

Maximum Hits – Indigenous Arts

Overselling and under-delivering: the dilemma

by CHARLES TRINDALL

Strengths

- There seems to be a lot of discussion in regards to Indigenous arts these days, (good or bad publicity is still publicity).
- There are lots of practising Indigenous artists, ranging from the dabbler, to the more serious artist trying to make a living or more importantly, a career through their Indigenous cultural expression.
- There is an abundance of Arts grants available to assist in development areas of Indigenous cultural expression.
- There is more than enough inspirational material that could be used as a basis for cultural expression development.
- There are also enough social and political issues that impact on Indigenous people's lives that inspire one to write, sing, dance and paint about.
- There are professional Indigenous arts organizations that have had success at the national and international levels, to model Indigenous arts development on.
- There is an abundance of stories of Indigenous self-determination and survival that would inspire any dedicated novice to build a successful project around.

Then why do we still have a deficit in regional Indigenous arts development?

Weaknesses

- There is a very limited co-ordinated approach to the development of Indigenous arts outside the metropolitan area in NSW.
- There are limited opportunities to develop as an Indigenous artist outside that of the TAFE structure in regional NSW.
- Indigenous organizations in general have limited knowledge in regards to professional development issues, education and training opportunities for community cultural development.
- There are, in reality, limited organizations that's sole purpose is to strengthen Indigenous identity and cultural expression in rural areas of NSW.
- There is a lot of economical driven cultural expressive activities (owned and driven by markets) and very little spiritual and value driven cultural expressive activities
- Funding based on grantsmanship rather than the activity – process driven rather than cultural.
- When it comes to Indigenous affairs it's a consultants playground – there is a problem when the consultants disempower the community by limiting the ownership and responsibility of communities in projects and neglecting skills development.

The process of self empowerment is limited.

Threats

- Continued process of dependency (consultants doing all the work)
- Social issues get in the way of cultural development issues and initiatives.
- Mainstream marginalisation prevents Indigenous involvement these are both physical and psychological barriers.
- Appropriate consultation with Indigenous people usually happens after the process has been well developed and in most cases Indigenous consultation is only partially completed by the time project is well underway.
- Trying to address symptoms of marginalisation rather than address the cure for marginalisation. (chasing our tails)
- Still have not got a complete picture of what's out there in regards to Indigenous arts in regional NSW. (Do we know where we are going)
- Do we need a protocol paper on how to get a black and white person to talk together or is it just basic respect for other peoples values and to find out those values we need to communicate. (Protocols are guides)
- What really prevents this process is basically fear, fear of offending someone, most non-Indigenous people know very little about Indigenous Australia – this is basically due to the failure of education programs and the general conspiracy of silence on Indigenous Australia.
- We still too often hear remarks like: 'I don't want to offend Aboriginal people, so I won't do it.' Effective consultation and basic communication overcomes this problem.

- 'I don't want to offend' is a poor excuse to not get involved; it leads to no action at all, which in turn denies that group of any assistance and basically supports marginalisation.
- The refusal to implement or even read an Indigenous policy is a continual threat to development and again sustains marginalisation of disadvantaged groups.

A big challenge in life is to convince someone to want to change and take ownership and control of the process, But one of the biggest challenges I found, is to change myself and my own perceptions of other people's reality.

Opportunities

- There is a real chance to have an input into the development of Indigenous cultural expression in regional NSW.
- If taken seriously, we have very marketable product, but there needs to be a serious planning process.
- There is the reality of true reconciliation from the grass roots level of regional NSW.
- Becoming serious about Indigenous arts in regional NSW, would provide the opportunity for an experience that would open the hearts and minds of all involved but this takes perseverance.
- To show not only the wider community, but also ourselves that all it takes is the initiative to say yes to create an opportunity that will create change.
- There is an old saying - If we want to change behaviour we legislate but if we want to change attitude we educate. (Need to knock down the barrier of communication first)
- First before anything we need to have a complete audit of our own beliefs and analyze ourselves, when the opportunity arises to be involved with Indigenous people and other marginalized groups in any community development process.

As Indigenous people, a lot of time we experience on a daily basis the fear of being rejected (shops, pubs, cabs, real estates etc) but you have to have a bigger want or need burning inside that will overshadow that fear.

Overselling Issues

- Publicity regarding the value of Indigenous visual arts.
- The skyrocketing popularity of Indigenous arts especially the Didgeridoo.
- The popular misconception of what is Aboriginal arts and where did those dots come from in the first place.
- The pressure in and the misunderstanding of the marketplace - Lots of Indigenous arts limited Indigenous faces.
- The quick buck syndrome. (cultural guru's)
- Indigenous music production (commercial radio, community radio, live venues).

Under delivering Issues

- Grants and competition at the assessment stage.
- The lack of culturally appropriate Indigenous arts infrastructure and support at regional level.
- The support mechanisms at the personal and organizational level.
- The personal issue of trying to juggle work and home - lots of different issues regarding Indigenous communities.
- Learning to say no and being comfortable with it (burnout of limited Indigenous arts workers).
- Lack of development in regards to business planning etc.
- Majority of employment for Indigenous artist are in education area- dilemma here is that there is a trade off with funding that is set aside for basic education for Indigenous children e.g. ASSPA.
- Non Profit vs Profit.
- Issues of mainstream and Indigenous funding.

Questions we need to consider

- Are Indigenous projects coming from individuals from within the communities or are they imposed from external sources and sold to certain individuals in the community? - Who really owns the project? (No show workshops)
- Who writes the submissions for funding and who really owns the money?
- Do we in reality provide individuals and communities with the skills and ability to repeat the process without our assistance?
 - Yes Empowerment
 - No Dis-empowerment
- Are we willing to work with the individuals within an Indigenous organisation to continue the process so that it may have ongoing developmental so that the organisation can move from:

Dependency —————> Independence —————> Interdependency

Questions to ask

1. What opportunities and benefits are available to me here?
2. What's the perfect outcome that will allow everybody a chance to be happy with the outcome that hasn't been achieved as yet? (Visualize outcome)
3. What am I responsible for and more importantly, willing to do in this process to achieve these outcomes? (Visualized to reality)
4. What am I currently doing that is preventing this outcome?
5. What can I do to stop this preventative activity or inactivity?

Notes

Many Aboriginal people are trying to make a business out of arts and culture but it seems like its either that the competition has got there first and/or there are no structures in place that would allow isolated communities to benefit from the development of Indigenous arts i.e. supply and demand issues.

We should all acknowledge that expressive cultural activities are the foundation of cultural vitality. The danger that many of us face is that culture is looked upon from only a heritage point view, where many see it as a museum piece or Keeping Place issue. What we seem to be missing is the fact that cultural expressive activities in Indigenous communities is the root of our identity. It is the forum in which we express our spiritual identity and cannot be promoted or resourced from the optional arts, past times or hobby category, but should be viewed from the reality that without cultural expression there is or will eventually be no culture.

A qualified Indigenous Arts development officers network would provide the links with funding, employment and training for Indigenous artists as long as this network is fully trained, continually updated and properly resourced to do the task.

Other Issues

- Empowered at the professional level
- Dis-empowered at the personal level
- Mentorships vs Assimilation
- Emotional vs Morals
- Proactivity
- Constantly putting out fires
- Burnout issues
- Homogenizing of communities.