

Community cultural development across Far North Queensland with a health focus

Jenuarrie¹

¹Arts Nexus

Arts Nexus Inc. has a clear mission across all of Far North Queensland: *growing creative people, communities and industries.*

Community Arts and Cultural Development (CACD) that builds capacity, values cultural diversity and fosters resilience, is essential in creating liveable communities.

CACD is explained very well by the Australia Council: “Community arts and cultural development is distinct from other arts practice as it is the creative processes and relationships developed with community to make the art that defines it, not the art form or genre. What is at the core of this practice, however, is the collaboration between professional artists and communities to create art.”

Today I would like to share with you some of the many examples of the work being done in the Far North Queensland region through the efforts of many members and partners of Arts Nexus, from community arts and cultural development (CACD) practitioners themselves to the many arts and community groups. Encompassing Cape York and the Torres Straits, our region has grown to have some of the most diverse cultures and lifestyles in the nation.

These great examples demonstrate how arts and culture are the essential elements to ensure community wellbeing and resilience. “Arts with a health focus” has a real impact on the various social determinants that affect our ability to be resilience to challenges and change.

Community Cultural development projects begin with your inner circle, starting from where you are, regardless of skills and resources. If success can be measured by personal growth and potential, then these are most inspiring and personally rewarding for everyone involved.

Connectivity is key to social inclusion

In this day and age, it's common for community members to become isolated and disengaged.

CACD is the vehicle and platform that brings individuals together into meaningful social engagement, drawing people together creatively without being intrusive. Encouraging and being supportive in a constructive way builds confidence and contributes to problem-solving. Hidden skills are revealed, including creativity and leadership.

Feeling connected through shared experiences, even with strangers within your community, creates social cohesion. Very quickly you find you have more in common than is different, as we realise we all have similar challenges and aspirations. It is a proven fact that exposure to creative arts has a way of re-energising self-confidence and self-esteem. This has a positive effect on emotional and social wellbeing and subsequently mental wellbeing.

Creative expression leads to knowledge and empowerment

Engaging in creativity with others can change how a person feels about the value they have and the contribution they can make within their community. Speaking from their lived experience and sharing

their skills with others, each person finds they have a voice, and can participate in society. This is the way of developing community through culture.

ARTS NEXUS is committed to leading and facilitating strategic, sustainable development across all the cultural and creative industries in Far North Queensland. For over 20 years, Arts Nexus has been providing grassroots assistance to individuals and organisations in the absence of adequate cultural infrastructure, funding or professional development services in the region.

In doing so, Arts Nexus contributes to active life-long learning, recognising the value to our society of all arts, culture and creative industries and supporting sustainable cultural enterprises and tourism.

As a guiding principle of sustainability, we are committed to balancing the interdependency of social, cultural, environmental and economic spheres of human relationships.

This path was informed by John Hawkes seminal book, *Four Pillars of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning*, which was adopted by Rio+20 in 2012 and now incorporated into the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

To quote from the author:

“The Fourth Pillar’ demonstrates that the ‘concept of culture is an invaluable tool that has been largely ignored in the attempts to reconfigure the ways that governments plan the future and evaluate the past . . . Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability.”

But how is this applied in practice? Our work and programs embrace inclusive communication with our members and stakeholders to maximise access, active participation and collaborations. Supporting self-determined projects ensures people from diverse cultures can work in a collaborative environment. Arts Nexus works very closely with our community by listening, then responding to their aspirations and concerns with an effective program. This provides an atmosphere of pride and true representation that inspires participants to express their aspirations to advance their creativity, social and economic aspirations.

This presentation tells of just a few from the range of wonderful community arts and cultural development (CACD) projects with a health outcome in the region that Arts Nexus has partnered.

Whenever the name of Arts Nexus is mentioned, we are hoping that you will recall this presentation and examples of the CCD work that has been undertaken by our organisation (and others in Queensland like Red Ridge and Creative Regions) in support of arts, health, social and emotional wellbeing.

Best practice models example of CACD work in the region

Project: “Festlinx”

Some years ago, service requests to Arts Nexus for capacity building were coming from a number of festivals and events throughout Far North Queensland. There is nothing quite like a community festival to bring people together to reconnect and celebrate their unique culture, to overcome isolation and be part of something bigger, participate in civic and public life, demonstrate citizenship and build supportive and cohesive communities, boost confidence in the business community and revitalise the community at large.

In response to these many requests for support, funds were sourced in partnership with “Blue Print for the Bush” and local government Councils through Regional Arts Development Fund.

The “Festlinx” initiative set out to support the skills and capacity of local event organisers themselves and to bring them together, as it was realised these were the folks committed to being the prime *animateurs* of community cultural development and participation within their own communities.

As such, they are in a position to increase employment for artists and performers, to project regional identity and to foster cultural tourism. We brought the event organisers together, and they learnt as much from each other as they did from our services. Over 5 years, 85 community-led festivals across the region were supported. To name a few, these included:

- Laura Dance Festival
- Girrigun Cultural Festival
- Cairns Festival
- Mission Beach Evolve Festival
- Feast of the Three Saints
- Yungaburra Folk Festival
- Cooktown Discovery
- Cairns Buskers Festival
- ReggaeTown
- Wallaby Creek Festival

Project: “Song Connection”—a socially inclusive choir

This project was an activity that connected people through song. The aim was to be accessible to people of any ability and socio-economical background, but particularly those who self-identify as being disadvantaged or homeless. This was achieved in Cairns by working with partners to ensure participation was possible through referrals and direct support.

