art competition is a vehicle for renewed interest and involvement in the Williamstown Botanic Gardens as a resource and site of contemplation.

In the UK example, the generation of writing pieces was intended as a fitting counterbalance to the creative works housed in the gallery; artworks not experienced purely for themselves, but as a source of inspiration for new creative products (the writing).

‘...the educational role can stem from its function as a place of gathering, or public togetherness, a place where both objects and persons, or the network of their interactions, can be equally inspirational’ (Sabeti 2015:126).

Redressing the imbalance

Attempting to define the role of *Paint the Gardens* as a site of public pedagogy seems at once concrete and undefinable. What we have is a public event that in its humble and fledgling status, held the kind of promise that was widely recognised and embraced by those *seeking* something particular, or who were just *exploring*.

Burdick, Sandlin and O’Malley have given the following definition of public pedagogy:

‘Public pedagogy has been largely constructed as a concept focusing on various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond or outside of formal schooling. It involves learning in institutions such as museums, zoos, and libraries’ (2013:2).

Paint the Gardens in many ways represents a site of education and learning that is outside of formal schooling. In this sense, it fully embodies the spirit of public pedagogy. Nonetheless, the learning that occurs through such an event is exceptionally difficult to quantify.

It has been argued (Burdick, Sandlin & O’Malley 2013; Sandlin, O’Malley & Burdick 2011) that public pedagogy is, in the literature, not accurately defined nor clearly understood in terms of theoretical frameworks. Generating a definition of arts-based public pedagogy seems a particularly elusive endeavour. Ellsworth (2004) has written eloquently of the problematic elements of defining public pedagogy’s specificity in terms of the aesthetic experience.

‘Aesthetic experience “speaks” as if to say: “I know, but I can’t explain what I know through propositional language. Let me ‘tell’ this knowing through paint, sound, metaphor, media, built forms, sensation, emotion, or silence.” The experience of the learning self “speaks” as if to say: “I know, but I can’t explain how I came to know this. I came to know this in a non-conscious time/space. What I now ‘know’ happened in the interval, in the continuous space of crossing from one way of knowing to another. I can’t decompose my movement/sensation of that crossing into an explanation of it, but I can gesture toward the coordinates of its passage and invite you along an itinerary – a pedagogy – designed to open an interval for you to fall outside of what we already know. If that interval opens for you, and if you fall, my itinerary will be transformed by yours as it emerges, in the making, and on the way to a destination uniquely your own.”

‘This is the burden that pedagogy bears. What it knows of the experience of the learning self cannot be shared through telling, explanation, or propositional knowledge, but what it knows of the experience of the learning self can be shared in other terms. What makes for a pedagogical masterpiece is how it bears this burden’ (2004:162).

There is much about the public pedagogy of *Paint the Gardens* that remains unspoken, or difficult to define. I have no doubt there are facets to the learning gleaned out of *Paint the Gardens* that has not occurred to me or to the organisers of the event at all. And maybe at this point in time, not even to the learners themselves. Informal learning carries with it the element of surprise. This is not to say that surprises are not a part of structured, in-school learning, and that despite rigidly structured curriculum, unexpected learning events are thankfully inevitable.

Even the most obvious learning to be gleaned from *Paint the Gardens*, which is in regard to enabling and encouraging artists to practise and hone their skills, encompasses many spheres. These range from the technical to the analytical; painters improving the use of their medium, subject composition, and analysing the symbolic meaning that may be attached to a piece. Younger and less experienced artists will be concerned with different challenges to those more experienced. The

aspect of collaboration and sharing that is inherent in socio-cultural learning is another obvious benefit of the collaboration among fellow artists and their audience.

Learning benefits for visitors and spectators are many. But this is where lines can become blurred, and long essays could be written on any one of the specific benefits that participating in such an event can generate. The popularity and resulting expansion of the event has strengthened its public pedagogy in terms of community participation and development. This includes enabling and expanding dialogue among residents and the various stakeholders. Through dialogue, shared values become apparent, and these can initiate and flow on to other projects or collaborations that may be unrelated to *Paint the Gardens*.

Then there is learning that will remain unquantified. Wildemeersch and Von Kotze (2014:322) have written about ‘...an “ignorant pedagogy” that intervenes or interrupts without precisely knowing how the participants will respond as singular beings...’. This refers to the venturing into arts spaces, where the creation of art works is primarily an experiment. Creative endeavours necessitate risk-taking, but are buoyed by a faith in the process. *Paint the Gardens* relies on such faith.

