



Artist Learning Session: Consulting with Children

ArtPlay is committed to involving children in the development of new work. Meaningful consultation enriches the art making process for both the artist and child; and children have the right and the capacity to offer their opinions about art in which they are involved. To embed consulting with children into the art making process is an arts practice in itself and is a valuable skill that takes time to learn. What do we mean by consultation, though, and what are the most effective, authentic and engaging ways to consult with children? What methods suit which projects?

These questions were explored in April 2017, when eight artists took part in a one-day workshop to tease out the purpose, principles and practicalities of consulting with children when making performance-based art.

The participating artists were:

- Sarah Lockwood (Drop Bear Theatre)
- Simon Bedford (The Inhabitants)
- Kate Kantor
- Claudia Escobar
- Jackson Castiglione
- Cat Sewell
- Alex Walker
- Liz Francis (The Seam)

This report summarises the discussions and demonstrations that took place and offers a starting point for artists to consider when involving children in different aspects of the art making process.

The report is divided into four sections which you can read separately or together.

1. Guidelines for consulting with children
2. Tensions and challenges
3. Case studies
4. Links to further reading

1. Guidelines for consulting with children

The process

- There is a selection of tools you can use to consult with children e.g. games, improvisation, visual art activities, facilitated conversations - experiment! Use more than one tool. Select which ones are going to work for your particular project.
- Think about including some activities where the more extroverted children are comfortable participating, and some where the more introverted are comfortable participating.
- Create an immersive space and observe children engaging in that space.
- Playing is an important way to engage with children.
- When engaging in creative play with children, one technique to remember is: 'match and extend'. That is, on a creative level, match a child's creative play and then extend it by one thing. If you extend by too many things, you leave the child behind.
- It can be tempting to either take complete charge or 'let them do whatever they want' but both can be disempowering. These processes need scaffolding that is not too autocratic but does create safety.

Observation and conversation

- Observe the children's interaction with space and with others as deeply and curiously as possible.
- Remember, in this context, children are the experts of the space.
- There are several positions from which an adult artist might observe children participating in an activity all of which will give a different perspective. Consider using each of these roles:
Observer (sitting by the side and observing)
Communicator observer (playing with the children and observing)
Artist/player observer (facilitating the session and observing)
- Observation can be difficult to do alone. How can you bring other artist/observer/facilitators on board?
- Be careful of interrupting children's flow, considering when and how to ask questions to allow their play to continue.
- Talk with children afterwards so they can offer their own opinion.
- Consider letting children draw what they think instead of speaking it. Engaging in discussion about their drawing can elicit useful information.
- Very young children find it hard to answer questions about something that happened two hours ago so think about how to consult with them throughout the process, or how to use techniques other than post-experience interviews.
- How a child describes an experience might be different from what you observed but both perspectives are valid.
- Be prepared to respond to the unexpected so you can use what arises.
- Be respectful and responsive and use the information you receive.
- Think about how you can plan the project so that children see that their opinions have been heard and incorporated.

Working with babies, young children and families

- It's useful to consider that many adults feel like they have to 'manage' their children's behavior. Experiment with ways to set up the space so adults don't have to do this. (Do you need to hide the power points? Or shrink the space to discourage running? Or structure the work in a way that allows participants to experience it at their own pace?)
- All the elements of the experience need to be as invitational as possible, not just for the children but for all family members present. (Can you use lighting/sound to create a sense of wonder?)

Introductions

- Think about what the event/workshop/session is called when speaking with programmers or with potential audience/participants. The terms 'work in progress' and 'showing' don't necessarily imply consultation. You could call the event an 'artist in residence' or a 'development session'.
- How the process is introduced on the day is important. It's useful to consider the following when creating an introduction to a consultation process:

Both children and adults need to know that the children are valued collaborators.

The process is an experiment so it won't feel 'finished'.

The introduction needs to request/instill trust despite the fact that the process might feel messy or loose.

You might be inviting participation rather than critique and may need to find ways to make this clear.
- Consider how participants might begin the session or enter the space with a sense of wonder and respect. This could be through a verbal introduction or the use of space/setting/props/lighting/sound.

Making work using adult performers, in collaboration with children

- The role of maker is very different from the role of audience/participant and to ask children to move between them is difficult. This means that children who are part of co-creating a work may not be the best audience for the final work. However, it obviously doesn't make sense to exclude them from the performance!
- Child collaborators may have other valuable and enjoyable roles to play during a performance season, as outside eyes, or as evaluators, watching both the show and how their peers respond to it. This allows them to continue in the role of maker.

