

Shifting the Paradigm: Collaborative Learning for the Development of Sustainable Aboriginal Art Practices in South East Victoria – A Community-Based Action Research Project

Associate Professor Robert Nelson

Dr Julie Roberts

Mark McDean

Monash University; Department of Theory, Faculty of Art & Design

Summary

What would it take for the Indigenous population of East Gippsland to develop a vibrant art scene like the international art economy of the northern and central regions of Australia? Already there is plenty to build upon: local knowledge, local stories, lines of kinship and existing art centres. Our project team has developed an elaborate and elegant strategy to fold workshops, scholarships and networking into artistic projects that will acquire sustainable group energy. The proposed activities are based on careful assessment of community needs and latent enthusiasms. The project team is concerned to move away from old paradigms of teaching, predicated on outmoded notions of power relationships. Instead, we seek to institute a new paradigm of equality and mutual respect – a model cognisant of Aboriginal modes of knowledge exchange and skill acquisition, in which we have as much to learn as we have to teach. Our plans involve Indigenous people at all levels and are predicated on the belief that sustained art practice and recognition of that practice will add not only to the sense of community and identity of the Indigenous population of East Gippsland, but add substantially to the social capital of the region. This project is not simply a knowledge-seeking exercise but translates research into action and will actively build-up the art making culture of the region.

Introduction: Context & Culture

In recent decades, Aboriginal art has become a competitive, viable commodity in the National and International art markets. For the most part, this has been geographically located, that is, the artists of the Northern Territory and Kimberley region of Western Australia have become identified as the exemplars of Aboriginal art making. While the non-Indigenous recognition of Aboriginal art - and the willingness to pay high prices for that art - has contributed positively to the status, understanding and recognition of these practitioners, Aboriginal people in the southern states have not benefited significantly from this re-appreciation of Aboriginal life and culture. 'Authentic' Aboriginal people (and therefore, Aboriginal artists) are seen to live in the North, while those inhabiting the south-eastern portion of this country are, generally, seen to be

disenfranchised from both their traditional culture and, to an extent, the dominant non-Indigenous cultures.

But this is a mistaken belief: East Gippsland has the second highest Indigenous population in Victoria,¹ and a number of significant artists have emerged from that community. Artists such as Ray Thomas, Eileen Harrison, Alfie Hudson, Trina Wilmot and Auntie Phylis Hewat demonstrate the living, vital identity of Aboriginality in the region. The location of the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies at the Gippsland campus of Monash University further attests to the vibrancy of local Aboriginal culture. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that a rich source of stories, histories, knowledge and skills exist within the South-East Aboriginal communities waiting to be given a forum for expression and sharing. But East Gippsland is a somewhat economically depressed area and within the communities of this region many Aboriginal people are among the most disadvantaged. Over 50% of the Indigenous population of East Gippsland is under 19 years of age². In an area of little economic growth, with its concomitant impact on employment opportunities, this raises a potential problem of youth unemployment. The 2001 ABS census of population and housing states that the unemployment figures for persons 15 – 24 years in the East Gippsland area was 15.9%.

The Gippsland region has a relatively high degree of socio-economic disadvantage. There are known links between health and socio-economic status, and factors such as Gippsland's high unemployment rate are likely to have a substantial impact upon residents' health status, and their ability to access services.

Gippsland's sizable Indigenous population would have a high level of social and health needs. Indigenous persons typically suffer from disadvantage in a range of areas including health, education, income and unemployment. This issue would be likely to have the most impact in East Gippsland, and the least impact in the South Coast.³

A number of art programs are presently operating in the East Gippsland area. The East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation [EGAAC] and the East Gippsland TAFE Koori Unit continue to offer both studio and educational facilities both in Bairnsdale and Lakes Entrance. The VIAP, in partnership with these institutions, aims to increase the opportunities for local Aboriginal artists to pursue their art in a supported and supportive context, assisting them in skills acquisition, as well as acquiring knowledge of the art market and the ways in which they may participate in that market. This increased capacity for art making and marketing will inevitably increase the national profile of current practising Indigenous artists, along with increasing the opportunities to establish sustainable art practices for emerging artists. Our project aims to enhance and expand the established creative base in the region, creating further substantial social capital. Until now, the fortunes of art in the region have followed the general pattern of loss, dispossession and dependence on institutional contexts. EGAAC have had

¹ *East Gippsland Shire: Five Year Arts and Culture Strategic Plan*, November 2006
www.egipss.vic.gov.au/files/Draft_AC_plan.pdf

² Ibid.

