

'Best practice' is terminology which sounds like it has emerged from, and thrived in, private industrial enterprise in some economically rationalist whirlpool somewhere. It may well have done – I'm not sure. But it has always seemed, to me anyway, to be at odds with the very essence and purpose of youth arts practice.

Best practice, as I understand it, is the identification and, to some degree, regulation of the most efficient way of generating to the highest quality a product or a service. This concept alone is troublesome.

When Tony Mack asked me to write about 'best practice in youth arts', I remembered Barney Langford (Founding Director of 2 til 5 Youth

Barney says it best in his thesis when he states '...certain local factors have combined to create a diversity of structure and practice across the country. These local factors include the effects of location, the contributions made by individual personnel associated with the evolution of companies and certain ideological and philosophical factors associated with the work of individual companies.'

Furthermore in the last several years there appears to have been an even greater 'fracturing' of youth arts practice. I think this 'fracturing' has been triggered by many things, including artists with little or no experience of working with young people moving into this area and new technologies greatly influencing practice (and being taken up by some

'youth arts practice' would never have come up in the same sentence in the first place.

I'd like to go back a bit then and think about where the impetus for identifying such a 'best practice' may have come from. Among many possible causal factors, I have long heard the cries of frustration from artists working with young people about how their work is assessed, particularly by funding bodies (at all levels) and art critics. The frustrations have been focused on correcting inappropriate (whether perceived or real) mechanisms for assessing this practice. This, in itself, is a compelling reason to develop some measures for assessment and makes it easy to understand why energy has been invested in developing them.

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# best practice in youth arts?

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*Youth arts companies need to be assessed on process as well as product. But what mechanisms can be put in place to achieve this, and how do funding bodies determine best practice? Danielle Cooper investigates...*

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Theatre in Newcastle), several years ago now, talking to me about best practice in youth arts. So I started by ringing Barney and asking him about his progress and discoveries. Barney told me that he'd never managed to get anywhere with this idea. His experience was that others working in youth arts seemed resistant and not overly interested in the idea. He seemed unsurprised by this and pointed to the diversity of practice as the reason.

Best practice by its very definition implies that there is a singular and almost identical product or service being delivered. In some circumstances, private enterprise and the like, it is not difficult to imagine that there could be an equally singular and identical way of doing something. However, such singularity simply does not exist in youth arts practice. It doesn't even exist within artform-specific youth arts practice. In my experience, every youth orchestra is significantly different to any other, every youth theatre company different to any other and so on. Yesterday I was asked to define youth dance practice. I couldn't. Instead, I identified three different companies working in completely different ways for completely different reasons with completely different young people in completely different contexts to produce... I think you get the point.

artists and youth arts organisations and not others). Youth arts practice too, as a whole, is significantly repositioning itself in relation to young audiences, young 'emerging' artists and the broader arts community.

What's to be gained then by identifying a singular way of working with young people in youth arts? Perhaps, at best, we could hope to identify some fundamental similarities between youth arts organisations but – while some of us would like to think this is so – with the exception of the common factor of young people themselves, this is also not easy.

Take, for example, the notion of young people as self-determiners of their work. I, for one, would love to think that this was a notion endorsed by anyone working in youth arts practice, regardless of her or his artform. However, this is not the case. Many times I have seen work and spoken with artists working with young people and discovered that for many reasons (not the least of which is young people not wanting to be self-determiners of their own work) this notion is not a part of their process.

So, where does that leave us? I'd like to think that it leaves us gloriously and energetically devoted to a diversity of process and practice! However, if we all felt this way, then 'best practice' and

As a part of developing the Youth and the Arts Framework, the Australia Council canvassed all State and Territory Governments on their processes for supporting youth arts practice. What emerged was an enormous array of mechanisms, criteria and structures which achieved varying degrees of success, sometimes against the odds.

This proverbial buffet of assessment tools is again a strong argument for developing a singular set of benchmarks for assessing youth arts practice. Currently it is possible for a single youth arts organisation to be simultaneously assessed against wildly different measures across several levels and departments of government. This range of approaches also however, points to the enormity of such a project – we all know the complexity and difficulty, both subtle and overt, of shifting such large bureaucracies.

One of the fundamental obstacles in improving government assessment procedures is the difficulty for these organisations in assessing the process. Funding body procedures for assessing youth arts 'product' are usually no different to those used to assess any other arts 'product' – the work is seen. Many would say 'and therein lies the problem'. I suspect that what we really

mean is that there are many critical factors in the development of the work which are not necessarily apparent in the 'product' itself and, without witnessing or understanding these, such an assessment is only ever going to be worryingly inadequate.

I don't wish to degenerate into a 'process versus product' debate at this point – we all know it well and have, unsurprisingly, a substantial divergence of opinion on the matter. I would, however, like to identify and consider a few mechanisms which government agencies (and for that matter, art critics!) could implement to more fully and appropriately assess youth arts practice or, more specifically, process.

