

Living data in the Lower Balonne: Cultural enablement or cultural imposition?

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Abstract

This paper discusses recent developments in a partnership between the Creative Arts at University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc. (QMDC) that is exploring how to develop the use of theatre and visual arts to promote natural resource management in schools and communities in the Lower Balonne. In particular, this paper investigates what constitutes imposition of a theatre-in-education performance for schools in the communities of Surat, Dirranbandi and St George, which are all towns along the Balonne River in south western Queensland. The transference of the “living data” (stories from the children about their river) into a play entitled “The doctor and Nursey-Wursey’s most amazing hydrological examination” polarised school-children and adult community audiences in such a way that the research team needed to re-frame (and continues to re-frame) the relationship between data and knowledge in community cultural development.

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Introduction

In my experience of producing over 30 theatre-in-education projects in regional communities since 1999 with Theatre students from the University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba (USQ), approaching theatrical work with a community is about giving participants the tools for “reading” their own experience within the theatre event. This becomes not just reading a play text or reading a performance text, but about actively experiencing the reading of the event by being *in* the event.

Using Drama as a method and means to enable a community of learners to reflect on themselves as cultural-makers is nothing new to the field of educational drama. Key scholar/practitioners in the field have been highlighting the notion of dramatic process as paramount to anchoring learning in visceral experiences since the 1950s (O’Toole, 1992; Neelands 1984; O’Neill 1995). Theatre-in-education (TIE) techniques have been used throughout schools since the 1970s to invest children and communities in the collaborative art of building an expressive vehicle for public viewing, promoting dialogue, and the exchange of ideas (Mirrone, 1993; Schwietzer, 1980). The methods of TIE usually involve the immersion of visiting artists into a community who undertake workshops and other collaborative artistic enterprises in order to build rapport and trust within that community so that “speaking on behalf of” or “for” a community can have currency and efficacy. For

schoolchildren in remote areas, the chance to engage with Drama and Visual Arts practitioners over a sustained period of time is a luxury most communities cannot afford. The good intentions of the Queensland Arts Council and other touring companies belie the fact that they do not have budgets to place arts practitioners in remote communities for extended visits. The result is often a “dump and run” (an imposition) arts event in schools that presents a polished product but does not necessarily enable or engage the children in the *process* of making the art.

A genuine and focussed shift away from the “dump and run” model towards one that encourages cultural enabling; motivating communities to enable their own artistic activities for their own needs is at the core of my work with school children in the communities along the Balonne River in southwest Queensland: Surat, St George and Dirranbandi. In order to begin this process, the Creative Arts (Visual Arts and Theatre) at USQ had to reconsider and reframe how we research our “acts of expression” in our community work. This greatly impacted how we researched, built and presented a touring theatre-in-education play and student arts exhibition in the Lower Balonne in December 2006. This paper will address aspects from this first six months of the *Cultural catchments* project (June–December 2006), specifically in terms of how new questions were raised about the interface between induced, “living” data and the artist’s intellectual use of this data to create new theatre and arts products: is the artefact created an imposition or not?

The broad picture: Creativity and regional communities

Before discussing the *Cultural catchments* project in more detail, it is appropriate to consider the current climate that exists for theatre and theatre-in-education (TIE) initiatives in non-metropolitan areas as well as the general consensus about creative communities within the major regional arts funding bodies of Australia. There is a current trend in much of the literature regarding community cultural development in linking community innovation to the application of creative ways of thinking to increase cultural literacy and tourism. The 2006 Regional Arts Australia National Directions priorities suggest that local identity is what binds the community and the ownership of decision-making about arts and culture is strongly linked to identity: and this must include diverse voices. One of the ways for developing the priority for sustaining cultural activity is to find increased support to bring practicing artists to the regions, preferably over a long time (to avoid the “dump and run”), and foster stronger alliances between cultural tourism, heritage, sports and environmental groups (Regional Arts Australia, 2006, pp. 12–14). Community theatre practitioners, John du Feu and Eve Stafford added their discussions about this change of practice back in 2001, suggesting that developing cultural capital in the regions is a matter of creating arts events where “conversations to exchange experiences, human scale storytelling and values-sharing” are the key to creating “good” regional theatre (Stafford, 2001, p. 11). When a city-based theatre instructor or company “develops a dialogue with a local community, it places itself in a position to receive directly the kind of insights and energies that can lead to creative theatre making and individual products” (Stafford, p. 13). Sue Benner’s research also highlights the shift in amateur theatre from performing scripted plays to working collaboratively with a playwright or theatre instructor to create new works (2001, p. 16).

