The CREATE Centre

Creativity in Research, Engaging the Arts,
Transforming Education, Health and Wellbeing

"*Like light refracting into a rainbow.*"

The Regrowth Workshops

An Evaluation

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Executive Summary

Regrowth was a series of five drama skills workshops for young people, culminating in public performances for five different communities on the South Coast of NSW.

Regrowth was developed as a response to the 2019-2020 Bushfires, which caused significant and long-lasting damage to the region. The project was funded through the Australian Federal Government's Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund, and brought together three organisations who worked in partnership to deliver the program. The organisations were The Family Place, Campbell Page, social work organisations based in the Eurobodalla and Bega Valley respectively, and BBT, an Australian theatre company. The funding for this program allowed the workshops to be provided free-of-charge.

The workshops functioned as a form of applied site-specific theatre, providing participants, who were young people aged 11 – 17 years, with the opportunity to express themselves in performance, tell their own stories and develop their skills in drama and theatremaking.

The program was successful, engaging with over seventy young people over eighteen months, developing skills in performance and theatremaking in local communities, and fostering new connections amongst participants.

The two key findings of this evaluation are as follows:

1. Participants experienced a greater sense of community and social connection as a result of participating in Regrowth; and
2. Participants felt that they had been listened to, that their voices had been heard during the workshop process and in the public performance.

These two elements of Regrowth, connection and voice, are the most important elements of the program. Participants were provided with a platform to express themselves post-disaster, and crucially, their ideas, thoughts and feelings about living in their region were communicated and heard via the public performance.

In 2020, researchers at the University of Melbourne undertook an extensive overview of Australian-based disaster recovery arts intervention models (Cahill et al., 2020).

Through that report, it was found that, provided they are administered effectively, “arts… programs can be used post-disaster to provide young people with a voice and an opportunity to enhance connectedness and relationships”. (W.H.O, 2012). Regrowth emphasises participant voice by presenting the theatricalised ideas, concepts and political views of the young people involved to their friends and family who attended the final performance.

The report also found that arts-intervention programs in response to disaster recovery are most effective when they exist among a suite of complementary programs including “broader education, community building and psychosocial endeavours” (Campbell, 2020). Research shows that arts-based wellbeing interventions can positively affect children’s ability to process their experiences following a disaster, to manage post-traumatic stress, and to build self-confidence (Mutch & Gawith, 2014; Mutch & Latai, 2019)

This evaluation makes the case for additional programs of a similar nature to Regrowth, and in particular those which foster social connection amongst participants, and allow them to use their own voices in speaking to the local community.

Introduction

Regrowth was a series of drama skills workshops for young people, culminating in public performances for five different communities on the South Coast of NSW. In Local Government Area (LGA) terms, and for the purposes of this research project, the South Coast comprises Eurobodalla Shire Local Government Area and Bega Valley Shire Local Government Area.

Many of the towns, localities, suburbs, and regions of the South Coast are within close proximity to beaches and national parks. In late-2019 and early-2020, the South Coast of NSW was badly affected by what came to be known as the Black Summer Bushfires, during which 26 lives were lost, 2,448 homes were destroyed, and 5.5 million hectares of land was burnt. The young people who live in the South Coast region subsequently faced the COVID-19 pandemic, causing further significant disruption to their everyday lives and requiring them to continue their schooling online. Following the fires, the South Coast Region experienced seven more declared natural disasters, with floods in February, July, August, October and December 2020, and March and May 2021. The South Coast of NSW contains one of the highest concentrations of unemployed people and people living below the poverty line in Australia (Phillips B, et.al, 2013).

It was with reference to this specific context of ongoing disasters, that Regrowth was developed. The program itself was funded by the Australian Federal Government's Bushfire Local Economic Recovery Fund, and brought together three organisations, which worked in partnership to deliver the program. This funding allowed the workshops to provided free-of-charge to local young people on the South Coast.

In late 2020, BBT, a Sydney-based theatre company and the Moruya-based community services organisation, The Family Place, formed a partnership with Campbell Page, another community services organisation based on the South Coast of NSW. Together they developed a program of theatremaking workshops, which would be delivered alongside wrap-around community support for local young people affected by the 2019-20 bushfires.

One of the aims of the project in its infancy was to provide opportunities for engagement with existing support services to local young people, many of whom might be unaware that such services existed. A key aspect of the project, the community performance, would also function as the culmination of a week-long process of community development.

