

Does Cultural Activity Make a Difference to Community Capacity?

A key question addressed by the Small Towns: Big Picture project.

Maureen Rogers and Judy Spokes

Paper presented to the National Congress of Local Government Managers, July 2003

Published in *Community Quarterly* Vo 1 No 4 (2003)

Abstract: Many rural communities are confronted with a host of unprecedented challenges, caused by globalisation and economic restructure, community fragmentation as a result of service withdrawal, and increasing distrust in political processes. These pressures have emphasised the need to re-ignite creative energies and build community capacity to effectively respond in determining their own future. Small Towns:Big Picture was a community development process designed to foster creative, energetic and collaborative action by 5 small rural communities in central Victoria - focusing specifically on the development of social, environmental, and economic sustainability indicators. The project brought together artists, researchers and local communities to produce a coherent and shared understanding of the sustainability issues and opportunities. The main question addressed here concerns the role of the arts in building community capacity - more specifically, what difference did the cultural activity make to the engagement of people in the process, and their ability to act to improve their social, cultural and economic well-being?

"Not too many social action projects, or local arts events for that matter, can boast an audience of 50% of the entire population of a town at its launch. Yet this is exactly the kind of energy this project has generated. Also, the active involvement at all stages of the project of young people, older people, women, men, businesses, councils and community groups is very impressive and often difficult to achieve."

Anne Dunn,

Chair, Commonwealth Government's Women's Regional Advisory Council

Mention the role of the arts and creativity in community development in the company of 'professional' artists and the conversation can quickly turn to questions of what is art and who has the right to call themselves artists. From a social researcher's perspective, where the need to engage community is a central issue, this discussion is unhelpful – essentially ridiculing those who see themselves as both artist and community developer – and who, in the words of Williams (1998, p3) "...refuse to accept the division between so-called 'real' or professional art and community practice.

The central issue is how art engages with the human experience, and how, by its very nature, it promotes dialogue, communication, and social interaction (Lucy, 1997). The challenge as presented by Williams (1998) is to create a unified picture where social impact and artistic excellence share equal and complementary status. If we are to re-ignite our creative energies, to produce vibrant, responsive, sustainable communities, then Rogelj (2003) believes we must all become artists - willing to take creative risks and make previously unimagined connections across disciplines and cultures. We need to create dynamic social processes which allow us to reflect on our values, ideas, and modes of expression, and also to postulate and play with the possibilities of how things could be. The arts create the fertile ground for growth in new ways of thinking - and with that Lane (1996) argues that the five-hundred-year-old Humanistic tradition of art for the elite, cut off from [community], will not serve the needs of our future society.

Rural communities, particularly, are being challenged to create a new future – with the magnitude of change demanding a quantum shift in the way resources are used and the structure of economic and social enterprise and communication. Cooperation and inclusiveness are now the cornerstones of new approaches to ecologically sustainable development, requiring new knowledge and new strategies for capacity building, investment and adjustment. Cultural activities are being increasingly seen as important to the conceptualization and articulation of such strategies - and in making them work. According to Kingma (2003), the arts fulfil a crucial role in these circumstances, not only through transmission of information, the building of relationships and boosting the productivity of businesses and community organizations, but also by creating employment opportunities.

The Small Towns: Big Picture project, in many ways, epitomises the challenge posed by Williams – to build community practice through exposure to artistic excellence - and provides a valuable demonstration of how the arts can play a central role in building community capacity to respond to change. Essentially, Small Towns: Big Picture is about the development of key indicators of social, environmental and economic sustainability – which are meaningful, validated and used by community to self-evaluate performance

A sub-text to the project is the desire of La Trobe University, Bendigo, to build a genuine partnership with its regional constituents such that the research focus would ultimately be highly collaborative, and therefore directly relevant to the region. Consequently, the indicator development work had to be genuinely embedded in community if it was to achieve the mutually supportive goal of ‘real’ community benefit and ‘genuine’ community engagement with the university.

While the development of sustainability indicators is of academic interest to those working in the field of triple bottom line performance evaluation, the research would have been an insignificant blimp in the community’s experience if it had not been for the involvement of artists. In contrast to the more typical research model where people are passive participators in a process which provides them with little or no opportunity to really engage, the research findings from Small Towns: Big Picture component have been transformed into a vast array of artworks and creative interpretations involving over 1500 people – an outcome not commonly achieved by social action researchers or even many community arts projects (Dunn, 2003).

