

Cultural Understanding

Case Study: Ngapartji Ngapartji

Partner: Big hART

Location: Alice Springs, Australia

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Introduction

Ngapartji Ngapartji, meaning 'I Give You Something, You Give Me Something'; is a concept governing relationships and exchange in Pitjantjatjara society and culture.

Ngapartji Ngapartji is a long term inter-generational language and arts project based on Arrernte country in Mparntwe (Alice Springs). The project seeks to highlight the status of indigenous languages and generate a national and international groundswell in desire to maintain and preserve these languages. In addition, the project seeks to respond to issues of health, education, substance abuse and violence presenting for young Pitjantjatjara people in Alice Springs and region using arts intervention strategies.

Ultimately it is hoped that the profile of the *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project and its model generate a broader understanding of and interest in the value and preservation of all indigenous languages, not just Pitjantjatjara.

Ngapartji Ngapartji is run by Big hART, a not-for-profit charity, comprising of a group of professional artists, arts workers and producers who have been making work together for 14 years. Big hART most often works in small communities around the country or in cities where groups of people lack opportunity because of policy decisions, circumstance, survival issues or personal choice.

Activity

The *Ngapartji Ngapartji* project applies the Big hART model of art-based community development in a new context. It brings together Pitjantjatjara and non-Pitjantjatjara people, honouring everyone's contribution, to create a process of *Ngapartji Ngapartji*: exchange and cross-cultural collaboration.

Ngapartji Ngapartji has many layers involving language learning, teaching and maintenance, community development, crime prevention, cross-cultural collaboration, creating new literacy training models as well as film, art and theatre-making.

Part of the project includes the development of an online Pitjantjatjara language course where young people, assisted by their families, elders and Big hART artists, become the language tutors for the national and international audiences of the *Ngapartji Ngapartji*

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production - a high profile and beautiful touring theatrical work which is performed in Pitjantjatjara and English.

Regular workshops in Alice Springs and 'out bush' with young people create material for the online world of *Ngapartji Ngapartji* as well as feeding ideas into the theatre production. Material varies in form and content in response to participation, which is in turn influenced by matters such as cultural and family obligations, sickness, sorry business (grieving after the passing of family or friends), and high levels of transience between town and bush communities.

Impact

Ngapartji Ngapartji works with:

- 29 young people and 25 adults and their families 'closely' (meaning there was a level of regular attendance at workshops and relationships built with young people who also participated in public events);
- 200 additional young people and their extended families on a 'drop-in' basis;
- over 25 artists;
- more than 16 partnering organisations; and
- over 220 people enrolled in the *Ninti* online language and culture site.

More than 15,362 people have seen the touring theatre works.

Some of the greatest impact has been in the area of community engagement and participation. This has been evident on an individual level as well as at a broader community level. The 'community' includes 29 young people, 25 adults and their families 'closely' and over 200 more people and their extended families on a 'drop-in' basis. Since participating in the Big *hART* programme there have been visible changes in focus, ability to commit and timetable as well as general demeanour, dignity and pride in young people who attend regularly.

The project also established close working partnerships with eight organisations in Alice Springs and Ernabella. Through the on-the-ground process a range of non-traditional arts skills have been shared with young people and elders in Alice Springs and Ernabella, and strong relationships and trust have been built.

The following is a sample of participants' responses to a project survey conducted in 2006:

'The Ngapartji Ngapartji project is an important and exciting project which enables both indigenous and non-indigenous people to learn from each other. I enjoy the creative experience, working with the Ngapartji team, and sharing my language, culture and this story with non-indigenous people. I grew up in "ration days" and have experienced discrimination, particularly when I was younger and working with a team that has empathy with indigenous issues and my Pitjantjatjara family is very rewarding for me.' - Lorna (language adviser)

'I like the show, I like my part. I like to wear my costume. When the audience is there I feel a little bit shame, but it gets better.' - Julie (young participant and performer)

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'We're a long way from home, but it's "palya", no worries. We are helping Trevor to tell his story. My grandmother Amanyi from Ernabella is in the show and she always makes stories from long time ago, and my other grandmother Lorna from Titjikala is here, too. The audience "kulini" - they listen.' - Sadie (young participant and performer)

'What's great about touring is the intercultural exchange/relationship development, joy of creating a work together, working as a team, and getting the creative stimulus of other artists and art works, and taking indigenous language out into mainstream Australia and getting incredibly positive responses to this, making the Maralinga story visible as well as the culture (both through the show and through the promotion of the website).'' - Dani (arts worker)

Lessons

As well as through participation in more 'formal' workshops and activities, a strong sense of ownership of this project by young people and community members has been built through the cheerful dynamic of the office space, especially the regular sharing of *mai* (food) and *cupati* (cups of tea). A strong relationship has developed between the residents of town camps and several Pitjantjatjara communities where a number of young people live, so that the project has engendered a sense of 'community' broader than workshop participation.

It is through this 'open crowd' approach, the ownership that the community has of the project and the depth of inter-company trust that has grown, that participants choose to travel and share their stories. This allows Festival audiences around Australia to be exposed to the stories and skills of this community, such as Elton Wirri, grandson of Albert Namatjira, who moved audiences to tears with the exquisite landscape he sketched in chalk during the 2006 Sydney Opera House season.