

The Challenge of Active Community Engagement

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I suggested to Maggi that she introduce me as an ex-circus strongman, not because I wanted to terrify you all into submission, but because it gives me an opening for an anecdote.

Twenty years ago, while touring Europe with Circus Oz, we arrived in a Dutch town where the presenters of our show had already designed and distributed their own poster. Across an image of a human pyramid was imposed a very long Dutch word that I could not understand. Upon asking, I was told that the English translation was 'highstanders' and it referred to those brave souls who climbed to top of these human walls of flesh. And what was the word to describe the poor buggers on the bottom, I asked. 'Understanders', I was told. It was an epiphany. Suddenly I understood my vocation. As a direct result, here I am now.

I will start by stating the obvious: this was, is and always will be blackfella country. I am a boat person (literally). I thank those who know what it means to belong this country, for the opportunity they may offer my daughter (who was born here) to learn what belonging may mean. The fact that this gift may still be available, in the face of all that has happened in the last two hundred years, constantly fills me with wonder and gratitude.

But, if we really want to authentically belong this country, to transcend being simply occupiers, we must, beyond reaching a mutually agreed accommodation with the custodians, be prepared to learn from them what the responsibilities are that go with nurturing, rather than exploiting, country.

Amongst these responsibilities is the maintenance of keeping places: those sites of place, and of mind, where the heritages of cultures are kept. And this keeping is not just a matter of storage but of daily use. Just as blackfella culture is not some memory of a pre-invasion tribal golden age, but a range of living, dynamic and ever-developing responses to contemporary conditions and experiences, so it is, or should be, with all cultures.

The challenge for the custodians of the keeping places is twofold:

- to ensure that our keeping places house the full diversity of our heritages; and
- to ensure that our heritages remain connected to our daily lives.

These two responsibilities, in the language of the policy makers, can be summarised in two words: diversity and engagement.

I've been asked to speak today, not because I'm in any way an expert on houses of heritage or places of exhibition, but because I've contributed, in a small way, to massaging the ideas floating around at the moment into a shape that appears to be relevant to contemporary issues, or at least to those issues that public planners are trying to grapple with.

The main focus of my work has been to draw connections between the role of culture in the development of wellbeing and sustainability in general, and in community building and capacity in particular.

Consequently notions of participation, engagement and empowerment have figured significantly in my thinking. The most coherent version of this thought appears in the small volume I've written for the Cultural Development Network of Victoria entitled, *'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning'*.

In this work, I use 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights).

In this context, the concept 'culture' describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

A couple of months ago, I was asked by Deborah Mills to comment on a draft of Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government in New South Wales. Building on her original work, I suggested this preamble as a description of culture:

Our culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations.

Our culture connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society.

Our culture describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves.

Our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative.

This description demonstrates that culture describes those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence.

This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

And, of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

As I hope is obvious from this description, the function of social memory is critical to cultural vitality. And memory, to remain healthy, requires exercise – not simply in the revisitation of memorabilia but in the active social application of our memories to the matter of our daily lives.

And it is in this necessary application that the topic of this address comes into focus.

The challenge of active community engagement.

The most immediate challenge is to give this concept a useful meaning. And this is not as easy as might first appear. Allow me to illustrate:

Three months ago, our state government launched its new arts policy, 'Creative Capacity+'.

The Age, reporting on the policy the following day, appended 37 column centimetres of editorial to a photo twice the size of the copy. Fair enough, a picture can often tell the story much more effectively than words. And in this case, The Age editors got it exactly right: the picture was of 11 schoolgirls looking, across a fence, at 3 very old skeletons.

This, to announce a policy that's first goal is 'Arts for all Victorians: A Culture of Participation'. Looking at bones from behind a fence is perceived as an appropriate image to illustrate participation. In a brochure entitled 'Arts Count' that accompanied the policy document, we were told that 68.3% of Victorians have been to the movies, 37.5% have been to a library and so on. It turns out that statistics like this are the measure of participation.

One wonders whether the number of people who attend AFL games would be seriously accepted as a measure of participation in sport. Yet this is exactly what's happening in the arts. What's more, even before the Premier launched the policy proper, he took time out to tell us that the admission price to the Melbourne Museum was to be reduced – and that this was an absolute indication of the government's commitment to participation.

Let's imagine for a moment Justin Madden proclaiming the cornerstone of Victoria's new sports policy as being a reduced admission price to the Museum of Sport. It wouldn't happen.

How is it that we know exactly what it means to participate in sport, but get totally confused when we use the same word to describe our relationship to the arts?

Please don't think that I am using this example to denigrate the function of cultural institutions like museums. As I have already said, we need keeping places. And, as far as I'm concerned, as public services, they should be able to offer free access to the citizenry. What I'm questioning is how the concept of participation is being applied.

