

LIKE RIPPLES IN THE POND: BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FOR SUSTAINABLE OUTCOMES

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Introduction

The first decade of the 21st century in Australia will be recognisable as 'a new era marked by the radical impact of global forces, rampant technologies, an exponential pace of change, and considerable discontinuity with the overturning of established paradigms, including those for human resource development' (Kearns, 2005; pi). Common terms such as 'the knowledge society'...'the new economy'...'the high-tech economy'...'the twenty-first century economy'...and 'a culture of lifelong learning' (Kalantzis and Harvey, 2003; p24) reflect these changing emphases. The cumulative effect of these forces associated with the demographic changes of an ageing population, has created a new context for learning and education, including the need for learning across the lifespan (Kotter, 1995; OECD, 1996; Larsson, 1997; Latchem and Hanna, 2001).

The provision of opportunities for learning across the lifespan brings significant challenges and necessitates new forms of thinking and learning that recognise the diversity of modes and contexts in which learning might occur (UNESCO, 1996; Vaill, 1996; EAEA, 2004; Scottish Executive, 2005).

Kalantzis and Cope (2001) argue that the new learning environment will be underpinned by 'a kind of person' with specific dispositions and orientations to the world, one who is 'able to navigate change and diversity, learn as they go, solve problems, collaborate, and be flexible and creative (p3). Further, 'new learning will be increasingly interdisciplinary, requiring deeper engagement with knowledge in all its complexity and ambiguity' (p3). Schuller's (2004) concern is with the relationship between learning outcomes and the wider impact these have on such areas as family, health and social capital. In his study, Schuller identifies three forms of capital: human, social and identity, and deploys these collectively in order to capture the multiple processes involved in an analysis of learning outcomes. As Schuller explains:

The simplest way to address our analysis is therefore to think of learning as a process whereby people build up, consciously or not, their assets in the shape of human, social, or identity capital, and then benefit from the returns on the investment in the shape of better health, stronger social networks, enhanced family life, and so on. (p12)

Development of all three forms of capital has always been important but has received a new imperative marked by the need for sustainability. Factors associated with identity definition, such as increasing confidence and self-esteem, are clear indicators of our effectiveness in sustaining individuals, particularly those who might otherwise be disadvantaged; for example, people with disabilities, youth, and members of the Indigenous community. Individuals in these groups may best be served by forms of learning that encourage not only cognitive but also emotional, creative, and spiritual aspects of their development. Empowering people to learn, and to continue as lifelong learners, necessitates the adoption of various types of learning and involvement in a full and diverse range of learning experiences (UNESCO 1996; Vaill, 1996; Jackson, 2003).

Kearns (2005) outlines future directions for lifelong learning in Australia, and presents a model comprising five pillars or building blocks, as representative of the complex interaction of civil society, government and market in progressing lifelong learning in Australia, and essential to building an inclusive learning society. The five building blocks are:

- empowering individuals as motivated and capable lifelong learners;
- sustaining and transforming communities through learning;
- using technology to extend learning environments and transform the way we learn;
- developing the workplace as a key learning environment to underpin economic objectives; and
- extending and connecting partnerships and networks to build Australia as an inclusive learning society.

Building learning partnerships in many forms and contexts, and innovation in forging relationships and partnerships, and in the interaction between stakeholders, is important if these priorities and potential benefits of 'enhanced creativity, personal fulfilment, and a capacity for enterprise and innovation in firms, communities, and education institutions' are to be realised (Kearns, 2005; p5). Although considerable variation exists in regard to the strategies used, strong community-based initiatives that connect schools, universities, families, cultural institutions, and community organizations for collaboration and partnership have the potential to 'impact on the values of the community and build a culture where learning is valued and promoted throughout life' (Kearns, 2005; p48).

