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Arts, Science and Community

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As discussed in preceding chapters, Australian rural and regional¹ communities are confronting unprecedented change. While agricultural restructure, globalisation, population changes and policies based on economic efficiency left many communities feeling frustrated, dis-empowered and vulnerable, policy makers have been actively devolving responsibility for community development back to community in the belief that greater local empowerment and ownership of decisions is a prerequisite for reversing the trends of decline (Perrons and Skyers, 2003). To assist the process, governments and their agencies across Australia have encouraged the formation of partnerships between public, private, voluntary and community sectors to enhance community capacity to respond.

Today a community's success depends on its capacity to generate creative and entrepreneurial action, to mobilise resources, and to access knowledge and learning. More than ever before, rural and regional communities are looking to their regionally located universities to play a greater role in their development – to contribute much more than intellectual capital. Communities now expect contributions of leadership, skills, infrastructure, facilities, and targeted knowledge to assist in their development (Cumpston, Blakers, Evans, Maclachlan and Karmel, 2001; Garlic and Pryor, 2003). Similarly, universities are asked to become more involved with the community, to engage in mutually beneficial and collaborative research. The Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training stated in a policy review of higher education funding that "...higher education institutions need to be responsive to the social, economic and cultural needs of the communities in which they are located and foster a more active engagement with these communities. The obligation for community engagement is one that rests with all higher education institutions, but regional institutions and campuses clearly have a special responsibility to their communities" (Nelson, 2002). Since then many have taken up the challenge with over 30 institutions involved in the newly established Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (inaugural conference, 2005), and reflected in the recent survey of university policy and activities (Winter, Wiseman and Muirhead, 2005). Yet, in spite of this coalescing of will, academic imperatives and community needs are not always in sync, often creating barriers to genuine and effective engagement.

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¹ Regional communities are defined in Australia as being urban centres and their surrounding locale found outside the major cities and metropolitan areas.

After examining 80 examples of university / community engagement initiatives, Garlic and Pryor (2002, pp.3) identified specific criteria for effective engagement – pointing out that such a relationship needs to be “...mutual in both process and outcome, where there is reciprocity in learning and knowledge exchange and equity in the partnership arrangements”. These included the commitment of sufficient time and resources to develop a trusting and meaningful relationship, ensuring the purpose of the engagement was made clear, and orienting research toward producing locally relevant results. Easier said than done when funding for research comes with strict timelines, when university success is measured by publications, with no formal acknowledgement of time spent building community relations, and where the research goals of academics are not always readily aligned with the needs of community. The process of building local knowledge and capacity to engage in collaborative research is not readily supported by the tertiary sector or its funding agents.²

From the community perspective, collaboration with academics has often seemed more akin to a ‘mining’ activity where information is sought, but the analysis and outcomes are neither returned nor considered of direct relevance to the community. Failure to convey information in an accessible and meaningful way is also a common problem. Engagement with researchers can be another burden for community volunteers already suffering from ‘burnout’. These people are running businesses, farms, and families and can’t always respond in a timely manner, or afford to travel for meetings, and so things take longer and the processes can often be quite convoluted. Another issue is the dissemination of information. People want to be kept informed but the dissemination of information throughout the community can be difficult when outsiders don’t know the local information networks. It takes time to build the necessary relationships which enable information exchange and the development of mutually beneficial and relevant research programs, where roles and expectations coincide.

To help bridge these gaps La Trobe University established a Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities (CSRC) in 1999, with the stated purpose of making research more relevant to, and interconnected with, the needs of the region in which it resides. Essentially, La Trobe University was resourcing a community capacity building initiative; developing relationships and mutual knowledge and understanding were key elements of the CSRC’s activities. The primary aims were to enhance the community’s capacity to respond to change while enhancing the research effort.

