**P(ART)icipation and Social Change**

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This paper was jointly presented by Martin Thiele and Sally Marsden at Cultural Sites, Cultural Theory, Cultural Policy: The Second International Conference on Cultural Policy Research at Te Papa, Wellington, New Zealand on 25 January 2002.

Abstract Summary:

The Artful Dodgers Studio is a Jesuit Social Services program in Melbourne, Australia established by Sally Marsden, in 1997. This inner city art studio uses a community cultural development methodology to provide opportunities for extremely complex young people to participate in quality artistic projects and to engage in positive dialogue with the community as artists.

Due to its structure, The Studio is one of the only community cultural development programs in Australia providing an opportunity for longitudinal analysis of the social emancipation effects of artistic engagement.

In this presentation, Thiele and Marsden will outline how they are using research conducted at The Studio to inform community cultural development theoretical practice. They will argue that artists who wish to work with marginalised or fragile communities need to employ working methods that combine both vertical and horizontal practice. They will demonstrate why funding that increasingly focuses on short term projects, often defaults on the full social change potential of artistic participation.

Background

Over the past two years and with the assistance of the William Buckland Foundation, we have been investigating the relationship between community cultural development (a form of community arts practice) and health and welfare service delivery, specifically for young people at risk. In June 2000, with additional assistance from the Australia Council’s Community Cultural Development Fund, we published Risking Art: Art for Survival a publication profiling 12 different non-government health and welfare organisations that employed artists on an ongoing basis. Artists working in this field are invariably highly skilled within their art form areas, demonstrate strong conceptual and implementation skills and are experienced in collaborative processes involving marginalised groups.

Since May 2001 we have been undertaking exploratory research, investigating the working methods employed within The Artful Dodgers Studio, a Jesuit Social Services art program initiated by Sally Marsden in 1997 and based in Melbourne, Australia. This research is partly based on material that has been collected retrospectively and includes attendance graphs as well as documentation of both the artistic and social trajectories of participants as recorded in participant files and through a chronology of artistic events. Martin Thiele has been part of the Studio team for over two years and is therefore able to unobtrusively observe Studio practice through participatory research. Both Thiele and Marsden have undertaken interviews and discussions with both participants and other allied professionals including counsellors, outreach workers and therapists.
Thiele’s role in this process is to provide an objective examination and analysis of the working methods employed by artists within the Studio. Marsden’s role is more complex given that her position is both subjective and objective simultaneously. As well as being a practicing community cultural development artist, Marsden is a well known advocate for community cultural development. She wrote *Healthy Arts* in 1993, an Arts Access publication, and has a long demonstrated history of interest in professionalising community cultural development practice.

**The Artful Dodgers Studio participants**

The Artful Dodgers Studio is based in Connexions, an inner city agency incorporating a broad range of youth work interventions aimed to assist young people experiencing dual diagnosis. As well as The Artful Dodgers Studio, there is a wilderness therapy program and a professional counselling and outreach service.

Within a health framework ‘dual diagnosis’ refers to people who experience substance addiction on the one hand (typically: amphetamines, alcohol, heroin, marijuana and prescription medications) and mental illness (including: depression, psychosis, drug induced psychosis, bi-polar and schizophrenia) on the other. It is recognised that the Connexions service group often experience homelessness or street dependency and are frequently disengaged from family, school and other institutions most commonly associated with a traditional and positive sense of belonging and community. These young people often exhibit high-risk behaviours such as prostitution, offending, intravenous drug use, needle sharing, suicide attempts, and other forms of self-harm, including unsafe sex and binge drinking.

For the purposes of this paper we examined sixty-three young people who are engaged in the Artful Dodgers Studio, we refer to this sample as ‘participants’. We find that even within a dual diagnosis framework any form of easy categorisation can be problematic. For example whilst the agency supports dual diagnosis we have ascertained that only two young people in our sample actually experienced the same diagnostic combination (that is we have two participants who are managing both bi-polar and heroin addiction). This is to say that the drug of choice and the mental health experienced vary significantly between Studio participants.

From a community cultural development artist’s perspective it is recognised that there is a sense of shared experience amongst participants that manifests in social connectedness, shared identity and belonging – a sense of community.

