

Keynote Address: Defining the domain – valuing arts & culture

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It seems to me that a piece of art in itself isn't necessarily intrinsically good for us. The fact that quality art exists doesn't necessarily influence social cohesion or create a civil society. I'm pretty sure that an incremental increase in the amount of quality art available for public viewing will not subsequently correlate to an increase in employment or social well-being.

The degree to which the arts contribute to our social, economic and environmental well-being will have more to do with whether or not the production and/or display of art engages people emotionally and intellectually. A valued arts experience is a very subjective thing. People do not value arts experiences that leave them emotionally or intellectually unmoved, no matter how vigorously we present reasons why it should.

In addition to the capacity of an art work to engage its audiences, the way we go about managing arts resources and facilitating public engagement in the creative arts, is of fundamental importance in generating social, educational or economic benefits.

This presents a challenge for any arts practitioner or arts organisation wanting public support for their work, to have a fairly good idea of who they are wanting to engage, why this is important and how they will apply their resources to respond to these needs. It also presents challenges to arts funding decision makers in how they see the priorities for public funding of the arts, and what they are hoping to achieve through that funding approach.

For those of us working in the arts, it's a very interesting exercise to ask ourselves who cares about what we do? If we vanished tomorrow what would our constituency or audience miss, and how might this loss affect their lives? What is it about what we do that people value? What do they want from us and how can we go about responding to and nurturing this dynamic relationship?

It's more than likely the answers to these questions will include, but not be limited to things such as:

- Entertainment
- Arts experiences that engage, stimulate and inform
- Content that is accessible or relevant to their lives and experiences
- Opportunities to gain new arts skills, knowledge or generate income
- Opportunities to produce artworks and to share this experience with others
- Opportunities to develop networks and relationships with like-minded people
- All of the above in a good social or peer environment

A clear understanding of these sorts of needs can provide the rationale for future programming – the domain if you like - and also provide starting points for how well we understand and consequently demonstrate the value of the arts in our communities.

Regional Australia has recently undergone rapid changes placing extraordinary strains on country communities. How well small communities respond to the challenges of rapid change depends on healthy levels of confidence in their capacity to find solutions.

But the degree to which communities can work creatively to counteract unwanted externally imposed change, depends on the resources at their disposal. In terms of cultural resources this includes, access to information, artistic skills, money, networks, venues and facilities, and community leadership skills, etc. Communities with the least resources are also least able to organise themselves to address their communal, or individual needs.

So how we go about managing our available arts resources and facilitating public engagement in the creative arts, is critical to the arts generating the sorts of social, educational or economic outcomes most wanted and valued by our communities.

Quality participation in the arts such as occurs in well conceived and well executed community based arts programs, can generate lasting social, educational and economic outcomes. By this I mean projects such as:

- Community participation in arts workshops to identify the values and qualities to be embedded in the design, construction and management of community facilities
- Professionally resourced youth theatre companies providing skills development and performance opportunities for young people at risk
- A large scale community performance event communicating or celebrating community views and values

- Community members collaborating with artists to produce and install artworks in public spaces or public buildings
- Participation of socially isolated people in a series of creative writing workshops and production of an anthology of their work
- A large scale exhibition of artwork produced by the community around a theme or issue of concern to them

In 1996 I undertook a major national study of around 100 publicly funded community arts projects which was published as *Creating Social Capital*. The study, which set out to identify the long term benefits of community based arts projects, found that two years after the project end, over 90% of respondents reported that the projects delivered significant ongoing community development outcomes. These included the establishment of valuable networks, the development of community pride, the raising of public awareness of a community issue, and over 80% reported that the project led to a decrease in social isolation.

The study also found that the predominantly small dollar funding for this work had a considerable multiplier effect for the arts – in creating new artistic work, uncovering new talents, developing arts markets, expanding employment for artists by generating new non-arts funding partners, and attracting funding dollars that were spent in the local area.

Participants in these projects also gained skills that benefited them in terms of employment and professional capacity, as well as in community and personal life, such as increased ability in:

- Communicating ideas and information (94%)
- Planning and organising activities (84%)
- Collecting, analysing and organising information (72%)
- Problem solving (77%)

It is interesting to note that the Vocation Education, Employment and Training Boards, who advise government and the education sector, have recently identified these as the greatest generic skills demand needed to work in today's environment.

The fact that community based arts programs deliver these sorts of social and educational outcomes are well documented, for example, Australian and UK studies both show that community based arts programs produce significant positive outcomes in areas such as:

- Building and developing community networks, and generating greater social cohesion
- Generating a sense of community pride
- Generating greater tolerance of different cultures and lifestyles
- Prevention of crime or a decrease in anti-social behavior
- Improved sense of community confidence and well-being
- Stimulating take up of further education or networks leading to employment
- Improved consultation leading to better design or planning for public facilities

There is a large body of evidence showing that the major residual benefits from community based arts programs come from developing social and human capital, that is, in how these experiences can develop new insights, connections, skills and knowledge which influence changes to people's attitudes and behaviour.