This chapter presents a major initiative of the CSRC, *Small Towns: Big Picture* where art, science and community were brought together to build relationships and networks, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and information, and help communities address issues of social, environmental and economic sustainability. The outcomes will be discussed in terms of contribution to community development, research, and the creation of a collaborative learning relationship between a university and its regional communities.

The Art of Engagement

An earlier initiative of the CSRC was management of a project called *Building a Future for the Country* involving 7 small rural communities located in central Victoria, which had

² Note that grants from academic research funding agencies carry far greater academic kudos, and are linked to further funding, than government grants for community development.

attracted significant federal funding aimed at building employment opportunities. The CSRC's role, from the community's perspective was to 'manage' the project and 'provide' additional university resources in the form of community development personnel. The project was successful in many ways, but the desire of academics to stretch the boundaries and to provide exploratory input to the process was more than the committee members could cope with, given the already immense task of the specific project. The communities were not ready for the expanded possibilities and ideas presented by the academics. The academics were not much interested in simply being a resource for the communities in ways which didn't seem to have direct research potential, resulting in a disgruntled feeling among all concerned. While relations were sometimes strained, much was achieved and strong connections and relationships formed over the 2 year period assisted the development of subsequent projects.

The BFC project revealed the need to:

- build greater connections and participation within the communities so that the community development tasks did not fall on the shoulders of the few;
- evaluate and gain a clearer understanding of the social infrastructure and capacity of the communities; and
- create a development strategy which was widely community owned, and which enhanced the communities' capacity to respond to the challenges they faced.

A community audit project subsequently emerged, and in good academic style Rogers introduced the participating communities to the concept of a 'sustainability dashboard' involving a suite of locally measured performance indicators (Rogers and Ryan, 2001).

Over the course of a year the ideas were discussed among committee members from each town and support given to seek funding to commence the project. However, very little real enthusiasm was expressed – for a variety of reasons: local burn out, focus on other more locally determined and driven activities, and possibly the feeling that this would be an academic exercise with very little return or tangible benefit for the community. And maybe it all sounded a little too hard and complicated.

The CSRC team were committed to research which was of direct interest and benefit to the community. It was therefore inappropriate to continue with a project that didn't interest the community. Also, to be useful, performance indicators needed to be developed with the community, for the community. How to inspire and engage the community became the real challenge, given that locally relevant performance indicators were considered to be an important weapon in the armory of small town survival.

At this juncture, the author began the search for new ways to engage people. Media releases, community workshops, and the distribution of information sheets were not going to inspire and motivate the community – let alone engage them in the dry process of data gathering and performance evaluation.

Entrance stage right –the Cultural Development Network (Victoria), whose mission was to demonstrate the role of the arts in community planning and development. Judy Spokes (Director) was emphatic that researchers, governments, and communities alike typically failed to fully achieve their goals because they failed to engage people in a profound and meaningful way. Spokes argues that it is the arts which can reach people, move them, inspire and challenge them like no other discipline, and that it is through the arts that people can become

meaningfully engaged. Lucy (1997) and others in this newly emerging field support this view, arguing that it is the very nature of cultural activity that engages - it promotes dialogue, communication, and social interaction, while breaking down old barriers and fostering relationships. More than just stimulating interest, the arts and cultural activity could create the environment necessary for the exchange and development of complex concepts, technical language, and the creation of new knowledge in ways which would inspire and motivate people. According to Kingma (2003) “by encouraging creativity, inclusiveness, empowerment and trust, the arts help build bridges from narrow competitive activity to more enriching, value adding enterprise with high multiplier effects within communities”. Given that cooperation and inclusiveness are now cited as the cornerstones of new approaches to ecologically sustainable development, cultural activities were promoted as having an important role to play in conceptualising new strategies and making them work.

To link indicator development by communities and the role of the arts the CSRC and the CDN formed a partnership and secured funding to commission 8 artists to work with the communities and researchers to develop a shared understanding of the “Sustainability Dashboard of Community Performance Indicators”. Very quickly the project became arts-based and more suitably named *Small Towns: Big Picture*.