Similarly, the Australia Council’s recent report by the Community Partnership Scoping Study entitled *Creative communities* (Dunn, 2006) reveals a widespread interest in broadening and developing arts and cultural activities by involving

communities in the consultative process. The report suggests the Australia Council adopt a Creative Communities Strategy which integrates policy, planning and delivery through strong leadership and effective partnerships to facilitate these interests in being inclusive, organic, diverse and indicative of their particular communities (Dunn, 2006). Research undertaken outside of the field of arts or community cultural development has identified similar findings as those discussed in the Scoping Study. Researchers from the Department of Primary Industries (Queensland) and Faculty of Business at the University of Queensland, Ian Plowman, Neal Ashkanasy, John Gardner and Malcom Letts (2003) investigated eight Queensland regional towns and asked “why some towns thrive while others languish?” Their findings discovered that innovative communities were culturally active communities who embraced the arts in order to promote their town through the following behaviours: managerial attitude towards change; healthy exchange of ideas internally; higher level of education; a younger population; higher proportion of residents working in “creative-class” occupations (Plowman et al., Executive Summary, 2003, pp. 1–2). The researchers’ recommendations for creating an innovative, and therefore healthy and thriving community, was to encourage: public celebrations of creativity and achievement; continuing education and development of home-grown talent; travel in order to bring ideas back; and to develop opportunities for shared relaxation and play, that is, using cultural events to develop social interaction (2003, pp. 4–5). Interestingly, these findings were achieved independently of any arts agenda that may have desired the centrality of creativity and arts to make towns more liveable.

Richard Florida’s *the rise of the creative class* (2005) is an extensive piece of research regarding what is essentially economic and civic engineering terminology that reframes and refocuses how society might read the role of creativity (in all ventures, not just the arts) in innovative life practice. Florida is neither an arts graduate nor a practicing artist yet he explores the fuzzy boundaries of what constitutes creativity and suggests creative impulses are an economic force and not just a middle-class luxury. One aspect of his theory is his discussion of the creative person whom he believes must have a “well-defined notion of how one relates to others: what one’s obligation is to other people and what one expects of them”, which he calls this a sense of “relational identity” (p. 317). Yet Florida fears that his concept of a Creative Class does not yet have a well-evolved sense of this and that articulating creative potential is about creating collectives of people; a collaborative effort, in order to nourish and manifest change (p. 325).

This concept of “relational identity” becomes very important when gaining access to a community to collect story and cultural data. How the well-intentioned, metropolitan research team builds genuine rapport can be a highly complex process that has the potential to polarise a community between loathing and embracing the experience. The town of St George has had two such experiences in the last five years where they have been publicly represented by a mediated production. The ABC television documentary series *Two men in a tinnie* (Smith, 2006), with John Doyle and Tim Flannery, screened between September and October 2006 (in the middle of our six-month series of visits) left some community members in shock. In some cases, they were angered as they felt the program presented them in an unflattering light alleging the Balonne’s cotton industry is a major contributor to the demise of the Murray-Darling systems. The data we collected from interviewing the adult audience members of our TIE production of *The doctor and Nursey-Wursey’s most amazing hydrological adventure* in December 2006 suggested that they were wary, if not hostile, about people talking to them for documentary purposes, speaking on their behalf or misrepresenting them in the public domain (Ross, 2007, Appendix 1). Yet in 2001, a theatre project entitled

Way out west was conducted in the region by a partnership between The Centenary of Federation Queensland, Queensland Performing Arts Trust and Laboite Theatre Company in Brisbane creating a touring tent-show that used a blend of comedy, rock'n'roll and audience participation to tell rural stories. Playwrights Margery and Michael Forde wrote the play based on a conflation of stories they gathered from the region throughout 2000; their play *Way out west* featured seven key stories (with embellishments) that toured throughout south western Queensland (Roma, St George, Mitchell, Charleville, Cunnamulla and Quilpie) in 2001. Five actors who were all born and raised in regional Australia spoke on behalf of the community (not parodied) and their perceived “county-ness” was by all accounts warmly received as “entertainment” by all who attended the outdoor event (Laboite, 2001).