Twenty years ago, 'participation and access' were key concepts in the development of public planning. After more than a decade in the cellar, they are now re-emerging as support terms for this year's key concepts, 'engagement' and 'capacity'.

There was a time when participation and access were ideas with widely agreed meanings. These meanings, for better or worse, have stayed in the cellar.

At least in the public rhetoric of 'The Arts', current usage displays both a counter-productively broad definition and a reduced appreciation of the need to distinguish more relevantly between types of engagement. For example, museum attendances are referred to as 'participation rates'. Reading a catalogue is participation. Buying a postcard in the gallery shop is participation. Being a volunteer attendant is participation. Experiencing an interactive exhibit is participation. Being part of a reference group is participation. Actively contributing to the content of an exhibition is participation.

Being able to analyse the cultural significance of types of engagement is severely restricted when they are lumped into categories so wide that critically different activities all appear as one. This is not a very useful way of looking at the world.

As an alternative, I have developed a framework that I believe makes sense of engagement; one that makes it easier to recognise key engagement factors and that can then usefully inform strategy development and program design.

I suggest that all the afore-mentioned 'participations' are types of engagement: some are about making culture, some about ingesting it; some are more creative than others.

Being able to distinguish between them is necessary because their differences are profound – both in essence and, as important from a policy-making perspective, in resource needs, social impact and application of sustainability strategies. All these various types of engagement require different approaches.

There are two streams of cultural engagement: participation and reception, producing and consuming, breathing out and breathing in; we make culture, culture makes us.

These streams run constantly in both directions: in our daily lives they are always in dialogue, eddying around in our consciousness: we talk, we listen; we make, we learn; we show, we watch. A large part of life is the rhythm of movement between one mode and the other, of often being in both at once.

Nevertheless, envisaging them as distinct functions is both reasonable and useful.

Across this spectrum from production to consumption, our imagination engages at shifting levels of intensity. To the most intense, we apply the term 'creative'; to the least, the term 'managed'. This is the second axis.

Both participation and reception can be creative; both can be managed.

In both the participation and the reception streams, the fish are jumping – creativity can be at play: jolts of intuition, shocks of lateral connection, conceptual leaps that transcend rational processes, lightning strikes of illumination. This is the creative side of the spectrum. Yes it is electrical, yes it is stormy, yes it can be dangerous and scary and risky AND YES IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR SURVIVAL - essential not only that we cherish those who do this sort of thing all the time (commonly known as Artists), BUT ALSO THAT we **all** get used to doing it a lot. This is the creative aspect. The most potent form of active engagement.

And in both streams, merchant vessels ply their trades (this extended metaphor appears to work). That is, agencies pursue their goals. It may be to improve public health; it may be to sell a million CDs; it may be to cheaply human resource an international sporting event; it may be to attract more customers; it may be to educate the young. This is the managed side of the spectrum. The objectives of the 'merchants' tend to direct or at least mediate the behaviour and experience of those that are being engaged. This is the managed aspect.

This framework offers a simple way of visualising the varying, but related, modes of engagement with cultural action.

It shows a horizontal distinction between the two modes of engagement: we make culture (participation) and culture makes us (reception).

Then there is a vertical distinction that can be made on the basis of creative intensity. The apex is maximum empowered, active and direct creativity, in sharp focus. The base is a directed and mediated engagement with little control in the hands of the engaged (apart from passive choice – and sometimes even that is missing) and little imaginative stimulation.

These splits create quadrants that combine to provide a reasonably comprehensive, realistic and simple way of approaching cultural engagement; it's built on an intelligent analysis of what actually happens in the world, it appears to meaningfully reflect real-world events, it offers interesting measurement possibilities; it identifies the mode in which maximum engagement is possible. All these, particularly the last, should make it a very useful planning and evaluation tool.

The grey areas separating, or joining, the quadrants symbolise the overlaps, simultaneities and constant transformations between the modes.

Even so, against these two (fuzzy) axis (participation/reception; degree of creative intensity), every contribution to culture, every particular type of engagement can be precisely placed (that is, if one wished to).

The creative/managed axis

Creativity is an enormously difficult idea to describe, and its absence even more so.

An operational description of 'creative'

First there is nothing and then there is something. This is the creation moment. Most cultures have a creation myth, that moment when nothing became something. When we became anthropocentric, we took upon ourselves this capacity, although we have continued to suspect that its source may lie beyond mortal ken. It certainly lies beyond the constructions of rationality, indeed in a rationalist world, creativity has come to describe functions that lie beyond rational calculations.

