

# ALARj

Action learning and action research journal

Special Edition  
Creative and expressive arts  
in Action Learning and  
Action Research



Volume 20 No 1 April 2014

# ALAR Journal

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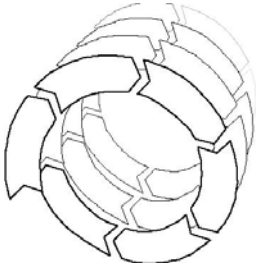
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**Cover illustration:** Installing the exhibition in the gallery required all CAM members. Photograph by Howard (Joe) Butler, 2012.

Mr Howard (Joe) Butler is a descendant of the Georang Georang, Ijman and Gangulu peoples of Central and CW Qld. In the 1990's Joe's artworks became public through the opportunity of working with communities locally, nationally and internationally and over the years has developed a large body of artwork. Jo is managed by Kima Consultant and is a member of the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM)

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**CONTENTS**

<b>Editorial</b>	<b>3</b>
Virginia Kaufman Hall	
<b>Engaging creativity through an Action Learning and Action Research process to develop an Indigenous art exhibition</b>	<b>15</b>
Bronwyn Fredericks, Pamela CroftWarcon, Kaylene Butler and Howard (Joe) Butler	
<b>Reflecting on the arts in social action: Possibilities for creative engagement in Action Learning</b>	<b>35</b>
David Moxley	
<b>Conferences: Building a reflective learning community through creative interventions</b>	<b>63</b>
Cathryn Lloyd	
<b>Undertaking practice-led research through a Queensland-wide women's history project</b>	<b>95</b>
Bronwyn Fredericks	

**The generative and catalytic powers of creative,  
expressive arts in Action Research** **112**

Susan Goff

Conference announcement **142**

Membership and submission details **143**

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# Editorial

## Virginia Kaufman Hall

### Why am I writing this for you to read?

When asked to write this editorial, I was curious to see how Action Researchers and action learners apply methods also practiced in the creative arts. I was keen to see methods common to artists and ALARA practitioners.

We don't have to be in an art gallery or a theatre to use creative or arts-based methods of inquiry. Readers already engage daily with media and street art, as viewers or readers and some as creators or co-creators. Because as researchers we aim to unpack assumptions, and make meaning out of lived experience, the writers in this journal apply creative processes to heighten our awareness and inform ways of knowing as we ask *what is going on here?* As Stefan Kaufman, a reviewer of this editorial noted, the practice of creative arts invites a decentering of subjectivity prompting us to experience something using other / different ways of seeing and being.

I see the creative arts as an active 'field' (Bourdieu, 1993), where opportunities for Action Research and Action Learning may result (intentionally) in a redistribution of power. The papers in this special edition demonstrate how effective the arts can be in applying ontological equity through creative community building, social justice, knowledge construction and Aboriginal recognition and collective self-determination – an aim of your usual editor Susan Goff, in producing this edition.

Readers are likely to have used similar methods. The term "creativity" in this edition is not limited to the 'elite' arts. In keeping with practices that support development driven by those affected, the authors in this journal show how useful and powerful

the creative arts can be as both method and theory that underpin the praxis in these pages.

It is a purpose of both my arts and research practice to inquire into how we know what we know, and to attempt to name and understand those unseen forces. For 13 years, I have been playing<sup>1</sup> with a group of co-researchers/ learner/educators whom we name Women Out to Lunch WOTLs<sup>2</sup>. When I proposed that we perform our collective research at a Regional Arts Conference, two of the five women in our group said "...But I'm not an artist". Our proposal was accepted, we put the session together, performed our play, got positive feedback and they both changed their minds. I like to think that research – the way we like to do it, is a creative act.

One of the WOTLs put it like this:

When we talk about creative practices we mean using poetry, collage, painting, narrative, performance and other non-traditional teaching-research forms. Our ...collective work is about legitimising creativity as a way of accessing and representing meaning, understandings and knowing – research findings, some may say. (Horsfall et al, 2011)

Writers of this journal use multiple methods to assist participants to feel safe, create experiences to reveal ways of looking at the world, search for ways to uncover stories that are meaningful to the participants – the research findings and the learning outcomes.

We look for ways to tell the stories of the findings: as reviewer Judy Lovell states, we try out *synonymous and/or different modalities* to tell the stories that bridge the divide between those whose lived experience has been offered/ entrusted to those listeners

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<sup>1</sup> One reviewer suggested 'playing' does not seriously demonstrate 13 years of sustainable reflexive practice – so I've added that extra dimension here – because I know WOTLs love to play or we wouldn't keep doing stuff together.

<sup>2</sup> Women Out to Lunch is a group of recovering academics who write and perform together. The research and development process for the 5<sup>th</sup> National Regional Arts Conference is detailed in Horsfall D. et al 2011.

/audience/ policy makers who may influence their future. And the greatest influence falls back onto the story owners themselves, as you will read.

There are many ways to tell stories – this edition has a shoebox full (as Fredericks shows us). Action Learners and Action Researchers are not afraid to use multiple strategies to both collect and tell the research/learning story. Creative innovations, expressions and media provide unlimited opportunities.

Arts in all formats tell human stories. Readers of this journal are likely to reveal stories for purposes of epistemological equity and recognition of multiple ways of knowing as your usual editor Susan Goff states:

...creative and expressive arts can break with conventions of knowing, reveal the knower to ourselves and each other in the act of knowing, lead us to unexpected questions, and usefully introduce clarity by revealing and contesting hidden assumptions of power about what there is to be known. (This publication)

I took this research approach to the development of a theatre piece: *What was that you said?* funded by ACT Health in 2008 to inquire into the tensions experienced between young people and adults who work or live with them.

Two experienced theatre directors Joe Woodward and Sally Hendrie worked with the two separate groups of young people and adults who improvised upon the frustrations they experienced communicating across the age divide. The developmental work was a series of Action Research cycles where we reflected, listened, watched and re-shaped the stories in an iterative development process. The results were performed as theatre, with the audience invited into discussions with the actors following the performances - young people, youth workers, parents and teachers. As co-director Jo Woodward states:

We would rather adopt an epistemological approach; starting with a phenomenology of our existence and how we influence and react to the seemingly invisible forces

surrounding and shaping us. Is this a purpose of art itself?  
(Joe Woodward <http://www.shadowhousepits.com.au/>)

Arts practitioners, researchers and learners devise methods that are useful to enable people whose voice had been unheard to speak out, speak up and develop steps towards the change they need, want and can drive themselves with appropriate support towards what they experience and name for themselves as better lives (Brown & Harris, 2014).

The arts use research methods and researchers use artistic methods to support change and where needed, healing.

Can such an approach help Australian Defence Force soldiers and nurses make the transition from a war zone to home? General David Hurley asked this question of Sydney Theatre Company in order to produce a contemporary Australian story with the aim to enhance recovery, provide vocational opportunity and give the Australian community a sense of what its like to go to war.

The result was the production of *The Long Way Home* written by Daniel Keene, 2014. The work was informed by a research and developmental approach using group sessions, interviews and workshops in a *rank-free* environment that was called “*drama boot camp*” by the ADF participants. The play was performed by fourteen soldiers and four professional actors. Readers will be familiar with similar situations where we work with people whose lived experience has damaged their lives and know the ethics-of-care that are required (<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/blog/A-Company-of-Soldiers-Australian-Defence-Force-and-Sydney-Theatre-Company-unite-140204/default.htm>)

## Inside this edition

In this journal, we consider the use of artistic thinking and processes of researchers, learners and artists applying their trades to understanding our worlds. The focus is upon participatory approaches including those used by Indigenous cultures like



yarnin', cultural respect and protocols, mentoring the young people and learning together.

Act 1 of this special edition is set in an art gallery in Rockhampton. Browyn Fredericks introduces you to the Dharumbal and Woppaburra mob who developed their exhibition to honour NAIDOC<sup>3</sup> week 2012 with the theme of *Spirit of the Tent Embassy 40 years on*.

Fredericks details the Action Learning and Action Research processes used with the Capricornia Arts Mob for their first collective art exhibition. The Indigenous values that underpin this work show Action Research and Action Learning praxis. A process of questioning drove the work deeper to reveal the artists' own analyses for the impact of the Tent Embassy in the Australian public consciousness. Particular care is revealed to work safely with the young people who:

...had comfort in their own Indigeneity – one that wasn't developed from fear for their life simply because they were Aboriginal. (This publication)

To address a worry that the young people may slide into a form of resistance – the work was re-visioned... in order to support their development into "*critical adults and wise Elders*".

This struck a resounding note with me as I recalled the driver that pushed me into the Action Research theatre development project *What was that you said?* It was my deep need to understand the rift between my 15 year old daughter and myself. To accept that adults and young people do conflict and that we can learn from that conflict. Research was necessary in both projects to find pathways for our young people to become *critical adults and wise Elders*. For myself as a parent it was important to learn how to step back while I learn the wisdom necessary to be an Elder.

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<sup>3</sup> National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee – annual event held over a week in the Australian national calendar to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I see the same driver in Fredericks closing words:

We seek... to challenge both ourselves and others through art. We transform lives in ripples of consciousness about Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories and Countries. (This publication)

Fredericks describes here a theme linking all the papers in this journal. In using arts as a self and group expression, arts become *artefacts of activism* my term for a range of activist promotions such as posters, street stencils, flash mobs, t-shirt designs and other forms which both stimulate and reflect change. Here activists use creative hooks to engage where there is apathy, to invite reflexivity where there is none, to begin to bridge the divides in our society.

Act Two in this journal focuses upon ... "*those groups whose members experience marginalization*". David Moxley asks: "*What is the potential of the arts for Action Learning?*" For Moxley the arts provide a platform for co-creating curriculum.

Is this what the participants of *What was that you said?* and *Long Way Home* were doing, developing a curriculum for life communication? Art provides a more palatable way for society to make visible, translate and consider our shadows. The cast of *Long Way Home* were keen to spark off on-going discussions with Australians who had not been to war.

Moxley considers that the "*Arts can deploy images that capture the plight people suffer.*" Not only images, but stories, traumatic triggers, body imprints and sounds.

To sit in an audience including military people and their families, was to feel the immense power of the horror of the experience of the 'theatre' of Afghanistan and to know the madness of trying to fit the hugeness and alienation of that horror into our irreverent, commercial ever-busy everyday life in Oz. Here live theatre reached across the foot lights, enveloping the audience in the lived experience of our military men and women, then brought them 'home'. As an active learner in the theatre experience, I am an active witness, a validator and can further analyse the story through critique and dissent. Invoking Kolb (1984), I experience

learning I would never have known about – yes it could be argued it is vicarious experience but what can't be taken away is the visceral nature of that experience. The capacity audience of young men and women and military families along with the general public were deeply moved, silent and strong. The production included a range of research approaches to collect feedback, including respectful questioning of audience members after the show in the foyer and an email survey.

Moxley states that: *“through the arts, those groups and their members facing oppression or marginalization can build new capacities for support...”* Soldiers who played themselves re-imagined, took the horror and the magnitude of war onto the stage in an attempt to gain our understanding. All are participating in on-going Action Learning – to learn what works - from their extraordinary courage to reveal their vulnerabilities to us.

In projects reported in this journal and I expect readers' projects too, you may work as facilitating witnesses trying to weave a support web to create a safe space for exploring these shadows. We rely upon our ethics of Action Research and learning tools as supporting frameworks.

Moxley shows us how the arts build *“new forms of knowledge”*. I suggest that includes such Ways of Knowing expressed in dot paintings, body paintings, street stencil art, a hip hop song on YouTube... We apply multiple methods to triangulate, using different media to collect ways of knowing to identify multiple layers of meaning.

Moxley and Goff show poetry as a way to reveal to listeners/ readers a way of pushing our boundaries and offering a sense of *other*. In my town there is a homeless poet. At bus stops or on a bus, he invites people to buy a poem from him. Here is art as social enterprise. He gets some cash and the buyer gets an insight into his lived experience. He could go on-line and stay out of sight – but he wouldn't have all those conversations he invites.

Our third act is an invitation to co-create at conferences – those big talk fests that attract people with a range of intersecting

knowledges. Content packed conferences too often limit possibilities for sharing and ideas generation. Cathryn Lloyd reports upon her conference interventions / integrations with the purpose of building reflective learning communities at the last two ALARA conferences and three other conference settings. Her practice-led inquiry demonstrates the reflexivity that Action Researchers and Action Learners apply in their praxis – weaving together the doing and the theory of the work in our reflexive approach to continually strive for understanding about the work.

Lloyd asks what can she learn from delegates?

My aspiration is that a conference be a place where our bodies, hearts and minds are aroused and where we are inspired to take action. To me a conference should also be a place of surprise, a place to wonder out loud, to ask and explore ‘What is Possible’, a place to experiment, and take risks. (This publication)

Part of being an Action Learning/ Action Research practitioner is to look out for how practitioners design, implement and harvest their results. We ask: *what worked, what didn't work so well for some and what was learned?* Lloyd offers her facilitation approach to strengthen the inclusivity, creativity and connectedness of events for the delegates –you may recognise this as one reviewer did, as Appreciate Inquiry in action.

The fourth act plays out inside Bronwyn Fredericks' shoebox in which she respectfully honours her ancestor women. Like all good research, the findings are applicable across a wider canvas – and the methodology applied state wide for the Centenary of Queensland women's suffrage in 2005. The shoeboxes enabled women to:

...decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items that could speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears over the past 100 years. The shoebox activity was designed to encourage women to celebrate, research and record their everyday lives from various perspectives – including the political, social, cultural, environmental and family. (This publication)

Here we have practice-led Action Research that was iterative, opportunistic, and involved talking with the old people, finding out who knew things, who had something to offer and a collection of differing perspectives on relationships with “Country, history, each other and the community.”

Fredericks reflects upon her artistic practice, research and teaching focus; she reflects upon her flow of knowledge and the interdependency of her practice. She knows in her bones that central to her work is research, mindful practice, reflective practices and artistic practice. I’d love to be a fly crawling over her visual wall, watching how it all interconnects together throughout its iterative development. As she asserts “*Aboriginal women never have Aboriginality without womanhood.*” This is a way of being and knowing that is indivisible – as is the shoebox project offering multiple perspectives as art, craft, history, research and/or scholarly activity. It is in itself a form of inquiry –practice-led research and development – in microcosm.

The last act comes from your usual editor Susan Goff whose work I chose for the final act as a summary of many of the themes already visited where she considers: *the generative and catalytic powers of creative expressive arts in Action Research.*

Goff’s paper focuses on methodological literacy and considers ways of knowing revealed through creative expressive arts. She shows how artistic data collecting can provide a safer way for sensitive topics such as young people exposed to family violence. A poem, a piece of music or visual art can express pain in a way that is within the total control of the story owner (the artist). Other means of data collecting such as interviews with case managers, can provide the raw history needed for the research. Context and understanding is strengthened with Goff’s use of artistic methods.

Goff’s paper rounds up this edition by synthesising theory and practice using creative approaches to managing difficult knowledges. She details a range of examples of applying artistic methods to reveal other ways of knowing that contextualise the worlds of our research participants:

It is the creative arts in the Action Research of how to be, that enable us to encounter such departures from all that we are familiar with, bringing us into co-existence with our new family members. This is a very different way of knowing, and relating to knowing, taking form in a world of very different composition to anything that we can call on. In such moments of ontological incomprehensibility creative arts in Action Research are fundamental to our survival. (This publication)

As an audience member watching *Long Way Home*, my unknowing state was shifted to accommodate the ghosts of young men and women trying to find solid ground under their feet after they returned home. There is an art in presenting research that leaves audiences feeling deeply about new knowledge. Can we as researchers take the feeling and try to verbalise, analyse, synthesise it into something we and others can understand?

And what was the result for the participants? I met some of them at a panel discussion at Australia's Parliament House. The soldier/actors reported a strengthening of their own capacity to transition. One particularly wanted other men to know its OK to reach out for help.

[\(http://news.defence.gov.au/2014/04/12/curtain-comes-down-on-the-long-way-home/\)](http://news.defence.gov.au/2014/04/12/curtain-comes-down-on-the-long-way-home/)

## **A creative research date**

Finally I offer a research task if you'd like to action it. Take your researcher and learner on a date to a gallery, maybe pause and look at a street stencil, really listen to a song, or go to the theatre (live or film). You might like to reflect upon the research that underpinned the artistic result. As an Action Research/ Action Learning practitioner you will have many ideas about how you might go about doing the preliminary research that led to the art you are experiencing. The experience may lead you to think about how you might use creative ways of exploring understanding in your next project.

Action Research, Action Learning and the arts in all media, can inform a wide range of fields of practice and offer multiple Ways of Knowing as this journal shouts out loud. Enjoy creating your next project.

## Acknowledgments

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## **Biography**

Dr Virginia Kaufman Hall is a long-term Action Researcher and Action Learner applying her practice to research, community development, community arts and theatre. For the past 5 years she established and managed the Participatory Planning, Research and Evaluation panel for Australian Government Indigenous Affairs. She recently returned to her own practice where she uses creative arts for storytelling, inviting people together to tell stories and show their places, environmental, personal and political.

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# Engaging creativity through an Action Learning and Action Research process to develop an Indigenous art exhibition

Bronwyn Fredericks,  
Pamela CroftWarcon,  
Kaylene Butler and  
Howard (Joe) Butler

## Abstract

*In most art exhibitions, the creative part of the exhibition is assumed to be the artworks on display. But for the Capricornia Arts Mob's first collective art exhibition in Rockhampton during NAIDOC Week in 2012, the process of developing the exhibition became the focus of creative Action Learning and Action Research. In working together to produce a multi-media exhibition, we learned about the collaborative processes and time required to develop a combined exhibition. We applied Indigenous ways of working – including: yarning, cultural respect, cultural protocols, mentoring young people, providing a culturally safe working environment and sharing both time and food – to develop our first collective art exhibition. We developed a process that allowed us to ask deep questions, engage in a joint journey of learning, and develop our collective story. This paper explores the processes that the Capricornia Arts Mob used to develop the exhibition for NAIDOC 2012.*

## Keywords

Capricornia Arts Mob, CAM, Capricorn Coast, Rockhampton, Artists, Indigenous, Australia, collective, Action Learning, Action Research, creativity

## Introduction

For art exhibition visitors, exhibitions tend to be about the artworks on display. They have little opportunity to think about the process leading up to the opening night, of developing the works and ensuring they are perfectly hung in a spotless, serene gallery. For artists though, the journey of getting to opening night is critical. For the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM), getting to our first opening night and first art exhibition in Rockhampton during NAIDOC Week in 2012, was a journey of Action Learning and Action Research that helped to form us as a collective.

CAM is a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists, sculptors, photographers, carvers and writers; based in the Rockhampton region of central Queensland. Our first work together involved developing an exhibition and working towards the embodiment of the NAIDOC 2012 theme (*Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on*). As we worked, CAM developed an interactive, dynamic and inclusive way of working, which has since extended beyond CAM to the wider central Queensland community.

For the artists involved in CAM, the process of working together to develop and design the NAIDOC exhibition was equally as important as having a successful exhibition available for visitors. We needed to learn how to work together and how to work collectively towards a common theme. We used a number of Indigenous processes, such as yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Fredericks, Adams, Finlay, Fletcher, Andy, Briggs, Briggs, Hall, 2011), following respectful protocols (Martin, 2008) and sharing food within Indigenous environments. We also used: broader artistic practices to develop and select our artworks,

photograph the collection, prepare the didactic panels, artist biographies, curate and market the event, and plan an opening event that was attended by over 150 people. The processes that we developed for our NAIDOC exhibition are now used to actively involve, inform and inspire others within our community. CAM has emerged as a strong group of artists who can hold our own in Queensland's regional arts scene.

In this paper, we reflect on our creative research processes in leading up to the opening night of our NAIDOC week 2012 exhibition. We explain the Indigenous values that underpin our work and explore the creative platform that is enabling us to engage with the broader community of central Queensland.

## **What is NAIDOC?**

Every July, NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Observance Day Committee) celebrations are held around Australia to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NAIDOC, 2014a). Each year, NAIDOC has a theme that focuses on some aspect of Indigenous Australian issues, cultures and history. Everyone who participates in NAIDOC is encouraged to plan activities that centre on the theme and bring it to life for NAIDOC participants (NAIDOC, 2014b; 2014c).

NAIDOC has a strong arts base, and part of its annual activity involves organising a national poster competition. Artists submit work that is relevant to the theme, hoping that theirs will be selected as the annual poster. Once the artwork is selected and announced, it is printed, circulated and displayed in communities across Australia in the lead up to NAIDOC. People keep the posters as a memento, while the official NAIDOC website proudly displays a poster gallery (NAIDOC, 2014d).

NAIDOC is celebrated throughout Australia by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and is now part of the national calendar of events. The week is a great opportunity for Australians to participate in a range of activities together. An increasing number

of government agencies, schools, local councils and workplaces celebrate NAIDOC (Australian Government, 2014).

### **What does NAIDOC mean to CAM's members?**

For the members of CAM, NAIDOC represents an opportunity for us to display our art, celebrate and share. It provides a focus for us to share with each other as members of a collective, showcase our artworks publicly, and engage community members in our arts practice. Each member of CAM can celebrate NAIDOC through their own artistic medium, while drawing on their own interests and incorporating other aspects of their lives.

