

Art and Wellbeing; Integrating Policy and Practice – some helpful hints for artists and entrepreneurial bureaucrats.

Introduction

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land.

Last year the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council commissioned research to identify where and how community arts processes can enhance the efforts of government agencies concerned with community and individual wellbeing. The following policy themes were identified as relevant: health, environmental sustainability, public housing and place, rural revitalisation, community strengthening, active citizenship, social inclusion and cultural diversity. The project mapped the connection between these policy themes and community arts, identified projects which demonstrated these connections and reviewed recent local and overseas research on the social impacts of involvement in community arts activities. In commissioning the work the Board hoped to increase government agencies' awareness and appreciation of the significance of community arts to community wellbeing. This work has now been published by the Australia Council in the Art and Wellbeing guide.

In tackling this project, my colleague Paul Brown and I adopted a concept of wellbeing which built on a social and environmental view of health and which recognised the inter-relatedness of social, cultural, economic and environmental factors.

There are a number of case studies specifically relating to health in the book. However, there are lessons to be learned from many of the other case studies which I believe apply equally well in a health context.

While I am happy to talk about these wonderful programs and the inspiring people who have devised and implemented them, you can read about them in the book. I thought it might be more useful to spend our time together having a look at the barriers to the effective integration of community arts processes into the policies and programs of health agencies and what we can do to overcome these barriers. After all, there has been 30 years of sometimes exemplary community arts practice in health settings, and yet our research shows that relatively little progress had been made in integrating community arts practice into the ways in which government health agencies think and behave.

Researching and writing this book has given me an opportunity to explore some of the reasons for this. I have found that some of these reasons have to do with the ways in which government agencies behave, and some I think have to do with the way in which community arts is practised, funded and theorised.

Community arts processes can have an enormous impact on people's lives, on our learning, on our organisational structures and on our policy and planning processes. Community arts processes can change the way in which agencies relate to their clients and deliver their services. But we have to be prepared to make some changes to the way in which we approach community arts practice if these opportunities are to be fully realised. And health agencies have to be prepared to make some changes as well.

In the following sections of this address I will discuss some of the reasons for the continued marginalisation of community arts practice within health agencies. But before I do I would like to take a moment to explain an important concept underpinning the work developed for this project.

The Arts as Tool? The Arts as Transformer?

In considering the intent behind community arts practice and its application by government agencies, Paul and I distinguish between *instrumental* approaches which involve the arts ('let's implement policy using the arts') and *transformational* approaches ('let's allow creative activity to help determine policy by developing and negotiating shared understandings of various policy challenges and mapping out solutions.').

Our research has found that the understanding and application of the arts by non-arts government agencies in their work has focussed, for the most part, on applying the arts in an instrumental way. Certainly these efforts have been useful in getting the arts recognised as an effective tool for educating and raising awareness of particular issues. The arts have served as a tool for promoting awareness of risk taking behaviours, as a way of educating communities about occupational health and safety and, through public art, as a tool for civic enhancement. However, I argue that such instrumental use is only half the story.

I would like to propose that there are transformational possibilities arising from engagement with the world of the intellect and the arts which move beyond these instrumental applications of the arts. These transformational approaches can unlock new solutions to the challenges faced in achieving the wellbeing of communities. Policies on wellbeing - ranging across health, environmental sustainability, public housing and place, rural revitalisation, community strengthening, active citizenship, social inclusion and cultural diversity - all contain new policy paradigms. If these new policy paradigms are to take hold they will require, amongst other things, new habits of thinking and behaving. In our research we have found that transformational community arts processes can assist in engendering these new habits of thinking and behaving.

They can stimulate new habits of thinking through encouraging debate, extending knowledge, illuminating divergence and highlighting consensus around shared

meaning, purpose and values. They can bring about policy changes through connecting policy makers with those for whom the policies are intended.

Transformational approaches to community arts can also stimulate new habits of behaviour. They can encourage organisations to be more innovative in their policies and programs. They can build and strengthen social capital between groups – even when those groups appear to have competing or conflicting interests. They can encourage cross sectoral and multi agency cooperation.

