

Community Cultural Development according to Adams & Goldbard

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The Rockefeller Foundation has recently published two books by Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, *Creative Community: the Art of Cultural Development* (2001) and *Community, Culture and Globalization* (2002).

Creative Community is an expanded version of the authors' report to the Foundation on their Partnerships Affirming Community Transformation (PACT) program. It focuses on 'community cultural development's definition, history, theoretical underpinnings and current conditions in the United States' with the intention of 'develop[ing] both the theory and practice of community cultural development'. The more recent volume is a collection of essays and interviews from a conference held at the Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Centre in May, 2001. Among the score or so of participants from all over the world were the Footscray-based founder of Vietnamese Youth Media, Tony Le Nguyen and the Brisbane-based co-ordinators of Feral Arts, Sarah Moynihan and Norm Horton.

Adams and Goldbard are well credentialed: they've had considerable hands-on experience in the community cultural development field and have had their own consultancy firm, specialising in cultural development, for over twenty five years.

For brevity's sake, I will refer to their books as A&G01 and A&G02 respectively, and to community cultural development as ccd.

I've been asked to review these books as a contribution to the theme of this edition of *Artwork*: the similarities and differences between international work and our own.

Implicit in my brief is the question whether the A&G publications are a useful way into discovering what our overseas colleagues are thinking and doing. My response is unequivocally positive: these books are, as they are intended to be, extremely valuable contributions to the documentation of the 'theory and practice of ccd' and I strongly recommend them to all those who take this work seriously.

The two publications are viewed by the authors as 'companion volume(s)' and they certainly complement each other very well, A&G01 being slanted towards principles and A&G02 towards practice.

Given my obsessions, I am much better able to deal with the former than the latter, and so that's the area I'll concentrate on.

Apart from their many other qualities, A&G are very good at encapsulating concepts in lists. There are two really good ones in A&G01. The first identifies seven 'unifying principles' that the authors believe guide the work of 'practitioners of ccd' (p14). The second nominates seven 'core beliefs about the nature of the social transformation [that ccd] seeks to advance' (p61)

These two lists provide the most comprehensive and rigorous collation of ccd principles that I've encountered and I believe they deserve close scrutiny, particularly for their potential to affect the way we think about ccd here.

Later, I will examine each of their points in detail, but first, I will address an issue that emerges in both A&G's work and in the theory that has developed in Australia. It has to do with the way in which the question 'what is ccd?' is answered.

I'll start by observing that Australia may be the only country in the world that has a central government authority with a declared responsibility for the support of ccd along with a network of independent State-based (and state supported) organisations with a similar function (the community arts networks). Ever since the convicts arrived, we have been a society in which government agency (and agencies) has played a crucial role. Not even the worst excesses of economic rationalism have overcome our deeply held

commitment to the expectation that government is a hugely important structure through which to initiate and achieve social objectives.

This context has meant that we almost always perceive social action (and indeed cultural action) as being something that is initiated by government (or at least government subsidised) 'experts'. I am not suggesting that this is either good or bad, simply that it happens. As examples, I cite the fact that the independent community arts networks I mentioned earlier were initiated and established by government. When the Victorian community arts network was 'defunded' in 1994, no grassroots organisation emerged to continue its work – it was not until some seven years later, when two local governments collaborated to establish a new network, that a web of interconnectedness re-emerged. Even the term ccd was introduced into Australia by government (in the face of strong opposition from the field, as I describe at the end of this article).

As a further example, witness the description of ccd provided by the Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board (the Commonwealth Government's arts funding authority)¹:

'ccd describes collaborations between communities and artists ...'

This is in stark contrast with Deidre Williams's description in the pamphlet 'What is Community Art?'²

'ccd is a process which works towards an environment in which democratic exchange of cultural expressions can occur.'

In the first description ccd is envisioned as a professional practice: the placement of artists with communities. In the second, it is the actual process that is nominated as the essence.

Looking at A&G's lists (and extrapolating from the community control rhetoric of both mainstream and oppositional American rhetoric), it would be reasonable to presume that their descriptive focus would tend to the community process end of this spectrum. But, when they do attempt the one sentence 'what-it-is' summary, they go the same way as our bureaucracy does: "ccd" describes the work of artist-organisers ("community artists") who collaborate with others to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building cultural capacity and contributing to social change.' (A&G02, p8).

