

# Case study

## The Bodja Chair Project

### Details

#### What:

The Bodja Chair Project was an artist in residence project delivered in partnership between Toowoomba State High School and artist, Michael Epworth. Visual Arts, Manual Arts and History students in years 9 to 12 worked with Mike to deepen their understanding of Australia's cultural heritage by exploring the history, design and work processes of nineteenth century Tasmanian chair manufacturer, Jimmy Possum.

Students applied this knowledge to their own work with recycled timber sourced from old school desks and port racks, producing and decorating a number of Bodja Chairs based on Possum's designs as featured in the National Gallery of Australia collection. 'Bodging' refers to the use of hand tools and recycled wood to produce unique chair designs – a manufacturing process particularly common during the depression era.

The students' five chairs were exhibited in Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery and students documented their projects online via Facebook and the school's website.

The artist and educators worked collaboratively and flexibly to adapt the project to student needs, providing positive skills development opportunities for a diversity of participants.

#### When:

August to December 2014

#### Where:

Toowoomba



Michael Epworth assisting a student. Image courtesy Toowoomba State High School.

#### Key stats:

- 40 students
- 4 educators
- 1 artist

#### Arts Queensland contribution:

\$19,500 – Artist in Residence program

#### Contact for further information:

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#### Links:

ABC Southern Queensland news story:

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/10/30/4118016.htm>

## Outcomes

- Students provided positive feedback about their experience of the project:

*“When I first saw what we were going to use to make the chairs I thought you are kidding me, but it was a really cool process.”*

*“Thanks Mike for showing us such a different style of art.”*

- Outcomes were particularly strong for disengaged students involved in the project. These students demonstrated the highest levels of improvement in performance as a result of their engagement, evidenced in both attendance and behaviour.
- A longer term partnership was developed with Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, including a small bursary to support students' continued arts practice.
- Environmental outcomes were key to the project, with all materials salvaged or recycled.



Bodja Chair in production. Image courtesy Toowoomba State High School.

## Learnings and reflections

Kim Betros, Head of Arts Department, shared the following reflections from an educator's perspective:

*We had to adjust the project to cater for diverse learners. Grade 12 art students used the process to engage in higher level thinking regarding material, technique and concept, whereas several disengaged students participated in the doing and the making. They found the simple act of carving wood calming and reflective. When they were engaged in carving we would discuss how to improve their school performance. Teachers reported these students to have improved behavior and attendance.*

*The two-day set up allowed for the maximum use of the artist's time and the least disruption to student learning. The project was delivered on a Thursday and Friday every week. This routine benefited students, teachers and myself in that I could plan for each class and knew what to expect in regard to behavior and attention spans.*

Michael Epworth offered the following reflections on the project from an artist's perspective:

*This was a big learning curve, seeing the daily running processes of a school and how an artist in residence program can be best accommodated. The critical element was the liaison point between artist and school. Kim facilitated the project extremely well with clear and consistent communication.*

*It was a steep learning curve to be able to manage a diverse range of students and get the best out of the time available. Working with teenagers is very different to working with adults. Initially I would get frustrated by what appeared to be the glacial speed of teenagers as opposed to adults. I overcame this frustration through understanding that the process was more important and delivered more benefits to the students than the chair. The act of making is revolutionary. It places students as agents of transformation and purpose; it promotes resourcefulness and resilience.*