A Brief Comment on Indicators

While indicators are natural, everywhere, part of everyone’s life, they have recently become a widely discussed instrument of change – an essential guide to developing sustainably. We all use indicators to make sense of complex systems – but not everyone relates to the same indicators. Meadows (1998: 7) provides an example in football scores which are only meaningful to football fans while often considered gibberish to the less enthusiastic. Similarly, a farmer can read signals from a field of growing grain that the rest of us don’t perceive. Jiggles in stock prices carry vital information – but only to those who watch the market every day.

We need many indicators because there are many purposes. However, when the need for indicators is mentioned in the context of community building or local government best practice, people seem to feel a little overwhelmed. Comments like, ‘how do you choose which indicators to use’, or ‘there is very little point in creating your own indicators when there needs to be some universal sense made of our progress’, or ‘everyone is doing *indicators*, I don’t want to be recreating the wheel’, are common.

Indicators are ‘...*only useful if the carried information is to a mind prepared to receive it, educated to its terms and actively engaged with the system illuminated by that indicator*’ (Meadows, 1998: 7) In other words, no matter how difficult it is to develop community-based indicators, or how diverse they may appear to be, indicators that are not locally determined, locally validated and locally used are useless at the local level.

Small Towns: Big Picture

Small Towns: Big Picture aimed to develop a set of indicators to enable the communities to gain greater understanding of their social structures (namely the rules and values which operate), their environmental sustainability, and the drivers of economic activity. The indicators developed were based on Max-Neefs (1987) nine basic human needs (a community cohesion index), Wackernagel and Rees’ (1991) ecological footprint concept (an energy footprint measure), and an economic activity measure based on gross regional product and

employment figures. These indicators together highlight the elements and interconnectedness of sustainability.

The community cohesion index was based on the notion that overall community well-being was directly related to the well-being of each individual, and that it was a community responsibility to ensure that individual needs were satisfactorily met. Based on the work by Manfred Max-Neef, the criteria of well-being included basic human need for freedom, affection, creativity, understanding, protection, participation, identity and sustenance. Through a process involving groups of young people, business people, community volunteers and senior community members, these needs were explored in terms of how well the community was performing. Individuals were given the following prompts, and then asked to rate their community's performance (ie. 1 = performed poorly, 6 = performed well). They were also asked to write down their own thoughts about how the community function in relation to each of the criteria which provided a rich source of narrative about each community from different perspectives.

| | |
|---------------|--|
| Freedom | Does your community encourage independent thought and action? |
| Sustenance | Does your community take care of its disadvantaged? |
| Reflection | Does your community take time to dream, have fun, reflect on the past, and fantasise about the future? |
| Affection | How welcoming and friendly is your community? |
| Creativity | Does your community encourage imagination, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity? |
| Understanding | Is your community a learning community? |
| Protection | Does your community provide for a safe environment? |
| Participation | Does your community encourage participation? |
| Identity | Does your community have a strong sense of identity? |

The energy footprint measure was used because of the CSRC's links with the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance which was working with 10 shire councils across the region to develop a regional response to climate change. The Alliance believes strong regional development opportunities lie in a proactive response to climate change and the adoption of alternative energy sources. Small towns can benefit from actively participating in region-wide initiatives, creating new economic opportunities. For more detail refer to *The Energy Footprint for North Central Victoria: An Initial Step Toward Addressing Climate Change*, Rogers (2002).



Figure 1: Indicators presented as a Sustainable Dashboard

It was believed that communities that focus on building their community cohesion, and commit to reducing their environmental impact will ultimately change the nature of their economic activity and social/cultural vitality. Inherent in this assumption is the need to re-kindle the creative energies and motivations within community. The links between the social, cultural, environmental and economic dimensions of community life were ultimately expressed through the concept of a 'Sustainability Dashboard'. The aim was to increase community cohesion, reduce the energy footprint, and hopefully stimulate new and innovative economic opportunities as the basis of a community-wide strategic plan and development process.

