Creating Community in a Changing World

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What do Hamilton’s Top of the Town Ball (2004), Dunkeld’s 150th anniversary celebrations (2005), Macarthur’s ‘Boring, Not Likely’ celebration (2005) and the work of Balmoral’s Chameleon Artists Collective (2005-06) have in common? As most readers will know, they all resulted in creative and morale-boosting celebrations of local community capabilities across the Hamilton region. They all showed what can happen when people are given an opportunity to use their creative and artistic abilities for the good of the community. They also have in common the fact that they have all been referred to in presentations made by Globalism Institute researchers, in places ranging from Daylesford and Broadmeadows in Victoria to Durban in South Africa and Edinburgh in Scotland. They have been referred to in papers written by the same researchers for publication in some high profile international journals. They have all been discussed, at some length, in a report written by Globalism Institute researchers for VicHealth, titled Creating Community: Celebrations, Community Arts and Wellbeing within and across Local Communities.

The report to VicHealth and the various presentations made in 2006 were based on the outcomes of a three-year study of the ways in which community-based arts can enhance the wellbeing of local communities. The research was conducted across the local communities centred on St Kilda, Broadmeadows and Daylesford and within the Hamilton region. In order to address weaknesses in earlier Australian research on the social benefits of community-based arts it used a range or research methods that could generate different forms of ‘evidence’ concerning the outcomes of projects and activities. These methods included two surveys (one random and one targeted at participants in community events and activities), the construction of local social profiles, an innovative use of photonarrative techniques for getting people to reflect more deeply on their experiences of community life, and an exploration of community arts practices that relied on lengthy
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interviews with practitioners and participants and the collection of stories related to arts-based community projects and activities.

Whereas other research in this area has focused almost exclusively on arts projects funded by external agencies, this research focused on a broad array of community projects and initiatives that incorporated creative and artistic processes and practices. The fund-raising Top of the Town Ball, for example, would not normally be categorized as a community arts project, but it was clearly a creative project with strong artistic elements that captured the imagination of a large number of Hamilton people.

The report on the research was also innovative in that it was able to relate local experiences to broader—‘global’—social trends and practices. So, for example, it includes a discussion of the research findings in relation to international debates about the changing nature of community life in the contemporary world. It looks at strengths and limitations of the notion of ‘social inclusion’—first used as a goal of social policy by the Blair government in the UK—and it relates the experiences of the case study communities to international literature on sense of place, belonging and identity. It is a far-reaching report that cannot easily be summarized. It was launched publicly by the internally acclaimed performer and festival director Robyn Archer in March 2007, and copies can be obtained from either VicHealth or the Globalism Institute. The following discussion of the research outcomes is specifically targeted at a Hamilton region audience and it aims to present a case for giving the region’s community arts sector a much higher priority.

Why the Research was Needed

A range of studies\(^1\) have demonstrated that an international trend to use the arts for a range of ‘social outcomes’ began in the early 1990s and has continued to the present. Quite suddenly, it seems, people with a professional interest in social or economic development in countries ranging from the United Kingdom to the United States and Australia got excited about using the arts to achieve their aims. Vibrant community arts movements had already emerged in these countries through the 1970s and 1980s, but now the funding opportunities were commonly tied to the delivery of social ‘benefits’, such as the rehabilitation of prisoners, the reintegration of alienated youth displaying anti-social behaviour, the social inclusion of marginalised and ‘disadvantaged’ people, and the creation of new futures for cities and regions affected by deindustrialization of other forms of economic ‘restructuring’. In other words, people involved with community development and social policy began to turn to the arts to address some rather intractable social problems and they then influenced the ways in which funding was made available to community arts practitioners.

This trend set up high expectations about what the arts could achieve— which other social policy ‘tools’ had not been able to achieve—and it
increased the danger of using the arts in narrow, instrumental ways; that is, expecting a close linear relationship between aims and outcomes. However, the arts, and creativity more broadly, often work precisely because the outcomes cannot be predicted. This can be illustrated by taking just one example. In some parts of Australia, skilled and appropriate artists have been employed to work with teenagers who are ‘at risk’ of dropping out of school. For such a project a measurable ‘key performance indicator’ might be an improvement in school retention rates. However, good arts practitioners know that even when they do succeed in giving some such youngsters a new sense of purpose and stronger self-esteem they might not decide that staying at school is the best option for them. They might still drop out of school and try other things for some time, perhaps years, and then decide they want to get back into education to continue an interest awakened by their arts experiences. How do you measure success and failure? What ‘evidence’ do you use?

