



Ausdance (Vic) Inc. Response to Australia Council CPMD Scoping Study

Context for response

Ausdance (Vic) is the Victorian office of Australia's professional dance support network: Ausdance the Australian Dance Council. Ausdance (Vic) has a strong history of support for dance practice in community settings. A notable focus over the past 3 years has been dance and disability, including a training program to increase the number and quality of dance opportunities for people with disabilities, which was funded by the Department of Human Services. Dance in regional Victoria is also a current strong focus. Programs in this area included a residency coordinated by Ausdance (Vic) by Kage Physical Theatre in Sale (Central Gippsland), and the current Australian Youth Dance Festival being run in Horsham (Western Victoria). The AYDF is being run with strong local partnerships, so as to leave a residue of skills, knowledge and enthusiasm in the region. Evidently, the AYDF has as its principal focus the development of youth dance practice.

The current document was prepared following a consultation held with approximately 40 Victorian practitioners. This consultation was part of a seminar and workshop day with visiting German/US disability dance practitioner and academic Petra Kuppers, a partnership event between the Cultural Development Network and Ausdance (Vic). Petra provided a valuable international perspective for the discussion.

Responses to questions

The responses below were synthesized by Kath Papas out of the discussion that occurred at the consultation. Ausdance (Vic)'s assumes dance as the artform used, though many ideas may translate more broadly.

Victorian practitioners wished to make some broad points, and challenge some of the assumptions inherent in the four scoping study questions, namely:

- The implication that there is a conceptual divide between 'artists' and 'communities'. Artists are all part of multiple communities in their lives. Language should not serve to perpetuate a divide between artists and communities;
- Professional practitioners who happen to have a disability are strongly resistant to the idea of their practice being viewed as community or CCD practice, unless they are undertaking a specific project with this as a focus;
- The Australia Council's policies need to encourage a sense of communities owning their own dance and other cultural practices. Communities should not be passive recipients of projects and performances.

Some points in the responses below are italicised: this is to emphasise their importance.

1) What are the achievements of arts programs in and with communities?

- Everyone's body has its own language(s) that differ from conventional or codified uses of the body, resulting in exciting diversity and valuing of difference, especially in disability dance practice;
- These programs can change public perceptions and stereotypes of many kinds. This includes the perception of dance as an elitist practice;
- Programs can address important or painful social, political and historical issues in communities. They can heal, and enhance the well-being of individuals and communities;
- Arts programs create opportunities for change;
- They can link communities: geographical, generational, cultural;
- They can reduce an individual's isolation or sense of isolation;
- Participants in arts programs are empowered by participating in a creative process and having the opportunity to assert their stories. This is particularly important for groups whose voices are often not heard, such as young people and those with disabilities;
- Communities have opportunities for education through arts programs: self education, teaching others, learning through exploration;
- These programs raise awareness of contemporary arts practice;
- These programs can draw on and provide new contexts for traditional dance practices.

2) What are the important things that contribute to these achievements?

- *Training, professional development and networking for artists working in community settings;*
- *Partnerships: with other artforms, with universities. The university partnerships have potential to contribute to the development of a critical language to describe, evaluate and promote Australian community dance practice. This is essential.*
- The ability for metropolitan and regional/remote organisations to work together effectively. This requires adequate funding, and skills within both organisations;
- Passionate arts leaders;
- Artists with well developed community facilitation skills, who can create shared goals;
- Funding and resourcing for success. Low levels of funding lead to short processes where there is no time to build the quality relationships and trust that are necessary for successful projects;
- Greater visibility and higher public profile for community dance practice.

3) What arts and cultural activities do we want to see in communities, and what is inhibiting this?

Many of the inhibiting factors are covered in Q2, i.e. lack of these things – training, professional development, networking, critical language, funding/resourcing, visibility.

Other wishes for the future are:

- Stronger emphasis on arts and culture within Neighbourhood Houses, and resources to support this;
- Support for longer term projects, where local people can be nurtured and keep the creative spark alight in their communities;
- More activities that link communities and create connections between – not just within – communities;
- Events out on the street! Raise the profile of community dance, and surprise people with what is possible;
- Funding that supports process, and where there does not always need to be a public outcome. (For some groups, this may be an active deterrent to participation).

Some other inhibiting factors are seen as:

- Ongoing issues with obtaining public liability insurance;
- The need to rely heavily on volunteer labour to deliver community dance projects – it is sobering to realize that in some environments, such as the UK, the creative labour of not just the leaders but also the community participants is recognised with payment. (Petra Koppers cited examples from her own practice);
- Disadvantaged people often think art is something only specialists can do. This perception needs to be overcome;
- The polarisation of the 'community dance artist' and the 'dance therapist': it was emphasised that current dance therapy training is about empowering the individual, and dance therapists bring considerable experience to work with diverse groups.

4) What do we see as the emerging trends and needs within communities, and what role could the arts play in meeting these needs?

- There is an increasing sense of isolation from the arts. People need to tell their own stories – everyday, Australian stories – to build and maintain a strong sense of identity. In the context of the Australia-USA free trade agreement and its implications for our media content, and of the predominance of American youth and hip hop culture amongst many young Australian communities, this is seen as critical;
- There are exciting possibilities offered by new technologies: micro-casting, pod-casting and many other internet-based communications allow for the creation of special interest communities that cross cultures and distance. Activities in these areas should be supported;
- There is a trend towards polarisation of 'high arts' and 'community generated arts'. The Australia Council and others should embrace the current groundswell of popular interest in movement and dance by further challenging the perception of a divide, or a difference in value.