

Creating Wellbeing – Youth, Arts, and Mental Health Conference

Friday 10 April 2026

The Ian Potter Southbank Centre
43 Sturt Street Southbank, VIC 3006
Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne

Convenors:

Professor Jane Davidson (Chair) with

Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative Conference Committee:

Dr Derrick Brown-Appenzeller, Dr Trisnasari Fraser,
Ms Anna Kennedy-Borissow and Dr Sarah Woodland



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We acknowledge the many Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and honour their Elders past and present. We respect their deep enduring connection to their lands, waterways and surrounding clan groups. We embrace the richness of First Nations Peoples' artistic and cultural expressions.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Eva de Bruijn, Stephanie MacArthur, Joanna Brooke and all our session chairs for volunteering their time; to Stephanie Rocke for scheduling, design and layout of the conference program; to Millie Mullinar for production coordination and to all event staff.

Share your experience

You are invited to post your highlights or reflections on social media. Please use the conference hashtag **#CAWRI2026** in your posts.

Feedback

Please complete the post-conference survey to help us improve future events.



Location and site information

The Ian Potter Southbank Centre
Melbourne Conservatorium of Music
43 Sturt Street Southbank, VIC 3006

Tram: No. 1 East Coburg - South Melbourne Beach Tram

Alight at Stop 17 (Arts Precinct – Sturt Street), proceed 40 metres south down Sturt St

Registrations: Enter on Sturt Street for Ground Level foyer

Presentations: Kenneth Myer Auditorium (KMA) (Ground Level)

Rooms 701, 708 and 709 (Level 7)

- *See schedule for specific session locations*

Refreshments: Ground Level foyer

- *Morning and afternoon teas and lunch*

Drinks/Dinner [Blondie Bar](#), corner Sturt Street & Southbank Boulevard

- *Optional from 5:30pm, no registration required, pay as you go*

Guest WIFI: Username: cawriconference2026

Password: Q\$!9cL

Join the Visitor Network

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If you have questions or difficulty connecting to the visitor network, please contact the Service Centre on +61 3 8344 0888 (available 8am to 6pm, Monday to Friday).

Low sensory space

Room 710 is open to all attendees as a low sensory space to take time out from the hustle and bustle of the conference. To maintain a quiet and comfortable space please keep noise to a minimum and enjoy your food outside the room.

Conference Schedule

8:30	Registrations (Ground Level foyer)			
9:00	Acknowledgement of Country and Conference Opening Address (Kenneth Myer Auditorium – KMA): Dr Tiriki Onus, Prof. Jane Davidson			
9:30	Plenary Panel – First Nations (KMA): The Wilin Model and Wellbeing Emma Holgate, Deadly Creatives (MTC); Amy Sole, ILBIJERRI. Facilitators: Leah Avene & Dr Tiriki Onus			
10:10	Transition time			
	KMA (Stream A)	Room 709 (Stream B)	Room 708 (Stream C)	
10:15	Chair: A/P Tully Barnett	Chair: Dr Angie Black	Chair: Anna Kennedy-Borissow	
	The Creative Industries, Social Enterprise, Repair & Restoration (CISERR)... (Eleni Kalantidou)	L.E.A.P. An embodied, co-creative framework for youth wellbeing (Carine Laughton)	The Art and Soul of Paper (Gary Friedman, Sharon Gelber)	
10:30	Make Some Space: belonging, recognition and relational safety in arts participation with young people (Samantha Butterworth, Dr Sarah Austin, Enhui, Sabrina Lee)	Students as co-creators: Mad Studies & mental health... (Louise Kolff, Rachel Maunder)	Moey: A narrative AI Pet for co-creating creative wellbeing practices with young people (Jenny Long et al.)	
10:45		Weaving knowledges to co-create an evaluation framework ... (Kelsey Deane et al.)		
11:00		Professionally psyched: Fostering university students' ... (Amanda Krause)		
11:15	Morning tea (Ground Level foyer)			
11:30	KMA (Stream A) Chair: Dr Anthea Skinner	Room 709 (Stream B) Chair: Dr Gillian Howell	Room 708 (Stream C) Chair: A/P Leon de Bruin	Room 701 (Emerging Creatives Stream) Chair: Dr Ash King
	Encountering gender-based violence through theatre... (Angie Black et al.)	Co-creating inclusive youth communal listening... (Matthew O'Leary et al.)	Understanding how young people from refugee backgrounds... (Meg Lee)	Cultivating resilience: Communities of practice... (Kim Goodwin)
11:45	Creative interventions that calm, connect, and empower children in health and community settings (Cat Sewell, Alice Ghazarian, Briony Farrell, Sonya Soares)	Podcasting Youth Arts: Co designing a youth participatory action... method (Evrin Şen)	Art, Agency and Well-being...Migrant & Refugee... (Nicole O'Loughlin)	Amplifying Student Voice: Co-designed Citizen Science... (Trisnasari Fraser)
12:00		Arts Gen: codesigning a Theory of Change to measure... (Arkie Barton)	Creative acts for climate feelings: Arts-based tools for supporting young people's climate emotions. (Diane Macdonald, Katherine Boydell)	Creative Minds - Building resilience for sustainable practice (Ash King)
12:15				
12:30	Lunch (Ground Level foyer) Artful Evaluation for Creative Health and Wellbeing Book Launch			

13:30	Keynote Panel (KMA): Educational, Mental Health and Community perspectives on Creating Youth Wellbeing through the Arts: Michael Anderson, CREATE, University of Sydney; Elise Carrotte, ORYGEN; Craig Rogers, The Push. Chair: Dr Derrick Brown-Appenzeller.			
14:25	Transition time			
	KMA (Stream A)	Room 709 (Stream B)	Room 708 (Stream C)	Room 701 (EC Stream)
14:30	Chair: A/P Claire Hooker	Chair: Prof Katherine Boydell	Chair: Dr Sarah Austin	Chair: Dr Ash King
	Youth wellbeing through cross-arts collaboration: Impacts and Insights from an ongoing tertiary-school partnership (Chris Summers, Rhiannon Simpson, Emily Wilson, Prue Wales, Bella Ambrose)	Relational theatre practices for supporting agency and creative... (Jennifer Andersen)	We are the Impact: Collaboratively mapping... Shopfront... (Bryoni Trezise)	Navigating pressures in creative training: practical tools for professional sustainability (Isabella Mazzarolo)
14:45		Future visioning for inclusion, access & opportunity... (Anthea Skinner, Leon de Bruin)	Roll for Wellbeing: A Qualitative Examination... (Alyssia Merrick)	
15:00		Lead and Step Back: Creating inclusive creative spaces for youth... (Kathryn O'Connor)	The uses of the "Secrets and Lies" of theatre and filmmaking... (Arpad Mihaly)	Wellbeing for emerging and young creatives – Closing panel (Ash King with Isabella Mazzarolo, Kim Goodwin, Trisnasari Fraser)
15:15				
15:30	Afternoon tea (Ground Level foyer)			
	KMA (Stream A)	Room 709 (Stream B)	Room 708 (Stream C)	
15:45	Chair: Dr Kim Goodwin	Chair: Dr Sarah Woodland	Chair: Dr Amanda Krause	
16:00	"These kids need this, this works for them": The unique power of Playback Theatre for young people (Phoebe Mason)	Future Reset: Fostering mental health and wellbeing... (Roshani Jayawardana)	"Taking Carter to the Moon" - Working creatively... (Lynne Seear, Bonnie Melrose)	
		Connected voices... resources to navigate the social media ban... storytelling... (Eleni Kalantidou)	Holding space for many ways of being: An art therapy... (Kate Richards)	
16:15	Final Plenary (KMA): Youth creativity and wellbeing in action: Make Some Space (Sabrina Lee, Enhui Cai); House of Muchness (Kirin Agnew, Celeste Rose); Deadly Creatives (Brodie Murray)			
17:00	Closing remarks: Prof. Jane Davidson			
17:30	Optional drinks/dinner at Blondie Bar (no registration required, pay as you go)			

 15min presentation

 30min workshop/lecture demonstration

 30-45min panel

Opening Remarks

The University of Melbourne is committed to fostering an environment where the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their fellow Australians is characterised by deep mutual respect, building positive change throughout our nation. In this spirit, we begin this conference by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, that of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, and pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are participating in this conference.

Australia's youth mental health is in crisis. Almost two in five young people in Australia now live with a mental illness – a 50% increase over the last two decades. The effects of the mandatory minimum age requirements for social media usage, implemented by the federal government on 10 December 2025 remain to be seen. Youth mental health received 'high level' status at the recent UN General Assembly.

The UK's National Centre for Creative Health and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing conducted a roundtable on 3 June 2025, bringing together experts from across research, policy, practice and lived experience to discuss the role arts, culture and creativity can play in supporting the mental health of children and young people. The roundtable informed a wider campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of arts, culture, and creativity for young people's mental health and wellbeing, calling for opportunities to access these activities throughout mental health care pathways and as preventative and early intervention approaches.

Our conference, *Creating Wellbeing: Youth, Arts, and Mental Health*, seeks to build upon this important campaign and the invaluable work by researchers and practitioners already underway here in Australia. The relationship between creativity and wellbeing is not a new concept on these lands; it is a return and restoration of practices that have thrived here for millennia.

Bringing together more than 70 stakeholders from across sectors, we aim to explore innovative strategies to integrate creative practices into mental health support systems for young Australians by framing the conference around three core questions:

1. How can we effectively measure the impact of creative programs on youth mental health and wellbeing across diverse contexts?
2. How can young people be meaningfully involved in co-creating mental health interventions through creative programs?
3. How can equitable access to creative spaces and resources be ensured for diverse youth, including those with disabilities, neurodivergence, or trauma exposure?

Alongside three parallel presentation streams that respond to these questions, we are also pleased to offer tailored sessions designed to support the wellbeing of young and emerging creative practitioners (but open to all). The Emerging and Young Creatives Stream (Room 701) acknowledges the challenges of working in the creative industries, and will include presentations and workshops on flow, play, rest and recovery, resilience and collaborative practice.

We look forward to your contributions to these important conversations throughout the conference and beyond via future collaborations.

**Jane Davidson, Derrick Brown-Appenzeller,
Trisnasari Fraser, Anna Kennedy-Borissow, and Sarah Woodland**

Plenary Panel – First Nations: The Wilin Model and wellbeing - Connecting country, creative practice and collaboration

Dr Tiriki Onus and Leah Avene frame creativity and wellbeing as foundational to culture, survival and continuity on Kulin Country - 'we are not implementing new ideas, we are restoring continuing Indigenous cultural practices'. Explored through the frame of multilogue - multiple, concurrent conversations in multiple directions - The Wilin Model is presented as a framework for Indigenous pedagogy, where relationships are paramount and wellbeing is understood as foundational to any relational, cultural or scholarly pursuit.

Facilitators & Panellists

Dr Tiriki Onus is a Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung artist, academic and filmmaker and is Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous), as well as being the Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts in Cultural Development, and Co-Director of the Research Unit for Indigenous Arts and Cultures, in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music at the University of Melbourne. In his role as PVC, Tiriki Onus supports the delivery of Murmuk Djerring with a particular focus on students. The role champions cultural safety, reducing historical fear and improving engagement and dissemination of Indigenous knowledges among students, both First Nations and non-Indigenous, within the university community and beyond. As an artist and educator Tiriki's work fosters innovation in research, development, advocacy, representation and inclusion of Indigenous arts and cultural practices and practitioners in the academy.

