Cultural brokerage and regional arts: Developing an enabler model for cultural and economic sustainability. An update
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Abstract:

Many rural and remote communities in Australia could be considered \'unsustainable\' because of the loss of human, financial and consequent social capital and degradation of the natural resource base that provides both the setting for the community and, in many cases, the economic foundation. The problems they face, such as lack of services, unemployment, maintaining professional workers in the region and youth suicide have been extensively explored, yet studies of the role of the arts and associated organizations as brokers of culture through pedagogical activities are few. This paper describes stage one of a project that proposes arts activities as a means of stimulating community development through the interface between cultural brokerage, cultural pedagogy, and the sustainable outcomes that might emerge from their application in rural and remote areas of Queensland. The project is investigating ways in which performing and visual arts activities might contribute to sustainable communities. The interdisciplinary research approach was developed in a partnership between Flying Arts, The Queensland Murray Darling Committee and the University of Southern Queensland.

Keywords: Cultural brokerage, community, sustainability, arts

Background

The research project introduced in this paper explores the interface between cultural brokerage and pedagogy and the sustainable outcomes that might emerge from their application in arts practices carried out in rural, remote areas

of Queensland. The project is investigating and documenting ways in which creative and artistic disciplines function as a relevant, enabling agency in industry and commercialisation in regional and remote communities (Gascoigne 2005); and how performing and visual arts activities can contribute to sustainable communities. These are communities that limit the decline of economic, environmental and social capital, the fundamental pillars of sustainable development. Interrelated elements include: cultural pedagogy; relationships among forms of arts practice; and community 'gatekeeping' and generationalism.

Many rural and remote communities in Australia could be considered 'unsustainable' because of the loss of human, financial and social capital and degradation of the natural resource base that provides both their setting and, in many cases, the economic foundation. Problems such as lack of services, unemployment, and difficulties maintaining professional workers and youth suicide have been extensively discussed (Lawrence, Lyons & Momtaz 1996; Pritchard & McManus 2000; Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan 2004), as have the structural causes of regional decline (Smailes 1997; Gray & Lawrence 2001).

The arts may be one avenue for generating community support and development, though such contentions have not yet moved from advocacy to analysis of practice other than some survey work on individual arts productions (.g. Curtis, 2003). Research is needed to evaluate the application of the principles of cultural brokering and best practice concepts and models for community outreach and capacity building (Trend, 1992), particularly in rural and remote areas where the depletion of the three forms of capital is especially worrying.

For the purposes of this research, a broker is defined as an individual or group who advocates or intervenes on behalf of another (Moffat & Tung, 2004). Culture is the ensemble of stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. It is always constructed and positioned within histories (Trend, 1992). It is a living, local thing (Overton 2001: 12) concerned with representations and identities and the stories that structure a sense of place, belonging and possibilities of living well

(Doubleday 2004: 391). The brokering process involves creating points of convergence and conversation between cultures, choosing and developing debates about difference and creating relationships (Overton 2001: 11) using an enabling approach.

In their study of eight Queensland country towns, Plowman *et al* (2003, (pp. 1-2), found innovative communities had a greater abundance of 'freshness' in management and leadership; a younger population; higher than average levels of education, and an upward trend in and higher proportion of residents working in 'creative class' occupations and industries. They forecast that '… (A)trophy or decline awaits those towns that are not innovative or adaptable' (Ibid: 8). With regard to arts and pedagogy, they suggested that towns develop their cultural capital by encouraging: public celebration of creativity; continuing education (both formal and informal) for all residents; home-grown talent; the development of a community resource centre; and exploration of ways to make towns attractive to young people (Ibid: 4-5).

Adult 'gatekeepers' often dismiss the idealism associated with youth as fleeting and somehow suspicious, yet it is this potential for innovation and 'thinking outside of the box' that Florida (In Davis, 1997: 16) defines as a necessary ingredient in building creative communities. Davis argues that economic growth depends on a 'creative class' that comprises '… people who add economic value through their creativity' (Florida. 2002: 68) and that cultural industries drive growth in knowledge-based societies. This research proposes models of community networks, characterized by collaborative environments and new forms of communication, as 'circles of convergence' that recognize the importance of group processes (Overton: 2001).

