

Binge on Art

Karyn Hodson¹, Joanne Lawrie²

¹Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia, ²Country Health SA

Karyn Hodson is a social worker with Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (DASSA), working in the Yorke Peninsula region. She is a sole practitioner delivering drug and alcohol services, including community education and development over a broad geographical area. Karyn is responsible for the design and delivery of the drug and alcohol education component of the Binge on Art program.

Joanne Lawrie is a social worker working with Yorke and Lower North Health as a youth worker in the Lower North region. She delivers group and community development programs in response to issues raised by young people and schools. Joanne has worked in regional South Australia in a variety of roles, including economic development and local government. Joanne has worked in partnership with other health workers throughout the cluster to source funding and develop 'Binge on Art'.

Background

Binge on Art is a project targeted at young people funded by Country Health SA in regional South Australia, which partners with Drug and Alcohol Services SA (DASSA), local schools, and Country Arts SA to provide a creative way to discuss issues related to Binge Drinking, a national health priority.

The Federal Government launched the National Binge Drinking Strategy in 2009 with the following frightening statistics;

- One out of every two Australians aged 15–17 who get intoxicated will do something they later regret
- Four Australians under 25 years of age die due to alcohol related injuries in an average week
- 70 young people under 25 years of age receive alcohol related injuries that require a stay in hospital in an average week
- On average, one in four hospitalisations of people aged between 15 and 24 years happen as a result of alcohol¹

Binge Drinking and its consequences is a major issue faced in our rural communities, especially for young people. It is consistently being raised by individuals, parents, families and other community members at community forums as a concern for youth in our communities, as evidenced by youth consultations from across the cluster region and from media articles. The impetus for this project was to address binge drinking with regional young people in a way that was engaging, generated discussion and provided education in a meaningful way involving them in the process, and validating their experiences.

Project aims and objectives

- To increase awareness of binge drinking issues for youth and the community at large
- To provide a creative outlet for the depiction of binge drinking and its impact
- Increasing the knowledge of the broader community towards youth issues and binge drinking
- Developing networks between health professional and schools to further address alcohol and drug issues within the community
- Fostering relationships across the cluster between health service staff

Project methodology

A steering committee was established to develop and implement the project once funding had been secured (\$9,000) from Country Health SA. This group comprised workers from Country Health SA (based on the Yorke Peninsula and in the Lower North region), DASSA and Country Arts SA. It met on a regular basis to plan, review and evaluate the project.

This project developed a mobile art exhibition, based on a similar concept trialled in another region addressing the issue of problem gambling, and was designed to address binge drinking themes. The project was funded to employ 15 artists (including local young artists) to portray aspects of binge drinking using canvas as the artistic medium. These artists responded to advertisements in regional newspapers and local art groups. The artists were required to provide a portfolio of previous work and a template of their concepts for Binge on Art.

Once selected, the artists were given a contract and three month period to complete the works. Artists were paid upon completion and receipt of their artwork. During this process local senior schools were contacted with information about the program and indicated their interest in participating in the projects. Schools generally chose Art or Society and the Environment classes to participate in the project. The steering committee devised a program to be implemented with the selected senior classes based on a narrative approach of open and externalised discussions about the Binge on Art collection. Art is an acceptable form of communication for adolescents. "They can problem solve through the advantage of externalising their problems."² It allows young people to take a step outside and take a new look from a place of safety. Working with art also allows young people to creatively seek solutions whilst working with their strengths.³

These discussions were then followed up with information sharing through appropriate DVDs and age-appropriate information. Finally students were asked to explore their own artistic response to the concept of binge drinking and to start to develop their own art works. Many arts students had this project integrated into their core curriculum. The exhibition toured through schools with staff from Yorke and Lower North Health and DASSA.

The Binge on Art Exhibition was exhibited at a community art gallery at Moonta on the Yorke Peninsula; alongside of the purchased exhibition many completed student art works were also exhibited. This exhibition was open to the general public for a month long period and had over 250 visitors.

Evaluation

Several evaluation methods were implemented at the inception of the project as a requirement of the funding criteria. The evaluation plan was developed within three months of receipt of the funding and this was completed within three months of the completion of the initial project. The evaluation was concerned with both the partnerships developed to provide the project as well as the impact of the project on the recipients.

Outcomes

The project resulted in both anticipated and unexpected outcomes.