When children are performers

- Build the children's skills. This may involve discipline and training.
- Consider how best to bring the families on board to support the project.
- If you establish a strong foundation for the trust of the children and their families you will be able to take greater artistic risks.
- Begin with an open democratic process which deeply welcomes children's creativity.
- Move away from 'kids say the darnedest things' toward the children having a profound sense of agency in the creative process.

2. Tensions and challenges of consulting with children

- There is often an inherent tension between the artist's vision and children's creative agency. How much of the children's ideas will the artist incorporate into the work and who decides this? If the children are performers, at what point and to what degree does the artist take the role of director and shape the work? This will depend on the shape of the project and who the artists and children are.

- Quotes from the artists:

"My job as an artist is to help shape the ceaseless creativity: I say to them, 'Say whatever you want – I support you and I love your ideas. But afterwards, I will be editing.'"

"Having a long term relationship with the performers, means they know I adore them, which means I can show them I don't adore everything they do. Because everything they do is not good. I now have the relationship to sort and direct."

- It is challenging for artists to find funding and programming support for something unfinished because it is difficult to describe something you have not yet made. To give consultation with children the respect it deserves, the work needs to be unfinished when it's presented to them. Not many venues are prepared to support this risk. Other options are for the artist to gather children from their own community, or to build relationships with schools, each of which has its advantages and difficulties.
- There is a tension between the importance of children's safety and the importance of children having the opportunity to take creative and personal risks. For example, some children might bring to the work material that others find discomforting. It is part of the artist's role to be able to facilitate this; to be flexible with decision-making, based on the knowledge of the children with whom they are working.
- Paying children to be creators can be a difficult area to negotiate because the artist's relationship with a child is bound up with a relationship with their guardian who may not want the child to be paid. Payment also raises questions about how we respect children as artists and how we acknowledge and value their work.
- Projects often develop a deep sense of intimacy and community between children and artists. At the end it can be challenging to debrief with a group who have become like a family.

3. Illustrative Case Studies

Sarah Lockwood (Drop Bear Theatre) and Liz Francis (The Seam)

Drop Bear and The Seam collaborate to make interactive theatre for babies, children and their families. Their work is focused on relationships and they are currently moving from referring to their work as 'child-centred' to 'relationally-centred'. Throughout their creative process, they ask themselves, "Is the relationship strengthened by the experience?" (i.e. particularly the relationship between carer and child, but also relationships with the artist, artwork, cultural institution or public space)

Their consultative process is entangled with the actual work. They perform and deliver workshop iterations of the work while observing the children's interaction with space and others as deeply and curiously as possible. As well as the performers, they have four sets of eyes watching during development and taking notes. They aim to be very careful, respectful and trusting, starting with the principle that children are the experts of the space. They are guided by participants' emotional embodied response and pay attention to how much adults feel like they have to 'manage' their children.

They ask, "What makes a space invitational?" They believe it's important to have introductory time so that every child (and adult!) enters the space in exactly the right way for them. For example while creating Rain, (a work for babies and their carers) it was evident that parents were busy, overwhelmed and hyper vigilant of their child's safety. To address this, the entry into Rain involved coming down in stages from the outside world through a series of transitional spaces. This gave permission for the parents to be immersed in the work.

Simon Bedford (The Inhabitants)

Simon created In A Deep Dark Forest, an immersive storytelling game, in collaboration with Roslyn Oades and children at ArtPlay (representing the show's target audience). They worked with the assistance of a Brains Trust, (seven children 9-12 years old, recruited by ArtPlay staff). Simon and Roslyn started with a series of workshops called Games that Tell Stories which were designed to begin generating the show. They began the workshops with the single idea of turning the board game Waldschattenspeil into an interactive theatre piece, with the aim of exploring the primal thrill of playing in the dark.

During the workshop season, mornings were spent with the Brains Trust and afternoons with a new group of children each time. The Brains Trust was created so the artists could have an ongoing relationship with a group of children. The workshops consisted of playing games and gathering ideas from the game-playing process. During the process Simon and Roslyn realised they needed to introduce different games where the more extroverted or introverted kids could influence the quest, and played with ways to do this. They tried to build the show using a mixture of physical and mental challenges. In the end the Brains Trust helped to audition the performer.