This community is primarily based around drug taking and is cultivated in ‘street’ sites such as games arcades, public parks, train stations and rooming houses. For the purposes of this research we have not undertaken observational research in community sites external to the Studio. What we have identified is that participants recognise both positive and negative characteristics of their community. On the one hand they comment on positives such as friendship, belonging and companionship. On the other hand participants comment on negatives such as transience, isolation, exploitation and loneliness.

**The role of ‘culture’**

In The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability (Hawkes 2001), the author makes a distinction between small ‘c’ and big ‘C’ culture. In this monograph he explains small ‘c’ culture as referring to a shared value system of some kind. Big ‘C’ culture, on the other hand, refers specifically to the output of artists.
The Artful Dodgers Studio artist works with both definitions of culture. In terms of a shared value system, characteristically Studio participants frequently express concerns about environmental degradation and the impact of globalisation. It is also common for participants to express shared concern about their sense of social exclusion. Importantly participants also express shared value in a commitment to their own creative expression.

Through the interviewing process, we have ascertained that the vast majority of studio participants have had artistic experience prior to their involvement in The Artful Dodgers Studio. Of the 63 we reviewed, only one participant had no previous artistic experience.

From a recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS Report 4904.6 Leisure and Cultural Participation, Tasmania) report investigating leisure and cultural activities of Australians, we noted that arts and cultural activities are disproportionately more significant to the quality of life of Australians in the 15-24 year old range. This report documents participation rates of around 67.5% for this age group, higher than any other group. Participation consistently declines as Australians age (the lowest level of participation is 41.7% for those over the age of 55). The Artful Dodgers Studio services young people in the 16-26 year old range, though not strictly the same sample, the ABS report confirms that young Australians are highly attracted to opportunities for participatory arts and cultural expression.

We can confirm that Australian young people attempting to resolve extremely complex social problems are just as interested in artistic participation as their mainstream counterparts. Moreover, that this commitment to creative expression is integral to their cultural values and central to their quality of life. According to our research, previous artistic or creative experience can be both formal and informal and includes graffiti, tagging, chalk art, song writing, poetry, guitar playing, tattooing, body art, fashion, performance and installation.

**Horizontal and Vertical practice**

In reviewing the last five years of practice at The Artful Dodgers Studio it has become clear that the artists promote both small ‘c’ cultural connectedness and mainstream social emancipation using a combination of what we term horizontal and vertical practice.

Put simply, in horizontal practice the intention of the artist is to actively encourage and guide a participant to invest time in exploring their creative potential. Within vertical practice a participant is encouraged to meet both personal and artistic challenges by engaging in a collective art-making process resulting in a public outcome.

*Horizontal* practice promotes co-operation, continuity, respect, reliability and trust. In the Artful Dodgers Studio this is reflected in an open access studio environment where participants are able to experiment with mediums and explore concepts and ideas in an unhurried and art focused setting. As a cooperative working environment the Studio practice is underpinned by health and safety considerations and participants periodically assist in the collective development of Studio policies and principles. In this way the artists are able to work with existing value systems of participants and at the same time promote collective consciousness based on exchange of ideas and mutual priorities thereby expanding the participants repertoire of ‘shared’ values.

Given that the horizontal process is designed to cultivate connectedness and belonging, groups of participants will often begin to coordinate their Studio attendance. This *core group* as we refer to it, is generally made up of a stable group of participants who attend reasonably frequently and support and encourage each other. In this group structure, established
participants will often peer mentor newer ones artistically, but also assist in ensuring the studio is properly functioning and well maintained.

Within the Studio environment *vertical* practice is characterised by participants working towards the delivery of an outcome for an external audience. *Vertical* practice promotes collaboration, negotiation, discipline and completion. The artist’s role in this instance is to assist participants to communicate and negotiate their ideas and concepts within a group context. The artist actively works to maintain individual and group focus, and to develop a sense of trust in the collective process engendering faith that quality artistic outcomes are achievable. Through *vertical* practice the participants develop resilience to challenge on multiple levels. This includes individual and collective artistic critique and an appreciation of the importance of a commitment to structured and fixed timeline process. The finished artwork is placed within a public context and the participant as *artist* has the opportunity to engage in dialogue with the mainstream community through their artwork.