Making something out of nothing, reaching a conclusion that could not be rationally deduced (ie out of thin air), intuitive leaps, inspired manipulation of shape and form, visitations by the muse – these are some of our ways of describing and interpreting creativity.

What we do know is that creativity is an essential ingredient of vitality and consequently of health and sustainability. We know that, no matter how mysterious and how risky, we must plan for creativity to flower. We know, with the problems we face, the capacity to transcend reason is a really valuable solution-development tool.

In arts practice, something being made out of nothing goes with the territory. This is why we recognise that arts practice is where the most intensive forms of creativity occur – in this realm things are regularly made out of nothing – a song, a tune, a poem, an image.

There are degrees of creativity. Less intense, but probably equally important, is the creativity inherent in transformation. Turning ideas into plans, speeches, designs, or theatre can be thought of as ‘applied’ creativity. Here we begin to see intuition and reason in interaction and are moving along the scale towards the ‘managed’ pole.

An operational description of ‘managed’

Engagement in which independence is mediated; actions may be directed or guided; there are pre-determined outcomes aimed for by the guides; engagement is influenced by agents with purposes other than the interests of the engaged.

This isn’t necessarily a bad thing: it describes supervised education, for example. I’m attempting here to describe a spectrum of ‘engagement consciousnesses’, not, at this point, to comparatively evaluate them.

The modes of engagement

These two axis (participation/reception; creative/managed) create four modes of cultural engagement that allow us to focus on what are clearly four quite different behaviours and attitudes requiring discrete analysis, evaluation and strategies.

Creative participation

Doing it. Hands on culture-making. Empowered, direct and active engagement. The cultural right: actively participating in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one’s society.

Managed participation

The efforts of those that make a living facilitating, distributing, presenting, exhibiting, publishing, selling, promoting, administering, funding, managing, conserving, protecting, curating, maintaining, teaching, training, educating, hiring, cleaning up, interpreting, analysing, criticising, researching in and around the sites of cultural production.

The work of volunteer fundraisers and ushers, interpreters and committee members, the equipment hire organisations, venue management, arts department government workers, arts teachers, community arts facilitators, cultural studies academics.

Creative reception

The most obvious (although it crosses over into participation pretty quickly) is 'audience' activity at dance parties. There are many others: book groups, doing cryptic crosswords, intense, kinetic museum tours where there is an expectation of 'observer' interaction, behind-the-scenes workshops, indeed receiving training of all kinds. The most subtle and profound, mysterious and often invisible of all creative reception is the world-view changes that occur through contact with the work of artists.

Managed reception

Consumption of cultural products in a primarily recreational/leisure context. Traditionally this has been the main area of measuring cultural vitality. In the context of the new paradigm it is obvious why this is no longer appropriate. Nevertheless, this mode produces hugely significant economic impacts AND there is always the chance that creative reception is involved.

Significant overlaps, ebbs and flows

We all operate in all of these modes at various times, sometimes in more than one at the same time.

Managed participation often slides into becoming creative participation as those engaged assume autonomy (singers becoming songwriters) and vice versa, as they relinquish control, lessen their focus (artists becoming teachers).

But becomings are not permanent state changes: many individuals have developed skills that allow them to alternate between (or operate simultaneously in) the participation modes

Creative reception can (and is often expressly designed to) lead into creative participation (students become artists).

What relevance does this have to the managers of museums and galleries?

Simply, that increasing visitation, more effective interactive exhibits and community consultation are all well and good but they can't be claimed as manifestations of active community engagement. They are valuable but none of them land in the creative participation quadrant.

For the keeping places to achieve active community engagement, they must assiduously facilitate communities telling their own stories.

And not just stories of long ago, though these are important, but the stories of now, of the connections between the past and the present and the future.

And we need to constantly remind ourselves that there are an infinite number of ways in which stories can be told – in words, in images, in movement, in music, in objects.

I will conclude with something I wrote in *'The Fourth Pillar'*:

'Knowing where we have come from helps us to discover where we want to go. Our social memory and our repositories of insight and understanding are essential elements to our sense of belonging. Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present.'

We are born into complex surroundings. Our environment is more than paddocks and rivers, trees and climate, roads and buildings. We are also surrounded by memories, attitudes, songs and stories. These inheritances are as much a part of our environment as the earth beneath our feet and the air we breath.

They make us what we are. To know who we are, we need to know what made us.

What we become is deeply influenced by this heritage, both physical and spiritual. The meaning we make of our lives - what we call our culture, grows from this soil. The culture we make, the life we lead, the hopes we nourish, will be the richer from our understanding of our roots.

Losing touch with the stories of our predecessors risks our humanity and threatens our environment and our culture. It is impossible to make new stories, new songs, if we have forgotten the language, misplaced the music.

Thank you and I wish you a productive and engaging day.

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