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Igniting young people's creativity: the Sydney Story Factory

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an insight into the work of the Sydney Story Factory, a creative writing centre for young people. Based on an interview with the centre's Storyteller-in-Chief, it shows how the Sydney Story Factory seeks to maximise the attention given to each student's creative output. In the article it is argued that the innovative approaches employed at this centre can serve as an example of reforms that might need to be introduced in the educational system and teacher education and development.

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Introduction

Creativity is increasingly being espoused as a pillar upon which to construct young people's education. However, the act of nurturing their creativity is sometimes perceived as inordinately challenging. Franken (2006, 396) defines creativity 'as the tendency to generate or recognise ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others'. He considers it imperative for anyone wanting to be creative 'to be able to view things in new ways or from a different perspective. Among other things, you need to be able to generate new possibilities or new alternatives' (394). Such a definition is scuppered by the tendency to view education as a producer of minds consistent with the predetermined needs of society. Consequently, teachers are the purveyors of those knowledge bases and skills that society prioritises above everything else. Such a mechanical approach to education blights the possibility to cultivate creative minds capable of lateral thinking and fresh possibilities. It is also shortsighted as one can never predict what qualities, knowledge and skills will be needed in the future. Curing education of such a lack of imaginativeness requires the courage to transcend conventional practices on the part of the educational system and its rank and file. The most basic condition for young people's creativity to thrive in schools is that those responsible for its development must think and act creatively.

On a research visit to Australia in 2014, I had the opportunity of interviewing a significant number of educators and writers on the topic of creativity in education. I also met people working at a variety of institutions and organisations that either research creativity or else help promote it amongst young people. One of the most remarkable organisations I visited was the Sydney Story Factory (SSF), a non-profit creative writing centre that helps

young people to write and publish their own work. Based on my interview with Richard Short, the centre's Storyteller-in-Chief, this article provides some background information about the history, ethos and programmes of the SSF and demonstrates how the practices engaged in at the SSF are an example of the kind of creative conditioning that is essential for young people's creativity to take root and bloom.

Inspiration

In 2002, the writer Dave Eggers and the educator Nínive Calegari founded the young people's writing centre 826 Valencia in San Francisco. Its remit is to support the flourishing of creativity and make writing more accessible and enjoyable: 'By making writing fun, by demystifying the process, and by creating gorgeous books, magazines, and newspapers that honour their work, we can inspire young people to gain critical skills and write with confidence' (826 Valencia, n.d.). In a TED Talk on how he was inspired to set up 826 Valencia, Eggers (2008) explains that he wanted to provide young people with the opportunity of one-on-one support in their writing. By means of 826 Valencia, he sought to create a conduit between young people, most of whom were from an underprivileged and English as an L2 background, and volunteer tutors skilled in writing. The building in which the organisation is based operates as a pirate supply store as well as a publishing and writing centre. For Eggers (2008) it was important that the building would not only become a focal point for the hundreds of young people who went through its doors every year, but that it would also act as 'a gateway to the community'. 826 Valencia led to a number of spin-offs in other cities, including the Brooklyn Superhero Supply Company in New York, the Echo Park Time Travel Mart in Los Angeles, and the Ministry of Stories in London. At the end of his talk, Eggers (2008) expressed the following TED wish:

I wish that you – you personally and every creative individual and organization you know – will find a way to directly engage with a public school in your area and that you'll then tell the story of how you got involved, so that within a year we have a thousand examples – a thousand! – of transformative partnerships. Profound leaps forward!

Eggers's (2008) wish inspired Tim Dick and Catherine Keenan, former journalists with *The Sydney Morning Herald*, to set up a writing centre in Sydney similar to 826 Valencia.

Founding the Sydney Story Factory

The SSF was founded in 2011, receiving support from established writers like Anna Funder, Malcolm Knox, Peter FitzSimons, and Markus Zusak. Unlike 826 Valencia, the SSF does not run homework-assistance programmes but focuses exclusively on creative writing. Its motto is 'Igniting the spark of creativity in every child, one story at a time'. According to Short, the SSF's mission is

to change the lives of young people, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, through creative writing. I think in essence we want to encourage students to write and to become comfortable with their writing. For me it's very much about students being able to use writing as a way to connect themselves with the wider community, to understand how

other people in the world see and feel things, and to explore that understanding through writing. That's at the core, for me.

