

‘When the stars and moons are out’: Reimagining and reconceptualising an early childhood arts event

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how ten early childhood teachers, three specialist arts teachers, and 151 kindergarten children, at the University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre (ELC), reimagined and reconceptualised an arts event to comply with COVID-19 restrictions, and in doing so, generated processes and products that reached beyond the traditional. Visual vignettes provide insight into the moments, tasks, and projects that led to a culminating transdisciplinary multimedial production.

Keywords: Early childhood, Arts education, Transdisciplinary

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CONTEXT

In July 2021, a range of operational restrictions were imposed on early childhood settings across Melbourne, as the city entered its fifth COVID-19-induced lockdown in less than 18 months. This paper considers how ten early childhood teachers, three specialist arts teachers, and 151 kindergarten children, at the University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre (ELC), reimagined and reconceptualised an arts event to comply with restrictions, and in doing so, generated processes and products that reached beyond the traditional.

The winter solstice is a midwinter celebration that marks the shortest day of the year. For over 15 years, ELC children and teachers have joined together on this day, to perform a well-rehearsed repertoire of choral music about wintry weather, stars, and moons. In recent years, the choir has performed to a large audience of family members and local aged-care residents, in a nearby chapel adorned with high ceilings and stained-glass windows (Figure 1). The performance is now considered a major annual event in the ELC calendar, with the entire community beginning preparations for it as soon as the red leaves begin to fall from the trees in the playground.



FIGURE 1. WINTER SOLSTICE PERFORMANCE IN THE GOOD SHEPHERD CHAPEL, 2019

Amid the pandemic, this was not to be. In the days leading up to the planned event, it was announced that children in early childhood settings were no longer permitted to venture offsite into the community. Organised singing in large groups was restricted, due to the perceived potential for aerosol transmission of the COVID-19 virus, and venue density limits were significantly reduced. The winter solstice, it seemed, was set to be cancelled.

Having navigated a pathway through four previous periods of operational restrictions, including a 111-day lockdown where early childhood education programs were delivered partially online, early

childhood teachers rose to a new challenge. They asked themselves and their community: *How can this event be reimagined and reconceptualised for this moment in time?*

APPROACH

A pedagogical research approach was adopted for this project, whereby documentation was generated, made visible, and explored as part of the learning process (Rinaldi, 2005; Ritchhart, 2015). Process-in-action photographs, children's visual art samples, and videographic artefacts of performing arts practices were used, both independently and in combination, to stimulate child-teacher discourse and further learning within the classroom context (Dahlberg, 2011; Eisner, 2002; Moss, 2019). Teachers' critical reflections (Dewey, 1933) and children's reflective drawing-tellings (Deans & Wright, 2018) were collected post-event, as part of the continuous planning cycle implemented across the centre.

The following sample of visual vignettes will be framed by Ritchhart's (2015) pyramid of events (see figure 2 below), in which moments of emergent interactions inspired more focused learning tasks. These learning tasks then led to projects, and the projects combined to form the larger-scale winter solstice event. Although lower down in the hierarchy, moments, tasks, and projects are viewed as essential components of an event. Without them, a successful outcome would be unattainable. According to Ritchhart, 'events are unique in their power to engage, motivate and propel learning. This power can be attributed to the holistic and creative aspects of events, in which learning often extends beyond the academic' (p. 161). The visual vignettes illustrate the progression of experiences towards the event, as well as the threads that pull each part into a cohesive whole.

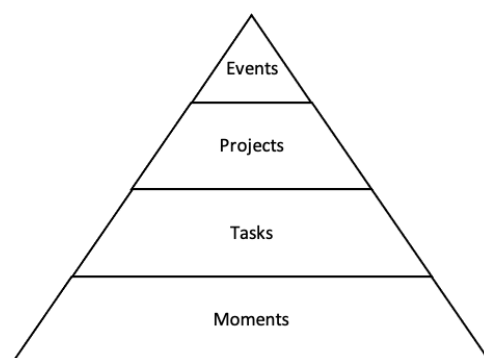


FIGURE 2. RITCHHART'S (2015) PYRAMID OF EVENTS

The moments



FIGURE 3. SPONTANEOUS SINGING; POETRY READINGS; MOON CYCLES

The tasks



FIGURE 4. TRANSFORMING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



*The moon was dancing in the sky,
Twinkling in her yellow, grey, white, silver and yellow dress.*

*She sprinkled wintry dust
onto the world,
Telling everyone:
'From today the days are
getting longer and lighter,
to make all feel
happy and awake'.*

*The winter solstice is peaceful,
and calm,
and beautiful;
just like all the people of the world.*

(Blue Gum children, aged 4-5 years)