The workshops were delivered by BBT, an organisation that produces original Australian entertainment for the stage, screen and public spaces. BBT works with emerging Australian artists across various disciplines, as well as directly with communities and young people, using theatre to tell their stories. The Family Place is a community services organisation based in Moruya NSW, which offers holistic and responsive support to the Eurobodalla region and wider community through a range of evidence based, innovative programs. The Family Place worked as the lead project coordinator and administrator, managing the community consultation and administration of the project. Campbell Page is a not-for-profit organisation that delivers a range of employment, community and commercial services. For the Regrowth Project, Campbell Page provided youth workers, who worked alongside the workshop facilitators to provide support for participants.

While no formal data was collected about the workings of the partnership between BBT, The Family Place and Campbell Page, the success of the program overall is attributable to their ability to work together constructively in delivering this multi-year project.

These three organisations were committed to bringing an innovative, arts-based intervention to the South Coast, and for local history, environment and community to feature clearly in the performance that would ultimately be made by participants. In this way, the drama workshops were applied site-specific theatre, providing participants, who were young people aged 11 – 17 years, with the opportunity to express themselves in performance, tell their own stories and develop their skills in drama and theatremaking.

The critical applied aspect of the Regrowth workshops was its explicit focus on both the specific place and people involved, and that these elements formed the bedrock of the performance that was eventually created. One of the aims of Regrowth was to develop, with participants, skills in creating and staging drama performances so that they might go on to use those skills to create their own work in the future. In this way, Regrowth was applied site-specific theatre made by, with and for the local community.

What is Site-Specific Theatre?

Applied Theatre is defined as “a form of theatre that takes participants and audiences beyond the scope of conventional, mainstream theatre into the realm of a theatre that is responsive to ordinary people and their stories, local settings and priorities.” (Prentki & Preston, 2009).

In 2020, researchers at the University of Melbourne undertook an extensive overview of Australian-based disaster recovery arts intervention models (Cahill et al., 2020). Through that report, it was found that, provided they are administered correctly, “arts… programs can be used post-disaster to provide young people with a voice and an opportunity to enhance connectedness and relationships”. (W.H.O, 2012). Regrowth emphasises participant voice by presenting the theatricalised ideas, concepts and political views of the young people involved to their friends and family who attended the final performance.

The greater report found that arts-intervention programs in response to disaster recovery are most effective when they exist among a suite of complementary programs including “broader education, community building and psychosocial endeavours” (Campbell, 2020). Research shows that arts-based wellbeing interventions can positively affect children’s ability to process their experiences following a disaster, to manage post-traumatic stress, and to build self-confidence (Mutch & Gawith, 2014; Mutch & Latai, 2019). Regrowth was delivered amongst support from attending youth workers, gave participants access to local social services providers, such The Family Place, and importantly, raised the voices of participants so that they were heard amongst their community.

While it may be commonplace for applied theatre to be performed in non-conventional spaces, the material generated for performance throughout Regrowth workshops was directly related to the specific location in which the workshops occurred. For example, participants in the Regrowth workshop that took place at the Tathra Surf Life Saving Club engaged in drama skills activities and exercises that sought to generate material that directly related to the site of the workshop, as well as the site’s history, the relationship of the participant to that site, as well as the functionality and physical elements at play within that site.

The stories that emerged out of material generated through the Regrowth workshops allowed participants to engage with their own past experiences, and also their relationship to the site – and to do so under the disinhibiting cloak of character and make-believe. The liminal space so often assumed in conventional theatre in this way, was given over to the actual space in which the workshops occurred, while still allowing for the safety and metaphorical affordances of theatre to exist.

One of the key outcomes of Regrowth is its use of activities that require participants to creatively reimagine the world in which they live. The participants were given time to reflect on their lived experience and then consider the site that they occupy and its significance in relation to their individual experience as a young person on the Far South Coast of NSW, or their town or region. The work of Cordileone & Whorton (2015) has investigated the impact of applied site-specific theatre, suggesting that "… site-specific explorations have long been embraced by applied theatre practitioners, often out of necessity, as they collaborate with participants to link performance and community literally on common ground. Operating as a means of de-mechanising and deconstructing space, site-specific work infuses it with unencumbered purpose; and by participating in such performances, community members and artists may unlock new understandings of the significance and stories imprinted within their floors, walls, and ceilings."