Besides seeking to develop young people's literacy, language skills and creativity, the SSF also seeks to help them 'experience this very real sense of community'. It does so by enabling young people to work together with an adult volunteer:

So for the seven weeks that we're running our poetry writing workshops and our script-writing workshops, there's this kind of combined effort and community going into the project. That's really one of the most important things because it gives students this idea that literacy, education, the written word is a way of being part of this community. It's very much a communal experience.

Short expressed the belief that the sense of community generated through the writing workshops is as important as the gains young people make in terms of literacy and creativity.

Every week the SSF sets out to run innovative and fun creative writing programmes with expert teaching and one-on-one tutoring. It encourages young people to communicate ideas, giving them more confidence in their skills, themselves and each other. It seeks to create and sustain a vital contribution to the community, by respecting and giving voice to people's stories. Its workshops are essentially aimed at disadvantaged young people and students from language backgrounds other than English. However, they are open to everyone given that the SSF tries to bring together students from different social backgrounds. Short remarked that his teaching experience in the public school system made him

very conscious of [...] the separation that starts very early with students in Australia in general, as they are slotted into the public and private school systems. There's this kind of lack of opportunity for students from different backgrounds to sometimes meet up.

He claimed that the SSF seeks to help teachers make its workshops available to all young people and not just to students who are academic achievers:

We encourage them to bring students that aren't necessarily from the selective stream. My core audience are the kids who don't really get access to these kinds of things. So I really want to make it as easy for teachers to bring a group of students here.

The SSF's commitment to young people's creativity has led it to collaborate with a number of Australian organisations that share its ethos, including WEAVE's Kool Kids Programme, the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP), the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), and Belvoir Street Theatre. However, most of its collaboration is with community groups rather than with writing-based organisations. The former consist of after-school care and holiday care groups as well as refugee groups and Indigenous organisations. The centre's work has received very good feedback, with a number of mentions in the media.

Location

The SSF is based at a building in the inner-city suburb of Redfern. The premises operate as the Earth's Martian Embassy and Gift Shop. Besides selling such items as an intergalactic

space travel kit, a flying saucer repair kit and an alien virus survival kit, the premises host the workshops led by a small paid storytelling staff and the volunteer tutors of the SSF. Designed pro bono by the Laboratory for Visionary Architecture (LAVA) and a winner of a 2012 Sydney Design Award, the building's interior is made of oscillating plywood ribs that are reminiscent of *Moby Dick*, *The Time Machine* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Light and sound projections complement the architecture to make visitors feel as if they are inside a spacecraft or time tunnel.

The decision to locate the SSF at Redfern was based on two important considerations. The first one is the fact that the district is central and has a train station that services all the major lines. Finding volunteers and schools willing to participate in SSF programmes is thus made easier. Students from both local schools and schools that are further afield can visit the SSF effortlessly. The other reason for which the SSF was established in Redfern is due to the district's unique cultural identity. According to Short, Redfern is demographically interesting because historically it has been the centre of Indigenous culture in Sydney. Besides the proportion of Aboriginal people living in Redfern, there are also a significant percentage of residents who originate from various European and Asian countries. Redfern and the neighbouring suburb of Waterloo have traditionally housed a high concentration of poverty. However, in the last few years Redfern has become increasingly gentrified. In fact, Short claimed to have noticed a shift in the district's population. The SSF works with five schools in the area; these draw students from diverse parts of the population of Redfern but some of them are starting to shift more noticeably than others. The SSF considers these schools to be its key schools, particularly the ones in Waterloo where a lot of students live in public housing. To celebrate the district's identity, in 2014 the SSF launched a book entitled *Home: Mapping the Stories of Redfern*. It consists of contributions by residents of Redfern, pieces penned by prominent public figures, and stories by some of the young people who attended SSF workshops. Just like Eggers's *826 Valencia*, the SSF seeks to cultivate a close bond with its immediate community. In fact, before opening the centre, Keenan (2012) had hoped that it would 'be a place where our students and volunteers feel more connected to their local community, and celebrate the stories that come out of it'.