The “documentary” or “entertainment” approaches previously used by visiting artists polarised the community’s perceptions of how they were represented as either critiqued and ridiculed (documentary) or sentimentalised “bush folk” (entertainment). This polarity in how the community “read” theatrical and mediated products about themselves became an important discovery by the *Cultural catchment* research team because we wanted to build a theatrical artefact that the community could access through their understanding of “theatre”. A TIE method offers a flexible form to fuse together the pedagogic aspects of the documentary style with the theatrical aspects of the entertainment style.

Cultural catchments and cultural pedagogy

The creation of the TIE play and touring visual arts exhibition were major outcomes of this research project which was formed through a partnership between USQ Departments of Visual Arts, Theatre and the Queensland Murray-Darling Committee Inc. (QMDC), which provides \$80,000 to the joint venture over 18 months (June 2006–December 2007). This project is a cultural pedagogy project that provides a significant collaborative site for researchers and students from USQ to investigate how the creative arts impact a community, and provides vital information about lived experiences and cultural understandings by locals in their communities. These aspects particularly interest QMDC as a way of augmenting their mostly scientific and environmentalist purpose in the communities in order to better their delivery of natural resource management policy and information in the region (QMDC, 2006).

As a relatively new environmental group in the Lower Balonne (which specifically targets the Maranoa-Balonne and Border Rivers catchment areas), QMDC is one of many groups working out in the region. Upon approaching USQ in January 2005, Queensland Murray-Darling Committee’s representatives stated their biases; they knew little about the arts and had some trepidation regarding the stereotypes of “arteests”. QMDC officers told us from the beginning they had not yet considered cultural aspects of their communities, yet had faith in the potential for the arts as cultural activity to engage and enrich a community. Some of my previous research explored youth theatre initiatives in Toowoomba where USQ Department of Theatre worked with larger arts organisations to develop an organic theatre for young people (McDonald, 2005). This kind of arts-partnership can offer underwhelming support for fledgling regional arts initiatives because the partners are often vying for the same audience market (theatre markets in Australia are notoriously small and unpredictable) and there are often issues of mainstream arts organisations imposing a generationalist view (read: constrictive) on the emerging youth enterprise (Davis, 1999). For the purposes of *Cultural catchments*, QMDC

provided a partnership outside the realm of the arts industry; they were genuinely “wowed” by the potential power of theatre and visual arts to excite and bring communities together.

The cultural pedagogy driving this project is about engagement and embodiment rather than any authoritative notion of “education”. Cultural pedagogic theory is strongly underpinned by the work of Bruner in his book *The culture of education* (1996), which champions the reciprocal relationships between people as key to cultural development and cultural literacies (Korat, 2001, p. 226). Trend suggests that cultural pedagogy involves analysing stories and encouraging this analytical spirit in others (1992, pp. 2–3), and this might entail the dismantling of old forms of art and contesting pedagogies that deny the very real ways that culture is produced and consumed (Doubleday, 2004, p. 6). According to Florida (2005) and Plowman et al., (2005), innovative communities actively seek out rapport opportunities with cultural or creative outcomes in order to encourage a definitive measure of themselves as a community. *Cultural catchments* was established by the Creative Arts at USQ to investigate the application of this current thinking about cultural pedagogy; we began with the centrality of stories and how children use these to share their idea of place in the community. With Ethical Clearance provided by the USQ Office of Research and further funding from the Faculty of Arts Public Memory Research Centre, the research aspects of the project use a critical ethnographic (Thomas, 1993) and reflective practitioner approach (Taylor, 1996; Schon, 1983) to the collection and analysis of data from the field. This means that the reflective generation of interviews, journals and field notes for the research involves similar practices to ethnographic performance or verbatim theatre techniques (Donelan, 2002; Mienczakowski, 1993; Sallis, 2004) which are used frequently by TIE producers; the collection of stories is at the core of the research and artistic enterprise. Stories are readable data, yet read in infinitely different ways.

