

# Rural youth and multimedia

## An interagency approach

The 10MMM multimedia project began in late 2002 in a rural region of western Victoria and has now entered its second stage. It is an interagency initiative intended to decrease the social isolation of rural young people and stimulate the expression of youth 'voice' and leadership using multimedia tools. As the process of working with rural young people unfolds over time, it provides an opportunity for ongoing reflection on the extent to which the project can become truly driven by young people, and whether it can enable them to take a stronger leadership role in their rural communities.

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**10** MMM (Ten Triple-M, or "Multi-Media Mayhem") is an initiative designed to use various media to decrease the social isolation of rural young people and stimulate the expression of youth "voice" and leadership in a rural context. The establishment and evolution of the project are presented in a reflective case study, which has been written as a collaboration between rural-based practitioners and academics. This approach provides an opportunity to bridge theory/practice divides, and to gain new insight into processes to support the aspirations of rural Australian young people.

10MMM focused on rural young people in 10 towns in the Southern Grampians Shire area of western Victoria, about 300 kilometres west of Melbourne, which has as its centre the city of Hamilton. 10MMM was developed by three local agencies: Western District Health Service (WDHS), RMIT University, Hamilton, and Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE). All three agencies came to the project from slightly different perspectives, but all were motivated by the desire to improve the wellbeing, skills, capacity and connection of local young people in their region.

The seeds of the project emerged from observations of the social landscape of the region made, on the basis of their years of professional and personal experience, by rural-based practitioners working with young people. They observed that even though the population was small, there were different youth cultures within the region: there were differences between young people living

in the towns and in the country, distinctions between young people attending different secondary schools (particularly private and state), and divergences between those still at school and those who were unemployed or attending TAFE, university or an alternative youth program at SGAE. There was no single youth “culture” in the region; rural youth were diverse, and social and cultural divides were often significant. Meanwhile, RMIT University’s Youth Building the Future Conference in the city of Hamilton identified the voice of young people as clearly missing from the region’s planning and decision-making arenas. The institutional cultures of government, agencies and community organisations did not empower young people to have a voice.

Thus, there were divisions among young people as well as between young people and the rest of the community. A 2001 Department of Transport and Regional Services (DOTARS) case study of Hamilton identified the issue of cultural divides as the greatest barrier to community “success” (DOTARS 2001a, p.24). Yet, at the same time, local forums were beginning to bring people together. These forums encouraged an approach to networking, collaboration and reflection that contrasted with more rigid traditional community structures and silos. They included the ANTA (Australian National Training Authority) Learning Community project in Hamilton and the cluster of practitioner scholars who were undertaking RMIT Hamilton’s Action Research Master of Education Degree, many of whom focused on youth and community issues.

In all of these forums, themes about loss of young people from the region and growth in the numbers of disengaged young people emerged. These local concerns echoed many of the broad themes in the rural youth literature: the broad impact of rurality on the wellbeing and aspirations of rural youth, isolation, lack of services, skills gaps, rural–urban migration, and more (see, for example, Rural and Regional Services Development Committee 2006; Gray & Lawrence 2001). The *Success factors* technological report (DOTARS 2001b) identified young people’s sense of success in rural communities as “second rate” compared with that of young people who leave. Yet Southern Grampians

women participating in the DOTARS project felt that opportunities existed in the region’s wealth of educational infrastructure and that there was the scope to develop strong leadership, technology, creativity and lateral thinking for future community success (DOTARS 2001a, p.22).

The project then grew from these new networks that crossed agency and social boundaries and emphasised local assets and opportunities. People working in different agencies began to talk to each other about what could be done to address the lack of opportunities for young people in their region. Ideas flowed from many directions. The literature of regional development argues that innovation can be linked to networks that facilitate the flow of information and knowledge and their re-assembly in new ways (see, for example, Amin 1999; Cooke & Morgan 1998). While the discussion in the literature is limited to economic innovation in and among businesses, the 10MMM experience demonstrates that networks can also generate social innovation – the shaping of new approaches to longstanding social issues.<sup>1</sup>

The creative approach that emerged from this networking was to actively work to bridge the divisions, not just between agency and agency, but also between countryside, town and city; between “good students” and “at risk youth”; and between the young people of the region and the region’s decision-makers. The goal was to validate and encourage *youth voice* – the perspectives of rural young people of western Victoria, in all of their diversity. A local action research project had recently explored visual media as a tool to encourage rural young people to “speak out” about their lives and issues affecting them (Abbott 2001). Young people in the region were expressing a desire for outlets other than sport (Kruger & Abbott 2002); the project was shaped to meet this need.

