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

Christine Putland

Country Arts SA, Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity, Flinders University, SA

> It was horrific for the animals… [the water] got really salty and so in come tubeworms from the Coorong, into this water here, the fresh water, and grew all over the turtles... But it was really horrific for the people too. We could just see the community walking around with their head down and bowed over.
>
> (Commercial fisherman, resident of Clayton Bay for 50 years) [1.]
>
> We're down 40% in school numbers and a number of farms have been bought up by bigger land owners… So what was once a community on this Peninsula…that community shrank. A lot of them were very angry, there were a lot of depressed farmers out there – suicidal.
>
> (Vet married to farmer whose property near Meningie has been in the family since 1935)

Introduction

This paper gives an account of how an interdisciplinary partnership between arts, health and environment sectors went about contributing to community recovery following an environmental crisis, with all its social, economic and cultural implications. It concerns the 'Change and Adaptation' program managed by Country Arts South Australia in sites across the Southern Fleurieu and surrounds between 2012 and 2014. [2] Triggered by the devastating effects of the 'Millenium drought' on the Coorong, Lower Lakes and Murray Mouth region, this program was developed to support the community in its response by embedding arts-based approaches within non-arts organisations. Given the dearth of documentation about this kind of collaboration, an independent researcher was engaged to work closely with the team throughout, collecting feedback data to inform the continuous development of the program and build a model of practice based on the learning. While the conference presentation provides examples of specific projects, this paper focuses on the partnership itself. With details of the drought as background, it explains how the program grew out of the community's response and describes the concept and process of building a model of practice for an arts-based collaboration.

A background: the 'Millennium drought'

In the decade spanning 1997 to 2009 south-eastern Australia experienced a major drought, widely regarded as having the greatest impact on the environment and communities of any such event in 110 years of records. [3] For South Australia, as 'the driest state in the driest inhabited continent in the world', the effects were devastating. [4] Low rainfall and reduced run-off to catchments, both within the state and in the headwaters of the River Murray in New South Wales and Victoria, produced drastically reduced flows overall. This resulted in historically low allocations to irrigators, falling water levels in the exposed lake beds and lack of floodwaters to rejuvenate floodplains and wetlands. [3] Attention was drawn to the Coorong, Lower Lakes, Murray Mouth (CLLMM) region of South Australia located at the down-stream end of the Murray-Darling River system, where the extended drought compounded the effects of long term land management practices and evident impacts of climate change. [4]

The enormity of this conjunction of events and resulting ecological stress cannot be overstated. The 142,500 hectare CLLMM region is a Ramsar site (International Wetland convention) containing a diverse range of freshwater, estuarine and marine habitats, home to many endemic plant and animal species. Populations of rare waterbird, migratory shorebird, and orange-bellied parrots were threatened and the high biodiversity value of the area undermined. [3] For the traditional custodians, the Ngarrindjeri nation, freshwater flows down the Murray-Darling system are the lifeblood of their lands and waters which are inextricably linked to their living culture and community wellbeing [4.] The area falls partly within the current boundaries of Alexandrina Council which also comprises historically significant rural centres and coastal towns, so local employment in the agriculture, viticulture, fishing,

manufacturing, and tourism industries was affected. In summary, it left the 'internationally significant wetlands dry, the lakes disconnected, and communities and industries under significant stress'.[5]

The community responded to this experience with characteristic resourcefulness, addressing the severity of the physical impacts on wildlife and vegetation through local initiatives. Regeneration and water monitoring groups formed, 'The Lakes Hubs' at Milang and Meningie and the 'Goolwa to Wellington Local Action Planning Board' helped to disseminate information and provide collaborative links between government and local communities. The Ngarrindjeri community became actively involved in managing the re-vegetation of their lands. With the receding water and rising salinity levels in the lake, hundreds of Murray short-necked and long-neck turtles had become encrusted with tubeworm. Children from the Milang Primary School responded by creating 'The Turtle Shed' where they collected the turtles, chipped and scraped the 'coral' off their shells and returned them to freshwater.

Amidst controversy about appropriate management strategies and impact mitigation plans by governments and responsible agencies, many local people felt they were not adequately consulted despite being directly affected. Environmental and local industry groups formed to lobby members of parliament and voice their perspectives. Women took the lead in many cases as they observed the heavy toll it was taking on men in the community:

> …most [farming] husbands withdrew quite a lot. Because of the tremendous strain for them to get through their daily work, they were totally exhausted by the end of the day and they didn't want to see anybody, didn't want to do anything, they were really in depression. And as much as you tried to help them, they would not acknowledge or realise they had depression. But the women were still talking to each other and trying to find solutions.
>
> (Vet married to farmer whose property near Meningie has been in the family since 1935)

They found creative ways to draw attention to local perspectives, aided by the active arts community in the area:

> ….singing was just another way of saying to people "here's what we're up to. No, we're not just whingers from the end of the system down here, we've actually got something important to say here"…. We used our local resources to make a CD and sent it to all of the politicians for Christmas. It was called 'Murray Christmas'. And we sang [it] on the steps of Parliament House… [More effective than] if you'd stood there and thumped the table or whatever.
>
> (Female organic farmer and wine grower, Finniss resident 15 years)
>
> We had a lot of people from the arts community to help. One lady in particular took an exhibition up-stream, high up in South Australia, to let everyone know what was happening below Lock 1. She showed them through her art. And then they in turn came down here. That was really good for everyone to get to know each other and have a feel for what they were feeling too…
>
> (Member of Women's Industry Network SA, married to fisherman, Clayton Bay resident 50 years)

Reflecting the ways in which people across ages and cultures have tended to externalise and share experiences and views through creative expression, these activities presented an opportunity for Alexandrina Council to intensify its existing collaboration with Country Arts SA.

The program: 'Change and Adaptation'

Country Arts SA is a Statutory Authority established in 1992 by the South Australian Government to support arts and cultural development throughout the state's regions. As well as state-wide positions specialising in multi-art form development, arts and mental health, Indigenous arts and culture, for example, Country Arts SA adopts a decentralised approach, partnering with local governments to employ Arts and Cultural Development officers living and working in rural and remote locations. Increasingly health and community service providers are choosing to work with artists because they offer another way of looking at situations and therefore open up the possibility of alternative solutions. Arts initiatives in community settings have been found to be an effective way to bring people together,

reinforcing a sense of collective identity. They typically start from 'where people are', rather than imposing pre-cast solutions, and so are particularly helpful when exploring difficult issues.[6] Theoretically they align with broad social determinants of health and wellbeing and a 'strength-based' approach to creating conditions for positive change. The World Health Organisation's new regional policy framework 'Health 2020' provides a receptive context for the contribution of arts-based approaches to 'empowering citizens' and 'creating supportive environments and resilient communities'.[7] Thus Country Arts SA draws on a sound evidence and policy base in embedding arts and culture at the heart of communities as a powerful tool for generating more vibrant, viable and humane societies.[8]

In 2010/11 Country Arts SA in partnership with Alexandrina Council and key health and environment agencies sought funding from the Australia Council for the Arts to develop a major three year program in the region.[9] With the working title of 'Change and Adaptation', this program aimed to support the local communities' efforts to respond to their changing physical, economic and social environment in creative and constructive ways. The title for the embryonic program proved to be profoundly prophetic: before it was up and running the worst drought on record ended dramatically with one of the strongest 'La Niña' episodes the world had experienced. The Murray-Darling Basin received its largest total annual rainfall on record and south-eastern Australia recorded its fourth highest.[4] True to its name and reflecting the customary flexibility of artists working in communities, the program adjusted to this new direction. As the waters returned and the environmental crisis eased, attention shifted to the future and to reinforcing the community's capacity to survive further waves of change.

When the program officially got under way in 2012 no one could have predicted the extent to which 'changing' and 'adapting' would become the standard protocol, albeit from other causes. During the life of the program, partner organisations variously experienced major funding reforms, departmental restructuring, high turnover of senior personnel, re-aligning of jurisdictional boundaries, demolition of existing premises and relocation to temporary buildings pending construction of new facilities. As the program scope spread and diversified in response to the partners' changing priorities there was a risk of fragmentation, and the chance that it would come to resemble a string of projects in a shifting landscape rather than an integrated program. The idea of building a model of practice based on experience, introduced early on in recognition of the complexity of the approach, became even more opportune.

The rationale: why a 'model of practice'?

Aside from diversity of art forms employed, arts-based programs in communities are notoriously variable in approach and outcome insofar as they respond to relationships and context – whether physical, social, cultural, political and/or historical. Drawing on the creative ideas of the artists involved, typically they remain exploratory and open-ended throughout, reflecting the direction of the particular community's interests, needs and capacities. Thus there is no 'cookie cutter' template for practising art within communities in general and certainly no rule book for a structurally complex and evolving undertaking within a volatile climate as in the present case. While this unpredictability means individual programs are not readily amenable to conventional outcome-focused evaluation, nevertheless Clift makes a cogent case for the value of arts-based practice based on the 'face validity' of certain features of the field as a whole.[10] In evidence he stresses the proliferation of initiatives based on positive experiences and tangible benefits observed in practice, and the remarkable consistency in reports of positive personal experiences by participants.

In this context an alternative role for evaluation comes to the fore: studying the requisite qualities of effective process in order to support rigorous and self-reflective practice. Developing a model of practice based on the learning provides a framework for articulating, analysing and documenting process. Use of the term 'model' is not a reference to an ideal type but to the notion of a unifying rationale for how the program works in practice, rather than in the abstract, and what holds it together as a coherent approach.