A major element in the project is the development and application of a pedagogy of culture that positions the role of the arts and arts practice in community development and natural resource management. Cultural pedagogy involves analysing stories, tellers and their times and encouraging this analytical spirit in others. It cuts across professional and community boundaries to focus on

particular objects or community practices within the contexts of the broad range of circumstances in which cultural forms are produced and received (Trend 1992: 2-3). It creates opportunities to re-envision an ethics of the local. Specifically, exploring the roots of sustainability means understanding and applying strategies at grass roots level that are informed by immediate, local consequences (Doubleday, 2004). When they are practised as part of an active assertion of community vitality, the arts highlight the importance of the local ecologies that can render livelihoods in particular locales sustainable. They reflect and constitute identity by retracing and remaking connections between lives, land and place (Ibid: 396).

According to Giroux (2006:4) cultural pedagogy offers a powerful way to effect social and environmental change by providing the cultural circumstances in which citizenship and a sense of community and identity can be learned. Thus the socially relevant site for information exchange is the local community where adults and children learn how to view themselves, others and the world they live in (Ibid: 5). Issues of public memory are drawn on so as to develop awareness of how the experience of place has been storied by earlier generations (Bowers, 2001:257).

By reclaiming the space for pedagogical work we can better deal with problems of community sustainability. We can discover ways of inspiring students and citizens to recognise and address the pervasive problems of their communities by critically examining the patterns of community life they face regularly. In this way we can empower them to regain their role as critical citizens who work collectively to address relevant social, economic and political issues and build a future that opens up the promise of a viable, sustainable community (Giroux, 2006:8).

A socio-cultural approach to education that builds on problem solving requires a broad, flexible, creative approach that includes the communities concerned and draws on diverse pools of knowledge to change apparently entrenched circumstances (Smith, 1998:142). As Lim & Renshaw (2001)

describe it, this sociocultural approach to knowledge-building moves people out of their familiar worlds and positions learning within interrelated historical, cultural, institutional and communicative processes. Emerging issues and problems affecting people and their communities can be addressed through the acquisition of skills for life-long learning, collaboration and creativity (Ibid: 13). The outcomes 'story' the collective activities and social practices that are framed in the process of becoming active participants in a variety of communities of practice. As Wertsch (1998) argues, the process of appropriating cultural tools enables individuals to be included into new collective ways of functioning and action as members of more varied and overlapping communities. Lim and Renshaw (2001:4) understand this socio-cultural space of appropriation as a zone of proximal development in which individuals with greater cultural capital and membership of a particular community of practice mentor people as they begin to participate in social and cultural activities.

The interdisciplinary research approach developed for this project comprises a strongly consultative and collaborative bricolage of research strategies appropriate for encouraging community dialogue towards the development of new forums for activities. It is a process of collective strategizing (Overton, 2001) designed to effect long-term reform in community and intercommunity exchange through establishing and strengthening alliances among 'backbone' groups like students, churches, ethnic coalitions and town councils. Authentic community happens when people engage with each other (Ibid: 17) and believe in the driving value of the innate ability and talent of ordinary people. The process explores the perspectives of the participants by examining their locally situated 'funds of knowledge' and provides them with a voice within collaborative contexts (Lim & Renshaw 2001:15). The research procedures being used include ethnographic observations, focus groups, surveys, conversations and interviewing, life histories and case studies. These modes of inquiry enable a portrait of an array of cultural resources and forms of knowledge and make explicit the wisdoms, beliefs, assumptions and lay theories of socio-cultural practices (Ibid: 15).

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is well positioned to operate as cultural broker and potential enabler of economic upturn in regional areas in terms of building cultural sustainability. As part of the research project, USQ will auspice a website that promotes a collaborative, self-service and user-driven approach to maximizing access to information and increasing the profile of the arts in regional Queensland. It is anticipated this will remain in place after the project is completed as a mechanism for continuing to foster the self-actualization of cultural investment in the participating communities, and as a model for other regional areas in Australia.

The research will examine, implement and enable ways of sharing cultural and economic strategies and resources and disseminating high-level expertise through regional centres. It will involve an analysis of the potential contribution of visual and performing arts activities to rural and remote community economic development and map changing demographics and social conditions within the arts sector in these areas.

Encouraging young people to critique their environments and represent themselves by beginning to suggest solutions to local problems is a central aim of the project (Overton, 2001). The research team is working with two industry partners, the Queensland Murray Darling Committee [QMDC] and Flying Arts Inc. The first stage of the research involves working with young people on two projects these industry partners have developed. This paper will describe them briefly.