Gathering the story data/living data

In June 2006, QMDC suggested suitable research communities in the Lower Balonne, and the promise of creative arts activity gave us welcomed access to a composite Year 6/7 class at Surat State School, a Year 4 class at St George SS, and a composite arts class that had a wide range of Year levels (5–10) at Dirranbandi SS. We chose to begin our work in state schools because we believe that these provide a cross-section of the entire Balonne community; the schools then also become the benefactors of our emerging thinking and practice about artistic enabling and engagement. The first six-months of the project therefore were designed to build rapport and trust between USQ, QMDC and the community through their schools. Beginning in August 2006, we undertook seven visits (approximately two per month) to each school where we would spend a 1.5 hour session with each of the classes mentioned above. Our overarching themes for the workshops were about life on the river and storytelling using Visual Arts and Drama techniques to illuminate and promote the “reading” of the river in different ways. Workshops using photography, frottage (charcoal rubbings), indigenous story-telling techniques, mapping of stories using natural objects, improvisation and basic acting all produced both photographic data and artefacts from each school.

One of the most consistent arts activities which had genuine and enthusiastic contributions from all students was the painting of collaborative canvases (one for each class, although some classes completed two over seven visits) which became

a way to engage their further discussion about life on their river. Each of the classes was divided into two or three groups where they could rotate through several activities in the 1.5 hour session that also included opportunities for them to sit in small groups with a USQ student who would record their stories about the river. Over 3 000 photographic images were captured between August and November 2006, over 100 digitally recorded stories, as well as a variety of artefacts that were archived and curated by our Research Assistant, Carley Commens, for display as a travelling visual arts exhibition which toured with the theatrical performance of a new theatre-in-education play (also developed from the gathered data stories) entitled *The doctor and Nursey-Wursey's most amazing hydrological examination* to Surat, St George and Dirranbandi from 5 to 8 December 2006.

This significant amount of story-data digitally recorded in the local children's own voices meant that we had captured a significantly nuanced sense of the context of the Balonne River and the communities living on its banks. This methodology of collecting deliberately anecdotal and induced data highlighted the value we placed on rapport-building as a key cultural pedagogic intent of the project; inclusion, response, reflection and re-presentation. Arts education and cultural pedagogy are fertile grounds for this kind of rapport-building, as contrasts and conflicts during the process invariably illuminate new ways of thinking in order to deal with the complexities of multiple voices. The data were therefore treated as "live" by the research team, that is, a living conduit of cultural revelations about the community which were then directly used in the creation of two significant theatrical outcomes of the project; a script for the theatre-in-education play and the vocal score for a collection of data-digital stories presented as part of the touring Visual Arts exhibition. The school and community audiences who received these artefacts recognised their part (or their absence) in the process of collecting the data and were therefore afforded the opportunity to reflect on their re-presentation of how they read their environment.

Another vital source of this living data was the consistently regular recorded evaluations of the research team. The method of digitally recording this living data was repeated by all research and workshop teams who travelled to and from Toowoomba to the Balonne communities. The four-and-a-half hour drive (9 hours combined travelling time) became a most significant time for processing information about the project. Driving with Theatre and Visual Arts students, fellow researchers and QMDC representatives, we informally and formally collected data and played back digitally recorded interviews and stories from the community (they travel with us also). This allowed us to warrant the data by firming up and giving gravitas to hunches, focussing perceptions, ironing-out assumptions, and generally building a discourse, definitely a culture, about the project from all contributors.