Community – University Partnerships

Changing contexts and needs have impacted on universities and the increase in political and economic pressure by governments has seen the development of strategies to reduce reliance on government funding through external consultancy, increase the relevance of research, improve the quality of teaching, and build stronger partnerships with the community (Broadbent, 1998; 2000; Sunderland et al., 2004). No longer are universities able to exist in isolation from community; their changing role and function is reflected in the establishment of mutually reciprocal links to all facets of the educational community, as each extends its boundaries and sees the potential benefits of working collaboratively (Yeatman and Sachs, 1995; Bourner, Katz and Watson, 2000). As a result, new and effective partnerships have emerged between educational institutions, industry and the wider community, and there is growing evidence to suggest these have the potential to revitalise and sustain learning across the lifespan while transforming communities to ensure more equitable outcomes for all in an inclusive society.

Establishment of the Arts Factory

The ARTS (Adult, Recreation and Training Services) Factory was formed in 1995 at Australian Catholic University, Canberra. It is an innovation that grew out of the work commenced through a Federal government funded National Professional Development Program (NPDP), for which substantial government funding was acquired over a three-year period. This work involved collaboration between university staff, arts specialists and members of professional associations in the development and presentation of sequential 'Arts Packages' for both primary and secondary teachers in Canberra and nearby New South Wales. The success of this endeavour provided the catalyst for the establishment of the ARTS Factory thereby creating a vehicle through which further collaborative arts-related projects and activities might be conducted. Underpinning all ARTS Factory initiatives is a strong commitment to purposeful engagement within the wider community and the achievement of reciprocal and socially just outcomes for all participants. The critical role of the human and cultural dimensions of innovation in building a society and economy where continuous innovation and adaptation to change is central is also acknowledged (Florida, 2002; Kearns, 2005). Within this context, the Arts become the means for interpreting, expressing, communicating and understanding the world and our relationship with it

(Fowler, 1996) to thereby enhance the spiritual, aesthetic, and health dimensions of individuals across the lifespan.

General Aims

All ARTS Factory initiatives are guided by the following aims:

to establish mutually reciprocal partnerships and relationships between the University and the wider educational community that promote the concept of an inclusive learning society;

to build a dynamic community of learners through the interaction of practising artists, educators, students, business, and community members that encourages learning across the lifespan;

to develop new learning opportunities for members of the community, including adults, youth, children, educators and families that respond to specific needs, build knowledge and skills, and focus on an holistic concept of learning.

to promote a sense of fun and enjoyment in learning through the development of innovative projects that enrich the lives of all participants.

Since its inception, the ARTS Factory has been proactive in strengthening partnerships between the University and the wider community through the development of projects that are multi-faceted and engage individuals in learning through the interaction of artists, educators, pre-service teachers, businesses, youth, children, community members, and members of the Indigenous community. As a result, links have been formed with national and local institutions and government instrumentalities in the development of projects, including the Australian Botanic Gardens, National Gallery of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archives, the ACT Department of Education and Training, the Hindmarsh Education Centre at the Quamby Youth Detention Centre, Canberra, Adult Learning Australia and the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector.

Management of all projects is the responsibility of the Coordinator and expertise is drawn from university staff, consultants, artists, and well-respected members of the wider educational community for the development and facilitation of specific projects, which have expanded over the years to embrace a diverse range of arts-related activities including music therapy, painting, ceramics, environmental sculpture, theatre and dance. In response to the emerging needs of the community, the ARTS Factory has successfully secured funding through the Adult and Community Education sector to implement a broader range of community-based projects, including the 'Families Learning Together' projects 2003-2005, developed in collaboration with members of the Canberra Indigenous community, and arts-related programs for youth at the local detention centre in Canberra.