There is a lot going on during NAIDOC week, and both visitors and artists need to be prepared. For example: performers are booked to dance, play the didgeridoo and read poetry while others work with schools, Elders, the Rockhampton NAIDOC Committee or act as a judge for an organisation. By the end of the week, people generally feel tired but happy. In particular, they feel good about being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.

At the 2013 NAIDOC Ball, people were asked what NAIDOC meant to them (Australian Government, 2014). Their comments included:

NAIDOC's an opportunity for us to actually share our culture and we share that with the rest of Australia, so it's actually a very significant week in the year for us... With our history and knowing what's happened to Aboriginal people, to actually be a strong, thriving, growing culture, I think that's a testament to the resilience of us as a community. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 6)

Aboriginal recognition, everything we do in the sport and media and business, and just celebrating being us, and celebrating our land and who we are as a people and our culture, and us just getting together and having a good time. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 7)

NAIDOC to me is really a celebration of life. It's a celebration of being an Aboriginal person and it's the one week that we actually get to showcase all of the

achievements of individuals and the successes and to really showcase what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can do - there are no limits. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 8)

When CAM formed in early 2012, we quickly decided that NAIDOC would be our initial focus as a collective, and that we would showcase our individual creative works through a collective exhibition in Rockhampton.

In Rockhampton, some of the other long-term NAIDOC activities include: the NAIDOC Ball on Saturday, the Aboriginal and Islander Community Resource Agency Baby Show on Sunday, a flag-raising ceremony on Monday, a Church Mass on Wednesday, an Elders morning tea, a big breakfast, a rally march through town to demonstrate our pride, plus much more. In past years there have been: health expos, library sessions, a women's only gathering, specific screening sessions undertaken by the mobile breast clinic, football matches, a netball tournament and other events. CAM's members were conscious that our work needed to complement what was already planned and had to fit into a busy schedule. We knew very early that we needed to have our event locked into the timetable for 2012 so that it could be included in marketing material and the published timetable. We also knew that advising the Rockhampton NAIDOC Committee of our plans would mean that we were committed. If we didn't deliver, it would not be well received by community members, including funding representatives and arts decision makers for the region. This was our first major opportunity to shine and show our commitment and professionalism as regional artists within our home region.

## **CAM working towards NAIDOC**

CAM is a disparate group that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from different clan groups and different nations. Our different cultures bring added complexities to working together, even though we all work within an Indigenous context. Like any new group, we had to learn to work with each other on this project. We experienced tensions and struggles, and

also experienced the exhilaration of working, collaborating, learning and developing as artists from diverse Indigenous cultures who use different mediums and media.

The founding members agreed that artist and curator, Pamela CroftWarcon would be the curator of this exhibition and that Kaylene Butler would be the assistant curator and be mentored by Pamela. This arrangement aligned with one of our goals, which is to develop and support each other in areas of the art industry.

Our working base for the NAIDOC preparations was the Sandhills Studio, about 40 kilometres out of Rockhampton, near the Keppel Sands village along the Capricorn Coast. This is within the Country of the Dharumbal and Woppaburra peoples of the region. The studio is owned and managed by CAM member Pamela CroftWarcon. It is set on 100 acres of land and the studio itself has several large workspaces, including a large table to sit and talk, eat and drink, and spread out work. There are other areas to display and select work, photograph, wrap and package artworks. There is also space just to be together as artists and Indigenous peoples.

The studio is culturally affirming and Indigenous centred. It is a place that allows us to acknowledge our existing relationships, the new ones being created, and the outcomes we expect to achieve from our exchanges, processes and projects (Martin, 2008). In this way, we were able to maintain a sense of order about our work and our interactions with each other. We are able to maintain accountability and relatedness between us, as Indigenous peoples who are also artists (Martin, 2008). Figure 1 shows the large worktable and gives an idea of how we worked together in the Sandhills Studio to prepare for our first exhibition.



*Figure 1. Gathering around the table to work at the Sandhills Studio. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.*

As we began to prepare for the NAIDOC exhibition, we explored the 2012 theme: *Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on* (NAIDOC, 2012). Not everyone knew about the Tent Embassy, which is reasonable as some of them were too young or not even born at the time. We started our work by looking at books and journal articles and talking about the Tent Embassy. We also looked for other materials and images from this time in history. This process was facilitated by Pamela CroftWarcon, with contributions from all of CAM's members.

As we learned about the historical period, we began to develop a story and images. We talked about how the people might have felt, how we felt about it, the policy timeframe, the government's actions and more. Our Action Learning process went beyond sharing information or being a group think tank. We worked together to build a common thread of analysis about where we fitted within this part of our history as Indigenous peoples and artists. We sought to challenge and develop knowledge through the group process and through the creation of artwork (Baldwin, 1985). By holding these gatherings at the studio, CAM members had a culturally safe place to tell their stories and their family's stories of the Tent Embassy. It is unlikely that we would have been able to achieve such depth of discussion in a more public or less culturally safe place.

We began to weave our individual stories into a public, collective story of the Tent Embassy. We asked deep questions throughout the process – yet not the kind of questions that seek simple responses for the sake of gathering information. The questions asked were considered, ordered and designed to develop a deeper sense of wonder and analysis. These questions became a platform for others in the group to develop their own sets of questions. Westoby (2013) states that, in ‘creating a space of questioning the quest for learning is animated’ (p. 132). For CAM, the questioning brought a blurring of learning, co-teaching, research, politics and cultural processes. This questioning process was developed by Pamela CroftWarcon and Kaylene Butler.

As we worked towards developing our collective story, we found that some CAM members were involved in helping others, pulling them along in the journey of learning and challenging them in their thinking. There was sometimes a sense that a member might need some help to move along. This was particularly relevant for the younger members of CAM, who had grown up in a different time period. They were shocked by some of the stories of what had happened in the lifetimes of older CAM members. The younger group members may have experienced racism, but they had benefitted from growing up in a time with legislative protection and specific programs to address such inequities. They had comfort in their Indigeneity – one that wasn’t developed from fear for their life simply because they were born Aboriginal. Some of us needed to move in and out of these conversations, uncertain of where we would end up. We recognised that we have the right to claim and reclaim these stories, experiences, emotions and histories, and to articulate what they mean for us as individuals and as a collective (Cram, 2009; Dulwich Centre, 1995; Rigney, 1999). Through our participative Action Learning, we began to transform the stories within their social, political and cultural contexts, and within the whole.

As we shared our stories, it became clear that the younger members of CAM needed nurturing and care. This was especially in terms of what they were ready to talk about and hear about, and



in terms of whether they were being placed at risk. We did not want the young people to slide into a form of resistance to 'avoid self-defeating outcomes while striving for social advancement' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, p. 2). Instead, we wanted to support CAM's younger members to 're-vision and denaturalise the realities of their social worlds and then undertake forms of collective challenge based on the knowledge garnered through their critical inquiries' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, p. 2). In fact, we needed them to do this if they were going to develop into critical adults and wise Elders (Berman, 1997; Wyn and White, 1997).

The conversations were also frightening for some of the older people in CAM, and we needed to focus carefully on cultural safety. Some older members needed to be moved from their positioning of the past, to unlock the past that kept them as victims and move to a higher form of wisdom about the events. We needed to provide a safe way to minimise anxiety, because anxiety would undermine any opportunities for learning (King, 2005). Over time, our process enabled everyone to gain a greater consciousness about the past, including at times the past of their ancestors and their real life situation in relation to the world (Friere, 1974).

Only after we developed a common understanding of the history of the Tent Embassy and our relations to it (Martin, 2008), could we commence our discussions of how to incorporate the concepts and passion of the Tent Embassy within our artworks. We changed direction several times in our process of learning and action. We needed to develop an exhibition with a sound concept and a strong collective story that we could achieve as our first exhibition, and that would fit in the gallery space. There was absolute disagreement at times, along with enthusiastic agreement with the yelling of the 'yes, yes, yes!' and 'let's do that, we have to do that!'. Then we would change direction again. In working together, we came to understand that we have different skills and abilities, and we needed to trust those with more experience. We needed to manage any conflict that happened when an individual's ideas were not embraced by the group, or when individual artwork concepts were not included for the collective exhibition.

Little by little, over several yarnning gatherings of shifting, altering, reflecting and critiquing, we reached agreement on what we would develop. Throughout the processes, we needed to focus on the protocols of working with each other as Indigenous peoples, to maintain the shared vision of what we were trying to do and also to maintain a respectful way of working with one another (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). We worked to affirm our identities and our processes, and to culturally embed Indigeneity within the process and the exhibition itself. This relied on us following cultural protocol and being conscious of the relationships between people, groups and outcomes (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Fredericks et. al, 2011). For the younger group members, it became a form of being mentored within a cultural process, where everyone became bound in relationality and accountability to each other as members of CAM (Grace and Wells, 2007; Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

Having sufficient time was an important aspect of our Action Learning process. We worked on our plan for the exhibition over several months. The final plan included: art on canvas, photographic works, fibre arts, carving and mixed media and digital installations. We also decided that one group member would write a poem, which would be staged as a performance and produced as a short film by another member of CAM. This was played as part of the exhibition. We planned that all the work would be done by members of CAM, and everyone's talents would be showcased in some way. Some of the works would demonstrate collegiality through joint art projects within the larger exhibition.

## **Embodying the Tent Embassy**

After developing our work, we needed to enact and embody the *Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on* within the gallery environment, at the Walter Reid Cultural Centre in Rockhampton. We wanted to express our individual and collective sovereignty as Indigenous peoples and most importantly, demonstrate commitment and ongoing allegiance to the impetus and passion that started and maintained the Tent Embassy. We were also

guided by our desire to engage our audience with the artworks and with the exhibition as a whole. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) demonstrates, it is possible to develop approaches in art museums and galleries that can be seen as Action Research and Action Learning where the audience is active in their learning within the space. Similarly, Piscitelli and Weier (2002) describe how Action Learning can take place through the collaboration of those undertaking the artworks and those engaging with the artworks. We sought to engage the audience with us in the process of Action Learning. Figure 2 shows CAM members designing our Action Learning space in the gallery.

We sought to unite hearts and spirits around the historical moment of when four Aboriginal men (Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey and Bertie Williams) planted a beach umbrella to form the Tent Embassy on 26 January 1972 (Koori History Web Site, 2012). The men had travelled from Sydney to Canberra to protest about the government's Aboriginal policy, Aboriginal infant mortality and the rejection of Land Rights. They started a movement that still continues. Today, the Tent Embassy remains a powerful symbol of unity and represents one of the most significant movements for Indigenous land rights in Australia.

As a group, we talked about how we might be able to set up a tent in the gallery space. This was going to be difficult, as there was no soil to push in tent pegs and no trees to tie off ropes. Pamela CroftWarcon and Kaylene Butler lead the conversation about how we could achieve this and then also lead the process within the Gallery space. Figures 3 and 4 show the freestanding tent that we put up, with ropes wrapped around the cement pillar to make it look part of the tent. We chose a tent that visitors could walk in and through. Inside the tent were photographic images from the 1972 tent embassy and the years that followed. An installation inside the tent featured the video recording of our poem, *40 Years Ago, 40 Years Since: The Tent Embassy*, written and performed by CAM member Bronwyn Fredericks (Fredericks, 2012).



*Figure 2. Installing the exhibition in the gallery required all CAM members. Photograph by Howard (Joe) Butler, 2012.*



*Figure 3. The tent in the Gallery. Photograph by Kaylene Butler, 2012.*



*Figure 4. The tent in the Gallery. Photograph by Kaylene Butler, 2012.*

Bronwyn's poetry performance was complete with props and costume. She tied a 1970s scarf with burnt orange and lime green around her crown, wore beads from the same era, and had a crocheted blanket from the era to throw over her shoulders. We chose a filming location that gave the impression of Bronwyn sitting on the lawns opposite old Parliament House in Canberra, the site of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. The digital recording was produced by Kaylene Butler and displayed using an old computer shaped as a television and projected onto the wall and roof of the tent.

Bronwyn's work is a creative, non-fiction poem that moves from autobiographical to biographical and to the collective voice of 'we' within the one piece of work. It contains documented evidence of real people, events and time frames covering the last 40 years. During the exhibition, the work could be heard throughout the gallery space and formed the backdrop for the entire exhibition.

The words resonated and connected the artworks within the gallery. The words from one verse are below:

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The Sign read

'Aboriginal Embassy'

Proud and loud

'Enough' as the shroud

Canvas tents were established

Symbols of poverty and impermanence

That offered little sustenance

Others arrived

2000 or more

Campaigning and yelling

Passion filled to the core

'Land Rights Now'

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Standing in solidarity

No doubts in clarity

Leaders developed and grew

Invigorating the movement anew (Fredericks, 2012, p. 2)

Road testing the exhibition and our multi-media installations was an important part of our Action Learning. Everything was tested by CAM members and our families (Figures 5 and 6). We were happy with the look and feel of what we had achieved, even

though we had some initial reservations and fear. It is likely that fear came from the 'not knowing' and the 'new'.



*Figure 5. Viewing the performance by Bronwyn Fredericks projected on the wall of the tent. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.*



*Figure 6. Kaylene Butler triple checking the multi-media installation work. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.*

CAM's Tent Embassy exhibition was installed in Rockhampton's Walter Reid Cultural Centre Gallery 6 from 2-10 July (CQUniversity, 2012). Opening night was held on 2 July and attended by over 150 people. It was a celebration for CAM as artists and for the broader community; it firmly planted CAM as a contributor to NAIDOC activities.

## Conclusion

CAM developed its first collective art exhibition in Rockhampton for NAIDOC Week in 2012. In designing the exhibition, we developed as an Action Learning collective that empowers each other – both as individual artists and as a collective. Through our Action Learning process, we maintained Indigenous control and ownership over most of the process in the lead-up to the exhibition, and were guided by Indigenous values and knowledge processes (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 1999). For us, this process of learning to work together was at least as important as the successful exhibition – if not more so.

We applied Indigenous ways of working to develop our exhibition and develop a process that allowed us to ask deep questions and develop our collective story.

CAM went on to hold another successful NAIDOC exhibition in 2013, and will develop another this year. The strong Action Learning processes that we developed through our first exhibition, formed a platform for our future work and strong community spirit. We create and co-create as Indigenous artists, using Indigenous processes. It was a proud and uplifting moment when we collectively recognised the strength of our work and that the exhibition could have been curated in any capital of the world. We seek to continue our work and to challenge both ourselves and others through art. We transform lives in ripples of consciousness about Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories and Countries.



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## Biographies

Dr Bronwyn Fredericks is a Murri woman from SE Queensland. She is a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University. She is a member of the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and CAM.

Dr Pamela CroftWarcon is a member of Kooma Clan of the Yuwaalaraay people, SW Queensland, who lives / works from her studio in Keppel Sands, Central Queensland. She has practiced as an independent visual artist since the mid-eighties and exhibited regionally, nationally and internationally. Pamela also works as a Lecturer at Central Queensland University, Australia and is a member of AIATSIS and CAM.

Ms Kaylene Butler is a Gungarrie, Wulli Wulli, Iman and Juru woman. She is also of Chinese and South Sea Islander (Motto Lava, New Caledonia, Tanna Island and the Banks) heritage. She has been an artist since 1990 and undertakes work regionally,

nationally and internationally. Kaylene is the proprietor of Kima  
Consultant (arts mgt) and member of CAM.

Mr Howard (Joe) Butler is a descendant of the Georang Georang,  
Ijman and Gangulu peoples of Central and CW Qld. In the 1990's  
Jo's artworks became public through the opportunity of working  
with communities locally, nationally and internationally and over  
the years has developed a large body of artwork. Jo is managed by  
Kima Consultant and is a member of CAM.

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# Reflecting on the arts in social action: Possibilities for creative engagement in Action Learning

David Moxley

## Abstract

*Using my own experience in integrating the arts and Action Learning, I discuss creative expression as a principal strategy in fostering social change and in advancing social betterment. In this paper, I offer several examples of the use of the arts in Action Learning involving homelessness, AIDS, and serious mental illness. The paper incorporates specific tactics for employing the arts in Action Learning including: fostering group cohesion, affirming countervailing values, amplifying voice, building support among participants, prototyping creative settings and projects, and linking creative prototypes to the development of social enterprises.*

## Key words

Action Learning, values, voice, prototyping, social enterprise, arts, social action, folk art, participation

## Introduction

What is the potential of the arts for Action Learning? In this paper I engage this question and, using my own experience in the arts and Action Learning, I seek to tease out what is distinctive about artful ways of taking social action. The arts offer avenues for self-expression, the development of group life, the creation of rich intersections among the arts, health and social services, and the development of indigenous knowledge. The resurgence of folk art and folk knowledge as forms of creative engagement (Yanagi, 1972) reveals the importance of local knowledge. The usefulness of the arts is reflected by their legitimacy in participatory,

community-based and empowerment-focused forms of learning through action.

There is now a disjuncture occurring in the arts. It is no longer under the control of elites who themselves once had the power to define what constituted art and who were once able to determine what stood as merit and worth in the arts (Moxley, 2013). Diverse forms of the arts, now visible across many different communities as outsider, vernacular, naïve, and brute forms or styles, indicate that artists do not need formal training in a specific art medium to emerge as artists whose work moves people cognitively, emotionally and spiritually (Rhodes, 2000). The emergence of such forms suggests counter movements in the arts resulting in the weakening of elite control over what constitutes artistic expression.

Carey (2006) indicates that the popularization of the arts are a function of people's search for belonging, meaning, and creative engagement thereby opening up the field to a range of creators and diversifying what constitutes art and artistic forms, as well as who can stand as an artist (Moxley, Feen-Calligan and Washington, 2013). But artists have always stood in the shadows of a society where there is considerable potential for creativity (Tanizaki, 1977).

Such diversity can challenge prevailing aesthetics concerning what constitutes the beautiful (Foster, 1998). Indeed, artistic production is now unhinged from the requirement of producing beauty since artists can adopt a counter-aesthetic or a negative aesthetic; enabling artists to characterize those situations in which society produces ugliness either intentionally or unintentionally (Berger, 1997). In this manner, the arts can serve as an avenue of criticism of prevailing social conditions. I remain mindful throughout this paper that the arts can serve as a form of dissent (Moxley, 2013). It is the expression of dissent that may very well offer society its most potent form of information and evaluation that together can challenge what majoritarian groups consider normal, acceptable, valuable and worthwhile (Sunstein, 2003).

Emotionally for me the arts today challenge our sensibilities in situations that we do not fully understand or appreciate. Our experiences of daily life simply do not expose us to those locations

of human action and human experience in which human beings are diminished in their functioning or their status (Allen, 1995). The arts are dynamic and when we seek to link them to Action Learning many possibilities open up as avenues for seeking social engagement, intergroup dialogue, and ultimately social justice (Moxley, 2013). If Action Learning is an important element of realizing social betterment, then artists and their creative expression may be a source of inspiration, action, and creativity that together stimulate social change (Eisner, 2004). Within this paper, I maintain my focus on those groups whose members experience marginalisation for as I suggest in another venue:

... popular art can diminish what Carey (2006) calls 'modern solitude' but for us it is a vehicle for cutting through marginalization, for humanizing those who have experienced dehumanization, and for tapping into the creative impulses that all humans possess, particularly when they search for innovative ways of thriving in the face of challenges. (Moxley et al, 2013, p. 17)

## **The arts and creative expression as strategy in Action Learning**

Increasingly I observe the arts forming in novel community locations and I come to see them in unexpected places. Whether traveling through India or Ethiopia or in rural or urban areas of the United States, I see many rich examples of the arts and group engagement in the arts. In the summer of 2013, visiting a village in northern India, I sat with women in a Chopal, a village square, and listened as they talked with me (through a translator) about their hopes for enriching their children's lives through the arts. The women themselves had formed a self-help group in which they were engaging in their own productive economic activity through shops, crafts, and food production. But they saw their children developing differently. Adjacent to the Chopal was an empty unused building that the women saw as the site of the arts education they envisioned for their children. Here the arts become what Campana (2011) calls "agents of possibility."

In late 2012 I attended a small planning group meeting in which the members, who identified with the disability rights movement,

came together to create a community centre celebrating disability culture. The participants envisioned the community centre as a place for creative engagement, for the staging of protest and demonstration, and for the collation of the local history of the disability rights movement. For these individuals the arts (and humanities) meant heightening their own identity as people with disabilities and heightening awareness of other groups about the history and culture of disability communities. The centre also represented a space for memorialising disability history and it served as a container holding knowledge about the disability experience (Falk and Dierking, 2000; Harvey, 1996).

On several occasions in 2013 and into 2014, I sat with activists for music education who saw this kind of learning as a vital opportunity structure for children whose schools dispossessed them of creative engagement. Under the leadership of a musician, himself not a formally trained educator, the activists were shaping a new way of enacting the development of children in poverty, using music as a portal through which those children could learn about the world beyond music itself. The founder was confronting the deficiencies in music education within primary schools, but he was also forming a new kind of school through Action Learning as the activists, children, and families began the process of co-creating curriculum, forging new partnerships with the arts community, and shaping facilities and venues to support music-informed education. Participation in the arts serves as yet another form of possibility.