And now I will talk a bit about the barriers to the application of these transformational processes and give some concrete examples of where and how these barriers have been overcome. The first hurdle we need to overcome in getting community arts more securely embedded into government policy is the policy development process itself.

1. The Forces Shaping Policy Development

The policy development processes of governments are represented as logical, rational and linear involving carefully argued premises, comprehensive evidence and rigorous examination of the alternatives. This rationalist view of the policy making process presents three challenges for community arts advocates.

The first challenge is the demand for ‘objective’ evidence in support of a particular policy. There is little local research into the social impacts of participation in community arts projects, although this is changing. Some research is lacking in the rigour necessary to mount convincing arguments, dependant as it is on weak methodology and a failure to track results over time. It is all the more encouraging, therefore, to see Vic Health and respected academics such as Paul James, the Director of the RMIT Globalism Institute, Melbourne and Ric Flowers from the Institute of Popular Education at UTS becoming involved in local research, evaluating the social impact of involvement in the arts and participatory arts practice on individuals and communities.

VicHealth (the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation) has, since 1999, evolved partnerships with arts and community organisations to increase participation and access for disadvantaged groups while contributing to the building of community.

Participants in these programs are people who are conventionally isolated from participation in mainstream society – people with intellectual disabilities, psychiatric illness, long term unemployment, substance abuse and people experiencing isolation in rural communities.

An evaluation conducted into this program identified a number of specified mental health benefits – see page 18 of the book.

By examining Studio participation data over a four year period in 2001, the Artful Dodger Studio was able to identify a range of trends – see page 31 of the book.

We can only hope that as the evidence from these and other evaluations accumulate community arts processes will gain credibility in the realms of mainstream policy development.

The second challenge this rationalist view of government policy development presents is the dominance of particular knowledge systems. In government policy spheres technical and economic knowledge has greater cachet than other forms of knowledge, including knowledge about community arts practice. In the health system, technical knowledge and in particular, western scientific knowledge has precedence over many other forms of knowledge, including cultural and social.

Vic Health have found that the recruitment of advocates from amongst the dominant knowledge systems, for example, physicians and psychiatrists, can be effective in convincing health organisations to apply community arts methods.

Somebody's Daughter has found through their work *Bring Down the Walls*; a project with women prisoners, that involvement of decision makers in projects creates new knowledge about the reality of prisons. Stereotypical views of prisoners are broken down, so that policy making can reflect a sophisticated understanding of women in the prison system.

The third challenge presented by this rationalist view of policy making is that it is often a lie. Irrationality and opportunism are often the real drivers of government policy. It is not unusual for government policy to result from the frantic efforts of bureaucrats to retrospectively make sense of a Minister's door-stop pronouncements. Carefully crafted arguments can be overthrown by backroom deals or last minute cold feet in Cabinet.

Big hART is very skilled in exploiting the opportunistic nature of policy development. Every project – and their projects run over years, not weeks or months – begins with a carefully plotted campaign to engage with people whom Scott Rankin, BighARTS's Director, refers to as entrepreneurial bureaucrats and the policy decision makers, particularly politicians. BighART's projects build attachment to policy making into their whole methodology and approach – and specialise in bringing the policy makers into direct relationship with those for whom the policies are intended.

2. The Multi Disciplinary Environment

All spheres of government are grappling with new ways of thinking and acting in order to improve the wellbeing of communities. They are also recognising that many of the issues they deal with separately are inter-dependent. This has led to attempts to develop a holistic approach and response to economic,

environmental and social development which recognises the interdependence of these issues.

In order for these efforts to be successful, ways need to be found to harness the expertise of people from different disciplines and, often, to develop partnerships between government and non-government agencies. In the words of one official interviewed for this project, “The days of thinking you can do it on your own are well and truly over.”

However, these multi-disciplinary approaches present challenges. Different knowledge systems can use different assumptions, values and language. One knowledge system may have predominance over another. The dominance of economic rationalism is something most of us have encountered in our dealings with government policy makers. The dominance of the medical model and of doctors within the health system is another example.

