

Case Study 3: Example of community-based work with art education at its core.

ARTS-ED'S 'MYBALIKPULAU' PROJECT - Using the Arts to Help Children Engage with their Environments

The case study is compiled from interviews conducted with Janet Pillai and Chen Yoke Pin, and supplemented with additional details from Liew Kung Yu, and from Arts-ED's online resources and publications.

PROJECT SUMMARY

MyBALIKpulau is a project run by Arts-ED, a non-profit organisation (NPO) based in George Town, Penang, which specialises in innovative community-based arts and culture education for young people and adult communities. It is an example of how an art form—in this case, photography—is used in a community-based project to help children engage with their cultural and physical environment.

BACKGROUND: Arts-ED and the community of Balik Pulau

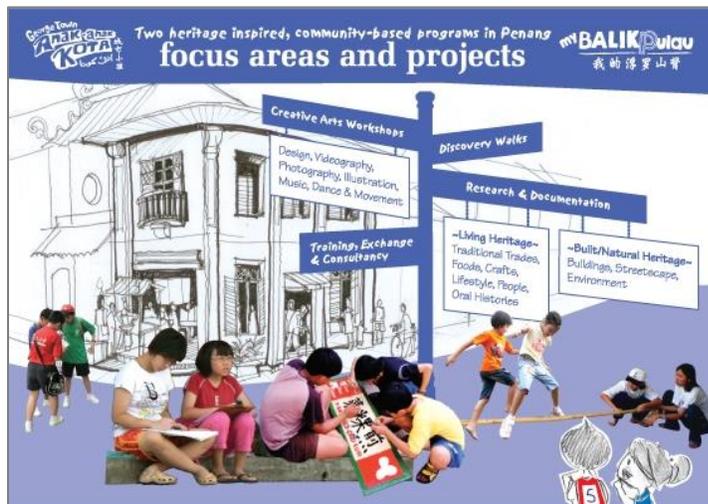
Arts-ED, working with youth in Penang since 1989

Arts-ED was founded in 1999, first as an informal group under the Penang Education Consultative Council, and then became a nonprofit registered society in 2007. The organisation's main activities include providing non-formal arts and culture education programmes for young people, community research and community consultation, producing cultural events, and publishing culture-related educational materials.

Arts-ED's founder and chairperson, Janet Pillai, has an MA in Theatre from the University of Hawaii, USA. Janet also taught at USM's Drama & Theater Department and -is an arts education programmer and trainer. Arts-ED's Senior Programme Manager is Chen Yoke Pin, who has been with the organization for 9 years; she has a degree in mass communications from USM and joined Arts-ED with experience in production and publicity for street theatre.



Arts-ED office on Cannon Street, George Town, Penang.



Arts-ED is a small organization, with only 2 full-time and 2 part-time staff members, and an advisory committee of 7 who steer the organisation's direction and programmes. Arts-ED also works in collaboration with institutions, arts educators, artists and community activists to promote culture education at a local and regional level.

The organisation's core mission is arts education for young people, with a strong heritage and cultural thread running through much of their programming. Their programmes and activities include showcase events, the creation of shared spaces, street fairs, festivals, and workshops in visual art, and design, dance, film/photography, acting/drama, and craft, as well as in project management and research skills.

Arts-ED's work is often located within a socio-environmental context, with a strong community-centered focus. What is crucial to their working methods is the process that participants go through as part of a learning experience and how art is used as a subject and a tool to educate in non-formal contexts.

Balik Pulau, the “other side of the Island Penang”

Balik Pulau is an agrarian district on the southwest coast of Penang island. It consists of one main street, surrounded by orchards, farms and a fishing villages. In 2005 the town and surrounding areas of Balik Pulau were seen to be experiencing a decline in the agrarian economy, out-migration of the younger population and an increase in property development. This led to a fermenting awareness of the need to document the area's cultural assets.

Arts-ED which had been working in the urban context of George Town in Penang since 2000 shifted its place-making activities to the rural site of Balik Pulau in 2005.



Balik Pulau town centre

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The project, myBALIKpulau, took place over 5 years, from Aug-September 2005 until 2010, with different stages of programming. The project participants and primary target group were children aged 10-17 who went to school as well as resided in and around the Balik Pulau town, and its surrounding villages. Children were recruited through the local schools in the area.

Project aim and objectives

The project aim was to raise awareness of and appreciation for the cultural assets of the children of Balik Pulau, and to increase understanding of their environment.

The objectives were:

- (1) to identify, map and document cultural assets with the children, and
- (2) to promote this to various groups ('insider' groups such as schools, land office, local residents), as well as 'outsider' groups (visitors to Balik Pulau).

Project structure and organisation

The core team consisted of 2 Arts-ED members, a minimum of 2 project staff who came on board intermittently throughout the 5 years, as well as other invited artists and organisational partners such as Badan Warisan Malaysia and Pusat Internet Desa (a local community internet centre). None of the core project team members resided in Balik Pulau, but during peak project time, the team would spend on average 3 working days a week in the small town, and up to 5 days a week for certain programme activities.