**The five stages of participation**

Within the Artful Dodgers Studio participants initially transit from a *horizontal* to a *vertical* process as a standard developmental path. We have observed, however, that the movement between the *horizontal* and *vertical* is more cyclical than linear for this service group. It is standard for an artist to alternate between *horizontal* and *vertical* process when working with a participant over an extended period of time. Through participation graphs we have identified five different stages of participation that demonstrate a participant’s journey through the Studio program to improved social emancipation.

*Initial Engagement*

As the first stage of participation initial engagement is characterised by short infrequent attendance by participants. At the time of initial engagement participants are often still in the process of resolving immediate consequences of substance addiction and frequently interrupt their studio participation because of legal, medical, personal or social obligations.

During this stage, the Artful Dodgers Studio artist works *horizontally* and prioritises the building of trust with the participant – often it will be necessary to make direct phone calls to participants or their workers in order to engender a sense of familiarity. Participants will use studio visits to undertake simpler artworks that can be completed within shorter timeframes. Our records indicate that 28% of participants will disconnect from the Studio program within the first three visits. Through cross referencing with other programs, we note that participants who disconnect early from the Studio will often also disconnect from other workers (counsellors and outreach) as well.

Participants might take months to transit this phase depending on their own personal fragility and the complexity of their life circumstances.

*Sustained Engagement*

This second stage of participation is characterised by an increased frequency of attendance as participants begin to develop a routine and build familiarity with the Studio’s core group.

The Studio artists continue to work horizontally with the participant who is now beginning to refine specific artistic skills and expressing preference for working on more complex and challenging art works that require multiple visits to resolve. It is not unusual for a participant to attend the Studio three to four times a week for up to seven hours a day during a *sustained engagement* period. During this phase the artist will seek to include the participant in *core*
group discussions about past artistic projects and foreshadow future possibilities – inviting input and discussion.

A participant’s high productivity provides an indication to the artist of the participants readiness to focus on future projects. Therefore most participants transit through this phase to project work in around twelve to sixteen weeks.

Project Work
In this third stage of participation the artist works vertically with participants to focus specifically on a collective public outcome. Participation is characterised by regular self-disciplined attendance, open critical dialogue related to the works in progress and demands of a public outcome. The artist will frequently challenge participants to refine and refocus their skills in order to resolve the project to a high standard.

These projects are generally presented in publicly accessible high profile venues and like other significant cultural events, are opened by leading public figures. As a time for celebration of achievement, participants are encouraged to invite family members, friends and workers to the opening. Stakeholder representatives, arts professionals and other industry colleagues are also invited to review the work.

Participants are introduced as the artists and are provided with ample opportunity to receive feedback from their audience. Due to the intensity of this process participants will often temporarily disengage from the studio for a few weeks following an exhibition or public outcome. This disengagement period can be a vulnerable time with the artist seeking to maintain arms length contact with participants. Participants will be periodically drawn together as a group in order to reflect upon and acknowledge the magnitude of the achievement. The artist will use these group discussions to evaluate the project outcomes on the one hand and re-engage participants in a horizontal process on the other.

Transitional Engagement
This is the fourth stage of participation and it is during this phase that a participant re-positions him or herself for increased mainstream or normalised social emancipation.

Following project work participants demonstrate new skills, resilience and a heightened sense of self. We have noted that participants begin to identify programs and activities outside of the Studio that they feel confident to pursue.

Typically during this phase participants begin to re-engage with school, begin tertiary study or apply for work. At the same time they generally start to normalise other aspects of their lifestyles, such as a move into more stable accommodation. They begin to manage their mental health picture and many will find themselves in stable relationships.

During the transitional phase participants are often extremely disciplined and productive when they attend the Studio. Participants will also demonstrate more responsible behaviour and frequently mentor or support others both artistically and socially during this phase.

The artist uses both horizontal and vertical practice during transitional engagement. Often a participant requires assistance with their own individual projects such as the development of a portfolio or body of work. Often they will bring in work from a course of study for feedback.

It is during this phase that participants start to build their own constellations of positive social relationships external to the studio. We note from participation graphs that transiting this
phase is a comparatively slow process. It is not unusual for a participant to take a year or more to transit this phase as they build confidence in newly acquired life skills as well as confidence in new relationships with people that are external to the studio such as teachers, family, partners, friends, work colleagues and others.