While I do not consider myself an artist, I do see the arts as a strategy for human emancipation and for addressing barriers and challenges which those who are committed to Action Learning face in realising social betterment. In all of its diversity the arts offer opportunities for: reshaping aesthetics and introducing novel ways of appreciating beauty which society may neglect to see or respect, confronting socially-induced ugliness found in degradation of ecosystems, both human and natural ones, and in bringing out of the shadows that which society denies (Connolly, 2013).

When I reflect on my own Action Learning through the arts, I come to see how creative expression can shed light on that which



society keeps in the shadows as a strategic form of marginalisation. The arts here can serve as a counter strategy, so I am not surprised to find the arts being used as vehicles for enlightening people, particularly those who possess power, about homelessness, HIV, abuse and trauma, mental health issues, and violence. By pushing artful expressions of such situations into mainstream community venues, and into the consciousness of people who possess the resources to address them denial can crumble in the face of the provocative, the documentary, the visual, and the inventive portrayal of realities that society can easily oppress.

In this way, for me, and within my Action Learning research and practice, the arts potentiate new ways of framing social issues. Through our Action Learning research, my colleagues and I have framed four forms of narrative through which the arts can frame (and deepen insight into) situations that society can easily deny, such as homelessness (Washington and Moxley, 2008). Artists can deploy images that capture the plight people suffer and offer collective forms of mourning and the catharsis accompanying them (Junge, 1999). Alternatively, artistic representation can capture the self-efficacy and sources of resilience people possess in combating factors inherent in the plight. These are the same factors that could otherwise overwhelm them in the absence of the virtues that they mobilise to address the challenges they face - too often commanding their own resources without assistance of the greater society. Artists can also create narratives in which they interpret how people transform and recover in the face of what can be debilitating situations or life challenges (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994).

Through the arts, those groups and their members facing oppression or marginalisation can build new capacities for support, whether this involves mutual support among artists, self-help, care and assistance, and or creative connections with other community groups. Thus the arts themselves anticipate sanctuary, group formation, prototyping of novel or innovative ways of living and problem solving, and organisational development. The arts themselves can intersect with economics, work and employment, community service and civic engagement, and health as well as

mental health promotion. People who face serious health challenges may find the arts as a source of healing (McNiff, 2004). Particularly in its efforts to bring out of the shadows what society can deny the arts do facilitate new forms of knowledge, such as emotional knowledge. Both artists and those who receive the arts, including audience members, can come to better understand what is denied through an emotional awakening. Emotion itself can stir action and learning combining with cognition to create new ways of viewing the world, what Austen (2010) refers to as the cognitive emotions.

Kast (1994) notes that emotion involves something moving within us. Motion is essential to learning and the arts can move us emotionally to see what we would otherwise not see. It opens up the field of vision and enables us to see new possibilities in the human condition. Audiences may say that the art “moved them.” Or, that they found the exhibit “moving.” Such movement can establish a first condition of learning: the person’s receptivity to that which is observed. Such a movement can stir curiosity perhaps best fulfilled when a person or group experiments with artful representation.

## **Possibilities for Action Learning**

### **The arts as a way of learning**

Connolly (2013), who confronts the power hegemony inherent in neoliberal regimes, identifies the arts as a source of disruptive action in society that can heighten emotions, create alternative aesthetics, and bring people together into concerted action. For Connolly this concerted action undertaken at local levels reflects a form of experimentation around emergent or novel social arrangements. Central here are new kinds of roles people undertake: as provocateurs, creative agents, documentarians, and educators (Hyde, 1998).

But what is Action Learning within the context of the arts? Action Learning involves an engagement in generating representations of reality that challenge the status quo and that bring out of the shadow the lives and perspectives of people whom the greater

society considers unimportant, reprehensible, deviant, or dangerous. Invoking Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, the process of learning can induce change in perspective and understanding rather than merely an augmentation of canonical knowledge. For Kolb (1984) learning is experiential, which ties directly to action. The arts are inherently experiential but they are also interpretative, allowing people to cast upon a canvas an evocative impression of their own experience. This capturing of experience in an interpretative manner fosters insight producing a form of deep understanding in which artists communicate how they see their world.

So learning here is more than the acquisition of new knowledge or experience. It more likely involves the induction of perspective and the acquisition of insights into alternative ways of seeing and understanding. In all of its forms the arts and the people who engage in its production are well qualified in shaping such perspectives and ways of gaining insight. In this sense, artful representation and the interpretation accompanying it, can set in motion a process of empowerment. Consistent with Kolb's work, learning is more of a process than a massing of outcomes.

### **Art and its influence on resistant or receptive audiences**

The action of artists links to a resistant or receptive audience or viewer. The stance of the audience may create two different forms of learning, one in which people find consonance with the art and another in which people confront their dissonance in which they struggle with the what they confront through their sensory experience.

#### **Resistant audiences**

Imagine an artist who exposes audiences to the experience of imprisonment or torture. There is a realism of bars, graying and damp settings, and gritty furnishings. Behind the bars stands a disfigured individual, whose body is torn and distorted communicating perpetual pain and surrender. Some audiences may resist such images. They may discount them and readily defend themselves against those images, ones provoking sorrow,

pain, or disgust. The defences of other audiences may harden and become resistant to the representation the artist offers in all of its stark reality. Is this learning for the audience? One can argue that it is.

Critics here may assign manipulative intent to the artist who is seen as taking advantage of observers who may be vulnerable. Critics may raise ethical concerns and degrade the aims of the artist, which can be to empower viewers with the distortions of imprisonment. The artist opens up the emotional field of a given subject or object and the participant enters to learn about something that can induce the experience of violence, as Kaminsky's (1984) poem achieves when he amplifies the voices of Hiroshima survivors.

Those artists who engage in such provocative action define a boundary between those who endorse imprisonment and those who do not. The creation of such a boundary may ultimately fulfil the intent of the artist. Society incorporates multiple boundaries and the artist is ready to amplify those. Such is how many artists have operated: as prophets, critics, and innovators (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008). Some artists are prepared to identify a space or location that induces the experience of loathing among mainstream or privileged members of society. Creative engagement proceeds in this manner. Action Learning is induced when viewers actively engage the art and arrive at conclusions that inform their lives, for better or worse, even though those conclusions may deviate from the artists' intentions.

### **Receptive audiences**

Alternatively, imagine an artist who promotes identification among viewers. They do not resist the representation the artist offers members of the audience. Indeed, they find it consonant with their worldview and/or their belief system. The artful representation of imprisonment, torture and disfigurement induce open reflection among the members of the audience who consider the art from several vantage points or perspectives. Dialogue ensues and the discussion produces new insights into the artists' intent. But beyond this interpretation, members of the audience

are moved emotionally and perhaps even ethically for the ugliness the artist portrays motivates audiences to think of themselves as moral agents. The receptive audience may experience empathic regard for the message and/or vision the artist presents. Perhaps this involves a vision of a world disordered by deprivation. Such an aesthetic, one the artist and audience may both consider “ugly,” portrays the state of reality as it exists in situations normally unavailable (either because of status, class, location or emotion) to viewers. How reality actually exists can be a form of realism or it can be an expression in which brute interpretation amplifies what is wrong in a given situation. Here representation and the decisions the artist makes about framing may move people to think differently about a given situation.

### **The importance of emotion**

Critics may underscore the emotionally moving features of the art. People are observed seeing the art through an emotional lens since the induction of such sensing is so fundamental to multiple art forms. Observers witness sighs, groans, and verbalisations that reveal the evocative features of the art. Observers themselves sense something is wrong with imprisonment. They witness its devastation. Perhaps through sculpture, photographic images, poetry and verse, paint and brush, or collage; the artist presents images communicating what is desperately so wrong within a given society. The artist’s portrayal of incarceration is so moving that it may catalyse change – in the perspectives, understanding, values and actions of those who consume it. Here the artist can serve as witness, educator or prophet. And here the art as object, may embody critique of that which is wrong and offer prescription for how it can be changed.

One may argue that art does not exist until there is an audience who consumes it, denies it, resists it, or supports it. What figures into this equation is the importance of the audience whose members are composed of observers who actively engage the art and its creator. The reaction of those observers is likely immaterial to judging what constitutes art. Such reaction may be positive or negative. The art itself may create despair and dread. Alternatively, it can create joy and a sense of the sublime. What is

important here is that there is a reaction measured by the audience itself. Critics may stand between the art and the audience but it is not really the critic's measure of judgment that determines whether artists fulfil their aims. That power resides with the audience itself.

This is likely why art is so inherently participatory and links it to Action Learning as a strategy for stimulating social change. Even the art of the repulsive in a given culture can pull people in and involve them in the process of deciding for themselves their stance on a given theme or situation. Whether the viewers' reaction is consonant with their beliefs or reflects dissonance, the emotional product can influence learning. Participation itself is evocative. The art both stirs people's cognition and emotions enabling them to form images they may have not experienced before. The images themselves sit within a field of emotion that imbues them with new significance and meaning (Austen, 2010).

## **Evocative projects in action**

### **Homelessness**

In one project I undertook with my co-researcher, formerly homeless women presented their photographic journeys of homelessness in public settings to help visitors come to understand the beauty of these heroic women and the brute ugliness of homelessness. The exhibit created a paradox: heroic subjects with considerable virtue immersed within a degrading and violent situation. The images themselves highlighted the virtues of the eight women whose photographs were on display. The audience, a mixture of interested citizens, human service professionals, educators and corporate administrators, came to witness the heroism and environmental degradation standing in stark contrast but blending into one context. The women stood out from the backdrop – the ugliness of homelessness.

Often times in such exhibits the nonverbal or paraverbal communicate the most: people weeping in front of a collage of photographs that show the dark foreboding features of a homeless shelter; people talking under their breaths uttering "this could be

me” as they observe a photographic essay of a women coping with homelessness by sheltering herself in a car she knew could fall apart on any given day. Another woman who observes a set of photographs while she holds her teenage son so tightly he could barely move, tells an independent observer that the photographs and the story they tell portend danger for herself and her child.

In an elevated tone one hears a strident voice or shriek cut across the exhibit hall: “what are we doing? How have we failed?”

People do not reprimand the woman visitor. No one reprimands her since the ensuing silence validates what likely everyone is feeling: what the photographs communicate is something that is not right. The ethical imperative emerging is a form of learning based on self-reflection on community life and its faults and possibilities.

Such a scenario does not fully capture Action Learning, but it does capture some of the ingredients Action Learning can incorporate by using the evocative nature of the arts. The scenario captures active engagement through the use of artful products, such as photography, that engage visitors in the representational or interpretative realism of homelessness among poor minority women. Each woman’s story is told through well-organised essays stretching across canvases in ways that visitors can access them physically and visually. Standing next to each display is the woman whose photographs tell her story. She is prepared to take visitors through the display of photographs offering her own storied narrative in all of its evocative features. Each display is premised on one well-validated assertion of the humanities: that a person’s story can incorporate the full countenance of a given social issue (Hyde, 1998).

There are yet two other elements to this scenario indicative of Action Learning. First, there is a reception so all participants, whether storytellers, researchers, and visitors, can come together and process within a safe milieu what they just immediately experienced. The availability of food draws people together, crossing boundaries and dividing society, which otherwise creates and sustains outside of this gathering. The visitors then move into an educational forum in which the storytellers fill in the more technical features of homelessness, discussing its numbers,

demographics and the toll it takes on health and well-being of those individuals who experience it. The forum only takes about 20 minutes. The visitors are receptive to the details since they have first come to understand the devastation inherent in each autobiography. Cognitively they are open to this information because they have become ready emotionally or perhaps even ethically.

### **Succumbing to AIDS**

I look in my journals in which long ago I captured other ways the arts engage people holistically. It is 1990 and the AIDS pandemic remains aggressive as it is spreading across the United States. I am on the flats in Cleveland, Ohio, an area now gentrified by art galleries installed in what was once productive factory space adjacent to the Cuyahoga River. The factories have long gone and in the vacuum the galleries had become well rooted. I enter one of those galleries and blinding me is the pitch white of the walls. The wooden floors are scuffed, indicating the numerous visitors who have crossed those planks to view what turns out to be a provocative exhibit. A young man has recorded his progression into AIDS with various art pieces.

They are arranged in chronological order with an adjacent label indicating the date of each photograph. The young man is descending into disorder, perhaps into dementia. His story is one of death and pain: the last mounted piece tells the story clearly without relying on anyone's words or phrases. I find myself not merely moved but distressed. I find myself reflecting on the global pandemic. I find myself at a loss for words. I find myself succumbing to AIDS. I now understand the artist's intent as I reflect on this experience some 24 years later. His aim for me was to align myself with the act of succumbing, of giving up, and of yielding to death.

The face of AIDS has changed dramatically since 1990. New medications have emerged as well as innovations in human services, both likely ushered in through the sincere efforts of Gay activists and advocates. People are living longer with HIV, which itself is now considered a disease rather than an inevitable prelude



to AIDS. People living with the infection have strategies for reducing their viral loads, increasing their CD4 counts, strengthening their immune systems, and engaging in lives with normal rhythms. How did this change occur?

While we may be thankful to modern medicine, we must also come to understand that this change was a product of an awakening and an expanding consciousness of how social action improves people's lives. I also want to think (perhaps in error) that the particular exhibit I described moved many people emotionally, helped educate visitors about needless loss, and broadened understanding of the human condition writ large stirring acceptance of those who struggled with the disease and the negative social reaction people too often experience. As I write this I am mindful of the AIDS Quilt and the names of the people lost to the pandemic.

My reference point is that stark white room in which the artwork of that particular young man was arranged to capture his descent into death. The deep grooves in the floor reveal the volume of human traffic moving through that gallery. I sought out the curator. She told me that the sponsor of the artist, the young man's family, had the floor sanded and varnished before the exhibit opened. I reflect on the deep multiple grooves in the floor.

### **The mural**

What stood out for me was the artist's strong hostility over which he seemingly had little control. It was prominent and consistent. His psychiatrist told me that it was a negative symptom of his schizophrenia. The negative symptoms were those that remained after aggressive pharmacological treatment. It was 1993 and the medication this young man imbibed was a powerful reminder that he was less than what he was supposed to be for his age and social class. According to the sociological literature since his diagnosis Lawrence, a pseudonym, had descended further and rapidly in the social structure. His father said that the schizophrenia started when Lawrence enrolled in university. He called home on several occasions to report that he was bed ridden with what he said were the symptoms of influenza.

But soon the symptoms worsened and the dreaded pattern was diagnosed by a psychiatrist as schizophrenia. Lawrence followed the recommendations of his physician. Leave school since it was too stressful. Reduce his expectations for a normal life and accept his illness and what it predicted about his potential. It was 1993 and while the psychiatric rehabilitation movement was accelerating in the United States, the recovery movement was nascent. Later on in the decade Lawrence would have had numerous options involving supported housing, employment, and education. Later there would be the possibility that he could have re-entered higher education with considerable support from a responsive team of professionals and consumers.

I met Lawrence when I worked with a group of mental health consumers who were seeking to engage the arts to advance their quality of life. He shared with me his love of art and how he felt art was a way of advancing people's understanding of mental illness. The following week Lawrence came to the meeting hall, the site of the emerging community of support, with a mural rolled up. Actually, the mural had three panels with each panel devoted to a phase of what he called his "career." The first panel captured his life and accomplishments prior to the onset of his mental health challenges. Punctuating and populating this panel were numerous letters testifying to his accomplishments, award certificates, and school transcripts as well as teacher evaluations revealing his tremendous competence and sharp intellect.

The second panel captured Lawrence's descent into what he called "the system." Here the content framed what the system saw as his emerging incompetence. Punctuating and populating this panel were diagnostic reports, letters testifying to disability, pejorative professional reports amplifying what Lawrence could not do, and medical and social service reports identifying individualised service plans that he felt led him nowhere. Those plans revealed how the system saw Lawrence's potential: that someday he would be ready for competitive employment working in perhaps a restaurant, clearing and washing dishes.

The third panel represented what Lawrence sought to achieve for himself. That is, his future, as he saw it. He longed to return to

higher education and pursue his love of biology. He posted to these panel statements of his potential, bibliographies of books he read, excerpts from college catalogues, and descriptions of careers. The words emblazoned across this panel amplified his aims: "I am an educated person. I want to move forward."

Does this mural constitute art? The contents of each panel incorporated real documents arranged in a way in which Lawrence could interpret his reality. The mural was a way he could communicate to others the nature of his experience and the unfolding of schizophrenia conditioned by how a system of care saw it and sought to manage it. While Lawrence did not seek to recruit others into a cause, he did want them to see the destruction he experienced as a function of a label and as the labelled.

Lawrence had hoped that the mural would help people understand his aspirations and the barriers he faced. He had sketches if not caricatures of various actors, and he sketched or painted elements of scenes of mental health systems he saw as mostly destructive. His initial exhibit brought in 100 visitors. They observed the three panels and had a chance to interact with the artist. The triptych fell on deaf ears. Lawrence did not realise the support or the public attention he sought.

### **The artists' collective**

It is 2007 and I am working with a group of people who struggle with serious mental illness. Fortunately, unlike Lawrence, these individuals have organised themselves into a self-help group characterised by considerable peer governance. The members, all of whom have been brought together through the experience of serious mental illness, many sharing Lawrence's experiences with the onset and initial social reaction, are invested considerably in the formation of an intentional community.

This community is an on-going source of sustenance offering a diversity of support through the provision of assistance in multiple life domains: nutrition and good food, safe and stable housing, socialisation and social contact, vocational development, health promotion, and work. While the members recognised the importance of cultural engagement and the contribution of the arts to healing and well being, they came to appreciate the need to

create more opportunities within their well-established community. What emerged was an art collective in which members of the intentional community could get involved in the collective to advance their creative work primarily in the form of painting and portrait.

The membership of the artists' collective was a product of an asset assessment. The initial group of artists readily joined the collective and came to see it as a circle of like-minded people who could come to define an alternative life course competing with the labels of mental illness they had carried for almost their entire adult lives. Artist stood as an alternative identity and the collective immersed its artists in a new context in which they could become and practice as artists, support one another, and engage in the business of art. Indeed, the capacities of the collective formed its core competencies and as it became known among the members of the intentional community and the greater holding community, (i.e. the large city in which it was nested) the collective earned an identity independent of the mental health status of its members.

New competencies emerged as the collective became adept at: marketing, staging art exhibits, participating in large scale art festivals, and supporting shows in which artists displayed their work. Moving about the physical community I began to notice the artists' displays in commercial, governmental, retail, and cultural sites. When visiting with these artists I became mindful of how the collective could stimulate creative capacities that were long dormant and through such stimulation new identities formed when those individuals who held them were willing to express them through their art.

Perhaps Lawrence could have benefitted from such a collective. Like its parent host, the collective represents an intentional community in which members share various identities that stand apart from the more pejorative one induced by a label of serious mental illness. The collective formed a context competing with the greater world in which people likely misunderstand or even fear serious mental illness. Within the collective Lawrence may have sought refuge, for intentional communities can serve as a form of sanctuary within an otherwise hostile world. He would have

likely discovered like-minded artists with whom he could have shared a common experience or his critique of the mental health system, as together they engaged in mutual support. Johnson (2010) reminds me of how group life can nurture innovation through such mutual support.

For me the collective reflects the paradox of social action. Before pushing out efforts to change the outside world, people who experience marginalisation accompanied by oppression, likely form their own community of support. It is within this community of support that members gain the skills, stamina, and identity they require to pursue an agenda of change. Given the focus of artists on engaging in criticism of what exists, creative framing or reframing of what can be, and experimenting with alternative ways of seeing and understanding a collective of creative expression can prepare members for more concerted action in the world in which they may feel unwelcome.

Action Learning here may be either internal, external or both. Within a group, Action Learning can build culture and support preparing members for social action in which they externalise their learning by sharing it with others. Thus, in many cases, art exhibits are forms of externalised Action Learning. Exhibits can move members of a group from an internal stance to an external one.

## **Tactics of arts-informed Action Learning**

### **Fostering group cohesion**

Whether the arts in action work or not begs the question of their importance and relevance as a strategy of social action. Art is human and it reflects the evolution of human beings across the millennia. Some art theorists point to the way the arts instil or otherwise promote group cohesion, a quality perhaps necessary to survive in the face of hostile environments. Cohesion here brings people together into tightly knit groups and by affirming identity and interrelationships, the members of a group come together into closer commerce. Here the arts are distinctive in what they contribute to group membership, identity and relationship to the sublime. Note how the point paintings of Indigenous Australians

capture the relationship of groups and their members to seasonality, to hunting and gathering, to a particular ecosystem, and ultimately to the cosmos. The group may form within its relationship to the sublime.

Looking closely at folk art will likely reveal how people come to memorialise their membership in groups, and how traditions that compose those groups, give their members continuity in the face of an uncertain environment. Artists were fundamental to advancing community life through the affirmation of traditions during the Great Depression. The New Deal supported the involvement of artists in community life. And artists were integral to supporting community life in the face of the Great Depression (Kennedy, 2009).

