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Struggling to Survive

With every year the rural/urban divide fissures more deeply as contemporary economic and technological pressures challenge communities in many ways, often to the precipice of existence. Indeed, the continuum from urban to rural has become more rainbow-like as urban identity escalates and the *real* rural becomes seemingly even more remote. In particular, rural and remote communities are being increasingly challenged to move from primary industries and manufacturing to knowledge-based services; they are also being pressured to respond in new ways to the globalisation of national economies and the consequent emergence of more complex and competitive economic environments. In addition, they are being confronted by information and communication technologies that transcend concepts of distance and place, thus requiring communities to participate more actively in communities of interest rather than only primarily communities of place. In this context of rapid change, rural and remote communities struggle to maintain identity, preserve historical, cultural and environmental distinctiveness, and achieve genuine economic competitiveness. In essence, they struggle to survive.

The Need to Transform Rural and Remote Communities

The sharp and profound changes currently impacting on communities in rural and remote areas are not limited to economic and technological transformations; they arise also from mounting ecological concerns and evolving social attitudes. A growing number of environmentally responsible people in Australian society are progressively questioning the farming and grazing practices of rural Australia and, in the process, raising issues about agricultural sustainability, land degradation and the destruction of waterways. Metamorphosing social mindsets are prompting a much closer scrutiny of rural Australia's relationship with Indigenous peoples and a growing concern about poverty and inequity in rural towns, with research focusing on the high rate of youth suicide in rural communities, especially for males.

New levels of ecological and social awareness, combined with an ever more dominant urban mindset, have stimulated an emerging perception of the functional insularity of rural living — parochialism, circumscribed viewpoints, reluctance to change, and a fettering unwillingness to innovate. The success of rural and remote communities in responding to current economic, technological, social, cultural and ecological pressures thus depends not only on the ability to maintain infrastructure, employment and income, but on the capacity of local people to anticipate, accept and manage change, to develop and apply analytical, critical and problem-solving skills, to communicate effectively, to provide social, cultural and economic leadership, to develop and use effective community networks, and to think strategically and creatively beyond both real and apparent restraints.

Extant abilities, attitudes, skills and resources available to rural and remote communities provide the key to improving their economic and social situations. Indeed, they constitute the very platform on which these communities can mobilise and build capacity to creatively solve problems and develop innovative opportunities for growth and community renewal. However, worryingly, several key questions remain unanswered. To what extent are existing community development programs in rural and remote communities viable? How effective have they been in developing and sustaining creative

and innovative approaches to change in communities? What have been the effective change agents in these programs? To what extent have social, economic and cultural potentials been harnessed? What stimuli exist for creativity and innovation? What roles do the arts play in such programs? Might there be further potential for the arts in community development? How might this most effectively be harnessed? Answers to such questions require an initial appreciation of the scope and nature of extant community development programs in rural and remote communities.

The Landscape of Efforts to Help Communities

Over the last two decades, there have been many efforts to help communities to address the challenges and opportunities arising from identified social, economic and technological changes. While such efforts have been described in various ways and marketed under various umbrellas, the most common and pervasive has undoubtedly been community capacity building (CCB). This is a contemporary term used to describe strategies and approaches available to communities in responding to the rapid changes impacting on their futures. Currently there is a bewildering array of definitions and descriptions of CCB in the contemporary literature, a selection of which is provided in 'Appendix A: Chronological Review of CCB Definitions'. These variations arise mainly from the differing contexts in which CCB programs have been designed and implemented (Chapman and Kirk, 2001; Craig, 2007). For example, many such programs are government sponsored and focus on utilising external skills and resources to strengthen community decision making and control over the delivery of government services, including health, welfare, child protection, energy, environment and primary industries (McGinty, 2003; Smyth, 2009). Other CCB activities are community generated and supported from within communities; they build on local knowledge, skills and resources to create local innovative opportunities (Craig, 2007).

