The ins and outs of undertaking a song-writing workshop for rural women

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Abstract

Song-writing is a creative process that has several social and health benefits, including enhanced mental wellbeing and social connectedness. However, there are several challenges associated with implementing, managing and evaluating a song-writing workshop in a rural context. In this paper, we focus our argument on 'ins and outs' to highlight the behind-the-scenes workings of such a workshop, but also to highlight the inclusiveness/exclusiveness realities of small communities and how these can play out through the creative process. Specifically, this paper will explore three logistical and ethical issues: 1) getting buy-in from the media and community; 2) managing personalities within small towns; and 3) the expectations around an external facilitator when an internal champion is needed for sustainability. The paper draws on qualitative evaluation data, including interviews with the workshop facilitator and project manager and a journal kept by the project manager. Interviews and journal entries from some of the women who participated are also used to more fully understand the issues and circumstances from a variety of perspectives. The evaluation was framed within narrative inquiry that privileges the stories of the women involved, both those who ran the workshop as well as those who participated. By examining the logistic and ethical issues associated with this workshop, we contribute to better understanding how creative and arts-based workshops can optimise the health and wellbeing outcomes for rural people who attend while minimising some of the potential risks.

Introduction

Music is inherently social. Songs are meant to be shared; between the songwriter, musicians and audience. Indeed, music is well known for bringing people together to develop social connections and a sense of belonging.[1,2] Community-based song-writing workshops take this a step further by providing a creative outlet for participants to share their inner-most emotions and have these validated by others through the song-writing process.[3] However, community-based song-writing workshops don't just happen. They require significant organisation and effort on the part of an organiser, and they take considerable skill in the part of the facilitator to ensure the positive social and wellbeing benefits that are documented are actualised for the participants attending. In this paper, we explore some of the challenges associated with implementing and managing a song-writing workshop for rural women. Based on the data collected as part of an evaluation of a specific workshop, we highlight three logistical and ethical issues: getting buy-in from the media and community; managing personalities throughout the workshop; and managing expectations of

participants as to the outcomes of the workshop. Throughout this paper we argue that the logistics of running a song-writing workshop cannot be considered in isolation of the ethical aspects of who participates, how social relationships are supported, how emotions are expressed and managed, and how expectations around ongoing outcomes are navigated. Only when these are considered together on an on-going basis will the potential health and wellbeing outcomes from a song-writing workshop be fully realised.

Background

Since the 1990s, there has been increased political and academic attention paid to concepts of social inclusion and exclusion in rural communities.[4] Anwar McHenry[5] argues this relates to governments seeking ways to 'empower' local communities to find local solutions to local problems related to inequity, although this needs to be seen within a broader political context of governments shifting responsibility back towards local communities.[6] In this climate, a range of initiatives have been implemented, including rural leadership[7] and arts-based programs.[5] These are designed to provide avenues for networking and promote a sense of place and civic participation; that is enhance social inclusion. While the evaluation of these programs may be of variable standard, there is a growing evidence base that associates social networking, participation and cohesion with enhanced health and wellbeing outcomes.[8]

Song-writing workshops can be considered as part of this broader community arts-based program. There is emerging research that links song-writing with positive health and wellbeing, including: enhanced self-concept, identity and confidence[9,10]; increased sense of belonging, acceptance, and social connections.[3] In rural communities, accessing music and song-writing outlets is particularly important as these avenues of creative expression may not be readily available. Indeed, Gibson and Gordon[11] found involvement in a rural all-women's community choir provided a place and avenue for women to tell stories, share worries, knowledge and skills, and became a source of emotional support. Unfortunately, many rural communities do not have access to, or the ability to provide these creative outlets for themselves. In 2002, Warner-Smith and Brown[12] argued the avenues for leisure in general and therefore the wellbeing of women in small Australian country towns were constrained due to lack of choice. Shifts in demographics, declines in services and the impact of climate change on farming in more recent years have continued to see social and environmental constraints on rural communities' cohesion leading to a range of health issues, including increased suicide rates.[13] In the face of these challenges, creative outlets such as song-writing workshops can be an important way of supporting the mental health and social wellbeing of rural communities.