I'm not about to argue that ccd doesn't describe the work of "community artists". Of course it does. What I am saying is that by creating a description that focuses solely on intervention (even when softened to collaboration), we are in danger of forgetting that ccd is a phenomenon that communities engage in, at various levels of intensity, as an ordinary part of being, or becoming, communities.

Look for a moment at a similar concept: Early Childhood Development. This idea refers to something that children do – they develop. There are experts that specialise in facilitating this development, but ECD isn't their work, it is the field in which they work. This may seem like splitting hairs, but especially in the Australian context, I'm convinced that it has serious consequences, not least, the unspoken assumption that if there's not a (subsidised) artist in the picture, then it's not happening.

The fact is, these two ways of envisaging ccd are not mutually exclusive. For example, 'cooking' can describe the professional practice of chefs as well as describing the food preparation processes that humans have undertaken since they discovered the effect of heat on food. Problems only arise when it is assumed that the only legitimate definition is

¹ From 'hands ON!', a brochure produced by the ccdB in 2002.

² A pamphlet published by the Community Arts Network SA in 1996.

the professional practice one, or when this is the only one expressed. And I fear that this, in the case of ccd, is often the case.

Before reading the A&G material, I had thought that this was an exclusively Australian problem, arising out of the cultural peculiarities I mentioned earlier and the fact that 'recognised' ccd in this country is predominantly funded by an agency that's primary function is the support of professional artists and facilitated through organisations (the community arts networks) that are de facto professional associations of community arts workers (including the legion of cultural development workers employed by local government).

But, it would appear, at least if the A&G material can be taken as an indication, that this process of professional appropriation of ccd (and arts appropriation, for that matter) is happening globally.

While I respect and applaud artists who wish to engage with communities, and with creative people who wish to apply their talents to community service, I get extremely nervous when ccd becomes reified (turned into a thing) as a professional practice when the entire philosophy of ccd runs counter to this.

And while I think that it is imperative that professionals who wish to work in a ccd context do develop principles that inform their work, it seems to me that in so doing, they must not fall into the trap of thinking that they are the focus. It is so reminiscent of Lawyers believing that they embody Justice, Doctors believing that they embody Health, and Teachers believing that they embody Learning that it gives me nightmares. With ccd we have a little bit of human activity that hasn't been colonised by 'experts' and here we are busily covering this last acreage of bush with bitumen.

I believe that it is most useful to think of ccd as referring to the processes a community goes through as it discovers its social identity and purpose and its capacity to express this identity and purpose.

It is possible (perhaps probable) that this discovery and expression will evolve more quickly if creative activities are embedded in the processes, and likewise, if outside facilitators are employed.

It is reasonable to refer to these facilitators as ccd workers but to then call ccd the work of these facilitators (thus implying that that's all there is to ccd, thereby rendering invisible the fact that ccd is an integral part of every community's journey, for better or for worse) is to fall prey to the very influences that ccd principles purport to counter.

To me, it's remarkable that it's not until the very end of A&G02 (p374) that the authors acknowledge that:

'... apart from cultural development as a professional practice, the responsibility to preserve, cultivate and extend culture is universal. Good parents do this when they nurture their children's growth as autonomous beings ... The dedicated teacher, the engaged librarian, the imaginative recreation leader and the democratic political leader will deploy community cultural development skills in their efforts to involve people in constructing lives of meaning and service.'

In the last gasp, so to speak, the universality of ccd is recognised, although still in terms of skill, leadership and responsibility – of 'experts'. Why is it so hard to accept that ordinary humans, through social intercourse, invest their lives with meaning – that this is an inevitable, ineluctable process that happens no matter how harsh the environment, how embattled the participants, how malignant the external forces? Of course, visionary leadership can help to focus a community's will, but ultimately the key to all democratic energy must lie in a faith in the innate capacity of humans to see for themselves, to make their own culture.