Supporters and programmes

The backbone of the SSF's success consists of what it calls its supporters. Short has been the SSF's Storyteller-in-Chief since its founding, having previously been a high school teacher of English. In this sense, the SSF's founders heeded Eggers's (2008) bidding to 'always let the teachers lead the way'. Short runs the majority of the workshops, aided by two deputy storytellers. Besides these three positions, the SSF also employs an Executive Director, a Development Manager, and a Mission Control/Volunteer Manager. In order to provide students with the maximum amount of guidance possible, each SSF workshop requires 10 volunteer tutors for every 20 students. The SSF started with 100 volunteers in 2011 but these have now gone up to more than 1200. Of those, the organisation relies on the services of around 200 core volunteers who participate in most of the workshops. All volunteers are first vetted and then trained. In an initial orientation session that lasts around two hours, prospective volunteers are shown how the workshops are run and provided with information about the SSF's students. Following this session, volunteers are

invited to attend a variety of focused training programmes, which run once a month. These programmes focus on providing the volunteers with training on how to work with students who might be disengaged, have low literacy, or else are coming from non-English speaking or Indigenous backgrounds.

In addition to running the workshops, Short oversees the SSF's programmes, which cater for upper-primary and high school students. The majority of students are in Grades 5 and 6, that is, 10 to 12 years old. High school students constitute around 25% of the total intake. Most of the workshops are held at the SSF's premises but, when asked to, storytellers run workshops at the schools themselves. Sometimes half the workshops would be held at the Martian Embassy and the other half at the school itself. Prof. Robyn Ewing and her colleagues from the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney evaluate SSF programmes.

The SSF runs four main kinds of workshop for young people. The first type consists of two-hour workshops during school hours, where teachers bring a class of students to the premises. These are most often one-off workshops where the focus would be on poetry, storytelling, script writing or podcasting. The second category is constituted by term-long programmes, where teachers bring in a class of students for a series of workshops during term-time. Most often the storytellers and volunteer tutors would only see these students for the time they are booked in because these are the kind of groups that come from further afield in Sydney. Another type of programme is made up of workshops run on Sundays and in school holidays. The last category consists of afterschool workshops that run once a week for six or seven weeks of a term. According to Short, these programmes are the ones attended mostly by students from Redfern and there are always repeat students for them. Some students have been attending SSF programmes ever since the centre's opening. The SSF has registered 5000 student enrolments since July 2012. Given that the programmes are project-based, students get the opportunity to publish their work. The publications are usually in the form of an A4 booklet or else an animation, podcast or DVD if the workshop focuses on oral storytelling.

Short explained that the benefits of learning creative writing for young people include 'being able to live in another person's life, being able to feel empathy for other people, but also using that ability and the written word to connect to a greater community of writers wherever they may be.' The SSF workshops build on the skills that students learn at school: 'Classroom teachers give students these great tools for writing and what we do here is give students the opportunity to use those tools and practise and develop their skills with those tools'. Most of the students who attend SSF workshops come to feel that writing is exciting and not as daunting as they thought it was, but 'those who attend the long-term workshops experience the most important changes'. Short claimed that he and his colleagues 'work really hard to give them something that's a little bit different, something that is not like school. That creates a sense of excitement. It's as if we're all in this together'. This is one of the reasons why some students re-enrol on SSF programmes.

All SSF workshops are free but the centre welcomes donations. If schools, which sometimes fail to secure funding for this kind of thing, cannot afford to make a donation, the SSF still runs the workshops for free. Funding is derived mainly from corporate sponsors and philanthropic trusts and foundations, with no money from government funding. The corporate sponsors are supportive of the fact that they are funding a creative project. Short claimed that initially he was sceptical about asking for corporate

sponsorship, however, in time he realised that it is easy for such sponsors to provide funding to the SSF given that its work is tangibly beneficial for young people and is removed from controversy or politics.

Creative conditioning

The SSF plays a pivotal role in fostering creativity amongst young people in Redfern and the rest of Sydney. The effectiveness of its programmes is largely due to the concept of individual attention promulgated by Eggers (2008) in his TED Talk. The sense of reassurance that young people experience when their ideas are listened to and carefully cultivated bolsters their confidence to engage in creative writing. For Keenan (2012), 'The most exciting thing has been watching the kids' abilities shine through, particularly from students who previously didn't think of themselves as writers. It has been wonderful to see how proud they are of their work.' The success of initiatives like the SSF and 826 Valencia relies on bold experimentation with non-conventional approaches to education. However, the results of such innovation need to be taken into consideration by policy-makers and curriculum developers when reforming the educational system. Such reform is fundamental in order to restrain the system's obsession with standardised testing and to spotlight the significance of creativity. Wyn (2009, 51) declares that 'Until there is greater "ownership" of non-mainstream programmes that address more creative ways of learning, the gains made by small, responsive and relevant locally based educational innovations will remain invisible and therefore undervalued'. The lessons learnt by the SSF in implementing its innovative practices and programmes need to be adapted to mainstream schooling so that as many young people as possible benefit from a creative education.

