

Whose domain? – Legacy + Capacity Building Empowering Communities

A collaboration between JACK RITCHIE (RADO, Arts North West), CATH FOGARTY (RADO, Outback Arts), LISA O'BRIEN, CHRIS HALLIGAN and ROSEMARY RICH (Armidale Advisory Group), PAT CAVANAGH (Walgett Advisory Group), numerous other members of advisory groups and KIM McCONVILLE (BIG hART), prepared to offer other voices to the tripartite presentation given by Kim McConville, Sheree Bamforth and Kiri Smith from the Cobar BIG hART Advisory Group at the whose domain session of culture@com.unity on October 6.

Since 1998 BIG hART has been working with Arts North West and Outback Arts on a series of linked CCD based projects in Northern and North West NSW, working in film and radio. Although these projects have produced stunning material, won numerous awards and benefited many young people, the most rewarding aspects of the projects have been in the less glamorous area of legacy.

BIG hART is an arts based company working in rural, regional and isolated areas, which combines the gifts of marginalised people and the skills of professional arts mentors. BIG hART's focus has two aims of equal importance. On the one hand, to contribute experimental cross-form art made with people experiencing multiple levels of disadvantage to national Arts and Social Policy Forums. On the other hand, to achieve behavioural change, increased options and engagement in the community for people who experience multiple layers of disadvantage. BIG hART tries to keep these two, often opposing aims operating in tension.

How projects begin

The creative inspiration is found on the fringes of any community where people are struggling to survive. BIG hART is usually invited to partner with a number of groups in a community to experiment and create a unique project not linked to any one organization.

This allows for a synthesis of issues confronting people on the fringe, determined by the changing needs of each community.

Because BIG hART has such a defined area of expertise – working with experiences of marginalisation – it brings a very specific set of skills to other highly accomplished organisations such as Arts North West and Outback Arts who must maintain a broader perspective. These working relationships go two ways with BIG hART gaining as much as it gives. Rather than striving for duplication or empire building, the aim has been to work collaboratively across the region. This means establishing sound partnerships, genuine friendships, working locally but with a regional perspective, building on local and regional capacities and needs, facilitating rather than directing, and supporting rather than fixing.

The ongoing projects in 12 communities are supported by over 210 organisations across the New England, North West and Western regions who have a focus on or interest in working with the target group. The approximate area covered by these projects is over 200,000 square kilometres. This large group is beginning to form a regional web, and through meeting regularly, and riding the energy created by the ongoing projects, these groups are generating up to six new projects in each community that marginalised young people can access regularly.

Through mentoring, responsibility and ownership of projects the process is handed over to the community. BIG hART then applies its resources to establishing vertical relationships with different levels of government and philanthropy to build the success and sustainability of a process at a community and individual level.

For the young people, these multi-layered interventions provide connectedness and the possibility of sustained engagement in the community. This work has inspired further exploration by BIG hART into building legacy. Developing approaches that don't drift into hand holding exercises, which inevitably dwindle because, a) the legacy work has been ill conceived and b) there was no effective exit strategy.

Armidale

In Armidale the latest project began in February 2001. The Armidale group – a diverse professional and non-professional representation – met weekly, its purpose to assist the BIG hART team in accessing local information and resources, billeting, storage and operation space, media contacts, local network support contact with marginalised young people. Equity in participation, at all levels, became a guiding principle.

Since then the Armidale advisory group has developed an operational structure that is dynamic and professional, fluid and informal, non-exclusive and well maintained. It is effective because it is driven by motivated and committed local people, who are willing to assist local professional agencies in service delivery. Strong community and agency links have been forged through an efficient collaborative process. The diverse needs of individuals are recognised and all ideas and input become part of the process with priority determined by support requirements and timelines.

There are over seven services directly involved, with impressive links to other agencies. Collectively the group reaches through and across most community sectors. This collaboration allows for the various levels of participation and links the resources and aims of multiple agencies/individuals in local project delivery. Armidale projects include radio programming, visual art production, performance arts, D&A and DV workshops and mentoring. They are innovative and diverse with service delivery through event based activities.

Legacy

Legacy can be just another buzz word, used to cover anything from a kind of mythical goodwill, to ideas left in a community, to a couple of follow up phone calls to appease the funding bodies. Although Legacy doesn't have to meet a clinical benchmark, it needs to be measurable on the ground. In the recent project which looked at intergenerational addiction and homelessness, this has meant, the number of new projects generated and the engagement of the target group in them. As well as this there are important stories of legacies in the lives of individuals.

Legacy needs to focus on harnessing energy, commitment and creativity that exists locally. Through CCD strategies, this is facilitated and a structure develops for providing access for marginalised young people to projects locally and regionally.

BIG hART supports the development of these projects and guides communities in extending the scope of original ideas. The process is bottom up and organic rather than top down and imposed.

The legacy process:

- BIG hART partners a community and engages marginalised young people.
- These young people create art that reveals serious hidden issues in the community.
- BIG hART mentors this creativity improving the quality of the work - film, radio, theatre, *etc.*
- Advisory groups, moved by the work provide infrastructure for further projects.
- These projects provide opportunity for young people to reengage with the community.
- BIG hART facilitates capacity building to improve access to more projects.
- Funding partnerships are built regionally, facilitated by Arts North West and Outback Arts
- Advisory groups access funding, initiate and deliver projects
- Advisory groups develop strategies for sustainability.

This process originates from the base of the community, and is mentored by BIG hART to become vertically integrated - from funding sources high in government, through to the grassroots of communities – to bring real pathways for social engagement to marginalised young people.

Through building these collaborative partnerships, ownership is built and everyone wants to win. The art created by young people become tools to build empathy, which changes community perceptions about the target group. When placed in the right forums, the quality of this mentored Art, can move government, releasing more resource and support directly to effective community projects. This avoids projects stagnating at a bureaucratic level or funds being sapped at middle management. In this way, the reach of the projects has the potential to contribute to change at a macro as well as a micro level.

Measurement

Measurement of these projects needs to be practical:

- the number of projects delivered to this target group;
- the survival of marginalised young people;
- the number of sustained partnerships forged locally and across the region;
- the upskilling of individuals; the effective flow of funds;

- the increase in self referrals to agencies;
- the number of awards and the critique of the art created

all provide measures of effectiveness.

The work of BIG hART and the commitment to ongoing legacy has been generously supported by the NSW state government through the Regional Coordination Management Group, representing all state government agencies. The Arts North West RAB has recognised the importance of this development and sees advisory groups as a potential new tier of regional infrastructure for all communities in NSW. Similarly, BIG hART has had its future strategies shaped by working with these organizations. ■