Building on their idealised visions, artists can advance innovations in human relations. In one painting produced by an anonymous folk artist that hangs in my own collection, I witness daily the portrayal of children engaged in play. Surrounding them are watchful parents who with great excitement are observing the children's collective play. The context of the painting is the artist's vernacular reconstruction of the village, in which the scene is placed. But what is unusual about this painting, at least from my perspective, is that the village strikes me as one located in the deep south of the United States. The year 1963 is painted in the upper corner. The group of children and parents are black and white. And they play in harmony. I imagine the date. And I reflect on the history of the United States. The year was one year before the full emergence of the civil rights movement. Was the artist capturing a vision of the future? Was the artist thinking about the deployment of new values that could come to fulfil a yearning for a new era of social harmony? Such is the possibilities that artists can imagine and even deploy. Is such deployment a form of Action Learning? I see it as such a form.

Inherent in support is cohesion at a group level or within a social network, such that the interconnections among members influence the behaviour of individual members. This kind of cohesion effect is very powerful and becomes an asset of social action.

Engagement in social action requires risk in the face of retaliation

and retribution. Risk can create physical threat and danger. It can degrade people's lives who engage in the social action of which the desired change demands which likely implicates liberation and emancipation.

Folk art, in particular, can create support within a group as members come to draw together folk knowledge, useful in first interpreting a given situation, then in shaping action, particularly for community building, and then in sustaining action during periods that can compromise morale. My colleagues and I have experimented with quilting as a way to foster group cohesion (Moxley, Washington, Feen-Calligan and Garriott, 2011). Quilting is one way of affirming mutually held values and forms of knowledge as people with common experience express them in each square of the quilt that together form a greater whole.

Emotional support is particularly important in situations in which people may otherwise find themselves alone. Emotional support can influence cohesion within a group and become an important factor in healing in the face of trauma. Action Learning in the form of emotional bonding can be one form of learning that is increasingly recognised as essential to social action, recovery, and human development. Support is intimately connected to identity. And the arts foster identity and identification, both of which are essential to the emergence of viable social movements.

### **Affirming countervailing values**

The work of the artist I describe above brings into my consciousness values that were not of their time. Those values are countervailing ones that can create tension with the prevailing values of a culture or that stand in opposition to them. Those values may be emergent ones held by many people who are unwilling to express them publicly yet may nonetheless identify with movements and artful forms of demonstration, until it is safe to make them real in their daily lives. Social change theory suggests that there are leading parts influential in altering a given society (Johnson, 2010). Populating those parts or locations are people who are the innovators, the early adopters of the change that eventually the society as a whole may incorporate, and even

come to celebrate. The arts and their deployment may anticipate such an alteration of values.

Witness five movements that today are reshaping how we think about the global society: the disability rights movement and disability culture, Gay rights and culture, deep ecology, sustainability, and animal rights proceed through the creation of new narratives, the redirection of human and civic energy, and the deployment of images and icons challenging the status quo. Each of the five movements captures what Connolly (2013) identifies as sources of societal innovation. The arts can redefine values and deploy them through emergent narratives that challenge a society to change what it once considered to be an immutable reality. Action Learning can embody such innovation and the arts can serve as its vehicle.

### **Amplifying voice**

Voice is so fundamental to the realisation of change. The willingness to lend voice, particularly to those values that the greater society negates, expresses courage, a virtue indispensable to advancing social change and betterment. The events surrounding Stonewall ignited a movement that spread first slowly, then rapidly across the United States gaining considerable momentum in 2000, as Gay and Lesbian activists challenged the status quo. Culture supports such movements and members linked by supportive structures begin to create narrative that counters what the majority may assert as real.

The arts in its many forms, such as performance, theatre, music, spoken words, poetry, sculpture, murals, paintings, dance and movement, and crafts can amplify voice. And inherent in voice is perspective, stance, and location. Those qualities of position gain salience through the arts, which can become a vehicle for emancipation and liberation. Thus, the arts are fundamental to thinking about Action Learning in emancipatory ways.

Countervailing values can find expression in art forms and it is those forms that can liberate voice, even in the face of hostility or potential violence. Here we see the importance of the arts as a way of expressing dissent. Why is dissent so essential to social change?



It creates new information that can alter the position of those groups and their members who at first stand in opposition to the liberation of perspective (Sunstein, 2003). Exposure to the arts can help people overcome such opposition and win the day for emancipation. In this manner the arts in Action Learning can be political.

### **Prototyping creative settings in service to creative action**

As I indicate in previous content, the arts can take place in numerous contexts in which creative people come together to take creative action. What I refer to as “prototyping” involves an explicit appreciation of how actors form what Sarason (1972) called the “creation of settings.” Imagine the settings in which the arts can occur. These can involve alternative galleries, craft workshops, exhibits, studios, and classrooms – all settings in which learning transpires through intentional and creative action.

What do these sites hold in common? They are places in which alternative learning can occur. I label those sites as alternatives because they are voluntary, embody people’s interests, deploy new or novel values, and experiment with innovations in structure, form and relationships. They are places within which people can come to heal, express themselves, steep themselves in ritual and process as well as create sanctuary where quiet solitude may be essential to the creative process inherent in the artistic engagement of ideas, concepts, feelings, and experience.

Such places may counter the cacophony of those places that can undermine the creative spirit – the din of incarceration, the noise of the factory, and the chatter of the outside world. Indeed, the principal paradigm of the creative prototype is likely the studio. This is the place in which people as artists can control their settings thereby creating the contexts in which they are most able to create. Creating the setting in which creative work will occur may be one of the most fundamental synergistic aspects of the artist’s work life. It is in such settings that the planning and prototyping of creative expression likely takes place (Schon, 1986).

All of these entities serve as sites of creative expression, engagement and production, offering members opportunities to

interact and create novel role constellations. Those constellations can involve what many artists may take for granted but can be very important for those who experience marginalisation: instructor, curator, docent, master artist, novice artist, gallery manager, or marketer. The options offer numerous possibilities involving the creation of the self and the forging of new identities.

Those of us who come to work with the arts in Action Learning projects, may recognise that the studio is a private world but social change demands public presentation and performance. The nexus between the private and inner life and the public and outer life is visible in the arts in Action Learning. People may come together to co-create a supportive world in which artful production occurs. Then they produce, they push their creative production out into the public sphere so people can consume or confront their work. What is salient as I reflect on what I learned from our work with homeless women who engaged the arts, was the formation of a tightly knit creative group. This group formation served as a prerequisite for moving out into the public sphere in which the participants sought to educate others whose schema of homelessness were either inaccurate or simply impoverished. The exhibit these women co-created was a prototype of action, something that they sought to nurture, grow and further develop.

### **Linking prototyping to organisational development**

Organisations become substantive as the prototype becomes rooted in place and as members come to support concerted action through collective support. In my own discipline of social work, we appreciate those organisations emerging from early prototypes of social action. Such alternative organisations may strike us as decidedly informal and characterized by intense, flexible or even spontaneous involvement of members in the daily lives of administration, fund development, programming, outreach and community education.

My own research reveals the vibrant and nuanced activities within the arts, in which people are creating what Bergquist (1993) refers to as intersect organisations. Those organisations embody numerous thematic or substantive foci, bringing together singular

or multiple forms of the arts with other strands of human interaction like: social services, health care, vocational development, employment training, adult education, or rehabilitation. Those kinds of organisations have populated the landscapes of communities for decades, but are now becoming visible in what organisational theorists may refer to, as social enterprises. The members of such organisations make income from their engagement in the arts. They may incorporate their own galleries, shops, and studios selling creative products year round or holding markets during holiday seasons.

The members of such organisations can gain substantive skills through their involvement in the arts—like numeracy, computer, and health literacy competencies. Social enterprises can create settings in which the success of a work-ordered day depends on the engagement of members in productive involvement with the arts. Characterising such social enterprises is their undermanning in which there are few professional staff to handle all of the work, so the organisation must depend on the productivity of all members. The necessity of maintaining the organisation and advancing its work can demand creative engagement—in governance, program administration, fund development, evaluation, and service provision.

Here Action Learning becomes highly experiential as organisational members who may lack the professional credentials, that other organisations may highlight as their key asset; become adept by engaging issues and resolving them at a group level. Social enterprises themselves are small enough to favour the integration of group life, social interaction, and technical performance. A social enterprise may become a wellspring of practical knowledge, in which the competencies of members to run the entity can accelerate through social learning—that is learning occurring within a given setting in which members observe how others function, encode that functioning, and practice it within a supportive milieu.

Such social learning may accelerate, when the arts and social enterprise combine to form distinctive cultures of engagement. Often learning in the arts is mediated through demonstration and

experience; the essence of the studio in which participants learn from an experienced instructor, interact with one another in rich and informal ways, and experiment with their own ideas using informal guidance from others as a way to shape their ideas and work. Learning in this way is conative. Artists generate inner concepts, ideas and images, nurture their formation through rich dialogue with others, and then push them out from the interior world, as they coordinate the concept with the movement of the body. Such learning can shape organisational culture and come to influence how the enterprise functions.

### **A reflexive conclusion**

From this overview of how the arts can influence Action Learning, we can appreciate how Action Learning can also influence the arts. As those engaged in Action Learning promote work in various settings to realise social betterment, the arts become a viable set of tools for enacting change. In this sense, while there is history suggesting that the arts can facilitate nefarious ends, such as during the Nazi regime, the frame of reference I offer links the arts and Action Learning so people can advance a progressive agenda of change. Here we can witness the importance of perspective and experience, two fundamental aspects of Action Learning.

A focus on the marginalised implicates the importance of amplifying voice. Who will listen? And who will see from the perspective of the narrator? In a previous paper my colleagues and I sought to amplify how the arts and voice are connected, especially through the medium of lyrical verse. In that paper, we examine a “voice in the wilderness,” as a homeless poet seeks to deepen her audience’s understanding of the debilitating contours of homelessness (Moxley, Tatum, and Washington, 2011). For the homeless poet art heals the wounds of trauma.

It is difficult to appreciate the voice without further seeing how the perspective or stance of the artist influences form, style, theme or message. For the minority and degraded or ignored voice, the outsider artist is witness here of some kind of holocaust (the experience of which can dramatically alter narrative) and serves as a messenger of a new way of seeing an object that viewers,

listeners, or participants may initially overlook or misunderstand. The artist can help us see. And, the artist can help us understand. Sometimes the artist can enable us to connect emotionally with that object we find alien or even revolting. Perhaps the artist can enable us to grasp that which has been out of reach. Thus, the change artists can induce stands as a form of learning, for the artists themselves, as well as for members of their audiences.

As a social worker and social activist, the incorporation of the arts into my own research, and my collaboration with artists as partners in inquiry, has tremendously altered my understanding of multiple social issues. The arts offer a way of knowing that can be at substantial odds with the methods of contemporary social science. As I came to the arts rather abruptly at midlife, I have at times reflected on that fortuitous occasion. Resonating here for me are Thomas Moore's words as he comments on the Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII who:

... used a powerful and relevant image when he convoked his Vatican Council. 'Apriamo le finestre' (Let's open the windows), he said. When he suggested that the locks be loosened and the catches released, fear arose among the church hierarchy. What would happen? What new ideas might enter? (Moore, 2000, p. 27)

Let those of us who compose the global community of action learners appreciate the full and considerable potential of creative expression, as the arts in all their diversity and innovation make possible. Can the arts bring our discipline new ideas of action and new ways of learning? *Apriamo le finestre*.

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## Biography

David P. Moxley, Ph.D. is a professor in the University of Oklahoma Anne and Henry Zarrow School of Social Work. David works extensively with community partners in addressing serious social issues, like homelessness, and marginalisation, through the use of methods from Action Research and Action Learning. Over the course of his career David has employed Action Research and Action Learning in social research and development as well as organisational development in the human services.

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# Conferences: Building a reflective learning community through creative interventions

Cathryn Lloyd

## Abstract

*Through a reflective practitioner -led perspective, this paper looks at five conferences in which creative learning processes were incorporated and used as participative experiential learning community building processes. The paper explores how creative interventions were designed and used to connect conference participants and to encourage mutual inquiry, reflection and other ways of knowing.*

## Key words

Conferences, creative learning community, TEDX, collaboration, participation, City of Thought, embodied learning, art

## A practitioner's reflection

This paper is written from a practitioner/practice-led perspective (Gray, 1996; Haseman, 2006; Haseman and Mafe, 2009; Lloyd, 2011) and reflects on my experience of designing and facilitating creative interventions in five conference environments. It reflects a practice-led inquiry approach which is where inquiry and reflection on practice, loops back to draw on appropriate theories and or to create new theories. As a hybrid practitioner/researcher, I identify with the notion of the "bricoleur" (Lloyd, 2011) whereby I draw on different theories and practice for my praxis. My agenda for each of these conferences was to introduce creative ways for participants to connect, build a creative learning community, and reflect on their conference experience. In doing so I draw on experiential aesthetic and arts-based learning processes and

methodologies (Darso, 2004; Heron, 1989; Lloyd, 2011). The interventions include the use of images, stories, metaphors, movement, human sculpture (Lloyd and Hill, 2013), and other creative processes. The artistic methods provide a creative way for conference participants to engage with one another in a process of mutual inquiry and expression (Reason, 2001).

## **Creative conference communities**

When I started to write this paper I was still buzzing after having spent the day at a local TEDx Conference, entitled TEDx Kurilpa. To provide a little background, TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) is a non-profit, non-partisan foundation conceived in 1984 by architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman, who saw the possibilities within the convergence of three worlds: Technology, Entertainment and Design. He thought it would be a good idea to have an event that explored these areas through a range of speakers, who were doing lots of interesting things. TED's aim is to provide a platform for thinkers, visionaries and teachers, so that people around the globe can gain a better understanding of the biggest issues faced by the world, and feed a desire to help create a better future. Core to this goal is a belief that powerful ideas can drive change in the world (<http://www.ted.com/about/our-organisation/how-ted-works>).

Since its inception, TED has broadened its scope to include two annual conferences and a TEDx program, which gives communities, organisations and individuals the opportunity to stimulate dialogue and independently organise TED type conferences at a local level. The TED talks and conferences are a global success and have captured a lot of peoples' imaginations, particularly as the live presentations are recorded and then become available via the Internet. In general the presenters are mostly very engaging, articulate, knowledgeable and passionate about their topic, and are often creative leaders in their field of interest. Over the years I have watched and enjoyed many of the videoed TED talks that are available.

Over the past couple of years I have also had the opportunity to attend two local TEDx events in my city. While both were

interesting there was a strong format of conference delegates sitting and listening to the presenters. As a result, in my mind there was limited opportunity to engage in other meaningful ways with my fellow delegates. Therefore much of my enthusiasm in relation to this TEDx Kurilpa event, was coloured by two elements. A serendipitous meeting with the TEDx Kurilpa licensee, provided a chance to share our thoughts on how we both felt there was a need do something a little more creative and different to the standard TEDx format within the TEDx guidelines (<http://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/tedx-rules#h2--general>). The TEDx Kurilpa conference seemed the perfect platform to do this.

The conversation led to an invitation for me to design and facilitate a creative community building process for the opening and closing sessions of the conference. As I began to think and reflect on my involvement and how I would design and facilitate these sessions, two intentions were paramount in my mind; firstly, I gathered that the sessions needed to be experiential and participative, and secondly the creative interventions should encourage delegates to connect with one another, help build rapport and develop a sense of community. Why did I think these ideas were important? This thinking underpins my professional practice and it reflects how I want my conference experiences to be. I want my conference experiences to be a holistic learning environment. Not only do I want to learn from the formal presenters, I also want to engage and learn from my fellow delegates in other sorts of ways.

### **What are conferences for?**

I reflected on the question of the purposes of conferences. As I began to write this paper I undertook a quick search of the scholarly literature. The search revealed very little. This is curious given the huge number of conferences on offer around the world. Does this indicate an implicit understanding that conferences are worthwhile and do not require research and reflection? A general Internet search provided a few links that outlined some of the reasons why conferences are worth attending. Some of the obvious reasons include the opportunity to meet people and network, to learn and gather new information, and to showcase

one's research or professional practice. These are the obvious reasons why conferences exist and why people attend. I appreciate that conferences provide a place where these things happen, although I am often left with a sense that in many instances these things could also happen more creatively and effectively.

Currently there are many conferences that continue to follow a particular structure: the keynote speaker, multiple streams, and in my opinion limited time to meet to engage with delegates in other experiential ways. This format has developed over time and serves a purpose for the delivery and exchange of knowledge and ideas. As much as I appreciate the opportunity to gain new knowledge from my fellow delegates through a workshop or presentation, I now seek other ways I can connect and learn from those who are not formally presenting. I am curious about my fellow delegates. I want to know what brought them to the conference: what they hope to get from it, what their interests and ideas are. I also would like to share my experiences, as I am interested in how we might create and take action as a learning community.

My aspiration is for a conference to be a place where our bodies, hearts and minds are aroused and where we are inspired to take action. To me a conference should also be a place of surprise, a place to wonder out loud, to ask and explore "What is Possible", a place to experiment, and take risks. A conference should be a place where our individual and collective imaginations (Heron, 1989) and moral imaginations (Lederach, 2005) are free to roam and where a "creative learning community" is formed.

The idea of a moral imagination has great resonance for how we might cultivate conference experiences. Lederach calls on peace-builders and conflict resolution professionals to "envision their work as a creative act" and exercise their "moral imagination". He suggests they have "one foot in what is and one foot beyond what exists" (book cover). This is an inspiring and imaginative way to think about how we might creatively interact and learn from each other. With those aspirations in mind, that is how I envisaged my small contribution to the TEDx Kurilpa conference and is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

## Connecting and creating with others

The idea that “life [and knowledge] is created from interplay among different participants who make contact, influence one another, exchange their essential natures, merge, and generate new forms” (McNiff, 2003, p. 2) resonates strongly for me. This is the work I am motivated to do. I facilitate creative learning experiences for a range of people, groups, and organisations and all for different reasons. These learning experiences are designed to help people build relationships, make meaningful connections, and tap into their creative potential regardless of the work they do. I find that at the heart of all human endeavour is creativity, and the work I aim to do is to support people in their learning, change, and creative pursuits both individually and collectively. This is the thinking that underpinned my doctoral research, *“Artful Inquiry: an arts-based facilitation approach for individual and organisational learning and development”* (Lloyd, 2011). My own learning and professional practice are works in progress and constantly evolving. I continue to draw on an experiential, aesthetic, and arts-based learning “philosophy” that includes action and reflection to design and facilitate adult learning experiences (Darso, 2004; Daudelin, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Eisner, 2002, 2008; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Heron, 1989; Kerr and Lloyd, 2008; Kolb, 1984; Nissley, 2002; Schön, 1983).

In that context this paper offers a brief exploration and description of some of the ways I have facilitated, contributed, and endeavoured to make the conferences I have been involved with inclusive, creative, meaningful, connected, and a flourishing experience for the delegates.

### The Ideas Festival

In 2009 I approached the Brisbane Ideas Festival with an idea. The Festival was a public event and promoted as a place where recognised speakers and writers would present ideas and encourage public debate. From my observations the presentations seemed to be taking a fairly traditional format, such as lectures and panel discussions presented to an audience. Increasingly I began to feel strongly about the need for an open public workshop – a place

that the community could come and share their ideas in a creative and collaborative way.

The idea I presented to the Director of the festival was a two-hour workshop positioned at the end of the festival. The inspiration for the workshop was driven by the various descriptions I had seen about the festival being a driver for “new ideas, old ideas in new manifestations and the exchange of ideas across sector, across industry, across generations and across the room”. What better way to do this than bring the public, the community, a group of strangers, from diverse backgrounds into a “neutral” space and allow them to meet and converse about the ideas that mattered to them. I felt sure that after a few days of listening to others presenting their ideas, the festival community would appreciate and respond to the opportunity to express and share their ideas.

The workshop I proposed was a semi-structured and yet flexible creative process. I believed this would help people connect with one another in a relatively short time and engage in meaningful dialogue (Clouder, 2000). The Director of the festival could see the possibility of the workshop. Although I sensed an initial apprehension about the perceived slightly unorthodox and unstructured nature of the workshop, he was prepared to support it. I shared my vision for the session workshop and so “Creative Collaborations – Ideas that Matter”, a two-hour public workshop was held at the end of the Ideas Festival and made available to the local community. The marketing material promoted the workshop as an interactive and collaborative session.

The workshop attracted a diverse group of approximately sixty people. Given there were other presentations on offer it showed me that people were eager to interact and share their ideas with one another. It highlighted that people were ready to come together and find other ways to engage with their community. The process I would offer would be based on some strategic and minimal intervention, and where I would hold the space for people to explore the festival themes (“self and society”, “invention and innovation”, “development and design”, “ecology and ethics”, and “action and advocacy”).

At the beginning of the session I shared with the group the workshop approach and suggested a few ground rules for engagement, which the participants agreed to with a couple of additions. I began the session with some quick spontaneous improvisational activities that were playful and helped build rapport quickly and I provided some basic props for participants to work with such as images, chalk and some paper and pens if they required them. The rest was up to them, to self-organise into groups inspired by the festival themes. They were left to negotiate how they would interact and how they would share their ideas to the rest of the group later in the form of a creative act. My bold statement to them was that this was not only about sharing ideas with their fellow participants but also it was a place to engage their bodies, hearts and minds and to act. It proved to be a highly engaging, reflective, energetic and creative session where those who committed to the process seemed to participate fully.