The workshop that formed the focus of the evaluation outlined in this paper occurred in a small country town in Queensland, identified here as 'Red Hill', located approximately 50km from a regional city. The workshop was organised by a small arts-production, not-for-profit company from the regional city. Although community meetings had been held by this company to ascertain what activities the community was interested in, the decision to implement a song-writing workshop came about as a result of a funding opportunity that was specifically looking to showcase rural and regional women's voices through song. The organiser, who needed to find funding for the project was therefore in a situation of balancing the requirements of the funder with the desires of the community. The workshop was run over three days in January 2018. Fourteen women, all of European-Australian backgrounds ranging in age from 14 to 76 years of age, attended, during which time they either worked alone or in pairs to write a song, most of which reflected deeply emotional and personal experiences. These songs were then performed for the local community at the end of the workshop, and three months later at the Women of the World Festival in Brisbane. The

workshop was facilitated by an experienced songwriter/performer who had conducted these types of workshops in several rural communities.

Methods

Narrative inquiry informed the evaluation of the workshop. Narrative inquiry emphasises individual stories and experiences from a holistic perspective, including social, cultural, emotional and behavioural aspects of life.[14] As such, the data consisted of individual interviews with the organiser, facilitator and nine participants, personal journals kept by the organiser and five of the participants, and the songs themselves. The interviews were undertaken either face-to-face or via the telephone and lasted between 17 and 70 minutes (average 31 minutes). They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The journals recorded whatever the writer wanted to include, but mostly consisted of thoughts and feelings related to the workshop or issues raised from the workshop discussions. The data were holistically coded to draw out broad patterns.[15] In this paper, we focus particularly on the experiences of the organiser and facilitator. However, we do draw on some of the participants' data to help provide a fuller understanding of the issues. Pseudonyms have been used throughout for place and person names to protect the identities of those who participated.

Findings

Three main logistical and ethical issues were identified from the data: 1) getting buy-in from the media and community; 2) managing personalities in small towns; and 3) expectations around external facilitator when an internal champion is needed for sustainability. Each of these issues will be explored separately, drawing on the data and literature to derive meaning and relevance of these issues for others looking to run similar workshops.

Getting buy-in from the media and community

Regardless of how effective any workshop may be in promoting health and wellbeing, without community participation, the workshop will be ineffective. For the organiser of the song-writing workshop, considerable attention and energy was directed towards gaining radio, local television and print media attention as well as using social media avenues. Fortunately, in this case, there was interest in the workshop from various media outlets.

> The [workshop] had so much media interest, far beyond any project we've run in the last couple of years… There were live performances on radio, online content and celebrations that it was, at points quite laboursome, while you are in the project and also trying to make sure that people are turning up on time too, meeting arrangements (Organiser).

However, even with this support from the media, it was uncertain what the uptake would be until the beginning of the workshop. The organiser records in her journal on Day 1:

> Ten minutes before we started there was only one extra car in the carpark and I thought … this is going to fail. No one is coming. I haven't worked hard enough, we haven't advertised enough, the concept was wrong for the community, they weren't coming. How do I recover from this. Who can I beg to come. Then the sound of tyres on the gravel as more cars trickled in. The relief of seeing the ladies come in one-by-one was palpable. And to my surprise, the long table filled and we needed more chairs. In the end 14 women came!!

While the media plays an important part in the logistics of making the event known within the community, there are also ethical issues associated with the selection of various media to ensure as many within the community have the opportunity to know about the event to be able to decide to

attend or not.[16,17] For example, one of the elderly participants does not own a computer and is completely disengaged from social media outlets. She only heard about the workshop on the local radio. While social media is popular with younger people, there continue to be segments of the community who are not accessing social media, including many older adults.[18] As such, it is incumbent on organisers to have a comprehensive and broad media strategy if they are wanting to address inequities and to reach as many in the community as possible, from all segments within the community.

Managing personalities in small towns

A song-writing workshop is an intensely emotional experience. Participants are often asked to explore past and present difficult lived experiences as the source of their song-writing creativity, as was the case in the workshop evaluated in this paper. However, either as part of this exploration of emotions or independent of that process, participants occasionally have negative experiences that have the potential to counter the positive social and health benefits associated with the workshop. For a small number of people, the song-writing process can result in increases in anxiety and depression.[9] Having a counsellor available to help participants deal with intense emotional reactions initiated by exploring old emotions and difficult lived experiences may be helpful if it is anticipated this could be a problem or beyond the therapeutic skills or available time of the facilitator.