Leah Manaema Avene (she/them) is a mother, musician, therapist, broadcaster, facilitator, researcher and educator. Leah's bloodlines have been shaped by the Pacific Ocean and the islands of Tuvalu through her father's line and the landscapes of Ireland through her mother's. Leah was raised as a settler on unceded Kulin Nations lands along the coastline of Waddawurrung / Wathaurong Country (South coast of Victoria). Leah's work focuses on nurturing the strengths of culture, ancestry, land, body and community, to transform harmful power dynamics in stories, relationships and systems. Leah has a Masters in Relational Gestalt Psychotherapy and currently holds a research position as Indigenous Pedagogy Lead at the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, where their academic research focuses on Indigenous knowledge, language and art as holistic, integrative healing processes.

Amy Sole is a proud Wiradjuri/Worimi director, playwright, dramaturg and advocate. They are Head of Artist Development at ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and a graduate of NIDA's MFA (Directing) and VCA's Master of Theatre (Playwriting). Recent directing credits include Whitefella Yella Tree (STC/Griffin), Robot Dog (MTC), Emu in the Sun (MTC/ILBIJERRI), and Blak in the Room (MTC/ILBIJERRI). Amy's work as a writer includes Burning (NIDA) and co-writer of Tracker (ILBIJERRI/ADT), which toured nationally to Sydney Festival, Rising Festival, Adelaide Festival and Brisbane Festival. In 2024, Amy was awarded the Max Afford Playwright's Award for their play Nan's Place. Their practice is grounded in truth-telling and the transformative potential of theatre to connect, heal, and create space for First Peoples' stories.

Emma Holgate is a proud Mandubarra woman, artist and arts worker based in Naarm. Since completing a Certificate III in Live Production through Arts Centre Melbourne in 2023, Emma has continued developing her practice in production and design, working across multiple disciplines with a wide variety of companies and artists in a range of roles. In 2024, Emma was the winner of Victorian Trainee of the Year and Runner Up Australian Trainee of the Year as part of the Australian Training Awards and has since become an ambassador for on-the-job vocational training. As the Deadly Creatives Project Officer with Melbourne Theatre Company since 2024, Emma facilitates workshops and opportunities for young First Nations artists to upskill and develop as emerging theatre makers.

Keynote Panel: Educational, mental health and community perspectives on creating youth wellbeing through the arts

The keynote panel brings together three leaders whose work shapes practice with young people across educational, online and community settings. Professor Michael Anderson (University of Sydney), an international authority on creativity and school transformation, will frame how arts rich pedagogies and arts informed research can reshape professional learning, school culture and curriculum. Research Fellow Elise Carrotte (Orygen) will speak to the impacts of social media restrictions on young people and the value of codesigning resources and interventions with youth. Craig Rogers, Head of Programs at The Push, will bring practice-based insight into youth music participation, access barriers, industry pathways and the role of live music and community arts in building belonging and wellbeing.

Through a mix of research, policy and practice examples, the panel will explore creative and collaborative approaches to supporting youth wellbeing; the ways that education, health and cultural sectors can collaborate to support young people; and how ethical, arts informed methods deepen understanding and public impact. Attendees will hear about codesign with young people, arts informed dissemination that reaches communities beyond academia, and policy implications for schools, cultural organisations and social media platforms.



Michael Anderson,

Professor of Creativity and Arts Education, Co-director CREATE Centre

Michael Anderson is Professor of Creativity and Arts Education at the University of Sydney and Co-Director of the CREATE Centre at the University of Sydney. An internationally recognised leader in school transformation, his work focuses on how creativity can drive educational change. His most recent book is *How Schools Transform*.



Elise Carrotte, PhD

Research Fellow, Orygen Centre for Youth Mental Health

Elise Carrotte is a postdoctoral Research Fellow within the Suicide Prevention Unit at Orygen Centre for Youth Mental Health. She has over a decade's experience across public and mental health research, clinical psychology, and clinical governance. She is a researcher on the #chatsafe project, a youth co-designed suicide prevention initiative that is delivered entirely via social media.



Craig Rogers

Head of Programs, The Push

Craig Rogers is an experienced cultural leader with more than 20 years across Australia's arts sector, spanning festivals, public art, music, youth arts, venue management, and cultural policy. His work also intersects with community health, gender violence prevention, community development, and emergency recovery. He is currently Head of Programs at The Push.

Final Plenary: Youth creativity and wellbeing in action

The final plenary brings CAWRI Conference 2026 to a close through performance, film, and storytelling. This session invites us all to witness belonging, expression, and connection as lived experiences. Featuring Sabrina Lee and Enhui Cai from Make Some Space, Kirin Agnew and Celeste Rose from House of Muchness and Brodie Murray from Deadly Creatives.

Make Some Space

Facilitated by Sarah Austin, Samantha Butterworth, and John Marc Desengano, *Make Some Space* is a professional development program designed to build creative and cultural leadership skills for emerging artists. The inaugural program ran across Nov/Dec 2025 with 10 selected young people aged between 15-25 years who are beginning their journey in the arts. The 2025 program culminated in a performance at Footscray Community Arts.

Through a suite of workshops designed to build skills in creative collaboration and event organisation, participants developed a final participatory performance that explored and challenged traditional concepts of power and expertise.

House of Muchness

At the *House of Muchness*, we have created a third space. There is home, there is school, there is HOM. Here we champion the village, the community, the tribe. At HOM young people can belong to a collective and build social relatedness, artistic expression and find their creative kin.

Inclusivity and equality reign at HOM. Inclusive practice involves a considered and lateral approach to planning and several practical strategies to enhance the participation of all young people, including multiple entry points to exercises, the use of physical and visual language, and three-pronged verbal language (plain and direct, abstract and terminology).

Deadly Creatives

Deadly Creatives is a free creative learning program facilitated by Melbourne Theatre Company for young First Nations people interested in the arts. The program's alumni, teaching artists and new participants all work together to explore ways of telling stories for the stage. Participants in the program also get to see shows and meet with industry professionals to spark their own creative ideas and connections to the wider industry.

For YIRRAMBOI 2025, the Deadly Creatives presented two new works in development at Southbank Theatre. The 2025 participants wrote, designed and performed in both plays for four performances during the festival, showing their skills and growth as theatre makers.

Lunchtime Book Launch

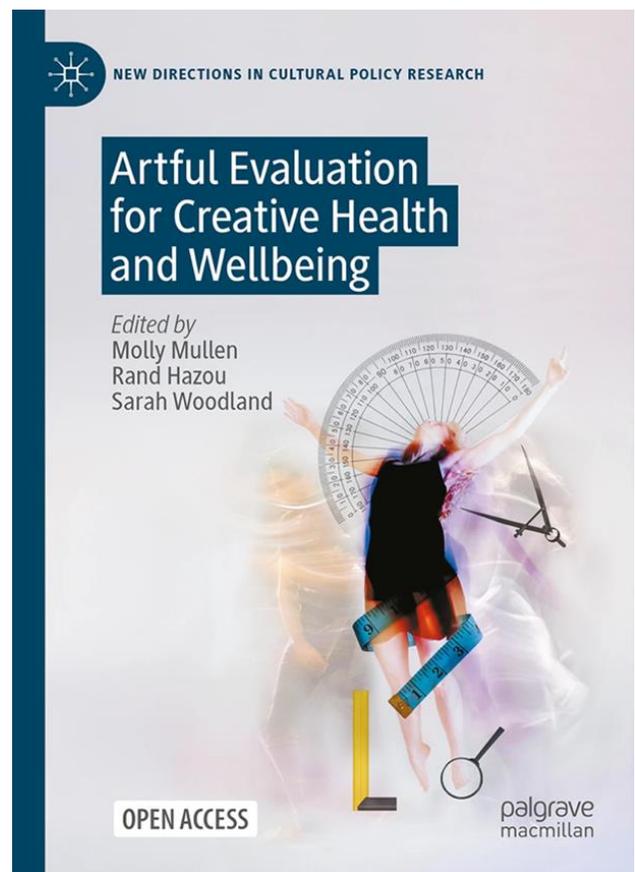
Join Sarah Woodland in celebrating the launch of *Artful Evaluation for Creative Health and Wellbeing*

Editors:

- Molly Mullen,
- Rand Hazou,
- Sarah Woodland

Springer Nature, April 2026

<https://link.springer.com/book/9783032170620>



This open access book presents new methods for evaluating the contribution of participatory arts to health and wellbeing. Responding to shifts in arts and health discourse, it argues for challenging long-standing ideas about how value is theorised, measured, and communicated. This book critiques the dominance of social impact as the primary way of understanding change in arts, health, and wellbeing, proposing instead evaluation approaches grounded in contemporary Indigenous, post-humanist, and postcapitalist theories. Curated as a collaboration between academic scholars and arts practitioners, this book brings together theoretical research frameworks and practical expertise to consider the collective inequities that shape the delivery of community arts projects.

Breakout Parallel Sessions

Panels (alphabetical by title)

Creative interventions that calm, connect, and empower children in health and community settings

Keywords: children's voice; creative interventions; wellbeing; research; impact

Abstract: *Creative, arts-based programs are increasingly recognised as powerful vehicles for supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. Yet important questions remain about how to effectively measure their impact and how to ensure young people are meaningfully involved. This panel draws on emerging findings from a VicHealth-funded collaboration between Polyglot Theatre and researchers at the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. We worked with children aged 3–12 years across three Victorian health and community settings. The project investigated how creative methodologies can be used to meaningfully involve children in matters affecting them. It also examined the impact of these interventions in real-world environments. The work brings together CCCH's Voice of the Child toolkit and Polyglot's child-led creative practices to explore new ways of listening to and acting on children's perspectives. Early findings highlight the transformative potential of Polyglot's signature interventions — Voice Lab, Big Draw and Paper and Tape — in supporting children's emotional regulation, communication and engagement. Children contributed rich insights that health services will use to inform decision-making. Families and clinicians reported that children were calmer, more settled and that the intervention improved experiences in clinical spaces.*

The Polyglot–CCCH panel will discuss how arts and science can be combined to capture impact across varied contexts, drawing on verbal and non-verbal child feedback alongside input from parents, carers and practitioners. It will also outline practical strategies to position children as active partners in shaping decision-making, demonstrating how creative programs can honour diverse forms of voice and agency.

Panellists:

Cat Sewell, co-CEO and artistic director, Polyglot Theatre has spent the past 20 years working at the intersection of arts, health and education, with play and creativity at the heart of her practice. Cat brings deep expertise in participatory theatre as a director, facilitator, educator and play specialist. She has led award winning work across child development, community collaboration, public design, education and local government. Cat will facilitate the panel conversation.

Alice Ghazarian, senior consultant, Murdoch Children's Research Institute is an evaluator with over a decade of experience at the Centre for Community Child Health (MCRI). As Voice of the Child Implementation Lead, she is guiding national testing of the Voice of the Child Toolkit in community health and early education settings. Alice is dedicated to supporting organisations, service systems and communities to use and generate evidence that improves services and conditions for children and families.)
alice.ghazarian@mcri.edu.au

Briony Farrell is an artist and performer who finds joy in the playful, imaginative worlds created through Polyglot's work. A career highlight was performing in Paper Planet at Western Autistic School, where she deepened her practice in engaging neurodivergent participants. She co-created and performed in Polypropylene Dreams at ArtPlay and has worked with Arena Theatre Company, The Lost Lands Festival and The Starlight Children's Foundation.

Sonya Soares is a multidisciplinary performer, dramaturg, director, producer and arts activist whose career spans film, television and theatre. Her screen highlights include My Year Without Sex, Lowdown and Very Small Business. In 2012 she founded Sondheim repertory company Watch This, earning 21 Green Room Award nominations and two wins. She has also been recognised for performance work with Melbourne Theatre Company and Polyglot Theatre.