The Cloister Gallery, situated in the cloister space of the University itself, remains a central element in the work of the ARTS Factory, and works in partnership with commercial and regional galleries to present major exhibitions that provide ongoing support for local and national artists. Since its inception, eleven major exhibitions have been presented in the Gallery bringing together members of the University and wider community, including, for example, one exhibition comprising works by 45 Australian artists from every state and territory in Australia. Further interaction between community members, artists, teachers, and students is also encouraged through the development of enrichment programs that extend the exhibition theme; for example, kite making workshops, historical slide and film presentations, and children's workshops. The recent 'Country and Cultural Connections' exhibition of Yr 12 students work from a Catholic High School in Griffith, NSW, aimed to strengthen established links between the University and

regional and rural communities. This remains a clear focus for future initiatives, given the often deleterious impact of contemporary society on the sustainability of many of these rural communities (Kearns, 2005).

The exhibition 'My Land, My House, My Home' (1999), which brought together a unique celebration of the social history of the Canberra region before development, provides clear evidence of the power of the arts to stimulate creative thinking and to capture the imagination of community members for innovative projects. The exhibition portrayed the major changes that had occurred in the national capital region from Aboriginal occupancy until the filling of the lake that is now its centrepiece. Many physical and social changes were associated with the location and construction of the Federal capital city of Canberra and this exhibition focused on the people who were associated with those changes: the Aboriginal community, the early pastoralists, those at the economic centre of the region (particularly the nearby country town of Queanbeyan) which grew out of the pastoralist era, and the workers and public servants who built a city from the wilderness. This exhibition of photography, painting, sculpture and found objects brought together individuals and community groups including fine artists, historians, the local Aboriginal community, the National Trust, and the ACT Regional Studies Network. Contributors included: Ngunnawal elders, members of pioneer families, Braidwood artists, photographers and quilt makers, Bywong Historic Mining Village, Queanbeyan Council, Queanbeyan Riverside Pioneer Cemetery group, Queanbeyan Roll of Honour group, Queanbeyan Bush Poet's Society, Canberra and District Historical Society, ACT Heritage Library, Railway Historical Society, Canberra Stories Group, Cycling Museum, Minders of Tuggeranong Homestead, Tidbinbilla Pioneer Association, National Trust of Australia (ACT), Progress Association Oakes Estate, Canberra Stories Group and the education section of the Canberra Museum and Gallery.

Families Learning Together Projects (2003-2005)

In 2003, the ARTS Factory coordinated the first ACE funded 'Families Learning Together' community-based project in which Indigenous families were supported to assist their children's literacy and numeracy learning. The learning project, which became affectionately known as the 'What's Up' program, was developed and presented collaboratively at a local community centre by respected members of the Indigenous community, Indigenous education advisory staff, and staff from the University. The program was successful in that it responded to the specific needs of parents and students in Indigenous families and created a positive learning framework through which to build community (Wenger et al. 2002). All participants identified the program's connections to Indigenous culture as a strong element in its success, while the focus on rich, learner-centred experiences built personal confidence and a sense of pride, as well as more positive scholastic achievements within the school environment.

Initially the 'Families Learning Together' project emerged from collaboration between the University, Government and non-government agencies, educational institutions and groups committed to the improvement of the social outcomes for individuals, families and communities, including the Indigenous community located within the northern and southern districts of Canberra, and built on the strengths of earlier projects such as the Barnardos Homework Groups Project (Broadbent et al., 2003). The development of stronger synergies between government and non-government providers through a focus on the development of a more holistic approach towards supporting individuals, families, and communities who might otherwise experience disadvantage and social exclusion, was also of importance.

The high levels of student disengagement from schooling, particularly during the middle years, is an ongoing concern and provides sufficient argument for the strengthening of partnerships between all stakeholders within the community if students' achievement outcomes, level of

engagement, and sense of self-efficacy are to be improved, especially within the Indigenous community. While there are numerous reasons why students disengage from the school classroom, including the difficulties faced by those who live in families experiencing poverty, violence, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, psychological illness and social isolation, the benefits of families learning together to build strong communities of learning are substantial (Anstey and Bull, 1999; Epstein, 2001). Projects that respond to the needs of the community develop trust and strengthen relevancy thereby enabling young people to make more informed choices regarding the challenging issues that confront them in their everyday lives.