Secondary groups which were crucial partners to the projects realisation were teachers and head teachers and various other individuals as listed below.

- Administrators and head teachers of 4 primary and 2 secondary schools (partner in recruitment of participants)
- Barat Daya (southwest) District Office (provide space and maps)
- Balik Pulau public library (space for activities and exhibition of outputs)
- Pusat Internet Desa (space partner and human resource partner, equipment)
- Different funders for different projects, state and corporate funding, such as Penang Education Council and CIMB.

- Local community historians, teachers, traders (knowledge bearers) who were involved in the project by giving information and helping distribute maps, etc. who were very interested in its outcomes.

The initial phase of the program described below, was planned as a 2 month program, but it subsequently developed and grew in scale into a 5 year project, with Arts-Ed, rather than project partners taking the lead.

This case study does not focus on how the program was delivered, but in a step-by-step description of the case study can be found in an excerpt from Arts-ED's recent publication, *Community-based Arts & Culture Education: A Resource Kit* (2014), made available for free [here](#) as an additional pdf reference.



Familiarisation activity for children to get to know significant sites in their neighbourhood.

ART AS AN EDUCATION TOOL: Photography for engagement with surroundings

The main component of the project involved the use of photography as a documentation tool to record information on cultural elements, objects and people; and, stemming from this documentation, stories about the place were communicated using exhibited images as a visual communication tool.

Selecting the medium

What is significant here, however, is how and why photography was selected as the medium to be used in the project. Working with an invited artist, Liew Kung Yu, the Arts-ED project team members recognized that it would not do to enter into a programme activity without considering whether the art form was relevant and pedagogically appropriate. A possible pitfall when artists enter communities to do work is that they might automatically employ the medium that is their field of expertise or skill, without considering whether the art form works with the community's needs.

For myBALIKpulau, the invited artist and programme facilitator, Liew Kung Yu, chose the medium based on its suitability for the purpose. Considering the age and socio-cultural background of the children, photography was chosen as it was considered an entry point that would reliably excite them. It was a tool that did not pose challenges to the children's ability as it required minimal technical skills. It was also seen as an equalizing art form which would not result in children being judged in an artistic medium for which they might not demonstrate sufficient talent or skill. Furthermore, photography was well suited to the aim of the project which was documentation of cultural assets, which would help children learn and better understand their environment.

Using photography as a tool

When working with children, the team recognized that the subject (cultural assets) may not naturally appeal to children, therefore relying on the art medium to hold their interest. The tool selected, therefore, needed to have an element of the extraordinary to spark interest and desire. In this case, the camera was used as an 'eye' to look at ordinary things in a new way.

In this initial program children were required to shoot images of themselves, their families and their town/village, basically representing what Balik Pulau meant to them. Initially no prior instruction was given in photography technique to enable them to approach the subject and handle the medium in an atmosphere that was fun and uncritical. As the project progressed, more critical skills were developed which involved observation, research, photography and printing techniques.



Nametags created from images captured by the children

Active participation and engaged arts

Arts-ED's work is based on principles of Engaged Arts, which Janet Pillai is a proponent of, where "the process of making art is a used a pedagogical tool to facilitate engagement, comprehension, application and communication of knowledge and skills" (ref. p.6, Community-based Arts & Culture Education: A Resource Kit, 2014, Pillai, J.).

The child participants were active agents at each stage of the programme activity:

- 1) Data collection – conducting interviews, field observation and taking photographs as visual records
- 2) Analysis and interpretation – mind mapping, creating meaning through selection and editing of photographs
- 3) Creative construction of outputs – synthesizing data into sculpture, photo assemblage, diagrams, maps and banners

What is significant throughout is that the children learn not only creative skills but also research skills, and they learn how to analyse visual data through the medium of photography. Through each programme activity, they increase understanding of their cultural and physical environment, and construct their own interpretation of their surroundings as opposed to having this dictated or shown to them by an adult



Kung Yu working with the children in a mind mapping activity.

Photo essay in the interpretation process.

Outputs

The three 'inquiry and documentation' workshops on self, family and town/village each yielded specific artistic outcomes using computer-generated prints; 3D photographic sculptures of self, a wall-mounted photographic triptych of family/traders, and a town map in the form of a banner.

