

Published Research

Western Edge Youth Arts Projects 2004–2015

Executive Summary

Since 2004, **ten peer-reviewed research articles** examining Western Edge Youth Arts' **innovative arts education practice** have been published in books and journals in four countries: Australia, China, UK and Canada.

These publications include: an evaluation of **Western Edge Youth Arts** practice by the **Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)** and articles written by **five leading international experts in arts education**: Professor Helen Nicholson of the University of London, Professor Robyn Ewing of the University of Sydney, Associate Professors Angela O'Brien and Kate Donelan and Dr Chris Sinclair of the University of Melbourne.

Publications by Dr Dave Kelman that examine WEYA's innovative practice have been reviewed and approved for

publication by twenty-four independent experts in arts education (two peer reviewers and one editor for each of the published articles) confirming that WEYA's practice is **internationally significant arts education practice**.

Research into WEYA's practice combines cutting-edge arts education theory with extensive data revealing young people's experience of WEYA projects. These research practices have been recognised by the University of Melbourne in 2012 with the **Vice-Chancellor's Engagement Award**.

This body of work draws on the experiences of hundreds of young people and reveals the **depth, complexity and rigour** of WEYA practice in disadvantaged communities and state schools in Victoria.

Review of the Publications

Articles and Book Chapters Examining Western Edge Youth Arts Education Practice

The following papers were written by Dr Dave Kelman, some in collaboration with Jane Rafe (in association with Deakin University). All these publications were peer-reviewed by independent experts in the field. They are qualitative research articles that link current education and socio-cultural theory to **Western Edge's** practice in disadvantaged Australian government schools, data is obtained from a rigorous framework of interviewing young people, ensuring the theory was relevant and grounded in contemporary research practice.

2015 – ‘But was it artistically vibrant? An analysis of the audience response to a community performance. Published in the international journal *Applied Theatre Research*.

This article is based on a rigorous analysis of audience response data for WEYA's 2013 community youth theatre performance *Fate*. The research finds that this audience is sophisticated and demanding:

*Perhaps the most significant finding of this analysis of the audience's response is that this was a sophisticated, discerning and culturally diverse audience. Its members identified what they liked about the eclectic and relatively complex form and what it meant to them. Although they embraced its culturally diverse cast and enjoyed their energy on stage, they were not uncritical. With regard to the content of *Fate*, they were challenged by it but were happy to engage with that challenge because they found it authentic and relevant to their lives.*

2014 – *Come You Spirits. Shakespeare, Mythology and Process Drama*. Published in *English in Australia*.

This article examines WEYA's primary school practice and ways in which process drama can be used to open new perspectives on Shakespeare's plays.

What we are suggesting is that an awareness of the mythological symbolism in Shakespeare's plays can enable educators to read his work at a meta-level; these symbol systems can then be explored in ways that are enriching and empowering to young people who – like us – are trying to gain insight into the plays so they can work out what it all might mean.

2013 – *Playing on the Great Stage of Fools: Shakespeare and Dramaturgic Pedagogy* by Dr Dave Kelman and Jane Rafe (Deakin University). Published in UK Journal *Research in Drama Education* (Volume 18 # 3).

This article on the adaptation of Shakespeare for primary age students in a disadvantaged regional school is based on research conducted by Jane Rafe and Dr Jo O'Mara (Deakin University); it examines WEYA artists' use of dramaturgy and creative writing as part of a sophisticated arts pedagogy:

Teacher-artists selected material that explored the key ideas of Shakespeare's play or at least those that were potentially accessible to the primary children: filial love, betrayal, madness and power in this instance. They then shaped the dramatic material both for the exploratory drama process and, informed by that process, they crafted a performance text that was – based on an analysis of the available data – an aesthetically shaped and layered narrative that communicated at a deep level with both its cast and their community audience.

2008 – *Reaching out to a Larger World: An Investigation into Narrative Meaning and Performance Dynamics* by Dr Dave Kelman, (published in the book *Global Vision in Local Knowledge in Hong Kong*)

WEYAS's contribution to arts education internationally is illustrated by this chapter outlining in detail the complex nature of the WEYA process for devising theatre with young people. It reveals the importance of process underpinned by theory for quality arts education practice.

The characters and the stories created by the young people were projections of themselves, as older adolescents or adults, in situations exploring contradictions and conflicts in Australian society as they perceived them. When young people create a complex dramatised story it becomes a lens through which we can see the performers and their perceptions and values; this generates insight into our society as a whole.