Regrowth sought to situate the drama workshop activities within the context of the participants' lived experience. It was important to acknowledge directly to the participants that the facilitators knew the participants came to the workshop with their own stories, ideas, and ambitions around devising the final performance, and that not all of these could be integrated into the final performance. Nevertheless, the process prioritised opportunities for each participant to be heard, and to make a clear and demonstrable contribution to the creation of the final performance. This was demonstrated in various ways, from something as simple as the name of the planet that the characters were travelling to, or something as complex as the overall plot structure of the final performance.

Aims of Regrowth

The approach taken during a Regrowth workshop centred on five key principles.

1

Regrowth aimed to work from a strengths-based model rather than a deficit model.
Regrowth adopted a strengths-based approach, focusing on the inherent strengths and abilities of the participant young people rather than aiming to address perceived shortcomings. This approach recognised and nurtured the potential within each individual, empowering them to build on their existing skills and capacities to create a meaningful performance for their community.

2

Regrowth was not explicitly about educating young people, or conveying a "message" to them;
Unlike traditional educational theatre programs, Regrowth did not aim to educate young people or convey a specific message to them. Instead, it created a space where participants could explore, express, and discover their own perspectives and voices through theatremaking. An emphasis was placed on self-discovery, taking risks, and self-expression.

3

Facilitators of Regrowth were provided with trauma-informed training;
Regrowth facilitators were equipped with trauma-informed training, which ensured that they were sensitive to the potential trauma or emotional experiences that participants might bring with them to the workshop. Facilitators were trained to create a safe and supportive environment where participants could engage in creative expression without feeling pressured or uncomfortable.

4

Regrowth eschewed hierarchical power structures within the workshop room, and instead promoted guided collaboration as the primary method of content creation;
This approach fostered a sense of equality and shared ownership among participants, where everyone's contributions were valued, and decisions were made collectively. This collaborative approach often led to diverse and innovative creative outcomes.

5

Regrowth valued the First Nations heritage and traditions that abounded within and around the spaces within which it took place.
Regrowth acknowledged and valued the First Nations heritage and traditions present within and around the spaces where the workshops took place. This recognition showed respect for the land and culture of the indigenous peoples of the South Coast of NSW, specifically the people of the Yuin Nation. Regrowth incorporated indigenous perspectives into the workshop activities and acknowledged the land's traditional custodians, fostering cultural sensitivity and awareness among participants.

Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews

This research project employed a semi-structured interview approach to investigate what happened to young people who participated in Regrowth workshops. Using a sample size of 5 participant young people, subjects were engaged in semi-structured interviews two-weeks before, during the workshop, and two weeks after their participation in the Regrowth workshops. Subjects were selected via a voluntary expression of interest, following a community run consultation event.

Two key interview questions were asked at each interval (pre, during and post workshop) and responses were analysed for any differences between interviews. The two questions changed in tense depending on whether the interview was happening before, during or after the workshops:

- (before) How could we make theatre about your home?
- (during) How are we making theatre about your home?
- (after) How did we make theatre about your home?
- (before) How could we make theatre about you?
- (during) How are we making theatre about you?
- (after) How did we make theatre about you?

Because the workshops have been designed to draw on the backgrounds, personal experiences, ideas, and artistic outputs of participants, it was useful to make an explicit connection between artistic choices and lived experience. The interview process sought to identify the rationale behind artistic choices directly from the participants.

This approach also gives voice to participant young people about their wider experience in the Regrowth workshops. The participants are in the workshops and of the workshops, and to a large degree, the creative force behind the performance that occurs at the completion of the workshops.

Participant Observation

Although the Regrowth workshops culminated in a public performance, and rehearsal is a part of the workshop process, the kind of ethnographic approach employed by this research project largely resembled rehearsal ethnography as conceived and proposed by McAuley (1998). The content that is rehearsed for performance throughout the Regrowth workshop was generated entirely by participant young people, and therefore not all the activities undertaken can be said to be rehearsal. Operating alongside the semi-structured interviews, the data collected through participant observation provided detail around how material was generated, and why certain material was generated and then preferenced by the participant young people for inclusion in the final performance. The data collected included field notes and video and audio recordings of the workshops, and aimed to provide a holistic set of data from which to analyse the Regrowth model of applied site-specific theatre making.