This paper presents the aims, processes and outcomes of the *Small Towns: Big Picture* project with a view to addressing the central question – how did the arts make a difference to community capacity.

What is Community Capacity

The notion of building community capacity has emerged as a key focus for government agencies concerned with on-ground development and implementation of public policy. Unlike the more traditional approach of information transfer from expert to layperson, the newly emerging models of engagement are about assisting communities to better manage their own human, environmental and economic resources. More specifically, as defined by Thomson and Pepperdine (2003), building community capacity is about developing a communities ability to act – to manage change – to understand and deal with the many internal and external influences on the direction of that change.

A community’s ability or capacity to act requires knowledge and skills as well as trust, cooperation, motivation and a high level of community cohesion. Consequently, the notion of building community capacity relies on a process which is effective in transferring knowledge and skills between people (both expert and lay/ internal and external to the community) and which fosters the positive and creative energies that typify a motivated, trusting and coherent group.

At the heart of building community capacity to act, is the ability to engage people. It seems clear that researchers, policy makers, governments, communities and individuals, seeking to nurture viable, resilient, healthy and dynamic communities will have minimal impact if their efforts fail to engage in a profound and meaningful way (Spokes, 2003). No matter how well developed their policies, programs or research instruments, the key to effective change relies on community motivation and action. The key to fostering the necessary creative, energetic and collaborative action is deep and sustained engagement of the community with the issues at stake, the goals to be achieved, and milestones of progress towards these.

To this end, it is the arts which can engage people in ways which no other discipline or approach can – “the arts can reach people, can move them, can inspire and challenge them (Spokes, 2003). It is in the amorphous dimension of art and culture that lies the vital ingredient to any effort to build community capacity to act. “The cultural dimension encompasses the world of values, motivations, aspirations, attitudes, creativity; a world where hopes, dreams and plans engage the heart and soul, not just within the psyches of individuals but between them and among them at the heart of communities themselves” (Hawkes, 2001, p).

Comment on Indicators

While indicators are natural, everywhere, part of everyone’s life, they have recently become a widely discussed instrument of change – an essential guide for us to develop sustainably. All of us use indicators to make sense of complex systems – but not everyone relates to the same indicators. Meadows (1998: 7) provides an example in football scores which are only meaningful to football fans while often considered gibberish to the less enthusiastic. Similarly, a farmer can read signals from a field of growing grain that the rest of us don’t perceive. Jiggles in stock prices carries vital information – but only to those who watch the market every day.

The most important point about indicators is that they are ‘...*only useful if the carried information is to a mind prepared to receive it, educated to its terms and actively engaged with the system illuminated by that indicator*’ (Meadows, 1998: 7). In other words, no matter how difficult it is to develop community-based indicators, if they are not locally meaningful, locally validated and locally used, they are often of little use at the local level.

Consequently, the development of the sustainability indicators in Small Towns: Big Picture had to be part of a sound community engagement process if they were to be useful in local community-based planning. The community needed to be empowered with the knowledge of indicators and how they could be used to enhance community development.

Small Towns: Big Picture

In June 2000 the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities hosted Australia’s first national conference on the Future of Australia’s Country Towns. It is clear to us all that rural Australia is facing a declining population, loss of social and financial capital, and the ‘rationalisation’ of both public and private services. Many communities are also faced with a declining resource base as soils become saline and water resources become scarce. In addition, the conference heard that rural communities could no longer expect economic security and sustainability from traditional agricultural enterprise. Nor could they hope to be saved by external entrepreneurs looking for a town to call home. It was also made clear that the type and level of government support was unlikely to return to the days of old (Collits, 2000). To survive, and even prosper, small rural communities would need to ‘create’ a new future – would need to embrace change and adopt new forms of innovation that will “...leave neither individual lives nor the structure of social relations unchanged” (Keller, 2000).

Governments round the world are progressively recognising environmental sustainability as a major driver of technological and economic development – with innovative direction being found at the interface of our efforts to become more socially and environmentally sustainable. Rural communities have an opportunity to embrace the principles of sustainable development, to create that new future, and to be part of the leading edge of global change – but they need help. They need both knowledge and skills to enable them to self-evaluate and strategically plan, and they need a highly motivated, creative, and coherent community to carry it through.