Part of the formula of the SSF's success is that it creates meaningful creative relationships between its volunteer tutors and students. Keenan (2012) considers it 'very gratifying to see what strong relationships they form with their tutors. Both the students and tutors gain so much from being together'. According to Short, the fact that the workshops work in a one-on-one manner facilitates matters, even with respect to behavioural issues:

Imagine if you've got a class that is difficult to handle and you've got a student who likes to get up and wander around. If you sit down with that student, most often they're attentive and interested in the programme at hand because they've got your interest and they've got your attention.

To achieve this the SSF capitalises on its tutors' role as practising writers: 'Through our trained tutors, many of whom work professionally with words, the students are exposed to people for whom writing really matters. This encourages their creativity and opens new paths for them into the future' (Sydney Story Factory, n.d.). The educators who dedicate their time and expertise to work shoulder-to-shoulder with students in order to develop their writing skills and unleash their creative potential should act as role models for other teachers.

Even though promoting creativity might seem exceedingly difficult for an ordinary classroom teacher tasked with catering for the needs of a group of students and constantly preoccupied with the demands of assessment, the most important lesson to be learnt from a project like the SSF is that teachers need to position themselves creatively

in order to instigate creativity on the part of their students (Xerri 2013, 2014). For this to happen it might be necessary to provide teachers with adequate support. Ewing (2010, 35) points out that a 'paucity in pre-service training is compounded by the widespread lack of sufficient or appropriate in-service teacher professional learning in the Arts'. According to Short, even if pre-service training were to properly equip teachers with respect to creativity, when they start working in 'schools it breaks down because they're overwhelmed by the amount of curriculum they need to cover and by the demands of assessment. When that overcomes them, one of the things that slide away is the creative aspect'. Short concedes that 'there are skilled teachers who are committed to the idea of creativity in school. They work to include creativity in their classrooms and when teachers are very good at that it always impresses me'. However, he is aware of the fact that

not all teachers are like that and some teachers, when they're not as skilled or as well-trained as they could be, are almost over-powered by the demands of assessment tasks, the demands of things like NAPLAN [National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy]. They fear and are very conscious of the fact that parents, other schools, and other teachers are looking at the marks that the students get. So they might feel compelled to sit in that little groove that directs the students to improving their marks.

Since teachers are most often the linchpin for the success of the creative enterprise in education, teacher training needs to develop the knowledge, skills and beliefs of educators so that they can position themselves creatively in the classroom with competence and confidence. Short maintained that

a lot of teachers are little bit afraid of [creativity]. I think one of the reasons for which they're afraid of it is the idea that while many English teachers are very good readers of texts and are incredibly good at talking about texts, not a lot of them are good or committed writers of texts. I think there's that kind of breakdown between being excellent at teaching how texts work and analysing texts, and not being necessarily so confident or good at writing a text. I think this is very much based on the idea that the best teachers of writing are those who sit down every day and do a piece of writing.

Providing teachers with adequate training would enable them to adopt a more positive attitude toward creativity in the classroom and strive to cultivate it in themselves and in young people. It would encourage teachers to engage in creative writing, which is something that they 'struggle' with because they

are just not confident in teaching creative writing. And that's something that kids can just sense. When you get teachers who are good at it and who are confident and who are able to teach it, students really respond positively to that.

Teacher training would help to make 'the whole process of creativity less threatening for teachers. Once they've seen what can happen and how engaging this can be, hopefully it helps to influence their practice in the future'. For these reasons, the SSF is interested in designing teacher-training programmes focusing on developing educators' creativity.

Conclusion

The SSF's work to promote creativity amongst young people is highly significant, especially since it is aimed at students of varying abilities and not only at those who are proficient in writing or derive from privileged backgrounds. The SSF's programmes are

also an example of how creative conditioning can engage young people with writing so that they are better able to manifest their creativity. The SSF's storytellers and volunteer tutors should serve as an inspiration for teachers in mainstream education so that they seek support in developing the necessary knowledge, skills and beliefs to position themselves creatively.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note on contributor

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