During this research project, we looked at the work of a visual artist who had clearly established a strong relationship with a group of disabled people and who got obvious satisfaction out of painting portraits of people. Yet the local government authority cut the funding for the classes because there were not enough people enrolled. Similarly, the wonderful Multicultural Planting Festival in Broadmeadows has been threatened because mass plantings of indigenous plants by ‘amateurs’ does not produce a high success rate for the plants; whereas it does succeed in building stronger environmental awareness and cross-cultural linkages for settler communities in the region. Should we measure success in terms of short-term goals or long-term, less tangible outcomes?

I would hasten to point out that although there has been an international trend towards ‘using’ the arts to achieve clear social benefits, support for this kind of strategy at the local government level in Australia has been patchy. We included St Kilda as a research ‘site’ largely because the Port Phillip City Council has a strong reputation for initiating and supporting a wide range of community-based arts programs and projects and it has officially adopted cultural vitality as being the ‘fourth pillar’ (or the fourth bottom line) of sustainability. Hepburn Springs Shire Council supports an impressive array of cultural activities in the Daylesford area, and the Hume City Council has become a convert to the use of arts to build stronger people-place relationships in the Broadmeadows area. However, support for community-based arts is more commonly seen as the ‘icing on the cake’; something that can be left off when budgets get tight. Rarely are the arts seen as being of strategic importance in pursuing ‘core’ local government business. Doubts are raised about the nature of the ‘evidence’ supporting an investment in the community-based art.

Despite this scepticism, those who have experienced the deep impact that good quality arts initiatives can have on the direct participants and the
motivation of the community more broadly know that the arts have some unique capabilities. The challenge is to understand the forms and levels of impact more fully and to translate these impacts into various forms of ‘evidence’ —from survey outcomes to powerful individual stories. It is important to get a better understanding of how community arts practice has evolved in Australia over the last thirty years or so and, from this understanding, to get a much better understanding of what might constitute good practice, as against an inauthentic use of the arts for narrow and predetermined aims.

**Some Key Research Outcomes**

By using a wide range of research methods across four diverse communities, this study was able to add to the body of ‘evidence’ supporting an investment in community-based and participatory arts for a range of positive social outcomes. For example, participation in arts-based activities can help people see things from another perspective, develop self-esteem and skills in collaboration and expression, learn more about local people and places, and create new social networks. It can help individuals and groups of people to tell and share stories which give their lives more meaning. The sociologist Richard Sennet has strongly argued that in an era of great change and uncertainty people are groping for ‘narratives of meaning’ that can give them an ‘emotional anchor’, and the arts are certainly good for helping people to select and share powerful stories. For some people it might be enough to tell their stories and know that they might have relevance to other people. However, some stories can become part of the local folklore and mythology that helps to shape and reshape a local sense of identity in the context of global change.

Our research demonstrated that in helping people to develop narratives of meaning the arts can give them a greater sense of agency in their lives. What people might do with a greater sense of agency is unpredictable; we came across a man living in a rooming house in St Kilda who used a new story-telling practice to maintain a degree of distance from other people living in the same rooming house. In this sense, increased agency can help people renegotiate their forms of engagement with other people, and this tends to shed a new light on the complex relationship between social exclusion and inclusion. For some people living busy lives it is enough to simply feel that they live in an interesting and vibrant local community, and this kind of ‘avowal’ of community can be a major outcome of big events, such as festivals. Furthermore, the extent to which people need a supportive local community might change at different times in their life. Our research suggests that it is better to have a diversity of local arts-based projects and programs—ranging from classes to big celebrations and festivals—in order to cater for different needs and different levels of participation.

Our research across the four different communities showed that in the context of ongoing global change, local communities must be constantly created and recreated. Community can no longer be taken as a given but
as a constant act of creation for all those who choose to participate; hence we gave the research report the title *Creating Community*. The research demonstrates that the arts have a huge role to play in the constant creation of community, and that is why they should be given more strategic importance by people involved in local government and community development.

As well as trying to develop a better understanding of what arts-based projects can do for participants—at all levels of participation—our research focused on what community arts practitioners had learnt over many years of practice. We conducted long ‘strategic conversations’ with a range of very experienced practitioners and learnt that the most effective practitioners had accumulated a sophisticated range of skills in regard to both their artforms and their ability to work with people and communities. Yet such practitioners continue to feel isolated and undervalued. Community art practice is a very difficult career choice because funding is infrequent and unreliable; income security is non-existent. Funding bodies and local agencies need to do more to create more viable career paths for experienced practitioners and for new people wanting to build such a career. We need a much bigger pool of skilled practitioners because individuals will get stale and move on and the work needs to be constantly refreshed. At present, there tends to be a rather adversarial relationship between practitioners and funding bodies—borne out of the scarcity of funding. Hopefully, the case will continue to be made for a bigger pool of public funding for community-based arts in Australia. At the same time, funders and practitioners need to find more effective ways to work together to ensure that good practice can be supported. Skilled practitioners are the sector’s most important asset.