FIGURE 5. WRITING POETRY

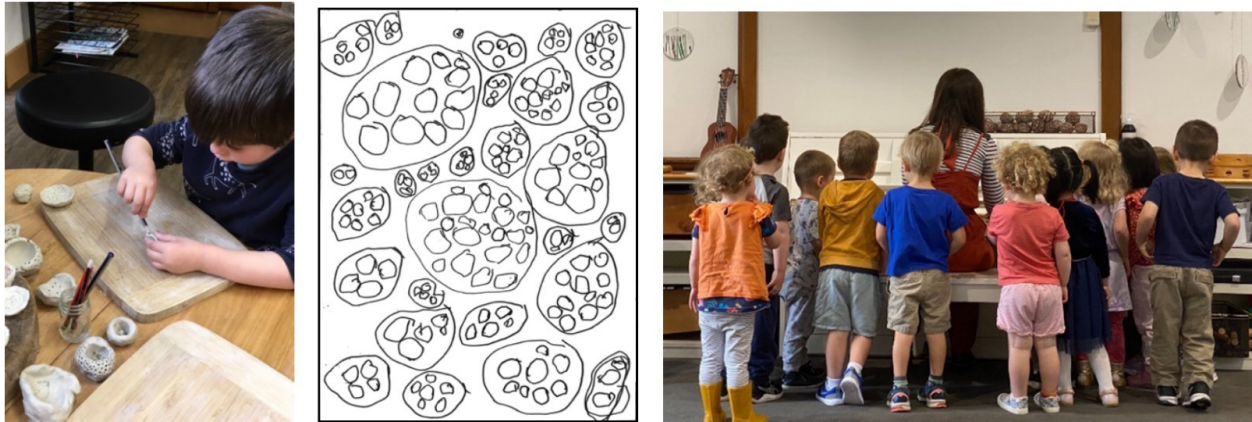


FIGURE 6. DEVELOPING SKILLS: MANIPULATING CLAY; DRAWING CLOSED SHAPES; SINGING IN A GROUP

THE PROJECT



FIGURE 7. CLAY LANTERNS; MOON PRINTS; CHAMBER CHOIR


THE EVENT

Winter Solstice Film Premier!

The ELC children and teachers present...

drum roll

Winter Solstice Performance, 2021



To access this highly anticipated performance, please use the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/572364783/706c3cdf23>

Created and produced by our very own Esther Wong (Wattle senior teacher) and Kylie Payman (Blue Gum lead teacher) in collaboration with Melvin Tang.

Learning tags:

Children's Choir Exhibition Music The Arts

Links:

Add a child note highlighting where to from here or linking this story to a goal.

Responses

- SH** Sally Hasler (Hope) 14 days ago
So wonderful thank you and beautiful to share with interstate family
- R** Rachel Bucsuhaży (Angus) 4 days ago
Gorgeous video. Our family loved watching this together on the big screen
- KA** Kelly Adams (Madeleine) 14 days ago
Thank you so much for all the wonderful work that has gone into creating this to share with us. It is beautiful and will be treasured!
- SM** Steve Murray (Samuel) 13 days ago
This was so lovely to watch. Thank you for putting it together and sharing.
- CL** Candice Law (Will) 13 days ago
Gorgeous video! Thank you for all the effort put into creating such a memorable winter solstice keepsake. We love it 🥰
- SL** Samantha Loi (Daphne) 14 days ago
Fabulous!
- AH** Ann Hogendoorn (Elise) 14 days ago
Thank you Esther, Kylie & Melvin! This is beautiful 🥰
- S** Suzana Klarin 15 days ago
Exquisitely beautiful and emotional video twinkling with wintry mystery and amazing art.
- NL** Nam Le (Marlowe & Tess) 15 days ago
wow!!! just stunning - thank you!

FIGURE 8. WINTER SOLSTICE 2021 FILM PREMIER SHARED WITH FAMILIES VIA ONLINE PORTAL

REFLECTIONS

The moments, tasks, and projects grew to become a transdisciplinary arts event that respected each individual arts discipline while also creating opportunities for interconnection between them (Vecchi, 2010). According to Kelman et al., (2017), such events can 'be a form of powerful learning, particularly when this approach allows for direct, real-time dialogue between artforms' (p. 2019). The

set of post-event drawing-tellings indicate that children gained inspiration from varied artistic components of the projects, with the processes of singing, crafting lanterns, dancing, and creating moon prints dominating the data (figure 9). The children's experience of 'making' these products is what Dewey (1934) refers to as 'the *work* of art' (p. 168). The event outcome itself – the transdisciplinary winter solstice film – was also of interest to the children, with one child summing up the overall sentiment in her analysis, 'It was so good. I liked that we saw me! I liked the lanterns hanging and I liked that we saw all the singing'. The concepts of day/night, moons and stars, were frequently symbolised in the children's reflections (figure 10), indicating a depth of understanding that the small and large components of the event were connected and united by a central premise: the winter solstice.

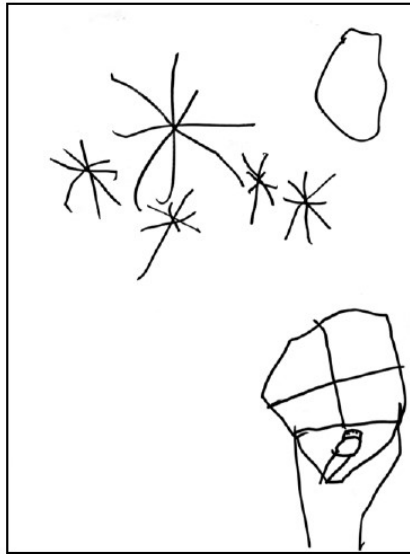


'Louis, Mabel and I were singing together in the Wattle room on winter solstice day. Winter solstice is when the day gets shorter and the nights gets longer. I am the one singing the loudest.' (Anya, age 4 years)



'My friend was dancing around the room with music on and I was watching her dance.'
(Mae, age 4 years)

FIGURE 9. CHILDREN REFLECT ON THE PROCESSES OF SINGING AND DANCING



'Me sitting on a singing chair and that's the night, moon and stars. The chair made me sing forever; This Little Light of Mine forever. I like it. I light lights. It is when the stars and moons are out.'
(Jack, age 4 years)



'When it was the winter solstice, my mum told me to go to bed because it was dark. We're on the roof watching the sky go black and the stars come out. We're singing songs to the stars and moon about winter solstice.'
(Sophia, age 4 years)

FIGURE 10. THE CONCEPTS OF NIGHT/DAY, MOONS AND STARS FEATURE IN THE CHILDREN'S REFLECTIONS

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