I think that any one of the following strategies has the potential to markedly improve the quality of assessment but all of them come at a substantial cost, either financial or in human resource terms. These would be borne not only by the funding body but, potentially, by the arts organisations themselves.

Let's take for example the idea of submitting, alongside an application, excerpts of process on video. This could be marvellous – committee and panel members all over the country at all levels finally seeing the generation of ideas, the evidence of young people self-determining their work and the role of professional artists in such a process. Even if we assume companies, organisations and artists were agreeable though, the costs would be enormous. It would involve, at the very least, the hire of a video camera, the purchase of tapes and the cost of making copies. For all youth arts organisations, especially those that are completely under-resourced, these are substantial costs. If passed onto the funding bodies in some way these combined costs could easily climb to the value of an entire youth arts project. And this doesn't even take into account the desire of companies to produce high quality videos, which would incur further costs, or the time of personnel (in both the companies and funding bodies) to organise and then assess the videos.

Let's consider another idea then – that of committee/panel members attending workshops, tutorials and rehearsals. Again, this would be marvellous – members seeing first hand the approaches used to canvass ideas, develop them into moments, and shape them into work. However, I feel sure that youth arts organisations would not prefer the workshop/rehearsal to be seen instead of (if applicable) the final performance. Equally, I feel sure that organisations would prefer members to see this span of process in more than one context, and more than one organisation. And therein lies the difficulty. In most instances, in order to keep committee running costs to a minimum, committee and panel

members are usually remunerated only for sitting time (actual funding meeting time) and in some instances, reading time (application preparatory and pre-assessment time). All other time is effectively given 'pro-bono' which is not so onerous if the member is not also trying to hold down one or several other work commitments. Implemented fully, such a mechanism would require several members seeing a variety of work at different stages of development. (This is more achievable at a State and local level and it may well be happening satisfactorily as I write, but I suspect not.) This would substantially increase the workloads of the members and, for some funding bodies, also the travel costs. And this doesn't even begin to account for the increase in workload for the organisation in coordinating or arranging the visits, discussion with the participants, etc.

Another possible mechanism – but the least satisfactory of them all in my opinion – is the idea of encouraging (or even requiring!) documentation from the participants as they move through their process. I have seen many applications from youth arts organisations which attach post-production/performance statements from participants about their experiences in the process. However, these have almost always been post-performance/production and are usually comprised of largely spontaneous accounts of the excitement of the production/performance itself. While the energy and enthusiasm coming off the page are palpable and revealing, there is very little in the way of recounting the process itself or analysis of the experiences (and I strongly believe in the ability of young people to consider and articulate their experiences). To be useful for assessment purposes this strategy would need to be implemented in a more formalised way. While inexpensive in financial terms, it would also place the onus squarely on the organisation, and I'm not sure that young people would necessarily be keen to participate – or that the artists working with them would be keen to insert such a strategy into their processes. And, at a time when all funding bodies are endeavouring to reduce the paperflow associated with funding applications, this doesn't even begin to take into account the workload at the other end in including and distilling the substantial additional material as a part of the assessment process.

I think that one of the over-arching considerations in any discussion about improving assessment techniques in funding bodies has to be the distinctly different natures of the funding bodies themselves and the relationships they have with any arts organisation. Some funding bodies endeavour to be as 'hands-off' as possible. However, while ideal in many ways, this 'hands-off' approach can also lead to trouble – for

example, an organisation not realising its funding is in jeopardy until it's too late.

It has always appeared to me that the more localised the level of government, the closer the relationship and, in many instances, the greater the involvement in an organisation's operations. This can also be problematic in a 'cart before the horse' kind of way – in the heat of twisting themselves into pretzels in order to attract funding, have organisations stopped being the very things they set out to be?

Although overly simplistic, a colleague once reminded me that the practice came before the arts funding bodies, not the other way around. This has stuck with me and, when in doubt, I've always tried to remember it.

So, as I sit here, I feel like the doomsayer but I don't actually think that all is lost. I don't believe that arts funding bodies are unaware of their inadequacies in terms of appropriately assessing youth arts practice nor that they are uncommitted to improving their mechanisms. However, I also believe that it is not enough, in itself, to simply develop appropriate mechanisms. Although a good start, we will all be sorely disappointed if we believe that the development and implementation of such stand-alone mechanisms will deliver the desired knowledge and experience of our practice.

A much broader, cooperative approach is required here. We must work actively to influence appointments to all committees and panels and we must work to ensure that, once appointed, all members have increasing levels of experience and understanding of youth arts practice. We must find and develop collaboratively with funding bodies tenable strategies that properly account for increased expenses and workloads. But most importantly, the implementation and evaluation of these strategies must also be collaborative – which means we must all invest in this exercise and work generously towards its success.

## **DANIELLE COOPER**

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