McQuaid and Plastow (2017) have undertaken key research in a setting similar to that of Regrowth, and in general terms, the arts-intervention program that they investigated seems similar to Regrowth. Their research employed ethnographic and social science research methods to “develop knowledge about a community and then integrated these insights into a Freirean-inspired approach to community participatory theatre.” Their findings indicated that an approach that involves being both of the research and in the research leads to better outcomes and strengthens a community of participant in a variety of ways.
In particular, where applied theatre is used as an intervention tool in disadvantaged communities, Massó-Guijarro et al. (2021), who provided a qualitative synthesis of several applied arts interventions. They note in their synthesis that across a broad range of programs “qualitative methodologies were employed in all cases, with the research making use of techniques typical of an ethnographic approach, including participant observation, in-depth interviews or discussion groups.”

Participants

Prior to the workshop all participants:

- had limited experience in devising, play-building or theatremaking;
- expressed a pre-workshop desire to “improve skills”; and
- lived within close proximity (<30 km) of the workshop location.

This data was collected via the sign-up expression of interest form for Regrowth.

Participants were selected following an open registration process. The only criteria for selection was that participants needed to be between 11 and 17 years of age. All participants were selected from the local area.

- Bodalla Memorial Hall, Bodalla – 8 Participants
  - 7 females;
  - 1 male.
- Tathra Surf Life Saving Club, Tathra – 15 Participants
  - 12 females;
  - 3 males.
- Broulee Surf Live Saving Club, Broulee – 14 Participants
  - 12 females;
  - 2 males.
- Rooma Studios, Narooma – 13 Participants
  - 12 females;
  - 1 male.
- Pambula Town Hall, Pambula – 23 Participants
  - 21 females;
  - 2 males.

How did Regrowth Work?

Regrowth was a five-day drama skills workshop that culminated in a performance for the local community. Three major activities were undertaken in a Regrowth workshop:

1. Participants learnt new skills in drama and theatremaking;
2. Participants worked together to create a play; and
3. Participants performed the play for and in their community.

During the workshop, the participants were taught drama skills and strategies in storytelling, improvisation, character building, writing, vocal technique, and movement. The skills development process is focussed on providing participants with the tools they needed to devise a performance based on their experiences as young people living on the South Coast of NSW.

The five key stages of a Regrowth Workshop are:

Day	Focus	Activities
1	Ensemble Agreement and Themes Exploration	A key element of Regrowth are the warm-ups that involve all participants and facilitators. They occur before the day begins, and after each break. Regrowth also involves a reflection at the conclusion of each day. Participants get to know each other and develop an Ensemble Agreement, which functions as a contract between all participants and provides the terms of engagement in the workshop. The Ensemble Agreement is centred around the three core values of: Be Brave; Be Encouraging; and Be Awkward. Participants create a mind-map of themes and ideas that they would like the play to explore, and these ideas are contributed to and collaborated upon by other members of the ensemble. This is used as a touchstone throughout the workshop, guiding the overall direction of the play that is created by participants.

Day	Focus	Activities
2	Character Building and Improv Skills Development	Participants are guided through exercises designed to generate characters based on the participants' own choosing. The exercises focus on working from "the outside in", using external characteristics, movements and gestures to find and create meaning in characters, which the participants develop themselves. Key drama skills are taught to participants, including the technique of saying "yes, and" and skills in stagecraft. Participants are taught how to warm up both vocally and physically, and are given instruction, primarily through arts-rich processes, games and exercises, which provide participants with a grounding in improvisational technique. The participants then use these newly developed skills to devise scenes.
3	Scene Making and Writing	Using skills in improvisation developed earlier in the workshop, participants are asked to creatively reimagine the world in which they live, using their themes mind-map as the jumping off point for scenes that may or may not be integrated into the final performance. Participants are led through writing exercises, which give them the opportunity to critically reflect on the journey and lives of the characters they have developed. This also creates an opportunity for the participants to creatively reflect on their own personal experience as a person living on the South Coast of NSW, and to do so in a safe and supportive environment.
4	Storytelling and Stagecraft	Participants are taught the components of a dramatic story, and engage in storytelling exercises, with a specific focus on teaching the mechanics of plot, show structure, character development, and how to integrate themes within the participants' scenes. The focus shifts to consider how to craft a compelling and engaging narrative that incorporates the themes explored in the earlier stages of the workshop. Stagecraft skills are further developed, focusing on technical aspects of theatre production such as blocking, lighting, and sound. Participants gain an understanding of how to use these elements to enhance the overall theatrical experience.
5	Rehearsal and Performance	Participants begin to rehearse and fine-tune the scenes and storylines they have created. They work on character interactions, dialogue delivery, and the overall flow of the performance. Participants engage in dress rehearsals, where they practice with costumes and props, and receive feedback from facilitators. The workshop concludes with a public performance where participants perform the play they have developed. This is an opportunity for participants to apply the skills and techniques they have learned throughout the workshop in front of an audience.