The data we collected from visits between August and October 2006 were given to the director/playwright (Scott Alderdice) and actors for developing what became the TIE script: *The doctor and Nursey-Wursey's most amazing hydrological adventure* (a draft script and performance were delivered at the Discovering Landcare Conference in Toowoomba on 16 October 2006 in order to gather feedback from the mostly Primary school audience). As a researcher who has undertaken several qualitative, data-inducing research projects, for the first time I was reading the raw data as fodder for theatre practice; that is, I ceased to analyse the data only as critical ethnography and read the data as potential for re-inscription and re-presentation in the making of theatre for the regional audience. Practice-led research in the creative arts is not new, but is consistently and hotly debated in

terms of its methodology and research outcomes which have not always been accepted by the traditional academy (Gillies, 2004, 207). If qualitative and empirical data are a way to capture meaning and represent the world, then manipulating this living data into a theatrical production is a transformative process for the data which makes malleable the authentic voice of the participant. Similarly, the voices of the research team's recorded ongoing evaluations of the process also served as a living aperture on the process of practice and how we built our rapport.

Transforming living data into *Nurse Wurse*

The process of transforming the verbatim language and stories from participant data into a TIE performance becomes complicated when the production team is discretely separate from the research team (as on this project). This transformative aspect of “re-presentation” is an analytical creative process that involves the mining and reflection of the data experiences to build complex vehicles of expression, such as new theatre performances. What was presented back to the community as a performance of *The doctor and Nursey Wursey's most amazing hydrological examination* was a detailed reflection from both the research team (who initially induced the data and encouraged authentic voices for recording), as well as the production team who embodied these stories into three-dimensions upon the stage. The analysis from the participant voices, however, occurred only at the point of performance where they were asked to evaluate the presentation; locals were not directly part of the process of making the performance. The artistic licence and creative metaphor that Alderdice (director/playwright) brought to this play-building process were also legitimate factors that did sometimes ignore the verbatim data in favour of combined and complex imagery. Making manifest the stories on the bodies of actors was the method used to allow the audience to “read” (Oddey, 1994) their stories again as a set of images. TIE play-building methods used by the production team create a unique experience in every instance; no two productions will ever be the same even if they use the same data, and the process is what determines the product (Oddey, p. 11).

As research leader, I had composed a brief for the director asking him to base the play upon the gathered material of the research team, and promote a sense of balance about the water debates to avoid overt “preachiness” or didacticism. Alderdice had also visited the research sites and taught workshops in all three schools participating in the research; this all helped to formulate his theatrical ideas for the performance. Alderdice's own upbringing in Wakool near Deniliquin (part of the Wakool river system entering the Murray-Darling at the bottom-end of the system) on the New South Wales/Victorian border influenced his reading of the Balonne River as “ill” and prompted his creation of a “hydrological examination” in order to diagnose aspects of disease in the river. This point of view was not clearly stated in the participant data, but the various stories from the students describing dead sheep floating in the river to the river's muddy condition suggested a river in flux; this was the entrance point for Alderdice's naming and exploring of these issues in the format of a TIE production.

Alderdice's directorial practice is to work with the actors “on the floor” (in this case two female actor-graduates from USQ Acting Major), meaning that a bulk of the early rehearsals are about finding metaphors for hunches the director may have, to improvise ideas in order to give them physical form, to find the comic rhythm and the characters that are suitable for the intended audience (mixing the nuances

of “entertainment” and “documentary” styles). The writing is a living process as the director/playwright will take ideas “from the floor” and scripts them after rehearsal for re-exploring and refining in subsequent rehearsals. The play and script were “built” in isolation from the research team over a two week period using the motif of two “clowns”, a doctor and a his smarter side-kick nurse, to embody metaphoric aspects affecting the river as they take a journey to conduct a health-check upon the river (any river); the team removed the name “Balonne” from the script in order to suggest that these processes occur along many rivers of the Murray-Darling system. Together, the characters encounter El Nino (the big fat over-nourished baby of air floating off the coast), an Old Lady (good citizen who lives in a local town by the river), Barry (a frontier-Western-like cotton farmer), and Murray the Cod (a barely breathing fish carrying an oxygen mask); all of these characters are metaphors for the people and issues the project has come into contact with over the six-month residency. The play uses many entertaining conventions of clowning where the knowledgeable and haughty Doctor is upstaged constantly by the brighter and sweeter Nursey, who also plays most of the other characters in the show. Not unlike the public-friendly aesthetic of the “tent-theatre” used in *Way out west*, the clowning motif offers simple staging, minimal use of props, and a self-referential, “wink to the audience” inclusion of documentary facts and figures gathered from the research team.

