

**Cultural Brokerage and Regional Arts: Developing an Enabler Model
for Cultural and Economic Sustainability**
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Background

The research project introduced in this paper explores the interface between cultural brokerage and cultural pedagogy and the sustainable outcomes that might emerge from the application of these in arts practices in rural and remote areas of Queensland. The project investigates and documents how creative and artistic disciplines can have a relevant and 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; the 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 consequent social capital and the degradation of the natural resource base, which provides both the setting for the community and, in many cases, the economic foundation. Problems such as lack of services, unemployment, the difficulty of 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, except for some survey work on individual arts productions (see for example Curtis 2003). Research is needed to evaluate the application of principles of cultural brokering concepts and best practice models for community outreach and capacity building (Trend 2005), in particular in rural and remote areas where the depletion of the three forms of capital is especially concerning.

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) and is a living and local thing (Overton 2001, 12), concerned with representations and identities and the stories that structure senses of places, belonging and the possibilities of living well (Doubleday 2004, 391). The brokering process involves creating points of convergence and conversation between

cultures, choosing and developing debate about differences and the creation of relationships (Overton 2001, 11), using an enabling approach.

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

However, adult 'gatekeepers' (Davis 1997, 16) often dismiss the idealism associated largely with youth as fleeting and somehow suspicious, and yet it is this potential for innovation and 'thinking outside of the box' that Florida defines as a necessary ingredient in building a creative community. He 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 are drivers of 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 of the project is the development and application of a pedagogy of culture to position 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 study particular objects or community practices within the contexts of the range of circumstances in which cultural forms are produced and received (Trend 1992, 2-3), creating opportunities to re-envision an ethics of the local. In particular, an exploration into the roots of sustainability means understanding and applying strategies at grass roots levels that are informed by immediate and local consequences (Doubleday 2004). When practised as part of an active assertion of community vitality, the arts highlight the importance of local ecologies that might render livelihoods in particular locales sustainable. They reflect and constitute identity by retracing and remaking the connection between life, land and place (2004, 396).

**** Cultural pedagogy represents a potent force for social and environmental change, through the provision of conditions for learning acts of citizenship and a sense of community, 'for it is precisely on the terrain of culture that identities are produced, values learned, histories legitimated, and knowledge appropriated' (Giroux 2006:4). In this way the local community becomes the socially relevant site where information is exchanged as adults and children access specific lessons in how to view themselves, others and the world they inhabit (p.5). Issues of public memory are involved developing an awareness of how the experience of place has been narrated by previous generations (Bowers 2001:257). This involves a process for exploring how certain meanings under particular historical conditions become more legitimate as representations of reality and take on the

force of common sense, in turn shaping a broader set of discourses and social arrangements (p.5). Cultural pedagogy ‘opens up a narrative space that affirms the contextual and specific while simultaneously recognising the ways that spaces are shot through with issues of power’ (6). A performative interpretation that suggests that how we come to know and understand ourselves and others cannot be separated from how we represent and imagine ourselves (7). Addressing the problems of sustainability of communities suggests reclaiming the space of pedagogical work to find ways to inspire students and citizens to identify and address the central problems that permeate that community, exploring the face to face patterns of community life, to recover their role as critical citizens and organise collectively to address those relevant economic, political, and social problems in order to take seriously a future that opens up the promises of a viable and sustainable community (p.8)

Education that builds on solving problems requires broadening what we take to be our constituency to include communities ... it requires flexibility and creativity which presupposes a commitment to make knowledge count for the long-term health of local communities and people... joined in a common effort to accomplish something by drawing on diverse pools of knowledge to change what appears to be unchangeable (Smith 1998:142). As Lim and Renshaw (2001) describe it, this sociocultural approach takes people beyond their familiar world and situates learning within interrelated historical, cultural, institutional and communicative processes. This process of knowledge building incorporates creativity, life-long learning, and collaborative skills to address and solve ever emerging problems and issues that can affect people within their communities (p.13). The outcomes give accounts of the collective activities and social practices that are framed as a process of becoming active participants in various communities of practice. As Wertsch (1998) argues, it is through the process of appropriating cultural tools that the individuals incorporated into a new functional system of collective action and into membership of more varied and overlapping communities. The key sociocultural concept regarding appropriation is the zone of proximal development (Lim and Renshaw 2001:14) which highlights the way individuals with greater cultural capital and membership in a particular community of practice can scaffold the participation of novice participants in social and cultural activities.