The development of this project over a four-year period reflects this process of social innovation through networks and illuminates the challenges of bridging entrenched social divides. For both the young people and adults involved in the process, there were many obstacles to articulating and hearing young people’s voices. The cultures of the institutions working with young people led them to frame

“youth issues” and project processes in certain ways; meanwhile, entrenched social roles and expectations made it difficult for young people to take strong leadership roles. Yet as social divides were bridged, new opportunities were created for young people’s voices to be heard in the broader community.

## The 10MMM project – a brief history

In 2002, prior to the commencement of the 10MMM project, local agencies were undertaking a range of initiatives to attempt to meet the needs of rural young people, largely in isolation from one another. YouthBiz, a drop-in centre for young people run by WDHS, faced declining numbers and did not appear to be meeting the needs of its target audience. At the same time, however, SGAE was reporting an increasing demand for its youth program<sup>2</sup> as an increasing number of 13- to 18-year-olds were disengaging from school. Meanwhile, RMIT University had undertaken several years of consultations with organisations in the region and identified the existence of a significant skills gap in the area compared to the Melbourne metropolitan area, particularly in relation to technology.

Representatives of these three organisations, including RMIT University, Hamilton, were highly motivated to work together and to provide opportunities for young people. They recognised that community capacity-building, through increased networking and collaboration, could lead to the development of strategies to build youth engagement and “voice”. They jointly and successfully sought project funding from the Foundation for Young Australians for three years from 2002 to 2005.

The project model involved wide consultation, and the views of rural young people were integral to this process. In addition, feedback from young people was – and still is – incorporated into the project structure. There was a tendency to “mentor” young people from the project’s earliest inception; for example, experienced staff members from each organisation worked with and encouraged younger employees. Support from other agencies as well as from business and the wider community was also established early on.

The 10MMM project was designed to have a dual management structure, reflecting the “creative tension” between the project’s agency base and its youth empowerment focus (Senge 2000; Rappaport 1995). The steering committee was made up primarily of community leaders from a range of agencies, business and government.<sup>3</sup> It was responsible for strategic guidance, budget, project oversight and employment of the project officer. The action group was comprised entirely of local young people,<sup>4</sup> assisted by the project officer. Thus the structure of the project itself was designed to bridge the divide between the region’s power-brokers and its young people and, in doing so, to build local leadership capabilities.

Multimedia was seen as an ideal vehicle to assist rural young people to overcome problems of physical and emotional isolation and to enable them to develop common points of contact among themselves. At the same time, the media acted as a conduit for agencies’ concerns about health, wellbeing, and aspirational and educational themes. Important information could be relayed from agencies to young people; however, young people could use radio, internet or print to develop their own voices and platforms for discussion wherever they lived in the region. Mixx FM, the local radio station, became an active and consistent partner in 10MMM. A website was developed for (and by) young people, with the support of the steering committee.<sup>5</sup> A newsletter called *Purple Couch* was also developed as a hard-copy publication, to ensure that those unable to access 10MMM in other forms could still be involved and contribute.

The multimedia component also offered opportunities for bridging the rural–urban skills divide and providing new tools to rural young people. The involvement of RMIT University’s Melbourne-based lab3000 introduced exciting ideas around the use of multimedia and design to drive creativity, innovation and enterprise. At a 2004 leadership camp in Melbourne, the 10MMM group had the opportunity to work with the *Lord of the rings* animator, and to attend a Digital Design Breakfast with the editor of the *New York Times*. These influences injected enthusiasm and ideas into the local group. lab3000 also held numerous workshops

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in Hamilton, with topics including web page design, digital storytelling and computer game development. The digital storytelling workshops resulted in the largest collection of digital stories per capita in a single geographical location and comprise a rich store of voices of rural young people and what they have to say about growing up in rural Victoria.

An important element of 10MMM that was instigated by the Foundation for Young Australians was the action research framework. This continuous learning and reflection process involved annual leadership camps, the first held at the Grampians Retreat in June 2003, which brought together the action group and the steering committee in intergenerational dialogue. During an early leadership camp workshop, the 10MMM motto 'Voice yourself' was developed to highlight the project's emphasis on encouraging youth voice. A small group of the original action group members stayed with 10MMM over the last three years of their schooling because they had "bonded" during the leadership camps. The Foundation for Young Australians biannual conference also enabled four 10MMM members to participate in further skills development and networking with high-profile speakers. These opportunities contributed to breaking down rural-metropolitan divides and supported the emerging "voice" of local young people.