These are the things which help people critically evaluate and gain greater personal insights and understandings of the world around them. They also develop the confidence, skills and connections to be an active participant in a world of extremely high levels of social change, such as:

Personal Awareness: in developing understandings about the way we construct ourselves as persons and how we take on or discard habits of thought and action.

Social Awareness: in developing understandings about the way we are located in and affected by existing social relationships and how we create and engage in new ones.

Political Awareness: in developing understandings about the way we are located in and affected by existing political groupings and the inequalities between them. It can also involve reflection on how these relationships are created, the morality of the inequality between such political groups and how they can be made more equitable.

Ecological Awareness: in developing understandings about the way we occupy space and shelter, consume resources and shape the natural environment.

In 1999, a landmark US study titled *Champions of Change – the impact of the arts on learning*, found that when well taught, the arts provide young people with authentic learning experiences that engage their minds, hearts and bodies.

The study found that engagement in the arts – whether the visual arts, dance, music, theatre or other disciplines – nurtured the development of cognitive, social and personal competencies. These findings correlate to the sorts of benefits identified by adult participants in the Australian and UK studies mentioned previously.

The *Champions of Change* study also identified that the arts impact in ways that other activities don't. For example, the arts:

- reach young people who were not otherwise being reached
- reach young people in *ways* that they are not otherwise being reached
- connect young people to themselves and each other
- provide learning opportunities for the adults in the lives of young people
- connect learning experiences to the world of real work – in the evolving work environment the ability to generate ideas, to bring to life and to communicate those ideas is what underpins workplace success.

Champions of Change also found that schools are not the only venue in which young people grow, learn and achieve through the arts. One of the researchers spent a decade studying dozens of after-school programs for disadvantaged youth. These programs were broadly clustered into three categories – (1) sports/academic, (2) community involvement and (3) the arts. The youth in the arts programs were actually at greater 'risk' than those in the other programs, however the researchers found that characteristics particular to the arts made those programs more effective. Consequently the youth in the arts programs were doing the best in comparison with the other groups.

These arts characteristics were summarised as the combination of thinking, saying and doing something important while being aware of the self and the group in these endeavours. It is very interesting to note that the report identifies the impact was increased as the result of group activity generated through collaborative arts experiences – as in community cultural development processes applied in the arts in Australia.

Experienced practitioners in community cultural development work, well know the power and impact of community based arts projects in generating these outcomes. Most arts activists and supporters are aware of the significant contributions arts projects make in areas such as community development, health promotion, expression of Aboriginal cultures, opening up of disability access, aiding processes of rehabilitation, informing urban planning, assisting youth at risk etc. These outcomes are not soft options considering the social, environmental and economic challenges of today – nor those challenges facing the arts.

So why are we still 'on the back foot' in arguing for funding for this type of activity?

Perhaps one of the reasons is because we – as arts practitioners working in communities – are not effectively documenting, publishing or communicating these results, and the importance of these results, to those who control the distribution of arts and cultural resources.

Many people hold the view that 'real' art is made by 'talented artists' for us ordinary folk to enjoy as part of our recreational options. This is often accompanied by the view that ordinary people make ordinary art and amateur art activity thus is dismissed as being of marginal value. By default, arts and cultural resources are still strongly aligned to offering passive arts experiences, with an insufficient ratio of resources available to provide opportunities for meaningful active engagement in the arts.

There is a strong body of work that demonstrates the social, educational, and economic value of community based arts programs for arts practitioners to build on, and present arguments for greater levels of support. Evaluation and documentation is critical to this process because:

- What gets measured gets done
- Without measuring results, you can't tell achievement from failure
- If you can't see achievement, you can't reward it or learn from it
- If you can demonstrate achievement, ***you can win public support***

For those of you who are involved in resourcing or facilitating the arts at a community level, I'd like to share with you some of the ways that this evaluation can be done.

The first and most important factor is to have extremely clear objectives or outcomes stated *before* the project commences. Sometimes this means going back to the information generated through the funding process and revising this, to come up with a very clear picture of what you believe the project will achieve. Here's an example of how this refinement might occur

The project description

A public art project is proposed as phase one of a long term vision to develop public artworks in local shopping centres. Through a program of workshops using three different artforms, phase one will bring together community members from three different council areas to work with artists to create and install three artworks. It is expected that local networks will be strengthened between community groups, businesses and

community agencies working to achieve the common goals of empowerment, community pride and recognition. Themes for the project will include:

- The importance of space and place
- Different generations coming together
- Multi-cultural fusion
- A sense of belonging and celebrating positive lifestyles.