The lack of a common language can also frustrate opportunities for different knowledge systems to inform and enrich each other. In the case of community arts the shortage of theoretical analysis of the working methods used, or simply the lack of a language with which to communicate this theory and analysis to people from disciplines other than the arts, has stymied progress in my view.

The writing of *Engaging Art*, the book about the Artful Dodgers Studio written by Sally Marsden and Martin Thiele, was inspired by the ‘widespread lack of understanding of the social development outcomes of community cultural development’ and the lack of literature ‘on the working methods required to achieve these outcomes.’ The book is an interesting example of an attempt to describe a model of arts practice in terms which can be understood and appreciated by artists and other professional workers in the health and welfare sectors.

However, the book does not suffer from cultural cringe and boldly asserts that a central element of the Artful Dodgers Studio program is the engagement of participants as artists, not clients, and the philosophy that, rather than regarding art as therapy, the program uses art to ‘be with’ participants. The book also acknowledges that a contributing factor to the program’s success is its location within a welfare program, enabling participants to develop trusting relationships with youth workers and counsellors.

The community arts program at the North Richmond Housing Estate is an example of a long term series of negotiations about ways of doing things between health and community arts workers and of the mutual trust and respect which has developed as all professionals ‘work ‘alongside’ to learn and grow.’

Other projects documented in Art and Wellbeing guide also demonstrate how participatory community arts processes provide a working environment that is

trust-building and that this atmosphere of trust allows hybrid knowledge, that is, knowledge synthesised from a diverse range of knowledge systems, to develop. For example, the *Murray River Story*, a play devised by people from all walks of life, brought together lay, scientific and Indigenous forms of knowledge about the river. The community theatre processes involved provided a vehicle for conveying technical information about ecological sustainability and water management to the community and for projecting information about community needs and desires into the policy and management arenas of the catchment authority.

3. Organisational Behaviour

Another factor which can stymie multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approaches is the nature of organisations themselves. Government agencies are formally constituted, hierarchical entities. Inter-disciplinary work is often complex, involves high levels of uncertainty and requires multiple interconnections between different parts of the same organisation and often with other organisations. This can create a turbulent environment which sits uncomfortably within hierarchical, formally constituted, highly controlled organisations. Solutions to the challenges posed in achieving community wellbeing require new forms of organisation, forms which allow for different parts of an organisation to work together, for different disciplines to work together and for government and non-government agencies to work together. These organisational arrangements require a willingness to permit a dispersal of power - a power sharing down the employment hierarchy - but also out into community based organisations through the development of mutually beneficial and mutually respectful partnerships.

These organisational arrangements require in turn a leadership which encourages free and creative thinking and has the ability to create structures and mechanisms that inspire and encourage the desired actions and results. Much of what passes for management in today's organisations is based on rewarding employees only if they perform adequately. As long as organisational goals are met, the manager does not seek to change workplace methods or structures. These management attributes present a challenge for community arts workers and entrepreneurial bureaucrats attempting to influence the way government agencies think and behave.

In the Art and Wellbeing guide we have described case studies which demonstrate how community arts processes can build links between different parts of the same organisation, between an agency and other organisations and even change the way in which agencies behave, making them more willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of working.

The *Murray River Story* is one example of how this can happen. Another example documented in the Art and Wellbeing guide is the place-based, whole-of-government approach to public housing and facilities. In the Kensington Public Housing Estate, the residents involved in the closure and demolition of the 40 year old estate were able to determine how things evolved, rather than have to conform to predetermined outcomes imposed by a government authority.

Cascade Place, a facility of the Cerebral Palsy League of Queensland has, through the application of community arts processes, transformed approaches to disability services. Their community arts projects have become a means of communication with the general public, decision makers and other agencies, transforming policy approaches and management.