Eight artists were commissioned to work with the communities and the researchers, to create an interactive environment, drawing together a broad cross-section people. The artists were residents of the towns - an important factor in the project's success. Each artist worked with one of two indicators (community cohesion or energy footprint). The artists included a playwright³, website developer and photographic artist⁴, printmaker⁵, textile artist⁶, ceramicist⁷, film maker⁸, photographer⁹, and a community artist/co-ordinator¹⁰. The artists' task was challenging as they had to work with researchers and the communities to build understanding of the indicator concepts and involve people in cultural/creative activities. Most of the artists had not worked in this way before and so gained valuable experience and exposure in their own communities. They ultimately became the source of information about the indicators where people felt more comfortable talking to local people.

An array of creative works was produced including a theatrical performance associated with the community cohesion indicator, and a collection of prints, photographs, and ceramic tiles reflecting the energy footprint and our impact on the environment. A professional video captured the year long process.

- *Right Where We Are* – a theatrical performance reflecting social cohesion issues.
- CD – songs from the performance recorded by the local actors/singers.
- An interactive website depicting organisational networks - highlighting the gaps.
- 30 minute film of the community engagement process.
- 50 pinhole photographic images associated with the local environment.
- 60 mono/colligraph/lino prints associated the energy footprint.
- 14 metres of ceramic mural tiles depicting the past and future image of sustainability.
- 30 terracotta ceramic footprints installed in the community garden in Wedderburn.
- 150 silk banners depicting affirming statements associated with a cohesive community.

³ Playwright, Craig Christie (Melbourne) – created *Right Where We Are* out of the Community Cohesion indicator development.

⁴ Website developer, Anne Molony (St Arnaud) – created *Community Connections Directory* website.

⁵ Printmaker, Tiffany Titshall (Talbot) – worked with the communities to produce images of the energy footprint.

⁶ Textile Artist, Anna Ashton (Dunolly) – worked with the community to create 150 silk banners reflecting the elements of a strong, coherent community

⁷ Ceramicist, Judy Lorraine (Wedderburn) – worked with the community to create ceramic footprints installed in the local community garden.

⁸ Film maker, Phillip Ashton (Dunolly) – documented the year-long process in *A Journey in Community Building*, 30 minute video

⁹ Photographer, Donna Bailey (Bendigo) – worked with the community to produce pinhole images of the local environment

¹⁰ Arts Co-ordinator, Andrea Hicks (St Arnaud) – co-ordinated the vast array of creative workshops and outcomes.

- 30 hand made felt creations depicting affirming statements associated with a cohesive community (Appliquéd into a colourful banner by the Wedderburn Quilters Society).
- 72 framed photojournalism images documenting community engagement in creativity.

The Artwork Produced through Small Towns: Big Picture

Local people were engaged in data gathering. Some gathered energy consumption data from businesses and household, while others were involved in focus groups exploring the elements of community cohesion. Local people performed the theatrical piece, were the sound engineers, caterers, musicians and supporters. Noteworthy was the 150% response rate to surveys conducted by local people – *they photocopied more questionnaires!*

The research findings, initial set of performance indicators, and the creative reflections came together in 5 separate town events. Approximately 1500 people across 5 communities were directly involved in some aspect of the project, generating a high level of energy. The process forged unique connections between artists, researchers and community, and reached into the heart of the communities involved – “...actively involving young people, older people, women, men, businesses, councils and community groups at all stages of the process which is very impressive and often difficult to achieve” (Dunn, Chair, Commonwealth Government's Women's Regional Advisory Council. *Personal communication*, 2003)

The amorphous dimensions of art and culture can provide the vital ingredients for building community capacity and engagement. As Hawkes (2001) argues, it is the cultural dimension which encompasses the world of values, motivations, aspirations, attitudes and creativity. It is where hopes, dreams and plans engage the heart and soul, within and between the psyches of individuals. The intangible outcomes were carried along by the powerful surge of energy felt within, between and beyond the communities and the researchers involved. A dry and seemingly uninspiring project to develop a set of sustainability indicators became a powerfully energising, community engagement activity, producing many spin-off actions and relationships which could never have been anticipated. In short, people did something, and were proud of it.