Small Towns: Big Picture is essentially about the development of performance/progress indicators within a triple bottom line framework, to assist rural community planning for sustainability. The indicators developed include a **Community Cohesion** Index, an **Energy Footprint** measure, and an **Economic Activity** measure. The initial set of benchmark indicators enable the communities to better understand the elements of a sustainable community, and how well they are performing. The underlying assumption is that communities which focus on re-building their community cohesion and commit to reducing their environmental impact will ultimately achieve increased economic activity and vitality. Inherent in this assumption is the need to re-ignite the creative energies and motivations within the community.

The Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities (CSRC) at La Trobe University, Bendigo had been working with a number of small rural communities in central Victoria for a couple of years on a project called *Building a Future for the Country* (BFC). This project was focused primarily on achieving economic and employment outcomes for the participating communities of Talbot, Carisbrook, Dunolly, Wedderburn and Maldon. The project boasts a range of successes, however, it struggled to develop a clear focus for its efforts and to engage the wider community in the process. This initial project did, nonetheless, establish important relationships between the CSRC and the participating communities – enabling the ideas encapsulated in Small Towns: Big Picture to be introduced and discussed.

Still... there was very little community support for this idea of developing performance indicators of sustainability. People saw it as irrelevant, likely to take a lot of time and effort, and most likely to produce outcomes of benefit only to the university. Tacit support for the ideas was given by the BFC management committee, but there was little to no real enthusiasm or energy for its development. As a Councillor for the Central Goldfields Shire pointed out “...*People are already struggling with burn-out, and this project sounds like a lot of hard work for the same few people*”.

Then the Victorian Local Governance Association introduced the CSRC to the Cultural Development Network (CDN) and its mission to promote the role of the arts in community planning. A partnership was formed between the CSRC and the CDN – with the aim of engaging the community in a triple bottom line community audit and strategic planning process using cultural development techniques. Funds were secured from a range of sources, artist briefs prepared for each of the indicator areas, and ultimately 8 artists were commissioned to work along-side the researchers and the community. The artists included a playwright¹, website developer and photographic artist², printmaker³, textile artist⁴, ceramicist⁵, film maker⁶, photographer⁷, and a community artist/co-ordinator⁸.

Essentially, there were 3 areas of creative activity. These were the:

1 Playwright, Craig Christie (Melbourne) – created *Right Where We Are* out of the Community Cohesion indicator development.

2 Website developer, Anne Molony (St Arnaud) – created *Community Connections Directory* website.

3 Printmaker, Tiffany Titshall (Talbot) – worked with the communities to produce images of the energy footprint.

4 Textile Artist, Anna Ashton (Dunolly) – worked with the community to create 150 silk banners reflecting the elements of a strong, coherent community

5 Ceramicist, Judy Lorraine (Wedderburn) – worked with the community to create ceramic footprints installed in the local community garden.

6 Film maker, Phillip Ashton (Dunolly) – documented the year-long process in *A Journey in Community Building*, 30 minute video

7 Photographer, Donna Bailey (Bendigo) – worked with the community to produce pinhole images of the local environment

8 Arts Co-ordinator, Andrea Hicks (St Arnaud) – co-ordinated the vast array of creative workshops and outcomes.

- development of a theatrical performance reflecting the issues identified through the development of the community cohesion indicator,
- creation of prints, photographs, and ceramic tiles reflecting the energy footprint and our impact on the environment, and
- development of an interactive website depicting organisational networks within each community.

The project successfully produced a set of initial benchmark indicators for each of the 5 participating towns, and a vast array of artworks and creative reflections on social and environmental sustainability.

These included:

- *Right Where We Are* – a theatrical performance reflecting social cohesion issues.
- CD – songs from the performance recorded by the local actors/singers.
- An interactive website depicting organisational networks - highlighting the gaps.
- 30 minute film of the community engagement process.
- 50 pinhole photographic images associated with the local environment.
- 60 mono/colligraph/lino prints associated the energy footprint.
- 14 metres of ceramic mural tiles depicting the past and future image of sustainability.
- 30 terracotta ceramic footprints installed in the community garden in Wedderburn.
- 150 silk banners depicting affirming statements associated with a cohesive community.
- 30 hand made felt creations depicting affirming statements associated with a cohesive community (Appliquéd into a colourful banner by the Wedderburn Quilters Society).
- 72 framed photojournalism images documenting community engagement in creativity.

