

Consider the arts: Engaging leaders and communities in new ways

**Kim Dunphy, Cultural Development Network,
Wimmera Leadership Seminar, August 2006**

Active community participation in arts practice is an essential component of a healthy and sustainable society. Arts practice not only open up fantastic vistas of community expressivity but also profoundly contributes to the development of community (Hawkes, 2001).

My organisation, the Cultural Development Network works to support communities across Victoria to develop vital local cultures. Our area of particular interest within all that is culture are the arts, so we seek to support and encourage opportunities for communities to actively participate in creating their own stories and celebrating their identity through the arts.

I am pleased to be here today to meet you and talk about some possibilities for using the arts in your professional areas. I will give some examples of the way others have used specific artforms and projects to engage communities and address particular issues. I will also talk about some of the relevant research evidence for the effectiveness of arts as such a tool.

In planning this talk, I talked with other organisers about what the professional contexts of our audience today was likely to be, and then thought through what your goals might be. These are some of the big picture goals I assumed you might have

Professional goals:

- increased creative opportunities and experiences for yourself / your community
- improved health and well-being of your local community
- improved educational outcomes for local people
- increased and improved life opportunities for people with disabilities, young people, older adults.....
- a healthier, more sustainable natural environment
- quicker and more effective recovery from local challenges such as bushfire, drought

I assume that as you are likely to be working within and with communities, that your intention would be to engage others to join you in achieving these goals. You are not likely to be able to achieve them on your own. Therefore you need others to share your vision and be motivated and skilled to work with you or at least support your goals.

How can we utilise the arts to engage our communities and achieve our goals?

Rick Flowers from University of Technology, Sydney, in his article 'Community Capacity Building and Community Cultural Development' is cautionary about traditional forms of community engagement such as meetings, workshops and surveys. These methods, he says, are overwhelmingly cognitive, often quite didactic and mostly engage people who already have power; educated people who are comfortable and engaged in cognitive formal processes.

He talks about alternative strategies for engaging people, suggesting the use of participatory arts as a means of reaching those who might not be successfully engaged in more traditional formats. He gives the following reasons why participatory arts might be more effective;

they are inclusive. There are people who like meetings and committees but there are probably more that don't. A challenge is to engage those who don't.

they are pluralist, responding to different ways people like to learn, plan, make decisions and work together.

they are experiential and provide opportunities for learning by doing; create opportunities for people to be actively engaged rather than passively engaged...

they are shaped by an explicit commitment to work with people whose voices are not usually heard.

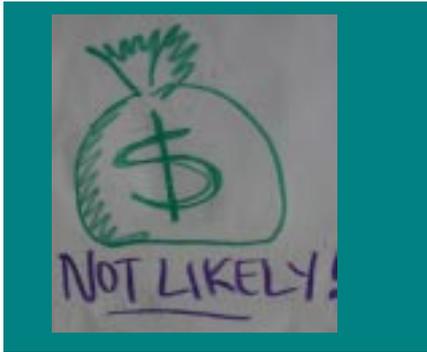
Artists and community educators can make valuable contributions to community capacity building. Artists can help people map their communities, research and tell their histories, and convey their possible futures, in ways that are creative, engaging, dynamic and inclusive.

Now I will introduce some examples of different ways people can be engaged in arts activities that relate to the previously discussed goals.

Small events; one-off activities

A participatory 'social marketing' approach.

This initiative was developed by Gamblers Help based at Bethany Support Services in Geelong. This offered students attending O-Week at Gordon Institute an opportunity to express their opinions about gambling through a simple graffiti-like activity. This very simple art event required little skill or equipment, little preparation and virtually no commitment on the part of the participants. Yet the outcome is both interesting, amusing and its message is quite powerful!



I can't tell you whether this activity resulted in less problem gambling amongst participants, though this would be a useful study. But one might anticipate that the process of engaging with this issue in such a creative and humorous way might have made a greater impression on this student than perhaps reading a sign or receiving a sticker or seeing an ad on TV.

Sharing stories

Another example of a very simple arts activity that was effective at engaging the audience was a recent project developed by Corridor One 4 arts and culture action group from Geelong, working with CDN. This group wanted to offer people attending a community conference the chance to share stories and address life issues through a simple enjoyable and creative activity.



