

POLYGLOT THEATRE'S VOICE LAB



polyglot
Theatre is child's play



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You are super nice, I like talking to you.
Can I come another time please.

Child, 6 years old



POLYGLOT THEATRE

Polyglot Theatre is Australia's leading creator of participatory theatre for children.

Our distinctive artistic philosophy has placed us at the international forefront of contemporary arts experiences for babies and children up to 12 years of age. Inspired by the artwork, play and ideas of children, we create imagined worlds where audiences actively participate in performance through touch, play and encounter.

At Polyglot we approach our work for and with children with curiosity, attention and respect. We know that as agents for cultural change, children can influence perceptions of place, space and art-making. Our works show the power and capability of the child to an adult audience.

Mission

Polyglot's mission is to make innovative and daring theatre which provides children worldwide the opportunity for imagination and adventure through participation.

Vision

Polyglot places children at the heart of our art. Our vision is of a future where children are powerful: artistically, socially and culturally. We are committed to offering transformational, playful arts experiences that are alive and human in their content and connection, knowing that in this, we offer something that is vital for children everywhere.

Values

We are guided in our work by three value areas:

- » Children are always at the heart of our art: as collaborators, instigators and audience. Our work exists to give children the power to be in control.
- » Our artistic approach is one of unbridled curiosity and daring; we champion possibility and innovation.
- » We work with respect, resourcefulness and a spirit of genuine collaboration, in the pursuit of a sustainable future.

ABOUT VOICE LAB



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I would like to say thank you. I feel like I actually have a chance to express what I feel about school because normally I don't like talking about things.

Child, 12 years old

Voice Lab is a creative installation module for listening to the thoughts and opinions of children. Children are invited one at a time into a beautifully designed, serene dome where they have a conversation with Voice Lab — a voice driven by a concealed live performer who elicits detailed responses, gives time for thought and regards the child as the expert. Voice Lab encourages reflective thinking and the articulation of opinions and feelings.

Children are often overlooked when it comes to life's big questions and are rarely asked for their true opinions. As a result, children generally give the answers they think adults want to hear. Voice Lab challenges this learned experience, providing children with an unmediated space in which to express themselves without inhibition.

Voice Lab's questions can be completely tailored to explore children's world views or to gather feedback on their experience of the arts, at school or in their community.

How does Voice Lab work?

Children see a dome with a small entrance. When they crawl in, they find themselves alone in a soft, comforting space filled with warm fluctuating light. On the floor, at the end of a long cord connected to the roof of the dome,

is a soft crown that fits snugly over their head, covering their ears. They hear a voice — it is Voice Lab.

Voice Lab's structure consists of a dome within a dome. When the child enters, they are entering the small dome which sits within the larger dome. Hidden in the space between these two domes is Voice Lab's operator. From this hidden control centre, the operator triggers pre-recorded questions for the child to answer and can also interact with them directly through a microphone. The crown contains headphones and a microphone and is the conduit between the child and the operator.

The questions can be designed around any theme, but Voice Lab always asks some introductory questions to make the child feel comfortable in the space and to create a rapport with Voice Lab. These questions are: *What is your name?*, *How old are you?* and *What is your favourite colour?* When the child says their favourite colour, the whole space changes to that colour. This puts the child in control and lets them know that Voice Lab is listening to them.

For the child, unaware of the concealed operator, it appears as though the space itself is speaking to them, asking them questions and interacting with them in a magical, one-of-a-kind experience.

WHY VOICE LAB?

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I wish I could live here because it's very comfy, it's very warm and Voice Lab is something I can always trust and talk to.

Child, 12 years old

“Involving children in decision making is directly underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the views of children and young people should be taken into account in any decision that is likely to affect their wellbeing.”

UNICEF 2015

Children are under the power, benign or otherwise, of the adults around them. Voice Lab offers power to the child to give their own opinions without interruption, mediation or interpretation by adults or peers. Children operate at a different pace and intention than adults — their world views are interesting, revealing and offer a different perspective to the adult understanding. Voice Lab turns up the volume on children's opinions and brings the voice of the child to adult attention.

Voice Lab's point of difference is that when children enter a very special, beautiful space, they are instantly more open emotionally. The theatrical premise of Voice Lab brings something special to the way a child interacts; it provides a sense of ritual and focus, enabling their imagination to fly because they are removed from the everyday world.

Voice Lab offers privacy, attention, time and design.

Privacy

Voice Lab is entirely your own while you are inside. No one can intrude. Your thoughts and actions are your own. You are not seeking anyone else's approval.

Attention

You are being listened to and being heard. You are shown that your voice is interesting and valued. You are the sole focus.

Time

Voice Lab travels at the speed of the participant. There is no hurry. There is time to think, to imagine, to expand, allowing thoughts to unfold in detail.

