

## 'How can research enrich arts practices in local communities?': a case study and dialogue

**Report on this half day forum presented by Cultural Development Network, RMIT's Globalism Institute and VicHealth, November 24, 2006 at VicHealth.**

This forum focussed on lessons learnt about relationships between research and practice in the broad field of community arts and the challenges involved in making these relationships really work. It featured the work of researchers from the Globalism Institute at RMIT University who have recently completed a three-year study with VicHealth on the way artistic projects and practices in local communities can enhance community wellbeing.

The event was attended by a group of 40 community-based arts, artists and artworkers, local government workers and those from health, welfare and community organisations interested in the relationships between research and their work. Feedback from the audience indicated that the session was really valuable, with almost all rating the quality of the event overall as 'Excellent' or 'Very good'.

Lead speaker Dr. Martin Mulligan described the research project he led in four communities; St Kilda, Broadmeadows, Daylesford and the Hamilton region. He used the term 'community-engaged research' to describe the methodology that sought to make the research locally relevant and useful. Research methods included two surveys, photo-narrative techniques, story collection and analysis and case study research on successful practices.

Other speakers who reflected on their response and experience of this research process were Ilke Tampke, health and community development project worker, City of Port Phillip, speaking from a local government perspective and Rebecca Lister, community theatre worker, Daylesford who described her experience as an artist/artworker research participant.

Mandy Press, social researcher and former local government manager summarised some salient points from the day, as follows:

*Martin talked about Richard Sennett's concept of the arts as an 'emotional anchor', which are even more important in uncertain times and with the current focus on individualism. Sennett describes the arts as consisting of 'narratives of meaning which create agency'.*

*The concept of action research is an important alternative to the kind of 'draculating' research which offers nothing to those who participate in it as subjects or advisors.*

*Martin also reminds us that causality is not clear, the impacts of our efforts are often indirect and diffuse, and therefore difficult to measure. As a consequence, good research is more an 'art than a craft, and requires both collaboration and dialogue'. Rebecca reinforced this idea when*

she talked about the importance of interpersonal communication skills, so fundamental to really effective work.

Key messages from the three presentations:

**Message for researchers**

Have a framework for understanding the area to be researched.  
Understand and validate the work, contextualise it and use the opportunity to assist participants to reflect deeply on their work and learn from their experience.

**Message for funding bodies**

Is there a way to make program evaluation less of a 'pain'?  
Can there be shared accountability and a willingness to hear about what went wrong as much as the good news stories? We often learn most when things go wrong.  
Project funding needs to include a creative development as well as a post 'production' assessment phase.

**Message for government**

More investment needs to be made in our creative artists.  
The effect on artists' livelihoods and health because of discontinuity of funding needs to be appreciated, as does the pressure arising from the intensity of experience working in transforming ways with community members.  
The importance of support, mentoring and further training need to be considered.  
Some of these issues were explored at the 3D conference for artists held in 2005.

**Message for local government.**

Opportunities for artists to come together in their locality, share experiences and stories need to be provided.  
Cultural indicators should be considered in annual community satisfaction research. Specific questions that reflect the local context need to be built in.  
VicHealth Community Indicators Project should be a reference point for this. [www.communityindicators.net.au/webpage/about/list-team.shtml](http://www.communityindicators.net.au/webpage/about/list-team.shtml)

Papers related to the day available for download from CDN's website are

- '[Stepping Out of the Shadows of Neglect: towards an understanding of socially applied community art in Australia](#)', Martin Mulligan and Pia Smith, Globalism Institute, RMIT University, [Int'l Journal of the Arts in Society](#), Vol 1, 2006
- 'Towards more meaningful and useful evaluation processes', Martin Mulligan

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