MAKE SOME SPACE: belonging, recognition and relational safety in arts participation with young people

Keywords: belonging, youth arts, relational and cultural safety

Abstract: *This panel will explore how experiences of belonging within arts participation shape the mental health and wellbeing of young people and children. Across diverse artistic contexts—including community arts programs, school-based initiatives, youth theatre, music, and digital creative spaces—the arts are frequently positioned as supportive environments for young people’s emotional expression and resilience. However, less attention has been paid to how feelings of belonging, recognition, and relational safety within these spaces are produced, sustained, or disrupted, and why these processes matter for mental health outcomes. Drawing on a specific case study of a program called MAKE SOME SPACE, which ran during November and December 2025 at Footscray Community Arts with 10 selected young people and three creative facilitators, this panel will be structured as a conversation designed to examine how belonging functions as a relational, affective, and cultural process rather than a static outcome. Together, the panellists will consider how we might design participatory arts spaces that can foster connection, identity affirmation, and agency, particularly for young people navigating marginalisation related to disability, neurodiversity, migration, race, gender, or socioeconomic inequality. At the same time, the panel critically interrogates tensions and exclusions that may arise within arts settings, including pressures to perform, normative assumptions about participation, and uneven power relations between adults and young people. Empirical contributions will showcase qualitative, participatory, and arts-based research methods, alongside practitioner-led and co-produced approaches that foreground young people’s voices and lived experiences. The panel also addresses methodological and ethical challenges in researching mental health and belonging with children and young people, including issues of care, consent, and representation. By centring belonging as a key mechanism linking arts participation and mental health, this panel advances conceptual and practical understandings of how arts-based interventions can support wellbeing beyond individualised therapeutic models. It offers insights for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and cultural organisations seeking to design inclusive, sustainable arts environments that nurture connection, meaning, and mental health for children and young people.*

Panellists:

[Samantha Butterworth](#) (she/her) is a Creative Producer and Programmer and currently a Senior Producer at national producing company Performing Lines. Sam has worked for organisations including Red Stitch Theatre, Regional Arts Victoria and Darebin Arts.

John Marc Desengano (he/him) is a Filipino-Australian actor, theatre-maker and educator based in Melbourne’s western suburbs who has worked extensively across film, TV and theatre. Until recently, he was the co-Artistic Director and CEO of Western Edge.

[Dr Sarah Austin](#) (she/her) is an award-winning artist, theatre-maker and researcher who specialises in working with children and young people in contemporary performance. She is currently an ARC DECRA fellow based at Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne. sarah.austin@unimelb.edu.au

Enhui Cai (she/her) is a playwright, performance maker, actor and dramaturg based in Naarm. She is currently studying a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Theatre) at VCA and was a participant in the inaugural Make Some Space program. As an artist, Enhui seeks to bridge gaps in understanding – she’s never felt fully comforted by a community, so she writes for the in-betweeners.

Sabrina Lee (any pronouns) is an emerging theatre-maker and dramaturg based in Naarm. She is currently engaged at the VCA in a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Theatre), where she strives to pursue skills in and explore all aspects of theatre, from writing to directing, dramaturgy to education. Sabrina was a participating artist in the inaugural Make Some Space program.

Wellbeing for emerging and young creatives – Closing panel

Keywords: emerging creatives; wellbeing; communities of practice; productivity; resources

Abstract: *Designed for early career and emerging creative practitioners, this closing panel brings together key ideas from across the Emerging Creatives stream (Room 701) and asks the bigger question: how do you actually build a creative life that's sustainable?*

Rather than offering neat answers, this conversation explores the realities of working in the arts, including uncertainty, identity pressure, isolation, and the challenge of staying well in an often unstable industry.

Drawing on research and lived experience, panellists will share practical ways to navigate career ambiguity, make values-based decisions, find or build supportive communities, and shape environments that better support wellbeing. The discussion will focus on what's within reach, small shifts, everyday strategies, and ways of thinking that can help creatives stay connected to their work without burning out.

The session will close with audience Q&A, creating space for reflection, shared insight, and honest conversation about what it takes to keep going in creative work.

Panel coordinator: Dr Ash King is a psychologist, creative and the Mental Health Content & Programs Lead at Support Act. She develops training, education and resources that support the mental health and wellbeing of people working across Australia's creative industries. Ash blends clinical expertise with lived experience in the arts to deliver practical, engaging programs that help creative workers and workplaces navigate pressure, prevent harm and build healthier cultures.

Other speakers:

- [Dr Isabella Mazzarolo](#), Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, The University of Melbourne
- [Dr Kim Goodwin](#), School of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne
- [Dr Trisnasari Fraser](#), Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne

Youth wellbeing through cross-arts collaboration: Impacts and insights from an ongoing tertiary–school partnership

Keywords: wellbeing; education; collaboration; evaluation; methodologies

For the past five years, artist/researchers from the Faculty of Education (FoE), University of Melbourne, have collaborated with Sydney Rd Community School (SRCS), Brunswick, to deliver an interdisciplinary Music and Drama program for Year 9 and 10 students. SRCS is a flexible learning environment supporting young people with a range of mental health, trauma-related, and neurodevelopmental challenges who have not flourished in mainstream school settings. The program integrates student-led learning with arts-based experiences developed through FoE's studioFive space, creating pathways which highlight individual agency for engagement, expression, and connection. Across this ongoing partnership, FoE and SRCS staff have observed and documented positive shifts in student engagement, wellbeing, and attendance, alongside persistent challenges related to confidence, mental health fluctuation, and sustaining participation over time. These tensions raise important questions about how impact is understood and meaningfully evaluated in creative wellbeing programs. This panel brings together artist / researchers and teaching staff to reflect critically on the program's development, implementation, and emerging impacts. Discussion will address approaches to assessing wellbeing outcomes beyond conventional metrics, including observational, reflective, and arts-based methods. Panellists will also consider how young people have been involved as co-creators in shaping creative processes, content, and modes of participation, rather than positioned solely as recipients of intervention. Finally, the session will explore issues of equity and access, including the role of institutional partnerships in enabling sustained access to creative spaces, resources, and expertise for neurodivergent and trauma-affected youth.

Panellists:

Dr Chris Summers is a Lecturer in Arts Education (Drama) and Co-Director of the Research-based Theatre Lab at the University of Melbourne. An award-winning playwright, AATE Distinguished Dissertation awardee and Dyason Fellow, his research integrates autoethnography and critical theory to explore social justice through arts-based methods. Formerly a Melbourne Theatre Company resident writer, secondary teacher and lawyer, he coordinates subjects within the Master of Teaching and Master of Education programs.

Dr Rhiannon Simpson is a Lecturer in Music Education at the University of Melbourne. Her research examines teacher agency, sociology, and informal music pedagogy, utilizing Bourdieusian concepts to understand pedagogical change. A recipient of the John and Eric Smyth Traveling Scholarship, she is also the co-founder of INERTIAeducation. Her work frequently investigates policy, agency in music education, and the representation of music educators in film and popular media.

Associate Professor Emily Wilson is the Head of Music Education at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education. With over 20 years of experience, her research focuses on student engagement, decolonising music education, and Indigenous knowledges. A 2023 Churchill Fellow, she lectures across undergraduate and postgraduate teacher education programs, maintaining strong ties with schools to bridge the gap between formal and informal learning in music education.

Dr Prue Wales is a Senior Lecturer and arts practitioner at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education, with extensive experience across Singapore, Hong Kong, and Australia. Her work centres on intercultural dialogue, applied theatre, and research-based theatre, often focusing on the narratives of marginalised communities. She serves on various international journal boards and has held leadership roles in the International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI).

Bella Ambrose is an educator, musician and artist with extensive experience working with young people with a range of wellbeing challenges. She has coordinated significant partnerships between young people at Sydney Rd Community School and arts organisations.

Lecture Demonstrations and Practical Workshops (alphabetical by title)

Creative acts for climate feelings: Arts-based tools for supporting young people's climate emotions

Keywords: climate change; young people, co-design, arts-based resources; mental wellbeing

Abstract: *Climate emotions are increasing among young people worldwide, yet few evidence-based creative resources are available to support them. This practical workshop introduces "Creative Acts for Climate Feelings," an arts-based resource co-created with young people that provides educators and parents with accessible tools to help youth explore their climate emotions.*

Unlike interventions aimed at resolving or managing difficult feelings, this approach recognises all climate emotions as valid and essential, creating space for young people to notice, express, and sit with their feelings through creative practice. The resource was developed through participatory research at Black Dog Institute's Arts-based Knowledge Translation Lab, with activities tested and refined via workshops with diverse youth groups.

Participants will engage with selected activities from the resource. We will demonstrate how simple arts activities can uncover emotional experiences that traditional assessments might overlook, while discussing practical ways to implement them across various settings.

The workshop aligns with conference themes by: (1) exploring process-oriented approaches to understanding impact in creative wellbeing interventions; (2) showcasing meaningful youth co-creation during the resource development; and (3) promoting equitable access through freely available materials that require only basic supplies and no specialised training.

Participants will leave equipped with practical tools, implementation strategies, and access to the full resource for application in their own contexts.

Structure:

- Introduction to climate emotions and the resource
- "Quick draw your special place"
- "Climate in your body"
- Discussion on implementation, adaptation and the importance of validating all climate feelings.

Presenters:

Dr Diane Macdonald is a qualitative researcher at the Black Dog Institute and UNSW Sydney, combining robust business management expertise with innovative arts-based enquiry methods to foster resilient and inclusive communities. Her research centres on partnering with people marginalised by mental health challenges and disability, using creative approaches to generate knowledge, support vulnerable populations and translate research insights for broader community engagement.

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Prof Katherine Boydell is an internationally recognised leader in qualitative inquiry and arts-based knowledge translation in mental health and social care. She has a long standing, successful history in the development of innovative methodological approaches to create knowledge and translate empirical research using arts-based methods. She has published over 250 articles in peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, and the texts *Qualitative Methods in Early Psychosis* and *Applying Body Mapping in Research*

Creative minds - Building resilience for sustainable practice

Keywords: creativity, wellbeing, mental health, psychology, productivity

Abstract: *This interactive workshop invites early-career and emerging creatives to challenge and expand prevailing notions of creativity while cultivating practical strategies that support sustained professional development. The session bridges creative practice with evidence-informed wellbeing approaches to reduce psychological distress and insulate participants from further risk of mental ill health. Through a mix of theory, exercises and reflection, participants will:*

- *Understand the importance of flow in creative practice and the contexts in which it's best supported*
- *Explore play as a vehicle to expand creativity*
- *Reflect on accessible rest and recovery practices, to keep their creative work sustainable*

Participants will be introduced to skills that boost creative resilience, improve collaborative working, and establish sustainable practices for career longevity.

