

The art of healthy community—strengthening rural communities

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This paper attempts to answer the following questions: What is health in relation to whole communities? How can the abstract notion as well as the physical realities of “health” be delivered to communities through art? What do communities tell us about their state of health through the processes of community arts and their artistic expression?

I would like to consider “health” as a state which exists in a dynamic relationship with ill-health or illness, and so in this framework it’s useful to define “health” as the individual’s *capacity* for recovery, as well as their *potential rate* of recovery from illness, disease or accident.

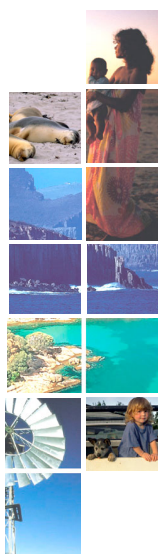
I am a writer in community as well as a certified practitioner of the Feldenkrais Method. Over the past 20 years as a writer, I’ve worked on story-telling projects and oral history projects within communities defined either by their geographical location, or by the interests, genders, age, abilities of members. Artistic outcomes from these projects have usually been published as books. In this presentation, I will showcase two community arts on which I’ve worked as a writer within rural communities from this perspective of “recovery” as the barometer for “health”. I would like to illustrate ways in which the two projects, *See Saw and Dirt Roads* and *Desert Roses* challenge some of the more traditional definitions we use in relation to health in communities and illuminate new potential for partnerships between community artists and the communities in which we all live and work – communities who might want to become healthier, through artistic expression.

It’s been my experience on *See Saw and Dirt Roads and Desert Roses* that healthier communities, or recovered communities can be achieved through:

- creative self expression
- engagement of hearts, minds, imagination
- communication
- participation
- skills development
- confidence building
- empowerment.

Question is: if we don’t have these things, would we regard ourselves as unhealthy? Images which come to mind when I recall the *See Saw* project and the *Dirt Roads and Desert Roses* project are these:

- optimism



- harmony
- balance
- new-found individual self images and/or a new image for the whole community
- new perspectives about the way people “inside” a community relate to each other as well as relate to the “outside” world
- the ability to listen to each other
- an appreciation and valuing of differences in each other – cultural, gender, age
- opportunities for communication about difficult issues in a safe environment whose goal was expression through artistic mediums
- confidence, creativity, credibility, active change, achievement, development, new opportunities.

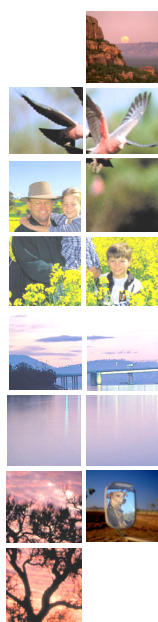
In my experience, these words are as applicable to states of health as they are to the results of artistic processes and artistic outcomes.

With reference to my proposal that health equates with the capacity for, and rate of recovery, I will talk now about the *See Saw* project. Some of you might recall that in Melbourne in 1997, an extraordinary event occurred when 2000 people gathered for a national reconciliation conference. I mention this because it's worth comparing with our *See Saw* arts project in Ceduna, a coastal community of 4000 people, 800 km west of Adelaide, on the edge of the Great Australian Bight.

Between 1996 and 1997, eight Ceduna women – four Indigenous and four non-Indigenous – came together to produce works of art which reflected upon and clarified issues of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in their community. The fact that this small town had a reputation for volatile race relations made the success of this project even more remarkable. The self image of this community was also acknowledged by the wider South Australian community and had a clear historical basis. A reality, rarely recognised, was that the family histories of five of the project artists connected them to settlement of this district in the 1850s. They were either descendants of white settlers, or descendants of Aborigines who lived there prior to occupation. (The other three artists in the group had more recently made their homes in Ceduna.)

Because Aborigines and Anglo/Europeans had lived side by side in this rural community since settlement, cross cultural reconciliation was far from an abstraction. Historical as well as present day realities raised basic questions which related to the general community's psychological, emotional and in the case of the Indigenous community in particular, its literal physical health. Some of the questions raised by the *See Saw* project were these:

- If reconciliation involves the past as well as the future of our community, how do we deal with that?
- Who will initiate a community approach? Or an individual response?