It was expected that strong working relationships needed to be established between the partners in the project, but the depth of challenge in learning each others' 'language' and new skills was confronting at times. Putland suggests that practitioners must "relax their professional boundaries and to confront the need for new skills and new kinds of relationships"⁴. Not only did this need to occur between health workers and artists, but also between health workers of different organisations and locations.

To make this happen, a new skill set was required by all participants "over and above those inherited from their immediate sector"⁵. As health workers, learning 'art speak' and delving into a world that was not our own presented a very real challenge for most involved in the project.

A new level of respect for each others' expertise and lived experience was developed between all involved in the project. This included artists and students.

Not only did the project provide an opportunity for young people to be educated about binge drinking by 'experts' in the field, it gave them a tool to discuss binge drinking amongst their peers and families. Students and commissioned artists reported that through the process of creating their own artwork, discussions were

generated and interest was shown by others. They would be asked what they were doing? Why? What does it mean? Drinking stories would be shared, not boasting or bragging stories but journeys of despair for some, for others a story of celebration and, for others, tragedy. "Art allows people to tell their story in their own voice ... It also creates a dialogue between those that may never ordinarily meet in a safe environment"⁶. Everyone has a story whether that be from their own experiences, family or community. At the public exhibition people could be heard discussing what the artworks meant to them, what message they thought the artist may be portraying and how that may fit with their commonly held values and beliefs.

Binge drinking can be a difficult issue to raise for some people, including some parents, teachers and other community members. The artwork was a conduit to develop relationships with young people and to engage them in factual, positive discussions about binge drinking and its ramifications at a personal and community level.

The artwork also crossed intergenerational communication barriers. Artists ranged in age from 15 to 76 years of age. It would not be unexpected for a teenager to disregard or devalue experiences and stories from someone in the 70+ age bracket in normal circumstances. In this circumstance the painting from the most senior of our artists was one of those that was most admired by young people, and generated avid discussion regarding the story the artist was perceived to be portraying. It served to highlight that binge drinking issues and problems are not only faced by young people, but traverse all age groups and generations.

One public exhibition has been held to date and another is anticipated in 2011. It was first thought the exhibitions would be held in local community or school halls, but the high quality of the work by both commissioned artists and students has meant that the project is seen as a stand alone exhibition by the arts community and is sought to be exhibited in galleries as well as community venues. This provided an opportunity for young people to exhibit their work in a professional setting and reinforced positive attitudes towards youth art.

Although initially challenging and confronting to health workers, the success of Binge on Art and the positive experiences of the project means there is will be an increased use of art media in future health promotion activities within our region. Feedback from the young people involved has demonstrated their support for this style of project to address other issues faced by them such as depression and body image.

This project would not have been possible without the financial support of Country Health SA and its Primary Health Care Grant Scheme, in kind support of Drug and Alcohol Services SA and Country Arts SA, and the participation of local senior schools.

Future developments

This project has clearly demonstrated that intersectoral partnerships and collaboration are a sustainable way to promote health messages. Binge on Art is now set to expand beyond the Yorke Peninsula and Lower North Health Cluster regions of South Australia. Selected staff from regional Country Health SA and DASSA have been exposed to a presentation about Binge On Art and are aware of the potential to loan the exhibition to tour in their own regions. This further expansion of the project has been met with keen interest.

This will provide young people from other regional clusters to explore their own artistic response to binge drinking and its wide ranging ramifications.

A memorandum of understanding and program outline has been developed to provide some protection of the intellectual property and consistency of the project. The protection of the art works is integral to the further development and sustainability of the project.

References

- 1 Dept of Health and Ageing, Binge Drinking Summit, 30 March 2009, Vibe Savoy Hotel, Melbourne
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/ministers/publishing.nsf/Contents>
- 2 Riley S. Contemporary Art Therapy with Adolescents, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 1999; 144.
- 3 Riley S. Contemporary Art Therapy with Adolescents, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 1999; 143-144.
- 4 Putland C. Art and Community-Based Health Promotion: Lessons from the Field. In: Keleher H, MacDougall C, Murphy B, eds, Understanding Health Promotion, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2007 ; 310.
- 5 Putland C. Art and Community-Based Health Promotion: Lessons from the Field. In: Keleher H, MacDougall C, Murphy B, eds, Understanding Health Promotion, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2007 ; 309-310
- 6 The Power of Art, VicHealth Letter, Issue No. 23 Winter 2004; 16-17