The research findings, the artwork and the theatrical performance all came together in 5 separate town events. Each community presented 10 local acts, in addition to the theatrical performance *Right Where We Are*, at each event which gave a distinctive flavour to all five occasions. These events proved to be a tremendous success with between 200 and 350 people attending in each community – indicative of the depth and breadth of community engagement in the process. According to a member of the Talbot audience, “...there hasn’t been this many people in the town hall for 20 years.... NOT since the war called another!!”

Who Were Involved

As Dunn (2003) points out, this project generated a high level of energy, forged unique connections between artists, researchers and community, and achieved an extensive reach into the heart of the communities involved. “...it actively involved young people, older people, women, men, businesses, councils and community groups at all stages of the process which is very impressive and often difficult to achieve.”

It is estimated that some 1500 people across 5 the communities were involved in some aspect of the project. This included involved in the :

- 20 focus groups across the communities including senior members, young people, business people and a group referred to as volunteers (non-office bearing community members);
- the theatrical performance including actors, sound engineers, musicians, and co-ordinators;
- energy footprint survey - 5 local people were employed to undertake the survey in each town;
- 30 creative workshops (covering 4 artistic mediums) and engaging hundreds of school children, teachers, and parents;
- community organizations which participated in the development of the community connections directory website;
- people from local government;

- steering committee by town representatives, artists, and representatives from arts organizations and local government such as Bendigo’s Cultural Events co-ordinator and a representative from Regional Arts Victoria;
- photojournalism students from La Trobe University who captured the creative energy of the workshops;
- Outdoor Education students from La Trobe who assisted with the energy footprint analysis
- Researchers from the Centre for Sustainable Regional communities and people associated with the Cultural Development Network.

Impact on Community Capacity to Act

There is no doubt that it was the inclusion of commissioned artists and a cultural development approach that achieved the project's critical goal of actively engaging people in the social research and community planning exercise – that would otherwise have been regarded as dull, unimportant or relevant only to town elites (Spokes, 2003). It is also the arts approach that has catalysed community interest and vitality and which will enable the project to be developed into its second stage– involving the development of actions plans aimed at improving on the initial benchmark performance measures.

Essentially, the project’s success will be demonstrated through the level of community action associated with the use, and further development of, the sustainability indicators. Funding is currently being sought for the implementation of stage 2, and it is anticipated that the communities will be far more enthusiastic and willing to participate than was experienced prior to Small Towns: Big Picture.

In the interim, there have been a number of activities since the completion of stage one which suggest that people are feeling better connected, more inspired to get involved, and more confident about their ability to make a difference - illustrating the way in which this project has enhanced the community’s capacity to act.

Dunolly

Within 3 weeks of the final event being held in Dunolly, the community met to discuss the possibility of accessing the proposed new gas pipeline and how they could become more energy efficient. A steering committee has been formed in Dunolly, and this group is now working closely with the Bendigo Bank and the CSIRO with the aim of piloting a community power company, and the use of hydrogen cell technologies in the local hospital. The first community meeting attracted a record number of over 70 people, and according to the local organizer, “...no one put up any negative arguments, everyone seemed to think it best to simply take one step at a time to see where it might lead”. It is difficult to say what exactly led to this kind of response, but it seems the community even surprised itself.

Carisbrook

The Carisbrook Town Hall committee were successful in their application for funding to restore the Hall. The Small Towns: Big Picture project apparently provided the impetus and support for that application in terms of the community’s renewed enthusiasm for making better use of there hall through creative pursuits. A new singing group have also formed in Carisbrook, with its leader claiming “...six months ago the eight members of the Carisbrook Singers were virtual strangers, now we meet weekly. Garden produce is shared, home baked goodies are sampled, we chat and yes we do sing for our own pleasure. Presently we are looking at holding an Old Time Music Hall Revue at our old town hall later in the year. Thank you Small Towns: Big Picture for the opportunity to enhance our lives (Sue Purchas)”

The Carisbrook community, in partnership with the Central Goldfields Shire and the Small Towns: Big Picture team, have recently received a grant from VicHealth to develop the Community Cohesion action plans through an arts oriented program, ultimately producing a public art piece reflecting the issues and the community’s response.