Led by artist Julie Tipene O'Toole, attendees at the conference experienced Julie's exhibition 'From the Tea Cup' which she describes as 'a celebration of the age old ritual of sharing stories over a cup of tea'.

Julie's interest in collecting and preserving local stories led to an installation featuring numerous tea-cups, old and new, with messages written by everyday people and left with the exhibition for others to read. The interactive installation invites the viewer to respond by creating and adding their own story. Julie's installation has grown since 2003, when she first used it to encourage people whose lives have been impacted by breast cancer to share their stories.



Over the weekend of the conference, many attendees chose to tell their own story- either personally in workshop session, like Neil pictured here, who talked about some of his memories of his early family life evoked by this teacup set.



Other people wrote their own tag. One conference participant wrote

This reminds me of my grandma who was born in a sea of controversy and was as gentle and fragile and beautiful as her precious tea cup. I have her cup now and it is a connection to her. We never got to meet but I feel a strong soul connection with her and warmth and love. What a beautiful soul and person.

Another person described 'From the Teacup' as the 'heart and soul' of the conference. This activity turned out to be a simple yet very effective strategy for engaging people, reaching a level of intimacy and trust quickly, through shared creative and experience. It also has the possibility of addressing health or other personal concerns in an interesting and creative way.

Community visioning

One more example of a simple yet effective and engaging strategy was a future visioning activity undertaken by primary and secondary school students. As part of community arts festival to celebrate Federation in the City of Bayside in Melbourne, students were asked to consider two questions;

*'Wishes for the Future:
My Wish for Myself, My Wish for the World'*



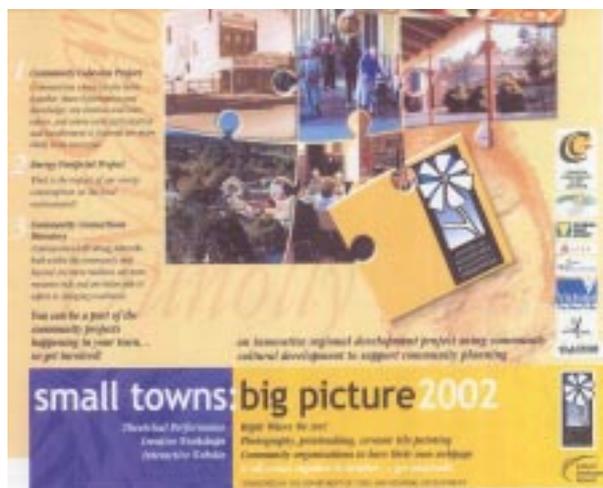
Then, working with an artist in their classroom, students expressed those ideas through words and pictures on these prayer flags, which lined the performance area on

the day. This was a really effective and visually appealing way for young people to present their dreams and aspirations creatively, and for their audience to receive them.

Creative engagement in research through the arts

Small Towns Big Picture project- central Victoria

This project was developed by the Cultural Development Network in partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities at La Trobe University in Bendigo. It began life as a ‘triple bottom line’ university audit of five small towns in central Victoria. Dr Maureen Rogers led the research program that gathered and analysed local data against ‘sustainability indicators’ in social, environmental and economic terms.



When the Network got involved and added the ‘fourth pillar’ of culture to the equation, this academic research study was transformed into an arts-led community engagement program that actively involved hundreds of people in the towns of Dunolly, Talbot, Carisbrook, Maldon and Wedderburn. Artists were commissioned as animators and interpreters. The processes of collecting, interpreting and expressing the research data were transformed. Thanks to the arts, the elusive element of active engagement by community members was achieved. The results exceeded all expectations.

The project did produce a set of benchmark indicators, namely:

- A Community Cohesion Index
- An Energy Footprint measure
- A Community Connections Directory
- An Economic Activity measure



In addition, it resulted in creative works by local artists and the communities involved, including:

- ‘*Right Where We Are*’ theatre performance reflecting issues of community cohesion
- artworks reflecting people’s thoughts about the local impacts of climate change using photography, ceramics, and printmaking.
- a website for local organizational network development
- a video depicting the community engagement and indicator development process.