Findings

Regrowth was a successful program, engaging with over seventy young people in five different locations on the South Coast of NSW, over eighteen months, developing skills in performance and theatremaking in local communities, and fostering new connections amongst participants.

There are two key findings in this evaluation:

1. Participants experienced a greater sense of community and social connection as a result of participating in Regrowth; and
2. Participants of Regrowth felt that they had been listened to, and that their voices had been heard during the workshop process and in the public performance.

These two elements of Regrowth, **social connection** and **participant voice**, are the most important elements of the program. Participants were provided with a platform to express themselves post-disaster, and crucially, their ideas, thoughts and feelings about living in their region were communicated and heard via the public performance.

Discussion

Community and Social Connection

In interviews post-workshop, as well as during observation, Regrowth participants reported achieving a better “sense of community” and social connection. This improved sense of community was likely a result of the non-hierarchical and collaborative approach of the workshop. At all times, the workshop was facilitated to provide space for participants to develop, share and enact the ideas they generated in groups or during activities. These ideas, which were eventually incorporated into the final performance, began as ideas that were suggested (or owned) by singular participants, and over time changed into ideas that were collectively owned and enacted.

Many of the activities undertaken during Regrowth are designed to build an ensemble amongst participants. On day one of the workshop, participants are asked to work together to create an “ensemble agreement”, which gives participants an opportunity to craft an informal contract that outlines guidelines and rules of engagement. Participants sit in a circle around a large sheet of butchers’ paper and come up with ideas for the guidelines, and then they sign the butchers paper as if it were a contract. This “ensemble agreement” is displayed and referenced throughout the week, and in general, codifies the collective approach to creating a safe and supportive learning environment in which everyone’s thoughts feelings and ideas are heard.

Most of the participants were unknown to one another prior to the workshop starting, and the participants also ranged in age from eleven to seventeen years. This meant that new connections and relationships needed to be formed in order for the collaborative potentialities of the workshop to be realised.

“*Like I walked in day one and I was like did not know what to expect. I thought it was going to be like really awkward… I had a couple friends there and I thought we were just going to stay in our little group and it was going to be like really awkward and embarrassing. But it turned out it wasn't and it was really fun… having new connections, which is really good because I'm not normally a confident person… I'm normally more shy and don't like talking to other people. But yeah, the group, the workshop was really good. I think it just opened me up a little more. Yeah, it was really fun as well.*” (Int JR)

Through collaborative activities and shared creative experiences, participants developed meaningful relationships with one another. Several participants reported an increased sense of community, and a feeling that they had “all been in this together”. This was a welcome finding from the research as one of the features of living in a regional and rural area such as the South Coast is the distance that needs to be traversed in order to achieve that sense of social connection. Young people on the South Coast would, primarily, find social connection through their involvement in local schools. For them to be exposed to different people, who may be from different schools or not in their year group, provided a unique opportunity to expand their circle of social connection and grow their community to include people whom they’d never met before. It was with others within the ensemble that participants were able to foster new and important friendships because of their participation in the workshop.

Other collaborative activities that participants felt created opportunities for social connection included the development of characters, which were placed in combination with one another under various scenarios, and many of which ultimately became scenes in the final performance. Participants reported that they felt “the power to tell a story through character” and to impact the stories of other characters in other scenes. In the Pambula Regrowth for example, because much of the final performance’s story was structured around a sense of a community dealing with the loss of planet earth, there was a sense in which the participants were living their understanding of climate catastrophe both at the interpersonal (non-theatrical) level, while also recontextualising that experience for the purposes of creating an engaging story for performance.

It has been well documented that engagement is a key enabler in learning (Astin, 1999; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), and there is a degree to which the increased sense of community, and the forming of new relationships primed the ground for a commitment to the workshop process, despite its duration and the fact that it was scheduled in school holidays. What is striking about Regrowth is the specific nature of the connection built through the participation in the workshop. Participants are not just getting to know one another in a safe and supportive environment, they are also being taught new skills in communication and collaboration. Participants entered Regrowth with a basic understanding that they would necessarily be collaborating with others, and working with people whom they hadn’t yet met.