Presenter: **Dr Ash King** is a psychologist, creative and the Mental Health Content & Programs Lead at Support Act. She develops training, education and resources that support the mental health and wellbeing of people working across Australia's creative industries. Ash blends clinical expertise with lived experience in the arts to deliver practical, engaging programs that help creative workers and workplaces navigate pressure, prevent harm and build healthier cultures. ash@supportact.org.au

Moey: A narrative AI pet for co-creating creative wellbeing practices with young people

Keywords: Digital Companionship, Creative Expression, Human–AI Interaction in Mental Health, Creative Wellbeing, Participatory Co-Creation

Abstract: *Creative programs are increasingly recognised as valuable approaches for supporting youth mental health and wellbeing. However, practitioners continue to face two significant challenges: how to effectively measure the impact of creative wellbeing interventions, and how to meaningfully involve young people in the co-creation of these interventions. This lecture demonstration introduces Moey, an AI-powered narrative companion designed as a creative wellbeing platform where young people actively co-create their own growth experiences through everyday actions.*

Moey integrates gamified goal-setting, reflective journaling, and AI-mediated encouragement to transform daily self-care and personal goals into a creative and emotionally supportive process. For example, users can share daily goals or tasks with the AI companion, which provides personalised encouragement and positive feedback when these goals are completed, reinforcing small achievements and promoting a sense of agency in everyday life. Rather than functioning as a clinical intervention, Moey operates as a participatory creative environment where users interact with a character-driven AI pet that celebrates small achievements, invites reflection, and supports an evolving narrative of personal growth.

Moey’s design is grounded in established frameworks from positive psychology, particularly Seligman’s PERMA model of wellbeing (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement) and the VIA Character Strengths classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These theoretical foundations guide the platform’s interaction design, encouraging users to recognise strengths, reflect on meaningful experiences, and acknowledge incremental progress through everyday actions. For instance, personalised feedback and encouragement aim to cultivate positive emotion and engagement, while goal completion supports achievement and agency. In addition, the platform explores narrative reflection practices such as strengths-based feedback and gratitude-oriented exercises (e.g., “Three Good Things”) to support users in recognising positive experiences in their daily lives. Within this approach, wellbeing is understood not as a static clinical outcome but as a set of observable and cultivable behavioural and emotional patterns that can be supported through repeated creative engagement, reflective practice, and positive reinforcement in daily life.

Presenters:

Jenny Long is an educator, AI product owner, and co-founder based in Melbourne. She studied neuroscience and educational psychology at the University of Melbourne and has rich experience in teaching and EdTech product sector. She co-leads the Moey project, an AI co-growth pet supporting wellbeing through creative interaction and gamified goals. Her work focuses on social-emotional learning innovation and integrating positive psychology with AI to design research-informed digital wellbeing practices.

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Darren Yip, Founder with over 7 years of experience turning ideas into scalable businesses through partnerships, channel growth, and execution. In the Moey project, I bring entrepreneurial experience from building Artspire Home, with strengths in marketing, product development. I also lead commercial strategy, go-to-market, partnerships, brand building, and coordination across product, design, and business functions.

Rosie is an advisor to the Moey project, contributing perspectives from Positive Psychology to support the design of creative digital wellbeing practices. With a background in accounting and professional services, she is interested in how AI can support human flourishing. Her work explores how evidence-based Positive Psychology frameworks, including PERMA and character strengths, can be integrated with AI to develop scalable tools that support reflection, growth, and wellbeing.

Moey: A narrative AI pet... *continued*

To address Core Research Question 1, the workshop demonstrates research-informed approaches for evaluating the wellbeing impact of creative digital interventions. The Moey prototype integrates a mixed-methods evaluation framework combining behavioural engagement metrics, self-reported emotional indicators, and narrative reflection data generated through user interaction with features such as task completion, reflective journaling, and conversational interaction with the AI companion. These indicators provide a non-intrusive way to examine how creative digital practices may influence motivation, emotional awareness, and perceived wellbeing over time.

To address Core Research Question 2, the workshop illustrates how young people participate as co-creators of the wellbeing intervention itself. Through everyday interactions—setting goals, reflecting on achievements, shaping the personality and responses of their AI companion, and generating personal reflections—users actively contribute to the evolving design of their own wellbeing practices. In this sense, the intervention is not predefined but co-constructed through ongoing interaction between the user and the narrative AI companion. Participants will engage in a live demonstration of the Moey prototype and explore how narrative AI companions can enable participatory, creative approaches to youth wellbeing support. The session invites educators, researchers, and practitioners to consider practical frameworks for designing research-informed, co-creative digital wellbeing programs that are scalable, engaging, and grounded in contemporary wellbeing science.

To address Core Research Question 3, the session also considers how digital creative wellbeing tools may expand equitable access to wellbeing practices. Moey is designed as a lightweight and easily accessible digital platform, offering potential to broaden access to creative wellbeing practices for young people who may not have access to traditional support environments.

Other Contributors:

Shu Liu (Tech Consultant) is a medical researcher and AI technologist at the Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health, University of Melbourne. His work focuses on applying machine learning to brain imaging and health data, translating interdisciplinary research into practical AI-driven digital health tools.

Aaron Chan is a computer science researcher and full-stack software engineer at Monash University. He focuses on building scalable AI systems and robust data pipelines, enabling reliable analytics infrastructure for intelligent applications and large-scale digital products powered by high-quality data.

Zi Mo Lee, studies Creative Writing and Ancient World Studies at the University of Melbourne. She works as a narrative designer, creating immersive storytelling and world-building for interactive experiences, exploring how narrative design can deepen emotional engagement in digital wellbeing technologies.

Daniel Yu is a UX designer and product consultant currently completing a Master of Design at Monash University. His work focuses on human-centred digital experiences, translating complex systems into intuitive interfaces through user research, design systems, and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Navigating pressures in creative training: Practical tools for professional sustainability

Keywords: professional sustainability; career development; creative practice; career uncertainty; values-based decision making

Abstract: *Tertiary institutions play a vital role in the development of students' artistic craft, offering structured pathways and support for creative excellence. Yet, creative training often amplifies exposure, evaluation, and identity investment, making students and early-career artists particularly vulnerable to stress and identity-based pressure. This interactive session introduces practical tools to support professional sustainability for creative practice students, with a primary focus on musicians while remaining relevant across disciplines. While centred on the experiences of creative students, the session is also designed for educators and practitioners, offering strategies that can be used to better support students within creative training contexts. Participants will explore common pressures experienced in higher education training, including burnout, career uncertainty, and creative versus personal identity. Through guided reflection and discussion, participants will engage with practical tools, including values-based decision making, reframing success and failure, and career scenario planning. The workshop will draw on institutional examples, including the IgniteLAB program at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, to illustrate how creative spaces can embed practical support structures that respond to the pressures students experience. Through this, the session equips emerging creatives with language, agency, and strategies they can carry into the creative industry to support sustainable professional lives.*

Presenter: [Dr Isabella Mazzarolo](#)

is a Lecturer at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne, where she teaches music careers and performance psychology and provides individual coaching to support students' artistic and professional development. A classical pianist and piano pedagogue, she holds a PhD in Performance Psychology from the University of New South Wales. Her research focuses on musicians' health and well-being, with particular interest in supporting musicians to develop in their practice while sustaining healthy creative lives.

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The Art & Soul of Paper

Keywords: puppet; power; arts-based; communication; metaphor

Abstract: *The Art and Soul of Paper - Puppet Power in Schools is a preventative, arts-based wellbeing program that supports youth mental health by creating safe, non-clinical spaces for expression, connection and emotional regulation. Using puppetry and animation, the project enables young people to explore complex thoughts and feelings through metaphor, narrative and visual storytelling. Central to the program is the use of the “puppet as proxy”, a well-established creative mechanism that provides psychological distance and emotional safety. This allows students to engage with sensitive or challenging themes—such as identity, belonging, cultural difference, anxiety, social pressure and uncertainty—without the need for direct self-disclosure. As a result, participation increases, stigma is reduced and students who may struggle with verbal communication are able to express themselves meaningfully. The workshops strengthen key protective factors associated with positive mental health, including social connection, self-efficacy, collaboration and creative agency. Large-scale puppetry requires collective focus, coordinated movement and shared breath, fostering calm attention and group regulation in contrast to the fast-paced, high-stress environments many young people experience. Stop-motion animation promotes focus, planning and mastery, supporting confidence, emotional organisation and a sense of achievement. Grounded in trauma-informed and strengths-based practice, the program prioritises process over performance and values creativity as a pathway to wellbeing rather than pathology. Delivered live, the program is inclusive, culturally responsive and adaptable to diverse school contexts. The Art and Soul of Paper positions the arts as a powerful mental health intervention—one that supports resilience, voice and connection while helping young people feel seen, capable and valued within their communities.*

Workshop facilitators:

- **Gary Friedman**, Master puppeteer & Puppetry-in-Education consultant)
- **Sharon Gelber**, Occupational Therapist and Educational Consultant

Gary Friedman is a multi-media artist, renowned puppeteer, animator, and filmmaker who has dedicated his career to the realms of education and creativity. With a strong passion for using puppets as a medium of expression, Gary has spearheaded numerous international adult-education projects revolving around vital topics such as HIV-AIDS, Democracy, Corruption, Abuse, and Prisons. Gary resides in Melbourne alongside his OT partner, **Sharon Gelber**, and their two sons. His indomitable spirit, unwavering dedication to education and artistic talent continue to inspire and shape the world of puppetry and animation.

Our workshops activate the brain and tantalise the senses to prime the performer for thinking and performing at their peak ability. Due to the non-verbal nature of this work, it is ideal for multi-cultural community engagement for all ages. Workshops encourage Critical and Creative Thinking and incorporate techniques such as stress management & relaxation, storytelling, group improvisation, puppetry & object manipulation, humour.

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***“These kids need this, this works for them”*: The unique power of Playback Theatre for young people**

Keywords: theatre; improvisation; storytelling; empathy; deep listening

Abstract: *Through an experiential demonstration of Playback Theatre as well as illustration of case studies of our work with young people and mental health, we share Playback’s unique position as a creative program that meaningfully engages young people in co-creating mental health interventions.*

Playback Theatre welcomes an audience to share their own stories, then supports the group to deeply listen to these stories by performing them back on the spot in theatre and music. Our work performing Playback Theatre with young people in a wide range of settings shows that giving the gift of trust to young people to tell their own stories, and giving deep listening and artistic representation in return, opens space for connection, self-discovery and enduring transformation, and can do so in extremely brief periods of time.

We watch audiences changing across a show (from wriggly to still, from distracted to leaning forward and quiet, from simple sharings to complex reflections); and we receive written and verbal feedback from young people and adult staff: “Usually when she speaks about her mum, she storms out of the room, but she was able to stay, share, and feel heard. I almost cried. These kids need this, this works for them” (Facilitator, Project Ready collaboration, 2022) and “I find that there is so much in common between us. When we can’t see that, it makes us feel more lonely. But in sharing stories we can help each other so much” (Year 9 student, Wagga Women’s Health collaboration, 2024).

Presenter: Phoebe Mason, Artistic Director, Melbourne Playback Theatre Company, has been with the company for nine years and has been the Artistic Director for three. She also works as a Clown Doctor and independent theatre-maker and previously worked as an environmental lawyer.

Melbourne Playback Theatre Company

[Melbourne Playback](#) is an independent ensemble of highly skilled theatre practitioners, with over 45 years’ experience in providing transformative arts experiences. Company members also work in academia, therapy, ministry, social work, teaching, arts-in-health, local government and not-for-profit change work.