Design

The artistic aesthetic of the space engages the senses, creating atmosphere and feeling. Voice Lab offers a transformative experience to those that enter.



WHY CHILDREN'S VOICES?

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Voice Lab is really cool and really fun, because this tent I'm in right now is glowing... and this soft stuff is so stretchy and nice. I could sleep here all day and share it with all my friends and just have fun in here!

Child, 8 years old

Enabling and capturing children's opinions and experience in matters concerning them deeply is difficult to effect authentically and with clarity of purpose. Throughout the development of Voice Lab, the creators have been influenced by others' explorations into empowerment of children, participation of children in structural, social or systematic re-design and children at the heart of consultation. It is an area that is powerfully advocated for around the world, as the rights of the child are consistently threatened.

The act of listening to children and allowing them time and attention — hearing what they have to say — means that children are being considered as valuable in our society as contributors. Once children are considered to be of value, their safety increases.

“Children's participation is more than asking them for their ideas and views. It's about listening to them, taking them seriously and turning their ideas and suggestions into reality.”

Aileen Ashford, Tasmanian
Commissioner for Children 2011–2013

How can Voice Lab be used?

Voice Lab has the power to collect detailed feedback from children and

can ask very specific questions around large topics that might feed into conferences and consultations, or as a way of gaining knowledge in difficult contexts. The expressed opinions of children have the potential to positively change the practice of professionals and organisations working with children in any field.

Voice Lab has already enabled hundreds of Victorian children to be heard, and consequently taken seriously, in a fun, safe and creative environment, contributing to their sense of well-being, inclusion and identity.

Polyglot has partnered with clients including:

- » Anglicare Victoria — Communities for Children Frankston
- » City of Greater Dandenong
- » City of Melbourne
- » City of Port Phillip
- » Connie Benn Centre
- » Melbourne Fringe Festival
- » Mission Australia — Communities for Children Dandenong
- » The Satellite Foundation
- » The Smith Family — Communities for Children Bankstown
- » RedRoad Consulting



“Our experience using Voice Lab for the first time was just amazing. The material we now have because of this experience is proving invaluable in how we now shape the workshop program and demonstrate what we do... Questionnaires and surveys do not adequately capture the essence of their experiences as they don't put children at ease. In fact, the opposite occurs and they can feel tested, examined, scrutinised... It has strongly reinforced the limitations of written feedback and we are now working on ways we can continue to work with Voice Lab and Polyglot Theatre.”

Rose Cuff, Executive Director,
Satellite Foundation

Voice Lab can be used for:

- » Workshops, festivals, forums, conferences and events
- » Community consultation and strategic planning
- » Policy review and policy development
- » Engaging the community
- » Evaluating projects, programs, services and products

Voice Lab can contribute to the development of:

- » Strategic plans
- » Practice guides for children's professionals
- » Performances and other cultural experiences
- » Workshops and programs for children
- » Policies

As a result of participating in Voice Lab, children will:

- » Express their inner thoughts, challenges, ideas, solutions and aspirations;
- » Develop communication skills including articulating opinions and ideas while enabling self-reflection and self-awareness;
- » Develop an understanding that their ideas matter and are respected;
- » Gain an awareness of their agency and influence;
- » Contribute to programs that affect their lives in their local community.

As a result of using Voice Lab, organisations will:

- » Better understand the value of child-centred practice and the empowerment of children;
- » Use these insights to inform the development of programs that support children within their local community or organisation;
- » Extend partnerships and programs that support children experiencing disadvantage;
- » Build the skills, confidence and cognisance of childhood professionals to support improved outcomes for children.

IMPACT OF VOICE LAB

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Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I will remember this for the rest of my life.

Child, 11 years old

Voice Lab is unlike other consultation or evaluation methodologies.

Voice Lab is a unique way of listening to children in a noisy world. Voice Lab gives children a space to think, away from peers, teachers and parents, where they are free to speak their minds in private space.

“RedRoad does a great deal of consultation with children and young people and Voice Lab is one of the standout methods we’ve seen in engaging children in rich, thoughtful and clever conversations about their lives. The format is intimate and comforting and it seems to support children to engage imaginatively with the questions posed by Voice Lab — so many responses were so disarmingly honest! We got material from Voice Lab that we didn’t hear elsewhere in the consultations, so we felt like we really expanded our understanding of what children thought about the spaces we were redesigning and what their aspirations were for that redesign.”

Andrea Cook, Director,
RedRoad Consulting

Voice Lab is an effective tool for gathering authentic feedback from children.

Voice Lab offers quiet, safety, comfort and confidence, allowing children to sit with their thoughts and be presented with the knowledge that their opinions have value.

“The most valuable part of The Voice Lab experience for students was that they as individuals could express their hopes and fears in a comfortable space. The delivery of Voice Lab is conversational. It encourages and promotes a spontaneous

and therefore an authentic response from the individual student. Voice Lab is not a person or a face. There is no judgement. Every answer is the correct answer. The responses are in effect the students’ most sincere truth.”

