



‘We Are Not Just Some Kids’: The Gallery as A Classroom Space for Student Engagement



Dr Kate Winchester is a facilitator and lecturer who is passionate about student engagement, inspiring social justice, creativity and authentic learning. Kate began working in schools as an Arts facilitator in disadvantaged schools in the United Kingdom. This experience motivated her to pursue a career as a teacher and she returned to Australia to undertake a Master of Teaching degree at Western Sydney University. Having been particularly inspired by the work of the Fair Go Program in her studies, Kate worked as a teacher in a variety of Primary schools that serve lower socio-economic communities in both Western Sydney and in the UK, and she continued to explore the key ideas from the Fair Go Program and how arts pedagogy could deeply engage students in these social contexts. Her PhD research, completed at Western Sydney University, examined how the synchronous interplay of the themes of creativity, arts practice, student engagement and big ideas in learning could enhance the social and academic outcomes of all learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This article talks about important ideas from that research.

The quote in the title of this article is from a student participating in the ‘Gallery’ pedagogical model. The words carry the important message that the Gallery had become a classroom space where the students saw themselves as valued members of an engaged learning team. The statement highlights a changing mindset in the students’ own perception of themselves as learners and a growing understanding that they themselves had powerful and valuable learning to communicate to their school and to their local community.

The ‘Gallery’ was designed to facilitate rich opportunities for students in low SES communities to experience arts-based creative teaching and learning experiences, and to dive deeply into learning about ‘big ideas’ in the curriculum. The Fair Go Program’s Student Engagement Framework (the MeE Framework) was a strong and crucial aspect of the Gallery design and subsequent research that took place in low SES primary school contexts in Western Sydney. This article provides an overview of the Gallery model in operation, and offers ‘food for thought’ about how the Gallery might open up classroom spaces for sustained and meaningful learning.

What is the Gallery?

The Gallery model is conceptualised as a ‘gallery’, evincing the language and physical domain of the arts world as a way of encouraging the students to think differently about their learning, and so to act differently within the more dynamic spaces that were opened up to them. Thought about in this way, both the gallery as a public space and the classroom as a learning space value the exhibition and expression of art in all its forms. Both are spaces that invite the interaction of the participants. Both have the potential to generate emotion and empathic understanding, and both value the idea that art has the power to reflect important local and global issues.

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The Gallery learning experiences were designed to work towards the creation of an 'Exhibition'. The classroom exhibition was likened to that of a public showing in an art gallery, and this was seen as an opportunity for students to share with their local community the deep and purposeful learning that had been occurring throughout the Gallery experiences. The Exhibition was thus not perceived to be a disconnected, one-off artistic showcase, but rather a purposeful exhibition of student learning. An important feature of the Exhibition was that it was to be designed and built by the students themselves, and so promoted a rich expression of artistic learning, rather than a fanciful artistic 'show'. It was intended to accentuate the participants' feeling of ownership as part of the student engagement concept of the 'insider classroom' (Fair Go Team, 2006). For this reason, it was seen less as a 'product' of learning and more as an invitation to the audience into the 'process' of the Gallery learning

The Gallery themes

The Gallery is informed by the four research themes: student engagement, arts pedagogy, creativity and 'big ideas'. The interaction and intersection of these key themes shape the theoretical and pedagogical framing of the Gallery model.

Student engagement

The *Fair Go Program's* (FGP) student engagement model (Munns et al., 2013) was deployed as a way of understanding the interactive and reciprocal dynamics of classrooms. The FGP model emphasises engaging and meaningful learning experiences, rather than focusing on the control of student behaviour. The FGP concept of 'in- task' behaviour (substantive engagement: strong psychological investment) was firmly at the heart of the arts practices developed for this research, and so two important aspects of the FGP frame were implemented. The first was the design of pedagogical experiences that were high cognitive (intellectually challenging - 'thinking hard'), high affective (enjoyable - 'feeling good') and high operative ('assisting students to become better learners'). The second was the promotion of processes aimed at the FGP idea of the 'insider classroom' - a student community of reflection and self-assessment, and teaching as conversation with feedback focused on self-directed learning.