A key reason for the Cultural Development Network’s involvement in the **Small Towns: Big Picture** project was to promote the value of the arts in community development, economic development, and environmental management in regional communities, and to strengthen connections between the arts and academic institutions and policy bodies in the regional development field including local government.

The partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities at La Trobe University proved to be an excellent way of promoting the incalculable value of artists as ‘engagers’ of community action. The key researcher, Dr Maureen Rogers, in all her discussions and presentations to academic and policy colleagues all over the country says,

Integration of the arts in the process has been critical to the community engagement process – enabling greater communication, more fun, and producing surprising, often unexpected outcomes’.

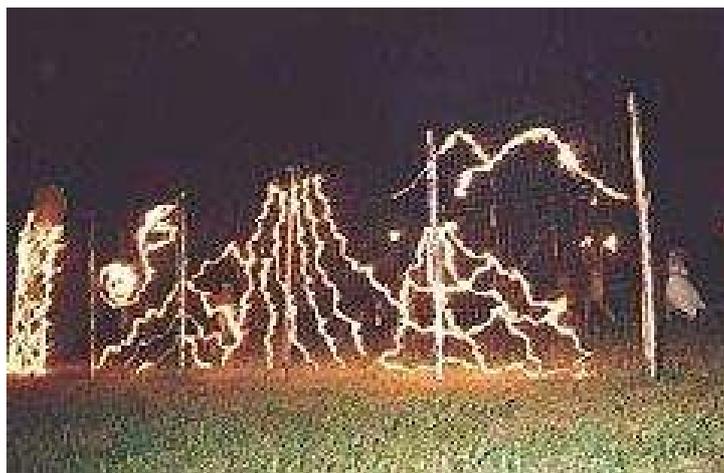
Maureen usually ends her story of the **Small Towns: Big Picture** program with the words: ‘*this researcher will never go into a community without an artist again*’.

Major event: Engaging communities with environmental issues, celebrating and showcasing achievements

**The Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival,
CERES Environment Park, Brunswick**

CERES, the location for the Kingfisher Festival, was formerly a tip on the Merri Creek. Over 21 years, the CERES community have created a beautiful park filled with fruit trees, market gardens, playgrounds, cultural villages, a café, a nursery and more.

Community effort has restored the degraded Merri Creek into a nature corridor. An indicator of the success of these efforts was the return to the creek area, in 1992, of a small and beautiful bird, the Sacred Kingfisher. The kingfisher had not been sighted along the creek for about 20 years. One day a bird flew into a classroom window at CERES and teachers and students rushed out only to discover a stunned but safe Sacred Kingfisher. The sighting was greeted with much excitement. It proved to CERES and the wider community that their environmental efforts were indeed bearing fruit. A celebration was called for and the 'Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival' was born.



The Festival happens every year, celebrating community achievements in environmental rehabilitation and introducing new audiences to these issues. The festival organisers seek to make the event very inclusive and actively encourage participation from all people of cultures, especially newly arrived residents, people of all abilities and ages and people from indigenous cultures.

Ongoing evidence of the success of the efforts of CERES community is that ten years after the first sighting of the Kingfishers along the creek, Yellow-Tailed Black Cockatoos returned to the area in September 2003 - unseen along the Merri Creek for decades. Stakeholders of various perspectives have this to say about the Festival

....the Kingfisher Festival has become an integral celebration of the Moreland community, highlighting issues of environmental concern in Moreland through an artistic forum....

Mike Hill, former Mayor of Moreland



....it has been enormously beneficial to groups participating in working towards something as special and important as the Kingfisher festival. The process of people with physical and multiple disabilities creating work to display in the Kingfisher Festival was an empowering and valued process...the inclusive nature of this festival to support and meet the needs of all community members was another attractive feature of this development....

James Vandrine, Leisure Action North West

Merri Creek Management Committee is an enthusiastic participant in the annual Return of the sacred Kingfisher festival. ...The festival provides recognition of the important work that MCMC and community groups continue to carry out along the creek.The festival is one of the most important community activities within the Merri creek catchment...