Community reception: Is all imposition an imposition?

The final production that toured to the Lower Balonne in December 2006 was not strictly a verbatim theatre performance, because the transformation of the data into TIE imbued the stories with images and metaphors that did not strictly come from the participants’ stories; some of these were immediately recognisable by the majority of student audiences who were part of the gathering-data process, and some remained completely inaccessible for the adult audience. The tour itself consisted of three full days of performing at schools in the mornings and free community performances (at the schools) in the afternoons with one public performance (at the local winery), for which over 100 invitations were sent to local farmers, politicians, Elders and service providers from the region. Therefore, there were two very different sets of audiences (and sets of responses) who attended these performances: the school students with whom we had worked and built rapport, and adult community members who were mostly agricultural folk from the region.

Feedback from the production and research teams on tour suggested our “relational identity” of a genuinely collaborative process was somewhat compromised in that the production team were only “seen” during the tour and there was little rapport between the actors and the school-aged audiences. This did not seem to adversely affect how the school students “read” the show as their feedback communicated some recognition and ownership of the material and processes of the show, enhanced largely by the display and framing of their own artwork in the Visual Arts exhibition that accompanied the touring performance. Students, teachers, and principals all shared glowing feedback about the tour and the need for further arts development of this kind in their schools; any constructive feedback tended to be in regard to the length of the show and that it was probably best suited for a middle-school audience (Ross, 20). USQ delivered upon our promises to the schools and QMDC in terms of providing cultural pedagogy that engaged and showcased primary-student thinking about natural resources. But the question still remained:

did our transformation of the living data into a living performance impose a cultural product upon their community?

Queensland youth theatre research team, Judith McLean and Susan Richer, suggest that theatre for young people, including TIE, is about re-focussing the relationship “between artmakers, arts educators, and young people as partners in creating and learning cultures to assist arts practice” (2003, p. 5); this was certainly successfully achieved in our rapport built with participating schools. Yet, because there had been little promotion of our project within the community, our performances for the communities were not very well attended. My hunch that engaging school students would also engage their parents and wider community did not come to fruition and the separation in the community between school culture and adult community culture was apparent. For the 20 adult community members who did attend the performance, however, their initial and raw responses suggested that we had created an imposed cultural artefact that especially “worried” the largest community in the region: the cotton farmers and related agriculturalists.

Being a regional university, USQ has a high proportion of students who are from regional and rural areas and this provided the project with one of its latent, but most revelatory access points. One such student, “Chris Ross” (pseudonym), is from the Lower Balonne and his family connections to the cotton industry opened a portal into the farming community that provided some genuine insight into the complexity of water issues for the people who are largely demonised in popular media. Their interviews and informal discussions with Chris and the research team revealed the discomfort in the community regarding their representation in the ABC *Two men in a tinny* series, as well as their growing anxiety about water issues coming under Federal government control; we quickly learnt that increased media brings increased scrutiny and “research” investigation to the community which can exhaust local interest in a project and make people feel highly vulnerable. Because of our lack of focused community rapport-building, the ugly notion of the “city wankers” coming to the country to gain their own brownie points was a genuine threat to how we would be “read” in the community. There is a line from the play where the Old Lady character (representing the community) says loudly:

Oh! Another jumped-up, know-it-all from a city university
come to tell us country bumpkins how to suck eggs!
(Alderdice, 2006, p. 22)

This always made me laugh nervously during the community shows, because rather than simply being a note of self-deprecation by USQ, it was probably a little too real for our regional audience. As a chief “informant” in the project, Chris ran qualitative reconnaissance for the research, and through his diaries and written reports he uncovered the wariness of talking to strangers about things that concern them; that this is usually done “farmer to farmer” (Ross, Appendix 1, 2007). Chris also uncovered how much he was also exposed to risk and ridicule from his own community. At one school he received some very terse questioning of his loyalty to his family and community through being involved with “such a project”. Chris noted in his report that his “insider” status built in an element of trust that may not have been found through a “foreign researcher” but that he felt this was a double-edged sword (p. 23).