Outside curriculum

Many parts of the world are currently experiencing a historical phase where education is deeply ensconced in neo-liberalist values (Goodson & Lindblad 2011). Compliance is a necessary component of this new order (MacDonald 2003; Wilkins 2011), and so teachers are incentivised to follow government-mandated guidelines, some of which are rigidly imposed. The manifestation of these values is a narrowing of the curriculum and an increase in standardised testing, resulting in a downgrading of the arts (Darder 2011; Geist & Hohn 2009; Goodson 2006). Similarly, Robinson (2001) has written about the growing imbalance in the curriculum that is driven by economic concerns which, in a misguided way, have been aligned to raising learning outcomes.

I am not arguing against academic standards in themselves nor would I celebrate a decline in them. My concern is with the preoccupation with these standards to the exclusion of everything else’ (2001:200).

Sadly, the arts are a casualty of the neo-rationalist reality, and what is more regrettable is the underlying irony. The arts have been (both anecdotally and through research) shown to be a positive force in learning throughout the curriculum (Caldwell & Vaughan 2012; Gibson & Ewing 2011). This is not to suggest in any way that the arts are only useful in schools because they have the potential to improve outcomes in what are considered more important – or more essential – curriculum areas, and Dinham (2011) rightly warns against the dangers of using the arts as *handmaidens*.

The focus of curriculum should be on developing life skills, and preparing young people for the challenges of the 21st Century. Thus, the public pedagogy of *Paint the Gardens* works on the principle that the arts should be accessible to all. Though the community is not a disadvantaged one in economic terms, the issue of the arts being devalued is a real one. As such, the event can be seen in political terms, as activist – restoring the arts to the community in a way that schools are currently unable to do.

‘The concern for a public pedagogy is a reaction against the way dominant educational practices and policies continue to reproduce inequalities and undemocratic and unsustainable conditions in society’ (Wildemeersch & Von Kotze 2014:321).

The popularity of *Paint the Gardens* thus demonstrates the thirst, indeed, the very basic human need, for involvement in the arts. If adequate place or sufficient time cannot be found for the arts in schools, then it is important to locate the arts where they are accessible and free of constraints.

It is interesting to note that though public pedagogy is defined as being learning that is outside of educational institutions, the pull, or power, of the classroom is still tangible.

One of the positive developments of *Paint the Gardens* has been the growing participation by local schools. Almost without exception, the children’s pieces are refreshingly effortless, in a natural, unassuming kind of way. They have that casual, slapdash brilliance that is difficult to achieve in the presence of self-awareness, and that can come across as laboured in the work of older artists. With seemingly little deliberation,

the young artists throw up snapshots of the Gardens, of the foibles of childhood, and of the symbolism that emerges when young minds and bodies engage with nature.

Overall, more than 200 children have exhibited this year. The involvement and partnership with local schools means a developing sense of ownership in the Gardens as a public resource, which fosters tremendous good will in the community. The Williamstown Botanic Gardens are not locked at night, and yet there is minimal vandalism.

That schools have become involved in the event, and have subsequently incorporated it in the curriculum is an accolade for the organisers. A positive consequence of the large number of entries is a validation that the arts are valued at least in the blurred space that exists between school and outside curriculum. However, in terms of formal schooling, the arts have much ground to cover. Indeed, a significant element of the public pedagogy inherent in the competition may be not so much to foster participation in, and a love of the arts, but to raise awareness of *why* participating in the arts is essential. It is not simply a matter of enjoying the arts on an unthinking, subliminal level, but of understanding *how* exactly we connect with the arts, and of the distinct elements inherent in arts practice.

Eisner (2002:25-40) contested the notion that the arts are perceived as a 'soft' subject in schools by identifying several elements of arts education that are significant to human perception and growth. These include the development of artistic skills that relate to perceiving and creating an artistic product, as well as fostering creative problem solving, which is a crucial element of design. The cognitive benefits of involvement in the arts are to do with enhancement of thinking skills and criticality, despite common perception that the arts are not connected with complex thought processes. Of great importance is also the ability to understand, decode and place value upon visual elements of our society, in popular culture and in the fine arts.

If we are to take Eisner's view of the benefit of integrating the arts in people's lives, and of the importance of arts education, the link between the public pedagogy of *Paint the Gardens* and people's yearning for involvement in the creative arts endeavours is palpable. Whether or not schools make room for the arts in the curriculum, teachers are taking

matters into their own hands by tapping into community networks and organisations (Jeanneret & O’Toole 2012).