Of importance also is the provision of a creative and safe environment for the expression of self and culture. Through a multi-disciplinary approach, the 'Families Learning Together' projects have aimed to encourage the development of new knowledge, skills and understandings that will result in positive learning outcomes for these young people and their families, while fostering an appreciation of learning that is contextual, cultural and sustainable across the lifespan. An evaluation of such projects showed they are successful in building a dynamic community of practice (Wenger et al. 2002) as further evidenced by a stronger sense of connectedness between the Indigenous students and their families, schools, teachers, youth centres, and the University. The allocation of funding to the ARTS Factory in 2004 and again in 2005 has allowed the projects to grow in strength while providing opportunities for extension to new locations. New initiatives continue to emerge and new partnerships within the local community continue to form, ensuring these community-based learning projects will be self-sustaining should government funding no longer be available.

Extending the Arts to Youth in Detention

In 1999, the ARTS Factory, in collaboration with staff at the Hindmarsh Education Centre, successfully obtained an Adult and Community Education (ACE) government grant to implement an Art, Design and Technology project for residents at the Quamby Youth Detention Centre. After extensive consultation, the project commenced in mid-1999, attracting strong participant interest. Through the presentation of stimulating and structured learning experiences, which provided opportunities for personal expression and development, the participants worked to achieve short-term goals, extend their knowledge and build a repertoire of skills suitable for further education. A strong feature of the program was the involvement of local practising artists in the presentation of the workshops who captured the interest of the participants through their willingness to share their expertise and scaffold the learning process to ensure productive and aesthetically pleasing learning outcomes. Since those early beginnings, a number of successful programs have been developed collaboratively for over a period of four years and these have resulted in quality artworks, which are exhibited periodically at the Centre.

Although youths in detention are not characteristically highly motivated to participate in educational programs that demand concentrated effort, and do not regularly display behaviours consistent with high levels of engagement and persistence, these programs provide evidence that such programs can work effectively to rekindle interest in learning, provide opportunities for creative endeavour, and encourage the development of positive attitudes towards learning thereby leading to improved levels of achievement (Broadbent, 2003). The high levels of enthusiasm displayed during the various educational activities suggest the visual and kinaesthetic modes of learning utilised during these experiences might hold potential for stimulating the construction of more meaningful connections to other areas of learning. Comments by both youth workers and educational staff at the Centre suggest these programs have the potential to impact positively on general behaviour and motivation.

Conclusion

The ongoing work of the ARTS Factory reflects the changing role and function of universities in this new era of global impacts and constant change. Its various initiatives, undertaken over a ten-year period, provide some evidence of the benefits that can accrue when new partnerships and relationships are formed across a broad range of instrumentalities and community groups. Such partnerships have the potential to build a stronger sense of connectedness throughout the community and provide support mechanisms for those who might otherwise be marginalised or disadvantaged. Learning to learn, and learning throughout life are now regarded as essential elements in our adaptation to change while the need for the establishment of inclusive learning societies that support the learning needs of all remains the ideal.

The collaborative effort commenced in early 1994 through the NPDP program has proven to be beneficial and continues through the establishment of the ARTS Factory at the Australian Catholic University in Canberra. The various community projects initiated by the ARTS Factory draw on the expertise found both within the University and the wider educational community for the facilitation of numerous arts-related events and experiences. These have created the groundswell for the formation of a dynamic community of learners that involves participants from a diverse range of contexts, including those in regional and rural communities, those in detention, and members of the Indigenous community. Collaboration in the development of all projects has been found to be most effective when there is deep engagement in the process, evidence of mutual trust and acceptance of mutual responsibility, a clear focus on quality learning outcomes for all participants, self-direction in terms of personal goals, and a sense of fun and creativity in the generation of new ideas and visions for the future. As the scope of the ARTS Factory continues to broaden, it should, like ripples in the pond, extend its influence and build sustainable outcomes for all within a more equitable and inclusive learning environment.

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