Mostly the feedback gathered through interviews and surveys from the community performances was that while many audience members appreciated the amount of work and creativity that went into the production, they wished that more people

from their community had attended. As one farmer stated “we rarely get the chance to correspond with each other and share stories and experiences” (Ross, Appendix 1). It seemed the small gathering of community at the performances was reminiscent of former social occasions where farmers could express themselves through one-on-one interaction, yet these had ceased to be a fixture of community life. Chris detected what he described as “sadness” from audiences at seeing the very complex issues affecting their everyday lives presented as a comedy (p. 20). For him, the performance for the community audiences (mostly agriculturists) tapped into an emotional seam that was not as noticeable with the student audiences in the schools. These regional farmers approached and “read” the word “theatre” as something that might relieve them of their woes for a while: an entertainment that is joyous and not reflective upon their lives. Paradoxically, the clowning methods used to “lighten” water and natural resources management issues and reflected back onto the community via the voices of their communities’ children (and transformed into the TIE model), made them feel that there would never be any escape from these issues (p. 20).

The lack of community rapport-building I feel was overcome somewhat by the inclusion of local people on our research team, such as Chris, who had access to honest and uncensored reactions to the performance, which may well have remained buried through politeness and courteous respect. Although the community audiences were not part of the processes in developing the artefacts, their reading of the play did provide a site for social interaction (a rekindling of a “relational identity”) and discussions on what they read of themselves in the play. Many adult audience responses stated that the play was performed to audiences who already knew what actions needed attention, instead; it need to be toured to urban areas for enlightening city people on the plights of regional communities (Ross, pp. 22–23).

Conclusion

Although the performance was created collaboratively from the experiences collected from school children, it was an imposed artefact on the community audiences. The imposition occurred on two fronts: the most obvious being the fact that we created the performance away from the community in Toowoomba (using their stories as impetus for the creative work) but nonetheless it was built in isolation from them and from the research team. The second impositional front was more subtle in that the reception of the performance for the community revealed their bias towards “theatre”, meaning a phenomenon where they could forget about their troubles for a short time. The TIE method we imposed upon them used declamatory techniques that eschewed their reading of the clowning comedy used to deliver the “message” of taking care of the river. I stop short, however, of suggesting that the imposition was an ugly or patronised attempt at “dumping art” on the regions. Certainly the relationships and rapport developed in the schools is exemplary of best practice for a cultural enablement model, but regional schools are hungry for cultural outlets for their students, and so our process was always going to be well received.

This six-month process of building a touring event stimulated some thinking and discussion from the adult Balonne community that revealed a yearning for greater social occasions in which to increase the “farmer to farmer” exchange (let alone other groups within the community). Using informants from the community in the actual research team also greatly enhanced access to how the adult community received the performance. If this had not occurred, we would only have concluded

that they disliked the show, rather than discovered the ways in which the TIE aspects challenged their biases towards theatre that is purely entertainment. What I learnt specifically through this process is that the collection of data in its raw form is *not* knowledge. The transference of the living data into another living readable structure like a dramatic performance creates an analytical pathway that does not produce traditional DEST-related academic outcomes; the equipping and presentation of the knowledge gleaned from the data remains alive and a shared phenomenon.

The notion of “imposition” therefore may also be an imposed one; my academic wariness of imposition in communities is certainly fuelled by the material written about this in the field, and yet, specific projects like *Cultural Catchments* have the ability to gather interactive and complex responses for greater exploration. This is exactly the kind of “social” information that QMDC desired to obtain from this partnership as the nuances and subtleties implicit in the transference of data into knowledge creates opportunities for new readings and discussions in their communities. The use of living data for the creation of theatre and visual arts products is a “work in progress” that suggests that a combination of rapport-building over time *and* imposition may be one of several keys to genuine cultural engagement in regional communities.

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