Regardless of their context, CCB programs and initiatives, whether developed and applied by governments or communities, share a single aim: to counterbalance the dual and sometimes conflicting pressures to respond to changing economic and social imperatives

while conserving and maintaining community historical, cultural and environmental distinctiveness. In such environments, which are increasingly concerned with economic and social survival, cultural products, practices and processes often take a back seat to initiatives focused either on more traditional rural activities, such as horticulture, agriculture and animal husbandry, or on the provision of critical government services such as health, welfare and education. Ironically, however, the cultural industries and the knowledge, skills and understandings underpinning creative practices may offer unique opportunities for meaningful community-based learning and growth. Creative decision making and problem solving, critical analysis, presentation of alternative viewpoints, as well as collaboration and networking are some of the skills inherent in artistic processes. Such skills are also relevant, if not critical, in building a community's ability to manage change. Therefore, the potential of arts practices and processes might be found in their prospective ability to stimulate and accelerate community development, to assist communities in generating a critical analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, and to build on community strengths and eliminate community weaknesses. Such potentials warrant further formal exploration and analysis.

The identified potential of the arts to support community development is based on the concept of the arts connecting with broad community agendas and contributing across a range of community products and services. However, recognition of this potential must also take into account the strong historic connection between the arts and community over many decades. The concept of community arts, for example, has been based on the belief that cultural meaning, expression and creativity reside within a community and the sense that the task of community artists is to assist community members to 'free their imaginations and give form to their creativity' (Goldbard, 1993, p. 2). This tends, however, to be about artists making art in partnership with community members and most often takes the form of one-off projects based on short-term processes and products (Evans, 2005). While these are commendable activities often leading to important social and cultural gains for both individuals and communities, they are essentially short term and lack a developmental framework to underpin aims and provide meaningful outcomes across a range of community concerns (Evans, 2005). The focus on

small-scale, time dependent, narrowly conceived projects has thus limited the impact of community arts and kept the cultural industries at the periphery of community life rather than at its centre.

A more recent iteration connecting the arts and community development is the concept of Community Cultural Development (CCD). While analogous with the aims of CCB, CCD narrows its focus to build community capacity solely through the arts. CCD has extended the foundation provided by the community arts movement to connect arts-based approaches more broadly with community development agendas and to respond to contemporary community issues (Sonn, Drew & Kasat, 2002). It supports the development of local leadership, and the establishment and maintenance of networks and partnerships; it recognises that community initiative, control and ownership are critical to sustainable growth and development (Goldbard & Adams, 2006). The strong emphasis on process and community engagement provides a philosophical platform focused on creating social value through lessening social isolation, developing community identity and pride, and prompting action on social justice issues. However, the adoption of a sociopolitical reform agenda with social justice as a core aim has served only to contribute to CCD's insularity and its failure to contribute broadly to community development across social, cultural, environmental and economic areas.

Yet the contribution of the arts to community development may be potentially more significant than current approaches. If artistic processes are to be more fully integrated with the social and economic goals and interests of the wider community, then artistic/creative processes need to be harnessed as key contributors to the development of contemporary rural and remote communities. Successful community responses to current pressures depend on their ability to develop innovative revenue opportunities, apply technology in creative and productive ways, maintain social cohesion, develop and apply innovative problem-solving skills, provide social and cultural leadership, and develop and utilise effective community networks. In this context, the arts and the foundations on which their practices are based may offer a new framework in capacity building in rural and remote communities to facilitate a comprehensive examination of the complex interconnections between the arts and the social, cultural and economic development of rural and remote communities.

Table 1 hypothesises a potential framework based on the identification of potential connections between the arts and community capacity building under five broad categories: community leadership; community growth and development; community cohesion; community problem solving; and partnership building.

Table 1. The Potential of Arts Practices and Processes for Community Capacity Building.