Arts pedagogy

At an intellectual level, the model was informed by Eisner's (2002) view that human understanding can be represented beyond literal language and quantification (p. 204), and that an aesthetic response might help with enhanced learning insights. Since the students in the research were reluctant (indeed, often opposed) to becoming involved with intellectually challenging work, the research wanted also to contest the common perception that the arts in educational settings are 'affective rather than cognitive, easy not tough, soft not hard, simple not complex' (Eisner, 2002, p. 35). So, artistic expression was favoured in this study as a viable format for the expression of intelligence (Dewey, 2005, p. 46). There was also a consideration of how emotion interplayed with intellectual understanding. Research was utilised showing that artistic expression is an important resource to negotiate and display intellectual understanding

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(Gallagher et al., 2013, p. 9). Emotional responses, therefore, were appreciated as particular forms of cognitive expression, and were central to the types of planned intellectual activities.

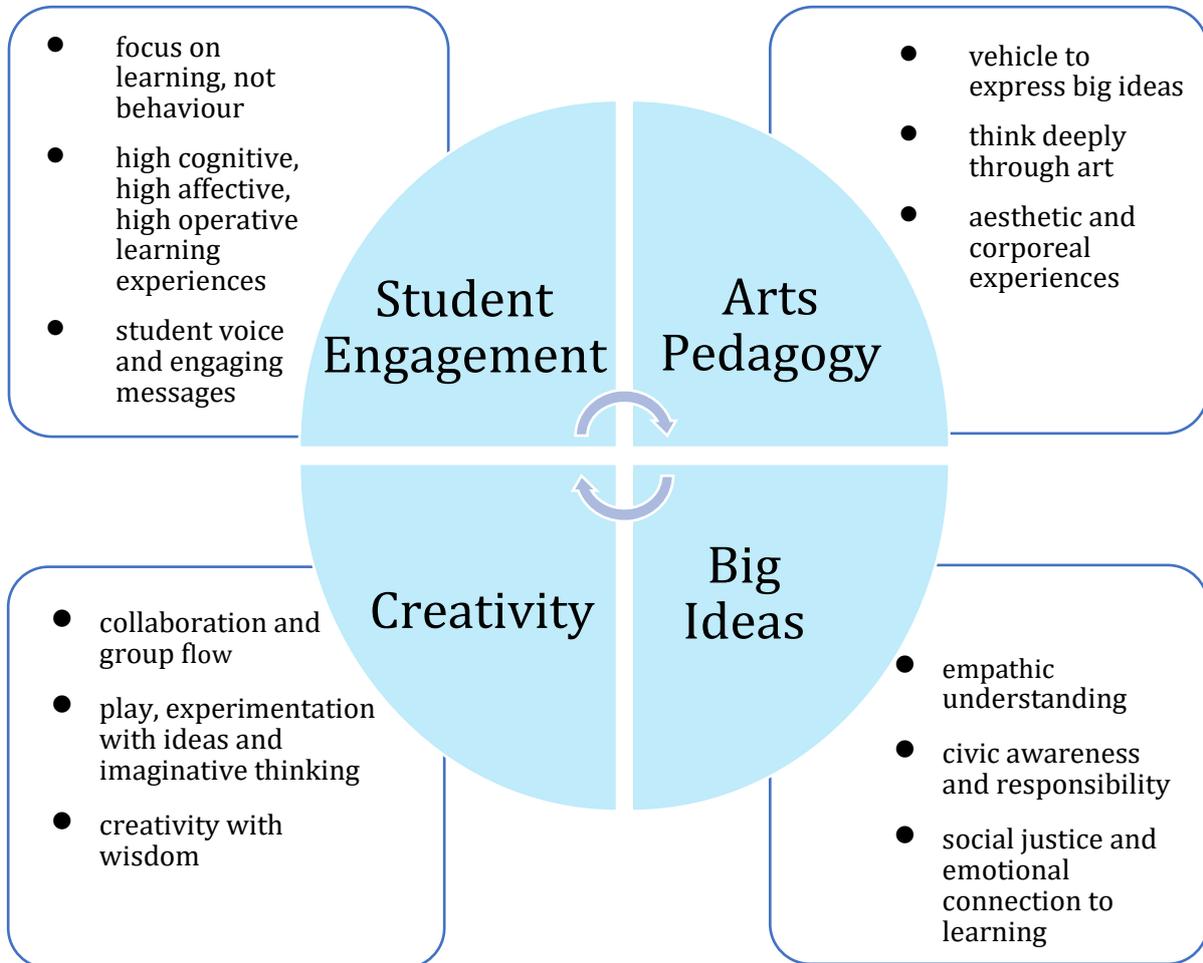
Creativity

The research considered the interrelationship between creative and intellectual work, and the importance of creativity as a shared social practice. There was a response to Craft’s (2008) call for ‘creativity with wisdom’, which is where creative practice is empowered by its connection to human concerns and ideas. Here, the relationship between creativity and wisdom informed the interplay of the four themes of this research. The Gallery embraced the importance of creative pedagogy aiming to improve learning through imaginative thinking (Egan, 2007), play and possibility thinking (Craft, 2000), collaboration (John-Steiner, 2000; Sawyer, 2014) and inquisitiveness (Lucas et al., 2013). The gallery model also challenged what Craft (2005) identifies as ‘blind spots’ in the discourses surrounding the educational importance of creativity, such as those that most highly value individuality. Here, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1991, 