Beyond the Tangible Project Outcomes

Clearly the arts can engage people in a process and produce tangible outcomes. Base line indicators were produced, and relationships were developed. But was the project successful in building knowledge, trust, and an on-going collaborative research environment? Of course, the answers are not black and white and as Lawrence (Prof of Sociology, University of Queensland, 2003) commented in a personal communication, *Small Towns: Big Picture* was a rather ‘ambitious project’ – but one which built foundations for the ongoing development of both the research and the communities’ development. Key questions concerning the project’s success are:

- Did the process build trust between community and university?
- Did the communities gain an understanding of the performance indicators?
- Did the communities go on to use the evaluation to develop strategic plans?
- Was the university able to work differently with the communities – in an ongoing research and development way?
- What did the communities gain from the process?

- What did the university gain from the process?

Trust between community and the University

While it is hard to know the amount of trust created, the University has moved from being ‘regionally irrelevant’ (McGuinness Report, 1999) to receiving community published statements like “...*All Hail La Trobe – the benefits to Carisbrook by the involvement of La Trobe University has been astronomical*”(Carisbrook Mercury, March 2004). Compare initial comments from individuals who were concerned that the university was just using them to access resources. One local councillor could see no value in the project at the outset, arguing that “...*people were already struggling with burnout, and it sounded like a lot of hard work for the same old few*”. However, it is the tangible and intangible benefits that ultimately accrued to each community that form the basis of any ongoing relationship. The community were left with a range of resources (ie. locally relevant data and measures of performance, locally produced artwork, an increased sense of their own capacity, and in most cases a renewed sense of community with strengthened networks within and beyond traditional boundaries). Working with the university proved to be a positive experience and the arts played a significant role in achieving that.

The difficulties in concepts, language and delivery meant that the project was indeed challenging but it was the realisation of the arts that enabled a communication and celebration to occur.
 Tamara Marwood, local artist)

Community understanding of performance indicators?

Many new relationships were formed between artists, people of different ages and genders, people from other communities, and people associated with the university and other regionally located organizations. Consequently, there is ongoing dialogue, enabling further development of ideas and new projects. While it is hard to know how effective *Small Towns: Big Picture* was in building people’s knowledge of indicators, dialogue continues to build people’s understanding and link them to other developments in the region. For example, the community cohesion work is now part of the Central Goldfield Shire municipal health plans, the energy footprint is being reduced through activities of the Central Victorian Greenhouse Alliance such as street lighting retrofits, and the planting of trees as carbon sinks. The community of Dunolly (1 of the 5 towns) is pursuing possibilities of forming a community power company in partnership with the Bendigo Bank – a member of the Greenhouse Alliance.

However, todate, there has been no direct use of the indicators developed by any of the participating communities. Given that 4 of the 5 communities were small settlements within a larger municipal shire, and were being managed largely through voluntary progress committees, it is not surprising that the performance indicators have not been fully utilised. It is worth noting that none of the 3 local governments concerned could be encouraged to actively engage with the Small Towns project, and while they were apprised of the final report they remained distant from the project outcomes.

What did the communities gain from the process?

