Wot’s THAT TRANSFORMATIVE EFFECT?

All students are challenged by this, but are highly engaged by seeing their ideas come to life as soon as they have them, and engagement is absolute. This in itself is democratic, because all ideas are equally immediate.

Back at MLC School I watched a relatively new student who had buckets of talent (and not just in music) but who was having a rough time, time committing to school and who was obviously underwhelmed with education in general go from being too-cool-in-the-corner to leader on-the-stage. The group dynamic changed around her from one of tolerance to one of openness and acceptance, and that student went on in the space of a year to become a leader of the school and community. WotOpera seemed to be her tipping point. Dahm says this is typical in his experience. “What you find is that throughout the entire process, any nuance to a character, any dialogue, any particularly good descriptor, when it comes to an emotion, is actually a fabulous door-opening experience. And when you explain that to the student, they just change. We’ve had students say they never knew another student before the program, and now they have a new friend.”

Fast-forward to 2013, and WotOpera in Sydney, this time involving Lumea High among others. If the transformative impact was impressive in a private school, multiply it by 100 here. Lead roles in the cross-age group have been given to a young boy in the IEC (Intensive English Centre) from Spain who has only been in Australia a few months and who has never sung in English before, a self-taught bass player from an islander community aspiring to have a career in music, and a year 11 girl who is an Iranian refugee.
of the four works that night brings opera a standing ovation, and its 107), and forging new connections such as social inclusion (p. 106), programs (Marsh, 2012). In these benefit from targeted music communities from high to low socio-economic backgrounds. the strategies that they have developed to engage students in opera speak to the very issues being discussed in education more broadly in the twenty-first century. Dahm says that with some cultures, “knowing how they engage can be vital” – it isn’t necessarily sitting up straight and being quiet and attentive – some young people just are not capable of that in my experience – but they are still engaged and paying attention!” (Dahm, 2013).

One such student, who spent much of the time slouching against the wall in a 2010 WotOpera project was in fact so dedicated to the project that he now volunteers as a team member while he pursues a music career: he worked as part of the recent team at Lurnea High, bringing to the opera not only his musical experiences, but the experiences and expectations of a Samoan cultural background he shared with many students at the school. He is under pressure from his family and community to “stop playing around” with music, and get a “proper” job, but so far he is resisting and following his passion, a role model to dozens of teenagers in similar situations.

Recognizing that engagement and finding the time and opportunity to validate it is vital, says Dahm, “I had one Nigerian refugee describe the opera voice as having “bouzos” which was a perfect way to describe “vibrato”. If you don’t know vibrato!” (2013)

Other strategies the WotOpera team employ centre around validation of the young people they work with. Leading by example is important, as is showing that they are willing to make mistakes, and never criticising any work that a student offers. “I often describe what I do as going into battle with young peoples’ self doubt – and that is a battle I’m willing to fight to my last breath,” Dahm adds. (2013)

The students can tell, as well. Too- cool student said “Murray brought out incredible things from all of our ideas. None of us thought it could be that good, but it was. Murray was the cornerstone of what we produced: he channelled our ideas.”

Whether English is their first, second or third language, students are keen to talk about their WotOpera experience too. Students from Blaimourn Public School said “People sometimes

released from an Australian detention centre in the last year. In a thick Iranian accent and stumbling English, she beams at the camera, saying “This opera is very good for me, because I making me confident. When I singing, teacher are help me, and tell me ‘don’t shy’, and I’m very better than before. ‘Yeah, I’m comfortable.” (Artology, 2013) This shouldn’t be surprising: research has already shown that refugee and newly-arrived immigrant children benefit from targeted music programs (Marsh, 2012). In these kinds of schools, WotOpera can deliver some of the same benefits, such as social inclusion (p. 106), cooperation, empowerment (p. 107), and forging new connections within the host culture (p. 108).

Curtain up at the Seymour Centre, where the other participating schools give Lurnea’s opera a standing ovation, and its stars whoops and whistles. Each of the four works that night brings a tear to the eye, and each for a different reason – in Lurnea’s performance it’s the evident journey and self-conscious change that has been required just to bring some students onto that stage to present their own creative work, and in another school’s it is the slight boy who emerges unannounced from back stage into a solo that takes the breath away from every member of the audience. “That kid is going to Broadway”, an impressed parent in the audience comments.

Working with a mixture of communities from high to low socio-economic backgrounds is important to WotOpera. The strategies that they have developed to engage students in opera speak to the very issues being discussed in education more broadly in the twenty-first century. Dahm says that with some cultures, “knowing how they engage can be vital” – it isn’t necessarily sitting up straight and being quiet and attentive – some young people just are not capable of that in my experience – but they are still engaged and paying attention!” (Dahm, 2013).

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