- What are the risks and are they worth the effort?
- Is change in everyone's interests?
- How much energy will be required and for how long?
- What are we waiting for?

The *See Saw* project encouraged an intensely practical response to a complex community issue around which there had been silence, division, fear and intractable attitudes for generations. The project offered the eight artists a common starting point – the image of a see saw – a playful image, easy to relate to, but which could also be a potent symbol or metaphor. A see saw is a single, unified structural plank with two sides and a fulcrum. It can be balanced or unbalanced. As such, the see saw image had expansive possibilities for the visualisation of concepts such as harmony, movement and potential shifts in position. The eighteen see saw sculptures made by these eight project artists were interactive mechanisms which the viewer could touch and explore. They became metaphors for the concept of, the exploration of and the experience of BALANCE/UNBALANCE.

Aboriginal woman, Lillian Holt, wrote about the project in the *See Saw* Exhibition catalogue:

In sharing their experiences, strength and hope with each other, these (eight) women honoured the whole gamut of emotions, (surrounding reconciliation), with frankness and fervour. There was acknowledgment rather than avoidance of the wounds on both sides which is a necessary prerequisite for bonding and healing.

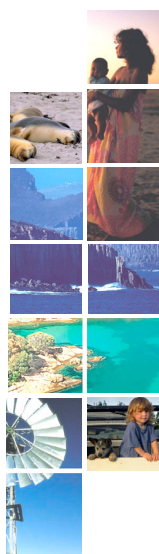
The ripples from this local project expanded outwards as the exhibition of their 18 see saw sculptures toured to regional galleries throughout South Australia and then in WA, NT and Central Australia. One of the sculptures was crated up and sent by ship to Toronto, Canada to be part of a community art biennale in 2002 called "The Indignant Eye". 1000 copies of the book I wrote about this project with Ceduna artist and writer, Bronwyn Coleman Sleep, and illustrator, Kunyi Jean McInerney, were distributed across Australia.

To quote Aboriginal woman and writer Lillian Holt again:

Sometimes, it seems that bigger things happen in smaller localities. Sometimes it just so happens that when we take the first step and join together we find that there are no longer any terrified nor innocent bystanders in the whole process as we discard our demons. Sometimes hope springs eternal from the most unlikely and surprising sources. Sometimes I come across a project such as this and am enlightened and elated.

The *See Saw* project was initiated, developed and implemented by the project artists – Cath Cantlon and myself. The idea for this project originally arose when we witnessed an incident in the main street of Ceduna in 1994 between an Aboriginal man and a white man. Briefly, the processes of this artist-initiated project involved consultation meetings with the community, engaging support from local government, educational, regional arts and aboriginal organisations, and then seeking project funding. Our three stage funding involved

- consultation
- workshops/creation of artistic product/exhibition



- written documentation – the book.

Funding was received from the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council, Arts SA and the South Australian Country Arts Trust as well as in-kind support from District Council of Ceduna, the Ceduna TAFE and the Aboriginal Women's Group. The interstate touring exhibition, 1999–2000, was funded through the national touring exhibitions program, Visions Australia.

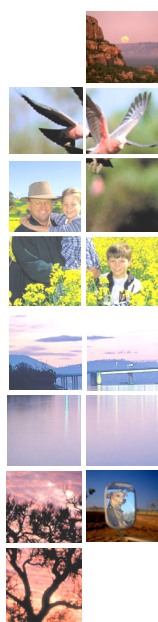
Secondly, I'd like to talk about the *Dirt Roads and Desert Roses* project.

I worked on this project as a writer, project co-ordinator and editor with a group of 23 women who live in very remote and isolated parts of rural South Australia, in tiny towns or on sheep stations. The project southernmost geographical border was Port Augusta and we travelled west as far as Tarcoola, north to Oodnadatta and east to the Flinders Ranges. Between September 2001 and November 2002, these women wrote more than 60,000 words of fiction, autobiography and poetry and then worked with me to edit, and oversee the design and printing of a full colour publication.