The interdisciplinary research approach developed for this project comprises a strongly consultative and collaborative bricolage of research strategies appropriate to encourage community dialogue towards the development of new forums for activities. It is a process of collective strategising (Overton 2001) to effect long-term reform for community and intercommunity exchange through establishing and strengthening alliances among ‘backbone’ groups such as students, churches, ethnic coalitions and town councils. Authentic community happens when people engage each other (2001,17) and believe in the driving value of the innate ability and talent of everyday people. The process explores the perspectives of the participants by examining their locally situated ‘funds of knowledge’ and provides them with a voice within contexts of collaboration (L & R p.15).

The research procedures 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 makes explicit the wisdoms, beliefs, assumptions, and lay theories of sociocultural practices (p.15).

The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) is well positioned to be a 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 maximise access to information and increase the profile of the arts in regional Queensland. It is anticipated that this will remain in place after the project is completed as a mechanism that continues 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 interrogate, implement and enable ways of sharing cultural and economic approaches and resources and disseminating high-level expertise through regional centres. In it will involve an analysis of visual and performing arts activities as potential contributors to rural and remote community and economic development, and map changing demographics and social conditions within the arts sector in rural and remote areas.

Central to the project is the encouragement of young people to critique their environments and to represent themselves by beginning to suggest solutions to local problems (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 project involves working with young people on two projects developed by these industry partners. This paper will describe these projects briefly.

Industry Partner Collaborations

1. Queensland Murray Darling Committee

The Queensland Murray Darling Committee (QMDC) catchment area in Queensland encompasses the Murray-Darling basin bounded by the Condamine, Maranoa-Balonne and Border Rivers. QMDC offers vast networks and resources that will liaise with and support ongoing and long-term research and artistic outcomes to promote and sustain cultural brokerage partnerships in southwest Queensland. It will also promote communications, education and capacity building programs to increase public understanding of natural resource management in the region.

The Natural Resource Management (NRM) Plan for 2004 is QMDC's chief planning document. Its communication, education and capacity building section specifies key strategies to proactively support young people to maintain viable and vibrant rural communities; strengthen capacity building and resource management awareness through education and training opportunities; develop information sharing with key research organizations; record cultural and social practices and their linkages to the environment; and develop and implement innovative awareness raising activities (QMDC 2004, 96-

102). QMDC is already actively engaged in forging potential links between education, cultural development and economic outcomes through building sustainable and organic cultural practices that simultaneously teach and support the ongoing restoration and maintenance of natural resources in southwest Queensland. QMDC believes that cultural development of regional towns can help in creating innovation that adds significantly to the lifestyle Queensland people and will commit resources and personnel to input into the data gathering of this research. QMDC is integral in bringing this research project to fruition.

The Landcare Conference

As part of the first stage of the project USQ is assisting in convening and hosting QMDC's annual *Landcare Conference*.

The QMDC's 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. The LDC 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. Its main office is in Toowoomba, with regional offices in Roma and Goondiwindi <www.qmdc.org.au>.

The *Landcare Conference* aims at encouraging young people to investigate their natural world and report their discoveries; empowering them to take an interest in their local community and the local environment; recognizing that young people learn from their peers; giving them the skills to stand up and have their say about issues that concern us all; and making a difference for us and our future generations. It provides hands-on, student orientated learning to ensure that people will manage our future who have an interest in and respect for their environment and natural resources.

The inaugural conference was convened by QMDC in Toowoomba, a city of 100,000 people in regional Queensland, in early October 2005. Participants comprised over 280 school students, from grades 4 to 12, and their teachers, were drawn from 24 schools in the Murray Darling catchment area. The conference spanned 3 days of activities, talks, workshops and explorations, providing a chance for students to profile environmental issues and projects that they had conducted in their local areas. Students presented these projects in innovative and often interactive ways including puppet and slide shows, art exhibitions and science experiments. Projects dealt with diverse topics such as developing community partnerships, web of life activities, pond, birds, habitat and endangered species ecological monitoring, property planning and saving school yard blitz programs.

In coordinating the visual arts components of the conference, USQ's teams worked with the QMDC's Landcare Discovery Centre to encourage and facilitate young people to visually investigate 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 of production skills and communication strategies

through visual language. The aim was to assist young people to develop a sense of local identity for cultural sustainability outcomes.

