



Changing and adapting: exploring an arts-health-environment interdisciplinary partnership

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The devastating effects of drought on the natural environment surrounding the mouth of the Murray River and Lower Lakes in South Australia during the last decade were well publicised, sparking controversial debates about water use and the respective responsibilities of governments and private interests. Less widely discussed were the impacts on the health and wellbeing of communities, the people who lived and worked, farmed and fished in this unique environment, including the traditional custodians of the land and waters. With the drought in its tenth year, an arts-based program was conceived in 2010 to support these communities' responses to the profound changes in their environmental, social, political and economic landscape by giving creative expression to their experiences, struggles, and resilience. As the environmental crisis subsided, the program evolved into an ambitious three year partnership between federal, state and local government agencies. Since that time health, environmental and arts organisations located in the Southern Fleurieu Peninsula, Murray Mallee, Kangaroo Island, Mt Gambier and the Coorong and Lakes communities have worked collaboratively to develop community-based arts initiatives exploring themes of 'change' and 'community wellbeing'. Local and visiting artists were engaged using diverse art forms including music, writing, cartoon, puppetry, sculpture, public art, digital animation and film, to create both ephemeral and enduring works.

In recognition of the challenges associated with this complex interdisciplinary methodology delivered in geographically dispersed locations, an independent researcher was engaged to work closely with the team throughout. Incremental feedback from the perspectives of partners, organisational staff, artists and community participants has been analysed to document the program's development and inform continuous learning. As well as appraising program progress and outcomes, the research explores the broader potential for arts-based practice to enhance the capacity of local agencies to provide support to such communities. The key elements that enable artists and arts practice to work effectively within community health and environment sectors, in particular, are identified. These results are being reported in the form of a 'Model of Practice' for embedding arts partnerships in non-arts organisations.

The paper will present an overview of the program model of practice, demonstrating how community aspirations and organisational goals were integrated through close collaboration with health workers and community members. Significant outcomes for all of the communities involved, including the traditional custodians of the lands and waters, will be highlighted.