What the world needs now is Love, Sweet Love (Punks)

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1Big hART

What do zombies and computer games have to do with young people’s and community health?

This paper describes an exemplary Big hART project aimed at sparking young people’s interest, engagement and attendance at school, while improving digital skills, literacy and creating innovative digital cultural resources in the isolated Pilbara community of Roebourne WA.

Situated 1500 km north of Perth, the state’s capital, Roebourne is one of the oldest towns in the harsh but beautiful West Pilbara region of Western Australia. From the late 19th century to the 1960s Roebourne was the largest settlement between Darwin and Perth and supported extended periods of mining for cherished resources such as gold, copper and tin. In the 1960s—with the exponential growth in Iron Ore mining—Roebourne boomed suddenly and then almost overnight saw the removal of infrastructure, jobs and a future, as larger modern company towns were created to support the resources boom. As a result Roebourne lost the majority of its non-Aboriginal population, while maintaining itself as home to families with Ngarluma, Yindibrandi and Banyjima heritage. Currently, the relatively young population stands at 950 and growing. Many Roebourne families have a tough history. Until the 1960s there were strict controls and curfews placed on people’s movement to and within the town. Indeed most of the senior people grew up confined to camps and reserves on the other side of the river. Today, even with many injustices torn down, there is no shortage of complex and multi-layered challenges facing these same extended families.

The success of this project involves creative relationships between Roebourne young people, families, senior men and women, local teachers (from the Roebourne District High School) community workers, Woodside Energy Ltd, the Rock Art Foundation Committee and to some extent the Federal Government. In late 2010, having been invited to come and discuss its way of working, Big hART quietly joined the Roebourne community to see if it might have a contribution to make.

Since 1992 Big hART, a not-for-profit, arts and social change organisation, has been working in marginalised and disadvantaged communities across Australia. Established by playwright and director Scott Rankin, the company is made up of artists, community workers, researchers, film-makers, designers and producers who combine experience, experimentation, innovation and art-based project work with building the skills, interests and relationships of members of the community. New skills and capacity are brought to a community by outsiders, who come to live, listen and learn. Together they build relationships, hear old stories, create new ones, and find ways to symbolically and literally create new cultural opportunities to share the gifts and potential of a community with the world, in such a way that new local opportunities are also created.

In 2010 Woodside, based on recommendations from an independent advisory committee, invited Big hART to work in conjunction with members of the local Aboriginal community to assist in thinking about ‘conservation heritage’ in a different way. In other words to reconfigure the way ‘outsiders’ work with local groups and approach the idea of heritage work from a more holistic angle with the result being what has become known as the Yijala Yala Project. This work might be described as a long-term, inter-generational, multi platform, arts project that sets out to highlight cultural heritage as living, continually evolving and in the ’here and now’ and uses a unique meeting of pop-culture elements such as zombie films and computer games to introduce young people to the concept of conserving their culture.

Vital to the ongoing success of this project is the relationship with the local high school. Roebourne District High School has approximately 270 young people enrolled from Reception to Year Twelve. Approximately 90% of the students are from Aboriginal families. The story of Aboriginal student involvement in the school is a familiar one in regional WA. Very few of students complete Year 12,
many struggle with the challenge of maintaining attention and attendance, literacy levels are well below state levels and school is often not a major focus in the lives of students.

In the early stages of the Yijala Yala Project, Big hART set out to begin building digital media skills, creating content and passing on stories through everyday technologies such as mobile phones, computers, TV and radio. A group of fifteen young men, a worker from a resource company and two young mothers came together under the mentorship of a professional filmmaker, choreographer and actor to make a short film exploring the energy of young people and how that can generate fresh ideas and change. The result was a comic film called ‘Love Sweet Love Punks’. The process included workshops in camera and sound set up, operation and technique; steady camera operation; sound composition; song writing; lighting; set design; choreography; costume design and makeup; acting; directing, photography; and behind the scenes documentary film-making. It provided young people with a chance to have fun, create contemporary stories, star in a short film and to become engaged in new forms of cultural activity.

Big hART workers saw how much young people loved working on this small project and also noticed how involved they became with technology such as phones, cameras, computers and iPads whenever they had the chance. During the third term of school, Big hART digital media artist and illustrator Stu Campbell teamed up with the IT and Computing teacher at the local school. The School Principal supported this working relationship by purchasing multiple Photoshop licences, and digital tablet producing company Wacom generously donated five electronic tablets to be used in the workshops. Together this partnership between school, community and the corporate sector provided a way of incorporating Stu’s skills and ideas into the classroom curriculum using stop-motion animation. The strength of the idea was to combine training in stop motion animation into class teaching, and at the same time provide workshops after school hosted by Big hART. To begin, existing footage was used from earlier film making workshops where the young people had featured as ‘Love Punk’ characters. The footage was broken down into frames and students were asked to remove their character images from the background. To do this, they learnt to create a file; import an image for stop-motion animation; make a mask and navigate through the animations once they were created.

As teacher Kane Guy explained:

The students then took turns working with Stu to cut themselves out of the backgrounds to be placed into the digital landscape that he had created. This was teaching them two different ways of achieving a very similar outcome and giving them experience with the tools needed to create stop motion animation and use Photoshop. This pathway was fantastic and made my lessons easier to plan and all the richer for demonstrating the positives of the collaboration.

These workshops ran four days a week at the school and soon became so popular that several students began working with Stu after school in the Big hART digital media room. Through these workshops, over 2000 frames of animation were created for an interactive online game, which will soon be made live on the project website. An important part of ensuring students remained engaged was to regularly show how their work came together as part of the game. Further positive reinforcement came at an end of year school concert when Stu joined other teachers in awarding certificates to students who had excelled in the digital media classes.

One profound moment in the development of this work was during an early workshop in the Big hART digital suite. Stu had been working with three young men, sharing animation software with one particularly talented young man while the other two watched from behind. At one point the young man proceeded to demonstrate his prowess by wrestling the tablet and digital pen from Stu. Keen to further show his mastery, he asked Stu to give up sitting in the ‘driver’s seat’ so he could teach the skill of animation to both his peers. In this one moment he had graduated from student to mentor, from apprentice to master, from the initiate to the initiator.
In Roebourne as in many communities there are many skills and great cultural depth, as well as chaos and everyday survival issues that disrupt traditional rigid educational approaches. It is often the case that rather than imposing new educative trajectories, there is a need to remove obstacles and build on gifts and skills that are already present, but hidden. There is no guarantee of ongoing success, however the continually evolving set of disparate partners on this project—many sections of the community, the school, Woodside, the RAFC, Big hART—the continued commitment to listening, learning and contributing creatively, seem to indicate there are many more chapters of this story to come.

For more information: www.yijalayala.bighart.org