Toward the end of the session I asked people to make a public declaration and commit to an action over the following week and beyond. The entire group individually responded in different ways, with one person saying they would contact their brother who they hadn't spoken with in three years. Another made a commitment to cycle to work and another said they would start their vegetable garden. Another group of people, who lived in the same area and had never met, said they would meet again to discuss what sort of community action they would undertake. The response to the session was very positive and people appreciated the opportunity to "have their voice" as part of the conference festival. Many commented that the session had been an "absolute surprise" and that they were pleased they had made the choice to attend, even though they were initially unsure what it was going to entail. This was a self-selected group and I knew there were a couple of people who arrived and left with one person telling me "this was not the session for them". Those who came and stayed were motivated to do so. They took a risk to attend an open conference session that explicitly promoted the idea that people should be prepared to actively participate and interact with their fellow festival attendees. It suggests to me that people were looking for other ways to connect and contribute. This was

highlighted by unsolicited correspondence I received from some of the participants, informing me how much they appreciated being part of the session:

I've been meaning to write to you and thank you for a fantastic session. It was completely unexpected! I think everybody at the festival was surprised at how easy it was to talk to each other, considering we were strangers... and a lot of us were from different backgrounds, ages, etc. I learnt a lot from the experience and think your concept of arts-based learning is a fantastic one, a good way to break the boundaries of logical thinking that we endure during the week.

Just a quick e-mail to let you know how much I enjoyed the session you facilitated on the Sunday of the Ideas Festival. We had a great time with some wonderful enthusiastic people, and your movement and trust games made it all so much easier to connect.

This was not a passive session where people listened, participated, and contributed. It was a creative and collaborative learning experience within a conference festival, and it highlighted to me that room should be made to provide creative ways for communities to connect, and to have a public place to share dreams and exchange knowledge.

### **Art of Management and Organisation Conference**

Having previously presented at the 2008 Art of Management and Organisation (AoMO) conference in Banff, Canada. I was keen to attend the next one as I had a sense that I had connected to a "tribe" of people working and researching in the areas I was deeply interested in. With the announcement and call for papers and presentation for the 2012 AoMO Creativity and Critique conference to be held in York in the U.K. I sent an email to the AACORN (Arts, Aesthetic, Creativity, and Organisation Research Network) email list; I knew there would be people on the list who had attended the previous AoMO conferences and could be potential delegates for the 2012 conference. The email was a request asking if anyone would be interested in collaborating on and facilitating an arts-based community building process for the whole conference. My initial idea was that this would be a creative



project that would run over the life of the conference and encourage people to learn, reflect, and connect with one another at various times throughout the conference.

Two people, Daved Barry<sup>4</sup>, an academic researcher based at the Copenhagen Business School, and Henrik Schrat, an artist/academic based in Berlin became project collaborators. So from afar we developed our interactive and participative community building process via email and Skype. In itself this was an interesting exercise as we had to overcome time differences and more importantly gain an understanding of how each of us saw the potential of this project. It took time to progress a coherent understanding of all our ideas and develop a cohesive and creative process of value to the delegates. The proposal was a collaborative effort with each of us drawing on our areas of expertise and interest such as: design-led innovation, the arts, aesthetic and arts-based learning, arts and management education, leadership and organisational aesthetics and design. We submitted the following outline as our “Community Buildings” proposal and waited to hear back from the organisers.

We would like to run a “community-building” project with the AMO participants, one that lasts over the duration of the conference. We have discussed many alternatives and have settled on using an architectural motif, where participants create representative structures of a paper, a research direction, and/or a practice – e.g. a house, theatre, office structure – something with rooms and connections. With this, we invite participants to experiment and consider new tools and strategies for taking concepts, theories, and methodologies presented in their papers and to explore other tangible ways to present that material, engage people, and transfer knowledge and understanding. We think the “architectural +township” perspective, with its mix of artistic gaze, fixed rules and looseness, hands-on building, and collectivity, could be a good way to accomplish this, plus advance our aesthetic and artistic thinking and practice.

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<sup>4</sup> Permission has been sought and given to use names

Process-wise, the four of us would form a support team that provides guidelines, compositional help (both conceptual and tangible), pushes up the artistic merit of the overall work, and facilitates the discussion processes around it. On the first day of the conference, we (anyone from the conference who would like to participate) would begin making structures and a township. Structures would be placed in a landscaped space (perhaps a floor or large table with various landscape features – ocean, mountain, river valley). The placements would be partially dynamic, like a chess game perhaps, moving around as they and the landscape develop.

Halfway through the conference, we would invite those who've made structures to make an extension to someone else's creation – an add-on room, a space, a path, decoration, lighting, you name it. The extension work would be a way to advance participants' thinking.

At the beginning, middle, and end we would facilitate reflection, discussion, and interaction. We might also use a stop-motion camera to capture the development and show the film at the end.

When our proposal was accepted it was time to get serious. It is one thing having an idea; it is another bringing it to fruition particularly when we were doing this from afar. As we developed and refined our ideas, the "City of Thought: community building through co-developing an architectural model" emerged from our collective mindscape. The "City of Thought" (CoT) was intended to serve two purposes; firstly, as a community building process, and secondly as a way of researching the relationship between thought, and its representation as a three-dimensional object; that is as an artefact. As a community building process it would allow delegates to meet and connect through creative practice. At the same time it would provide a place of learning, another way for delegates to represent or present their papers and/or research, and another way in which information and knowledge could be exchanged.

The following description is an excerpt from the hand out we intended to give to the conference delegates, which provided an

overview of our intention and a number of key instructions for how to engage with the CoT.

We can think of the City of Thought as a heuristic device; where heuristic denotes an experience-based technique for learning and discovery, and where architecture and urban space are used as ways of thinking about the multiple functions of one's research. As in all translation, a lot will be lost and different ways to express things will be gained. By temporarily dodging language, new insights might be triggered – for instance, the private/public dimensions of research, streets of research, leisure areas, work/office dimensions.

We would provide some creative constraints through a limited range of materials and some overarching guidelines for an artistic approach. Rather than leaving it as an “anything goes”, we were suggesting that artistic methods offer ways to “find structures in and map unknown territory”. In that way we were aiming for the CoT not only to be a community-building process but a “sense-making” (Barry and Meisiek, 2010) process and a vehicle for “presentational knowing” (Heron and Reason, 2006). It would provide delegates with the potential to reveal their ideas, share their research, and make connections via a visual and metaphorical artefact allowing them “to reach beyond the confines of conventional intellectual positivism to embrace the pre-verbal, manifest and tacit knowings we might associate with artists, crafts people and our own guts and hearts and bodies” (Seeley and Reason 2008, p. 4).

While we had a relatively clear picture in mind as to how this community building could be offered and facilitated; it is impossible to know how people will respond, interact and welcome such an intervention. There is always hope that offered in good faith, and with the intention to provide a meaningful experience, people will participate. I certainly was hopeful that this would be the case and that they would find value in the experience.



*Figure 1: The “crucifix” platform: laying the foundations*

At the beginning of the conference we were asked to explain the CoT to the delegates. We lead them to our sturdy cardboard crucifix table that we had built as a learning platform from which the city would be built. It was strategically positioned in the middle of the university space where the conference was being held. In the initial “induction” we outlined our project and some of the objectives. We informed them of the creative constraints we had devised such as the materials available and the size of land people were able to “claim”. I wondered how people would perceive it and how they would interact with it and their fellow delegates. Would it provide all the outcomes and possibilities we assumed it could?

We were now into the next phase of co-creation. While we were the initial instigators and facilitators of the project, the conference delegates also needed to bring their moral imaginations and willingness to the project. At some stage whenever we create something and set it free in the world we inevitably have to let go and see what comes. Given it was front and centre at the conference people could hardly miss it, so there was ample opportunity to be involved if people were motivated to do so. Part of our process was to facilitate reflective conversations in the middle and at the end of the conference. This was to encourage

people to share their experiences, to help make connections, and to encourage meaning making. What happened in the many hours between these “formally” facilitated discussions was up to the delegates, although we aimed for at least one of us to be present at the CoT as much as possible so that we could discuss the process and offer some general guidance if required. So it was to my delight when I arrived early the next morning to see the beginnings of a building and two delegates quietly working away together at their model.



*Figure 2: Collaboration: Two delegates working at their model*

Over the course of the conference others gathered and piece-by-piece a “city of thought” emerged. This was a project that in many ways had a life of its own. People came and went, either silently observing, or talking about the emerging world, and or other areas of interest. Some would make something and or add something to some else’s creation. There was always some sort of activity or interaction taking place around the CoT. It became a focal point in many ways although it did not take over the conference. People continued to engage in all the other ways people generally interact at conferences. Over the session breaks people would hover around and peer at the buildings, take photos, write comments and begin or continue creating their artefact. Many conversations took place and it is impossible to know all of them. One person I spoke with had just presented her paper and decided to use it as part of her structure. She commented that she found the

destruction of the paper and then reconstructing it as part of her artefact somewhat “cathartic”. One of the delegates offered a rich description of the CoT’s emergence:

The CoT is still rising and we heard the intentions and visions of our co-builders. Some created buildings alone, representing a built version of their own work activity or take on life. A church rises in the centre, roofless and someone wants to place a madonna in it – some negotiation may be needed. Towers rise up and even an underground, trap-doored realm where “here be dragons”. The city is both a collective and a thing of separateness, but the building is not done yet.



*Figure 3: A church emerges from the City of Thought*

At one point some of the delegates arrived with “poem dwellings”. These were small “poetic” houses they had made in one of the sessions. They asked if their houses could become part of the CoT. While they were different to what our guidelines specified (for instance we had provided certain materials, a limited range of colours, specified a size for individual artefacts) the “poem dwellings” were inspired and created in a different way, their origins manifesting from a different source and were more decorative.

I felt it was a rather coincidental connection that another session would work with the idea of small dwellings as a creative way of

reflecting and learning. I thought they were an appropriate addition to the landscape. After all this was the conference in action and what does one say to such a request? Wasn't the CoT also offered as a community-building process? How might the community have been affected, and or effected, had the request been rejected? Along the way there were all sorts of opinions, robust exchanges, resistances and engagement about the CoT. At one point someone said to me that our instructions "inhibited her creativity". There were conversations about many things. One such passionate discussion was focused on the CoT's perceived lack of "town planning" and as a result it was just a jumble of buildings and ideas with no heart. One of the delegates suggested that it be named "A City of Thinking", which he believed was more dynamic and ongoing than a static thought. These obvious and other less obvious interactions, discussions, and feelings manifested through this provocative project.

So what did this CoT community building and knowledge creation project achieve? From my perspective the CoT did much of what was intended. It offered a reflective and creative place for people to gather and return to. It worked as a catalyst for igniting discussion about many things: the project and process itself, the conference, what the Art of Management and Organisation community is about, and also peoples' research. People commented about the aesthetics, the look of the city, and what they perceived as a lack of design, coherence and planning (strongly articulated through the eyes of an architect). One could see the positivist discussions in action while others enjoyed and appreciated its eclectic and organic nature. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and I found it beautiful and intriguing because it was all of those things.

As an artefact it was an individual and collective creative expression of the people who participated. It represented the random and at times incoherent nature of ideas, imagination, creativity, knowledge and how connections are made - or not. It showed the convergence and divergence of connections and ideas. This was an artefact that moved beyond everyday language. Ideas were presented and represented in a three-dimensional visual form without the constraints of having to explain, which at times

worked and other times was less successful. Some people adhered to the guidelines while others “broke the rules” or improvised. Some people liked the creative constraints while others wanted more planning, structure and adherence to the original guidelines. These competing preferences, in my view, reflect so many aspects of organisational life and life in general as we try to make sense of the world around us. There were ideas that got lost in visual translation but other interesting and unusual connections and ideas were also found. As I reflect on the CoT I ask myself the question “could we have designed it differently?” The answer is “yes” of course. There are other ways it could have been developed and designed. Could we have facilitated it differently? Again yes, there are other ways we could have facilitated. We could have been more *lasses-faire* or we could have been more prescriptive. We could have rejected the “poem dwellings” which given the inclusion of, may have directed the CoT in a way that had they not been there, may have been quite different. Whichever way we facilitated there would be those who would respond or not. Did we push it far enough? In some ways yes, we did as it was given space-time in the conference programme; but we also had to share with other conference activities, presentations and displays. One of the participants posed a provocative question as to whether “we” had the courage to destroy it and begin again:

I proposed we burn it – together, and then go off to our night sleep, in order to come back together tomorrow and then build. The first is a draft. Do we have the courage and the resilience to suggest away this first draft? Would the post-sleep second draft be the more needed city? I think artists used to make more drafts in their work. Some still do. But many people are so tired by the call of media-flooded life, and being in the machine of a techno-driven society, that first drafts are often put out as final drafts. There can be something beautiful and compelling in that rawness, something essential and fresh in that coarse first-ness. But also something lazy. Something that fears to go further.

Reflecting on that question I am drawn to the words of poet and author, David Whyte who suggested that: “the cycle of making, disintegration, and remaking that is the hallmark of meaningful



and creative work” (Whyte, 2001, p. 77). I do think of the CoT as meaningful work and as a work in progress. The 2012 AoMO conference allowed for the first iteration. I recognise that as a creative community building process and a place for learning the CoT process has much to offer. I am aware that some delegates have considered using the idea in one of their professional management programmes. It is encouraging to see how ideas and knowledge can be built on and reconfigured for different purposes.

For me the CoT certainly had a beauty and rawness to it as a conference community-building and sense-making creative representation. One of the highlights for me was that it seemed to attract “outliers”. As the CoT was front and centre in a university communal building, I was aware that “visitors” also arrived and made their mark. One such visitor was a university porter who had witnessed the evolution of our city. He had watched over and seen the CoT transform and was finally moved to make his own contribution. I take heart in the fact that he felt interested and inspired by what we had seen happening and more importantly that he felt able to include himself in the process. One of the conference organisers had a similar observation:

As for City of Thought - It was such a great contribution to the conference. I think the thing that captured this for me was the contribution made by one of the university porters - demonstrating the collaborative and barrier-lessness (is that a word?) to the project. I also think it was poignant given this was a re-launch of the conference and the project was almost a metaphorical re-building of the community.



*Figure 4: An “outliers” reflection in poetic and metaphorical form*

Her comments about the approach being a metaphorical re-building of the AoMO community resonate as it had been four years since the last conference and during that time the AoMO “community” had faced a number of challenges. This re-building or re-thinking of a learning community was not lost on one delegate who commented:

I’m not sure what [the CoT] offered the conference. I guess it had the potential to be a point of intersection and a meeting place to exchange ideas, but I’m not sure it effectively achieved that. I didn’t experience much of that at any rate. What I took away from it was individual learning and inspiration from the process of constructing my individual piece. What I saw in the City itself both elated and depressed me, as I was left feeling part of a really interesting and creative developing community, but somehow quite alone and a little isolated at the same time.

This observation is rather telling in that it reveals one person’s story about their conference experience. I suggest it could at times reflect how people might respond to other conferences. This comes back to my question about how we develop a creative learning community. What are the ways we can help people build a sense of community at conferences? What I take from this is that

the CoT provided a creative way for this person to reflect on their own learning experience, and to also reflect on the AoMO learning community at large. From a facilitation perspective, had this been articulated more obviously at the time, had we been given more whole of conference time, and if we had reflected more effectively at the time in what and how we were facilitating the interactions and discussions taking place then this and other insights could have been explored in more depth. In turn it may have provided the AoMO organisers and community with a greater understanding of and what might be needed for the future.

The CoT provided a touch point, a place that could be revisited. It became a place for people to meet over a cup of tea, a place where you could flex your creative and intellectual muscle, a place where you could simply stand and reflect. It became a place where ideas and thoughts were made visible and people could interact with them by simply observing or adding to. People were free to come and go from our city, from their city. As a result, the CoT grew and developed its own creative energy and expression, and isn't that what a creative learning community should offer? The following comments provide further insights about the experiences of those who chose to actively engage with the CoT:

I loved the idea of the City of Thought, and I also liked that there were some guidelines/rules set out at the beginning. Because of the packed itinerary it was hard to find the time to actually make something, but once I put my mind to it something began to form. What I created wasn't really what I started out thinking I'd do, and I found myself partly responding to the materials provided and as I worked a vision began to form around a kind of Mexican mandala-like snake picture I'd been given as a gift. I mention this, as the image has since become something which continues to sustain me, and as soon as I got home I found the mandala and placed it opposite my bed so it is the first thing I see each morning and the last thing I see at night. I find an energy in it, that didn't exist for me before.

I thought the installation was well situated, and it was good to see creations appearing each day, giving something new to explore and reflect upon all the time. I think on the whole it was pretty difficult to figure out what many of the

individual pieces represented, but that provided conversation starters when the creators were present. Many people didn't stick within the original constraints and I thought that was to be expected but in some ways a shame, because as a designer I like the extra creative effort that having constraining demands. On the other hand I think there was a point at which either the rules needed to be explicitly lifted or changed. With an emergent installation like this I think it does well to have a narrative or story, so that participants can experience a journey of sorts, and I feel that aspects of that could have been (better) facilitated. Given the time constraints there wasn't enough time to see something properly, self-organise and evolve so I think it ended up still in its initial phase of semi-chaotic construction – possibly a reflection of where the field of arts in business stands.

On the train back from York in September, I could think of nothing else apart from the City of Thought (COT). COT had a profound effect on me and I had taken a lot of photos and had a lot of ideas about the experience, the process, how the process could be built upon, how I could use with my own students. I found the disagreements over town planning to be intriguing. I felt it was no bad thing at a generally very appreciative conference to have a bit of tension/argument creeping in. The issues actually mattered to participants, they were not just debating points. Leaving aside the dated inappropriate harsh criticism that some academics are capable of, there is perhaps too little emotional content in a modern academic conference. I like the way that someone put their painting into the church. Improvised beyond the rules.

I think the CoT was a bold idea. It did need a stronger set of community building efforts around it. I loved where it was located and I enjoyed the debate. I'd prefer it to be called a "city of thinking". Also I wonder what would happen if you just did it minimally and made it even more emergent. Just the materials, a big space and a big sign "City of Thought" and no other instructions - what might emerge then? But I think you could really experiment more with the idea - it was a bold thing at our conference.



*Figure 5: The City of Thought in action*

From my observation the CoT project was a valuable and rather unique offering to the AoMO conference. Hindsight is a great teacher and although it did many of the things we intended, I do think it could have done more. However, it provided a creative place for people to engage with their hearts, minds, emotions, and their intellect and with one another; it provided a way for some of the AoMO community to self-reflect.

### **2011 and 2013 ALARA conferences**

ALARA (Action Learning and Action Research Association) is a strategic network of people, interested in using action research and action learning to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses. ALARA's vision is that action research and action learning will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups, creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society (<http://www.alarassociation.org/>).

I've now had the opportunity to facilitate a creative community building process for both the 2011 and 2013 ALARA conferences. In 2011 I designed and facilitated a process whereby delegates worked with a range of images at the beginning, middle and end to introduce themselves and to reflect on and share their experience of the conference. Images were chosen as the tool of articulation (Lloyd and Hill, 2013) as they provide people with other ways of reflecting and knowing and have the potential to provide insight into the human condition (Weber, 2008). At the opening of the 2011 conference, the images were used as a community building process and a way to encourage people to connect with one another beyond everyday language. Given the conference was based on workshop presentations and discussions, this was an opportunity for delegates to work in silence and to experience another way of connecting with their fellow delegates. At the end of the process there would be time for people to discuss the process and their images.

From my observation this simple process proved to be challenging for some delegates who found it difficult and even rather confronting to work in silence. It took quite some time for people to relax and settle into the experience and to quietly engage and experience each other in another way. There were two other touch points throughout the conference: one at the middle and one at the end where delegates again selected images which provided them with a way to reflect on their conference experience and share that with their colleagues. The idea of having a whole conference community building was well received and it was decided that space would be given to another community building process for the 2013 conference.

For the 2013 conference I had the opportunity to collaborate with a colleague. With our mutual interests in creative expression and "other ways of knowing" (Eisner, 2008) we were both motivated to design and facilitate a range of experiential and creative modalities such as movement, physical interactions, images, stories and other creative expressive forms. We were both inspired to encourage participants to experience "sensory" responses (Eisner, 2008).

This whole-person learning (Heron, 1989) draws on “bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence” (Gardner, 2004) ‘somatic knowing’ (Matthews, 1998) “bodily kinaesthesia” (McCaughy and Rovegno, 2001), “sensuous encountering” and “bodying forth” (Seeley and Heron, 2008). These concepts embrace the link between mind and body, and the meaning and learning that is generated through our bodies. The body is ever present in our interactions, communications, how we learn, and our way of being in the world (Illeris, 2009; Jarvis, 2009). Presentational knowing emerges from experiential knowing and provides the first form of expressive meaning (Seeley and Reason, 2008). This can be seen by way of body gestures (glances, sighs and held breath etc), and through the body as mediated by the materials and tools used as channels for expression such as sound, sculpture, dance, story, drawing and movement (Seeley and Reason, 2008; Heron and Reason, 2006).

