THE UTILIZATION OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY FOR ENRICHMENT OF CULTURAL LIFE IN RURAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH MUSIC MAKING

John Welch
Regional Outreach Music Project

ABSTRACT

Information and Communications Technology enables music programs to be delivered on a regional population basis providing services to communities where access has been limited because of population size. A new market is opened up and new jobs are created making a significant contribution to economic growth. The enrichment of cultural life in turn builds a stronger community with a determination to grow and develop, valuing their own uniqueness and the contributions they can make to the cultural diversity of the country.

PREAMBLE

In an climate where serious issues must be addressed regarding economic decline and population decrease in regional Australia, it is often not realised how significant a contribution the arts can make. In the publication by the Australia Foundation for Culture & the Humanities, Making Arts and Culture Work in Business (2001) Richard Pratt AC points out that ‘Strategic investment in Australia’s arts and culture can deliver significant measurable commercial benefits to individual businesses while simultaneously helping to build a strong community and strong market place’.

This Regional Outreach Music Project does both. By focusing first in this paper on economic matters I purposefully draw attention to how ROMP can make a significant contribution towards building a stronger market place for communities in the Northern Tablelands and the North West Region of New South Wales.

In the remainder of the paper I deal with the equally important contributions ROMP can make to cultural enrichment and social welfare, so building a stronger community.

Most of what is related in this part is the result of my personal involvement in a wide variety of music activities in various parts of the region, and from speaking with many people of all ages and backgrounds at informal social gatherings. It is therefore tinged with the kind of passion it is difficult to avoid when speaking of music and the arts, enrichment of community and the greater life that can be enjoyed thanks to recent developments in modern technology.

INTRODUCTION

ROMP was developed over the last two and a half years for the communities in the 19 shires of the Northern Tablelands and North West Region of New South Wales.

The aim of the project is to create opportunities for access to music education and entertainment programs of a quality and diversity similar to that available in metropolitan centres.

Delivery of these opportunities is dependent upon effective use of Regional Resource Sharing, Information Technology.
and Interactive Communications Technology.

The strength and value of the project lies in the relevance of these opportunities to community social needs and cultural interests, as well as the contribution it makes to economic growth.

BACKGROUND

Dictates of Individual Community Population Size

Regional communities have had limited access to music programs because of individual community population size. The smaller the population the less able it is to financially support the physical presence of teachers and performing artists.

The two largest centres Armidale (population 24,383) and Tamworth (population 35,570) are able to support a diverse group of professional music teachers and enjoy performances by professional musicians, local and imported.

In these centres there are however gaps. There are instruments that cannot be taught because demand is too small.

The gaps become greater for smaller communities proportional to decreased population size. Gunnedah (population 12,371), Moree (population 15,135) and Inverell (population 14,725) have good music programs for a limited range of instruments in schools and through private teaching.

Smaller towns such as Walcha (population 3,194), Glen Innes (population 5,782) Guyra (population 4,202), Tenterfield (population 6,519) and Quirindi (population 5,782) are largely dependent upon their schools to deliver music tuition programs, with the support of a handful of local private teachers.

The remoter communities with populations below 1,000 (of which there are many) such as Boggabilla, Collarenebri and Mungindi have difficulty engaging classroom music teachers and private teachers are extremely rare.

Variety in music entertainment is likewise limited because of potential audience size; the smaller the community the greater its dependence upon government funding to afford performances by professional artists.

The collective population of communities of the Northern Tablelands and North West Region totals around 180,000. This is 5.6 times the population size of the largest centre, Tamworth.

Available figures indicate that the number of students receiving formal instrumental tuition in Tamworth and Armidale is 5.5% of their population. For the rest of the communities the figure is collectively less than 2%.

What this indicates is that if equity in accessing music tuition could be delivered for the region collectively an additional 3.5% of the population of the communities outside Armidale and Tamworth is likely to take up formal instrumental training; that numbers just over 4,000.

Regional Resource Sharing

Regional Resource Sharing is now being recognised by communities as an effective strategy to improve the region’s economy.

Strengthening existing industries and enhancing the profile of the region to attract new people is an important part of that strategy.

By implementing music programs on a regional population basis, communities both large and small, can share their music teaching and entertainment resources and
provide services previously unavailable to the larger sector of the region.