Song Connection was a socially inclusive community choir, founded on the values of equity, nurturing individual aspiration and personal development. There was also the benefit of social cohesion. While many health services deal with individuals and at most families, CACD fosters community-building and social networks, opening a place for people otherwise marginalised to participate and contribute to public and civic life.

Individual choir participants gained skills in musicianship, performance, music knowledge and production, as well as collaboration. Participants also gained self-confidence and experience in public speaking. Many went on to create their own performance groups, record CDs, and perform by invitation at major events.

Arts-workers involved in the project experienced in health aspects such as ‘challenging behaviours’ or mental health care, were introduced to industry networks, thus expanding their arts practice. Many choir mentors volunteered additional time and skills to share with participants. Some of these partnerships continue to this day.

Based on the principals of equity, participation and empowerment, the project has created opportunities for expansion of the program in response to the needs of the participants. Self-determined projects like this, supporting a community from different cultures and backgrounds,

influence the outcomes in a collaborative environment. An atmosphere of pride and true representation inspires participants to advance their creativity, social and economic aspirations and to express their opinions and to set goals.

Song Connection far exceeded its 'baseline' expectations, with social interaction, collaboration on musical projects outside of the group continuing long after the funded project finished. Participants still feel a very strong sense of their identity as a group, and are immensely proud of their achievements. It was originally expected that the Choir would need to rehearse for 6 months as a group before they would be ready to perform. However, the confidence and cohesion of the group has demonstrated their readiness to perform within the first four months of rehearsals. This is testimony to the success of CACD as a practice of working together in a community engagement process that empowers individuals, and groups.

Project: Connecting Community Voices—a response to the natural disaster

In February 2011, Cyclone Yasi left behind significant destruction on the Cassowary Coast. During the following year, significant community recovery initiatives were developed in the region by social and community organisations with assistance from local, state and federal governments.

The 'Connecting Community Voices' project undertaken by FNQ Volunteers Inc. used community arts and cultural development (CACD) processes to enhance individual and community recovery and wellbeing. Arts workers driving the project were Avril Duck and Melissa Robertson.

The purpose of the Connecting Community Voices project was to assist the community to explore issues relevant to their experiences of recovering as a community from the cyclone while also developing skills, leadership and knowledge necessary for sustaining locally based cultural projects. The project was guided by the following observations.

"Building capacity of the community to act is crucial to safe and effective responses immediately following a disaster where services may take time to respond and, without care, may disrupt community systems that allow local people to be and feel in control.

Individuals, family systems and communities adapt better or more poorly to significant changes caused by a disturbance depending on how 'resilient' they are: that is, their actual capacity to adapt, cope and take advantage of opportunities. Some populations have more vulnerability, which impedes their capacity to adapt.

"Increasing linkages between individuals and groups allow the transfer of information, support and exchange in the transition period following disaster, creating an increase in opportunities and choices for adaptation ... Building the organisational capacity of a small community group or medium-sized community organisation, usually formed entirely from volunteers, creates a 'container' for people to relate, respond and support following a disturbance." (Attorney General's Dept., 2011)

Connecting Community Voices was a significant vehicle that focused cultural skill development in the Cassowary Coast for a short time. The facilitators were versatile in their ability to share skills and develop management expertise on one hand, but also to produce a creative collaboration that drew a number of artists together in a short time to create a beautiful piece, the *Dance for Recovery*.

It has an afterlife too. It has left many people being more secure and confident in their cultural work and leadership.

The project report further outlines the activities and outcomes, and discusses issues that arise in delivery of short-term community development projects. A model that describes the different phases of this kind of community development work is proposed.

Conclusion

Through such community based activities as *Connecting Community Voices*, *Song Connection* and *Festlinx*, community's culture can be expressed, explored, interpreted, presented or developed, and social and developmental changes can take place alongside artistic outcomes.

CACD can be conceptualised as a process which fosters "participation in community life, mediated through culture and the arts, to achieve community-building outcomes". Excerpt from *The role of cultural planning in community change* (Sonn, Drew and Kasat, 2002, *The Arts and Social Wellbeing in Australian Rural Communities*).

In closing, community arts and cultural development (CACD), as distinct from pure artistic production, is not widely understood. As these regional projects demonstrate, it is the combination of creativity and community development that is so extraordinary in its potential.

Links

ARTS NEXUS President's presentation at launch held on 15 December 2016:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_hj1fo-H9UA&t=9s

Connecting Community Voices, by June Perkins "Dance For Recovery—Behind the Scenes"

<https://vimeo.com/46329288>

Quotes from "Connecting Community Voices Cassowary Coast, FNQ Volunteers Inc. September 2012" report was written by Margaret Pestorius

Song Connection—choir for people that have experience disadvantage. Funded by Arts Queensland, Cairns Regional Council and Regional Arts Fund, many local businesses, agencies and sponsors.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NtkglQclqkk&t=5s>

Presenter

Jenuarrie's mother's father's traditional country is Koinjmal (eastern coastal plains of Central Queensland). Jenuarrie was born and educated in Rockhampton and began a career in the arts in 1984 after graduating from the Cairns TAFE College with an Associate Diploma, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Visual Arts and completing numerous certificate courses for adult learners achieving higher qualification levels relevant to her visual arts practice as an artist and industry arts worker. She has been chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Board Visual Arts Panel, Committee member on their National Committee and Visual Arts, Craft and Design of the Australia Council peer assessment and policy development. She has been Panel Member on the Arts Advisory Committee to the Minister for the Arts in the Arts Office (now Arts Queensland) and worked for 14 years with Arts Queensland as the FNQ Industry Development Consultant, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art until recently retiring. Jenuarrie is currently the President of Arts Nexus, is a recipient of an Australia Council life-time achievement grant and continuing practising artist and ceramicist.