Single Papers (alphabetical by title)

Amplifying student voice: Co-designed citizen science for campus wellbeing

Keywords: co-production; student wellbeing; creative and performing arts; social prescribing; citizen science

Abstract: *An initiative co-designed with students in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music offers a participatory, arts-informed approach to address wellbeing challenges among university students, particularly those in creative and performing arts. The project investigates how students manage wellbeing and time, identifies service gaps, and co-designs a tailored social prescribing-inspired wellbeing program. Students act as co-researchers through three phases:*

1. *needs and assets review to map informal coping strategies and institutional supports;*
2. *collaborative programme design with a student advisory body to ensure relevance, accessibility and cultural responsiveness; and*
3. *implementation and evaluation of the programme – employing a citizen science framework.*

This initiative uses creative programmes and arts-based methods to enable meaningful involvement of student researchers: with students holding decision-making roles on the student advisory body, and leading facilitation and dissemination activities so lived experience shapes intervention content, delivery and evaluation. Equitable access is prioritised through inclusive design principles: accessible physical and digital spaces, flexible modes of participation, trauma-informed arts practices, and collaboration with disability services. Evaluation will combine experience-sampling survey data and focus groups to assess feasibility, acceptability and equity of outcomes. By embedding students in governance and research roles, the initiative aims to amplify peer support, reduce barriers to services, and offer scalable, community-centred strategies that promote inclusive wellbeing across faculties and campuses.

Presenter: [Dr Trisnasari Fraser](#) is a registered psychologist with a practice endorsement in community psychology, an orientation of psychology concerned with person-environment fit, and wellbeing in social, cultural, and political contexts. Her main areas of interest are the wellbeing of artists and the therapeutic value of community arts. She is a postdoctoral research fellow investigating the intersections of creativity and wellbeing as convenor of the Creativity and Wellbeing Research Initiative (CAWRI).

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Co-authors/contributors: Lucy Pfeifer, Daphanie Wong, Oil Lamp Moksha Fung and John Beder (all Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, University of Melbourne)

Art, agency and wellbeing: Supporting youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds

Keywords: participatory visual arts; CALD youth; culturally safe spaces; wellbeing; creative engagement

Abstract: *Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds navigate complex transitions as they reshape identity, belonging, and wellbeing in a new cultural landscape. Over half of Australia's youth are from a multicultural background, and at a time when Australia is facing a mental health crisis with young people, there is an urgent need for creative, culturally responsive approaches that support inclusion, agency, and connection. This presentation draws on findings from a ten-week Participatory Action Research (PAR) project involving visual arts workshops with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) youth aged 14–24 in Nipaluna/Hobart, Lutruwita/Tasmania. Through painting, drawing, and collaborative activities, participants used artistic expression to explore hybrid identities, articulate lived experience, and build social cohesion with peers. The research offers qualitative insights into how youth engage with visual artmaking to navigate*

settlement and cultural hybridity and improve self-confidence and self-expression. The PAR method, using a reflective iterative model, enabled youth to be active collaborators in the workshop design and dynamics, enabling autonomous expression with visual materials. The research findings highlighted the need for trauma-informed facilitation, the importance of working in a cross-disciplinary team to create culturally safe spaces and flexible, low-barrier arts engagement programs. This presentation will share key artefacts, participant narratives, and a framework for how participatory visual arts workshops can function as a wellbeing pathway for youth from diverse backgrounds. It will also offer practical recommendations from the researcher, who is a professional visual artist and lecturer, for designing engaging, flexible arts workshops.

Presenter: [Dr Nicole O'Loughlin](#) is a lecturer in Creative Arts at the University of Tasmania. Her research explores participatory visual arts in cross-disciplinary projects, the benefits of arts and cultural activities, and the development of embodied knowledge through arts practice. Her PhD centred around migrant and refugee communities in Lutruwita/Tasmania, she found the value of visual arts programs to foster belonging, enhance social cohesion, and support autonomous expression of lived experiences,

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Arts Gen: codesigning a Theory of Change to measure the impact of art and health programs

Keywords: community engagement, theory of change, evaluation, agency, First Nations

Abstract: *Monitoring and evaluating community-engaged art and health projects is a process that involves knowledge-making, sharing, and trust. Meaningful frameworks for measuring impact need to integrate community priorities and data sovereignty. Arts Gen has worked alongside community to develop a 4-year Theory of Change and Monitoring and Evaluation Framework that speaks to community needs and meaningful learning for improvement. Arts Gen acknowledges that*

evaluation can displace power away from community, so Arts Gen has developed a framework that is transparent and collaborative in this process to minimize the risk of this occurring. The programs that sit within our 4-year strategy work at the intersection of art and health to deliver programs to historically underrepresented communities. This Theory of Change looks to contribute to: an increase in wellbeing (physical, emotional and social), increased health agency for community and so that community can safely identify and connect with their culture and identity, Arts Gen works alongside artists from priority communities to codesign programs that meet community needs. The pilot year of Balance, a partnership with Weenthunga Health Network saw delivery to young First Nations women aspiring for health and wellbeing careers to explore social, cultural connection and boundary setting. Our evaluation approach for this program prioritised codesign with First Nations community, whilst still aligning to our framework – this led us to a strengths-based approach, highlighting existing cultural connection and how art as cultural practice can strengthen boundary setting whilst contributing to social and cultural connection.

Presenter: **Arkie Barton** is the Coordinator of Arts Gen, a health promotion program that sits at the intersect of art and health to deliver programs to historically underrepresented communities. As a proud Kalkadunga and Bidjara queer woman, both her arts practice and community engagement work draws from cultural practice and belonging. Her work at Arts Gen looks to how we can utilise art and creativity to support mental wellbeing and self-determination within health and wellbeing spaces.

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Co-Creating inclusive youth communal listening experiences

Keywords: music; listening; wellbeing; intervention; engagement

Abstract: *While digital music streaming is ubiquitous, it often isolates young listeners from shared identity-building moments that define youth culture. New restrictions on social media use, rising live-music costs, and venue accessibility have created a deficit of opportunities for shared musical engagement. Informed by findings from recent RMIT/Sonaur symposia (Nov 2025, Feb 2026), strategic priorities of the youth music organisation 'The Push', and published research on socio-emotional music interventions (e.g., Rodwin et al., 2023 & Romano et al, 2024), this presentation outlines a proposal to address this gap through localised community-driven communal music-listening, discovery and discussion experiences. We propose a 12-month exploratory initiative to co-design a framework and deliver a proof-of-concept pilot program. The model will integrate interoceptive awareness and *communitas* to support an embodied sense of connection and belonging. Through invited partnerships with 'The Push', the framework will be developed using a youth-led co-design methodology. This process incorporates dedicated youth focus groups and a youth advisory committee to ensure the proposed intervention accurately reflects the lived experiences and needs of modern adolescents. Crucially, the initiative will prioritise neuro-inclusive and culturally safe design principles. This includes exploring the integration of environmental sensory affordances, such as adjustable acoustic environments and designated low-stimulus quiet zones, to accommodate diverse cognitive profiles and support sensory regulation. The framework will adopt clear psychosocial safety protocols guided by experienced facilitators. The pilot phase aims to engage 50 youth participants over a six-month delivery period. The initiative incorporates a mixed-methods evaluation framework, utilising pre- and post-session wellbeing surveys alongside qualitative participant interviews to assess the intervention's validity and effectiveness. Our goal is to validate the role of communal music-listening, discovery and discussion experiences as a scalable, community-based support for youth mental health and social*

well-being. We acknowledge the exploratory scope of this work and the requirement for a comprehensive formal evaluation following the pilot phase.

Presenters: Matthew O'Leary: After a career in executive roles, predominantly in people and culture, across the media industry, including several years at Spotify in New York, Matthew founded Sonaur, a research translation start-up focused on integrating acoustic architecture & multisensory design, immersive composition, spatial sound, listening and deep human care. Our goal, through an expanding network of incredible researchers and industry partners, is to investigate novel cultural applications of these sensorial disciplines in public healthcare and community well-being. olearymatt@gmail.com

Dr Barbara Doran is an artist, researcher and transdisciplinary innovator with over two decades spanning public health, psychology, urban planning and creative practice. A key voice in Australia's creative health landscape, contributing to a pioneering network advancing arts-based approaches that strengthen collective wellbeing and cultural connection. As Lead Curator of the SPHERE Knowledge Translation Platform and Director of the Creative Intelligence and Strategic Innovation program at UTS, she champions creative practice as essential infrastructure for public health and wellbeing. She is also the author of *Creative Reboot: Catalysing Creative Intelligence*.

Dr Amanda Krause is a Senior Lecturer (Psychology) at James Cook University and Honorary Research Associate at the Kids Institute. Her research has made significant contributions to understanding how listening technologies influence people's experiences and how musical engagement impacts well-being. With a mission to share #MusicScience with academic, industry, and public audiences, Dr Krause actively publishes her research (85+ peer-reviewed publications), gives presentations, engages in initiatives like Pint of Science, and regularly participates in radio interviews.

Connected voices: designing resources to navigate the social media ban in Australia through creative co-production and storytelling

Keywords: co-design, social media, mental health, social impact, youth

Abstract: Existing recommendations (Australian eSafety Commissioner, 2025) for the Australian government's social media age restrictions enacted in December 2025, have not been translated to resources that could be used in educational settings, supporting this transition. This paper responds to this gap by presenting the pilot program *Connected Voices* (currently in progress), designed to address mental health concerns through creative media production (digital storytelling, video-production, short films) with the guidance of teachers and social workers. The program builds on existing literature (McQuilten, 2022; Dahya, 2017) presenting the positive impact of skilling young people in creative media production on enhanced civic participation and strengthening their own representation in media settings. *Connected Voices* consists of two streams for two different demographics running for eight weeks within a school setting. *StorySafe* and *The Listening Lab* are creative wellbeing programs aimed to students in years 7-9 and their families, and students in years 10-11, respectively. They are designed around four themes (participants digital/media literacy, digital citizenship, online safety and digital resilience) as interactive creative activities to promote emotional regulation and expression, sense of community and purpose, critical thinking and awareness of online risks. *StorySafe* provides an emotionally healthy transition to adolescence through a guided experimentation with digital media. *The Listening Lab* equips non-age restricted students with tools for increasing their digital resilience and critical thinking through digital creativity. The learning design of the program was informed by evidence (Collin and Swist, 2016; Archer, 2025; Jaffe, 2023) reinforcing the need for youth participation and a careful consideration of how the present adult-led, social media discourse is affecting them. The Monitoring Learning and Evaluation (MEL) of *Connected Voices* involves pre- and post- program surveys, interviews, and content and visual content

analysis of the produced outcomes. This process has been designed to capture how the young people want to be represented via the social media ban and their different perspectives related to their age. The findings generated will be triangulated with the service design outcomes of the program and scholarly literature. These will be converted into resources used for a co-design process, which will take place with both student groups after the completion of their programs. The inclusivity of the program lies in both the participatory design approach and the selection of the school, which is situated in Maryborough, a low-socioeconomic area with high social inequality (Walker, 2018).

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Presenter: [Dr Eleni Kalantidou](#) is a design psychology theorist and practitioner and an Associate Professor in design at Griffith University. Her research work on design psychology, community-led behavioural change, community resilience and adaptation, has been published in journals and books and supported by grants. Dr Kalantidou has also collaborated as a researcher and consultant with several international, national and local NGOs, Queensland Government and Brisbane City Council.