1996, 1997) concept of ‘flow’ and Sawyer’s (2004, 2006) notion of ‘group flow’ were both considered. For Csikszentmihalyi, ‘flow’ is a state of consciousness of optimal experience in which the participant undergoes complete focus and fulfilment. In Sawyer’s (2004, 2007) notion of ‘group flow’, creative collaboration and a ‘collective state of mind’ can explain high levels of engagement (2007).

‘Big Ideas’

To this point there emerges a picture of the way the pedagogical spaces of the gallery were crafted. That is, the gallery model was clearly shaped by a focus on learning intellectually and emotionally through the arts, a commitment to creativity as a shared social practice, and conscious teacher planning of high level and enjoyable experiences that would develop a community of learners. The final theme of big ideas provided specific directions within this shaping. The first was that the pedagogy should favour processes such as play, collaborative work and corporeal expression (Egan, 2013; Eisner, 2002; Gallagher, 2010; Winston, 2015). The reasoning was that these processes were important to balance the types of performative curriculum practices that can dominate the pedagogy of classrooms in all too many disadvantaged contexts. Second, content was designed to connect, both with students’ life experiences (Brophy & Alleman, 2007, p. 15, drawing on Dewey, 1938), and then, as a social justice issue, with fundamental understandings about the human condition through authentic learning about ‘big ideas’ (Brophy et al., 2010). Big ideas were employed to foster creative thinking, curiosity, deeper understandings and empathic experience, and to encourage a deep emotional connection between learner and content (Brophy & Alleman, 2007, p. 17). Their implementation into the gallery was a key engagement strategy, and complemented FGP engagement ideas around content that is authentic, interesting, relevant and worth learning. It was an approach that focused on schooling as an intensely social and moral process, and not a technical endeavour (Winston, 1998: p. 90). These four theoretical themes are summarised and depicted in the Figure below.