Industry partner collaborations

1. Queensland Murray Darling Committee
The Queensland Murray Darling Committee (QMDC) catchment area encompasses the Murray-Darling basin bounded by the Condamine, Maranoa-

Balonne and Border Rivers. QMDC offers vast networks and resources for liaising with and supporting ongoing and long-term research and artistic outcomes that seek to initiate and sustain cultural brokerage partnerships in southwest Queensland. It will also promote communications, education and capacity building programmes that seek to increase public understanding of natural resource management in the region.

The Natural Resource Management (NRM) report for 2004 is QMDC's chief planning document. The section on communication, education and capacity building specifies key strategies for: (i) proactively supporting young people to maintain viable and vibrant rural communities; (ii) strengthening capacity building and resource management awareness through education and training opportunities; (iii) developing information sharing with key research organizations; (iv) recording cultural and social practices and their linkages to the environment; and (v) developing and implementing innovative awareness raising activities (QMDC, 2004: 96-102). QMDC is already actively engaged in forging potential links between education, cultural development and economic outcomes and building sustainable and organic cultural practices that will simultaneously teach and support the ongoing restoration and maintenance of natural resources in southwest Queensland. QMDC believes that the cultural development of regional towns can help to create innovations that add significantly to the lifestyle of the people of Queensland and is committing resources and personnel to the data gathering process in this research. QMDC is integral in bringing the project to fruition.

The landcare conference

As part of the first stage of the project, USQ is assisting convening and hosting QMDC Landcare Discovery Centre's annual *Landcare Conference.* The Landcare Discovery Centre (LDC) is a dynamic Environmental Education facility located in the Queensland Murray Darling Basin serving landholders, community

members, schools, teachers, students, industry and local government. It is the educational arm of the Queensland Murray Darling Committee Inc., a not-for-profit organisation co-funded by the Queensland and Australian Governments and other investors. The main office is located in Toowoomba, and there are regional offices also in Roma and Goondiwindi <www.qmdc.org.au>.

The *Landcare Conference* encourages young people to investigate their natural worlds and report their discoveries and seeks to empower them to take an interest in their local communities and environments. It recognizes that they learn from peers and provides them with the skills needed to stand up and have a say about issues that concern everyone and learn how to make a difference now and for future generations. It provides hands-on, student-orientated learning to ensure that people who are interested in and respect their environments and natural resources will manage the future.

The inaugural conference was convened in Toowoomba, a city of 100,000 people in early October 2005. Participants comprised over 280 school students, aged from 8 to 17 years, and their teachers, drawn from 24 schools in the Murray Darling catchment area. The conference spanned three days of talks, workshops and explorations that provided opportunities for students to profile environmental issues and projects they had conducted in their local areas. They presented them in innovative and interactive ways and they included puppet and slide shows, art exhibitions and science experiments. The projects dealt with diverse topics such as developing community partnerships, web-of-life activities, conserving ponds, bird habitats and endangered species, ecological monitoring, property planning and saving schoolyard threatened by blitz programmes.

In coordinating the visual arts components of the 2004 conference, USQ's teams worked with the QMDC's Landcare Discovery Centre to encourage and facilitate visual investigations by young people of their natural world and the impact of the environment on their local communities. Workshops for youth sectors of the community, including indigenous youth, were devised to develop their production and communication strategies and skills through visual

language. The aim was to help them develop a sense of local identity for cultural sustainability outcomes.

USQ's contribution began with a 'Wearable Art Parade', with quirky creations that explored issues ranging from introduced weed species to the gardener as Shaman and then focused on a series of visual arts environmental workshops in Kleinton, the site of one of the first brickworks in the region. Sculptor Andrew MacDonald's *Scrub Scrutiny* workshop explored the palimpsest of natural features and human intervention in this remnant of early industry. Andrew Stewart's workshop, *An Eye for Detail*: *Learning to see Nature through Photography,* evoked personal responses to the environment through creative framing of images; and Randal Fedje's *Clay Keepers: Animals use of Natural Clay* provided hands-on exploration of deposits built up over thousands of years of settlement.