"*I hope to… learn new skills, I guess, and make better connections, maybe. And yeah… new skills about like drama and stuff like that.*" (Int JE)

This and similar statements from participants indicated that perhaps one of the motivating factors behind a participant's decision to be involved in the workshop was a desire to build new connections with like-minded individuals, while also taking part in a school holiday program wherein the participant would have fun and learn new skills. Many of the participants reflected on the special nature of being "centre-stage" and of feeling that the work they had done, and the play they had created together, was being acclaimed by the audience. In this way, it could be suggested that the Regrowth workshop felt like an opportunity for social connection at least at the outset of the workshop, but ended up being about creating a final product as an ensemble, with all of the attendant implications: participants were "in this together", they were "relying on each other", required to "trust each other" in order to deliver a final product that was significant to them and their individual lived experience. Moreover, the final performance appears to have been clearly understood as the result of structured and cooperative collective action.

When reflecting on the workshop during the process (at roughly the halfway mark), participants were able to understand that the strength of the ensemble was directly related to the strength of their final collaborative performance. Specifically, it was identified by participants that to succeed at making a piece of theatre, they would be required to work together, and maintain an ensemble. Participants' understanding of the process extended beyond an appraisal of the workshop as an avenue for creating new friendships and connections, and there was evidence to show that the participants were able to critically reflect on the process and structure of the workshop, and identify the rationale behind certain decisions made in the course of developing the final performance.

"*So… the first day we… played games to get to know each other and then we… worked on ideas for the play. And that progressed into… going into the groups to make scenes for the play. Just snippets and stuff. And then we moved on to… practising the play because we [had] made [our scenes] and then we performed it at the end. And it was nice, fun little workshop. Great… connections. Everybody… got along really well.*" (Int JE)

Participant understanding the process involved in Regrowth was clearly due to the frequent and open communication between facilitators and participants. The plan for the week was established early in the process, and participants were reminded that the final performance would be created by them, and they were in control of its content.

At being asked whether they would be interested in participating in a future Regrowth, one evaluation subject said:

"*100%... it's just so fun being with like-minded people who also want to do the same thing and on are on a similar path to you.*" (Int MP)

Participant Voice

The use of participant ideas in the creation of the final theatrical production was a unique and important element of Regrowth. Participants were aware that their ideas, characters and scenes would be rehearsed with the guidance of facilitators, and it was clear through both observation of and interviews with the participants that they felt their ideas were understood, developed and implemented in Regrowth. Participants also reported feeling that their creative contributions were valued and actively utilised in the development of the final performance. This likely led to a sense of ownership and pride among participants, as they could see their ideas come to life on the stage. It also reinforced the affordances of a collaborative and non-hierarchical approach to making theatre, where everyone's input played a significant role in shaping the final performance.

Research reports that focus on investigating the impact of the arts on young people have demonstrated that children and young people who engage in quality arts processes, activities and experiences develop more confidence and resilience, are more engaged in learning and achieve better academically than those students who are deprived of arts-rich experiences (Ewing, 2010; Fleming et al., 2015; Gibson et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2013). My research project seeks to build on this theme and examine what other effects might come about from a participant's engagement in applied site-specific theatre.

The workshop was designed to communicate directly to participants when ideas were generated, and to provide positive reinforcement, and constructive feedback on those ideas. This process prioritised the informing of participants of the value of their contribution, and the reinforcement of their idea and the artistic merit behind it. By valuing and incorporating the ideas and contributions of all participants, a supportive and inclusive atmosphere was fostered. In interviews, participants reflected extensively on the supportive environment that they occupied during Regrowth, with several participants in interviews expressing an acknowledgement that the group of young people were “welcoming” and “supportive”.

What can often be known as “arts-based interventions” (of which, Regrowth could be characterised as one) can provide “a powerful mode for collective expression” (Mutch & Gawith, 2014). Mutch & Gawaith found that a variety of arts practices, including drama and storytelling can be used to support participants “to explore emotions and connect with others in the aftermath of a disaster”.