The Brains Trust was the audience for the first performance and Simon described it as chaos! The Brains Trust had a very different reaction to the game than the artists had hoped. They were too comfortable in the space so the performer had to take the role of teacher, which was not fun for anybody!

Simon and Roslyn concluded that the game works best if the players know very little about what they're walking into and there's a sense of mystery. They wondered if it didn't make sense for Brains Trust to play as participants - perhaps they should have been facilitators or observers. The role of maker is very different from the role of participant and to ask kids to move between them is difficult. On reflection, the Brains Trust offered a lot in regards to the children helping to make decisions, but it wasn't clear whether they were genuine collaborators or there to give feedback.

Kate Kantor

Kate took the group of artists through a 'reflective drawing' process. A long roll of butcher's paper was laid out of the ground and participants were asked to draw in response to a series of questions. With each new

question, participants were encouraged to draw over the top of their own and into each other's drawings. We then walked around the paper and Kate asked us each to talk about our drawings and what we'd been thinking and feeling. Kate does this exercise at the beginning of every project and it becomes part of the final artwork. It is a chance to observe all the children in the process and to get to know them. She wants teamwork to be the subtext of whatever work she is making, so she begins by asking, through this process, "How do we make something together?"

Claudia Escobar

Claudia Escobar explores children's play, games and imagination both as a theatre-maker and as an academic. She is interested in developing empathy and raising issues of humanity with children and finds that within theatrical play there are many issues that come up that allow for dialogue. She has developed work addressing social issues such as child soldiers and child labour. This work requires consent from both children and parents. It also calls for great sensitivity to handle the tension between directing children and giving them creative autonomy.

Jackson Castiglione

Jackson is from Field Theory, a collective of five artists and an executive producer. Jackson talked about the process of creating Kids Vs Art a podcast series by Field Theory, following a group of children learning about contemporary arts. The children interviewed artists and reviewed shows in the Melbourne Fringe. He believed that it should have been at the Melbourne Festival because, as artists, children deserve to be working at the end of high art and their work should have higher stakes.

Jackson cast children with whom he had existing long term relationships as their teacher or director. He says that casting is absolutely critical in artmaking with children and that you don't just cast the kids, you also cast the parents (in that you need their support and understanding of the project).

The podcast was for an adult audience and had to be articulate and tell a story. It was therefore highly structured but the children were encouraged to challenge and play with the structure. The process was not about teaching kids to be creative because they already know that. It was about giving them tools and listening to their voices. Jackson gave the kids total permission to express their opinion throughout the process but then chose what went on air. He says he told them: "You say whatever you want – I support you and I love your ideas. But I will be editing."

One of the tensions was around paying children as creators. Jackson wanted to pay them but one stakeholder didn't want them to be paid. Another tension was around parental consent for some of the programming.

Cat Sewell

Cat led us through an activity where we played two different games and between us took four kinds of roles:

- Participant (analogous to the child)
- Passive observer (sitting by the side and observing)
- Communicator observer (playing with the children and observing)
- Artist/player observer (facilitating the session and observing).

It was clear from discussion about the role play that different ways of observing highlight different things.

Cat talked about gathering information throughout the play-process to accommodate the fact that children at early stages of development don't have the recall to answer questions about something that happened a while ago. How a child describes an experience might also be different from what you observed.

Cat talked about being careful of interrupting children's flow, considering when and how to ask questions to allow their play to continue. She also talked about 'match and extend'. That is, on a creative level, match a

child's creative play and then extend by one thing, being careful not to extend by too many things because this will leave the child behind.

Alex Walker

Alex talked about her work with the St Martin's Youth Theatre cross age ensemble. Key elements of their rationale included applying the same rigour to a company of young people as one might to a company of adults and a belief that young people should not just be the recipients but also the makers of culture. Alex listed the conditions she has found to be important for making this work. These included:

- A safe space
- Long term, reliable relationships
- Effective generative strategies
- Close relationships with families
- Responsible briefing and debriefing strategies
- Authentic editing and artistic framing of the work

Their process used child friendly, plain language, familiar structures and rituals, journals and documentation and self-written bios. The children were self-costumed. The professional artists focused on skills not connected to age range but to the personality of the performers and they aimed to make the process artistically demanding for all involved. In these circumstances the work the young people made was extraordinary and universal. Young people felt ownership of the work knew why they had made it and were able to speak about it.

