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Editorial

Youth participation in the arts

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One day in 2009, one of the guest editors for this edition (Lucas) was walking past Flinders Street Railway Station in Melbourne, a capital city located in Victoria, Australia. Completed in the early 1900s, the distinctive building now has well over 100,000 passengers passing through each day. It is also a meeting place for many Melbournians and travelers from abroad, so on any given day you can see the diversity of the city congregating on its steps. On this particular day, a different kind of confluence was taking place. Suddenly, a large group of young people burst into dance. Your editor quickly recognised the gathering as a flash mob, and as the group steadily grew in size, noticed that many of its participants were from the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC). They were dancing to promote Youth Decide, a campaign to raise youth awareness and action about the United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Copenhagen later that year.

Flash mobs involve spontaneous gatherings for a range of purposes from protest to performance. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones and services such as Twitter have become essential tools to enable these groups to get together. They have been as instrumental in recent events such as the Arab Spring as they have in enabling young people to participate in powerful, wondrous and sometimes sublimely silly public expressions of art (type "flash mob" into YouTube and you will quickly see that the Internet is awash with examples). ICTs have provided the tools for a wider movement towards new forms of collaboration, communities of practice and user-driven learning, action and creativity.

As an entirely youth-led and youth-run organisation, AYCC has been extremely successful in building movement around the challenges of climate change. It has done this through education programs, media campaigns, advocacy and, on this day in 2009, through dance. The Youth Decide flash mob is a good example of a contemporary phenomenon: the nexus of technology, people and performance in a single place but for nothing less than a global purpose - the preservation of our planet.

Beneath the act of a flash mob is a deeper, more complex confluence of phenomena, ideas and practice. As much as globalisation through ICTs has become one of the key characteristics of our age, so too has the rich diversity with which young people express themselves through the arts. It is through artistic expression and participation in the arts that young people are able to participate in the creation of universal truths about themselves, their communities and their world.

There is growing recognition of the value of participation to the overall wellbeing of young people. This is in part attributable to a better understanding of young people's wellbeing in holistic ways that cut across domains such as education, health, connectedness and identity. It is related to a better recognition of the diversity of young people and their needs. Participation is also understood to be instrumental in addressing the challenges faced by young people experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation.

The broader context of participation in the arts is significant in the spaces where young people typically live and learn. Innovative programs, in which young people participate as active and respected drivers of learning and agents of change, challenge conventional assumptions about education and other forms of practice. They also foster new forms of collaboration between educators, students, artists and the wider community. As this edition of the UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts E-Journal illustrates, a reframing of schools and other services in relation to young people is taking place as a result.

At the same time, persistent challenges remain, particularly in relation to the nature and role of young people's participation through the arts, and more broadly in how young people are characterised and located within society. Some of these developments, challenges and opportunities are explored across a rich variety of international contexts in this edition.

The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA) is pleased to have taken the role of guest editors for this issue. We are delighted by the variety of papers received and those selected for publication. These represent a wide range of disciplines, topics, research approaches, and countries of origin of authors.

The themes we chose for this edition were:

- The use of the arts to engage young people, including innovative and culturally inclusive models of engagement
- Patterns of youth participation in the arts
- The experience of young people as leaders and initiators in the arts including arts organisation and management
- Barriers to youth participation in the arts and strategies to overcome these
- The perceptions of young people of the role of the arts in their lives.

We invited papers that challenge or shed light on the participation of young people in the arts. In particular, we invited papers that address young people's active role in the arts and that position them not only as the target audience but as leaders and initiators of arts programs and initiatives.

These themes are close to FYA's heart. FYA is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated solely to young people. Our mission statement describes our belief that all young people have the courage, imagination and will to shape their education and create social change. Our research program documents and promotes young

people's capacity for active participation across all aspects of public life. It also provides a critical analysis of the ways in which young people and their participation are understood and approached.

Young people are characteristically depicted as a distinct group within the population. They are consistently differentiated from other demographic groups, as though the state of being young automatically denotes a unique set of needs, aspirations and perceptions. They are subject to monolithic or homogenised depictions and generalisations that overlook the diversity of their identities and experience, including inequities between and amongst groups of young people. At the same time, they are also the subjects of consistent contradictions and mixed messages.

These mixed messages emerge with particular strength in regards to young people's capacity to participate in the structures, processes and institutions of society. An international rhetoric eulogises young people's participation as the precondition for the wellbeing of social, economic, political and cultural institutions while overlooking the mass of empirical evidence that describes the ways in which these institutions serve to exclude and marginalise large numbers of young people. At the same time, youth and education policy and practice continually recast a remarkably resilient set of assumptions that construct young people as a risk to those same institutions.

The challenge for research is to unsettle or discomfit these assumptions by recognizing the structural forces and power relations that keep many young people on the fringes of public life, by documenting the diversity of youth experience and identity, and by prompting new thinking and practice in relation to young people's active participation.

As exemplified by AYCC, the arts are frequently seen as a space that young people already occupy. They are also seen as an area into which young people need to be further encouraged. There is still much to do in relation to how arts practitioners, organisations and policymakers create genuine opportunities for young people's participation that go beyond mere enrolment or involvement. Beyond this, there is a need to challenge the way in which we collectively understand and perceive young people's identities and roles within the arts.