Wedderburn

The ceramic footprints produced by the community are being installed by council, as an entry feature to the native arboretum, linking the creek rehabilitation area to the community garden. A resident artist gained community support for another arts project which she believes would not have been supported without the stimulus of Small Towns: Big Picture – “...people just couldn't see the point to doing arts projects before they became involved in Small Towns”.

One of the organizers of the annual Fleece and Flower show stated that “...*Small Towns: Big Picture has changed our lives. The whole process has been personally heartening to me, because everyone worked so well together, achieving so much more. The outcome was fabulous! We had a fantastic crowd on the night and made a lot of friends. This is exactly what makes a community healthy (Bernice Tonkin)*”

Recently, the community sprang into action to try and win the Triple J ‘Splendour in the Grass’ concert which was being offered to small rural communities. People involved in the football club, the school, local government, the police and a couple of resident artists joined forces to not only support the application with pledges of free use of facilities, security, and bus transport, but also in the creation of a local souvenir required as part of the application. Again, people comment that the level of energy, connectedness, and collective support has been fabulous, and not very typical in recent years.

The whole concept was of immense value to the community. It was an awakening and put into people's minds that new and exciting things can happen. This has had a snowballing effect on the community – stimulating positive initiatives which are a direct offshoot of our involvement with Small Towns: Big Picture.

Daryl Mcleish

Concluding comments

As discussed at the outset of this paper, a community's capacity to act requires knowledge, skills, trust, cooperation and motivation. The development of locally meaningful indicators of performance through a process designed to transfer knowledge and empower people with the skills to further develop and make more of them, satisfies the knowledge and skills component of building a community's capacity to act. It has clearly been the involvement of artists which has unleashed community aspirations and energy, creating an environment where trust, cooperation and motivation are offered in abundance.

It is important to note that the whole process (both the research and the involvement of artists) was based on an inclusive, ‘in-servicing’ philosophy which meant that artists did not simply gather people's ideas to then disappear into their own studio and create their own interpretation. Rather, each artist presented their own work, and then ran a workshop on the techniques used. The workshop participants were then provided with a template, or framework within which to explore their own creativity. This approach enabled the participants to learn about the various techniques, to produce something that would become part of a coherent ‘whole’, and to make use of the knowledge for themselves. The schools, for example, found that they could include photography in the curriculum because the ‘pinhole’ technique was neither expensive or complicated.

The involvement of local artists was also an essential element to the engagement and community building objectives. To begin with, local artists were already connected to the community, with a strong desire to be improve their own profile and value to the community. The local artists were committed to producing good outcomes which is not always easily achieved in the short timeframe available.

Not all artists or researchers are equipped with the necessary skills or even the desire, to work in a collaborative way with community. This project has been a unique collaboration, producing some fabulous creative outcomes. The effectiveness of the indicator work, and the community engagement

process has yet to be fully realised and evaluated. But one thing is for certain, this social researcher can't imagine working with communities ever again without the arts involvement.

References

- Collits, P. 2001. 'Small town decline and survival: Trends, causes and policy issues. In M. Rogers & Y. Collins (eds) *The future of Australia's country towns*, Bendigo: La Trobe University.
- Hawkes, J. (2001) *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning*. Common Ground Publishing, Melbourne.
- Kingma, O. (2003) personal communication concerning the merits of Small Towns:Big Picture.
- Lane, J. (1996) *A Snake's Tail Full of Ants: Art, Ecology and Conscious*. Devon: Green Books Ltd.
- Lucy, P. (1997) *In the Public Interest, Making Art that Makes a Difference in the United States*, Comedia.
- Meadows, D. 1998. Indicators and information systems for sustainable development. A report to the Balaton Group. Hartland Four Corners (VT): The Sustainability Institute.
- Rogelj, M. (2003) *Beautiful World: A Bridge Between the Arts and Sustainability*. Master's thesis for the School for International Training, Vermont.
- Spokes, J. (2003) *The Art of Engagement: an essay on the role of the arts in engaging community*. (unpublished)
- Thomson, D. and Pepperdine, S. (2003) *Community Capacity for Riparian Restoration – A discussion paper*. Land and Water Australia.
- Williams, J. (1998) *Common Threads – participation for a better world*. Common Purpose seminar, Nottingham, November 25.