In response to overwhelming circumstances, communities may become fractured, individuals isolated and meanings warped and destructive, but that doesn't mean that ccd is not happening, rather that it is operating dysfunctionally – that development is becoming envelopment, that the creative capacities of communities are wrapped up and enclosed rather than unleashed and liberated. Reversing this tendency can be achieved through an infinite number of strategies, some of which may involve creative facilitators working in communities to help them uncover capacities they have forgotten they have. The people with this calling need and deserve respect and admiration (and training, support and networks) but what they don't need, or deserve, is to be loaded up with the entire baggage of ccd on their backs alone. Community cultural development is what communities do; ccd workers help.

So, with this concern expressed, I will now examine the A&G lists. First, the seven 'unifying principles' that the authors believe guide the work of 'practitioners of ccd':

Active participation in cultural life is an essential goal of ccd.

This is an admirable opening sentiment, although 'of ccd' is a tad redundant – it's simply an essential goal. And perhaps 'community' should be inserted between 'active' and 'participation'. I'm also getting a bit leery about 'participation', although 'active' always helps. A lot of government material runs fast and loose with this word. I've seen voting, attending a meeting and going to a movie all called participation. These may be active but more often than not, they're not.

Also, I think there's a danger of maintaining marginality with this principle expressed in this way. 'Cultural life' could be taken to refer to that of one's own community rather than of society at large. Elsewhere, I've developed an argument for a Cultural Right that goes: the right to actively participate in the social production of the values and aspirations that inform one's society. Perhaps the declaration of this right is a clearer summary of the sentiments behind the A&G first principle

All cultures are essentially equal, and society should not promote one as superior to the others.

I can think of a bunch of cultures that I'd have no compunction promoting as 'inferior' – Nazism, Fascism, for that matter, Capitalism; that is, cultures with values that are based on, and glorify, inequality. While this principle is laudable in its desire to eliminate exclusion and to promote inter-cultural respect, it is dangerously close to drowning the baby in the bath water. If we are imagining a harmonious global village of spectacular diversity, there have to be some mutually agreed 'basic human rights' that all cultures accept – that transcend cultural specificity. Mutual and egalitarian respect is one thing - untrammelled relativism is quite another.

Diversity is a social asset, part of the cultural commonwealth, requiring protection and nourishment.

Beautifully and succinctly put.

Culture is an effective crucible for social transformation, one that can be less polarising and create deeper connections than other social change arenas.

I think this one is a bit woosy. Surely, social transformation, at least of the democratic kind, is utterly dependent on cultural action – culture is *the* crucible. As to what other social change arenas might be, I can't imagine, except if culture is being used here to mean 'art', in which case, there's room for a big argument.

Cultural expression is a means of emancipation, not the primary end in itself; the process is as important as the product.

I suspect that this one results from summary failure. Reading A&G's explanatory text, they are actually addressing the 'community art equals bad art' cliché. With them, I absolutely reject this 'red herring', as they put it.

However, their abstract is problematic: cultural expression is a basic human right – it is an end in itself; yes, it will lead to all sorts of outcomes, not least emancipation, but fundamentally it requires no more justification than its nomination as a basic right.

And I'd go as far as to say that the process is more important than the product. It is the act of expression that is primary; the what and the how are secondary.

Culture is a dynamic protean whole, and there is no value in creating artificial boundaries within it.

I think there's a bit of summary failure here too. A&G are talking about hierarchies of aesthetic values designed to consolidate the position of those in power and yes, these need to be exposed and rejected.

But humans cannot help but invent categories, which by their very nature are 'artificial'. The challenge is to resist nominating some as better than others, and to embrace constant cross-fertilisation, synthesis and change.

Artists have roles as agents of transformation that are more socially valuable than mainstream art-world roles – and certainly equal in legitimacy.

This one seems a bit defensive for my taste. Transformation goes with the territory of art. The evaluation of a particular piece of art's social impact may not be possible for years after its production. Surely it's enough to say that artists that choose to work with communities deserve legitimacy and respect, and possibly more respect, because of their preparedness to subsume their individual creative imperatives within the process of liberating the creativity of others (presuming, of course, that that is what they are doing).

And now for the 'core beliefs about the nature of the social transformation (that ccd) seeks to advance':

Critical examination of cultural values can reveal ways in which oppressive messages have been internalised by members of marginalised communities. Comprehending this 'internalisation of the oppressor' is often the first step toward learning to speak one's own truth in one's authentic voice.