Since 10MMM began, the action groups have been enthusiastic and committed. Their efforts to include the voices of their peers have ensured that many avenues for youth expression have been opened up in the region. While they don't always have the opportunity to take their voice to the wider public, a gala night in October 2005 showcased 10MMM's achievements to the community. The Chair of the WDHS Board commented, "it would be hard to find anything comparable that would ... [deliver on such a meagre budget] the enhanced capacity and motivation of our young people". In December 2005, the 10MMM evaluation report by the Australian Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne indicated that, "10MMM is a powerful model of how a community can work together to address the issue of young people's isolation (in every

sense of the word) in rural places" (Wierenga & Woodman 2005, p.i).

## Challenges

The 10MMM project has faced a number of challenges as it has navigated tensions between the region's established social and institutional structures and the new spaces that this project is attempting to create for rural young people. Some challenges relate specifically to the relationship between this interagency project and mainstream institutions, such as the WDHS and the local schools, who initially saw the project as outside their core business.

Existing institutional cultures meant that the project's goals had to be framed in certain ways (for example, in terms of education or health outcomes); meanwhile, there was the potential for these institutions to feel threatened by the freedom of the "youth voice" that the project encouraged. For instance, an article referring to same-sex-attracted young people in *Purple Couch* was banned by one school.

Other challenges have related to the social and geographic context of the local region. They can be categorised as: youth turnover, diversity, geographic and transport issues, and communication and technology issues.

### Youth turnover

The natural demographic progression that occurs as young people grow up and exit a project is even more noticeable in the rural context, as so many young people leave their homes to go to school or university (see, for example, Rural and Regional Services Development Committee 2006; Forth & Howell 2005). This has led to a loss of key human capital within 10MMM and a frequent turnover in project leadership. But there is also a positive side to this turnover as each year the opportunity arises for new people to join in and bring fresh skills and knowledge to the mix.

### Diversity and social divisions

The design of the project sought to provide a number of levels of access. These included venues: 10MMM activities were held at YouthBiz, RMIT University, Southern Grampians Adult Education and at bush and

city camps. Similarly, by incorporating a range of media, including print and radio, it was hoped that all young people would find an interest or access point. Nevertheless, the project is unable to claim that it has reached all sectors of the community.

The young people involved in 10MMM have ranged in age from 12 to 20 years and represent a range of personalities, life experiences, maturity levels, literacy levels and social skills. While the project targets ALL young people in the Southern Grampians, and aims to include a broad range of voices and opinions from the community, this diversity remains a management challenge for staff. For example, while the digital storytelling workshops have attracted a broad range of young people, it is difficult to manage and teach new skills to a group of 10 to 15 young people when some have literacy, concentration and behavioural issues that can be distracting to the group.

The social context of rivalry between towns and schools also creates a challenging context as local young people do not widely associate with those from other schools. These barriers have contributed to the difficulties in facilitating productive meetings between these groups.

*Prejudice – there are a lot of preconceived notions about different schools and it is sort of annoying when you go to a school that everyone hates based on things that aren't true* (Action group member, in Wierenga & Woodman 2005).

10MMM has actively attempted to bridge the social and cultural divides in the broader community that constitute a barrier to developing social and human capital. Information technology provides one opportunity for breaking down barriers because IT has (in the words of one key steering group member) “undefined barriers”. When young people interact through working together, these barriers generally break down and respect or friendships are created. Young people who are normally marginalised find their valued place in meetings, and other young people gain an insight into a different school or life, to which they hadn't previously exposed themselves.

Engagement of the project with the wider Indigenous community in the region has

involved inviting Indigenous elders to the university to see the digital story project in action. To date, we have had one young Indigenous person involved in 10MMM, and then only for a workshop. This has to be viewed against the actual number of Indigenous people in the community – approximately 45 overall in the Hamilton community, according to a local elder. Efforts to include the “excluded” are hindered by such small numbers, which probably only serve to highlight differences. Incorporating diversity remains a challenge to the project, but more proactive approaches to redress this situation are in place in the current phase of 10MMM.