The song-writing workshop did not have a counsellor available. Rather, the issues that presented themselves related more to personal dislikes or miscommunications between participants. However, these still had the potential to disrupt the experience for other participants and therefore needed to be managed, particularly so in small towns where participants know each other and will continue to interact with each other long after the workshop has ended. The facilitator observed:

> It's very tricky. There was two instances where we had the women were sort of a bit testy with each other. The thing is, you can't really take sides because in all the conflicts, all the women, it was fair in their eyes how they were feeling.

Managing these situations required a coordinated effort between the organiser and facilitator to ensure the concerns of those within the conflict are heard but to also ensure others within the workshop are not adversely impacted.

> I do believe that sometimes people just need to be heard so I think in giving them an opportunity to be heard and just listening to their concerns is really important. However, there has to be a point where you are either there to have a great experience or you need to exit stage left (Organiser).

Conflict within and between groups is a reality in community-based programs but it does not need to be viewed negatively and may be part of the necessary work to establish equity and genuine partnerships.[19] Finding solutions that are acceptable to all parties is thus a logistical and ethical issue for facilitators.

Expectations around external facilitator when an internal champion is needed for sustainability

The final logistical and ethical issue relates to managing expectations of some community members. Based on perceptions of the initial community consultations, there was an expectation by some who attended that the song-writing workshop would stimulate other local community activities.

> My take is that there is no individual drivers to make that happen, so I think they're still looking externally to [arts-based organisation] to be the driver of that... It needs to be an

individual or a group of active individuals to make those things happen, and while I think everyone's really enjoyed the project, they've enjoyed it as a participant (Organiser)

While an external facilitator can sometimes help disadvantaged rural communities to start initiating community projects[20], community development needs to occur from inside the community if it is to be sustainable.[21] This can be problematic in small rural communities that already have limited resources, both monetary and human, where there is a high level of reliance on volunteerism for community activities.[22] It is essential that rural communities recognise their own collective agency as the basis of locally driven social change[23], and that they realistically recognise the limits associated with small, once-only arts interventions such as the song-writing workshop evaluated here. The workshop was able to bring people together but it was never intended to support sustained community development.

Discussion and conclusion

Arts-based projects undertaken within communities do have the potential to promote individual and community wellbeing, but in order for social and health benefits to emerge and to be fully realised, various logistical and ethical issues need to be considered. Ideally, extensive community consultation and civic engagement is undertaken in the design and implementation of a project which can help with buy-in from broad sections of community and more comprehensively address issues of equity.[16] In reality, community-based organisations often have to act quickly in response to funding opportunities. This highlights a dilemma many community-based organisations face whereby their 'bottom-up' ideals are sometimes checked by restraints associated with funding. However, by ensuring a comprehensive media strategy is in place, as many people within the community as possible are informed of the event to enable them to decide whether to attend or not.

Once signed up for workshops, the power relations and personalities of participants need to be recognised and managed to ensure equality in decision-making. This is particularly important in small rural towns where participants have already-established relationships or where conflict from within the workshop can easily overflow into the broader community. Ensuring issues are addressed with those in conflict allows community members to reach a point of consensus, even if agreement is not achieved.[23] Being aware of other potential emotional trigger points is also important, and for song-writing workshops that intentionally encourage deep exploration of emotions, ensuring the facilitator is skilled in managing these situations, or having a counsellor available is necessary to avoid potentially re-traumatising participants.

Finally, projects run by small not-for-profit agencies need to be realistic about what they can offer communities. Arts-based projects can stimulate, but are not a substitute for broader social inclusion strategies, including genuine grassroots movements. For small rural communities that do not have a strong history of social action, more extensive external support is required than is possible with a three day song-writing workshop.[20] These limitations need to be clearly communicated to communities in the consultation and project design stages in order to avoid inadvertently raising false expectations as to the outcomes of the intervention.

While there is increasing evidence supporting community-based activities as providing opportunities for enhanced individual and collective social and health wellbeing, not all community-based activities will necessary deliver these outcomes. It is incumbent on organisers and facilitators to ensure they consider logistical as well as ethical issues when planning and implementing community activities. The evaluation of the song-writing workshop outlined in this paper has highlighted three such issues relating to getting buy-in from the media and community, managing personalities, and

understanding expectations of community members regarding external facilitation when an internal champion is needed. These are not the only issues, and other contexts are likely to raise yet other types of issues. However, exploration of these issues reminds us of the complexity of community work as we strive towards better social and health outcomes for our communities.

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Presenter

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