Often conferences focus heavily on the intellect and tend to forget about the body. Generally there is a lot of sitting, standing, listening and talking at conferences. On the whole, conferences do not deliberately include the body as part of the learning experience and we both felt strongly about deliberately including the body in the process. The idea is that “knowing is a multiple state of affairs” (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). At this point I would like to bring in the voice of Deb Lange, my co-facilitator and co-designer and share her thoughts on how she also envisaged our community building process. The following is an abridged version of her perspective.

*I asked myself how do you create community throughout the conference? This was my intention as Cathryn Lloyd and I designed and facilitated the community creating aspects in the 2013 ALARA conference.*

*What tends to happen when people arrive at a conference?*

*They know some people, they don't know others, they may connect with new people and they may not, they may have deep conversations or light ones. Often there is a tendency to sense presenters versus the participants, to feel there are those who talk and those who listen, and for people to be stuck in those roles. There are those with much “wisdom”*

*and those with little. The idea was to intentionally mess around with this and to create a space of:*

*Equal players*

*Being seen*

*Seeing others*

*Having a voice*

*Being a listener*

*Being present in whole body*

*This was done through connecting as a whole: giving people permission to look around, to bump into each other, to connect with bodies and eyes before starting rich conversations. Taking on roles as “Leaders” and “Followers”; Followers and Leaders where there was an invitation for anyone to initiate simple hand movements or voices and have others follow along, mirroring movements and voices. Here anyone can be a leader, a follower and roles are interchangeable allowing for a feeling of equanimity. Connecting in pairs one-on-one, where participants could quickly connect to a person’s history, have a shared experience in a very short space of time, and connect to a number of people quickly, although at the same time meaningfully.*

*People are invited to listen for 30 seconds and to talk for 30 seconds on random and as a result have their first experience in the community of having a voice, and being heard. This creates the safety of building relationships on topics where you are an expert in your topic! The intention of the process allows everyone in the community to connect with a small number of people 1:1, and to have an incremental influence of feeling connected to the whole community.*





*Figure 6: ALARA Conference: delegates make their contribution*

With this as a background story, Deb and I developed a series of processes to allow and encourage participants to interact and share their conference experience in other ways. These activities were a mixture of movement, dialogue, no dialogue, gestures, and other embodied relationship-building actions. I created a “graphics” wall, a visual place that people could visit and write their reflection, make their marks and offer their reflections about their conference experience. All of these processes were designed and facilitated to allow delegates to “warm up” to each other, build trust and rapport, help dissolve some of our initial defence mechanisms, and in turn develop an open learning community. I know from experience that not everyone is comfortable with this type of approach. People are always free to participate or not and it is their choice. My concern is that if we play it safe and leave out the experiential, creative and embodied learning processes, then we are potentially missing out on the possibility of new learning and insights due to the inclusion of these creative and artistic methods. “These forms of representation give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence” (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). Overall, the responses we had from

the 2013 ALARA delegates was positive, in relation to our community-building approach.

## **Back to the TEDx Kurilpa Conference**

We've now come full circle and I return to the TEDx Kurilpa Conference. There are a number of factors that I found helped cultivate and build relationships at this conference. There was a deliberately facilitated "meet and greet" by the conference organisers and volunteers for the delegates as they arrived. Delegates were randomly placed into small groups and encouraged to reflect on why they had applied to attend the conference and to share their views and ideas about "A New Australian Dream", which was the overarching theme of the conference.

Lunch was orchestrated in a way that allowed delegates and presenters to interact. Delegates were given different tokens so that they had lunch with people they hadn't necessarily met. The venue organised rugs and cushions for people to sit on and an inviting atmosphere was created. When I looked around I could see people eating, engaged in conversation, relaxing and listening to the music on offer. This is rather simple organisation but it does require thought and recognition that it might be worth investing time, energy and money to actively facilitate how people interact and connect with one another.

I decided I would offer a similar approach to the Ideas Festival. Delegates would be invited to participate and self-organise by selecting one of the conference themes and spending time with other delegates interested in the same topic. The TEDx Kurilpa conference was called "The New Australian Dream" and from the various presentations that were scheduled, a number of themes had emerged: Culture, Education, Creativity and Innovation, Family and Society, Health, and Environment. These were offered as the catalysts for exploration.

Delegates were invited to share their dreams and visions with their groups and finally share their group "stories" by way of a creative act using limited words. I ran with some of quick, playful

improvisational activities and then delegates had about 45 minutes with their groups. This allowed people some time to get to know each other, explore the topic and find a way to creatively share their ideas with the rest of the conference delegates. In making knowledge visible and moving away from the spoken word some things may get lost in translation but overall, more can be gained. The succinct, creative, embodied, storytelling that took place said so much more in a few minutes than lengthy discussions often do. As the saying goes “a picture says a thousand words” and also allows for interpretation.

Although initially challenging (creative experiential processes can take people out of their comfort zone) the results often speak for themselves. If people are inspired and motivated they will rise to the challenge of engaging with one another in all sorts of creative ways. At this conference we saw six thoughtful, embodied and thought provoking “stories”. Later people commented about the creativity and coherence that happened in a very short time with a group of strangers. At the end of the day delegates were invited to return to their self-organised groups to reflect on the day and discuss their experience, to see if and how their thinking had transformed throughout the day. As a public declaration, delegates were also invited to share with one another what action they would take over the following weeks.

Delegates were very positive about their experience. The survey results taken at the time revealed that 73% thought the conference was excellent and there was a positive response to the “community building” process. One of the features that I deduced worked well with community building is that the official TEDx presenters also took part in the interactive session. As a result there were conference delegates and “formal” presenters co-creating. This was an opportunity for the whole conference to establish a shared sense of what was important. It was an opportunity for individuals to work in groups around a theme that they were interested in, to conceive how they could creatively represent their shared dream and vision to one another.

At the end of the day there was an informal gathering at a local bar. When I walked in people were well and truly in a celebratory

mode. The networking was well and truly in motion and the community continued to build.

## **So what does all of this mean?**

The conferences referred to in this paper are ones with which I have creatively and actively been involved. In part my involvement is driven by my own need and desire to have conference experiences and ways of engaging with my fellow delegates that are different to conventional approaches. I have deliberately sought to influence these conferences and bring about a creative and community building agenda. I have offered collaborative and creative learning experiences as a way to engage, inspire, connect and potentially bring people to action. I have sought to do this because I believe it is a worthwhile thing to do. Inevitably there are challenges along the way and there is more that can be done to help make conferences, rich and holistic creative learning communities.

Seeley and Reason (2008, p. 3-4) highlight the dominant discourse in research and the “orthodox empirical and rational Western views of knowing.” In many instances I think that discourse plays out in conference environments. Knowledge, information and creativity need to be explored, shared in all sorts of ways and are fertile ground for co-creation. Conferences planned and resourced with creativity and many kinds of artistic expressions and creative interventions have the potential to engage more of people than their heads and in turn, build a collaborative and creative learning community.

While the success of a conference may be what the individual makes of it, and while people will self-organise, it is equally the responsibility of the conference organisers to offer and facilitate innovative ways for people to create and connect. By doing so there is a greater chance of building a more robust and potentially action oriented learning community. This means careful consideration for how people interact, generate new thinking, and find new ways to research and address complex issues. There are self-organising methodologies such as Open Space Technology (Harrison Owen, 1997; 2008) and the dialogic World Cafés (Brown

and Isaacs, 2005) that contribute to a new collective learning paradigm. These ways of bringing people together to share ideas, information and take action are certainly a way forward and are increasingly being embraced as a way to engage communities. We also need places for innovative and inspirational researchers and practitioners to share their stories, dreams and visions, and conferences are a good vehicle for that. There is room for both.

If conferences are places in which knowledge is created and exchanged and where solutions to complex issues might be found, rather than leave it to chance, we need to incorporate creative and reflective learning experiences as a valuable addition to our conference learning environments. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century it is time for creative expression and arts-based learning methodologies to be embedded in our conference environments, to help facilitate holistic ways of learning and other ways of knowing.

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## Biography

As the Director of Maverick Minds Dr Cathryn Lloyd is an experienced facilitator and creative development coach. Cathryn loves working with others to create a space for genuine inquiry, learning, creativity and change. She has experience across the arts, design, education, and business management sectors. She holds a doctoral degree in Creative Industries.

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# Undertaking practice-led research through a Queensland-wide women's history project

Bronwyn Fredericks

## Abstract

*This paper focuses on a practice-led research project, where the author as artist/researcher participates in a Queensland-wide women's history project to celebrate Queensland's Suffrage Centenary in 2005. The author participated in the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection, where Queensland women were invited to decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items that speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears. This paper explores the practice-led research process that enabled the artist/researcher to design and assemble her contribution. Fredericks describes the iterative process of developing the shoebox and the themes that developed through her artistic practice. She also describes the content of her shoebox and explains the symbolism underpinning the items. The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection is now owned by the State Library of Queensland and the Jessie Street National Women's Library.*

## Keywords

Artist, Indigenous, Australia, practice-led research, Action Research, learning, shoebox, Queensland Women's Historical Shoebox Collection

## Introduction

To celebrate Queensland's Suffrage Centenary Year in 2005, women throughout Queensland were encouraged to reflect on

what the centenary meant to them, both collectively and individually. As part of the celebrations, women were invited to decorate and fill a shoebox with personal and symbolic items; that could speak about their lives and the lives of their women forebears over the past 100 years. The shoebox activity was designed to encourage women to celebrate, research and record their everyday lives from various perspectives – including the political, social, cultural, environmental and family.

I accepted an invitation to be part of the shoebox project, and embarked on my own practice-led Action Research project to create my contribution. In this paper, I explore the artistic, practice-led research process used to create my shoebox.

## **The Queensland Shoebox Project**

The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection project was developed in 2005 by Jillian Clare, Beverley Perel and Scotia Monkivitch as part of the Queensland's Suffrage Centenary celebrations. Queensland Senator, Claire Moore suggested that the project enabled women to:

... look at their own history, to go back and to commemorate what was important to them and their families about the issue of the vote, about the issues of being part of a democracy and about what they were doing now and also what their mothers and their grandmothers were doing then ... to research their own histories and then record them. (Moore, 2006, p.5)

Women were encouraged to be as creative as they liked in assembling their shoeboxes, and to include any items that were relevant to them – such as: photographs, pieces of fabric, specific mementos, cards, things they might have collected over time, fragments of memory or maybe even suppositions in place of memories. They could paint their boxes or decorate them to reflect themselves and their female ancestors.

Senator Moore (2006) described her experiences in creating her shoebox. She learned new things about her family and discovered

the extent of her family's involvement in politics on Queensland's Darling Downs. She talked to her mother about suffrage and other aspects of women's history. She also learned about how suffrage and women's history affected the women around her, including people in her office and her two sisters. She writes:

... we got into the process – which was one of the exciting aspects – of celebrating, researching and talking to each other about the kinds of things that we would put into the box. We got the normal documentation. We found records – such things as birth certificates and school reports, which caused a bit of interest in terms of who actually did get the higher marks at different times. We also found out about different statements that were made in the family regarding celebrations that occurred. We found old cards that had been circulated in the family on the occasions of birthdays and marriages, and we were able to put them in the boxes. That brought back memories of the family members who have passed now. Through this process we were able to relive experiences. We found things like candles that were used at special celebrations, graduation certificates and photographs from school. This led to people talking and catching up with old school friends. So the process and the project had a life of its own – and it grew, because as we did this we gathered more people into our celebration and our research. (Moore, 2006)

Women from across Queensland sent their shoeboxes to the coordinators of the project and created an historical record of the personal lives of Queensland women. The shoeboxes formed the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection and were donated to the State Library of Queensland to be locked away for a period of time. Senator Moore reflected: 'Imagine what will happen in 50 years or 100 years, when the women of that generation will be able, I hope, to open these boxes and see what all of us thought was important in our time' (Moore, 2006). The Women's Historical Shoebox Collection is now owned by the State Library of Queensland and the Jessie Street National Women's Library.

## Creating my shoebox

I approached the shoebox as a creative, practice-led, Action Research project. I saw myself as an artist/researcher/writer, so I started with a series of questions: What message did I want to convey? What memories and images did I want to share? What memories were fragile and traumatic, and therefore definitely not for sharing? How could I present my life and the lives of my forebears in a way that would be engaging? How could I avoid being objective, dry and fiscal in the objects I chose – like the shoeboxes in the tops of many cupboards or under beds that contain bits of letters, cards, receipts, warranties and insurance papers? How would I balance things that might provide a more reliable record compared with a more subjective memory or record? (Papastergiadis, 1998).

My practice-led model of Action Research meant that I needed to allocate plenty of time to the project, to undertake relevant research, and to focus on myself and beyond myself to other women in my family and community. I began to gather, experiment, explore, document and generate data or evidence. I tried to learn by doing – by applying my knowledge and techniques, and then having time to reflect, make changes and reflect again. My process involved multiple, uncountable iterations.

As part of the research, I asked women members of my family what they thought about voting and democracy. This was difficult at times, as they hold such varied views. My family ranges from conservative through to hard leftist and radical perspectives. I spent a lot of time wondering how I could create a shoebox that would mirror the different perspectives I was hearing, and the relationships people had with Country, history, each other and the community.

Gray (1996) explains that, for the practice-led researcher, the research is initiated in the practice. It is in the process of the practice that questions, problems and challenges are identified and

reflected upon, and the outcome that results is shaped by the practice and the research (p. 3). My experience of the process oscillated between frustrating and exhilarating, as my practice developed and shifted over time. My performance of the practice was not static, but rather catalytic in approach (Haseman, 2006; Strand, 1998). As with many practice-led projects, the art that emerged was nothing like what was originally imagined. It still, however, may be accepted and seen as aesthetically pleasing (Sullivan, 2005).

My shoebox creation process happened in my studio at Keppel Sands, about 40 kilometres out of Rockhampton, near Queensland's Capricorn Coast. Keppel Sands is within the Country of the Dharumbal and Woppaburra peoples of the region. I also worked at the nearby Sandhills Studio, which is owned and managed by Capricornia Arts Mob member Pamela CroftWarcon. At the time, Pamela was working full-time as a professional artist.

From Pamela, I learned about mixing different ochres and other paint mediums. We shared ideas about representing Country and travelling between places. I began to experiment and work on the shoebox itself. Pamela's studio provided me with a culturally affirming and Indigenous-centred environment. It was a place where we could acknowledge our relationship as sisters, colleagues, artists and community members (Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

I also took my shoebox to some women's meetings in Rockhampton, so that I could work on the box in the same way that other women might take their knitting, crochet, sewing or painting. Other women became very interested in my work. They would ask where my work was, and I would open up the shoebox and sort through my collection. Through this process of sharing with other women, I was able to explore themes, ideas, concepts, historical memories and contexts of artistic inquiry. The conversations helped me to push the boundaries in my imagination and in the creation of the shoebox. This way of working was situational and intervening (Gray and Malins, 2004),

allowing me to engage with the work and with numerous other people. I was able to undertake my creative practice while involving others and being inspired or challenged by others, rather than completing the work in my studio in isolation (Gray and Malins, 2004). In this way, I was able to continue the research process informed by the practice, and continue with the practice with minimal disruption due to life's circumstances.

The shoebox project reflected the interplay and connection between different aspects of my life – between my roles as an artist, a writer, an educator and a researcher. Most of the time, I don't like being asked to choose which title best suits me, and I see them all as a continuum of myself (Papastergiardis, 1998). I often choose to represent myself as artist/researcher or artist/writer/researcher/educator. While I recognise that they are seen as different roles, for me they work in collaboration with each other, in much the same way that I collaborate with myself in practice-led research (Barrett, 2006). In essence, my various roles are elements of the whole as I undertake my practice-led work and my creative practice (Schon, 1983; Stewart, 2006). The words of Priest (2006) are useful here:

Creative practice is central to all my teaching and, within that, exploration, innovation and discovery are paramount. This approach makes the praxis between research/practice and teaching a real and vulnerable one. It's where students are exposed to the nature of both the practice-based and industry research I undertake and how that informs my own practice, my passion for experimental sound, and the framework in which I position my teaching. (p. 9)

The flow of knowledge that moves between my artistic practice, research and teaching is inspiring and dynamic. It propels me to do more, to be more. I understand that I can be an artist-educator, and that this is a positive thing (Blom, Wright, and Bennett, 2008; Hannan, 2006). Moreover, being with students and teaching others is, in a sense, integral to my creative practice. As artist-educator, I can explain how my work flows and how I make new contributions to knowledge. Through feedback, I know that others

learn from me. I believe that my artistic practice and teaching helps in growing the practice of others (Reilly, 2002). For me, the learning is two way: from teacher to students, and students to teacher.

I documented the process I used to create the shoebox through a series of photographs, sketches, a journal and a daily diary; where I kept notes about my thoughts, discussions and reflections (Stapleton, 2006). I maintained a visual wall, as I do for all of my projects, as I find that this allows me to move images around and add words, arrows and more pictures. From a research perspective, the visual wall offers me an opportunity to reflect, learn, interrogate, and be more rigorous in the practice of my research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Holbrook, St George, Ashburn, Graham, and Lawry, 2006). It helps me to explain the work to myself, collaborate with myself, analyse my ideas, and challenge and extend myself in ways that minimise any questions around the methodology (Hockey, 2003; Schon, 1983; Scrivener, 2000).

Research is central to this work, as is mindful practice (Stewart, 2006), reflective practice (Schon, 1987, 1983) and artistic practice (Barrett, 2007; Odam, 2001). At times, the practice-led research literature is confusing, because the field is new and writers do not widely agree (see Bolt, 2006; Hockey, 2003; Petelin, 2006; Rubidge, 1996; Smith and Dean, 2009). Despite this, it is an exciting area of work because it is grounded in 'long-standing and accepted working methods and practice of artists and across the arts practitioners across the arts and emerging creative disciplines' (Haseman, 2007, p. 148).

## **My shoebox**

Sometimes, the results of practice-led research are fully discussed and described in text, without including any images of the works produced. In the text of 'art talk', the artwork itself may be referred to as the 'artefacts of the research' (Pakes, 2004). In other examples, the textual discussion of the practice may include images of the

artefacts, even though the focus of the text is to explore and advance knowledge of the practice or within practice (Bolt, 2006; Petelin, 2006). In this paper, I would like to showcase parts of the artefact alongside my personal narrative on the work. In sharing the images in this way, readers become the audience of the artefact.

My shoebox project started with a shoebox that I found in the cupboard. It was not particularly ornate. I began to think about what the box represented in shape and form, and reflected on the various assemblage works with boxes undertaken by Pamela CroftWarcon (Croft, 2003).

Over several weeks, I looked through my studio and cupboards at the bits and pieces I had kept over the years. Each one reminded me of an event, person, emotion, time of day or thought. I used a separate box to gather the fragments of my life, almost as if I was adding them into a database of time. I kept returning to the box and reviewing the items to rethink and rework my ideas.

The fragments in the box combined to make a memory story about my life so far. I didn't want to make a linear story, because my life does not seem linear; even though it moves in minutes, days, weeks and years. I gained an aesthetic understanding of each piece before placing it near another piece. The fragments in the box also combined in practical ways, through the binding, gluing, sticking, placing, stitching and fixing. Some items seem to inform another item, and allowed words and concepts to be through the items. This exploring helped me to gain further insights (Wright, Bennett, and Blom, 2010).

The outside of the shoebox became a frame for the memories of my life. I painted the outside and the inside with ochres that reflected and were made from the colours of the earth. I ground the rocks in multiple colours of red, brown, yellowy-red and rust. The ochre on the shoebox is from the Woogaroo Creek area of Goodna and Redbank Plains, in the Countries of the Ugarapul and Jagara. I used rock on rock to make the paint from ochres and then mixed it with water from the Woogaroo Creek at Ipswich and the Fitzroy



River at Rockhampton (see Figure 1). I painted blue on the lid and underneath to represent the water of the: Capricorn Coast, Fitzroy River, Brisbane River, Bremer River, Moreton Bay and Woogaroo Creek. The dots that I painted represent my travelling lines – to and from Ipswich and Brisbane, and Rockhampton and Keppel Sands. I frequently travel between these regions and they are special within my heart and spirit. The travelling line inside the lid represents all of my other travelling. The yellow dots within circles at both ends of my box represent me meeting and gathering with others in both the Brisbane and Rockhampton areas.



*Figure 1. My Shoebox on the outside. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.*

Inside the box are items that represent past ancestors and friends who have passed away, and those who are within my life now – including a bone; friendship band; angel friendship pin; red, black and yellow binding; pink binding; shells; and seeds (see Figure 2). The bone symbolises humanness, and the understanding that we all experience life and death. The friendship band and angel pin were gifts, and are symbols of the items and relationships that bind people to each other. The red, black and yellow binding represents the Aboriginal people, while the pink binding represents the non-Indigenous people; all of who are friends, relatives and extended family. I am of both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

The shells and seeds represent people of land and water, freshwater people and saltwater people.



**Figure 2. Ancestral Bonds inside my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.**

Other items in my shoebox represent my love of adornment. I included bracelets; a sparkly earring; a plastic ring; seeds; and red, black and yellow binding (see Figure 3). I am comfortable wearing silver, gold, bone, seeds or plastic, and I see beauty and a sense of fun in many objects.