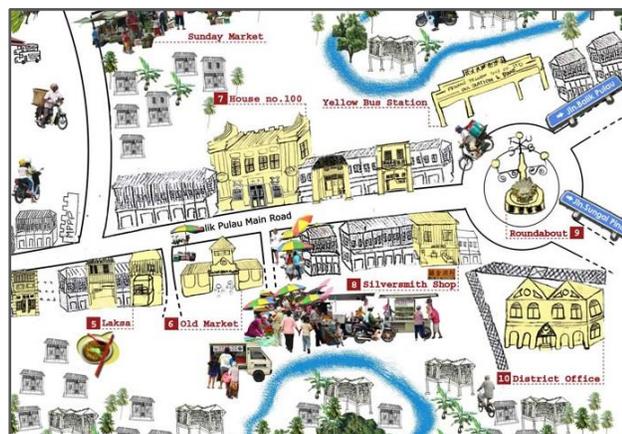
The children were actively involved and worked together with the facilitators to give shape to the final outputs while the content reflected fully the result of the children's documentation, analysis and interpretation. Facilitators played a strong role in setting parameters and guidelines for the children to follow. This gave clarity to the results of the children's research and documentation. The facilitators maintained a critical eye on the final form to ensure a suitable outcomes which the children could be proud, which successfully communicated the message to community, yet was clearly recognizable as children's own work.

The resulting outputs from this stage of myBALIKpulau were presented in the form of an exhibition to the townsfolk and school children, acting as a tangible interpretation of the children's understanding of local history and cultural assets, and as an advocacy tool to raise awareness of their heritage amongst the larger community.

In a later stage of the project, a community newsletter and a visitor's map was produced as outreach materials, and to share the children's work with a larger audience.



Exhibition in a community space.



Detail of map produced of Balik Pulau town using children's photographs and drawings.

Training and considerations for artists and facilitators

As a rule, Arts-ED always tests out project activities before implementing them in programmes as they feel it is unfair and potentially counter-productive to demand participation from the children if the activity fails to be understood or fails to engage participants satisfactorily.

Arts-ED also places importance on the skills of the facilitation, requiring an initiation for collaborating artist-facilitators and facilitators in working with a particular target community. While not all artists are able to make the separation from their selves as artists and their selves as facilitators, the ability to do so is considered ideal for a successful project.

In this particular case, although a professional artist with several years' experience, the programme facilitator, Liew Kung Yu, makes a clear delineation from his work as an artist and his work as a facilitator, taking care to not allow his personal artist motivations influence the objectives of the project. He attributes his ability to do so in part to his training and professional experience, first in graphic design, then in theatre, where he was accustomed to teamwork and employing his creative talents in service to another. He stresses the need to always prioritise the needs of the community in community-based work, and only

then seeing how these needs can be met utilizing creative or artistic means. The arts, in this case, is a means to an end, as opposed to being the end.

In Kung Yu's experience, artists with multidisciplinary experience are able to adapt and respond to community and project needs more readily as opposed to an artist with a narrow range of experiences. This is in no way a criticism of artist with singular practices and focus, but a consideration for any project manager or administrator for community-based work. In addition to understanding the community's needs, there should also be a sensitivity to local aesthetics and culture, to ensure that the resulting artistic outputs are ones that the local community will be receptive to and can relate to with minimum assistance.

Outcomes and Impact

Feedback on the project components was solicited by Arts-ED and feedback was also received at different stages throughout the project for specific activities, from whom Arts-ED terms 'insiders' (those involved in the process, such as the schools, the local knowledge bearers and other partners) and 'outsiders' (visitors and groups responsible for promotion outside of Balik Pulau).

Based on the feedback, the larger aim of the project was considered achieved: that the children, as well as the larger community, became more aware of their cultural assets—and this awareness extended to visitors, with the volume of requests for more newsletters, map reprints (consistently reprinted by Penang Global Tourism for five years) and more information about Balik Pulau, exceeding expectations of the Arts-ED team.



myBALIKpulau newsletter in Bahasa Malaysia



Other indicators of the project's success was how various partners were motivated to take on aspects of programmes and incorporate this into their own work: the local computer centre introduced some of the programme activities in their own programmes, and, with the help of Arts-ED, some school teachers adapted some of their Arts-ED's field methodology to specific subjects in the curriculum.

Further evidence of the impact of the project was seen in the loyalty and interest instilled in the participating children who returned to participate in later programmes/projects because of how rewarding they found the experience.

In the end the project took five years to run its course, although this had not been envisioned from the start; neither did the team plan for a continuation once it ended. The project process, however, has been adapted and applied in different projects since then, often with a thematic slant - .e.g culinary assets - cooking workshop with children in inner city George Town. Similarly, some of the programme activities and how a particular arts medium was used, has also been applied in new projects.

CONCLUSION

The myBALIKpulau project illustrates how the focus of Arts-ED's work is not on the finished creative or art product that results from a series of workshops, but the process the participants undergo as a system of experiential learning.

During the team's own evaluation of the project, there had been some criticism that the facilitation took on more direction than necessary, thereby limiting the children's creativity. It should be restated here, however, that the project objectives were for the children to document and map their neighbourhood's cultural assets and produce outputs to share this documentation; the emphasis, therefore, fell on this process and not in the development of artistic skills amongst the children. The children's artistic talents were activated, and their sense engaged using the arts, but the aim was not to turn them into photographers, but for photography and the artistic process to become the medium for an exploration of learning.