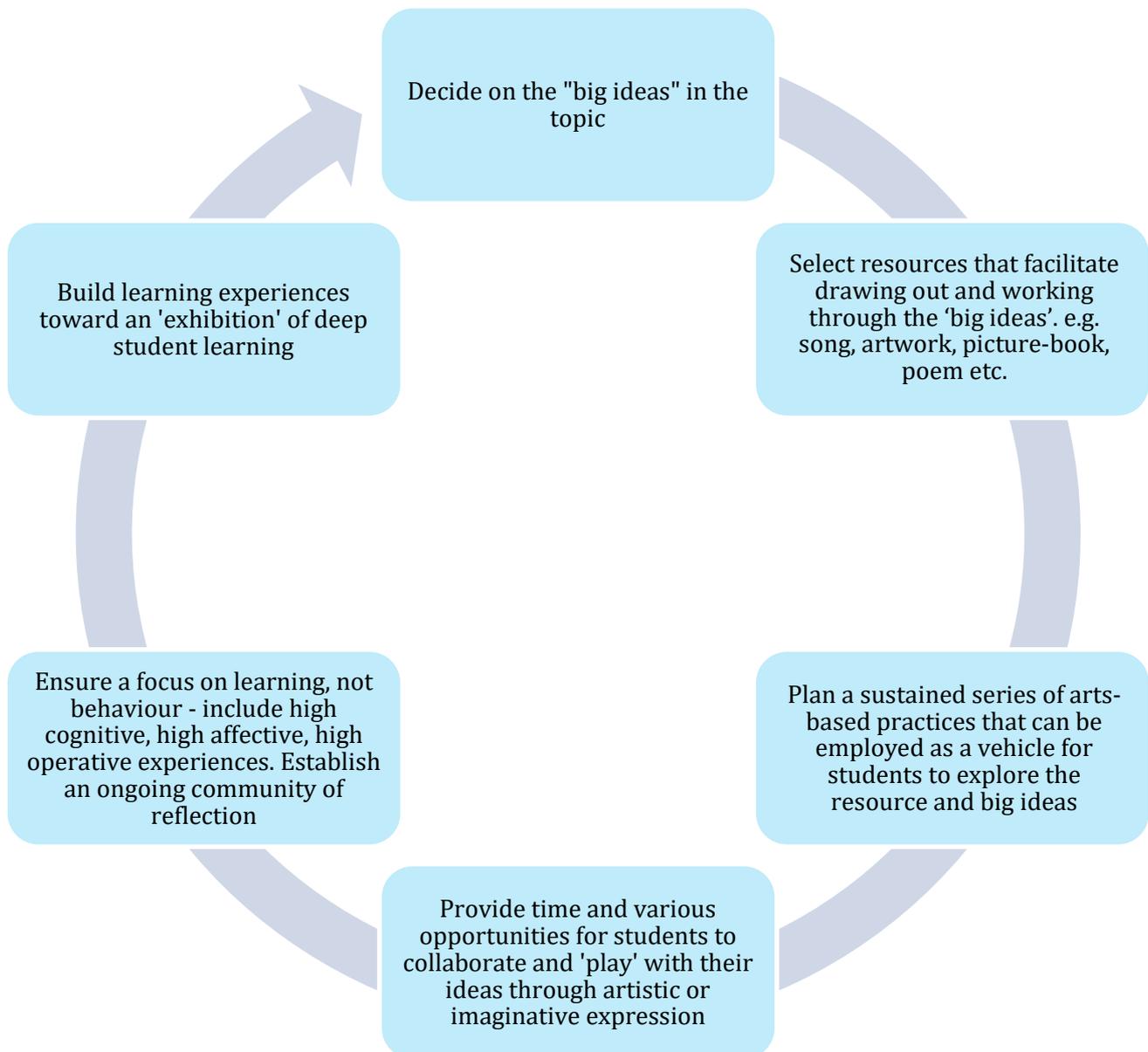
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What could the Gallery look like in practice?

The following Figure shows the key planning ideas in the development of the Gallery.



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What did this look like?

Let us now look at a brief illustration of a Gallery in action in a school in Sydney’s South West. This description of the Gallery in action paints a brief picture of how the model might take place over a series of lessons, perhaps once a week for a term.

Decide on the ‘Big Ideas’ in the topic

Students in a Stage 3 class undertook learning in the *NSW Syllabus: Geography* content topic ‘A Diverse and Connected World’. The ‘big ideas’ and key inquiry questions of the learning experiences that were to take place became:

- What are Australia’s global connections between people and places?
- Who were the people who came to Australia? Why did they come?

Select resources that facilitate drawing out and working through the Big Ideas

The Gallery opened up spaces for the students to explore individual narratives of the migration experience of refugees. Picture books documenting the experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker were employed as the basis of the artistic learning experiences. The books selected were: *Ziba Came on a Boat* (Lofthouse & Ingpen, 2007) and *Home and Away*, (Marsden et al., 2008). The descriptive poem, *The Magic Box*, (Wright & Bailey, 2009) was also used as a foundation for ideation and to help the students to structure their own poetry in response to the ‘big ideas’ as listed above.