2010 – ‘Who told you there was meaning?’ Narrative, Mimesis and the Search for Truth by Dr Dave Kelman in *NJ Drama Australia Journal*

This paper examines the need for complexity and sophistication in arts education practice if it is to be effective:

We can teach through art – as Sol says ‘there is no greater way’ – but to do so we must let young people construct their own meanings as well as question the basis on which they do so. One way of doing this is to structure a degree of narrative sophistication into the fabric of our work with young people to generate complex theatre that makes meaning but avoids simplistic moralising.

2011 – *Mythological Translations: Drama, Poetry and the Language of Myth* by Dr Dave Kelman and Jane Rafe in *Applied Theatre Researcher journal*

This groundbreaking paper draws heavily on young people's creative writing to explore the importance of mythology in Primary level education and ways that it can be made accessible through drama, enabling young people to ‘develop a critical awareness of mythology as a vehicle for generating contemporary meaning.’

2008 – *Narrative, Dialogue and Resistance: Making Meaning through Drama with Young People at Risk* by Dr Dave Kelman (published in the book *Risky Business*)

This chapter focused on the complex teaching dynamics involved in working with ‘at risk’ young people and explored ways of overcoming young people's resistance through building trust and dialogue.

This study involved two groups of marginalised young people who were ‘at risk’ of social alienation and disconnection. Through the creation of their own enacted stories in dialogue with artists and teachers, they explored some very destructive behaviors, but also critiqued these behaviors in ways they saw as impacting positively upon their own community. They saw these stories as having the power to reveal aspects of their society that they wished might be different, and in telling them to an audience they saw themselves, at some level, as agents of social change.

2006 – *Complex Messages* by Dr Dave Kelman (published in the book *Drama as Social Intervention in Canada*)

This chapter examined young people's sense of agency when they create devised theatre work delivering their own moral messages to their peers and their community; *'(Theatre) is a means of asserting and challenging a complex public identity'*.

The article argues that the safe exploration of personal identity and morality is important for teenagers who are developing a sense of their values and their role in society.

Articles and Reports Written by Independent Experts

2013 – Professor Helen Nicholson of the University of London writing about Western Edge Youth Arts practice in UK Journal Research in Drama Education (Volume 18 # 3):

Their **imaginative pedagogic process** enabled children to find connections with the world of the play. In turn this raises questions about the role of teacher-artists: 'when to challenge and confront and when to pull back and reassure. How far can we take participants and audiences without alienating them?' This negotiation lies at the heart of a poetic pedagogy that is alert to the tension between success and failure, and recognizes that it is precisely this tension that leads to **innovative and challenging artistic practice** (p215)

2013 – Drama, Cultural Leadership and Reflective Practice: taking the road to Zamunda by Dr. Chris Sinclair (University of Melbourne) and Dr. Dave Kelman; (In How Drama Activates Learning: Contemporary Research and Practice, a peer-reviewed international academic text on drama education, published by Bloomsbury Academic)

This research explored the importance of emerging artists from African refugee backgrounds in gaining a deep understanding of their own art-making. They describe this WEYA project in the following terms:

A challenging and sophisticated practice that not only effectively engaged its cultural context but also allowed the young people to develop further as art makers and emerging leaders in their own community.

This research won a **Vice Chancellor's Award 2012** from the University of Melbourne and publication in this prestigious book places research into WEYA practice alongside the work of leading international arts educators such as Jonathan Neelands (UK), John O'Toole (Australia) and Kathleen Gallagher (Canada).

2012 – Dr Lachlan Macdowall of the Centre for Cultural Partnerships at the Victorian College of the Arts led research examining the value of the arts for government departments involved in urban renewal projects. WEYA's Zamunda project in Flemington was one of the case studies that made up this research. Dr Macdowall found that there was 'definitely an increasing sense of identity and sense of pride' associated with WEYA's work in Flemington, helping to facilitate '**active citizenry**' and address the '**challenge of social exclusion**' (unpublished research for Arts Victoria into 'agile government'). This is supported by research from **Victoria University's** Lesley Pruitt into WEYA projects in Braybrook that found: 'young people can use arts practices, such as performance, in deconstructing identities both for themselves and for others'.

2010 – Australian Education Review, The Arts and Australian Education: Realising Potential (ACER) - by Professor Robyn Ewing of the University of Sydney found that: 'a dialogic community arts process' and 'high quality outcomes' led to '**attitudinal changes to learning**'.

2004 – The Australia Council for Education Research (ACER): Evaluation of School-based Arts Education Programs in Australian Schools.

This report evaluated WEYA's work using qualitative and quantitative methodology in two schools and found the program:

- Promoted confidence, cooperation and enhanced social understandings
- Developed rich language use
- Provided the experience of success and achievement for students who rarely have such experiences at school, giving 'at risk' students a reason to stay at school.

