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## The Unique Challenges of Investigating Rural and Remote Communities

### Difference and Distinctiveness

It is demonstrably clear that rural and remote communities are facing significant challenges arising from ongoing social and economic change occurring on a global scale. Extant approaches to community development and capacity building stress the need for communities to address challenges actively by identifying and building on existing community resources, including those deriving from natural, human and social capital. Emerging approaches to the development of creative and innovative communities stress the need for alternative community approaches based on new knowledge and fresh opportunities arising from innovative understandings about the centrality of creativity in human development. In this context, the arts have strong potential to contribute significantly to building creative, vibrant and dynamic communities. However, (i) there is limited direction about potential approaches to the application of the arts in community development, (ii) there are few good practice exemplars of arts-based community development, and (iii) models on which future applications might be based are not available.

More specifically, much of current documented practice is based on traditional perceptions of the arts, often focusing solely on the production of art products or the operations and processes of art producers. A concentration solely on tangible artistic outcomes overlooks the role of the arts in the broader warp and weft of community life, especially in relation to its potential in the development of human and social capital. Much of the current research focuses on the scope and size of the arts market and aims to identify the economic impact of the arts on cities, regions and communities. This approach, while providing some base economic data, contributes little to an understanding of how creative work can help communities change and grow. It also limits understanding of what districts and towns might do to foster more robust, creative communities. Moreover, many current programs focus on the role of the arts in urban regeneration so that there is little documentation of the experiences of rural and remote communities. To compound the problem, there are few case studies from the Australian context; most of the documented experiences of communities emanate from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States.

In order to broaden and deepen our understanding of the role of the arts in community development, contemporary models and approaches must be re-examined and re-envisioned in the context of rural and remote communities. A strong platform of reinvigorated and remodelled information must be established on which to expand our understanding of the role of the arts in rural and remote communities. Such a platform might result in the distillation of key principles and the development of new models for communities to base future development plans. Hence, the remainder of this book focuses on the rural/remote context through:

1. An examination of the viability and sustainability of existing approaches to community development in rural and remote communities
2. Scoping the current and potential role and function of the arts in supporting community development approaches
3. Probing the nature and scope of specific roles and functions of the arts in community development through contrasting case studies
4. A development of a new model for community development in rural and remote communities.

## Challenges in Examining Arts-Based Community Development

An examination of the role of the arts in community development in rural and remote communities presents some specific challenges. The first arises from the fact that arts-based disciplines are multifaceted; the second from the understanding that community development is a broad concept that has relevance to all communities, from urban neighbourhoods to remote Indigenous communities. Lastly, there is a significant definitional problem in terms of how to draw a meaningful line between urban, rural and remote communities.

### The Span of the Arts

An examination of the multifacetedness of arts-based disciplines indicates that the concept of the arts might encompass book and magazine publishing, the visual arts (painting, sculpture), the performing arts (theatre, opera, concerts, dance), sound recordings, film and television, multimedia and the electronic arts, even advertising, fashion, toys and games. Likewise, an examination of community development might include urban regeneration, regional and rural development, or the revitalisation of remote communities; it might focus on community health, social services, tourism or agriculture. It is thus necessary to sharpen the focus while maintaining the integrity of the primary task: to determine the potential of the arts, artists and art organisations to contribute to the sustainability and rejuvenation of small remote/rural communities.

Focusing on the arts perspective offers a significant challenge. Contemporary approaches to the creation and presentation of the arts extend well beyond technical mastery and encompass personal development through critical reflection, creative problem solving and decision making, interpersonal effectiveness through collaboration and team work, a dedication to innovation and quality, and a commitment to continuous improvement and lifelong learning.

Selecting one or two of the sectors of the arts that demonstrate these qualities in practice has the potential to focus the examination and make it more manageable. However, such a solution would ignore the importance of collaboration across the arts, the complexity

of organisational patterns in the arts sector, the diversity within and across the arts community, the distinctiveness of processes within each subcategory of the arts, and contemporary developments in hybrid, multi-arts, and interdisciplinary approaches to creative endeavours. Additionally, to focus on a single category as a specific perspective would limit any consideration of the particular interests and idiosyncratic talents residing across rural and remote communities.

Consequently, this investigation will encompass the potential of all aspects of the arts from painting to performance, from film to festivals, from drama to dance, and beyond to the ever-expanding new media arts such as digital animation, web design, computer graphics and games. In such an environment, it is essential to provide some parameters to chart the territory for the research. Although all definitions of art are necessarily arbitrary and ultimately problematic, it is necessary to have a framework to guide this investigation of the impact of the arts on community rejuvenation and sustainability. Obviously it needs to be broad and forward looking not only to encompass the traditional arts as well as new and emerging art forms but also to incorporate the arts in their dual role as explorations into the meaning and purpose of human life and creative products and processes adding social and economic value to communities. Consequently, the framework for the investigation is based on the understanding that all arts-based products and processes have their origin in 'individual skill, creativity and talent and each has the potential for wealth and job creation through the exploitation of intellectual property' (Cunningham, 2006, p. 5).