“*INT: Can you tell me in your own words what theatre is?*
SUB: I don't know. It's a way to express yourself. And it's… It's a way to express yourself and tell stories like in a different way than just as if, like, you know, reading a book or something. It's a way to like really act it out. And yeah, kind of put your own perspective of something into display… to display your own perspective of something.” (Int JR)

It became clear through both participant observation and interviews that the participants were able to understand the opportunity to express themselves, which was inherent in the Regrowth process. Aside from standard pre-show jitters, the ensemble of young people reported on their experience of developing and presenting their performance as both an opportunity to use their voice, but also to express themselves emotionally. There was an understanding that choices in the style of performance, and the way in which participants might structure or present their performance, could have a different outcome or effect on the audience.

“*SUB: Do you think there's a difference between the skills we use to make scenes – like the skills we need to do slow motion replay, for example, or slow motion commentary – do you think those skills are useful in trying to talk about the things that are important to us? Are they connected?*

INT: To easily communicate it to the audience, definitely… using movements and expressions… because if you just said something, yes, just said it without doing anything with your body or having a facial expression, I guess you wouldn't really be able to tell how they felt about it, or you know, I feel like you can say something... But I think that having a reaction to it, or yeah, being able to show how you feel about it with your body is really important to set moods and stuff and tones.” (Int JR)

Regrowth participants acknowledged that there was an important difference between communicating an experience, and embodying that experience on stage. There was also an acknowledgment that the participants would be more affecting through delivering their ideas through theatre, as opposed to only saying what they thought. Participants were explicitly taught that “if you can see it, the audience can see it” and this reinforced the idea that the world of the play needed to be primarily felt and understood clearly by the participants (actors) in order for it to be effectively communicated to the audience. The story of the Pambula Regrowth developed over three days, and during that time, participants focussed on ensuring that the story was communicated clearly, and that it was understood by their fellow participants in order for it to be eventually understood by the audience.

Upon being asked whether there was a difference between telling a story through theatre, compared with, for example, a book, participants reported that there was, and that there was an opportunity to position two or more ideas on stage at the same time, which couldn’t be done in the same way with a book. In addition, participants reported that they began to understand the perspectives of other participants, just as they felt that their own perspectives were being both communicated and understood.

“*Seeing other people's opinions on things and getting to work with a lot of different people has opened me up to different things and different ways that I can express things.*” (Int LC)

Participants also reported that through their involvement in Regrowth, they had a better understanding of what was required to make theatre. The strengths-based model of Regrowth empowered participants to recognise and develop their creative skills, contributing to their understanding of the theatremaking process. The workshop employed a participatory and ensemble-driven approach to making theatre, and therefore performing in a theatre context was seen as accessible and within the capabilities of all involved. It seems likely that the participants learnt and began to understand the various aspects of theatre production, such as character development, storytelling, improvisation, stagecraft, and the technical elements of theatre.

Participants also readily acknowledged that the Pambula Regrowth was, although not explicitly, a political work of theatre, as it addressed the impending climate catastrophe and humanity's failure to deal with the issue. There were obvious parallels to the lived experience of bushfires and the urgency with which the participants felt that there needed to be a better response to the threat of climate disaster. However, the participants also reported that the play didn't necessarily aim to change the audience's mind.

"*INT: And do you think the objective was to change the audience's mind or affect them in some way?*
SUB: … Not necessarily to make them listen or to make them change their mind. It would be to give our opinion in a way that can be heard.
INT: Do you feel heard as a young person?
SUB: In theatre? Definitely, yeah." (Int MP)

Exchanges such as these indicate the extent to which Regrowth are conscious of the theatrical form as a vehicle for expressing their emotions, political ideas, sense of self, and conveying an accurate understanding of their lived experience. There was a host of evidence both in the observation of participants and interviews that reinforced this idea. Participants reported that the experience of Regrowth was primarily about having the opportunity to create something with an ensemble of other young people, and have their community attend and witness their collaboration in the form of a performance. While it was true that the performance was was explicitly about climate change, the perils of a future where the risks of climate change are unmitigated, and the danger of not altering our current approach to environmental management – primarily the play functioned as a vessel for expression. The participants invited their community to watch, listen, and applaud.

Conclusion

These findings indicate that the Regrowth workshop was successful in not only providing a creative outlet for young participants but also in building a supportive and inclusive community.

By focusing on strengths, fostering a deep understanding of theatre, and actively involving participants in the creative process, Regrowth empowered young individuals to grow as artists and community members. These outcomes highlight the effectiveness of the workshop's unique approach to theatre education and personal development.

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