Judy Bush, Acting Manager Merri Creek Management Committee

These arts experiences, on different scales, from the smaller one-off activities to large scale community events, all provide a creative and enjoyable way for participants and audiences to engage with important community issues.

The research evidence:

But do we know that community-based arts actually have the outcomes we seek? Does participation in community arts experience lead to better health and well-being, greater success in educational and employment outcomes for young people, a more sustainable environment? Better understanding of people from different communities and life experiences?

My job today is to briefly describe some of the research evidence that indicates that this is so, as well as some of the issues we need to consider in providing quality community arts experience.

Research evidence

The Australia Council says that community cultural development can be a highly effective means for communities to:

- develop new skills and address issues which affect them;
- interact and increase communication and networking;
- address social justice issues;
- represent themselves to their own and to other communities
- and enjoy rich and diverse cultural activities.

Value of arts participation: health and well-being

The literature review 'Cultures of Well-being: a review of evidence for the health benefits of community arts practice' commissioned by VicHealth in 2002, stated that there is *'a substantial body of research pointing to the positive health impacts of community arts practice. This research supports widely held views about the value of community arts practice to the health and well-being of participants and the community more broadly'*.

The review goes on to a detailed critique of the validity and reliability of some of this research data and describes future research strategies to address some of the current deficiencies.

Some examples of major studies of note:

In the UK in 1997, Francois Matarasso made the first large-scale attempt to gather evidence of the social benefits and impacts of participation in the arts. Using rigorous research methods, he identified fifty social impacts on individuals and communities through participation in arts programs. Matarasso concluded that participation in the arts does bring benefits to individuals and communities, with individual benefits such as an increase in confidence, creative and transferable skills and human growth translating into wider social impact, building of confidence of minority groups, promoting contact and contributing to social cohesion. He also considered that many of the social impacts of participatory arts work can be identified and demonstrated, and that it 'cannot be argued that the arts, and the benefits they return for the public money invested in them, are beyond evaluation other than in aesthetic terms'.

In the landmark US study, 'Champions of Change: the impact of the arts on learning', Fiske (1999) found that the arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts and bodies. The study documented how involvement in quality arts learning experiences engages young people in ways that other experiences do not, in that they:

- reach young people who were not otherwise being reached
- reach young people in ways that they are not otherwise being reached

- connect young people to themselves and each other
- provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people
- connect learning experiences to the world of real work

Fiske discovered that out of school arts programs for disadvantaged youth were more beneficial in terms of learning and achievement for young people than programs in sport or community involvement.

Deidre Williams describes studies in Australia and the UK that show social and educational outcomes of involvement in community arts programs including;

- building and development of communities
- increase of social capital
- activation of social change
- development of human capital
- improvement of economic performance

There is a large body of evidence that the major residual benefits from community based arts programs come from developing social and human capital, that is, in how these experiences can develop new insights, connections, skills and knowledge which influence changes to people's attitudes and behaviour (Williams, 1996)

So, these are a few examples of the many studies that indicate the possible benefits of community arts for a range of participants in different communities. Given that, what we also need to consider is how we can do the best job of what we do.

Best practice

The Cultural Development Network have been working to develop a Charter for Lead Practice in community cultural development, or community based arts practice. We haven't got to the end of that process yet, but are working in an ongoing way with artists, artworkers and organisations to try and distill what the elements of successful practice are, so we know how we can do the best job when working with communities. Copies of our draft paper are available from our website www.culturaldevelopment.net. The paper also has an extensive reading and reference list- many of which are easily available for downloading.

The Australia Council, our national leadership and funding organisation has this to say about the qualities and skills of artists we should seek to work with communities. Artists and artworkers involved in community cultural development are highly skilled and adaptable.

They require:

- artform expertise to ensure innovative, high quality artistic outcomes;
- project management, planning, negotiation, communication and collaboration skills;
- responsiveness and sensitivity to the needs of the many different communities and understanding of social justice principles;
- the ability to lead, challenge, motivate and facilitate communities in their activities without dominating or directing them.