Local artists played a critical role in engaging people in a process that would otherwise have seemed dull, unimportant or only relevant to the town elite. The arts made it fun and engaging – which effectively transformed the initial project into a creative, energised and collaborative program of community wide activity. In addition to the tangible outcomes of the project, each community seemed to gain in confidence to try new things and tackle new challenges. According to one resident “*Small Towns: Big Picture has changed our lives – everyone worked so well together achieving so much more. Another commented that “the whole concept was of immense value to the community. It was an awakening and put into people’s minds that new and exciting things can happen. This has had a snowballing effect on the community – stimulating positive initiatives which are a direct offshoot of our involvement with Small Towns”*

More specifically, the artists became visible in their communities where the arts were previously seen as fringe and broadly irrelevant to the wider community. Several artists gained community support for further arts projects they felt would not have been supported without the stimulus of Small Towns – “*people just couldn’t see the point to doing arts projects before they became involved in Small Towns”*. One artist talked about the thrill of even seeing an advertisement calling for artists – “*I’ve never seen an ad for a job for an artist in the local paper ever!*”

School principals felt that the project had opened their eyes to the extraordinary range of skills that existed in the community, which could be drawn on to enhance the school curriculum and link community more directly with students.

Many who involved themselves in the theatrical performance had no such previous experience and found it to be much more than they imagined.

When I was first asked to audition for the ‘Right Where We Are’ project, I had no idea of what lay ahead. What I found was a lot of intelligent people all drawn together in a common cause.

It was challenging and rewarding. It was both bloody scary and exhilarating. It was humbling and a big character building experience.

What did the university gain from the process?

While this project consumed a large amount of time and resources, it was effective in raising the profile of the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities throughout Australia and overseas, and building its credibility in the field of tertiary / community engagement. The work has been cited by national arts organisations and community development agencies as a model of best practice (Garlick and Pryor, 2004; Mills and Brown, 2003; AUCEA, 2004; United Nations publication, 2002). The nature of the project and the richness of its outcomes provided abundant publishable material resulting in numerous invitations to speak at national and international conferences and to provide case study material for a range of publications. All of this combines to assist the Centre in attracting further research funding which is critical to its ongoing viability and internal recognition and support.

Had the project simply been about the development of sustainability indicators, created and measured solely through academic processes, it may well have produced publishable outcomes, but it would never have achieved the level of recognition that it did.

A comment on impediments to collaboration

Where to start when you come from outside (within a university) – with limited time and resources – when you know that process is everything.... The need to start with people, spend time talking with them, finding out what they are interested in and building a joint project from the ground up.... But how many academics have time for that. And what's more how many academics want to do research which is determined by community. The conversation needs to be two way and the project development of mutual benefit. This takes time and commitment on both parts. It usually occurs as a result of individual relationships and hence the importance of regional universities and academics who actually live in rural/regional areas – but even so, it takes time and effort – neither of which have been typically supported by the tertiary sector. An academic doesn't get paid to spend time drinking tea and chatting at the bar of a local hospitality house. They certainly don't get promoted for such efforts, unless they bear fruit in direct academic output terms.... ie. publications and research grants.

Socio economic – making it relevant is difficult

Willingness to accept outside input –

Role of local government is crucial – volunteers were great but it lacked the capacity to follow through with effective strategic planning

Funding timetable not conducive to communications and trust

Academic burn out due to lack of administrative/resource support – did everything right down to blowing up the balloons

Not being part of the community – outsider – makes it difficult to identify information networks, and to avoid the pitfalls of small town alliances

Communicating – where is the town crier...every town has one!

Keeping information accurate – word of mouth is great but it can become more akin to chinese whispers.

Concluding comments

In the absence of any empirical data on the impact of *Small Towns:Big Picture* on the development focus and capacity of these small rural communities, there are indications that individuals are more confident with the language of indicators and more willing to discuss ways these ideas might be further developed within their community, in partnership with the University.

It was the genuine desire to involve the community in understanding and engaging with measures of their own performance which led this researcher to seek out an alternative approach to the traditional workshop and media-oriented mail drops. The journey was as enriching for the researcher, as it was for the communities who found themselves exposed to new ideas and opportunities for creative expression. The impacts and outcomes over time will no doubt be unexpected and surprising for us all as the relationship continues to evolve.

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