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Other contributors: Tammy Brennan (Testimony Arts), Juanita Childs (Griffiths University)

Cultivating resilience: Communities of practice and wellbeing in the arts

Keywords: arts management; communities of practice; resilience; wellbeing; arts practice

Abstract: *The modern arts sector is defined by a paradox of immense cultural value and extreme precarity, leaving young practitioners to navigate a challenging environment characterised by informal, unprotected labour. For Gen Z students and emerging arts workers, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and prioritising self-care are clearly identified career goals, yet they often face a landscape that normalizes risk and privatises uncertainty. This presentation explores how communities of practice—social learning systems where knowledge is developed through collaborative participation—serve as vital ecosystems for youth wellbeing and resilience. Moving beyond the transactional nature of "network sociality," communities of practice foster deep mutual engagement and trust. Communities provide a psychologically safe space where individuals can share experiences, effectively normalising and depersonalising the career and learning setbacks. Participating in communities of practice can provide the psychosocial support necessary to boost self-efficacy and optimism toward career and education. Through a collective approach to identity work, young practitioners can integrate their creative practice with leadership, overcoming the isolation that often leads to burnout. Drawing on research from Creative Community Connections and international case studies, this presentation argues that building community is a foundational act of wellbeing. By shifting from individualistic competition toward a shared responsibility for collective health, the arts sector can empower the next generation to build sustainable, resilient careers.*

Presenter: [Dr Kim Goodwin](#) is a researcher and educator in arts management and human resources at the University of Melbourne. Her work explores how people build careers, lead teams, and thrive in the arts. She's passionate about creative workforces, inclusive leadership, and supporting emerging talent in the cultural sector. kim.goodwin@unimelb.edu.au

[Link to Conference Schedule](#)

Encountering gender-based violence through theatre: Beyond outcome measures

Keywords: theatre intervention, evaluation, ethics, gender-based violence

Abstract: *Globally, there is growing evidence that theatre can be effective in health education across areas including mental health, sexual health, and family violence (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016; Woodland & Bell-Wykes, 2024). However, such work is frequently positioned within prescriptive "impact" agendas that privilege measurable, metric-driven outcomes. This framing risks overlooking theatre's affective, embodied, and relational dimensions. By creating imaginative distance, theatre enables young people to encounter complex emotions and ethical dilemmas collectively (Thompson, 2009). Yet questions remain: How do we evaluate an educational theatre intervention? How can we account for its impact as an ephemeral, embodied experience? And what ethical issues arise when asking audiences to articulate emotional responses to confronting material? This paper examines these questions through MINE, a theatre project developed by Angie Black and Noel Maloney exploring the impacts of gender-based violence and the moral choices faced by young men. The performance invites young audiences to consider how narratives around sexual violence are silenced or distorted, how misinformation causes harm, and how consent is understood and negotiated. The project's first stage involved iterative script development and pilot performances in two schools, accompanied by audience and teacher surveys. Now entering a second phase as a potential school wellbeing intervention, we consider how more "artful" research methods (Mullen, Hazou & Woodland, in press) might better capture MINE's affective, ethical, and educational value.*

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Presenter: [Dr Angie Black](#) is Senior Lecturer in Film and Television at VCA, University of Melbourne, and an award-winning film director. With a PhD in performance approaches and an MA in screenwriting, they have 30+ years' experience. Their feature *The Five Provocations* (2018) and festival-winning shorts champion innovative, diverse screen practices. Research and practice focus on filmmaking, screenwriting and performance — especially gender, sexuality and cultural diversity. Angie co-wrote the play *MINE*. angieb@unimelb.edu.au

Co-presenters/contributors:

[Dr Noel Maloney](#) teaches screenwriting and performance writing in the BA at La Trobe University. His research examines contemporary Australian scriptwriting, especially tensions between writing, development and production cultures, with interests in television drama and independent film and theatre. He has published and co-edited special issues, writes for radio, TV and theatre, and co-wrote the play *MINE*, about the impact of violence on young footballers and their community.

[Dr Sarah Woodland](#) is Senior Lecturer in Theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts and an applied theatre researcher/practitioner. With 25+ years' experience in Australia and the UK, her work focuses on social, criminal and climate justice, and health and wellbeing. She led the AIATSIS funded THE SCORE participatory theatre project with ILBIJERRI and has led numerous community engaged projects, published widely and contributed to trans disciplinary debates.

[Dr Natalie Ann Hendry](#) is Senior Lecturer in Youth Wellbeing at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. She coordinates the Student Wellbeing MEd specialisation and teaches research methodology. Her research explores health, education and media intersections, focusing on youth studies and informed by media, cultural and sociological theory. Her PhD, supported by a Young and Well CRC scholarship, examined young people's mental ill-health and social media.

Future Reset: Fostering mental health and wellbeing through youth-led creativity, solidarity praxis and expanding ecologies

Keywords: youth; arts; creativity; wellbeing; solidarity

Abstract: *The Future Reset initiative aimed to increase social connectedness and mental health and wellbeing for young people in the context of post-COVID recovery, guided by the notions of collaboration, relationality, and equity. Future Reset utilised and delivered community-based art projects and activations across 26 locations in Victoria, Australia, funded by VicHealth and designed by young creatives in collaboration with their communities. This paper aims to showcase the two aspects of Future Reset, the Co-Learning Settings with Young Creative Leads and youth summits, to demonstrate how young people can meaningfully be at the forefront of co-creating interventions and prevention for mental health and wellbeing and how arts and creativity are central to such processes. This paper illustrates how the settings and engagements of Future Reset drew upon creative and multimodal methods for change and nurtured participatory processes and practices, which amplified youth voices, resource sharing, community knowledge production and critical thinking and solidarity, and provided 'contact zones' for critical reflexivity, relationship building and world making. The findings show how Future Reset was activated through arts-based social change, and highlight the potential of culturally grounded, youth-led arts initiatives to co-create the conditions for good health and processes of epistemic justice. Through this, we show how Future Reset is an example of change when it comes to young people's mental and social wellbeing in the context of solidarity praxis and creativity, with the approach to change drawing on ideas of expanding ecologies and relinquishing power, while providing resources and support.*

Presenters: **Dr. Roshani Jayawardana** is a postdoctoral researcher at Victoria University and works with Moondani Balluk (Indigenous Academic Centre), the Community Identity Displacement Research Network (CIDRN), and the Institute for Health & Sport (IHES). Roshani's research interests focus on how young people

respond to displacement, exclusion and forms of symbolic and structural violence, and how they make sense of ethnic identity—particularly using community-engaged processes and multimodal approaches. roshani.jayawardana@vu.edu.au

Nickila De Silva is a producer and communications/engagement specialist driven by the imperative to foster collaboration within hierarchies, and to drive the exchange of resources and knowledge between communities/generations. Nickila draws from lived-experience working within Government, Non-For-Profit, Arts and Commercial Arts sectors across Victoria. Through tried and tested strategic frameworks, story-telling and collaboration - Nickila transforms knowledge and research into engagement.

Dr. Amy Quayle is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology in the College of Sport, Health and Engineering, Victoria University, a Research Fellow in the Institute for Health and Sport, and a member CIDRN. Amy's research is grounded in community, cultural, and liberation psychologies. She investigates how multiple forms of oppression are experienced, contested and resisted by individuals and communities, with particular attention to race/whiteness and coloniality.

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Future visioning for inclusion, access and opportunity: Nurturing accessible communities of practice in the Adaptive Music Bridging Program

Keywords: music, disability, education, inclusion, ensemble

Abstract: *Musical experiences should be available to all but are often not accessible to those with a disability for several reasons. Despite Australian National Disability Standards for Education stating that students with disability are entitled to enrol in their local school and access education on the same basis as their peers without disability, instrumental music is often not promoted or considered for those with a disability in school, private studio, or community environments. The Adaptive Music*

Bridging Program (AMBP) established in 2023 is a multi-funded project of ensembles that now sits within the Melbourne Youth Orchestra's suite of bands and orchestras. The AMBP engages students aged 8-14 with a disability in one of three ensembles, engaging in instrumental lessons, cultivating musical skills, literacies and knowledge through weekly participation in music making activities. Research shows that participatory pedagogies, inclusive mindsets and emancipatory wellbeing benefits are cornerstones to student learning in the AMBP. This paper reflects on the outreach and teacher education activities engaged by AMBP teachers and students in providing professional development for pre-service and current professional instrumental music teacher workforces nationally and internationally, and community organisations across Australia. A descriptive case analysis of outreach activities and feedback received points to major themes of: individual teacher growth, disruption of systemic attitudes, and goal orientations of music education more widely. This lens of inquiry with AMBP activities illuminates how reappraising teacher, school department, and community attitudes can transform music education to a vocation that is enjoyable and rewarding for all.

Presenters: **Dr Anthea Skinner** is an ethnomusicologist who specialises in disability music culture and education, organology and heritage archiving. A McKenzie Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, Anthea's research focuses on professional musicians with disability, their creative output and career pathways, as well as adaptive musical instrument design. Anthea is currently the coordinator of Melbourne Youth Orchestras' Adaptive Music Bridging Program and a member of the all-disabled band the Bearbrass Asylum Orchestra. anthea.skinner@unimelb.edu.au

Associate Professor Leon de Bruin is coordinator of the Master of Music Performance Teaching degree program at the Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne. He has served as Past National President of ASME, NAAE and AAE committees and currently serves as a Commissioner of International Society for Music Education's Instrumental and Vocal Music

Teaching Commission. A staunch advocate for quality instrumental music education his research work spans music education, creativity, cognition, pedagogy, and improvisation.

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L.E.A.P.: An embodied, co-creative framework for youth wellbeing

Keywords: Embodied theatre; co-creative framework; lived experience

Abstract: *L.E.A.P. (Lived Experience and Applied Performance) is a trauma-conscious youth theatre program that uniquely integrates playful embodied theatre, co-creative improvisation, and micro phenomenological methods such as explicitation to help participants access multiple dimensions of their lived experience during improvisation. It supports young people to recognise internal bodily cues and better understand how their emotional states are expressed and experienced physically. Bringing together dramatherapy, applied theatre, and movement-based training—approaches rarely combined in a single system—the L.E.A.P. initiative is grounded in the understanding that distress and overwhelming experiences are often stored in implicit, sensory motor patterns rather than in narrative memory, and therefore respond more effectively to embodied, experiential modalities that support integration (van der Kolk, 2014). Innovation in impact measurement: The micro phenomenological methodology embedded within L.E.A.P. underpins a multidimensional evaluation framework that captures embodied, sensorial, relational, reflexive, and cognitive shifts. Facilitator metaperception further enriches this process by providing context-sensitive insight into how young people experience changes in wellbeing in real time. Youth-led co-creation: Improvisation and participant-led exploration position young people as co-authors of the process. Participants choose the themes for improvisation, giving them meaningful agency and a sense of control that supports wellbeing. This structure allows youth to experiment with choice, action, and relational presence, actively rehearsing agency and shaping the intervention from within. As an emerging methodology, L.E.A.P. lays*

the groundwork for a scalable, practice-based model capable of transforming how youth mental health is understood, measured, and supported across diverse contexts.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

Presenter: [Carine Laughton](#) is a collaborative theatre-maker with extensive experience in applied performance across community, youth, and interdisciplinary settings. A certified micro-phenomenologist, she investigates how fine-grained experiential methods illuminate embodied intuition and lived experience within creative practice. She leads LEAP, a youth-led movement and improvisation initiative supporting mental health. Her work integrates Lecoq-based physical theatre with trauma-conscious, co-designed processes that foster attunement to interoceptive cues and emergent agency.

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Co-contributor: **Dr Anne Gotfredsen**, Umeå University, Sweden. Invited fellow at the Centre for Youth Studies, University of Newcastle, NSW.

