Altered States and Asset Based Inclusion

For most young people with autism, completing secondary school is something akin to falling off the edge of a cliff. There is relief that the intense pressure of social conformity is removed, but apprehension when looking into the dark abyss of what the future holds. Current Australian research on the quality of life of young adults with autism paints an extraordinarily bleak picture. Young people on the spectrum who have completed or stopped attending school have an unemployment rate of between 45 and 50%. They have very low rates of tertiary education participation and only a 28% completion rate in post-secondary courses.

The most astounding statistic, and one which illustrates the sense of isolation experienced by this cohort, is that on average, adolescents on the autism spectrum spend 68 hours per week engaged in solitary technology based activities. That amounts to over 9 hours each day!

Digital creative arts practice is grounded in both an aesthetic framework and a diverse range of ever changing and evolving software tools. And this shared vocabulary of authorship is available to an army of creative autodidacts playing and learning till the wee hours as they build cathedrals of aesthetic and technical knowledge from sources as diverse as online manuals, You Tube tutorials and FAQ chat groups.

The Altered States project at Queensland University of Technology was a pilot post-school creative media project which sought to introduce these hibernating digital creatives on the autism spectrum to undergraduate studies in the creative industries by asking the fundamental question, “What are you the best at in the room?”. The decision to focus on the development of individual strengths rather than deficits is at the core of all community arts practice, and in sharp contrast to most clinical programs which typically devise strategies which address specific areas of need.

The prolonged hibernation of autistic teenagers into bedroom digital caves following secondary school is a phenomenon many families observe. This long-term exclusion from social contact with school friends, and in some cases family members, can

herald an erosion in self-esteem, confidence and social functioning that without intervention, can entrench experiences of social anxiety, depression and agoraphobia.

The Altered States project brought young people with autism together with creative artists in the fields of music, 3-D animation, film making and sound design to create an immersive new work to be premiered at the opening of QUT's new Creative Industries precinct. Motivation and enjoyment were key ingredients in the psychosocial outcomes of the program with emotional wellbeing, social participation and friendship being key contributors to the success of the project.

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Associate Professor Michael Whelan is an academic, writer, musician and autism advocate. In addition to his interdisciplinary live arts practice, Michael has written and directed a range of short films on topics ranging from post school transition for young people with autism to youth at risk and bullying.

In addition to his memoir, *The Other Country: A Father's Journey with Autism* which was published by Pan Macmillan in 2008, Michael also wrote the documentary film *What are you doing?*. This educational film for school audiences on the topic of social inclusion and autism was distributed to every school in Australia and was screened at the United Nations in New York as part of World Autism Day activities in April, 2013. Michael has worked with Autism Queensland as their manager of post-school services and was responsible for the development and delivery of Studio G, a post-school transition program for young adults on the autism spectrum, based at the State Library of Queensland.

Images



Altered States performance – August 28, 2016



Post-performance Q & A with creative team