## The Overarching Concept of Community Development

While community development, both concept and strategy, has relevance for all communities, its application in and for rural and remote communities must acknowledge that contemporary political, technological, social and economic pressures are impacting heavily on these communities (Cavaye, 2000). In turn, they are being challenged to shift from traditional industries to knowledge-based industries, they are bearing the brunt of pressing ecological concerns and changing social mindsets, and are fighting demographic trends leading to an ageing rural population. Community development programs recognise that these continuing economic and social transformations may result

in an ever more divided society with even more deeply entrenched pockets of disadvantage (Healy & Hampshire, 2003). As rural and remote communities increasingly fall into this category, it is vital to address the challenges facing them, which are immediate and require urgent action. The survival of rural and remote communities depends on their capacity to anticipate and manage change, to develop and apply problem-solving skills, and to think creatively and strategically, as key aspects of the application of community development programs (Cavaye, 2000). This book's focus on small rural and remote communities thus serves to magnify the compelling issues surrounding community development and provides an opportunity to examine how community development approaches are applied in meaningful and challenging contexts.

## The Rural/Urban Divide: Definitional Issues

Acknowledgement of the important differences between metropolitan, regional, rural and remote communities in Australia is fundamental to this investigation. Yet definitions remain quite problematic. Australia is a vast country characterised by urban concentration and sprawling, widely dispersed population nodes. Clearly, as the distance from the major cities on the edge of the Australian continent increases, population dispersion also increases, health outcomes decline, access to services becomes more difficult and prices of goods and services rise. However, distance from major population centres is only one of many criteria used to classify areas or populations. Many rural/urban classification systems have been developed in Australia and overseas. Wakerman & Humphreys (2000) have identified the most commonly used systems: the Faulkner and French Index of Remoteness; the Griffith Service Access Frame; the Rural and Remote Area classification (RARA) developed and used by the Australian Department of Human Services and Health; the Rural Remote and Metropolitan Areas classification (RRMA) used by the Department of Primary Industries and Energy and the Department of Human Services and Health; the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) used by the Department of Health and Aged Care; and the Australian Standard Geographical Classification (ASGC) used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The last three of these systems — RRMA, ARIA and ASGC — are currently commonly used in Australia and have most relevance to this book.

The RRMA uses population size and calculated direct distance from the nearest service centre to determine seven discrete categories: capital cities, other metropolitan centres, large rural centres, small rural centres, other rural areas, remote centres, and other remote areas. The ARIA uses geographical information to define road distance from service centres with a population of more than 5,000, thus producing a sliding scale of remoteness. The scale has also been divided into five classes: highly accessible, accessible, moderately accessible, remote, and very remote. The ASGC is based on a refinement of ARIA and consists of five discrete categories: major cities, inner regional, outer regional, remote, and very remote. Despite the relative advantages of each of these classification systems, the choice of rural–urban classification to underpin this investigation is neither useful nor informative. The communities targeted in this book are at the remote to very remote end of the aforementioned scales. In essence, these formal classification systems prove to be too inflexible to cater for the diversity found in communities across Australia. For example, a small rural community in Victoria located a few hundred kilometres from a major city has very different needs from those of a small rural community in western Queensland located over 1,000 kilometres from a major centre. Yet both types of communities are of interest to this research. To overcome the limitations of current classification systems, this book introduces a new category of remote/rural. This new category includes communities with populations fewer than 4,000 and communities that are more than 400 kilometres from a major centre with a population greater than 10,000. Table 10 contextualises this additional category (remote/rural) with other categories of communities (urban, regional and rural).

Table 10. Categories of Communities by Population, Dispersion and Access to Services.

	Urban	Regional	Rural	Remote/rural
Population	< 100,000	< 50,000	< 10,000	Less than 4,000
Dispersion	Nil	Low	High	Very high
Access to services	High	Moderate	Low	Very low

Source: Author's research.

## Surveys, Sites Visits and Case Studies

Surveys and site visits were developed and conducted to interrogate the viability and sustainability of existing approaches to community development in rural and remote communities, and to scope the current and potential role and function of the arts in supporting community development approaches. The nature and scope of the surveys and site visits along with their results are reported in the next chapter.

Three major case studies were identified and developed to provide detailed insights into the application of the arts in rural and remote community development as presented in Chapter 8.

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.