³ *Gippsland Region – Health, Wellbeing & Demographic Profile*, Insight Social & Health Research, August 2002.

sustainable outcomes and this encourages the belief that a thorough re-energising of the art scene is feasible. Through cultivation of existing talents and interests, and expansion to a critical mass of talent, ability and commitment, as well as a supportive and manageable infrastructure, a self-perpetuating body of art practice becomes possible. By growing cultural pride and identity a sense of community is enhanced, and the will to ensure continuity is strengthened.

Strategy: Cultivation & Co-operation

This project introduces innovative methods for *cultivating* the sustainable growth, not the 'teaching' of art practices in the Indigenous community. Running an integrated program of workshops focusing on art and story, supported by mentoring and art scholarships, exhibitions and networking we aim to put into practice a paradigm more sympathetic to the lived experience and traditions of Aboriginal communities. The proposed methods reject the normal suppositions of European art education in which the teacher has the authority, lays down the terms of the work and judges the outcome. Instead, we seek the empowerment of both the individual and group through the agency of proactive facilitators. Projects conceived within a group yield a collective energy (even when individuals work on their own ideas) which can be directed sustainably by Indigenous people themselves and used to build confidence in expressing their stories and identity and creating a stronger community.

The Myer report into the Visual Arts and Crafts of 2003 and the government of the Northern Territory have both acknowledged that the benefit of the artistic success of Aboriginal people is more than economic: it contributes to the well-being of the both the individual and the community.⁴ Our project aims to build stronger community cohesion through the shared process of art making. While the focus of our project is the Aboriginal communities of the region, the benefits of attainment of self-respect, individual and community esteem and, ultimately, improvement in economic status, will have a positive impact on the wider communities of the region. As the draft East Gippsland Five Year Arts and Culture Strategic Plan acknowledges, the value of art is not simply economic: it has important social, environmental and cultural value.⁵

The research component of this project focuses on evaluating the productivity of community-based action research. This approach is best defined by Ernest Stringer:

Community-based action research focuses on methods and techniques of inquiry that take into account people's history, culture, interactional practices, and emotional lives.⁶

Research in academia is generally configured as a 'problem' to be examined and, as a consequence, rectified. We stress that we are not seeing the Aboriginal communities of East

⁴ Myer Report (2003) www.cvacinquiry.dcita.gov.au. Also 'Northern Territory Indigenous Arts Strategy: Building Strong Arts Business' www.nt.gov.au/nreta/arts/artsnet/index.html.

⁵ op cit.

⁶ Ernest Stringer (1996) *Action Research: A Handbook for Practitioners* (California: Sage Publications) p.15.

Gippsland as a 'problem' population but rather as a potential source of productive artistic output. This output will potentially enable stories to be told to the wider community, with subsequent benefit to all Victorian people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous - a benefit to be experienced on a number of levels; individual, social and cultural, as well as economic. Again, to refer to the Northern Australian success: Aboriginal communities in the Territory produce an income of around \$10 million per annum and the money earned from 'cultural tours' to visit art centres and other locations of Indigenous significance, brings in another \$31 million annually to the Territory.⁷

The 'problem' to be addressed in this research is the problem of existing educational and rehabilitation paradigms and their failure to serve productively those whom they are designed to benefit and to provide their participants with skills enabling them to sustain their practice beyond the specified period of 'intervention.' Long-term commitment is necessary to ensure long-term benefits. This pilot study of three years is the beginning of a long-term program to facilitate the growth from seeds currently lying dormant in the East Gippsland community.