Lead and step back: Creating inclusive creative spaces for youth wellbeing

Keywords: inclusive arts practice, creative autonomy; belonging; community; joy

Abstract: *Creative spaces can be a place where young people belong, connect, and discover joy. Equitable access to these spaces depends on environments that prioritise community and peer connection rather than clinical frameworks. Wellbeing for diverse youth, including those with disabilities, neurodivergence, and trauma exposure, is best supported when young people come together to create, collaborate, and connect. Many young people spend significant time under observation by support workers, therapists, and educators. While these roles are important, their presence in creative spaces can limit peer connection, risk-taking, and authentic self-expression. This session presents an alternative: facilitated creative sessions where young*

people are invited simply to create together, build relationships, and develop a sense of belonging. Drawing on practice-based experience in inclusive arts facilitation, the presentation explores how arts organisations and agencies can provide low-barrier, community-focused creative spaces alongside clinical supports. Facilitated by skilled artists, these sessions encourage experimentation, choice, and social participation without outcomes being measured or interpreted in real time. Attendees will consider how such environments foster psychological safety, peer support, and social agency, all strongly linked to positive wellbeing, and discuss practical strategies for accessibility and collaboration between arts organisations and support services. By framing creative participation as a space for connection rather than intervention, this session invites practitioners, policymakers, and agencies to rethink how the arts can nurture community, trust, and shared creative experience for young people.

Presenter: Kathryn O'Connor runs Zen Hen Hula Art Studio in Geelong, creating spaces where kids and teens can make, play, and belong. She worked as a nurse for 17 years, including supporting children and teenagers with additional needs in Melbourne's western suburbs. Kathryn now combines her clinical experience with arts facilitation to foster autonomy, joy, and connection through creative practice.

Holding space for many ways of being: An art therapy open studio group with young people

Keywords: art therapy, young people, open studio, trauma-informed, neuroaffirming

Abstract: This presentation uses Ursula Le Guin's (2019) *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* as a conceptual foundation for exploring equitable access within an open studio group art therapy program for young people with diverse lived experiences of trauma and neurodivergence. Le Guin's framework challenges linear narratives that prioritise singular outcomes, inviting instead a focus on practices that gather, hold, and connect multiple ways of being. Within this framework, the art therapy studio functions as a

metaphorical "carrier bag". It is a shared space where a balance of therapeutic structure and non-directive engagement between materials, peers and facilitating practitioners supports young people to connect and create without judgment. In this presentation, access and engagement are explored through the facilitator's relational witnessing of how young people enter, interact with, return to, or resist the space over time. These observations highlight the studio's role as a container for expression and identity exploration, supporting agency and joy, holding possibilities for growth. The presentation will describe how the studio-based art therapy approach aligns with trauma-informed and neurodiversity-affirming practice, emphasising plurality and an ethics of care. Attendees will gain insight into how studio spaces can be intentionally designed to offer equitable access and foster positive identity exploration, shared joy and creative empowerment for young people whose experiences may not fit traditional clinical spaces.

Presenter: Kate Richards (she/her) is a Registered Art Therapist (ANZACATA) and Lecturer in the Master of Art Therapy at La Trobe University. For over fifteen years, she has worked with children, adolescents, and families experiencing complex trauma in community settings using neurodevelopmental and attachment-informed approaches. Her recent work focuses on group processes with young people and dyadic art therapy with child-caregiver survivors after family violence. k.richards2@latrobe.edu.au

Podcasting youth arts: Co-designing a youth participatory action research method

Keywords: youth arts; podcasting; structures; participation; codesign; design

Abstract: This presentation reports on the development of a podcast-based Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology within a practice-based PhD studying youth arts programs in Australia. Building on the broader ARC Linkage 'Vital Arts' project I am attached to, which has culminated in a community of practice around youth arts impact, my doctoral research uses podcast case studies to

explore how youth arts programs support 21st century transferable skills. Rather than outlining the full doctoral project or presenting findings, the session focuses on the design of a co-created podcast series with young participants from youth arts organisations. I outline the rationale for podcasting as both a research tool and a public communication platform, and describe my current stage of ethics approval, recruitment and co-design. The presentation will consider how podcasting can centre youth voice, shape research questions and episode themes, and make research more accessible and impactful for young people, practitioners and other stakeholders interested in evidencing the value of youth arts.

Presenter: **Evrım Şen** is a researcher and community builder with nine years' leadership experience in the community and arts sectors. They are completing a PhD in Arts Management at RMIT, using podcasting as a Youth Participatory Action Research method to examine 21st century employability skills in youth arts programs. Evrim's research intersects with their previous roles as the General Manager at SYN FM, a youth community broadcaster and as a Youth Consultant at the Centre for Multicultural Youth.

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Professionally Psyched: Fostering university students' professional identity and readiness through the creation of a student-centred podcast series

Keywords: self-determination theory; basic psychological needs; music listening; song lyrics; large language models

Abstract: *Sense of belonging between students and their university is critical to career readiness and an important driver of retention (TESQA, 2020). However, national Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) data shows that, in general, psychology students have the lowest levels of peer engagement (44.8% positive rating) in comparison to other disciplines, which is thought to be a consequence of high levels of external study. While work-integrated learning is integral to developing*

student understanding of their career pathways, placement-based learning can be restrictive and inflexible for students with location barriers and time-based demands. Consequently, as a team of tertiary psychology educators, we have developed a podcast series aimed at enhancing belongingness, career pathway clarity, and student retention. Launched in 2024 (and released as Professionally Psyched on Spotify), in addition to student involvement in podcast production, we have created an advisory board of students and staff to oversee the continuation of the podcast series. In this presentation, we will share findings from our program of evaluation research. With data collection underway, our discussion will focus on quantitative pre-post survey data as well as interview and focus group data concerning how a podcast series might cultivate a more connected, confident, and professionally engaged and resilient student community. Discussion of the findings will also address creatively disseminating career-related information to undergraduates via podcasts and how to optimize student engagement and address concerns of career readiness.

Presenter: **[Dr Amanda Krause](#)**, Senior Lecturer (Psychology) in the College of Healthcare Sciences at James Cook University (Queensland, Australia). Amanda is also an Honorary Fellow at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and an Honorary Research Associate at The Kids Institute. Dr Krause's current programs of research concern how music and radio experiences influence people's well-being and how podcast series can be used to simultaneously disseminate research and build community. amanda.krause1@jcu.edu.au

Other authors/contributors: Dr Alison Sheaves, Dr Connor McShane, Dr Dan Miller, Dr Jonathan Connor, Dr Jessica Muller, Mr Craig Ridep-Morris (All James Cook University)

Relational theatre practices for supporting the agency and creative self-expression of children with complex disabilities

Keywords: children; disability; agency; self-expression; practice

Abstract: *Despite some positive developments in disability rights in Australia, the cultural rights of children with complex disabilities are currently largely unmet. When the World Turns, by Polyglot Theatre, is one of very few Australian theatre works made expressly for this cohort. It aims to offer diverse young audiences access to a live participatory theatre experience in which they can exercise agency and creative self-expression. This presentation reports on a research partnership between Polyglot Theatre and CAWRI that used interviews, detailed observations of performances and narrative inquiry to understand the holistic and diverse individual audience experience of When the World Turns. The research explored the complex and intersecting creative practices and critical supporting factors that help to realise the company's vision to centre children's voices in live theatre works, and through which agency and creative self-expression are reframed as relational phenomena.*

Presenter: **Dr Jennifer Andersen** is a theatre maker, early years teacher and independent researcher. Her research focuses on the practice and impact of artists working with children and families in education and community settings. Recent research and evaluation projects include partnerships with ASSITEJ International, Threshold and Polyglot Theatre, and a study of intergenerational arts exchanges at the Faculty of Education, The University of Melbourne.

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Roll for wellbeing: A qualitative examination of the use of tabletop gaming to support young people

Keywords: Dungeons and Dragons (D&D); wellness; self-determination theory; tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs); identity

Abstract: *Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), are increasingly being used for therapeutic purposes. Preliminary research suggests TTRPGs can be utilised to enhance young persons' social skills and well-being. However, evidence is needed detailing practitioners' perceptions of the benefits of these interventions for their younger clients. We undertook semi-structured interviews with 16 Australian practitioners who employ therapeutic TTRPGs for wellness promotion. Practitioners were predominantly self-educated on TTRPGs and tended to use the D&D system. Most practitioners worked with youth aged 9+ years, with various pre-existing mental health and behavioural conditions (e.g., depression, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). TTRPGs were reported to be flexible, allowing practitioners to tailor game elements to their implementation needs. Practitioners reported client improvements in connecting with self and others and that TTRPGs supported exploration of identity and personal challenges through character roleplay. These outcomes stemmed from key features of TTRPGs—player agency, creativity, and collaborative storytelling—which facilitate self-determination (autonomy, competence, and relatedness). Further, practitioners reported improvements in clients' life skills (e.g., problem solving), enjoyment and immersion, and that TTRPGs provide clients opportunities to practise therapeutic techniques. While this study focused on practitioner perspectives, future research should prioritise youth perspectives. Subsequent work could then engage practitioners and youth to co-design of TTRPG wellbeing programmes. Elements necessary for effective programme design will be discussed, including considerations of how to emphasise agency and collaborative storytelling, flexibility in tailoring games to diverse populations, and potential strategies for overcoming barriers to inclusive implementation.*

Presenter: Alyssia Merrick (BPsych Hons) is a PhD candidate located at James Cook University, Townsville. Their research primarily focuses on the impacts of play on adults, with a particular focus on the employment of tabletop gaming as an intervention for wellbeing. Merrick has also been an active member in the tabletop gaming space, leading the largest tabletop gaming club within Townsville, and participating in several actual-play Dungeons & Dragons shows.

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Other Contributors: **Dr Dan J Miller** and **Dr Amanda E Krause**, both James Cook University

Students as co-creators: Mad Studies and mental health narratives

Keywords: Mad studies; mental health narratives; creative work; student projects; stigma

Abstract: *As part of a Cultural Studies unit at SAE University College, students from different creative disciplines (audio, music, design, animation, games, and film) collaborated to produce a creative media text inspired by a critical theory of their choosing. Students could choose from theories including posthumanism, queer studies, post-colonialism, critical race theory, Mad Studies and others. Interestingly, a majority selected Mad Studies, which focuses on the lived experiences of and discrimination against people with mental illness. This presentation reports on collaborative research by two academics, one coming from a creative industries and cultural studies perspective (SAE University College), the other coming from a social psychology perspective (ACAP University College). By analysing 2 student projects and their corresponding exegeses, we examine the stated goals and intended audiences, the quality of their understanding of Mad Studies concepts, and how the students contextualise mental illness through their creative work. In view of psychological perspectives on public stigma, self-stigma, and stigma reduction, we speculate on the potential influence of these works on both the intended audiences and the students themselves. Our analysis considers what it reveals about contemporary young people that mental health*

emerged so prevalently when given open-ended creative briefs with multiple critical theory perspectives to choose from. We also consider other ways of measuring the impact of this assessment task and how other young people can be involved in similar projects.

Authors: **Dr Louise Kolff** is a Senior Lecturer in design and cultural studies at SAE University College. Louise's research is focused on culturally sensitive and controversial topics in visual culture. She has explored HIV prevention efforts in Australia and the visual culture of sexuality education aimed at children and teens.

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Dr Rachel Maunder is a Senior Lecturer in the Discipline of Psychological Science at ACAP University College. Rachel's research is focused on understanding and reducing public and self-stigma in relation to mental illness and other marginalised social groups. She has examined various interventions for reducing prejudice and stigma, as well as various moderators and mediators of these interventions, using quantitative cross-sectional, longitudinal, and experimental research paradigms.