I included some red, black and yellow binding bound together with purple ribbon to symbolise that Aboriginality and womanhood go together for Aboriginal women. At times it seems that Aboriginal women are almost asked to make a choice between Aboriginality and womanhood, but how can we do this? Aboriginal women never have Aboriginality without womanhood. Any attempt to split ethnicity from womanhood, or womanhood from ethnicity is a European/North American, dualistic form of reasoning. It comes with divide-and-conquer tactics. In this split, Aboriginal women could be caught in a triple jeopardy of betrayals: accused of betraying men (or a particular man), betraying her community, or betraying women. At times, feminism

itself can translate into a Westernised, colonialising influence, where gendered activity is converted to Westernised sex-role stereotypes and applied to Aboriginal women. This feminism is not about Aboriginal women's notions of equity. It only adds confusion about what Aboriginal women may see as oppression, and becomes a new form of the colonising practices amongst white women.

There are two hearts at the bottom of my box, one larger than the other. The larger one represents my life partner. We were lucky to find each other. The other smaller heart represents my past loves and those who have broken my heart; they are people who gave me new ways to see and know myself.



*Figure 3. Adornment and love inside my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.*

My box also includes: a vintage cotton reel, vintage buttons, retro buttons, new buttons, red binding and pink binding (see Figure 4). Together, these items symbolise the women in my family who are linked through sewing. The red binding is a symbol of woman and our connection through being birthed through the generations. The buttons represent the many generations of women in my family who have sewn. The pink thread represents the woman who taught me the first word I ever spoke. Her name was Mrs Gregg, and my first word was 'button'. My sewing collection also

acknowledges the many Aboriginal women who worked hard as domestics for non-Indigenous people, from the time of invasion and through the years of colonisation. Sometimes they were victims of violence and sexual abuse, and they received little remuneration for their work (if any).



*Figure 4. The inside of my Shoebox. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2006.*

The shells, coral, sea urchin, driftwood, and twisted rope represent my love for the sea and water. When I was creating the shoebox, my home was near the water at Keppel Sands, overlooking the Keppel Islands. I have always liked being near water and in water. I give recognition here to my dear friend Angela Barney Leitch, who is a Woppaburra woman (Keppel Islands), and her husband Paul Leitch; together they gave me the honour of being Godmother for their daughter Kate Leitch.

My box includes emu feathers, with red, black, yellow and pink binding tied at the top. They are fixed to the box and sit over everything, because they represent my Aboriginal family through time and space.

My box also includes numerous non-attached items, many of which have details written on the reverse. These include:

- A paper I wrote on Feminism and the Plight of Aboriginal Women in Australia
- Photographs of my house at Keppel Sands
- Photographs of my office/ studio where I create
- A photograph of my eyes when I get an allergic reaction
- A photograph of me public speaking
- A photograph of me receiving a facial from a friend at our spring-time brighten up
- A photograph of me hamming it up and singing on stage as Dr Rock
- Poem: these eyes and this heart remembers
- Poem: Meat, Chips and Eggs
- Cover of NTEU Advocate Journal featuring the Indigenous forum
- Details of places of I have travelled
- The tops of some of the writing magazines I get delivered
- A couple of travel stories I have written.

My box is complete with personal and symbolic items that speak about my life and the lives of my forebears.

## **Conclusion**

The shoebox project can be seen from many perspectives: as art, craft, history, research or scholarly activity. For me, it is all of these things combined through the process of a practice-led research project. Creating the shoebox required a form of inquiry that is different from conventional Action Research, although it still involves: engagement, collaborative experiences, evaluation, learning, reflection, change, data analysis and processing, and movement within the process itself. The practice-led Action

Research process allowed me to contribute in a meaningful way to the Women's Historical Shoebox Collection. When other people open, view and interact with our shoeboxes, at some time in the future I hope they will be able to see what my life was like in my time and place, and understand my contribution in some way that inspires them for their time and place.

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# The generative and catalytic powers of creative, expressive arts in Action Research

Susan Goff

## Abstract

*Being conscious of how we know what we know, and equally conscious that when we come to such an insight that our ways of knowing are not necessarily the same as everyone else's, are increasingly essential aspects of methodological literacy. This competency is particularly so in Action Research arenas (Wicks, Reason and Bradbury, 2008) that can explore the natures of knowledge as well as the information that comprises the knowledge being produced in action. Such multi-dimensional inquiry is a characteristic of trans-disciplinary as well as cross-cultural inquiry in the Action Research field (Wright, 2011). This paper proposes that creative, expressive arts are affective (generative and catalytic) approaches in enabling this developing literacy to underpin knowledge construction practices in Action Research arenas. I also discuss the relevance of this form of praxis to the quality of future life on earth as framed by Tim Morton's work on "hyperobjects" (2013).*

## Key words

Creative and expressive arts, ways of knowing, ontology, epistemology, Action Research, hyperobjects, experiential knowledge, presentational knowledge, propositional knowledge, practical knowledge.

## The relevance of the enterprise

Here we explore the ways art, as an ancient and integral way of knowing, increases epistemological equity and our access to multiple ways of knowing. (O'Neill, 2012, p. 348.)

Coming into new understandings about epistemology and ontology, or other ways of knowing things that are other than the things we know, is a next step in being more critically aware of the semantics and psychologies of objectivity. In changing our relationship to this framework of thinking we can bring our subjective "self" into the voices of scholarship and social action as an active participant in research practice. As we subjectively make our knowledge claims we are compelled to sense our relationship with the knowledge we are claiming, rather than depend purely on another's authoritative account as affirmed in referenced publishing or instrumentally produced "evidence". These reflections are both personal and also social; requiring us to encounter our psychologies, cultures of language and listening, and the creativity of co-production of theory and practice.

The default language of "worldview" helpfully holds the place of "ontology", however the observation that knowledge is socially constructed rather than a material reality cannot be avoided<sup>5</sup>:

...I am going to look at epistemology as falling under three alternative worldviews or sets of experience or assumptions about reality. These are the **pre-modern**, which is predicated on the idea that "soul", "Spirit" or some construct of the "divine" is at the root of reality; the **modern**, which is predicated on logic or reason usually applied in ways that reduce the basis of reality down to materialistic formulations; and the **post-modern**, which is predicated on the idea that everything is relative (or relational) in a world where there are no ultimate predicates. (McIntosh, 2012, p.31)

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Morton's thesis propels these alternatives for understanding knowledge into an altogether different relationship.

The distinction between a socially constructed form of knowledge to one that is materially “given” also changes our relationship to that knowledge – the epistemological question. One can observe the material form of a cup under certain conditions, but we cannot observe the intention to drink from it. Experiencing a similar intention and communicating what is experienced to another is how we know such things (epistemology). When we do, we know that knowable reality is more than material things; it is also our experiences of them (ontology). This is another way of knowing to those, who maintain that reality is only knowable through its materiality.

“When you say ‘other ways of knowing’ what do you mean?” is a question that frequently comes my way, particularly in the context of cross-cultural inquiry strategies which work with Aboriginal Australian and conventional western knowledge systems in research environments. It is a question that is an opportunity to open up sensitivity to appreciating and incorporating aspects of our worlds in ways that can be inhibited when we continue with the traditions of our own education. The relevance of this capability is the relevance of diversity.

Monoculture constrains diversity to increasing fragmentation within the tight boundaries of a knowledge system (Bourdieu, 1977), whereas heteroculture - particularly in the context of cultures of knowing - radically expands the lone pine, western tree of knowledge into a rich and varied forest. Not only does heteroculture release the tightness of the boundary of the knowledge system, a tightness that often has dire consequences for the people within and outside it; it also enables an individual and social knowledge system to become self-aware. In some ways we could say that this is happening in Australia now as First Nations people are increasingly participating in mainstream systems within their own terms and to some degrees vice versa. I can trace my own learning about epistemology through both my migration heritage as well as my encounters with Aboriginal peoples in Action Research settings.

When monocultures become self-aware, not only can they increase their own internal health; they can also inter-breed with other

cultures, and even die without losing the whole human battle, by becoming part of a resilient ecosystem for humanity and all life. As Wojciechowski (1975) pointed out “An intellectual construct always retains its noetic role” (p.111). A significant issue is whether we can encounter such scales and qualities of difference without projecting the horizontal violence that monoculture instils within us (Bourdieu, 1977).

Being aware and respectful of other ways of knowing, which is a key aspect of good Action Research practice (ALARA, 2012), is essential to the health of our inquiring minds and to broadening our human capacity to meet difficulty with understanding, co-creativity and peace.

O’Neill’s quotation cited at the opening paragraph of this paper points to the value of the creative arts as a means of bringing us into equitable relationships with each other in our relationship with what we know. This is a strong critique of conventional western approaches to epistemology, which have bound into many of them presumptions of power *inequity*: academic qualifications and institutional ambitions create such hierarchies, as do the sometimes presumed relationship between a researcher and his or her so-called subject.

Being a co-producer of creative and expressive arts in research encounters brings the questions of power, silencing, risk and voice into the foreground. As the paintbrush gingerly interrupts the perfection of the blank page so the person becomes known to himself or herself; we are compelled to consider our relationship with what and how we know as we depict the idea in our minds, how little we know and the threats of punishment and humiliation from the powered-up conventional knowledge system, for being so.

Action Research was established in part, to redress this issue, repositioning the human subject as an equitable partner in the research arena, which in turn raised new questions about what it means to be a researcher and a subject in this situation. This commitment to redressing inequity in knowledge production increases epistemological equity in the direct inter-relationships of

an inquiry community as well as the ripples that their inquiry generates. Epistemological equity can (but does not necessarily) produce multiple ways of knowing, that is if the methods used in a research strategy provoke and support such a turn in power to come about. Creative and expressive arts in this context are a way of loosening up the grip of what we think it is “to know”.

This is not art for arts sake, neither for entertainment, nor for therapy though any of these rewards can also be enjoyed along the way. Working with the media of creative arts in research environments is directly related to the business of inquiry and knowing. They are of particular value in Action Research approaches because unlike other methodologies and epistemologies, Action Research has the capacity to interrogate its own epistemological and ontological assumptions. A commitment of Action Research is to improve the condition in which participants are living or working as an aspect of problem solving through which new knowledge is created and validated. Sometimes it is within the ambit of the research initiative, as it explores the dimensions of the problem, to inquire into the very foundations of what is known about a particular issue, and interrogate the philosophical assumptions that underpin those foundations.

When focussing on creative, expressive arts, I am valuing the use of artistic media involving aesthetic interaction with human senses as we interact, reflect, make meaning and produce artistic objects and events. I am not discussing the value of performing or being an audience for artistic works authored by others (pre-existing songs, choreographies and stories, for example). The value of facing the blank page or the lump of clay is essential to my premise. The value of being an audience is, for this paper, a different mode of engagement and action.

My argument is that creative and expressive arts can break with conventions of knowing, reveal the knower to ourselves and each other in the act of knowing, lead us to unexpected questions, and usefully introduce clarity by revealing and contesting hidden assumptions of power about what there is to be known. Theoretically, I propose that such media enable us to understand

experiential and presentational knowing (Heron, 1996, pp. 52-61), to generate new knowledge in these forms. If carried out attentively, practitioners using creative and expressive arts can provide a rigorous and innovative foundation for propositional and practical knowing.

## **Beginnings**

The South Australian Attorney General's Department in 1991 commissioned my first full-scale participatory Action Research strategy. The inquiry was to look into the background to youth crime prevention. As one of the department's project officers stated at the time that: "we ignore, control, neglect and punish children up until they turn twelve and then wonder why it is that they turn against us when they enter their adolescent years". The project inquired into "the meaning of family violence to young people", a project title with double entendre invoking a study of family violence involving young people rather than children, as well as the meaning of this abuse to young people.

As the Participatory Action Research (PAR) facilitator, I assembled a strategic research group made up of some fifty youth workers from youth services and domestic violence workers from domestic violence and rape crisis services located in the city of Adelaide. These two sectors had not come together before, and the questions that the inquiry strategy was raising had not been asked before.

At a workshop early into the first stage of the research strategy, I wanted the lived experience of family violence to young people to be brought to the foreground of the participants' collective gaze. This was so that we could move beyond the objectivity of policy and crime statistics and expose ourselves, human to human, to what it was that young people were experiencing.

One of the youth workers had referred to street poetry as a place where first-hand experience was being described, and introduced me to a young man who was living on the streets and busking with his poetry. He agreed to perform his work to the co-researchers at the workshop.

When he entered the government office room, fluoro-lit and some twelve floors above street level, his very presence was an act of self-expression in itself. When he recited his poetry, it was met with stunned silence. I was surprised that the people who were so close to the coal-face of the issue were affected this way. So powerful was his presence, his words and his unrestrained anger and grief in his recital that we lost several co-researchers from the project. Their reflections were that they had been “unprepared” for the assault, which made me wonder how they related to the knowledge of the issues they addressed in their policy and service provision.

I was an early stage researcher and perhaps had overlooked the reality that many service providers were survivors themselves, and while they had received the generally broadcasted information about the session, they had not experienced this kind of expression in the context of their work.

The publication “Restraint of Love” which presented the participants writings from the project included creative and poetic works from both the service providers and the survivors. Here is an example from one of the survivors reflecting on the value of their participation in the research project:

Life's no more a mystery that suffocates my will.  
I've made the choice to free myself,  
To start to feel fulfilled.  
I've struggled through the darkness of loathing who I am,  
To find my beauty buried deep, and bring it up again.  
No longer do I fear you, the evil that you wrought,  
The shame I carried through my life, the death I often sought.  
I've finished with the drinking and drugs existing brought,  
I see a person growing up and loving what she's taught.  
Life's no more a mystery, it's full of happy things,  
It's full with pride in who I am, not shame from hidden pain.  
(‘Joy’ [pseudonym] in Goff and Associates, 1998, p.50)

The use of poetry, creative writing and poetics influencing formal scholarly writing, has been a welcome development in sociological research for some decades. Consistent with my earlier assertion



about stepping away from the semantics of objectivity, poetics are a natural next step from refusing the institutional expectation of writing objectivity in the voice of the third person, and in its place communicating scholarship as a critically subjective self-expression. My early introduction to this development was in my postdoctoral research, through the work of Laurel Richardson (1997), who challenged the conventions of sociological writing:

For Richardson, language is neither irrational nor irrelevant, but the means by which truth is not only articulated but also given power to exist... She critiques how sociologists, who see themselves as social scientists, pay much attention to the language of the people they study but virtually none to their own (Richardson, 1997, p. 39). She critiques her peers as submitting to “institutionalised behaviouristic assumptions” about writers, readers, subjects and knowledge itself (Ibid, p.42) and in so doing overlooking that “how one writes one’s theory is not simply a theoretical matter. The theoretical inscribes a social order, power relationships, and the subjective state of the theorists” (Ibid, p. 49). (Goff, 2006, p.91)

Richardson (1997) coined the term “breaking genre” which is a practice of working in the new epistemological and ontological spaces that are formed when two disciplinary fields interpenetrate each other. In her text she brings the disciplines of literature to those of sociology, writing alternate chapters as a dramatic script describing a dialogue between the conventional and non-conventional forms of writing, interspersed with the real drama she experienced on campus with her academic peers, in their responses to her interventions. She purposefully exposes and deconstructs the conventions of writing sociologically in the interests of addressing what she sees as the self-contradicting diminishment of sociology’s responsibility to our human right to be nurtured, cherished and fostered (Richardson, 1997, p.213) in our “other ways of knowing” (Ibid, p.208).

In my research practices since, I have walked careful lines between objective and subjective semantics and poetics, seeking not to alienate an alienated readership while also inviting their engagement with the text in more than simply technical or

analytical terms. When working with Aboriginal co-researchers the point is often made that every statistic about health, crime or unemployment for example, is a real human life. In those research environments where emotional intelligence is needed on the part of decision-makers in order to support break-throughs arising from research practices, this approach to our scholarly voice can be both risky and effective. In accordance with Richardson's earlier work, French philosopher Jacques Rancière notes:

Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies. (Rancière, 2000, p.39)

## **Beyond words and towards images**

Some years after the research into family violence and young people, I had the great pleasure of working with an esteemed Aboriginal artist from the Noonghaburrah Nation. One of his methods when working with groups was group painting. He would prepare a canvas, about 2-3 metres in length and spread it across a table with paints, water and brushes. He would invite people around the table, and following a brief discussion about the issue being explored leave it to the participants to do everything else. He would sit quietly at one end of the table, apparently not doing much, as people self-consciously picked up the brushes and contemplated the white space. He would encourage them to begin by agreeing a background colour wash, which generally reduced anxieties associated with handling unfamiliar tools and media, while also enabling people to relax into the meditative and conversational spaces of painting together. Once the background colour and perhaps the size of a border had been agreed and committed to canvas, people had a chance to think about the images they wished to paint.

There are many ways to go about this – individual images, a group scene, abstract patterns, planned - or whatever comes. Sometimes images were only worked by their originator, sometimes people added to each other's creations and the relationships between them. The border space could provide symbols to read the central image with, or be simply decorative patterning. Depending on the situation, the painting process can be a central focus for a group of people to discuss the research question. Alternatively, or on completion, a group can reflect on what has been created, opening up how people see an issue, or an element of it, surprising themselves and each other with what the act of painting brings up.

I see O'Neill's insights about epistemological equity being evident in the shared commitment of imagination to material image, and shared unknowing that this act creates. The act of interpretation of the idea to the crafted image requires us to "come around" the knowledge (idea, memory, feeling, image) in our minds. Drawing a still-life requires us to decide what the curvature of the apple actually is for us to move the pencil one way or another, for us to know this curvature and share our way of knowing this way, with others:

The perception of art objects... relates to types of human involvement in real or unreal, past, present, or future states of the world. Types of **world encounter** are thus brought to presentation, through which types of **encounter with world encounter** become possible. (Seel, 2005, p.113) (Author's emphases)

I have used the group painting technique in several research and learning situations, for example:

- A one-off workshop involving some 130 school-based educational professionals exploring the meaning and dynamics of collaboration.
- A one-off workshop with a not-for profit organisation whose 13 team members needed to reaffirm their team relationships and the meaning of resilience in the context of high stress and staff turn over.

- A sustained participatory Action Research strategy into health promotion in the hands of Aboriginal early childhood educators involving some 40 people over 18 months of inquiry.

Each situation is unique of course, and the suggestion of using visual creative arts as the mode of engagement needs considerable dialogue with the commissioners and the participants. These details of context and dialogue are an aspect of methodology that need to support the chosen creative arts approach.

The not-for profit organisation held a 3-hour workshop in a retreat-style of location with the ten or so team members and their supervisor. They had received a flier prior to the workshop outlining the approach and inviting them to think about images that a) expressed their core nature as a person, and b) described their experience of change in their work place. They were free to ignore this pre-session invitation, to use it, or not, when they came to the workshop. It was a way of helping those who felt challenged by the idea of a painting session not to be paralysed by the blank canvas.

When people entered the room, they found it divided in half: I had set up the familiar electronic white board with a semi-circle of seats for dialogue work on one side, and on the other a large table with an equally large blank canvas, paints and brushes waiting. Following a briefing about the workshop, participants moved over to the table and were invited to fill in the background colour, then to paint images of their experiences of change. I stepped back and watched, refreshed the water jars, and notated with their permission, some of the dialogue that evolved around the table.

Here are some of the images they painted, and their comments about their experiences of change:



*Figure 1: The room, the images of change, in the moment of doing. Photographs by Susan Goff with consent of participants*

Change happens in many different rates and scales of growth – each person has their own experience of change, and together people create a very diverse reality – reflexive responses are deeply varied...” (Participant reflections on their image describing their experience of change in their workplace - Facilitator’s notes)

I then invited them to walk out into the natural bushland around the retreat facility and to find something concrete that symbolically expressed the relational gifts that they uniquely brought to each other and as they had discovered in the painting exercise. On returning to the workshop they were invited to glue their items onto the painting, at any place on the canvas where the relationship between their gift and the image of change that had already been painted, appeared to be strongest. We then sat in the semi-circle and using some theoretical frameworks about resilience we organised their insights into established management theory (e.g. Boxelaar et al, 2006; Morgan and Morgan, 2008), which I had simplified into table form. This was for use by their supervisors so

they could incorporate the workshop results into good practice supervision in the context of developing resilience in teams.

My reflection on this delivery is that the actual experience of painting and what it produced for the participants in terms of affirming themselves and their relationships was good work. The epistemological equity experienced in imaging and expressing their experiences of change was the means by which the team collaboration was affirmed. What remained slightly mystifying was the importing of the participants' insights into the established management theory, which required the supervisors to think critically about their supervision practice and to change it on behalf of their team. It is not that they did not wish to, it appeared to be more that they did not know how to and my responses to their questions about this, following the event, were unable to bridge that gap.

The participatory Action Research strategy into health promotion and Aboriginal early childhood education was a large-scale, state-wide initiative with the intention of national implementation. As with some of my other works, this project required two disciplinary fields at operational and managerial domains, to come together for the first time. This project had the additional complexity of cross-cultural engagement between the participants (Aboriginal multi-Nation professionals and Torres Strait Islander professionals), between the participants and the research strategy facilitators (Anglo-Saxon and Maori), and the research community and the funding body (Indigenous owned organisations, sector peak bodies and mainstream public sector).

