

Breaking down barriers – from tribes to community

The Charters Towers experience suggests cultural activities can have as beneficial effect on a council as on the community it serves.

Even a casual glance at local government in Australia will reveal a preoccupation with the provision of infrastructure and infrastructure-based services. The same glance will generally note that these are heavily skewed towards the traditional themes of transport, hygiene and building regulation.

Of itself, few would consider this a bad thing, and for good and practical reasons, local councils have developed structures to cater for these preoccupations. The structures tend to serve cost-centre-driven work patterns and communication channels which, in turn, create more-or-less separate streams and, most importantly, separate cohorts working within those streams.



Su McLennan (right) of Charters Towers Regional Council's community development team, and artistic director and project manager for Connecting through three generation in time, discusses paintings created for the project by local youth: they depict individual grazing properties which were then painted over with indigenous interpretations that showed shared understanding of the same locations.



by James P. Gott
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I hold to the premise that the creation of these separate cohorts or 'silos' is easy and comfortable. In some intuitive way, it reflects the apparent natural order of things wherein people tend to form cliques, groups or micro-communities – call them what you will.

Perhaps they are 'tribes' – and tribalism is comfortable. This is, I suspect, because for millions of years our survival – whether we live or die – has been determined by virtue of the success (or failure) of our tribe. It is logical, therefore, that if we accept that a commitment to the comfort of tribalism still exists (as demonstrated in the creation of silos), then we now need to find some sort of ongoing, positive pressure to mitigate or even remove the predisposition to this type of behaviour. Why? Because it is counterproductive to the sorts of organisations and communities we want to create today.

So where will we find this pressure?

If we have some notion of human history, some understanding of how people work, perhaps a little common sense and a knowledge of the 'knock-on' effect, we might be in a position to consider which tools could be applied within our organisations to work against divisiveness. In Charters Towers, one such tool has emerged through our involvement in the three-year *Generations* project, which commenced in 2006.

Charters Towers was one of five Australian local governments invited to participate in the *Generations* project, by designing and implementing a program of artistic activities to help address a significant and pressing social challenge faced by the local community. Further details of the project and its success are provided elsewhere in this article (see box), but one of the most fascinating outcomes for me was its impact on Council.

What emerged from *Generations* was a breaking down of traditional 'silos' and evolving cohesiveness not only in the wider community, but also within Council itself, an outcome that was not specifically planned or perhaps recognised as a primary aim of *Generations*. That is to say, while we intended primarily to create external change we in fact experienced a strong internal shift as well, with manifest results we are still enjoying today.

I think it's well and truly worth thinking about the internal team-building tools that might derive from whole-of-organisation recognition of the 'arts end' of our business.

What do you think?

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Elder Vince Reid (left) talks with a member of the public at the opening night of the 'Fading memories ... building new connections' exhibition that was part of the project.



Some of the young artists involved stand proudly in front of their work, together with exhibition curator Danielle Webster (left) and Aunty Patsy Dallachy (centre), who provided arts and cross-cultural advice to the project.

The arts at work in Charters Towers

The *Generations* project was established to explore the links between creative communities and active civic engagement. Five local government areas were invited to participate: Geelong, Wangaratta and Latrobe in Victoria, Liverpool in New South Wales and Charters Towers in Queensland. The task for each was to design and implement a program of artistic activities to help address a significant and pressing challenge in its area.

The challenge identified by Charters Towers Regional Council was to improve connections between three generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous families. These connections had been weakened by social and legislative changes since the mid-1960s, before which the two groups had often lived and worked together on pastoral properties.

Council recognised that these connections were still within living memory of both Indigenous elders and senior landowners. Accordingly, it implemented the project *Connecting through three generations in time*, via a range of arts activities designed to generate 'conversations' that would bring families back into contact before the older generation passed on.

The range of activities included dance, fabric-making and digital storytelling, focused on themes identified as important to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous families:

- caring for the environment
- creating a strong future
- importance of family.

A particularly effective event was an exhibition of photos taken prior to 1970 of local pastoralist and Indigenous families. The photos, which had never before been shared in this way, showed Indigenous and non-Indigenous people not only working together but sharing aspects of their lives such as children's schooling. They provided a starting point for families to share their past with younger people and for old connections to be rediscovered.

The Council contracted local Indigenous artist Aunty Patsy Dallachy to provide arts and cross-cultural advice. The first Indigenous

artist ever engaged by Council, she played a key role in enabling a stronger relationship between the Council and the local pastoralist and Indigenous communities. The result was a recognition that the arts are an inclusive, appealing and unifying way to facilitate understanding and connections. Some pastoralists and Indigenous people around Charters Towers are continuing to use the arts as a way of connecting.

Other outcomes of the *Generations* project for Charters Towers include:

- Council has increased its arts and culture budget and staff
- community expectations around arts and cultural projects have increased
- Council has created public arts spaces and is investigating the creation of a community arts workshop space, following the success of such a space during *Generations*.

The *Connecting through three generations in time* project cost \$225,000, with funding provided by the Australia Council, Arts Queensland and Charters Towers Regional Council. Factors that contributed to its success include:

- availability of funding
- a realistic timeframe (three years), which enabled the artist and Council Community Services Manager, Su McClennan, to try different formats and initiatives
- the general appeal, accessibility and capacity of the arts to spark conversations
- the commitment of the Council which, despite some initial scepticism about the project, has now committed further resources to this means of community building
- the commitment of the project's key drivers, lead artist and Indigenous elder Aunty Patsy Dallachy and Council's Mayor, CEO and Community Services Manager.

This case study summarises the report on the Generations project prepared by Sue Doyle, Policy and Research, Arts Victoria. A fuller version is available in Art, Governance and the Turn to Community: Putting Art at the Heart of Local Government by Martin Mulligan and Pia Smith, Globalism Research Centre, RMIT University, 2010.