



THE QUIET APPROACH

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Abstract: *In CCD, we bandy around words like empower and engage...but what do these words really mean? What is REAL community engagement? The words sound loud and active, but in reality they need to be a lot quieter than we think. This paper uses an example of Stepping Stones Indigenous Arts Project exploring the success of the quiet approach in CCD. The most impressive outcome of Stepping Stones to date is that participants have incorporated as the areas first indigenous arts organisation with an impressive list of objectives which include: "Build capacity, maintain culture and achieve economic advancement through the preservation, promotion and sale of Indigenous art." Local government has a significant role in the development of this enterprise - in a quiet back seat position lead by the communities needs. A great example of an arts project mobilizing a community for positive social change, and economic benefits.*

Keywords: *Indigenous arts, community engagement, Indigenous community, Baluk Arts*

The Perspective

In community cultural development we bandy around words like empower and engage...but what do these words really mean? What is REAL community engagement, and how can one person empower another? The words sound loud and active, but in reality they need to be a lot quieter than we think.

This paper explores an example of a successful community building project that the Frankston Arts Centre has been facilitating with Indigenous artists from the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula regions.

Three key themes have arisen from the project:

1. Indigenous Community – what does it mean in urban environments?
2. What is the role of local government and NGOs in community engagement and can a partnership approach work?
3. The possibilities that can grow out of encouragement

The outcomes of the Stepping Stones Indigenous Arts Project (due for completion at the beginning of 2010) have so far been unexpected. By far the most impressive outcome to date is that a core group of participants have incorporated as the area's first Indigenous arts organisation. The group has plans to raise funds and develop a home base – a 'space' where they can establish themselves as an integral business in the region.

Local government still has a significant role to play in the development of this enterprise – playing a quiet back seat role led by the community's needs. This is a great example of an arts project mobilizing a community for positive social change, and how art projects can also have economic benefits for a community.

Stepping Stones Indigenous Arts Project began as a partnership between Peninsula Health and Frankston Arts Centre (a business unit of Frankston City Council) and was funded for two years by VicHealth and augmented by other funds from Frankston City Council and the City of Melbourne.

Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula have a large underground Indigenous population which has been disconnected to culture and country. Many of the community are historical custodians, and have family in other areas of the country. Many of the traditional custodians are divided. It was thought that an arts project might help to bring some of the community together to discover traditional arts in a contemporary context which would then lead to better health outcomes.

The People

It is important to begin by putting the community into perspective in a situational sense. The area starts at Frankston – about an hour south of Melbourne, and stretch further south down the Mornington Peninsula. The traditional custodians – the Boonwurrung/ Bunurong have areas that actually extend right down to Wilson's Prom, up into Melbourne city and across to Werribee. With European settlement, the Peninsula region's Boonwurrung population dramatically decreased and was decimated by the mid 1800s.

Latest ABS census data shows that there are now 749 people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander in the City of Frankston, and 639 in the Mornington Peninsula Shire. These numbers may seem small but may not be completely accurate for a range of reasons. Given the geographical spread of the catchments, these figures further highlight the fragmentation of the community and the need for opportunities for connection. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of the community in the area are not traditionally Boonwurrung, and many are transient. Additionally, many travel as far as Dandenong or Fitzroy to access culturally appropriate services and support.

With no Aboriginal Co-operative or specific service or meeting place, it was very difficult not just to engage with the community, but difficult too for the community to connect together to celebrate their culture and heritage and to work together on common issues affecting them.

Other issues impacting on the community include - a high rate of child protection notifications amongst Indigenous families, and a high proportion of children removed from families of origin and placed in foster care with non-Aboriginal families. This disconnection from family, culture and community is experienced more severely in Frankston, as it lacks any Aboriginal-specific service to support these families and the broader Indigenous community.

All of these issues have been identified and raised through discussions with the local Indigenous community who attended the Aboriginal Health worker's focus groups and the community meetings conducted to inform this project.