USQ's contribution began with the Wearable Art parade, which featured as part of the public conference. This was an initiative of the Textiles Studio of the Visual Arts department, under the coordination of Kerry Zerner, Head of Textiles. Over a period of 8 weeks, USQ students workshopped ideas and created unique and innovative designs using materials from their environments. Their wearable artworks were diverse and explored issues ranging from introduced weed species to the gardener of Shaman. Titles for some of the garments included the *Twisted Strawberry Fairy*, *Nature's Temptress* and *Banksia Toothpicklia*. Several of the creations featured the vibrancy of fresh flowers and leaves, others utilised exotic spices and foodstuffs while yet another was created from 30,000 toothpicks. Ten visual arts students presented a wearable art creation.

For the visual arts environmental workshops, students were bussed to a rural area outside the city of Toowoomba to Kleinton, the site of one of the first brickworks in the region. There they participated in one of three workshops designed to encourage them to explore a unique environment from diverse perspectives and, in the process, to raise their awareness of the world around them, including destruction and reconstruction of the landscape.

Sculptor Andrew MacDonald conducted a construction workshop titled *Scrub Scrutiny*. Andrew's premise is that a specific site offers its own unique story, the natural features co-existing with human intervention, and that there is a tangible sense of history in Kleinton, with layers of growth followed by wiping away, like a palimpsest. His group explored this remnant of early industry and its bush setting for several hours, looking for local patterns, growth and colour; observing and working with natural and manmade forms; creating a number of sketches or exercises using found objects; and coming away with a fresh capacity to see the potential in a given location.

Photographer and media educator Andrew Stewart conducted a workshop titled *An Eye for Detail: Learning to see nature through photography*, which explored aspects of the natural world through close-ups and creative framing of images. The aim was to look at the natural environment with a photographer's eye and to create visual stories about personal responses to the environment.

Masters student Randal Fedje led a ceramics workshop titled *Clay Keepers: Animals use of natural clay*. The group used hands-on building to explore the clay deposits found in the area, which had built up over thousands of years of settlement and is used by many bugs and animals for shelter. Participants made their own nests and hiding places for their own precious objects.

Representative feedback from participants is summarized by Breaene Marsch from Warwick who wrote: "This was a fabulous experience and I enjoyed it greatly. The conference was educational and fun. I will never forget it".

“I am sure I am not the only one who discovered more about landcare and the importance of conservation and environmental restoration,” commented Emily Montgomery, also from Warwick. “I had never really realized how much the environment means to us in everyday life and I will strive to keep it amazing as a result of this enlightening experience”.

Other delegate responses suggested that this project should be expanded in 2006 to invite QMDC delegates to participate in a wearable art workshop and participate in the wearable art parade.

The conference activities enabled the research team to trace outcomes forward from these events and to begin the process of identifying communities for the project by making contacts with young people and their teachers in regional communities where future arts activities will take place. The focus now will be on developing models that explore possibilities for creating relevant and appropriate activities and events to 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, offers similarly structured visual arts workshops and workshop approaches on a statewide basis. The growing number of youth projects developed in and for regional centres has particular relevance and synchronicity with the Landcare activities of QMDC and this research project. Its regional arts activities offer a pedagogical scaffold for developing models of impact that explore possibilities for creating relevant and appropriate research-related events within the QMDC catchment area.

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. These have ranged from the more traditional painting, ceramics and textiles workshops flown into centres by one or two artists on board a single engined aircraft in the early 1970s to a host of contemporary choices, catering to all levels of experience, age and expertise, offered by 30 or more artists in Flying Arts’ 2006 Regional Program.

Since 1991, the University of Southern Queensland has hosted Flying Arts at its Distance Education Centre in Brisbane on the basis of a 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’. This research project provides an opportunity to strengthen the FA/USQ partnership through complementing each others’ strengths: an established reputation with, and connections to, regional communities on the one hand; 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) '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.ca, 2006). Specifically, Flying Arts offers its research partners:

- An established arts network in more than 60 centres, including communities, schools and cultural organisations, throughout Queensland. Through its regional representatives and its regular contact with and feedback from centres, it is ideally situated to deliver and report on the cultural events, trends and outcomes.
- An extensive program of real time workshops that reaches 2000 to 3000 people and an exhibitions circuit that attracts 4 to 5 times that number. This is substantial in terms of the quantitative and qualitative feedback needed for research purposes.
- Online discussion forums and training that increasingly include practitioners and guests from all parts of the world, whose input can add a global perspective to the research approach.
- A growing trend towards longer-term cross artform artist-in-residency projects in indigenous communities, with marginalised youth groups, with local festivals and with public art projects.
- A program for young people that has been developed both to ensure the relevance and survival of its programs and to guard against any hint of 'generationalism' (complemented and counterbalanced by programs tailored to its core clientele of women in the 45+ 'lifelong learning' age group).
- No dollars but real dollar benefits: USQ's need to increase its enrolment numbers in the creative arts by marketing its courses, in particular the visual arts, to prospective students coincides with a huge growth in Flying Arts' programs in schools, for which ETA has been a catalyst. Flying Arts' move into the primary schools market which began with a remote schools tour of multiple artists in 2005 complements USQ's plan to curate and tour (through Flying Arts) exhibitions targeted at schools audiences within and beyond its south east Queensland catchment area and further increases the youth base, which is the primary focus for this research project, for both organizations.