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"Taking Carter to the Moon" – Working creatively with vulnerable adolescents in a paediatric hospital setting

Keywords: co-design, creativity, adolescence, wellbeing, healthcare

Abstract: *This paper will focus on three creative projects co-designed with young people intersecting with the Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service (CHQ) across diverse contexts. It will address the second core question - how can young people be meaningfully involved in co-creating mental health interventions through creative projects. The bespoke projects discussed in the paper include virtual reality, music composition and environmental design and curation. CHQ is Queensland's standalone paediatric tertiary and quaternary public health service, responsible for the*

delivery of healthcare to the sickest young people in the state. The CHQ Arts in Health program worked in collaboration with cultural and academic partners to provide resources for creative participation to three vulnerable cohorts of adolescents and young adults including those hospitalised with life-limiting conditions or mental health diagnoses, and others experiencing uncertain education outcomes due to sociological pressures. In each case, young people were deeply involved in co-creating the projects and worked alongside young artists and musicians in a fully collaborative dynamic. The lived experience of the young people was central to the development of the activities, inspiring them to participate from a position of ownership. Each project provided an outlet for their stories to be shared, so this paper will report on outcomes through the perspectives and words of the young people themselves. Learnings included a growing awareness that young people over the age of 13 can feel disempowered within paediatric healthcare environments, where the focus of creative engagement is often heavily directed towards small children. Within an environment buzzing with Clown Doctors, Starlight Captains and play specialists, adolescents look instead towards their peers and contemporary culture for reassurance and meaning.

Lynne Seear has been a senior arts manager for 35 years, and has specialised in Arts in Health for the past 15 years. Before moving to Queensland Health, she was previously Deputy Director at Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art, where she had executive oversight of the strategies informing curatorial programs and projects. Since 2011, Lynne has worked on the development and implementation of Arts in Health programs within acute hospital settings.

Bonnie Melrose has worked at several galleries and cultural organisations in south-east Queensland, with a focus on access, inclusion and social justice. She is currently Manager of Arts in Health at Children's Health Queensland, where she develops creative programming and art collections in direct collaboration with the children and young people who are cared for by the health service. Bonnie has a special interest in arts and disability.

The Creative Industries, Social Enterprise, Repair and Restoration (CISERR) initiative: leveraging art and design to improve at-risk youth mental health

Keywords: co-design; mental health; youth, repair; social impact

The increase of youth experiencing mental health problems around the world and in Australia is strongly related to several factors including social media, eco-anxiety, social inequality and homelessness (McGorry et al., 2025). Art interventions to improve youth mental health have showcased promising outcomes (Coholic et al., 2020; Golden et al., 2024) but there are limited data indicating their short-, medium- and long-term impact. This paper provides such example by showcasing the findings from the Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) process employed to measure the social impact of the Creative Industries, Social Enterprise, Repair and Restoration (CISERR) initiative. CISERR, which has been running in Maryborough, Queensland since 2021, provides art and design education, vocational training, and social work and cultural support to at-risk young men disengaged from mainstream schooling and/or involved with the youth justice system. The culturally diverse cohort that has participated in CISERR has been actively engaged in the co-designing of three rounds via participatory design methodologies such as Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) and methods like Participatory Scenario Planning (PSP). The findings from all rounds revealed numerous positive mental health outcomes including increased confidence, development of trusting relationships and regulation of anger, frustration and anxiety. To achieve these outcomes, the initiative embedded a trauma-informed approach to respond to the diversity of the participants varying from neurodivergence to trauma. Considering the high unemployment, transgenerational dependence and addiction experienced by some of the youth participants' families, the initiative provides them with access to creative education as mental health and resilience support.

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Golden, T. L., Ordway, R. W., Magsamen, S., Mohanty, A., Chen, Y., & Ng, T. C. (2024). Supporting youth mental health with arts-based strategies: a global perspective. *BMC medicine*, 22(1), 7.

McGorry P, Gunasiri H, Mei C, Rice S and Gao CX (2025) The youth mental health crisis: analysis and solutions. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 15(151517533).

Presenter: [Dr Eleni Kalantidou](#) is a design psychology theorist and practitioner and an Associate Professor in design at Griffith University. Her research work on design psychology, community-led behavioural change, community resilience and adaptation, has been published in journals and books and supported by grants. Dr Kalantidou has also collaborated as a researcher and consultant with several international, national and local NGOs, Queensland Government and Brisbane City Council. e.kalantidou@griffith.edu.au

Other Contributors: Tammy Brennan, Testimony Arts

The uses of the “Secrets and Lies” of theatre and filmmaking in youth wellness workshops

Keywords: stories; script theory; Mike Leigh; language learning; Shakespeare

Abstract: *Mike Leigh, a youth theatre director, went on to make films such as “Secrets and Lies”. His approach was to create performances by asking his participants to think of people they knew who would be suitable as a template for creating a character. Each participant had very different objectives for their character. Leigh would “coach” each participant to find suitable stories, scenes, and events for scenarios to envision a back-story. All in preparation for their role in a group devised theatre or film project. Group improvisations would be arranged to allow each participant’s character to interact with other characters as Leigh identified them. This way of working might be called “Leigh’s guided improv”. The Leigh process is particularly suited for participants who don’t know each other and their respective histories. To begin with they are encouraged to interact in drama warm-ups, use breath and text to speak with structure, devise scenarios and perform short scripts, “whoosh” through plays, make short, scripted videos and then*

tackle short scenes from Shakespeare. The above can be expanded into a sustained preparation with Leigh’s process, rehearsing with “cue scripts” and presenting performances of “The Taming of the Shrew” or “Twelfth Night”. This approach is the result of a long gestation process in many different settings and scenarios. It has required a deep dive into the history and origins of western education / theatre. Literacy problems often cover over behavioural issues which require meaningful involvement in co-creating creative mental health schema.

Presenter: [Arpad Mihaly](#), a teaching associate, VCA Film & TV school, is a drama/media graduate, (B.Ed.), Deakin University, worked professionally in theatre and film/TV for 15 years. Founder and director of initial Melbourne fringe festivals. Consultant to Arts Victoria, devised and delivered community arts programs. He has worked in schools as “filmmaker in residence”. This paper is a partial answer to his research question: “why is drama so important in language learning”?

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Understanding how young people from refugee backgrounds utilise creative practices to support wellbeing in busy lives

Keywords: youth and young people; wellbeing; arts-based research; relational; regional and rural Australia

Abstract: *Research on the wellbeing of youth from migrant and refugee backgrounds increasingly recognises the value of the arts in fostering spaces of wellbeing and belonging. However, there is still limited knowledge about how this group are already using creative practices to support wellbeing, and what wellbeing means to them- particularly in regional and rural Australia. Exploring these questions is an essential first step in developing policy and practice to meaningfully improve access to creative spaces in ways that are relevant to the wellbeing of this group. Based on my PhD research which drew from arts- and community-based participatory research methodologies, this paper explores strategies for everyday wellbeing utilized by*

young people from recent migrant and refugee backgrounds now living in rural Australia. I explore wellbeing as a fundamentally existential phenomenon, where the 'being' concerned is relational, situated, felt, and embodied. Through the lens of Todres and Galvin's (2010) 'dwelling-mobility' framework, I explore young people's creative strategies for wellbeing as both grounded and expansive over memory, time, and experience. Young people in this research emphasised the importance 'the little things' in day-to-day life as part of essential meaning-making practices which enabled wellbeing. Through photography, art, and other creative practices, they found ways to connect, pause, experience moments of flow that helped them build a meaningful sense of home and future possibility. Ultimately, the knowledge co-produced with young people in this research illuminates how young people's ability to (co-)create possibilities for wellbeing are shaped by relational, creative practices woven into busy lives.

Todres L, Galvin K. "Dwelling-mobility": An existential theory of well-being. *Int J Qual Stud Health Well-being*. 2010 Sep 9;5(3). doi: 10.3402/qhw.v5i3.5444. PMID: 20842215; PMCID: PMC2938924.

Presenter: [Dr Meg Lee](#) researches youth wellbeing across health and human geographies and youth sociology at the University of Melbourne. She is passionate about co-creating meaningful ways of doing research together with young people and communities. Her work focuses on embodied experiences of place, movement, dis/comfort and safety, and how these shape young people's possibilities for being in the world.

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Weaving knowledges to co-create an evaluation framework for creative youth wellbeing

Keywords: youth; creative; mental health; evaluation; impact

Abstract: *Creative wellbeing programs for young people offer alternative approaches to addressing the global youth mental health crisis but the incorporation of creative approaches in health and social policy is hampered by a lack of evidence-*

informed frameworks that are attuned to the unique contribution of the arts. This presentation considers how the impact of creative programs can be effectively measured across contexts. It will draw on insights from a participatory research project to co-create an evaluation framework for Project X, a creative wellbeing program for young people with mental health challenges in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The research process enabled the production of a theory of change grounded in multiple knowledge systems, including youth lived experience, practitioner expertise, Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge), and international research evidence synthesised for a logic analysis. Because the framework is grounded in contextualised evidence but identifies the active ingredients of creative youth wellbeing programs more broadly, it can be used to guide practice, measurement, and evaluation decisions for initiatives in Aotearoa and across international settings. We will share the framework and walk through the steps of the staged research process. The walk-through will highlight the theory-based evaluation and arts-based methods we integrated to enable inclusive access to the co-creation process by young people with mental health distress and trauma. We will also provide an example of the way the framework can be used to guide impact measurement decisions.

Presenter: [Dr Kelsey Deane](#) is a senior lecturer in the assessment and evaluation research centre at the University of Melbourne. She has expertise in evaluation theory, community psychology, youth development and wellbeing, youth programming, youth-adult relationships, and youth work practice. Kelsey's research primarily focuses on projects that directly inform the quality of supports, services, and systems affecting marginalised young people. She specialises in mixed-method evaluations incorporating theory-driven, participatory and utilisation-focused principles. kelsey.deane@unimelb.edu.au

Co-authors: **Dr Amber Walls** is a Community Innovation Specialist working collaboratively alongside communities to co-create new ways to promote intergenerational wellbeing. Often this involves uplifting the voices and lived experience

of people who are furthest from power and draws from systems change, collective impact and community-led principles. My University of Auckland PhD focused on the unique contribution of creative participation to youth mental health in Aotearoa, including questions of 'impact', evaluation and evidence.

Dr Molly Mullen – Faculty of Arts and Education, University of Auckland

We are the impact: Collaboratively mapping the creative literacies of Shopfront Arts

Keywords: youth arts, impact, performance, creative, young people, literacy, data

Abstract: *This presentation shares the interim findings of a co-designed impact study conducted with Sydney-based youth arts organisation Shopfront Arts. Shopfront Arts is one of Australia's oldest youth arts organisations, established in 1976 as a co-operative with its young membership equally authorised to determine its purpose and entitled to vote on core issues and directions. This structure of youth-led decision-making informs not only Shopfront's cross-art form practices, but also the ways in which Shopfront positions Young People as experts of research about their creative and artistic experiences (Abrams, Mann, McLeod, 2019) and hence, as central to reframing the power dynamics embedded in what constitutes 'knowledge' (Petrone, Mirra, Goodman and Garcia, 2021). Stage one in the design and implementation of Shopfront's Young People's Impact Study draws on methods that aim to capture dimensions of the creative experience that are not typically transmitted through quantitative data analysis. In doing so, it attends to what Sandra Gattenhoff writes of the value of 'soft data' in relation to community experience and aesthetic engagement (2017, 4) by identifying – and mapping - five spheres of affective, cognitive and sensory perception. These spheres are considered 'creative literacies' for how they support a sensing and knowing of self in the context of relational negotiation. In doing so, this paper considers the impacts of Shopfront on young people's lives as well as the inverse – the impact of young people on Shopfront's institutional and organisational*

emergence. The paper considers how both narratives are increasingly challenging and yet imperative in the context of data-driven measures of valuing the arts.

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Thank you for your participation