So, the 'community' has been bundled together without recognition or understanding that there has been little or no actual sense of community amongst people who identify as Indigenous - the only sense of similarity they had amongst themselves was a sense of Aboriginality – but not of a cohesive community. Many of them had little sense of belonging to a community at all, or even wanting to – one example of this is that a recent survey of indigenous school aged youth in the area had a number of people – teachers and parents - refusing to let the kids in their care respond to the survey for fear of being identified as Indigenous.

So what are we talking about when we talk about community? Francis Peters-Little, in a paper in 2000 for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies describes community as

invoking a notion of an idealised unity of purpose and action among social groups who are perceived to share a common culture. To some extent, 'community' and 'culture' are treated as synonymous, rather than as principles operating at different levels of social realities. Indigenous culture is therefore seen to define Indigenous community. This, of course, is not necessarily the case. (Peters-Little, 2000)

What has become important for the project group is the sense of community centring around art, and the uncovering of cultural heritage and family has been an underlying significance, that has helped to bind the group together. This project has been about inspiring the local Indigenous population to develop their own sense of community and to work towards a mechanism for self-representation.

The Partners

Strategically this project fits with Frankston City Council's, Frankston Arts Centre's and Peninsula Health's priorities and plans relating to health promotion, social inclusion and arts participation.

Frankston Arts Centre had been endeavouring to engage with the local Indigenous community for the past seven years through the annual Southern Indigenous Art Exhibition which was curated by a local business – Kooeelung Enterprise. This included some local content, but also a deal of desert art as well, so was never really a representation of what was happening in the community. As such, the initiative had more support from the European population than from the local Indigenous population.

Peninsula Health is a partner in the Aboriginal Health Promotion and Chronic Care Partnership Program and over the duration of this project has been strengthening the Koori Health networks. This project emerged from focus groups held by the Aboriginal Health Promotion Worker at Peninsula Health.

Peninsula Health and Frankston Arts Centre came together in the spirit partnership to link the themes of health, mental health and arts participation through this project. The realities of the partnership have been harder work than that simple statement.

Frankston Arts Centre, although sitting separate (slightly) to council, is still governed by the modus operandi and detail of systems required by council. We have set ways of approaches and ideals that are coming from an arts perspective, and an understanding that art can have positive effects on health and well-being, but little understanding of what that translates to from a health organisations perspective.

Peninsula Health is a large health organisation who has had no history of engaging with arts projects. They have struggled with the idea of arts outcomes actually being identified with health outcomes. The partnership needs a very gentle approach as well.

This project has brought together a bunch of very passionate – and very ready – people who wanted to make some changes, wanted to connect and wanted to find community. The project's success has been driven by them, and at times has been hindered by perceptions of the two major organisations involved.

Both organisations have needed to make changes in attitudes and approaches to be really able to allow the community the level of autonomy that the project requires. The community in turn have needed to make some shifts in understanding to enhance the benefits from what was being offered. All have made mistakes along the way, but all have benefited by the experience.

Local government has a mandate to grow and develop their municipalities. Frankston City Council, encouraged by the work of Richard Florida, is currently toying with the idea of establishing arts and creative business incubators to bring life into the centre of the city and establish business growth in the area. In relation to this project, I wonder - is it the role of local government to entice 'creatives' into the community to bring about the benefits that Florida highlights, or do we need to engage and empower the existing community to become creative and seed the growth from within? I would argue a little of both, but until we can concentrate on what we have and developing the potential of what we have, we are surely somewhere missing out.

The Project

From the start this was a community owned project. The local Indigenous community members who were brought together with the promise of a BBQ, identified art as a vehicle for bringing a currently fragmented community together to tell stories, promote unity and help work together towards longer term goals of self determination and empowerment through art creation and celebration of common heritage and culture. Frankston was chosen as the key location because it is accessible to Indigenous people from across the catchments who rely on public transport.

The key need identified was for the community to have opportunities to engage and connect around issues of common interest, with a view to achieving the goal of securing a dedicated gathering place that would increase visibility, pride and connectedness to each other, culture and history and to the broader community. These mental health determinants are inextricably linked to mental, physical, social and spiritual health of the community, who currently suffer the greatest degree of health inequality in Australia.

