

Case Study 1

Inclusive theatre for young people

Barking Gecko Theatre Company in partnership with the WA Deaf Society.

With the nature of theatre generally excluding patrons with hearing impairments, there are issues that need to be addressed in order to make performances accessible to the broadest range of young people.

Through the DAII Pilot Program, Barking Gecko Theatre Company partnered with the WA Deaf Society and schools in the Mosman Park and Shenton Park areas to create inclusive performances and workshops designed to address the issue of low attendance by the hearing impaired community at theatre performances and performance-based workshops.

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The genesis of the project was the realisation that the hearing impaired community were unable to fully experience any of Barking Gecko's performances. Changes had to be made to ensure the company's core values were being acted upon.

"It's something the company has recognised as a really valuable thing for us to do," says Katherine McLean, Barking Gecko's General Manager.

"One of our core tenets is to make theatre accessible to everybody, particularly kids who may suffer from disadvantage or are disadvantaged in such a way that they can't experience theatre or the performing arts."

Project beginnings

The DAII Pilot Program opened up the possibility for Barking Gecko to work with the WA Deaf Society in a meaningful way that had not been possible before.

"Barking Gecko has worked on short term projects previously with people of varying degrees of ability, so we have tutors on hand who work with people with disabilities, and we sometimes work in special needs schools and with children on a short-term, as needs be basis," Ms McLean says.

Ms McLean's involvement with the project occurred in the final stages, towards the end of the Pilot Program.

"Everyone was pretty excited about the project and how successful it had been and that there would be a great focus by the company on ensuring there was authentic engagement with young children who were hearing-impaired.

“I think Barking Gecko saw it as an opportunity to expand our service and make true to our mission on making it accessible and we just saw it in perfect alignment with our company values.”

The company established a partnership with WA Deaf Society and Mosman Park School for Deaf Children. Training was undertaken by everyone in the company to ensure they were aware of the project and had the skills and knowledge to be able to work with the deaf and people with hearing impairments.

Two stage approach

The first stage was to take the existing performance of their production **Skylab** and make it inclusive. Barking Gecko realised that presenting an AUSLAN-interpreted performance was integral to forming the connection.

“We already had our program in place and we just integrated this program on top of it. It wasn’t rocket science; it was just a matter of recognising the importance of it. An AUSLAN-interpreted performance was the simplest thing we did and the thing we maintain in all of our performances now,” says Ms McLean.

“With all of our productions we now do a schools-interpreted performance and a public show, and we market those shows to deaf schools.”

The project continued with the Mosman Park School and a series of workshops encouraging the children to be involved in creating a performance. With funds left over from their first stage of the project, Barking Gecko worked on a second stage. Rather than creating workshops solely for the Mosman Park School for the Deaf, the workshops were created with inclusion in mind.

“The first stage was to do a workshop with hearing impaired kids and the second stage

was to deepen that experience and make it an integrated workshop,” Ms McLean says.

“The first workshop was predominantly for deaf children and essentially that was to utilise performance art to create expression and also do an interpretative performance of **Skylab**. We took that a step further in the next stage by taking down some of the barriers faced by hearing impaired children engaging with hearing children, and so we created a workshop with the two groups. Four schools – Mosman Park School for Deaf Children, Mosman Park Primary School, Rosalie Primary School and Hollywood Primary School all worked together to explore the use of story and performance regardless of whether they could hear or not.”

By joining together children of similar ages, Barking Gecko hoped to expand on the inclusive nature of the project.

“They were primary school ages – Years Five and Six. We had four classes and 106



Photo courtesy of Barking Gecko Theatre Company

children (19 deaf students and 87 hearing students) and 15 teachers involved.”

The tutors were trained in the protocol of working with the hearing-impaired.

“All of the staff and tutors working on the project did deaf awareness training, then the tutors ran workshops and we did set tours of the production **Gogo Fish**. Essentially what we did was break them into four groups of mixed ability and the deaf children were able to teach the hearing children sign language and then together they created a piece of theatre,” says Ms McLean.

The workshops enabled the children from the Mosman Park School for Deaf Children to teach the children without impairment how to communicate in AUSLAN. In this way the children with the impairments were able to actively involve themselves in the workshops in a more inclusive nature.

The project has also inspired the company to think about other ways of getting involved in similar activities.

“We have done other things like touch tours for sight-impaired kids. What we do, is first conduct a touch tour of the costumes and set with the children, so they get to feel what the costumes are like and then they’re told the costumes are red or pink and that this is a door that leads to the foyer area, for example. For sight-impaired children we’ve done a few of those touch tours, which enhances their experience of the theatre.

“The other thing we have done is offer the opportunity to have the theatre piece orally transcribed, so if you are sight-impaired you are able to have the touch tour and then sit

in the theatre and listen to what is unfolding before you.

“All of this has been predominantly focused on the hearing impaired. In regards to working with other disabilities at Barking Gecko, we are often asked to conduct a series of workshops with children of varying abilities, and what we usually do is find a tutor who has training in that area and then we really work with the teachers and carers to tailor that workshop to exactly what they need.”

The inclusive nature of the Barking Gecko partnership has had a positive impact on other parts of their business. Considering what is limiting to the deaf community in terms of popular culture makes Barking Gecko determined to continue the work beyond the initial project.

“I think with initiatives like this it allows us to be able to explore these options”, Ms McLean says. “What the DAII Pilot Program did was allow us to build relationships and explore how best we could service the hearing impaired community. Without that initiative it would have taken Barking Gecko a longer period of time to be able to initiate such a thing.

“You realise that these children don’t get the opportunity to go to the cinema, they don’t get the opportunity to go and see theatre, they don’t get to listen to radio – so there is a whole heap of things that fully-hearing people get to experience that’s just out of range for hearing-impaired children. So it is very important that Barking Gecko continues to provide AUSLAN-interpreted performances so that they are at least given that opportunity.”

Results

The relationships established during the DAII Pilot Program have continued for Barking Gecko and the WA Deaf Society.

“We’ve since created relationships with the AUSLAN interpreting service. In fact they nominated us, and we won the organisation of the year award in the AUSLAN Awards of WA,” says Ms McLean.

Receiving this award in July 2009 is just one show of recognition for opening up theatre to hearing-impaired children. The signed performances are now part of every public production.

“Generally I think the whole project was really successful. It has economic benefits for Barking Gecko in terms of audience numbers. I think all of the kids, both the hearing and the impaired, were extraordinarily open to it and pretty excited by it. Hearing-impaired children were really excited to be able to teach other kids their language. It was a pretty amazing workshop.”



Photo courtesy of Barking Gecko Theatre Company

Outline of project

Barking Gecko used the DAII Pilot Project to create their own relationship with the WA Deaf Society and make theatre more accessible for young people with hearing impairments through AUSLAN-interpreted performances and theatre workshops.

Partners

Barking Gecko Theatre Company is Western Australia’s professional theatre company, performing for young people 5-17 years and their families. The company resides in the Subiaco Arts Centre.

WA Deaf Society is a non-profit organisation established in 1921 to provide services to deaf and hard of hearing people in WA.

Mosman Park School for Deaf Children provides primary and pre-primary programs for students who communicate through sign language.

Outcomes

Barking Gecko was awarded ‘**Organisation of the Year**’ at the 2009 WA AUSLAN Awards. The theatre company has continued to develop inclusion initiatives as part of its programming, including running integrated drama workshops for school children with hearing impairments. Barking Gecko now schedules at least one signed show for all of the company’s public performances.