Bill Cleveland, a well-known American writer and researcher about community based arts practice, was a recent guest of the Network, and in February, he presented these qualities of best practice for artists work with communities

Community based arts practice should be:

- Excellent
- Respectful
- Accountable
- Sustainable
- Trustful

If we can consider these principles in our work, we are on the road to doing the best job we can with the communities we care about and work with.

Thankyou

Kim Dunphy,
Manager, Cultural Development Network
Kim.dunphy@culturaldevelopment.net.au
Ph; 03 9658 9976

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Some references

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New Village Press, http://www.newvillagepress.net/pub_BegGuideCommunityArts.html

Champions of change: The impacts of the arts on learning, Fiske, E.B. (Ed.). (1999).
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'Community Capacity Building and Community Cultural Development', Rick Flowers, University of Technology, Sydney, http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/projects/comm_cap_cult.html

Evaluating Community Arts & Community Well Being: An Evaluation Guide for Community Arts Practitioners, Clare Keating, (2002)
Developed by Arts Victoria, VicHealth, Darebin City Council and the City of Whittlesea, this guide includes worksheets and tools to assist the community arts sector evaluate its work.
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The fourth pillar of sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning, Hawkes, J (2001)
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Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts
Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth Heneghan Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras and Arthur Brooks
This new approach offers a more comprehensive view of how the arts create private and public value, underscores the importance of the arts' intrinsic benefits, and links the creation of benefits to arts involvement. <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG218/>

Just a Little Drop of Water: How a community based theater in Bolivia addresses the problem of water privatization, By Eve Tulbert
http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2004/05/just_a_little_d.php

Literature Review: Community Arts Practice
This report reviews the evidence base of the VicHealth Arts for Health Program in the light of existing Australian and international studies on similar programs.
www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/Promoting%20Mental%20Health%20-%20Arts%20Participation%20.pdf

Literature Review Of The Evidence Base For Culture, The Arts And Sport Policy
Janet Ruiz, Social Research, Research and Economic Unit, Scottish Executive Education Department, 2004. <http://www.sportdevelopment.org.uk/evidencebase2004.pdf>

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'Out of the Ordinary: Bringing Communities, their Stories and Audiences to Light', Bolitho, A and Hutchinson Mary, Murrumbateman, 1998

Promoting Mental Health & Wellbeing through Community & Cultural Development: A Review of Literature focusing on Community Festivals and Celebrations

This report focuses on the impact of community celebrations on community development, health and wellbeing to determine what further research is required to build present knowledge and provide assistance in developing policy or programs related to community celebrations.

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Putting people in the picture? The role of the arts in social inclusion

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Maureen Rogers, published in 'Social Dimensions of the Triple Bottom Line in Rural Australia - Bureau of Rural Sciences' (2003) *http://www.latrobe.edu.au/csrc/publications/socSustainability.pdf*

The Social Impacts Of Participation In The Arts And Cultural Activities

Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, Australia, 2004

This report investigates the social impacts of participation in the arts and cultural activities. It comes with an annotated bibliography of research in a searchable Excel database.

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'Story and Writing for Community Leadership and Social Action', Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchinson, UTS Centre for Popular Education: Community Action and Leadership Program
http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/pdfs/BolithoHutchison.pdf

Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in Arts Programmes, Francois Matarasso, Comedia, 1997

This influential publication reports on the first stage of Comedia's research into the social impact of the arts. It analyses the social benefits of arts-based projects, from amateur to professional to community work, clearly revealing the important role that the arts can play by drawing on case studies in the UK, Ireland, Finland and New York.

http://www.creativecommunities.org.uk/essaychunkpdfs/2.5UseorOrnamentWholeText.pdf

CLEAR: The Centre for Landscape & Environmental Arts Research explores and promotes how the arts can contribute to understanding of landscape and the environment, part of a growing new research culture whose disciplines are drawn from the humanities and sciences. <http://www.clear.cumbria.ac.uk/>

"One River Mississippi," project: uniting art, ecology and community in one event..
www.onerivermississippi.org

Arts & Ecology is a program supporting the work of the arts in examining and addressing environmental concerns in an international arena. <http://www.artsandecology.org/>