

The Black Swan project

Aleksandra Acker¹

Berenice Nyland¹

¹ RMIT University

The story of a project conducted in an early learning centre is the focus of this presentation. This paper aims to support an important purpose of the progressive education movement that promoted a social image of the child, where children were portrayed as competent communicators, individuals with rights and members of a community. How children think and learn has been an on-going emphasis of educational philosophy and research, and the notion of ‘learning by doing’ has been practised in various guises across the centuries from Socrates and Confucius to Dewey and the scholars of Reggio Emilia in the 20th century. By unpacking a specific project, conducted recently, we explore ideas of project-based learning grounded in 21st-century experience and technology. We challenge some aspects of beliefs about child-centred activity to explore the significance of the child/teacher relationship.

The context of this research was an early learning centre with pedagogical practices that are based on a combination of ideas from the past, children’s own experiences and more recent research. The contribution offers a nuanced look at projects as vehicles for learning their value for the future, and how pedagogies change as technologies develop while still strongly influenced by philosophers like Dewey as children are encouraged to explore, negotiate, interpret, and even create new meanings. The role of the adult as teacher, skilled and competent member of the culture, is introduced through the presence of a visiting artist. This visiting artist, influenced by the children, produced musical artefacts that had meaning in their lives and those of the teachers that worked with the children every day.

The research project was conducted in two special spaces: one was a studio; and the second an outdoor natural space where children encountered birdlife, native flora, fauna and a river. Protagonists were a musician/composer, specialist and generalist teachers and three- to five-year-old children. Data consisted of observations, video and audio recordings, children’s drawings and comments, teachers’ records and the composing of five songs across a twelve-month period.

The results of our observations throughout this project have helped us reassess the roles that adults and teachers can play in children’s learning. We argue, technologies are a symbolic language not to be differentiated from other languages; the social laboratory with learning grounded in experience, and driven by children and adult interest, has a place in future educational reforms.