**Utilisation of Technology**

It is communications technology that provides the means to deliver and share on a regional basis over an area of approximately 55,000 square kilometres.

Projects are coming into place to set up telecommunications infrastructures that will provide equity in data communications throughout the region.

If the infrastructures are assembled to enable the entire region to have coverage for a broadband network that provides high speed and high definition connectivity at affordable prices, face-to-face instrumental tuition can be delivered via interactive video link up.

Such infrastructures will also provide connectivity to internet facilities more efficiently than those currently in place. This means better access to educational resources on music theory and history, better use of networking facilities for planning, managing and promoting ROMP programs and community-based activities.

**ECONOMIC BENEFITS FOR THE REGION**

By creating a new market for an existing industry ROMP makes a significant contribution the economic growth.

All the major programs ROMP will deliver – Early Childhood, Pre-instrumental, Individual and Group Instrumental Tuition, Creative Music Making and Performances - generate income and create new jobs. The Instrumental Tuition Program, being dependent upon Interactive Communications Technology, provides the best example of how utilisation of the technology by the arts can produce economic benefits.

Setting the target enrolment for face-to-face instrumental tuition at 3,000, the equivalent of 67 new full-time jobs are created and the annual turn over is $3 million.

Delivering tuition to 3,000 students requires 48 studios dispersed throughout the region, and connectivity for 1,512 hours per week for 40 weeks of the year.

Of the 67 full-time equivalent teaching positions created, some would be part-time positions. Professional performers interested in relocating to the region would be encouraged to take up these part-time positions allowing them time to continue their performance careers and help build up a regional performance circuit.

Research indicates that a high percentage of the teachers and performers interested in relocating are in the 30 to 40 years age group with young families, now wanting to move from metropolitan centres because of lifestyle preferences. This means that the resultant increase in population is considerably greater than the number of jobs created.

Expansion of this sector of the music industry brings flow on benefits for music related retail outlets and services, as well as for other general business and trades services.

**EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY**

**Consultation**

For ROMP to be relevant and ensured of a meaningful and sustainable future in the region it was imperative that it be formulated in close consultation with the communities. While economic viability results from a regional focus, cultural and social enrichment results from individual communities being empowered by projects.
like ROMP to enhance and shape their own identity.
The consultation process has been extensive and is ongoing. It has included visits to 14 schools (pre-school to high school), meetings with 18 community arts and community services organisations, consultation with both State and Federal Local Members of Parliament and officials from their respective Departments for Regional Development, and addresses to Local Councils.

These meetings provided clear indicators of the needs and interests of communities across the region, and they identified those prepared to participate in the implementation process that requires committed input from community members, mainly on a voluntary basis, community organisations and government representatives. ROMP presented 10 public concerts which provided opportunities to meet with individuals and talk informally about how the project could best serve their interests and help build a strong concert audience. ROMP also ran 14 music workshops on creative music making for young people, which provided an overall view of the musical interests and the talent among youth in the communities visited.

Community Role in Implementation and Sustainability

Fundamental to the project’s implementation is the establishment of a Regional Advisory Group that is representative of each of the participating communities. The implementation strategy includes the Advisory Group working closely with Project Implementation Management during the two year implementation process and formulating a formal organisational and management structure for the ongoing operation of the project.

Making Use of the Internet

Members of the Advisory Group will need to be in regular contact with each other. Being dispersed over a large geographical area it will be time-consuming and costly if contact is dependent on long distance travel. Use of the internet provides an obvious solution.

It was interesting to observe the reaction among the general public when notice was sent to over 200 people by email to announce that ROMP now had a Website to inform people about the project, provide progress reports, dates and venues for upcoming concerts, and provide a vehicle for the public to make comments and suggestions.

Within the first few weeks 120 people had visited the webpage and 52 individuals and organisations officially registered their support for ROMP. One person replied to the email asking for a postal address where letters of support could be sent because there were a number of interested people who either did not have access or did not know how to use a computer. One person asked for information to be faxed because the internet connection in their area was very, very slow. The Department of Land and Water Conservation replied with a strong message demanding that their email address be removed from the address list immediately. Maybe they thought the subject ‘ROMP’ referred to something unsavoury.