It is notable that the massive cultivation of art in the Northern Territory has few of the characteristics of conventional Western education; often it is pursued outside any fixed-time school-style art-educational program and is not based on youth or individualism but transmission of inherited subject matter. Most importantly, it is community-based. But it is also necessary to note that paradigms from Northern Australia cannot simply be transferred to the South East.

A new set of terms and methodologies is called for. In part, they involve a deconstruction of the hidden assumptions of European art making and training.

Community - Cultivation - Co-operation - Collaboration: The Strategic Emphasis

Community is fundamental to the social organisation of Aboriginal people in Australia, whereby the individual is generally second to the community, in contrast to the dominant non-Aboriginal culture. We aim to work with and build on that sense of community. For this reason the project will build on existing networks and organizations: listening, learning, negotiating and co-operating together we will identify what the community wants and needs, to fully realise its nascent art practices as a flourishing, thriving productive aspect of community life.

This project is predicated on the belief that meeting on equal ground yields benefits for all parties. The model we will implement is based on community-based action research, as defined by Ernest Stringer, a social science research who has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities.⁸

⁷ 'Northern Territory Indigenous Arts Strategy', op. cit.

⁸ Stringer is a trained psychologist who now specialises in education and action-based research. He has worked extensively with Aboriginal communities in Western Australia.

Our plan is initially to talk with the key stakeholders, as mentioned above, from those initial discussions a number of workshops will be devised. With the agreement of the participants, we will begin a dialogue around the notion of personal history and transition and an open agenda where the outcome will be a series of individual sculptures, paintings, textile works, photography, video and other media, based around the participants' personal histories or community histories and transition through contemporary existence. Our role will be primarily one of facilitation, providing a context, materials, discussion and technical cues, where needed.

Much will depend on the will and imperatives of the community. The medium explored and the process used will be the outcome of discussion and negotiation with the participants: we stress it will not be an imposition of pre-conceived and conventional teaching mode in which the 'teacher' arrives with a set of desired outcomes prepared and a clear plan for achieving those outcomes. We would like to stress the importance of time given to developing our partnerships with the community. Much of our early involvement will be of a social nature: sharing cups of tea and stories; taking the time to listen and build trust with the community. As Stringer writes, 'participation entails the need to develop empathetic understandings that come only through close involvement with people'.⁹

Growing Communities: Social, Cultural and Fiscal Economies Co-operation – Cultivation – Continuity

Increasingly, government bodies nationally and regionally are recognising not only the existence but the importance of social, cultural and community economies which sit alongside the more easily measured and identified fiscal economy. The concept of 'social capital', defined by Ian Winter as '...social relations of mutual benefit characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity' is encountered more and more in policymaking.¹⁰ Communities with a strong sense of positive identity, a sense of personal safety and a sense of belonging, of civic pride and of valuing its members, are understood to have good levels of social capital, and it is these places that tend to maintain their population base and attract migration. In 2005, the Department of Victorian Communities identified the benefits of social capital in the following terms:

Key outcomes of community-building include increased capability and capacity - reflected in measures such as leadership skills, participation in community organisations, volunteering, relationships with governments, local pride and sense of safety and wellbeing—as well as concrete changes to community conditions and achievements in areas such as school retention, employment, transport, family stability and crime prevention.¹¹

A recent study in Sustainable Enterprise Creation acknowledged the particular challenges facing Australian regional communities and the growing recognition of the need for regions to

⁹ Stringer, op.cit., p.56.

¹⁰ Ian Winter (2000) *Towards a Theorised Understanding of Family Life and Social Capital*. (Canberra: Australian Institute of Family Studies).