### Geographic and transport issues

The Southern Grampians Shire covers an area of almost 7,000 square kilometres with limited public transport available to young people. The YouthBiz drop-in centre at Hamilton became the meeting place for the action group and the central site for most activities. But as the project aims to cover the entire shire, the lack of transport is one of the most significant factors limiting broad participation, and it is not yet mitigated by the use of multimedia and technology. Face-to-face meetings are still a powerful and vital way for young people to communicate and grow socially. Many of the action group members and young people who have taken part in multimedia workshops have said that they decided to participate largely to get away from home, to have something to do, and to have a chance to meet with other young people.

10MMM pledged that isolation or distance from Hamilton would not be a barrier to young people's participation, but transport is still an obstacle to wider participation and thus to achieving the project's goals for rural young people. Staff members frequently use their own cars and time to support the inclusion of rural isolated young people, but this practice is complicated by institutional barriers including cost, protocol and liability.

### Communication and technology issues

Communication between project workers and young people has been problematic from the outset. Young people failed to attend scheduled meetings. Those with mobile phones liked

to communicate by SMS; others didn't have mobile phones or lived in "black spots" with no reception. Some had computers and used the internet frequently; others didn't have computers or were on dial-up connections with restricted use of the internet. Communicating with young people about simple issues, such as scheduling meetings, assigning tasks or relaying information, remains time-consuming and problematic and highlights the technology divide that exists particularly in rural settings such as the Southern Grampians. To facilitate group communication, the next phase of 10MMM allows for the purchase and use of mobile phones by action group members.

In addition to the diversity issues identified above, there were significant differences in access to, and interest and expertise in, technology among the participants. For example, one cover for *Purple Couch* was submitted on a floppy disk, which the editors' computers could not read! Other local young people contribute handwritten work. One of the greatest challenges for the project has been facilitating the transfer of skills and information (for example how to troubleshoot a website) from people who are proficient in IT skills to those with only basic skills. Those who are skilled are willing to help, but it is difficult to get them to use their knowledge to skill up others.

The proponents of 10MMM have now taken up the project's challenges around structural issues, such as transport and communication technology, in numerous forums and networks at local, regional and state levels. As an evolving example of a group of young people and practitioners grappling with these basic issues, 10MMM provides evidence of the need for workable solutions to overcome barriers to opportunity and aspiration for rural young people.

## Achievements and project evolution

After four years of operation, the 10MMM project received funding to continue and expand its activities under the VicHealth Young People, Technology, and Social Relationships Grant Program. This next stage of the project provides

an excellent opportunity to reflect on the project's achievements and evolution over time.

The project is moving from an agency-initiated project to youth-driven project leadership, which is a challenge that necessitates the bridging of agency and youth cultures. Rural young people are a diverse group, as are the agencies working to support them. During 10MMM's establishment phase, logistics and responsibility to governance issues dictated that many project activities and much of the project's structure were decided upon within the project. However, there was a specific attempt to address needs previously identified by local young people. The creativity and imagination of the young people in the action group then served to mould the activities to suit the cultures of the region.

The 10MMM project officer noted that, in general, young people appeared quite "happy" to work within the structures set out for them. The project officer commented that perhaps this reflected the way the traditional education system worked – or had "trained" them! The project officer also commented that this compliance sometimes needed to be challenged in order for young people to influence change. Suggestions about changing the format of *Purple Couch* or altering the website were initially met with hesitation, with young people sometimes preferring to retain the status quo rather than change. These reflections caused project managers to rethink approaches (including how negotiations are verbalised) and question their own assumptions that young people would automatically embrace change and new ways of doing things.

The young people's responses also raise the question: to what extent might the protocols and structures of the 10MMM project inhibit the voices and preferences of young people? For example, during a reflection workshop in 2004, young people said they wanted a larger role in the decision-making processes of the project. The decision was thus made to dissolve the project's two-tiered management structure. From that point on, it was decided that the action group would become the major driver of 10MMM project decision-making. Steering committee meetings would comprise stakeholders and the entire action group, and

would take place quarterly. However, at the first combined steering/action group meeting, no young people turned up. Those present thought that this could be because the structure of the meetings had not changed at all; young people had just been added.

After a reflection process, changes were made to the meeting structures and processes to make them more “youth friendly”. Action group members attended future meetings. However, in the evaluation stage of the project, the young people said that they did not like attending steering committee meetings. Rather, they liked the structure where the adult steering committee dealt with the financial and funding decisions and they concentrated on the activities. It seems the young people liked the concept of having a leading role in all decisions, but in practice found it difficult and confusing. This raises deeper questions about facilitating young people’s leadership. Young people may need to be further supported to develop the skills and confidence necessary for leadership. Or, might other structures be possible in a truly youth-driven project in which both the content and format of decision-making are youth centred?