Plan a sustained series of arts-based practices that can be employed as a vehicle for students to explore the resource and big ideas

Students responded to the picture books through a variety of arts-based strategies. The theatrical device of tableaux, in which participants freeze in poses that create a picture of a key moment from a story, was an important strategy that was employed to support them to empathise with, and embody, characters, as well as to express their comprehension of the narrative. The students were also involved in exploring dance elements such as dynamics, relationships, action and space to create movement sequences to communicate a story or message (NESA, 2006). Working collaboratively, they used mime and movement to explore how emotions and feelings can be expressed to an audience. Drama activities were the main artistic modality that was invoked in order to support the students in expressing their understanding of the topic.



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Provide time and various opportunities for students to collaborate and 'play' with their ideas through artistic or imaginative expression

Improvisational drama games were a key element in providing scaffolding for the students to work cohesively in teams, collaborate on a task and to encourage them to share and respond to each other's ideas. Time and space were allowed for students to discuss their responses to the resources through planned and scaffolded group brainstorming activities, creative writing challenges and reflection. Writing challenges were given at key points in the program, only after the students had built up imaginative expression through drama games and activities first. Emphasis for such challenges was on play and experimentation.

Ensure a focus on learning, not behaviour and include high cognitive, high affective, high operative experiences. Establish an ongoing community of reflection

The creative and artistic learning space is intentionally planned against the high cognitive ('thinking hard'), high affective ('feeling good') and high operative ('becoming a better learner') structure. The tasks in each Gallery ensure intellectual inquiry focused on the big ideas, affective enjoyment and purposeful learning as well as reflective activities to help students work with the high operative level of their learning. The focus for each experience is on the process of learning, taking up artistic challenges and intellectual expression through creative practice, rather than on behaviour management and compliance. Learning is the main game.

Build learning experiences toward an 'exhibition' of deep student learning

An exhibition should be a celebration of the learning that has taken place in the Gallery as opposed to a one-off, disconnected, fanciful 'performance'. This particular Gallery incorporated the students' growing interest in shadow play (from playful shadow activities linked to measurement and Earth and Space Sciences), and this interest culminated in an Exhibition in which students decided to produce and share a shadowography performance in their own self-made shadow theatre. The story of the shadow theatre was designed by the students themselves and played out an account of a refugee who fled a war-torn country to travel by boat to Australia. Students were focused on communicating the Big Ideas and feelings about the topic to the wider school community.

In summary, the key aspects of a Gallery in practice include:

- Sustained aesthetic practices that value empathic and artistic expression as intellectual expression.
- Experiences of the essential human qualities of play, collaboration, improvisation and imagination.
- Focus on learning, high expectations, student active participation (shared control, student voice in reflection and discussion), high engaging experiences, increased student collaboration with links to wider school community.
- Sharing empathic understanding through big ideas around local and global impact and effect.



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Data collected from the Gallery at this primary school illustrated that students, when provided with these kinds of learning experiences, were able to take ownership, shift their perceptions around achievement and begin to challenge their own, and the wider school community's, perception of what a classroom might look, sound and feel like.

The Gallery and the 'bigger pictures' of student engagement

The Gallery is presented in this article as a model for deep and purposeful learning, particularly for students in low SES areas. The *Fair Go Program's* Student Engagement Framework (the *MeE Framework*) was a critical component of the inspiration, design and implementation of the Gallery. The pedagogical practices in the Gallery respond to a belief and commitment that all students, including those from marginalised backgrounds, need to be provided with intellectually demanding and meaningful work, not only as an engagement strategy but as a matter of social justice (Hayes et al., 2006). The metaphor of the Gallery, suggested here as an engaging classroom space, is a worthwhile response to the teaching challenge that many educators face. That students who were involved in this model were able to see themselves as 'not just some kids', but as people with powerful learning to share, and this points to the real possibility that the Gallery model can be a platform for advancing social and academic outcomes for students in low SES communities.

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