Paint the Gardens exemplifies the great desire of people of all ages to participate in the arts. Thus, viewing *Paint the Gardens* as a public pedagogy acknowledges the collective community desire that must underlie this endeavour. If not for the recognition of the importance of the arts as the connective fabric of a community, why would the event have experienced such effortless success? Why would the local council fund and support such an event, and why would so many artists seize the opportunity to make art, and with such zeal put themselves *out there* for public scrutiny?

A reason for this could be that the arts, with their inherent scope for creativity and self-expression, are fundamental in the lives of children and adults alike (Eisner 2002). But there is more. The other, equally important element in this equation is the Williamstown Botanic Gardens in itself as a community place of belonging and of shared history. When art connects with such a community mainstay, there is a significant degree of exponential strength in the combination. It is a formidable alliance, one that confirms *Paint the Gardens* as a public pedagogy central to the development and wellbeing of a community. What has been created inadvertently, and with support from the local schools, is an outside curriculum (Schubert 2010) where learning occurs in an out-of-school context. The Williamstown Botanic Gardens, as a location for this learning, has hence become an unofficial educational institution.

Adult learning

Once we leave school, many of us seek out the arts for self-expression, personal enhancement or purely for leisure. *Paint the Gardens* is one opportunity to delve into artistic creativity in a gentle, non-threatening way, and within a setting that connects residents deeply and meaningfully to other artists and with the wider community. Artists want to be seen, and this is a low-key competition without high stakes prizes or snobbish, judgemental curators to make anyone feel inadequate. *Paint the Gardens* as a public pedagogy connects deeply with the situated learning identified by Wenger (2000), where individuals who share a common interest engage in ‘communities of practice’ in order to enhance their personal and collective learning in a context of shared values and collaboration.

In this sense the ‘community of practice’ generated by *Paint the Gardens* becomes the public pedagogy; the vehicle through which participation is enabled. Artists are but one community of practice inhabiting that space. But the space is one where multiple levels of engagement are possible. Looking back on five years of *Paint the Gardens*, a pattern of providing incentives to new and established artists is strongly in evidence. But the day is about so much more than just the exhibiting artists. Most of the people who frequent the event have probably never held a paintbrush. They just want to get into the space, to experience, feel, ponder, chat with friends, perhaps meet new people, and importantly, to have a close encounter with nature, and to connect that encounter with what they see portrayed artistically on the day.

This dynamic exemplifies the connective elements of the arts; how arts-based events are a unifying force in communities. Such events can be transformative for communities, as outlined by Finley et al (2014), in an article that explored a Belgian mural art project through the lens of public pedagogy. The objective of the community arts based project was to foster a sense of belonging for the participating students. The authors argued that the dialogue between participants during the creation of the mural was equally important to the finished work. Similarly, it is not so much the generation of art that is to be valued in *Paint the Gardens*, but the myriad possibilities for dialogue, collaboration, self-discovery and inspiration that have been enabled as the event has gathered momentum. Schools becoming involved in arts-based projects that connect to local community sites enable a wide range of pupils and their families to access facilities they may not have felt were available to them. Hence this event, as an arts-based project, effectively provides a vehicle for inclusion and access, and is conducive to practices of social justice in the community.

Conclusion

Public pedagogies are convincingly enabled and enacted through *Paint the Gardens*, and extend well beyond the event; beyond the realm of the arts. Greene wrote eloquently about the function and the needs of communities.

‘In thinking of community, we need to emphasise the process words: making, creating, weaving, saying, and the like.

Community cannot be produced simply through rational formulation nor through edict. Like freedom, it has to be achieved by persons offered the space in which to discover what they recognise together and appreciate in common; they have to find ways to make intersubjective sense. Again, it ought to be a space infused by the kind of imaginative awareness that enables those involved to imagine alternative possibilities for their own becoming and their group's becoming. Community is not a question of which social contracts are the most reasonable for individuals to enter. It is a question of what might contribute to the pursuit of shared goods: what ways of being together, of attaining mutuality, of reaching toward some common world' (1995:39).

Greene's sense of community is in complete harmony with the philosophy and physical embodiment of *Paint the Gardens*. There are also firm echoes to her position on the need to rethink pedagogy, replacing those of thoughtlessness to pedagogies of imagination (Greene 2010). If the idea of nurturing community spirit is synonymous with such concepts as *imagination*, indeed *imaginative awareness*, making intersubjective sense and the contribution to the pursuit of shared goods, then all these elements are embodied as public pedagogy in *Paint the Gardens*.

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