4. Intentionality of Practice

Policy is a concept referring to the skills and competencies of organising people, resources and institutions. This became necessary in the 18th century as absolutist regimes governed by a sovereign gave way to the more dispersed requirements of 'democratic' regimes governing 'the people'. Policy has therefore been invented as a way of controlling the people and, for this reason, some community arts practitioners feel squeamish about integrating their practice into government policy.

Another issue which has been referred to already is the shortage of much theoretical analysis of practice. This lack of theoretical frameworks makes it very difficult to describe, analyse and then replicate community arts practice.

Another barrier to integration is the way in which people from different knowledge systems tend to position themselves at the centre of the universe. For example, a social worker working with marginalised young people will see social work tools as critical to successful intervention. An artist working with the same group of young people may see community arts processes as critical to success. I would like to suggest that both need to see the young people as central and to negotiate a range of approaches with the young people concerned.

5. The Nature of Patronage

Another barrier to effective integration of community arts into health agencies' policy and practice is the way in which funding is provided. I mean this in three senses. Firstly, the arts funding itself is often provided for short term, one-off projects, thereby limiting opportunities for the development of long term partnerships between arts organisations and health agencies and also limiting opportunities for long term results. Secondly, the funding is provided without securing any longer term commitment on the part of the health agency. Thirdly, resources are rarely provided for long term, independent evaluation of the social and other impacts of involvement in community arts processes.

VicHealth is a refreshing exception to this rule. An evaluation of their program has led to a restructuring of their grants program to allow for more long term and strategic project development and implementation. They have also sponsored the development and publication of an evaluation guide for community arts projects.

I would like to end with a short exploration of a tool I have developed to assist entrepreneurial bureaucrats and artists better analyse the prospects for integrating transformational community arts practices into their organisations.

A Model of Integration

Adapting some work done by Marla Guppy and Graham Samson for local government, I have devised the following model of integration which I believe can be helpful in assisting entrepreneurial bureaucrats and arts workers assess the degree of integration of transformational community arts processes into an organisation's ways of working.

The model can also be helpful in identifying the strategies necessary to more effectively embed transformational community arts processes into an agencies policies and strategies.

For example, an organisation which identified a low level of awareness of the transformational possibilities of community arts may develop the following objectives for a project employing community arts processes:

- To develop an awareness of transformational community arts processes within the organisation
- To build engagement with these processes within the organisation.
- To pilot a changed approach to decision making incorporating transformational community arts processes.

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you. I look forward to learning more about your own achievements and insights into this topic.

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Art and Wellbeing: a guide to the connections between Community Cultural Development and Health, Ecologically Sustainable Development, Public Housing and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity by Deborah Mills and Paul Brown, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004

Available from the Australia Council for the Arts – download a copy:
www.ozco.gov.au/ccd or phone 1800 226 912

The Stages of Integration	Agency Characteristics
Stage 1: Activity, but Low Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency unaware of full potential of community cultural development strategies and the relevance to their objectives; • Short term, ad hoc community arts projects.
Stage 2: Raising Awareness and Extending Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater awareness and recognition of the impact of community cultural development practice on social, environmental and economic wellbeing; • Initiation of some longer term community cultural development projects which engage different sections of agency; • Continuing strong dependence on energies/leadership of one or two key individuals.
Stage 3: Emerging Vision and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widespread awareness/acceptance of community cultural development approach within agency; • Beginnings of a long term vision. • Wider engagement by agency staff in community cultural development programs; • Solid basis of support within agency among senior managers and the various professional groups.
Stage 4: Vision, Commitment and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to routine consideration/incorporation of community cultural development factors and opportunities in agency activities/decision making processes; • Well articulated long term vision for the role of community cultural development within the agency; • Multi-disciplinary teams involved in community cultural development program development and implementation. • Community cultural development skills identified, acknowledged and developed in agency staff; • Responsibility for community cultural development shared across a range of disciplines and at senior, middle management and operational levels throughout the agency.
Stage 5: Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal integration of community cultural development into the agency's strategic planning, corporate planning and budgetary processes. • Powerful 'quality of life' ethos pervades all agency activities.