Overall, the experience of 10MMM suggests that as young people become more comfortable in a group setting, they begin to put forward their own opinions and ideas. Members of the action group in general indicate that the project has helped improve their confidence. This in turn affects many other aspects of their lives. For example, it also allows them to take a more active role in the decision-making processes of the project. Several participants have gone on to achieve elsewhere, for example, they have won leadership awards, taken on positions of responsibility in other arenas, attended conferences on behalf of young people, and prepared multimedia displays for the shire’s Powercor Business Awards. Still others have found work at the local radio station or gone on to further study in IT and multimedia.

10MMM is a project where young people can exercise influence and see very real outcomes from their decisions. This can be a very positive experience, but may also sometimes confront young people who may initially say they want something but are then not prepared to

act on it. The project continues to challenge many assumptions, perhaps raising questions for future exploration about empowerment (Senge 2000) and young people’s motivation to take action. In guiding the project forward, the gap between what is voiced and what is acted upon sometimes seems quite big. The desire to continually improve the “model” by reflection, discussion and willingness to change suggests that the project comes close to reflecting young people’s perspectives. However, genuine forums for youth voice and leadership remain a challenge for the project and its broader community aims. Despite many attempts to increase opportunities in the broader community, these are few and often tokenistic. The next phase of 10MMM, with its focus on youth-led research and expression, may well assist in expanding young people’s visibility and influence.

## Conclusion

The 10MMM project aims to reduce social isolation among rural young people and to offer them a range of media options to develop confidence in exercising leadership and expressing their own viewpoints. Innovative social networking across agency boundaries gave rise to the project, which has worked to bridge a number of entrenched divisions in this rural region. The strong role of the action group, and the active pursuit of youth “voice” within the project, seem to have served to encourage leadership and project ownership by at least some young people in the region, and to provide opportunities for their voices to be heard. But the project still has a way to go to reach its fullest potential.

As a result of 10MMM, rural young people have learned how to use a range of technologies (radio, web pages, digital storytelling, hard-copy publication) and have in turn used these to develop their confidence, networks, and platforms for discussion among themselves and their communities. At the same time, partner agencies, the broader community, and RMIT as a research organisation have all learned more about rural young people. As an example, the YouthBiz drop-in centre run by WDHS now has over 4,000 drop-ins per annum. 10MMM has

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been a key factor in that increase because of its relevance and ability to build capacity.

The 10MMM project has been ambitious on many levels – tackling diversity among young people; working with rural communities with, in some cases, only rudimentary access to technology; and integrating a multigenerational decision-making structure. The project has evolved with experience and reflection. In particular, 10MMM has stimulated considerable reflection on how to better facilitate rural young people’s participation in forging their own future and the future of their rural communities. Young people participating in 10MMM can already articulate their views clearly, and it is hoped that the stronger research focus in the next phase of the project will encourage them to communicate their experiences and viewpoints to a wider audience – supporting their arguments with evidence and extending them with recommendations and action.

In the end, while a myriad of technological options beguile young people keen to connect to the latest in gadgetry, many traditional barriers remain. 10MMM recognises that a multifaceted approach is necessary to facilitate rural young people’s access to and use of technology, but also recognises that, most of all, young people still want to personally connect with each other. Providing opportunities for this to happen remains a challenge. The real value of 10MMM’s multimedia work is ultimately to do with voice and communication across distance, age and culture – which reminds us that “connection” is after all, about communities and people.

## Notes

1 Here, we would go beyond simply recognising that resources can be embedded in social networks to form “social capital” (Lin 1999). The point is not that social resources exist, but that when networks cross existing boundaries, these resources can be reconfigured in new and innovative ways.

2 The SGAE youth program provides an alternative educational setting for local young people disengaged from mainstream schools.

3 Members included parliamentary representatives, media, radio, print, schools, TAFE, youth services, health, university and business – and also the Foundation for Young Australians.

4 Interested young people were invited to seek involvement with the Action Group. Presentations were

held at schools, and non-school-based young people were encouraged by SGAE staff. Ten young people were selected through an interview.

5 The 10MMM Website, which incorporated forums, news pages, games and activities, was developed by the Action Group with support from the RMIT University Technical Officer. Steering Committee members provided legal and logistical advice.

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