Many of the women had never written before. I travelled out to their communities in September 2001 and April 2002 to hold writing workshops, at which they developed new skills, learnt to make time for personal creativity in very busy lives, and slowly began to see themselves as writers and communicators who derived real pleasure from their creative writing with the additional possibility for enriching the lives of their readers. In between writing workshop tours, I published 8 bulletins – one a month – of the writing they sent me. This was a crucial part of the project, which gave writers the opportunity to read each other's work, to be published for the first time, to understand and acknowledge the similarities of their existence and to develop networks and friendships through the collaborative writing exercises I encouraged with them.

At the beginning of the project only two women were connected to the internet but by the end of the project, internet telecommunications had reached all but one of the homes. Right up until the book launch in December 2002, many of the women had never met each other. The project was initiated by the Remote and Isolated Children's Exercise (RICE) in Port Augusta. All of the project participants were clients of this community managed organisation providing health, welfare and educational services to families living in outback SA who have children up to eight years old. Until the project, the women's relationship to each other only occurred through RICE.

Discussions between the RICE social worker and a project officer of Country Arts SA in Port Augusta, brought forth the idea of an arts project which involved women in remote and isolated situations. This collaborative partnership identified the need for creative solutions to the needs of isolated women clients, who wanted to expand their skills base, develop communication skills and self confidence. But what form should this project take? Their answer to this question was to engage an arts consultant who went on a tour to outback areas with RICE staff to meet the women and look at the culture of the outback as it relates to women, children and family life. Her recommendation was for a creative writing and visual arts/photography project, because, this is what emerged through her consultation meetings with the women. This project was funded through applications which the arts consultant wrote to federal, state and regional arts funding bodies and it included health promotions money which is managed through Arts SA.



As the project's arts co-ordinator, it was important for me to liaise regularly with the Director and Social Worker at RICE in Port Augusta. I had only two opportunities for face to face meetings with the 23 women during both writing workshops, and during the rest of the 12 months over which I worked part time on this project, I simply maintained contact with them through fax, email, post, phone. A group of ten women formed into an editorial committee to oversee selection of writing for publication, design, editing, distribution etc and this editorial committee, RICE representatives and I would sometimes have one to two hour long phone meetings.

One of the project participants, Jeanette wrote this response to the project:

The writing of stories and my involvement with the project has given me immense personal satisfaction. I am so pleased with the pieces of writing I have produced that I feel I have achieved a personal goal. I had felt that my talent for writing was a thing of the past and had shrivelled from neglect, but now know that is not so. I have always written for myself, but now realise that other people may be interested in what I am writing, so I need to think of their interest and understanding when I write, as well as my own.

Project participants grew in confidence, developed skills for communicating with each other, drew comfort and support from the unity of shared perspectives and common situations and developed a strong link to the outside world. In only two months, 700 copies of the book were sold from a print run of 1000. Members of this group have now embarked on a new initiative, an Outback Women's Writing Group and they plan to keep writing and publishing. This is the most gratifying and most positive outcome and a firm indicator of a healthy project with healthy outcomes.

I'd like to conclude now with three quotes from participants on the *See Saw* project in Ceduna. The first from Bronwyn, a local Indigenous woman, illustrates the powerful effect of this project on her life as well as introduce the possibility of positive changes in cross cultural relationships in her community:

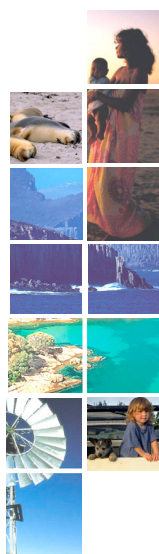
I think the project has actually had quite a positive influence on local hope for the future because it's raised awareness in the community about skilled Aboriginal people who are articulate and who can meet the dominant society on their own terms, but who can also offer something different and enriching. I think it's an awakening and an opportunity for people to welcome the contribution of Aboriginal people in a very positive way. The art work demonstrates how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have worked together which is really important.

The second from David, headmaster of a local school with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff:

The artists can be proud of themselves and Ceduna can be proud of the fact that such an exhibition has started here and will now be travelling around Australia and may inspire other people ... often, in the process of reconciliation, people do make mistakes. Then they feel like they've failed. But we should all take heart from the fact that it's impossible to learn and grow and change without making a few mistakes. We should not give up.