The first six-month stage involved monthly learning or yarning circles, working with the two organisations who had agreed in principle to the project and the proposed approach that we submitted in our tender. This gentle strategy allowed us to listen to each other, and for the central governance group, made up of purely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals to scope the research; the principles by which the project would be governed, to learn about each other's fields, and to set the terms of reference for the literature review. An indication of the eight themes follows:

Theme 1: An understanding of what “Health Promotion” is as understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and practitioners

Theme 2: Comparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of health promotion with diverse and mainstream understandings

Theme 7: The “whirly wind” form of Action Research

Theme 8: A postcolonial form of accreditation and quality framework (Goff, Reedy and Jones, 2009, p.13).

These questions came from the indigenous governance group, reflecting on their knowledge of the current state of the field we were inquiring into. The literature had to be drawn purely from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authorship, including unpublished or grey literature. The result was a significant and very unusual review, which the group read and had to find a way of assimilating to produce a conceptual framework with which to govern the Action Research strategy. This included who should participate, how to organise and interpret the data arising from reflections on practice, and what quality measures needed to be developed to make the whole enterprise culturally safe and strong.

We agreed a painting workshop would be a way to carry out this assimilation. The participants gathered around the canvas and over a period of some hours, yarning through the literature review as they did, they created a group artwork.



*Figure 2. Assimilating a literature review through group painting and yarning. Photograph by Susan Goff with consent of participants*

The resulting artwork remained a powerful icon for the whole project. Without going into all the detail, the painted image holds within it icons that for the group identified the key qualities the project needed to deliver as substantiated by the review in the participants' terms. This was not an analytical interpretation so much as a felt distillation of what had been learned with long histories in the field; continually contextualised by the harsh realities of infant and maternal deaths, disease and poverty in the peri-urban and more remote locations that the participants worked, and the severely reduced life expectancy of Aboriginal men and women.

We carried out several other group painting sessions, including at the subsequent two-day workshop inviting an extended network of Indigenous academics and field practitioners together to co-design the research methodology itself. This enabled the collaboration, including the strategy facilitators (ourselves) to work to and build on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals'



experiences of Action Research. This approach in a large scale and ambitious project gave participants voice, by providing a form of expression and communication that avoided the use of English and its colonising history, which was also wound into the problems we were addressing in the project. As before, once complete the participants reflected on the images they had created and informed us of the principles and approaches they wished us to take, as had come to the surface through group painting.

## **Sound, movement and performativity**

Other creative dimensions that have proved powerful in inquiry are voice and mime.

One of my favourite media is the collective “hum”. This is particularly useful for large group work – twenty or more people – and I have used it in gatherings of several hundred.

The invitation is to start a “hum” which I usually do with a microphone, and people quickly join in, then I stop for them to continue without the intrusion of an amplified level of sound. The beauty of a collective hum is that it allows everyone to hear himself or herself in the midst of everyone else, without having to be self-conscious about being tone deaf or not knowing the song or the words. There are no words and the song is as it naturally becomes as people expend their breath, and pause to breathe in and hum again. Once the tone has been established, people can increase their enjoyment and confidence and get experimental: they lift and lower the volume and the communal key of the hum, enabling the sound to become a thing in itself – a kind of “crowd-sourcing” of breath, heart, mind and body. It continues for as long as it needs to and comes to its own perfect conclusion. At the end there are usually smiles, looking around, quiet reflections on what it means to be a part of something, and sometimes to wonder at the innocent beauty of who we are together. I have found it to be a delightful way to begin a large-scale process – and equally, to end one.

Theatre is perhaps the most ambitious of creative arts and self-expression because it incorporates so many creative modes of

expression at once and requires a level of innovation and confidence that is not easily available to everyone. Mime is a way of overcoming the anxiety of the chosen word, which one might live to regret, while at the same time moving self-expression into a whole embodied, and kinetic form. Additionally, it can involve many bodies working together in space, adding to the appreciation of spatial relationships, boundaries and their meanings<sup>6</sup>.

I have used mime where an inquiry session has come to a brick wall, where words and rational thinking fail. At the moment of genuine “not knowing” we can gently move into feeling and how that feeling can be expressed metaphorically in movement. A metaphor can be a sequence of represented events as in a story or narrative, or it can be as a living sculpture.

In the mid 2000’s I was invited as a Fellow to support a postdoctoral research retreat in the United Kingdom. The students were reflecting on their progress and considering the roadblocks that they were each confronting. At one point, I was invited to comment, and rather than commenting I invited everyone up on their feet suggesting that they could each take turns in enacting the road block that they saw in each other’s work, as a form of critically reflexive feedback. Everyone stood in a circle and each person took turns, nominating the person whose work they were responding to.

This exercise remained resonant for some years with people revisiting the reflections that they were given by their trusted peers, almost as a benchmark from which to work and complete their research. I recall one mime at this event where a person showed the careful building up of an imagined form from the ground, like a potter working with air, to produce something very beautiful and fragile, then enacting smashing it to pieces and watching it fall to the ground. This mime was reflecting back to

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<sup>6</sup> This understanding of performativity, inquiry, spatial relationships and kinetic learning is given full form in the therapeutic “Constellations” methodology of Bert Hellinger ([www.hellingerpa.com](http://www.hellingerpa.com))

one of the participants about their tendency to destroy their careful and beautiful work, asking the question “why?” they did this.

My most recent adventure in creative arts and collaborative inquiry (but not Action Research) was at a two-day symposium, exploring the performativity of institutional authority in water management<sup>7</sup>. I had recently returned from a team project visiting Australian Aboriginal communities in the Murray-Darling Basin, affirming individual intellectual property ownership of 480 multi-Nation narratives; which individuals had contributed to a government body as a form of consultative feedback about a draft management plan. The open-ended narratives were of such a high value that to limit their use to the strategic consultation was thought to be a waste and a transgression of trust. However if the material was to be re-used for other purposes, the institution had to seek ethical consent from each submission-maker for archiving it and reusing it within agreed terms.

Teams of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous consultants re-visited the communities that had produced the original submissions, and with the assistance of Aboriginal “town facilitators” attempted to relocate the submission makers some 18 months after the initial engagement. Once the town facilitator had found the person, and reached agreement regarding meeting the team members, a two-person team visited each person in the location of their choosing. In the interaction we “performed” an agreed process to inform the person how their submission had made a difference, to formally thank them, to explain the nature and value of the database that their narratives had helped create, and to negotiate an agreement regarding the re-use, or otherwise, of their material.

For the symposium I decided to write a script with some members of the team. We read it as a play reading, performed with background slides that provided tangential references timed to provoke critically reflexive thinking in the audience. Our tone of

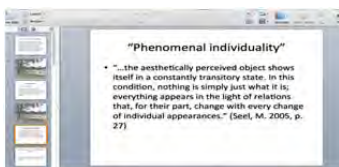
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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge the Systemic Governance Research Program and the Performance Research Unit, Monash University, (“Knowing Water: policy, performance and practice” 27-28 August 2013).

performance was flat, as our intention was not to entertain, or to persuade the audience about the benevolence or otherwise of the institution’s enactment of authority. Our intention was to provoke the audience to fill in the space between the deadpan reading, the tangential slides and the inquiry into institutional performances of authority in the context of water.

Date	Performance	Text
Slide 1: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one. IIR is a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 2: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 3: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 4: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 5: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 6: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 7: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 8: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 9: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.
Slide 10: Text	Performance goal (what is the performance aim?)	Suggestion: Consider an IIR as a constant way to talk the same value proposition to them all. It's a bit of a cliché, but it's a good one.

Figure 3. The script, the reflexive prompt, the room - Elements of performing authority in water governance



The small group discussion that followed revealed the breadth of responses including “how utterly boring”. Here are some samples:

- Authority for “guilt by association”
- A face value consultative process
- Ultimately a futile exercise – a question of power – pulling responses through words
- An attempt to do something but nothing can be done without structural change
- A distressing show of power
- A provocation
- Byzantine in its complexity
- Structured etiquette (reference to Goffman) – deference and demeanour, a ritual structure

- Powerful aesthetic – what you notice – a gracious relationship between ethics and aesthetics
- A praxis of love – bringing forward the legitimacy of the other. (Workshop feedback notes, Goff 26-27/8/13)

The beauty of this exercise was that creative expression was not in the scripted representation that we read which was merely a reference point: it was in the openness of us as a performing team to the responses of the participants to that reference. The fact that the responses were so varied was evidence to us that our approach had enabled people to make their own sense of it. I see this uncertainty, authentically shared by the performers and the audience, and provoked by the original transactions and their representation in the performance as all of us experiencing epistemological equity.

With regard to Aboriginal rights to the crucial issue of water – but in fact to all aspects of life in Australia - this is living drama, including how it is enacted, perceived and utilised, and crucial to Aboriginal cultural resilience and innovation. The question we were pointing to was this: Was the performance of institutional authority, as carried out by this particular government body, an intervention in colonisation and thus a participant in decolonisation, or was it further entrenching the neoliberal (new) colonial project? (Arabena, 2007) In the context of this question, the audience with more or less awareness, was participating through aesthetic engagement in decolonising research which in its very nature requires epistemological uncertainty and openness to multiple ways of knowing:

Decolonising research methodology, to me, must represent a process that not only reaffirms suppressed forms of knowledge, but also produces discernable indigenous models of research that integrate a broadened circle of diverse ways of knowing in a global and postmodern age. (Hamza, 2004, p.130)

## The relevance of creative and expressive arts to theories of participatory knowledge construction

By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered; is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists. (Abram, 1997, p.57)

Readers may be familiar with Heron's "extended epistemology". Now more than twenty years old, it is still powerful in its ability to awaken us to how we think about knowing. Heron proposes a model of "holistic knowing":

...which holds that propositional knowing, expressed in statements that something is the case, is interdependent with three other kinds of knowing: practical knowing, or knowing how to exercise a skill; presentational knowing, an intuitive grasp of the significance of patterns as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms; and experiential knowing, imaging and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. (Heron, 1996, p.52)

Abram's understanding of the participatory nature of aesthetic activity (further developed in Seel, 2005) underpins Heron and Reason's proposition about how we come to know. Our encounter with knowing begins with experiential emersion of more or less consciousness, and when we notice what we are experiencing we too create form, pattern and connections between the things we notice. We may then express what we are seeing (learning, intuiting) as creative expression – not necessarily "artistic" but an early and original assimilation.

It is here, in these first stages of coming to know, that creative arts gives us media to work within and through experiential knowing to presentational knowing. They can do this in a manner that allows us not to default to habits of thought, but to let the unconscious rise to our inner gaze. The materials and practices

themselves lead us to unexpected insights. In collaborative inquiry environments we do this together, witnessing ourselves in each other, building a form of community around the beauty and surprise of coming to know. This movement of affirming the sociology of knowing was evident in the group painting work described here, in one instance healing a team and generating its own unique approach to building resilience; in the other affirming inter-cultural governance of inquiry approaches and directions to address the life depleting consequences of colonisation. Creative and expressive arts in Action Research make it possible for us to experience Polanyi's (1958) understanding that in the end it is up to us as to how to know what we know, and to know that we do.

Heron and Reason developed their model further (1997, 2008) latterly inter-relating it in practical details of inquiry cycling through Action Research practices of reflection, action and their outcomes. Lincoln rounded the story of the extended epistemology to incorporate the work of others - feminist theorists who understand how gender plays a role in the construction of knowledge; race and ethnic research, which recognises the impact of marginalisation on knowledge construction practices as a consequence of race, history and language; and through Heron and Reason's work on the Extended Epistemology model (Lincoln, 2001, p. 128).

The challenge for Action Research practitioners in cultural contexts that are unfamiliar with Action Research, or even unfamiliar with knowledge as compared with "information", is the need to make knowledge construction transparent in order to afford participation in knowledge construction. It is up to practitioners to communicate the meanings and relevance of epistemological and ontological awareness at the point of research commissioning and throughout the endeavour, dwelling as we do in Polanyi's moment of ultimate personal knowledge.

People ask me why we need to mention the "O" and "E" words at all - do people really have to know? The focus on problem solving can limit inquiry to technical and analytical forms of engagement, often mimicking the preferred cultures of encounter in the

commissioning organisations. Being a good cultural fit is important, but not at the expense of the inquiry's purpose.

My suggestion is that creative arts and self-expression are effective ways to solving this issue; if in Action Research practice the questions you address extend to how people know the issue, what their relationship to this knowledge is, and how this knowledge informs their idea of what there is to be known in their world. The answers to these questions are steps towards enabling competency in co-inquiry practice and knowledge construction practices, including those which breach preconceived limits to knowledge and research. They are also key to enabling not only literacy in the crafting of knowledge, but embodied nimbleness in understanding and dissolving the brick walls that impede transformation.

The choices we make about what we reflect on, what we forget or avoid or just don't know, how we re-assemble our reflections, and how we connect them to each other in familiar or novel ways, become the means by which we move ourselves from blank to populated canvas, silence to hum, stillness to mime, muteness to articulation. It is these choices that are the basis for participation.

Moustakas's (1990) treatise on heuristic research was a quiet benchmark in tracking this process. He describes how a researcher travels through initial "engagement", then on to "incubation" where the researcher retreats from the experiential phase to concentrate on the experience; then, "illumination" which allows tacit knowledge and intuition to generate a breakthrough in consciousness; "explication" when we work detailed understanding and explanations into our knowledge production work; and finally "creative synthesis" that underpins the creative expression of what the researcher is perceiving as an insight.

Moustakas's proposition is foreshadowing Heron's experiential and presentational dimensions of knowing, which he also suggests are essential to the work of inquiry and knowledge construction. He talks about the need to continually return to all the traces of the heuristic approach in order to validate the resulting conclusions, referencing Polanyi's (1969) assertion that making a truth claim associated with a research finding is ultimately a judgement made



by the scientist in a moment that is unsupported by evidence or rationality. It can only be a reflection of the researcher's worldview and his or her approach to knowing. If our worldview is out of keeping with the world that is forming around us, we need ways to release ourselves from our habits of knowledge as part and the research practice. Creative arts and self-expression are a powerful means of doing so.

A more recent theorisation about how we come to know is Senge et al's (2005) text "Presence" which described a "U-Theory" or a movement from sensing to "presencing" and realizing (p.88). The movement is described as a "U" because it begins in the outer world of observing and "becoming one with the world" resonant of Heron's experiential knowing and Moustakas' "engagement", then dives into the depths of inner knowing, akin to Heron's presentational knowing and Moustakas' stages of interior knowing, to bring something new into reality (Senge, et al, 2005, p.91). The authors emphasise that this is not a planned action but a "natural flow", the theory circles around a continuous question: "what does it mean to act in the world and not on the world?" – a question that evokes O'Neill's (2012) concept of epistemological equity and accessing multiple ways of knowing.

If we slow the process of coming to know down, as Moustakas, Heron and Reason, and Senge for example suggest, then we can become aware of our own particular sense of knowing ourselves and our world: whether for example our playful child-self picks something off our neurological shelf, or our wise sage-self is claimed by some flow of thought that never originated within us. As Bohm suggests (1992) we continually reconstruct the thought that flows through us to fit our current sense of being in the world. He illustrates this representative in the example of how we think about a rainbow (ibid, p.107-8):

It seems to be an object made up of coloured arcs. That's the way you experience it. But according to physics there is no rainbow out there. And if in fact you assumed the rainbow was an object and walked towards it, it would not be found... the rainbow is not a coherent object... it doesn't have being as a bow; it has being as a process of falling rain

and light refracting. The rainbow is a representation ...  
[that] was probably produced in people even before words.

As with our previous reflections (Richardson, Rancière) Bohm goes on to state that how we talk about and how we think about things affects how we see them, and how we see them affects what we see. Thus it is that the very earliest stages of coming to know, and how we think about what we know (the patterns we make), and how we express what we know in material form – creative, exploratory and otherwise – is crucial to the state of the world we are in. It is human thought that has produced the age of the Anthropocene; we are only just coming to realise this and the implications for participation in inquiry as being discussed here.

## **Creative and express arts in Action Research into the age of the hyperobject**

The dimension of this realisation regarding human thought is powerfully and originally expressed in Morton's workings on the subject of "hyperobjects" (2013). His theory is that we are now in an age, where human thought activity has created impacts on the earth that are so far reaching in time and space that they are impossible for us to know - and yet we are inescapably held within them. They intimately hold us within them and we can never escape them. As a consequence of their arrival and our emerging ability to see them we have lost our aesthetic distance, a measure that is essential for coming to know anything within the western industrial sense of knowledge and its rebellious post-industrial children, at least. This inescapable intimacy reverses the conventional notion of a human being standing outside an object in some fictitious neutral location to observe it. Morton's insight, frequently explicated through the artworks he cites, utterly transforms the relationship between the knower and that which we know, including what there is to be known.

His obvious example of a hyperobject is that of climate change – the extent, dimension, dynamic and duration of which is beyond human capacity to know in our inability to escape from it. It reaches into every aspect of our world – a rain drop falling on our head, the food we eat, looking out at the day and so on. He

includes plastics, oil and non-human entities such as black holes as other examples of hyperobjects. There are particular criteria that define a hyperobject<sup>8</sup> which are somewhat complex and distracting to detail here, but his theorising clearly shows that not all things can be understood as hyperobjects even though hyperobjects engulf all things.

Morton suggests that the world has already come to an end, twice. The first time was in 1784, with the invention of Watt's steam engine beginning the production of carbon pollution and its layering across all life systems for an unforeseeable amount of time; the second was in 1945 with the explosion of nuclear bombs layering radiation into all life systems, a layering with a lifespan of some 24,000 years at least (p.5). Until these two interruptions, humanity had a chance to know the planet as a coherent world – however, and because the extent of these hyperobjects is so vast, the very notion of a “world” as conceived in Greek philosophy for example, has become extinct.

We are in a new age of ecology, wherein we are condemned to be in the midst of a perpetual and accelerating state of inevitable ignorance, suspended in the grasp of these rampaging giants. This state of affairs was foreseen by Wojciechowski, (1975) who produced 25 laws describing the internal dynamics of knowledge ecologies, which included the characteristic of increasing speed and scale of knowledge, increasing open-endedness of knowledge with increasing mass of knowledge. He saw knowledge as being of human beings and separate to us and in this sense as well as many of the laws, resembling Morton's concept of hyperobjects.

In this now finite state of being, our relationship with what we know, who we are as knowers and what there is to know are inquiry questions the relevance of which have taken a quantum leap in their intensity (Rancière, 2000). Artistic and self-expression in human inquiry has a tough task to fulfil:

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<sup>8</sup> They are: viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing and inter-objectivity.

We need art that does not make people think... but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse (p.184).

Going beyond Bohm's observations of our representation of rainbows, Morton says:

An object fails to coincide with its appearance-for another object, no matter how accurate that appearance for... Existence is fragile inconsistency. Every object exhibits this ontological inconsistency, but hyperobjects make it especially obvious. A tornado is not global warming. A mountain is not planet Earth.... A child is not the biosphere (p.196)... yet they are (p.199)

In conclusion, he points to an eventual calm of acceptance of our co-existence with hyperobjects - a kind of sociological entropy that we might consider to be peace, or hell. As we see our reflection of ourselves in our vast footprints across the globe we have met our match in the scale of the hyperobjects we have created, and that have a life of their own. So powerful is their presence that they are contacting us (p.201) even through that which we don't know we don't know (a state which Morton refers to as the "withdrawal" of the hyperobject).

In this astounding reconstruction of the fundamental elements of existence; self-expression of our denial, anger, grief and eventual acceptance are perhaps the only means by which human inquiry can become the vehicle that melts our separation from the earth and brings us into its hyperactive heart. As Morton clearly presents, it is the creative arts in the Action Research of how to be, that enable us to encounter such departures from all that we are familiar with, bringing us into co-existence with our new family members. This is a very different way of knowing, and relating to knowing, taking form in a world of very different composition to anything that we can call on. In such moments of ontological incomprehensibility, creative arts in Action Research are fundamental to our survival:

It is simply that we shouldn't leave ontology to scientism. Otherwise we end up with some New Age head-shop, lava-

lamp ontology that defaults to a reductionist atomism.  
(Morton, 2013, p.15)

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## Biography

Susan Goff is a participatory systems facilitator. With a background in Theatre Arts and Social Ecology, Susan has worked as an independent scholar through her consultancy, CultureShift, since 1991. She has designed, facilitated and documented over 50 participatory research, learning and evaluation strategies to inform policy research that addresses both socio-economic and environmental threats to intergenerational sustainability. As well as running her own consultancy, Susan is a past President and Life Member of the Action Learning Action Research Association and also works as an academic at the University of Sydney and the University of Western Sydney.

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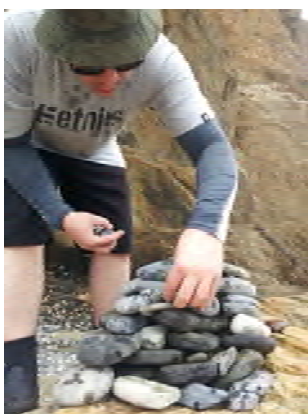
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