Schools in the region are well-equipped with computer laboratories. Young people are therefore quite familiar with internet access. Communications Technology Centres that are being set up in a number of the smaller towns will soon provide access for the broader community. But it is important to be aware when running community based projects that a significant number of people, particularly among the post 50 age group will need to be educated.
and made feel comfortable about using the facility.

OUT IN THE FIELD

My own involvement in music activities in the region have given me an over view of what music opportunities exist and how they vary greatly from one community to the next.

What they did have in common was a wealth of musical talent. What was lacking in the smaller communities was opportunities to express and develop that talent. Where the opportunities are strongest so is that community’s profile.

Tamworth enjoys a national reputation as the Country Music Capital; Armidale is known for excellence in classical music training and performance; Glen Innes has an annual Bush Music Festival that attracts people from all over the state; and the Crock Festival in the North West attracts Rock Bands from around the region.

These centres have valuable regional resources that could be shared, increasing music opportunities and offering greater diversity for all communities.

Last year as part of The Festival of The Brolga ROMP ran creative music making workshops in 5 schools in the Moree Plains area. The aim of the workshops was to provide an opportunity for young people to enjoy making music using whatever resources they might have.

By the end of each session the group had put together something which they saw as being their own. The experience had sown a seed that could if nurtured grow.

The workshops also offered insights into attitudes and social behaviour.

At the beginning of each session the students were asked to tell us what music they liked. Typically the main interest was Hip Pop and Rock. At one session with a group of 11 year old students, the first student began with “I like any kind of music”, when asked for some examples he said “Well anything modern like Rock”; the next student agreed but preferred Hip Pop; the next “Yes, I like anything as long as its not old”. It was time to ask what was old and what was new. The reply was loud and clear: “Anything before 1995 is old”.

At some session we played some samples of some very different styles of music from different cultures and from different western genres. At one where I included a composition of my own for violin and piano a young 12 year old boy said “That was really mysterious and interesting, sought of spooky too.” So I thought it would be interesting to repeat it at another session to see what the response was. It was to a group of 15 year olds and the response was “That’s rubbish, why would anyone want to listen to that”.

As we drove into one of the small towns we visited the feeling of depression was felt just from seeing the building and surroundings. In comparison to the other groups who were not backward in speaking their minds, it was difficult at the beginning to get the young people to clap out a rhythm with their hands or tap a foot let alone express an opinion. But by the end of the day with the help of some very dedicated young teachers they were stepping out rhythms, tapping tambourines, plucking strings while two young girls gave a two finger rendition of Beethoven’s ‘Ode To Joy’ on a very out of tune piano.

One further revealing example is from a similar workshop we had run in Quirindi as part of the NSW Artstart Program a few years ago. The workshops were conducted for two hours a week over five weeks. The group of students aged 13 to 15 consisted of a few good players all girls, four very rowdy male electric guitarists for whom
only Heavy Metal was of any importance and a few others who had no training but were happy to make their contribution with a selection of percussion instruments.

One young male who felt very marginalised in the school environment would come into the room, head straight down the back and lay down on some tables silently refusing to participate. We were advised to just let him be. When we arrived for the fourth session two of the Heavy Metal fans had placed an extra chair in the circle of performers and were at the back of the room saying to the young boy “Come on, mate. You’d really enjoy this. You can sit with us. You can play the triangle.” He joined in for the last two sessions and the performance given at the school assembly.

Two weeks later the music teacher from the school rang to say the boy had come to see her, wanting to know how he could get lesson on playing a musical instrument.

**ROMP PROJECTS 2002**

The common response after the workshops we ran at The Festival of The Brolga was ‘when can you come back’ which was very gratifying but too often followed by ‘you probably wont, no-one ever does’. While government funding makes it possible for professionals to bring informative, engaging and enjoyable music events on regional tour the funding is usually for one-off events not allowing for backup.

It was important therefore that ROMP continue in 2002 to offer community based projects while still seeking funding for its full implementation.

A series of projects were therefore formulated that covered showcasing local talent, developing creative music making skills, linking music with other forms of artistic expression and support for other projects using the arts as an invention strategy in areas such as crime prevention, domestic violence and youth suicide.