The conference activities enabled the research team to trace outcomes from these events forward and begin the process of identifying communities for the project by establishing contacts with young people and their teachers in the regional communities where future arts activities are planned to take place. The focus now will be on developing strategies and models for exploring the possibilities for creating relevant, appropriate activities and events that will ensure the longevity and sustainability of organic, endogenous arts activities and performances in regional communities.

2. Flying Arts Inc.

USQ's second project partner, Flying Arts, has been delivering sequential visual arts workshops to regional centres throughout Queensland for the past 35 years, with the aim of providing access to innovative arts experiences for people in regional, remote and other isolated, or isolating, circumstances. Provision has ranged from traditional painting, ceramic and textile workshops led by one or two artists flown into centers on board a single engine aircraft in the early 1970s, to a

host of contemporary practices catering for all levels of experience, age and expertise and reaching thousands of people statewide in 2006.

Since 1991, the University of Southern Queensland has hosted Flying Arts at the Distance Education Centre in Brisbane on the basis of mutual commitment to community service and engagement. Though they have been affiliated for 15 years and regularly reference each other with regard to programming, regional touring and strategic planning, USQ and Flying Arts have never formalized a joint 'pedagogy of culture'. The research project provides an opportunity to strengthen the FA/USQ partnership through complementing each other's strengths: an established reputation with and connections to, regional communities on the one hand and R&D expertise and capacity on the other.

With its grass roots, hands on, 'can do' approach to delivery, Flying Arts exemplifies what Australian theorist John Hawkes (2001) refers to as 'cultural vitality'. This is basically a variation on Throsby's (1999) ideas about 'cultural capital' referred to earlier in this paper and the 'fourth pillar' of sustainability identified in UNESCO's Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) (Culturescope. 2006). Because it has an established arts network of more than 60 centres, including communities, schools and cultural organizations, throughout Queensland, Flying Arts is ideally situated for implementing and reporting on cultural events, trends and outcomes. The on-line discussion forums and training it has developed over the past decade deliver a ready audience of regional and potentially global respondents for this research project.

In recent years, Flying Arts has also witnessed a growing trend towards longer-term cross-artform artist-residency projects in regional communities and a huge growth in its youth programme, which was developed both to ensure the relevance and longevity of the organisation and guard against any hint of 'generationalism'.

In January 2005, Flying Arts extended its annual *Experience The Arts (ETA)* youth residency to include an *ETA* summer retreat in conjunction with USQ's McGregor Summer Arts School held in Toowoomba. In so doing, it delivered a focus group of young people (its primary interest group) to USQ for

the research project. *ETA* brings regional secondary students from many different demographics to Brisbane and Toowoomba, for six to ten days of intensive artmaking, excursions to galleries, visits to university campuses and performance events. Over the years *ETA* themes have focused on expanding and challenging practice, individual and community identity and the transitions involved in moving from middle to upper secondary, or secondary to tertiary, education. Responses range from the observation, by tutor Catherine Parker, that 'The workshops allowed us to constantly process bringing a more lateral (cross-disciplinary) approach to their art work' (Flying Arts, 2004, 14), to participating students' statements that;

> "ETA helps students from remote areas of Queensland discover other options outside the communities we live in' (Skye Christie, Anandale). 'It was not just about the things I learned and created. It was about the people I met. To come here and be surrounded by people who know what you know and feel how you feel about art and give you support was an incredible experience'. (Stephanie Brown, Mount Sheridan) *'Experience The Arts* (*ETA*) was truly an art experience. The workshops and talks really opened my eyes to pathways I never even knew existed. They allowed me to *make* art and therefore *experience* art' (Mai Chi, Sanctuary Cove). (Flying Arts, 2005).

What is important about the ETA retreat is the opportunity it affords the project to document what happens to students afterwards with regard to career choices, the cultural capital they take back to share with their communities and its potential to stimulate lifelong learning and development.

Conclusion

We contend that innovative communities can be brokered through socially interactive and collaborative processes rather than individual endeavour, by pooling assets to build proficiency, consolidating practice and forming new

communities of cultural networks. Potential can be harnessed and hidden connections explored towards best practice and management this way. We hope the collective strategizing proposed the USQ/QMDC/ Flying Arts partnership has proposed will effect long-term change for community and intercommunity exchange. Our belief is that authentic community will only happen when individuals engage with each other and nurture the driving power of the innate abilities and talents of ordinary people.

Acknowledgements

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