¹¹ <http://www.dvc.vic.au/building.htm>

craft 'socially and environmentally beneficial economic enterprises'.¹² This study also acknowledged that rural areas were often leaders in creating 'exciting and innovative ways' to deal with changing 'political, social, and environmental conditions'. Forestech in East Gippsland, for instance, was cited as a good example of innovative thinking. Forestech is leading the way in the management of the highly contentious forestry industry. Rogers and Walker write: '...Forestech is acting as a catalyst in bringing local people together with a shared vision and values, for the purpose of stimulating regional socio-economic development that also is environmentally sustainable.'¹³ Similarly, we view this project as one that will bring local people together with a shared vision and values, through the shared practice and experience of art making and story sharing.

Project Outline

To achieve this outcome of enhanced social capital, however, we need to invest in the long-term: this cannot be a short, sharp interventionist project.

The basic component of the project will be workshops devised in discussion and agreement with participants. Connecting into existing networks, such as those already established through a partnership with East Gippsland Aboriginal Arts Corporation, we will invite interested parties to participate in workshops to be held in existing facilities. As mentioned, the media of these workshops will be determined by the participants. A workshop may focus solely on the use of textiles, or it may include a range of media, like video or painting. The workshops will be available to join at anytime during a two to three week period; that is, the facilitators will be available between specified hours, generally 9am to 5pm, but participants may come and go as suits them and their availability and responsibilities. Childcare facilities will be provided and are integral to the community spirit of the project, creating a centre in the region to enable parents and caregivers of small children to participate in cultural work. The childcare will also have an artistic and storytelling dimension.

The workshops will be managed by Mr Mark McDean and Dr Julie Roberts, who will be the primary facilitators, with occasional input by Associate Professor Robert Nelson and Ms Robyn Heckenberg. In addition, local practising Aboriginal artists will be employed by the project to also act in facilitator, or assistant facilitator roles, dependent upon their levels of expertise and desire for responsibility within the workshop context. The desired outcome of these positions would be to mentor those employed so that they can eventually assume full management/facilitation roles in workshops.

In addition, a scholarship program would be developed for those students who wish to undertake a more structured, university-based program of study. The form and substance of such scholarships would be negotiated with our participants who are better equipped than we are to determine need in their community.

¹² Maureen Rogers & Rhett Walker (2005) 'Sustainable Enterprise Creation: Making a Difference in Rural Australia and Beyond', *International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability*, proceedings of the Sustainability Conference, p.1.

¹³ Ibid, p.8.

One of our key outcomes would be to exhibit the work produced, as it is exhibition in a reputable, recognised gallery that stamps work as 'professional' and is therefore a desirable economic product. In working toward this outcome, we would be ensuring that participants gain skills and knowledge to do with exhibiting their work such as: professional presentation of work; professional documentation; negotiation of prices with curators/gallery directors; provision of information for promotional purposes; overseeing promotional material and production of invitations; and other requirements of professional artistic activity.

A catalogue would accompany the exhibition, with catalogue essays promoting the value of the work and the project itself, thus informing the wider community of the endeavours and success of the participants' activities. Wherever possible, participants would be encouraged to participate in this writing process.

Research Component: Action-Based Research / Action-Based Learning

Research outputs from this project will take the form of published papers and exhibition catalogues. As the project itself is about 'shifting paradigms' in the teaching of studio practice, the research will also work toward new paradigms. Wherever and whenever possible, participants in this project will have an active voice in the research outcomes. Whilst we will ensure that our encounters conform to requirements of ethical research at all times, we stress that we do not see participants in this project as 'human subjects' of research, but nor are we naïve concerning the inherent power imbalances that exist in our encounters. Each of the project participants, regardless of whether or not they are of Indigenous origin, is acutely aware of the need for self-reflexivity. We have all participated in a 'Cultural Awareness' workshop, run by Ms Lynda Nicholson, of the Equity and Access Unit at Monash University, but each of us also understands that this is merely the beginning of our knowledge. It is for these reasons that we see our Reference Group, consisting of a number of high profile Indigenous educators and curators, as particularly important in this project and it is why our research focuses on several key points of reflection, analysis and evaluation.