A key concept to emerge from the community meetings was that of needing *Stepping Stones* – uncovering the past and moving into the future to acknowledge both history and aspirations of the local community. Art workshops, facilitated by local Indigenous artists (both traditional and contemporary) were

held at Frankston Arts Centre's Cube 37, then incorporated into another Peninsula Health project, the Koori Kitchen, and then has also reached down to Rosebud and Hastings. Arts workshops have so far included: basketmaking, shell jewellery making, cultural tours, graphics, drawing, digital photography, batik, stencil art, emu egg carving and the creation of a community blanket.

Two exhibition outcomes have been held at Frankston Arts Centre, and one at Melbourne City Library. The culmination of the first year of the project was a concert on Frankston beach celebrating 'Survival Day' with Archie Roach, Ruby Hunter, Indigenous hip hop projects and other local performers. It was this celebration that really brought recognition of the project and of the community into the spotlight.

The project has to date attracted more than 200 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants from Mordialloc and St. Kilda to Dandenong and right along the coast to Wonthaggi to connect through art practice with our Frankston and Mornington Peninsula community.

The Potential

The artists involved in the project recently incorporated as the Aboriginal Corporation for Frankston and Mornington Peninsula Indigenous Artists with seven members taking a lead role as a director. The trading name is Baluk Arts. *Baluk* is a local Boonwurrung word meaning clan or extended family group. Baluk Arts is in a unique position to provide the wider community with knowledge of Indigenous traditional arts practise within a contemporary context and Indigenous contemporary arts development. The group is comprised of experienced artists who have long standing positions in the community in both of these areas. Baluk Arts has the ability to become the only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts business in the wider region. It also has the ability to potentially be the first urban Indigenous Art Centre in south east Melbourne.

The impressive development of the organisation is demonstrated through the articulation of their purpose and values statements:

OUR PURPOSE

To build capacity, maintain culture and achieve economic advancement through the production, preservation, promotion and sale of Indigenous art in Frankston and Mornington Peninsula.

OUR VALUES

Baluk Arts is committed to:

- Increasing the presence of Indigenous artistic culture in the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula
- Providing facilities, resources and assistance to Aboriginal artists
- Assisting, promoting and encouraging the development of contemporary aboriginal arts and artists and the maintenance of traditional cultural practises
- Providing training and assistance to aboriginal artists
- Assisting aboriginal artists and communities to develop cultural products to a marketable standard
- Recruiting and training indigenous employees in business management
- Providing arts and cultural information to the broader community

The group is working with traditional custodian groups with goals that include funding to find shopfronts and studio spaces both in Frankston and perhaps in Rosebud to operate from. They are currently exploring any and all funding opportunities to make this happen. Frankston Arts Centre continues to auspice any funding application in the short term and if funding bids are successful, anticipate self-sufficiency within a year.

It is a vulnerable, but incredibly exciting time for the group, for the community and for the broader demographics. There are still a few hurdles to overcome; organisational hurdles like cultural organisational status, Deductible Gift Recipient status and the final details on the rule book need to be sorted. Personal hurdles include the actual shakedown of who is taking lead roles as directors, membership drives and where community support is going to come from.

This project has already achieved better than expected outcomes. My belief is that is because the community itself had complete control and ownership of it right from the beginning. The organisational stakeholders, Frankston Arts Centre, Frankston City Council and Peninsula Health, have been able to provide the means and the space for the community to grow and develop organically, which it is. The quiet approach has enabled very loud celebrations and solid future possibilities.

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Biography: *Merryn Tinkler is the Arts Development Coordinator at Frankston Arts Centre where she is responsible for programming visual and new media arts, performing arts and the coordination of cultural development projects. As a Multi-Cultural Arts Professional Development (MAPD) alumni, she has been working closely with the diverse communities of Frankston developing and implementing a range of successful arts projects for a variety of local and regional audiences and participants. Merryn is currently undertaking an MBA.*

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