

USING VISUAL ARTS TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH GLOBAL ISSUES

Jessica Carson

Introduction

The Mayfield Community Arts Centre is a community oriented arts space that uses visual arts as a tool to connect local development issues with those in the global South. Our creative and colourful projects inspire personal learning, reflection and action, and allow for interaction with the public and various sectors of the community. A number of projects have been developed and delivered in primary and secondary schools, vocational training centres and with a variety of youth groups. We also support a core group of teenagers in out-of-school activities who are very active in shaping and developing the programmes. The Mayfield Community Arts Centre creates space for exchange of methodologies, sharing of perspectives, valuable debate and discussion on the use of terminology.

Linking partnerships

The Centre also maintains linking partnerships with community development organisations throughout Central America that use similar arts methodologies. These linking programmes give youth and youth workers the opportunity to learn methodologies and skills and develop perspectives on global education through international volunteer placements. These partnerships have strengthened and varied our programme's methodologies and enabled us to maintain a balance of local and Southern perspectives in our global education work. The contribution of international volunteers from our partner organisations who are regularly hosted locally also enriches our programmes. The organisations we work with have taught us that art has the power to change; beyond the personal development of participants it can also transform communities and inspire social and political change.

One of our strongest partners is FUNARTE, a Nicaraguan organisation founded in 1987 on the back of the Sandinista revolution. During the Sandinistas' period in power (1979-1990) murals were used to support their revolutionary ideals, including the right to health care, to education and literacy for all. The founders of FUNARTE recognised

the power of the murals in inspiring the public to stand up for change and protest against the denial of rights and equalities. They believe that the process of creating murals has the potential to be a powerful tool for their organisation in motivating young people to explore issues they think are important and working to bring about change. The participants in FUNARTE's *Muralismo* workshops have the opportunity to be creative and express themselves in an environment that nurtures their ability to reflect, debate, process ideas and cooperate with others.

The *Muralismo* workshops begin with a period of exploring ideas through stories, case studies, personal experiences and discussion. They then discuss their thoughts on each of the possible themes and work together to decide on a mural design to paint in an approved public location. In the process of exploring these topics and local issues, the young people also learn how to engage with local community leaders, decision makers and politicians.

The mural projects

In 2002 and 2003, Mayfield Community Arts Centre, inspired by the work of FUNARTE, engaged in its first mural project working with groups of children to explore themes of and express opinions on children's rights. Each group chose a theme to address in their mural and considered what message they wanted the public to see. Twelve murals were drawn in various locations in the Mayfield area supported by the Children's Rights Mural Trail, a guide and activity sheet to further engage the public.

Since the initial mural project, the Mayfield Community Arts Centre has developed and assimilated many other creative tools to work within the same type of model, such as graffiti and mixed media performance arts. Through continuing links with partner organisations we have proved that our creative projects are a dynamic means for building solidarity among youth from many different parts of the world. The process of creating art together gives them space to explore each others' perspectives, listen and engage with what is important to each person and culture, and consider what it is that they as young people think is important to express to other generations.

In July 2008 we had the opportunity to bring together young people from the Mayfield Community Arts centre in Cork; La Cambalacha in San Marco De Laguna, Guatemala; FUNARTE in Esteli, Nicaragua; and Centro Colombo Americano in Medellin, Colombia. Our international volunteers were able to participate with the support of the European Youth in Action European Voluntary Service programme (EVS). Together, they created a

festival of events to communicate their ideas to the public through mural art, street art, graffiti, theatre, music and dance. Workshops leading up to the festival utilised these various art forms to engage the public, and were facilitated by young artists from each of the participating countries. For example, the Guatemalan volunteers facilitated a drama workshop with local young people including young immigrants. They first explored the themes of home and belonging and together created a performance based on their exploration.

Irish and Colombian volunteers led a street art and poster project, which used slogans created by young people from Nicaragua, Guatemala and Colombia. This project allowed young people to explore issues faced by young people in each of the participating countries. It created space to explore commonalities, differences, and how perspectives are shaped.

The Nicaraguan volunteers designed a mural to examine the importance of working together to preserve the environment. They combined their ideas using the methodologies of the Muralismo project by FUNARTE to make a design, which was painted on a large wall in Cork's city centre. Our Guatemalan partners La Cambalacha motivated local youth to participate in street parades and performances. Using drums, costumes, stills, flags and a flurry of colour they paraded the streets with the local youth to encourage engagement with the festival and its important themes.

Collectively, all these projects and others developed by Mayfield Community Arts Centre and the invited organisations were showcased at a festival in Cork city centre to an audience of approximately 2,000. Through all these activities, the young local and international participants had the chance to compare and learn from each others' experiences. The creative processes of engaging with the public provided our young people and our organisations with the opportunity to act in solidarity in raising awareness.

The importance of critical engagement and lessons learned

Over the years working with local and international youth and organisations, we have come to understand the importance of critical engagement with young participants and with the public. To engage local youth in global education topics, we have learned that it is crucial that they first have the opportunity to explore these issues from a local perspective and make personal connections. When we first began working with partner organisations from the global South, we observed that their young participants were more capable of reflecting upon their own experiences and expressing personal opinions. Their individual awareness and understanding was the result of long-term efforts by our partner organisations and the nurturing environment they had created for personal and social development.

Our relative lack of experience at the time meant that we were launching into ambitious projects with high expectations of positive results based on unrealistic contributions from the young people on issues such as fair trade, the environment, etc. Since those early days, we have learned the need to move slowly, spending time with the young people so they can first explore what they view as important, particularly in their local community, and as defining their own identity. Taking the time to listen provides a valuable foundation for the exploration of global education topics and nurturing young people's capacity to understand others' perspectives and develop a sense of solidarity with youth from other parts of the world.

It has been equally crucial for us to create an engaging environment for the public to learn about the topics presented by the youth. From a global education perspective, it is important for people of all ages and backgrounds to interact with topics such as child labour, equality and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For example, we invited local youth to perform in Globalfest Youtharts in order to reach a wide audience comprised mostly of young people and to create space for dialogue and interaction.

To maintain the interest of the young audience members, many different performances were given by volunteers from all over the world: Nicaraguan young people performed a traditional dance; volunteers from Nicaragua and Guatemala, together with local youth, performed a theatre piece they had devised on the themes of home and belonging; local youth were invited to break-dance; young people from Guatemala performed a song written for the event expressing their desire for freedom for their community and the world from poverty and violence; young people from Guatemala performed a dance incorporating traditional elements from their villages' rituals; and all the participants spoke about their experiences and roles in creating the festival. Meanwhile, all those attending the festival could browse display stands to learn about various issues such as climate change, the use of child soldiers and the use of recycled materials.

Conclusion

These events demonstrated the importance of global linking initiatives and providing opportunities for young people at a local level to share their experiences and perspectives on global issues with counterparts from the developing world. Our art projects have provided an important learning context for the sharing of ideas and development of actions on international development issues. We have learned that the learning process itself can be just as important as learning outcomes if they support a deep engagement by young people with global issues.

For more information on the Mayfield Community Arts Centre, please visit our website: <http://www.mayfieldarts.org>. Here you can find out more about our global education programme and download resources that we have developed that share our creative methodologies. For more information about Globalfest, please visit: <http://www.globalfestjuly08.info>, and to learn more about EVS, please visit: <http://www.leargas.ie>. The Léargas website also provides information on Youth Initiative Funding which may be of interest for those involved in global youth education.

Jessica Carson is the co-ordinator of Mayfield Community Arts Centre. She has worked at the Centre for nine years, and runs the Global Education programme.