Attributes of the **Western Edge** education program were:

- Student ownership of the work
- Charismatic leadership
- Young artists working as role models
- Explicit and stable organizational structure
- Performances linking the program to the wider 'real' world beyond school.

2006 – My Story/Our Stories: Growing and Connecting Through Enacted Stories by Associate Professors Angela O'Brien and Kate Donelan (University of Melbourne) in Drama Australia Journal (peer reviewed)

Based on research into WEYA's arts education program, the authors concluded that young people devising their own plays with WEYA artists constructed moral frameworks through this work:

The research offers compelling evidence that the young people were aware of the social and moral complexities associated with the creation of enacted stories. In each project the young people demonstrated an interest in both working methods and performance product, and in the reflective and analytical processes involved in research.

They also found that WEYA school performance projects 'Not only empower the young people involved in them but also affirm the wider community of students, teachers, parents and friends'.

Conclusion

What does this body of work tell us about **Western Edge Youth Arts' Education Program**?

Each of the published articles covers a different area of practice. Some focus on Primary level work, some on Secondary level or post-school age young people; some on classic text adaptation and some on young people's own stories. Some focus on evaluating a particular project and others focus on aspects of our practice and the wider social meaning of the work.

There are however common themes that can be drawn from this work:

1. The articles by **independent experts** from the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) and the University of Melbourne represent a **strong endorsement** of the **quality, depth and complexity** of Western Edge Youth Arts' education practice.
2. All of the articles show the importance of **qualitative research methodologies** as a means of young people defining their own work in their own terms, in a form that allows them to fully express the depth and complexity of the project they have been engaged in.

Although there are limitations to what qualitative research can tell us, it is the only methodology that **privileges**

young people's voices and gives us insight into the depth and quality of their experiences in the arts.

3. This body of work addresses the ongoing need for practice to draw on the increasing body of international arts education theory and cultural theory enabling us to **understand how arts education works** so we can position the work culturally, evaluate it more effectively and develop it.
4. This body of work is **not advocacy but research**. These articles examine the complexity of the work and they also reveal its limitations. There is a realism and proportionality about the claims that are made in this research.
5. All of the books and journals that have published WEYA research have **international peer reviewers** and readerships pointing to the **broader significance of this work** and linking Australian practice to current international discourse.
6. There are different models of practice examined in this body of work showing the need for different approaches to **meet the needs of diverse young people and social contexts**. These models continue to evolve, influenced by the theoretical framework in which they have been examined.

Publications

- **Kelman (2015)** 'But was it artistically vibrant?' An analysis of the audience response to a community performance. *Applied Theatre Research* 3(3)
- **Kelman & Rafe (2014)** 'Come You Spirits' Shakespeare, Mythology and Process Drama. *English in Australia Journal of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English* 49(3)
- **Kelman & Rafe (2013)** Playing on the great stage of fools: Shakespeare and dramaturgic pedagogy. *Research in Drama Education* 18(3). Routledge
- **Sinclair & Kelman (2013)** Drama, Cultural Leadership and Reflective Practice: Taking the Road to Zamunda. Anderson and Dunn (Eds). *How Drama Activates Learning, Contemporary Research and Practice*. London: Bloomsbury.
- **Kelman & Rafe (2011)** Mythological Translations: Drama, Poetry and the Language of Myth. *Applied Theatre Researcher* 12, Griffith University
- **Kelman (2010)** Who Told You there was Meaning? Narrative, Mimesis and Narrative Complexity. *NJ Drama Australia Journal* 34. Drama Australia
- **Kelman (2009)** Reaching Out to a Larger World: an Investigation into Narrative Meaning and Performance Dynamics. in Shu, Jack & Chan, Phoebe et. al. (Eds.) *Planting Trees of Drama with Global Vision in Local Knowledge: IDEA 2007 Dialogues*. Hong Kong: TEFO & IATC (HK).
- **Kelman (2008)** Narrative, Dialogue and Resistance: Making Meaning through Drama with Young People at Risk. *The Arts and Youth 'At Risk': Global and Local Challenges* (the publication of the 2005 Risky Business Symposium) Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- **Donelan, O'Brien & Kelman (2006)** My Story/Our Stories: Growing and Connecting Through Enacted Stories. *NJ Drama Australia Journal* 30(1)
- **Kelman (2006)** Complex Messages. *Drama as Social Intervention*, Captus Press.
- **Bryce, Mendelovits, Beavis, McQueen & Adams (2004)** *Evaluation of school-based arts education programmes in Australian Schools*. Australian Council for Education Research.