Education practice is particularly prone to the perpetuation of normative truths in relation to young people's identities and participation. This edition includes a number of papers that offer ways to rethink or recast young people's role as learners and creative agents within the arts.

Anne Harris has used the findings of an Australian interdisciplinary arts and education research project as the basis of a call to arts educators to contribute a new research imaginary that crosses geographical, cultural and institutional boundaries to disrupt established truths about young people and their arts learning. She describes the potential for collaborative arts pedagogies to link young learners, artists and teachers in new ways that challenge conventional approaches to schooling and the identity of young people.

Eliza Pitri describes new pedagogical approaches that cross the boundaries of teacher-student relations to reframe the participation of Cypriot trainee teachers in the arts curriculum and the university learning process. Her paper uncovers some of the ironies that persist within education, whereby future teachers are taught through passive and traditional pedagogies. It also describes a means of breaking this cycle, of transmitting a student-centered approach that will, hopefully, be translated into future education practice.

Writing from Canada, Crystal Dumitru steps outside the terms of reference of the classroom to introduce new ways of thinking about young people and their learning. Her paper invites theatre educators to bring the dramaturgical practices of professional theatre into the teaching of scriptwriting to high school students. She

suggests that the introduction of these professional practices into the classroom can replace entrenched notions of young people as 'artists-in-waiting' with practices that respect them as fellow learners and playwrights.

Writing from British Columbia, Peter Gouzouasis and Danny Bakan launch a case for the fundamental revision of music education in ways that respect and reflect youth culture and utilise creative, digital technologies. Like many of the other authors in this edition, they also argue for the critical examination and revision of the assumptions about the nature of young learners that underpin current music pedagogies.

Jan Deans' paper illustrates the fact that youth participation in the arts can start early: even young children participating in an Australian dance program demonstrate personalised perceptions and experiences of learning in dance. Her paper discusses the way in which dance education can be redefined as a 'practice of participation' that enables children to engage in dance as an arts practice, creating their own dance, observing the creation of others and critically reflecting on their learning through dance.

Drawing on findings from an English research project, Sara Bragg and Helen Manchester consider the ways in which participatory approaches can challenge and reframe ways of 'doing' the arts and education. At the same time, they highlight the ambivalent nature of youth participation and its susceptibility to the kind of romantic discourses that we refer to above, which describe youth leadership and participation as though, to paraphrase the authors, they derive only from themselves. Like the other authors of this collection of papers, they call for ways of 'doing it differently'.

As well as provoking new thinking and practice about education, the arts and young people's participation, this first set of papers also adds to a considerable body of evidence which suggests that participation in the arts enhances young people's engagement with learning. The second set of papers in this edition highlight the connection between youth participation in the arts and young people's wellbeing.

Kim Wiltshire and Helen Kitchen outline the multiple benefits that accrue to young people with cystic fibrosis as a result of a participatory arts and health project conducted in the north west of England. It considers the potential of such projects to reframe the provision of health services to chronically ill young people in ways that provide a more holistic quality of care and recognize their wider identity.

Christina Mills, Michael Rosenberg, Lindsay Lovering, Lisa Wood and Renee Ferguson describe a program that utilises dance to address the growing level of physical inactivity and obesity among young people in Australia. Findings from the evaluation of the program suggest that performing arts such as dancing can successfully promote physical activity to young people.

The third set of papers extends this theme of personal or individual empowerment to describe the role of the arts in promoting positive social change and cohesion.

Anna Hickey-Moody describes the use of youth-directed dance workshops as a form of empowerment for newly arrived young refugee women from the Sudan. Her postdoctoral research into an Australian dance project illustrates the potential for young people at risk to redefine and 'reinscribe' themselves through active arts participation.

Kim Dunphy shares the findings of an evaluation of a physical theatre project for young people in Timor-Leste. The active participation of young people in this project promotes their positive personal development in the face of significant disadvantage. It also holds out the promise of conflict resolution and recovery from trauma for their communities.

Claudia Pato Carvalho considers artistic practice as a means of encouraging new concepts of creative citizenship and inclusion. Drawing on research undertaken in the United States, she reflects on the potential of the arts and culture to promote the civic participation of disadvantaged or marginalised young people while bridging entrenched social and ethnic divisions within their communities.

Writing from Japan, Koichi Kasahara describes the use of the arts as a means of fostering inclusivity and connectedness in communities that have been subject to rapid social change as the result of globalisation. His paper provides an example of a children's arts festival that serves the dual purpose of engaging children in the arts and of promoting community solidarity and understanding.

As editors, we thank the authors for their generosity in presenting their ideas and their findings for publication in this journal. We hope that these ideas and findings provide inspiration and support for readers seeking to improve young people's active participation in the arts. We hope that they illustrate the growing confluence of challenges, innovative practice and thinking about this key area of young people's lives across a range of international settings. Above all, we hope that this issue sheds a critical light on current arts thinking and practice, a light that inspires new ways of thinking about young people and new ways of recognizing them within the arts but also, and most importantly, new means by which young people can recognize themselves through the arts, challenging preconceptions of who they are, and promoting their own new forms of participation for the benefit of the arts and society.

Rosalyn Black and Lucas Walsh