Up and running thanks to Regional Arts NSW YOTO (Year Of The Outback) funding are two of the projects in the Moree Plains area:

**Introducing Soundbyte.org**

Soundbyte.org is an innovative initiative by the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. The museum is home to a SoundHouse™ facility, an interactive, educational, fun music and multimedia sound and video laboratory. Visitors to the laboratory have access to its extensive informational archive and educational resources during workshops, tutorials and masterclasses.

In November 2001 the Powerhouse Museum set up Soundbyte.org as an online music service to reach beyond the Museum walls bringing opportunities for creative music experience to the people of regional NSW.

As well as being an online portal to the Museum’s diverse range of music resources, Soundbyte.org offers a music distribution network. This streaming media network provides access to selected multimedia material created by participating community organizations and schools.

Soundbyte.org has also developed innovative music software that enables people to use the internet to connect to each other and create music together at a distance.

The ROMP project provides tuition at four schools and at the Miyay Birray Aboriginal Youth Services Centre on how to create music on computer and enjoy the opportunities offered by Soundbyte.org. It also provides online backup from tutors between sessions for advice, assessment and problem solving.
BIG hART, an organisation that works on non-welfare based arts invention projects for marginalised youths, has initiated a project for Moree and Narrabri, working with Aboriginal men and boys who are both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. The project provides options and opportunities for behavioural change among males who are extremely marginalised and dislocated from family and from community by showing them ways they can reconnect to their culture through artistic expression and build a balance between the past and today. ROMP is running the Soundbyte.org as part of this project.

The software being used requires no theoretical knowledge or instrument playing skills. ‘Super Duper Music Looper’ designed for 6 to 12 years olds provides a good introduction for people of all ages, and the more advanced version ‘ACID Music 3.0’ is all most people’s need for making music of all kinds.

For anyone who gets hooked on it there are many professional software packages and opportunities for professional development in this rapidly expanding sector of the music industry.

**Crossfertilising Music and The Arts**

This project is designed to engage the wider community in creative activity that derives from local culture, history and social circumstance.

The outline of the project as chosen by the Moree community is:

- All participants gather at a local site to hear a local Aboriginal Elder tell a Dreamtime Story about the site, then relate what has happened to it over the past 200 years, and finally lead an open discussion on how the whole community might reconnect to the traditional spirit of the site and renew its relevance within today’s environment.

- Through a series of workshops the story is then recreated first using only music and sound effects. The music can be accessed from a wide variety of sources: local musicians; computer generated music, recorded music and sound effects.

- Visual objects are next created to image the story and music and finally the performers’ actions and words are choreographed to move with the music, throughout the space of the visual objects.

- All is recorded on video and edited, completing the creative telling of the story for public viewing at Moree’s Festival of The Brolga in November. ROMP provides professional artists from music, visual arts, performance and video to guide the participants in developing a performance piece, and offer mentorship to members of the community interested in developing professional skills in these various areas of arts practice.

**Opportunities for Local Talent**

Two additional projects to encourage local talent are currently being planned.

In affiliation with the ABC ROMP is planning a radio program to showcase the talents of high standard young performers from the region. The program include 3 recorded tracks each by 4 groups/artists, reflecting a journey in sound across the region, and illustrating different youth ‘cultures’ in terms of the arts practice that these young people are engaged in.

The recordings will go to air on a selection of ABC regional and national programs and be available online through ABC internet services.
The second project provides opportunities for talented young musicians in the region to develop skills they will need to pursue a professional career in music performance. Through a series of workshops they will have the benefit of professional guidance and advice from high profile artists, managers and producers from the music industry.

The projects involve a diverse range of participants from across the community. As well as providing skills development they look to encourage better communication among people of all ages and backgrounds through artistic expression, and to help build a stronger community with greater self-esteem.

While awaiting the necessary telecommunications infrastructures and facilities such as the Community Technology Centres and interactive video studios, each of these projects in varying degrees paves the way towards productive use of the Information Technology and Interactive Communications Technology that ROMP and other Arts projects can utilise.

As communities feel stronger about their own self worth they will more readily explore opportunities such as those that the technology provides.

CONCLUSION

I remember some years ago listening with great interest to a forum for young Australian composers broadcast on ABC radio. A member of the panel raised a question about the value of studying overseas if one was looking to make a career as a composer. The general consensus was ‘no’, because Australia had a great wealth of musical talent and was producing music clearly identifiable as uniquely Australian.