The overarching aim of Change and Adaptation, in a nutshell, was to embed arts and cultural practice in non-arts organisations by introducing artists in aspects of their service provision. Structurally it comprised a multi-dimensional, layered partnership and its effectiveness relied on the quality of all of the composite relationships. The principal funding partnership was between Country Arts SA and the

major funding body, the Australia Council for the Arts, which defined the broad terms. Programmatically, however, the relevant partnership was between Country Arts SA and the five (health, environment and local government) partner organisations, each of which contributed financially to specified projects. Program managers from Country Arts SA negotiated with these partners to identify agency sites that could benefit from arts-based input and agree on suitable projects. Lead artists then developed projects through collaboration with staff in the chosen agencies and/or directly with community members using music, creative writing, cartoon, puppetry, sculpture, photography, public art, digital animation or film to make ephemeral and enduring works. Overall the program delivered 23 separate projects over a range of sites, many of which were hosted by more than one partner organisation. Clearly the operational partnerships at different levels were all crucial to effective program delivery.

Constructing the model of practice

Building the model was one of the main intended outcomes of integrating research in the program from its inception. The building process is incremental and inclusive, informed by the perspectives of partners, organisational staff, artists and community participants. Research functions at each level were critical to this process, in particular:

- incorporating the expectations and priorities of all **partner organisations** by participating in whole of program sessions involving presentations and discussions designed to maintain an overview, supplemented by regular meetings with individual managers;

- supporting the development of knowledge, skills and practical tools in evaluation within the team of **lead artists** to enable them to gather feedback on the ground and appraise their practice; this involved quarterly workshops interspersed with individual 'debriefing' meetings and visits to project sites to observe practice, meet with participants and agency staff or view performances, exhibitions and presentations.

The artists' role in collecting and reflecting on feedback was particularly important given the number and distribution of projects across dispersed locations, variously running for days or months at a time, which made a centralised approach unmanageable. Support for their role therefore comprised a more intensive strategy.

The model (currently under development) will detail the program structure, governance, delivery, artistic approaches, research role and tools that were developed to support practice. Feedback related to each of these aspects is being analysed critically to identify lessons in effectiveness. Below are examples of key factors already identified as influencing the ability to embed arts practice in non-arts organisations.

Clarity about definitions of 'health'

Different understandings of health and how it is promoted within communities underpin the work of each partner organisation. Whether the organisation operates mainly in the medical realm of individualised health, focuses on reducing risk factors in particular groups, or adopts a socioecological approach based on multifaceted relationships of determinants, will have a direct impact on the scope and nature of collaborative opportunities with artists. For the environmental partners 'health' was understood to be a quality of both the environment and the community as interdependent parts of the whole. Project outcomes were therefore defined in terms of community engagement as a pathway to wellbeing, which is readily achievable through the arts. By contrast, the health sector was more nuanced. One health service manager, for example, was facing widespread reforms directing the organisation's focus away from health promotion towards a narrower service delivery role, so the opportunities to incorporate arts approaches were contracting:

> The 'embedding' bit is the frightening bit for me because I'm [having] to divest myself of an [existing] art program, so it's a bit of dilemma… the actual artwork will be embedded… but how we can integrate [art] into our core business will be interesting in the future. (Health partner)

Internal organisational stability

Instability within an organisation creates uncertainty about staff roles, making it difficult for them to engage with new and sometimes challenging ideas about practice. In one partner organisation the artist was working directly with a staff group undergoing major re-structuring. While the intention was to support staff in this process, feedback from one member early in the project described resistance among her colleagues to anything remotely associated with the changes:

> A handful of staff are struggling with the changes and pulling others along…. They are tired and bitter and destabilised with rolling re-structures over a period of time – workers now feel they have no power or control or support. Some are less resistant, but are sitting back and watching before deciding. Will they get energised? Will they sit at their desk or join in? (Health staff)

The project culminated in a musical performance recognising the imminent demolition of their facilities. Largely as a result of the artist's careful respect for staff concerns in combination with supportive staff in key roles, in the event it was well-subscribed and a conspicuous success:

> I was so impressed with the staff turn-out to the 'Demolition Symphony' – everyone came out of their offices to see the spectacle, despite some having said they would boycott anything to do with the re-building. (Health staff)

Communication within partner organisations

As well as cooperation between the partner organisations, the program relied on there being good communication channels within each organisation. Clear commitment at management level was important, but equally so was conveying the value of arts-based approaches to agency staff. In one case, for example, a gap in understanding became evident between the manager – who could see the broad picture and recognise small signs of progress – and the staff on the ground, who had not fully engaged with the process:

> It has had some significant impacts into how we're delivering things. Probably if you ask my staff on the ground, they wouldn't realise, but you can see it from above… how it opened up communication about the stolen generation, started discussion…from a social perspective we've seen improvement because they [the community] are starting to talk about it. (Health partner)

Mutual respect for the distinct roles of artists and organisational staff

The value of embedding artists is not to have them replicate health workers' roles but to offer a complementary approach. Collaboration was most productive in examples where staff and artists understood their respective roles and ways of working. Shifts in practice were made possible by an organisational culture allowing for flexibility and encouraging staff to consider different ways to engage with communities:

> We really took on board some of those things, and certainly the technology…. So if you can be innovative, you can translate that into something that people [community] are more used to…. It's provided the conversation for these things to happen. (Health partner)

Conclusion

'Change and Adaptation' established a series of strong and effective partnerships which introduced powerful arts experiences into the work of non-arts organisations. The three year program demonstrated that this can be a successful way to support communities' efforts to recover from an environmentally triggered crisis such as drought. There are promising signs that the foundations have been laid for enduring relationships between the arts and other sectors, however it is clear that policy shifts destabilising many public services will remain a significant barrier to the longer term planning and commitment on which this relies.

Returning to the lessons from the drought that sparked this program, one of the community members reflected:

…now people are thinking about the whole river system, not just their own back door… we'll be ready next time to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Unofficially, this conviction may be about to be tested as the community watches the water levels dropping again since the start of 2015 …

References

1. Quotes by primary producers are drawn from interviews conducted in the consultation phase of 'Change and Adaptation' by writer Catherine Murphy.

2. The individuals and organisations responsible for the planning, creative development, funding and delivery of the Change and Adaptation program are acknowledged, too many to detail here. For information about all artists, organisations and staff involved refer to: www.changeandadaptation.com.au

3. International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management. Response to Drought in South Australia: A Case Study in Adaptive Management Proceedings of a workshop held on 7 December 2011 Hosted by the International Centre of Excellence in Water Resources Management with the support of the South Australian Department for Water May 2012. [cited 27 March 2015]. Available from URL: http://www.icewarm.com.au

4. Commonwealth of Australia. Case Studies on Biodiversity Conservation: Volume 2. Second interim report of the inquiry into Australia's biodiversity in a changing climate. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Climate Change, Environment and the Arts November 2012 Canberra. [cited 27 March 2015]. Available from URL: http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=ccea/ccbio/report/secondinterimreport/chapter3.pdf

5. Department for Environment and Heritage (DEH). Securing the future: a long-term plan for the Coorong, Lower lakes and Murray Mouth. Government of South Australia. 2010.

6. Putland C. Arts and Health – a Guide to the Evidence. Background report included in National Arts and Health Framework (2012 Institute for Creative Health). [cited 20 April 2015]. Available from URL: http://mcm.arts.gov.au/national-arts-and-health-framework

7. Clift S. Creative Arts and Public Health. Editorial. Arts and Health 2014; 6: 3. [cited 20 April 2015]. Available from URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2014.886146

8. Matarasso F. The Parliament of Dreams: why everything depends on culture. [unpublished paper accessed 2010 from URL: http://web.me/com/matarasso

9. Funding was received from federal government through the Australia Council for the Arts 'Community Partnerships, Creative Communities Partnership Initiative' and managed by Country Arts SA with program partners: Southern Fleurieu Health Service (Country Health SA); Alexandrina Council; SA Department of Environment, Water and Natural Resources; Murray Mallee Community Health Service (SA Health, Aboriginal Health); and, Southern Adelaide, Fleurieu, Kangaroo Island Medicare Local (SAFKIML non-profit primary health care organisation funded by federal government).

10. Clift S. Creative arts as a public health resource: moving from practise-based research to evidence-based practice. Perspectives in Public Health 2012; 132 3:120-127.

Presenter

Christine Putland is a consultant specialising in research and evaluation of arts and cultural initiatives designed to improve public health and wellbeing. She has a background spanning community arts, public policy, and public health fields. Her qualifications include an Honours degree from the Flinders University Drama Centre, DipEd in Drama and English teaching from Sydney University, a Masters and PhD from the Flinders Institute for Public Policy and Management. Christine worked in community development and community services management in local government and non-government organisations within SA and NSW for more than a decade. She later joined the

Department of Public Health at Flinders University as manager of a research consultancy for the Commonwealth Government. Having completed her PhD in 1999, Christine then taught graduate programs in Public Health and Primary Health Care, was an investigator on nationally competitive ARC and NHMRC research grants, and convened national training programs for health and arts practitioners in evaluation and research methods. Since 2007 she has focused on researching arts and health, while retaining academic status at Flinders University. She is currently involved in research and evaluation in relation to several major arts and cultural initiatives in rural and remote South Australia.