The final quote comes from Jeannie, one of the project artists. She said this about her see saw sculpture, *Equal Australia*:

The base of my sculpture is a map of Australia cut from wood which supports the see saw plank because the whole Australian nation has to be involved in reconciliation if balance is to be achieved. On the underside of the map I've painted an image of two Aboriginal men in chains taken from an historic photograph. This symbolises the reverse or negative aspects of Australian history. On the front, or positive side of the map, I've painted an image of two local boys, a Nyunga and a European, who are friends, which is my hope for the future. Around the edge of the map and plank, I've painted stitched which link Australia's past and present.



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Lisa Philip-Harbutt, Community Arts Network, South Australia

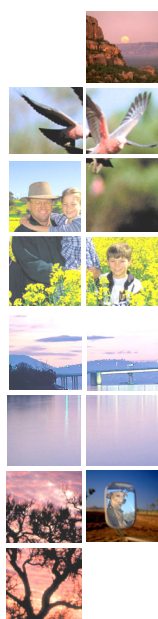
I have spent the past 25 years using art as a tool for social change. I have worked in visual, performing and community arts. I have used a range of different mediums for this work. I like to work collectively, so the medium often depended on the location and my partners in the art making. I have found myself contributing to the art of healthy communities in a variety of ways. For instance, I spent 12 months as the community artist at Flinders Medical Centre. I have designed puppets for a community health centres positive health initiative. I have been a long-term supporter in the forum theatre project, *Mermaids*, which is run out of the Dale Street Women's Health Centre. I worked last year with some teenage mums on a project called *Incubator*, was a mentor for a young theatre director on a show exploring teenage gambling addiction and created a video with young people in a rural community who were worried about their high youth suicide rates. I have also been the Arts Development Co-ordinator for the Aldinga Arts Eco village; A sustainable housing co-operative, building an ecologically friendly, culturally rich community near the beach in the southern suburbs of Adelaide.

But I'm not here to report on these projects for I am interested in the programs that support these projects and the ways we can all help to share the knowledge that is developed as a result of these projects. I have just got a "proper job". That's what my family call it. After 25 years as a freelance artist I am now going to an office every day of the week and theoretically not working weekends. Hasn't happened yet but I'm only 3 weeks in. So maybe soon. I am the Director of an organisation called Community Arts Network SA (CAN SA). It is an organisation whose Vision is: Inspiring Active Community Culture. And its Mission reads: CAN advocates for and promotes diverse and creative approaches for cultural development that are valued and recognised. We support artswokers and communities by promoting the development of arts practices that engage communities in their own cultural development by connecting, informing and educating

So as the topic is *The Art of Healthy Communities*, I thought it was relevant to tell you a bit about my brand new "Proper Job". But I wanted to reference it in away that allowed you see how you to could become part of an ongoing network experience.

There is some interesting terminology coming out of the International Development academics at the moment. They are talking about meshworks. Now meshworks are self generating networks. The sort that start from the base up rather than imposed from the top down. They maintain relevance and don't need the level of ongoing maintenance that many networks do. We are endeavouring to create a Community Arts Network on this model. One that is generated and maintained by those working in the sector.

One of the ways we a attempting this is through the national website project ccd.net. Having been around health workers a fair bit I understand how acronyms and jargon are part of your daily life. Well in the arts we have it to. And ccd is just one of them.



ccd stands for community cultural development. Shortened for sanity reasons to ccd. Many of you may be more familiar with the term community arts.

When asked for definitions I tend to say:

Community cultural development

- is an ongoing process in which a community creatively determines and expresses who it is, what it is and where it wants to go
- also refers to the principles or philosophy that underpins the practice. These include self determination, pluralism and cultural democracy. Projects are developed in a way that respects and empowers the community. Outcomes can include social or political change for the community, as well as personal development for individual participants.

Community arts is the medium I use for ccd. It is collaborative and can call on a range of different artforms. ccd.net is an National Project funded through the CCD Board of the Australia Council for the Arts. The first stage was launched by the chair of the Australia Council in March 2002. This web site contains the following information:

- ccd.net content and functions
- a national project register
- online forum.

You can get on to the site at any community library. So ccd.net allows those working in Arts and Health to contribute to share and to influence. That's meshworking to me. And that part of my new "proper job".

