

Consider the arts: Engaging leaders and communities in new ways **Kim Dunphy, Cultural Development Network**

at ‘Meet Meld Merge’ Forum, Yea, September 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.

The Australia Council in their recent Scoping Study for Creative Communities describe the outcomes they would like to see for a stronger, more self-directed and culturally vibrant communities in Australia, which are grounded in the common goals of economic viability, social equity, environmental sustainability and cultural vitality.

This is a vision in which:

- arts and cultural practices are valued as an integral part of everyday life;
- communities are valued as creators and active participants (not just consumers);
- cultural diversity is valued as a foundation of innovation, creativity and artistic excellence;
- creativity and innovation are valued as means of engaging communities, building capacities, responding to issues and generating change.
- and where artists and communities work together to make a difference.

Why community arts and culture?

The Reference Group writing this study found that arts and cultural activities make significant differences to people’s lives in many different ways, including:

- Inclusiveness – making art together and exploring each other’s cultures, teaches people to live together with respect and tolerance.
- Belonging – creating distinctive places through arts and cultural activities generates a sense of identity and shared ownership.
- Community building – making art together builds and strengthens communities in neighbourhoods, suburbs, towns and rural areas.
- Identity – making art and engaging in cultural activities in and with communities produces art that is relevant to people’s lives.
- Diversity – respecting and interacting with cultural diversity, makes arts institutions more relevant, dynamic and reflective of Australian communities.
- Dialogue – providing diverse communities with access to cultural resources strengthens their public voices.

The Reference Group concludes that community arts and cultural practices are a vital link between the arts and cultural sector and the everyday lives of the broader community, and deliver a wide range of arts, cultural, social and economic benefits.

How can we utilise the arts to engage communities?

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.*

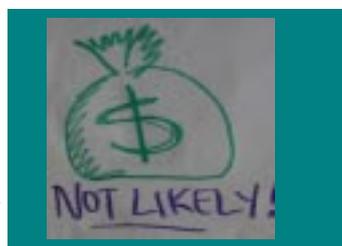
Artists and community educators can make valuable contributions to community capacity building. Artists can help people map their communities, research and tell their histories, and convey their possible futures, in ways that are creative, engaging, dynamic and inclusive.

Some examples of different ways people can be engaged in arts activities that relate to goals of diverse organisations and workers

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.



Sharing stories



Sharing stories and addressing life issues. Led by artist Julie Tipene O'Toole, 'From the Tea Cup', '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.



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. 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’.



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

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



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

....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

The research evidence

But do we know that communities 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?

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

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 on 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 here today. They also have an extensive reading and reference list- many of which are easily available for downloading. Our website www.culturaldevelopment.net also has extensive reading and reference lists for further information.

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, 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.

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http://www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/cdnevents_past.htm

Other references

"Airds Community Writing Project: From Leadership to Ratbags" by Sue Angel,
UTS Centre for Popular Education: Community Action and Leadership Program
<http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/pdfs/Ratbags.pdf>

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http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/art_and_wellbeing/

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Evaluating Community Arts & Community Well Being: An Evaluation Guide for Community Arts Practitioners, Clare Keating, (2002)

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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, Eve Tulbert 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

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

Partnership Resource for Community Arts, prepared by Effective Change for VicHealth, April 2006
This resource is to assist community arts organisations undertaking projects with one or more partners, addressing some of the challenges of working in partnerships, as well as highlighting the benefits.
http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/Partnership_Resource_for_Community_Arts.pdf

Promoting Mental Health & Wellbeing through Community & Cultural Development: A Review of Literature focusing on Community Festivals and Celebrations
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Cultural Ministers Council Statistics Working Group, Australia, 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. http://www.dcita.gov.au/swg/publications/social_impacts_final%20_2_.pdf

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<http://www.culturaldevelopment.net/publications.htm>

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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: event uniting art, ecology and community 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/>

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