Keery Gibson, Community Engagement,
Frankston North Schools Consortia

Voice Lab is an immensely rewarding experience for all participants, regardless of whether they answer all of the questions.

Children have a great desire to talk; a need to express how they feel about things. They have a lot to say and greatly appreciate the opportunity to express themselves. For many children this opportunity to talk openly about their feelings does not exist in general life or at home.

“Thank you for letting me tell you my feelings because I don’t really have much space to do that in the classroom. I get bullied inside the classroom as well as in the playground so thank you for letting me tell you my feelings.”

Child, 10 years old

“It would work everywhere. It works for all our children with additional needs, our children who have English as an additional language, and our children who have trauma backgrounds. Every child that came into that space, it worked for them. They might not have stayed and answered every question but they went in there and they had a go and they loved it and they came out smiling.”

Nicole Bechaz, Kindergarten Teacher and
Team Leader, Community Kinders Plus



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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I enjoyed being here. It's calming and it's led me to express my feelings and really be able to say what I really think about in a private place.

Child, 10 years old

How much space does Voice Lab need?

Voice Lab needs a quiet, cool, indoor space that is at least 4m x 6m.

How long does it take to set up and pack down?

Voice Lab takes two hours to set up and one hour to pack down.

What is the ideal age range of Voice Lab participants?

The ideal age range of participants is 4–12 years.

How long does each child spend inside Voice Lab?

This depends on the amount of questions being asked and the way the child responds to the space. Sessions can range from two minutes to 12 minutes, with the average duration of a session being around six minutes.

How many questions does Voice Lab ask each child?

This is entirely up to the client but the ideal number of questions is at least 20 and no more than 30.

How many children can Voice Lab speak to in a day?

The amount of children Voice Lab can talk to in a day varies according to how it is being used and the number of questions being asked. When working around school hours and breaks, Voice Lab can interview around 25 children per day. In a festival environment when Voice Lab is operating all day, it can interview up to 60 children. Generally, about 8 children per hour can be interviewed and the operator needs a break every 1.5 hours.

How will I receive the data collected by Voice Lab?

You will receive the audio file of each child's session, and there are a number of outcome options available. These include transcription of the data, data analysis and an animated video using the children's voices that highlights the major themes from the Voice Lab sessions.

Are children ever afraid to go inside Voice Lab?

Children under five can be wary of entering Voice Lab by themselves. In these instances the facilitator or child's teacher or parent can sit in the



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Bye-bye Voice Lab,
you are the best.

Child, 7 years old

dome with the child until the child feels comfortable to continue on their own. In a school environment it's possible to run 'tour groups' to Voice Lab where five children at a time can enter with their teacher and listen to the music coming from the crown. This usually empowers the kids to experience their individual session without fear.

How does Polyglot seek permission for children to participate?

Written consent is obtained from the child and their parent or guardian before participating and consent is specifically obtained for future use of the child's de-identified words. Consent is additionally sought at two stages during the Voice Lab session, once at the beginning — *“Are you happy to stay to answer some questions?”* and once at the end — *“Are you happy for Voice Lab to use your words?”* At all stages of the Voice Lab engagement participants can choose not to participate, or can withdraw their consent if they no longer want to participate.

Is it ethical to collect information from children if they don't know there is a real person listening to them?

All participants (and their parent/guardian) complete a consent form which states that their voice will be recorded and that if they say anything of concern to Voice Lab, their parent or teacher will be informed. Even though children are not aware that Voice Lab is a real person, they are aware that their words will be heard outside of their Voice Lab session. Having a live operator allows Voice Lab to be responsive to the child's needs and to where the conversation goes.

What is the risk management process if a child says something of concern inside Voice Lab?

Polyglot is a Child Safe Organisation and all employees hold a current Working with Children check and adhere to Polyglot Theatre's Code of Conduct and Child Safe Policy. If a child says something of concern during their session, the Voice Lab Operator will inform the Voice Lab Facilitator who will follow up with a representative from the hosting school or organisation. Organisational protocols

will then be followed. A report will also be made to Polyglot's Child Safety Officer who will ensure the report goes to the relevant body.

Can Voice Lab be used outside?

No, Voice Lab needs to be set up inside in a cool, quiet space. This is because Voice Lab contains a number of technical elements that cannot get wet, in hot weather the inside of the dome can get very hot, and noise coming from outside the dome can impact the quality of the recordings.

Is Voice Lab accessible?

Polyglot has a Voice Lab module which is accessible for children who are Deaf and hard of hearing. The Voice Lab team is also in the process of designing a module that is accessible for children with mobility requirements and children who use wheelchairs.

For more information about
Voice Lab, contact Polyglot Theatre:

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