

Anthology Vol. 2: Chapter 3 Summary

CHANGE THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT: Peace, Youth and Performance

by Mary Ann Hunter

Australian cultural worker and drama lecturer Mary Ann Hunter notes that while young people are often invoked as symbols of hope and inspiration for the future, they are rarely given opportunities to play an active role in shaping the present. In the chapter “Young People as Artist Peacebuilders,” Hunter documents the work of several innovative organizations and projects that have offered Australian youth the opportunity to be agents, rather than merely symbols, of peace and change in their communities.

Hunter highlights organizations whose approaches to peacebuilding can be described as “transformative practice.” Rather than seeking to immediately resolve conflicts, they take a long-term approach, identifying youth-specific forms of expression and helping young people to hone and attain the skills to make positive changes within themselves and their communities.

Hunter’s study focuses on “performance projects whereby young people attempt to ‘change the world as we know it’ through self-narration and self-representation, integrating the grounded aesthetics of hip hop, skateboarding, video, and martial arts with more conventional theatrical approaches to performance.”

Contact Inc’s Peace Initiative

In 2001, youth services organizations in the economically and culturally diverse Brisbane suburb of Sunnybank noted heightened violence among Polynesian, indigenous Australian, African, and Asian youth. The national response to youth violence in other parts of the country up to that point tended to be unhelpful media coverage depicting “restless and disaffected youth” and increased policing.

Contact Inc, an arts organization in Sunnybank, sought to respond in a different way, using art “as an intervention that could contribute to consciousness-raising, relationship building, and sustainable long term change in cultural attitudes and awareness.” They began with 18 months of preparation and consultation, building trust among various community organizations, governmental entities, and young people themselves. Through these consultations, Contact Inc decided to base their project around hip hop, because its multiple forms of artistic expression (including breakdancing, rapping, graffiti, and deejaying) resonate with so many young people, and because the roots of hip hop are grounded in a philosophy of respect for self, others, and culture.

The project was officially launched in 2003 as “the Peace Initiative,” the mission of which was to provide safe spaces for intra- and inter-cultural interactions, to support

young people in identifying and exploring common ground between identity groups, and to help participants work together toward a common goal.

Hunter reports that the program consisted of “ten weekly workshops using a variety of drama-related activities and the sharing of hip hop skills to guide participants through an exploration of the concepts of peace, conflict, culture, and honor. This culminated in an original song recording and a DVD with contributions from over fifty young people from indigenous, Polynesian, and Sudanese backgrounds.”

The Peace Initiative resulted in the development of a core group of youth leaders who are actively engaged in creating a culture of nonviolence and peaceful conflict transformation within their communities. The initial project grew into an ongoing program of workshops, recordings, and public performances and also led to other “spin-off” projects.

Transforming Conflict to Build Sustainable Peace

Today, with consultation from Contact Inc, the Peace Initiative has evolved into an entirely youth-run entity. Contact Inc continues to support young people to initiate, develop, and deliver their own workshops and programs on issues relevant to their lives.

According to Contact Inc, the Peace Initiative has been able to stay relevant and sustainable because of its emphasis on five key elements:

- 1. Identifying common ground.** Contact Inc believes that identifying and exploring common ground is a first step for any peacebuilding process, and they facilitate this by cultivating what they call the “Third Place Policy”—a commitment to creating spaces where youth from different backgrounds and perspectives can “safely and meaningfully meet.”
- 2. Developing self-reflexivity.** Through hip hop and other performance practices, the Peace Initiative helps young people develop the capacity of self-reflection which is essential for understanding, unpacking, and reconsidering one’s own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes.
- 3. Providing professional artists as mentors.** While it is extremely important to facilitate peer mentoring among young people, Contact Inc also felt it was important in an arts-based project for young people to have contact with professional artists. Professional artists not only inspire and provide role models for participants of the Peace Initiative, but they also signal to the participants that the artistic work they are engaged in is “real.”
- 4. Validating youth-specific ways of knowing.** The Peace Initiative has been successful because it has remained grounded in young people’s life experiences, their wisdom, and their preferred forms of self-expression.
- 5. Valuing the long term.** The Peace Initiative has always been focused on the long-term goals of building skills, strengthening relationships, and changing attitudes and behaviors. Each time a new series of workshops begins, a connection is made to the previous year’s workshops and performance, so that participants feel they are part of an ongoing, significant community peacebuilding experience.

More from “Young People as Artist Peacebuilders”:

- Hunter’s chapter provides a more complete picture of the Peace Initiative, including the voices of many of the young people who have participated in the Initiative and photographs from the workshops.
- The chapter also includes descriptions of two other organizations/initiatives that have used performance for peacebuilding in Australia. Backbone Youth Arts’ *Sk8 Grrl Space* merged the popular pastime of skateboarding with theater to explore issues regarding young women’s access to public space. Street Arts’ *Zen-Che* project provided young men from one of Brisbane’s under-resourced suburbs the opportunity to interact with older members of the community and to explore their own feelings about war, fear, and conflict through video, performance, and martial arts.
- Hunter discusses the impacts of these two projects, including in her reflections an interview with one of the *Sk8 Grrl* participants. While neither of these projects were explicitly initiated as “peacebuilding” efforts, they both unearthed latent conflicts within their communities, and provided a forum for young people to self-reflect, to collaborate with others, and to enact change.