**Disconnection**

In the fifth stage a participant will often voluntarily maintain informal contact with the Studio for months after they have ceased to regularly attend.

Typically during the disconnection phase participants integrate into the new social relationships they began to develop during transitional engagement. At this stage participants are fully engaged in ‘normalised’ social activities such as school, workplace, family and support groups. They are generally self determining and demonstrating financial independence.

**Summary of the five stages**

Based on participation records we have noted that the median engagement cycle is around 24 months. However for participants currently in transitional engagement the average cycle is higher at around 32 months. It is worth noting that this is an exploratory research exercise and that we expect to augment these findings quantitatively over the next twelve months.

What we have noted is that no two participation graphs have exactly the same pattern. It is apparent to us that participants navigate through the program on an individually determined basis where personal choice is paramount. The Studio embodies a lateral structure combining both horizontal and vertical process. Within the Studio structure project work is used to benchmark personal and artistic accomplishment. Over the next twelve months through an intensive interviewing process we will explain how a participant is able to develop their own personal spectrum of artistic achievements within a personally determined time frame and how this spectrum affects their social emancipation.

**‘Cultural’ Policy Picture**

In order to contextualise The Artful Dodgers Studio within an Australian cultural policy context it is necessary to re-affirm the components of Community Cultural Development as we see them. We have argued above that there are essentially five different elements to community cultural development, they are as follows: Community (based on shared experience); culture (as an expression of shared values); Culture (as the output of artists); Social Emancipation (an outcome of a participants journey through five stages of participation and informed by both horizontal and vertical practice); and Project Work (arts project outcome which are delivered to the public).

For the purposes of this paper we have evaluated the cultural policies of the six funding agencies based on our community cultural development perspective. We have reviewed the policies of the following institutions: The Australia Council for the Arts (federal government), Arts Victoria (state government), The City of Melbourne (local government) and three philanthropic foundations (The Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, The Ian Potter Foundation and The Myer Foundation).

In an Australian cultural landscape in recent years the concept of the arts product and its consumption have become commonplace reference points in local, state and federal government cultural policies. We have also identified that whilst community cultural development and/or community arts funding streams are commonplace, both the terminology
and the funding allocations reflect a bias for predominantly short term, outcome driven, project work. Based on our understanding of community cultural development as outlined above we note within the policy sector that there is widespread lack of understanding of the social emancipation outcomes of community cultural development and the combination of horizontal and vertical processes necessary to achieve them. This is clearly reflected in the design of most funding programs. To summarise briefly:

- There is widespread support within the local government sector for community cultural development. Due to limited resources, however, funding priority is generally placed on short term projects resulting in public outcomes (vertical process).

- Arts Victoria, the state government arts funding body, administers grants to professional Cultural organisations that contribute to what they term ‘cultural development’. They do not fund community cultural development projects and will only support artistic programs with community participation if the applicant is defined as a Cultural organisation.

- In Victoria there are a number of philanthropic foundations that support ‘cultural pursuits’ within a broader context of community empowerment and social emancipation. Operating from a multiple policy context, most foundations will actively support new community cultural development initiatives through seed (though not recurrent) funding.

- The Australia Council is the Federal Government’s arts funding and advisory body. In July 2001, the Community Cultural Development Fund of the Australia Council reviewed its’ funding guidelines to support a combination of both project (vertical) and program (horizontal and vertical) work by establishing the Special Program Grants scheme.

Rifts and Shifts

From our viewpoint this is a discontinuous policy picture that consistently interrupts community cultural development practitioners from fully realising the social impact of their work. Our research indicates that the engagement patterns for The Artful Dodgers participant exceed the majority of funding strategies currently in place to support this work. Moreover, work in this field is further hampered by the fact that one of our three tiers of government (Arts Victoria) makes no provision to support community cultural development work if it is not undertaken by a ‘cultural organisation’. Based on our research for the Risking Art: Art for Survival publication we identified that a significant proportion of community cultural development work associated with marginalised communities occurs outside of the organised arts sector.

We consider that the Australia Council’s creation of the new Special Program Grants scheme has acknowledged the importance of horizontal practice. We anticipate that this initiative will make an important contribution to community cultural development. This will assist the cultural policy sector to monitor social emancipation outcomes of the work in the immediate future.

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