This is absolutely true, but I can't help but feel that it's expressed in a rather patronising way. I know it's not the intention, but it smacks a bit of the missionary bringing light to the natives.

Apart from this, we all (not just marginalised communities) internalise the oppressor (the need that some community artists feel to be respected by the very interests that they are opposing is a case in point). Perhaps this should be acknowledged.

It also begs the question of how the social transformation of a marginalised community can be achieved in the face of the continuing existence (and power) of the 'oppressor'. But then, this is true of all localised community work so now that I've raised it, I'm going to beg it as well.

Live, active social experience strengthens individuals' ability to participate in democratic discourse and community life, whereas an excess of passive, isolated experience disempowers.

Yes, and it's a fundamental reason for democratising cultural production.

Society will always be improved by the expansion of dialogue and by the active participation of all communities and groups in exploring and resolving social issues.

An eloquent, and spectacularly non-threatening way of expressing the positive virtues of disputation.

Self-determination is an essential requirement of the dignity and social participation of all communities. No narrow interest within society should have the power to shape social arrangements for all the others.

Obviously yes, but these 'narrow interest(s)' are very good at promoting themselves as broad, even 'representative'. This deserves more thought.

A goal of ccd work is to expand liberty for all, so long as no community's definition of "liberty" impinges on the basic human rights of others.

Sounds good, but it smacks a bit of the American Dream to me. Perhaps we discover freedom through mutuality, through recognition of connectedness, through our understanding of citizenship.

A goal of ccd work is to promote equality of opportunity among groups and communities, helping to redress inequalities wherever they appear.

I think this requires amplification. Opportunity to do what? We all have an equal opportunity to speak, but not an equal opportunity to be heard. Again, 'equal opportunity' is a key facet of many repressive ideologies (as is 'liberty'). Work needs to be done to reclaim these concepts.

ccd work helps create conditions in which the greatest number are able to discover their potentials and use their resources to advance these aims.

This reads like another attempt to appropriate mainstream American ideology in the service of progressive ends. Fair enough, but I wonder whether it translates into practice?

Greatest number? ccd, at least that portion defined as professional practice, is hardly a mass movement. Or is it saying that, as a practice, it has a more profound and widespread effect on those exposed to it than any other practice?

And what's this 'their resources' – why not 'gain access to the resources they need'? Or is there an expectation of self-generated sustainability implicit here?

The intended meaning, at least to my mind, is not at all clear.

* * *

Examining these points has demonstrated, to me at least, that there is value in looking across the oceans, of recognising that common cause transcends cultures, climates and continents. At the same time, it is fascinating to see how our experience, our culture, gives us a different view of things, a different approach and a different way of saying, and doing, what may be the same thing.

As a last aside, it is interesting to speculate on the original source for this phrase 'community cultural development'. A&G don't identify an originating moment, although they devote considerable space to describing its predecessors. Nor do they, in their theoretical work, acknowledge its use in Australia (we are over the horizon).

Its origin in this country is shrouded in mystery. In 1987, what was then the Community Arts Board (of which I was Director) was causing the Labor Government such grief (then as now, we supported Palestinians, lesbians, unemployed, anarchists and prisoners - as irritating to Labor then as it is to the Coalition now) that the Arts Minister (one Barry Cohen) decided that he'd restructure us out of existence. As with all clever restructures, this move came with a name change: the Community Arts Board would become the Community Cultural Development Committee. We had never encountered this phrase before, nor did we ever find out where he got it from, but the interesting thing was that the initial response from Board Members, staff and the field was anger, loathing and rejection. Not because it was perceived as a bad phrase (indeed it very well described our position), but because it was correctly perceived as being a cloak for destruction.

After some initial panic, we realised that, at least within the Australia Council, we had the numbers (that is, we had the Chair, Donald Horne, resolutely on-side) and that we could twist this devious ploy to our own advantage. Although never specifically given that title, community arts language had become ccd language some two years before the Cohen plot, so it was no great effort to laud the Minister's vision, embrace the title, significantly increase the budget and re-design programs. Sometimes you win³.

A&G01 and A&G02 are freely available from the Rockefeller Foundation. The copies I read came from the library of the Community Arts Network of South Australia.

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³ Donald Horne recounts his version of these events in his book *'Into The Open'* (2000) Sydney, Harper Collins