**Implications for the Hamilton Region**

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the research report draws attention to some wonderfully creative community initiatives in the Hamilton region and it seeks to understand why they succeeded. The projects that we highlighted responded to clearly identified community needs in creative and pragmatic ways and they helped to lift the spirits of significant numbers of people. At the same time, however, a number of people who have been involved with the arts in the region for a long time told us that there was a ‘golden era’ in regard to community arts that lasted from the late 1980s until the mid-1990s and that there has not been the same level of activity in community arts—as distinct from what might be called ‘elite’ arts—in the period since. Of course, people continue to gather together to sing, paint, write, and discuss books, and even offer classes for people with ‘special needs’. At any one time, there might be a lot of activity going on. But it has been harder to sustain and co-ordinate the various activities and they are rarely linked into bigger celebrations.

It is no accident that the ‘golden era’ occurred at a time when local government—first Hamilton Shire and then Southern Grampians Shire—employed highly effective community arts officers who could support and
co-ordinate community initiatives and fill in some gaps. Community arts officers were able to initiate public festivals that eventually morphed into the large regional Southern Grampians Festival of the mid-1990s. However, the Southern Grampians Festival collapsed after the Shire decided not to replace the last of the community arts officers, Alan McGregor. For our research we interviewed Alan McGregor about his experiences in Hamilton, and it would frustrate residents of the district to hear that he feels he gained so much from this appointment that he has become a much more effective community arts worker during his time at the Frankston City Council. Sadly, there was no transfer of the lessons and experiences to an incoming community arts officer in Hamilton.

To be fair, Southern Grampians Shire Council did try to access the Regional Arts Development Officers (RADO) scheme run by Regional Arts Victoria, to secure the employment of a regional arts officer, however, the application was not successful. It may not be easy to find or make available the funding for such positions amid other claims on Shire funds. However, it is a ‘chicken or egg’ dilemma because the development of the sector will generate new funding opportunities. In the Hamilton region, the community arts sector needs some kind of injection of confidence and leadership to begin a new cycle of success.

If Hamilton has lagged in regard to community arts it is obvious that the sector has thrived in nearby Horsham and its surrounding towns. This was confirmed when Horsham was able to host the 2004 National Regional Arts Conference, which many participants rated as the best ever. Furthermore, it is not only Horsham itself that has developed a reputation as a centre of excellence for community arts, because statewide attention has focused also on Natimuk. This once obscure town may be best known as being the home of the extraordinary Bambuco company, which has managed to ‘export’ its skills to other towns and regions in Victoria and beyond. However, it is also known for using the arts to build intergenerational dialogue within the town and give the community new confidence about their future. There seems to be some kind of affiliation between rock-climbing and arts practice that may have given Nimiluk an unfair advantage compared to towns that may not have a lot of cliffs nearby. However, other towns have their own assets and their own stories to tell, and the success of Nimiluk can be taken as an inspiration.

The Hamilton region has experienced a resource-driven economic recovery in recent years, but the long-term sustainability of that recovery is far from certain. Fluctuations in world markets for resources and rural products continue to resound locally and new threats associated with climate change are demanding more attention. Challenging times lie ahead, and our research on community arts and celebrations suggests that arts-based activities should become more, not less, strategically important in such times. Furthermore, some things can be done that do not require large
investments of funding. It need not be expensive to hold meaningful community celebrations that help to bring people together. More can be done to co-ordinate diverse activities and bring them to the attention of more people. Emerging artists and performers can be given space to exhibit or perform their work. Local talent can be unearthed by bringing in skilled external practitioners for residencies and workshops. The annual Words in Winter Festival in Daylesford and its nearby towns provides a good model of a low-cost festival that continues to engage the imagination of the community and provide opportunities for local writers.

Perhaps the starting point is to get a better understanding of the evidence that supports a stronger investment in community-based arts. Hopefully, the report produced by the Globalism Institute can allay the fears of arts sceptics.

Endnotes

1 See, for example, K. McCarthy et al, Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts, the RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2004; and Cultural Ministers Council, Social Impacts of Participation in the Arts: Stage Two Report, Department of Communications, Technology and the Arts, Canberra, 2004.


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