Category	Arts practices and processes	Potential for capacity building in rural and remote communities
Community leadership	Artistic decision making and creative problem solving.	Enhancement of leadership skills enabling communities to manage change and sustain community-led development.
	Reflection on and critical analysis of artistic processes and products.	Adoption of continuous improvement, quality processes and critical evaluation.
Community growth and development	Technical mastery of art processes and technologies.	Provision of additional avenues for economic and social development. Creation of a vehicle for local people to express and act on existing concerns.
	Synthesis and translation of intellectual and sensory ideas into creative outcomes and products.	Provision of new community product and potential community revenue. Empowerment of individuals within the community to explore new options and possibilities.
	Conceptual and research skills.	Provision of new development pathways and reduction of barriers to participation. Facilitation of the adoption of technology by the community. Provision of information to the community. Support of the practice of art in the community. Assistance in keeping abreast of contemporary developments, including the application of technology.
Community cohesion	Artistic ethics.	Promotion of community sensitivity to cultural, historical and environment issues. Promotion of community sensitivity to change and development.
	Visual literacy.	Promotion of the social, historical, cultural and environmental distinctiveness of communities. Appreciation of the opportunities arising from community distinctiveness.

Category	Arts practices and processes	Potential for capacity building in rural and remote communities
Community problem solving	Interpersonal, verbal and written communication.	<p>Linkages between art and learning and community social and economic well-being.</p> <p>Promotion of inquiry and dialogue within the community.</p> <p>Provision of opportunities for economic and cultural development through the visual arts.</p> <p>Promotion of a community appreciation of the interconnectedness of the arts with community history, local economy, and regional culture.</p> <p>Facilitation of the integration of art practice with the wider community.</p>
Partnership building	Participation in collaborative artistic ventures (group participation and team building).	<p>Promotion of partnerships and network development within and between communities.</p> <p>Promotion of collaboration within and between communities.</p> <p>Promotion of individual development and the role of the individual within community.</p>

Source: Author's research.

In identifying some of the potential associations between the arts and capacity building in rural and remote communities, the conceptual framework provided by Table 1 is built on the assumption that arts practices and processes can be applied in rural and remote communities to add depth to and broaden community planning and development in order to promote alternative solutions and pathways, advance recognition and appreciation of cultural and environmental opportunities, and balance the sometimes conflicting demands of economic survival, and social and cultural development. While these associations and the assumptions on which they are based demand further exploration and testing, Table 1 nevertheless provides a starting point for a more comprehensive examination of the interconnectedness between the arts and community development.

Taking the Initiative

The tensions for strategic community building in sparsely populated areas are clear. The relative impotence of current programs is, alas, also a matter for concern given goals for sustainability and social/

economic development. Creative decision making, problem solving, critical analysis, presenting alternative viewpoints, collaboration and networking are recognised as skills and processes inherent in artistic practice. Whether these skills and processes might be better exploited in assisting rural and remote communities to address the challenges in creative and innovative ways, offers hitherto unexplored possibilities. A significant expansion in the current range and scope of capacity-building approaches and strategies available to remote/rural communities is overdue and urgent. The development of new arts-based models, strategies and approaches has the potential to provide a framework for the development of practical strategies for use not only by communities but also by artists and arts organisations in the achievement of economic growth, social cohesion and cultural development in remote/rural communities.

This book seeks to:

1. Examine the viability and sustainability of existing approaches to community development with a particular focus on rural and remote communities;
2. Scope the current and potential role and function of the arts in supporting community development approaches;
3. Probe the nature and scope of specific roles and functions of the arts in community development through contrasting case studies; and
4. Use the data derived to develop a new conceptual model for community development in rural/remote communities.

The particular focus of this book is rural and remote communities. In order to appreciate the particular issues facing these communities it is necessary to examine the scope and nature of their contemporary challenges; this is provided in Chapter 2. An examination of conventional approaches to community capacity building is provided in Chapter 3, while the contemporary literature relating to creativity and innovation is examined in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 also explores contemporary concepts of creativity and innovation and examines how these might influence new approaches to arts-based community building. Chapter 5 draws on national and international literature to showcase current approaches to arts-based community development. Chapter 6 identifies the unique challenges

inherent in investigating rural and remote communities, and Chapter 7 reports on the results of investigations of the impact of the arts in these communities. Chapter 8 further explores the impact of the arts on these communities through three major case studies. Chapter 9 draws together key findings of the research to propose a new model for the arts in community building. Finally, Chapter 10 explores scenarios for the application of the proposed new model and elucidates directions for further research and development.

This text is taken from *Harnessing the Bohemian: Artists as innovation partners in rural and remote communities*, by Peter Skippington, published 2016 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.