Alex talked about the importance of, at a certain point, the facilitators moving from working democratically- to being the director in order to create an excellent artistic product. She said that the long-term relationship with the children meant they knew she adored them, and could therefore show them she didn't adore everything they did. This understanding allowed her to direct/edit/sort the work in a rigorous way.

4. Links to further readings

Online reports

[Mammalian Diving Reflex: The Mammalian Protocol for Collaborating with Children \(PDF 759KB\)](#)¹

Bragg, S. (March 2007) [Consulting Young People: A Review of the Literature. A Report for Creative Partnerships by Sara Bragg, Open University PDF \(637 KB\)](#)² Creative Partnerships, Arts Council of England
ISBN: 978 0 7287 1335 2

South Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People (2017). [The Listening Tour: Reflections Reports on the method and outcomes of a state-wide consultative process with children. \(PDF 4,005 KB\)](#)³

Edwards, C.P. (1995) Democratic Participation in a Community of Learners: [Loris Malaguzzi's Philosophy of Education as Relationship](#)⁴ Child, Youth and Family Studies, Department of Faculty Publications, Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies, University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Young People and the Arts Australia (ASSITEJ Australia Inc) (2010) [Changing Habitats: Are Children and Young People Democratising Culture](#)⁵. Publication from the National Symposium, Changing Habitats.
YPAA/ASSITEJ Australia

Play Wales: [Participation and Consulting with Children \(PDF 2,487 KB\)](#)⁶ Includes a useful model of: What - what do we want to find out? Why - why do we want to find this out? How - how are we going to find this out?

Hart, R. (1992). [Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship](#)⁷ A foundational report that includes a good overview of children's rights.

Giles, S. (2018). [Young people and the arts: An agenda for change](#)⁸. Currency House. An extended essay about children as cultural citizens.

[A summary of resources about consulting with children, including in the arts, from around the world \(PDF 50 KB\)](#)⁹

Books (available at ArtPlay)

Brown, M. (ed.) (2012) *Oily Cart: All sorts of theatre for all sorts of kids*. England: Trentham Books Ltd.
ISBN – 978-1-85856510-1

Links: Early childhood, disability, theatre.

Essays about an innovative English theatre company, their philosophy and practice.

Edwards, C., Gandini, L., and Forman, G. (Ed's) In collaboration with Reggio Children and Innovations in Early Education : The International Reggio Exchange (2012) *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*. Praeger
ISBN – 978 0 313 35981 1

Links: Education, Early Childhood

An influential text about children's creativity.

¹ <http://www.mammalian.ca/pdf/publications/MammalianProtocol.pdf>

² <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/webteam/gateway/file.php?name=consulting-young-people-march-2007&site=45#>

³ http://www.cyp.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Listening-Tour-Reflections_WEB.pdf

⁴ <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/famconfacpub/15/>

⁵ http://issuu.com/ypaa/docs/changing_habitats

⁶

<http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/INFORMATION%20SHEETS/participation%20and%20consulting%20with%20children.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100>

⁸ <https://currencyhouse.org.au/node/45>

⁹ <http://www.apf.gov.au/DocumentStore.ashx?id=a1a34b47-492c-408c-adbb-4f9691c21071>

Kolbe, Ursula. (2005) *It's Not a Bird Yet: The Drama of Drawing*. Peppinot Press
ISBN: 0 9757722 0 1
Links: Visual Arts, Early Childhood

Kolbe, Ursula. (2001, 2007) *Rapunzel's Supermarket: All About Young Children and Their Art*. (Second Edition) Peppinot Press.
ISBN: 9780975772218
Links: Visual Arts, Early Childhood
Both of Kolbe's books give insights into how children make meaning from their own and others' art.

Stern, D. (1992) *Diary of a Baby*. Basic Books
ISBN: 9780465016402
Links: Early childhood, arts. Education
Essential reading for understanding the development of babies and toddlers, this book is a poetic explanation of scientific knowledge.

Svendsen , Jenepher. (2004) *There You Go Camel: A Celebration of Young Children's Art* Lothian Books
ISBN: 0 7344 0622 3
Links: Visual Art, Early Childhood
Children talk about their art as they are making it, and in discussion with adults.

Wright, S. (2010) *Understanding Creativity in Early Childhood*. SAGE Publications.
ISBN – 978 1 84787 525 9
Links: Early Childhood, Education, Visual Arts
A valuable book about what children's art means to themselves.