The revised objectives and structure to document and evaluate the project could look something like this:

Project Objectives

- To test the ground for developing awareness of the benefits of public artwork
- To strengthen networks between community groups, business and community agencies working through the project to achieve common goals
- To successfully involve shopping centre management as collaborators in the project
- To involve a wide demographic and geographic cross section of community in creative processes that develop understandings about what creates a sense of belonging in the community
- To identify the ways these ideas can translate into community cultural expression through the arts.
- To install quality public artworks created by the participants and project artists in three shopping centres as part of a week of festival celebrations in the region

A start towards measuring successful outcomes could be:

- To identify the ways in which business and community see the value of public artwork installations
- To identify the ways in which local networks between community groups and agencies working on the project were made more effective
- To identify the ways in which participation in the project met the participants' needs and interests and affected the way they felt about being part of the regional community
- To identify the ways to assess the effectiveness of the public art installations in communicating the intended ideas or values of the participants to the wider community

Like a ripple effect, attitudinal and behavioural changes can occur for the participants, their family and friends, the people who provide voluntary help or in-kind support, project stakeholders and audiences. Multiple perspectives need to be considered. These might include to:

Track changes in awareness and understanding

Record changes in participants views by getting responses at the start, middle and end of the project to questions such as:

- What are the main motivations for wanting to be part of this project
- What are your expectations – what do you want from it?
- What do you think the project will achieve/is achieving?
- Why do you think that this is this important?
- How will you know if the project has been successful?

Collect anecdotes on project impact

Anecdotes need to tell appealing and compelling stories, which demonstrate the social, cultural and artistic benefits of the project from various perspective's. They need to be short, easily retold examples which encapsulate why these things are valuable in real people's lives. They can be collected by asking people to write down short examples in a project journal or comments book, or by someone from the project team recording short interview to get the stories from key people, which could then be transcribed and edited to the essential story(s).

Collect samples of community response

A simple one page multiple choice survey form is one way to efficiently collect quite good information about audience or community responses. This could include things such as:

- What motivated you to come to this event? (or come to view this artwork)
- What do you think this event is about?
- How would you rate the quality of the performance (or artwork)
- Why do you think events like this are important?
- Do you think arts programs such as this are a good use of government arts dollars?

Collate data from the participants workshop enrolment information and attendance records to illustrate levels or areas of involvement

- Where participants came from and how they found out about the project
- Demographic information such as age, gender, cultural/ethnic background
- Overall number of participants and percent working with each artform offered
- Most popular workshop locations or times workshops were offered
- Percent of people who participated through the whole program in relation to those who did not

Calculate the volunteer hours and dollar value of unpaid labour

The vast majority of community based arts initiatives operate on a high level of volunteer time. This means that the outcomes being delivered by this work are largely generated as a result of unpaid labour. Within the current economic frameworks this productivity is invisible and consequently discounted. Count the unpaid person hours involved in delivering your arts programs and place a value on this resource.

Calculate the level of business investment

What is the volume of resources supplied on an in-kind basis or as sponsorship. This typically includes things such as loaned equipment, donated materials, loaned vehicles, free publicity or sponsorship in the form of discounted services, donated professional services in accounting, law or technical areas etc. These are business investments in the arts which need to be recorded and validated in the same manner as cash business sponsorships to large flagship arts institutions. The fact that businesses provide resources to the arts in lieu of cash does not diminish the economic value of that donation.

Present data on value for money

Calculate the relative percentages of arts funding to non-arts funding and in relationship to the overall project expenditure, to illustrate value for investment in the work. This actual example presents a good balance of investment illustrating value for money for all stakeholders. The percentage of cash from non-arts sources (90%) for example would be a rare achievement for flagship arts organisations.

Corporate Sponsorship	\$70,000	23%
Local Government	\$27,400	9%
Disability Services	\$84,400	27%
Arts Funding	\$22,000	7%
Box Office	\$8,600	3%
In-kind Sponsorship	\$98,750	31%
Totals	\$311,150	100%

This sort of detail might seem tedious and uninspiring, but what will count in the arts of the future will be influenced by what gets counted.

In summary

How we estimate the value of the arts in the 21st century will include its capacity to generate social capital. We will be familiar with how social capital describes the processes between people that establish the networks, norms, social trust and facilitates co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit.

We will understand that levels of social capital impact on things such as the levels of community health, child welfare, engagement in life-long learning, economic resilience, and safety in our communities

We will place a far greater value on participation in arts activities that engage us, emotionally, intellectually and socially, because we will know why that counts in the social capital equation.

The rate at which we progress towards this more enlightened view of the arts will depend on our capacity to provide the many examples of the social, educational or economic contributions generated through the arts at the local level. It will be these many small pictures that will collectively generate the big national picture of the arts at work in our communities in the 21st century.

References

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