***Experience The Arts* youth residencies**

Flying Arts has recently extended its annual *Experience The Arts (ETA)* youth residency to include an annual *ETA* summer retreat in conjunction with USQ's McGregor Summer Arts School in Toowoomba. In so doing, it has delivered USQ a focus group of its primary interest group, young people, for this research project. *ETA* brings regional secondary students from many different demographics to Brisbane (and now Toowoomba) for 6 to 10 days of intensive artmaking, excursions to galleries, visits to university campuses and performance events. *ETA* themes over the years have focused on expanding and challenging practice, individual and community identity, and the transition involved in moving from middle to upper secondary or secondary to tertiary

education. Responses range from tutor Catherine Parker's observation "The workshops allowed us to constantly process bringing a more lateral (cross-disciplinary) approach to their art work" (Flying Arts 2004, 14), to these from participating students:

"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 learnt and created", wrote Stephanie Brown from Mount Sheridan, "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".

"*Experience The Arts (ETA)* was truly an art experience," said Mai Chi from Sanctuary Cove. "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". (Flying Arts 2005).

2004/5 ETA coordinator, Skye Looney, summarises the ETA phenomenon of young, like-minded people exploring and sharing creative capital as being: "... not just about the hard evidence (nor) about the pathways and (but) also about what was unheard, unseen and unspoken ... about what was felt ... what became embedded, ingrained and embodied within each individual. It was about their newly evoked curiosity and confidence, their anticipation of being exposed to something beyond the 'familiar', the satisfaction that they were able to make the most of the opportunity and the willingness to simply give it a go!" (Flying Arts 2005).

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

***Australian Art Stories* <www.flyingarts.org.au>**

A relevant research project with a more mature-aged focus group of 15 artists from three different regions of the state is already archived on the Flying Arts web site. Funded as part of the *Centenary of Federation* celebrations in 2002, *Australian Art Stories* (Flying Arts 2002), documents the effect Flying Arts has had on the lives, lifestyles and livelihoods of a representative sampling of creative people living in regional communities in three different regions of the state. "What connects them as artists", says oral historian Lesley Jenkins in her introduction, "is not so much the theme of place as the commitment to the making of their art and craft, and rural isolation is a factor in much of the work that is created ... (the feeling) that they are not alone in their pursuit of individual excellence".

The creativity of the *Australian Art Stories* interviewees feeds back into and sustains the individual local communities in which all 15 are long-term residents. Bob Nason from Surat has painted two murals for the Balonne River Gallery, the first depicting life along the river bank, the second a horse change along the Cobb and Co. coach route in the late 19th century. Carol McCormack from Glenmorgan in the southwest lives on a stud cattle property, is a foundation member of the Glenmorgan Art Group and is also involved in supporting the local Myall Park Botanic Garden. Michelle Savoye travelled from France to Australia as a young woman, came across Mount Isa in Queensland's far northwest,

and settled there by chance. Her work is influenced by the Selwyn Ranges, which form the backdrop to Mount Isa's industrial landscapes as well as by the red earth and 9.5 hours of daily sunshine. Michelle explains that geographical isolation is a boon to her work but a supporting pottery group as well as organizations like Flying Arts combat the effects of insularity that isolation could produce.

Australian Arts Stories, Experience The Arts and the discussion forums and virtual residencies and flexible training associated with Flying Arts' online initiatives, which have been the subject of previous papers in this forum, are all relatively new developments for Flying Arts, which could be referenced, sustained and further developed through this research partnership.

Conclusion

We contend that innovative communities can be brokered through a socially interactive and collaborative process rather than individual endeavour, by pooling assets to build proficiency, consolidate practice and form new communities of cultural networks. In this way, potential can be harnessed and hidden connections explored towards best practice and management. We hope the collective strategizing proposed in the USQ/QMDC/ Flying Arts partnership will effect long-term changes for community and intercommunity exchange. Our belief is that authentic community will only happen when people engage each other and nurture the driving power of the innate ability and talent of everyday people.

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