

A METHODOLOGY FOR DETERMINING THE ROLE OF THE ARTS IN RURAL RESILIENCE: APPLICATIONS, DILEMMAS AND SOLUTIONS IN THE MEASUREMENT OF ARTS IMPACT IN COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: *Many consider the arts vital for communities dealing with social, environmental, and economic change. The potential for the arts to be utilised in this way is of particular interest in rural Australia, as some commentators claim that rural Australia is in decline. The biggest criticism of research within this field is the limited empirical evidence and lack of rigorous examination on this topic. In the absence of reliable empirical research, securing funding and policy support for the arts in this context is extremely difficult. This paper examines the issues and challenges of developing an evidence base for determining the role of the arts within communities. Within the context of my own research on the role of the arts in the social wellbeing of rural communities, the issues and challenges of measurement are examined, including the limitations of both qualitative and quantitative approaches, possible solutions, and future directions.*

Keywords: *arts, Australia, community, methodology, regional, research, rural, wellbeing*

It was an ambitious title, and not one I could realistically cover in the time allocated. I wanted to touch on some of the key points and issues concerning the development of my methodological framework for my PhD research on the arts and social wellbeing of Australian rural communities. This research is supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant in partnership with the Western Australian (WA) Department for Culture and the Arts, Country Arts WA, the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Curtin University. The reason for focusing on methodology was an indulgence on my part. I knew this conference would attract an audience who would all call themselves artists during or in-between their work, research, recreation, hobbies, and other pursuits. I did not need to convince this audience, nor did I need to resort to sports analogies, as they were already 'converted'. That I even had this thought process, for me, justifies this title. We know the importance of the arts for communities, we know what works, but we need the support to make it happen. We need a way to document the evidence.

So this is my proposal for a way of going about this task and I would like to begin with the words of a rural artist and school teacher:

*A lot of towns need a cultural plan drawn up and then they can use the recommendations from that to get funding for a project, chances are the arts bodies will back them because they have that plan. Lots of towns like ours don't have one, so if its in your document, you know its proven that in small towns that it works, people can use your document to help get them funding. That will be a bonus for arts workers to use your report as leverage to support their funding applications.
(artist/school teacher, late 30s, female)*

The benefits of the arts are well documented throughout the literature of a diverse range of disciplines. The arts have been shown to have therapeutic benefits and other health outcomes, to provide economic and social benefits, and as a tool in personal and community development [9]. The arts is an important means of communication, but it also has a role in rural resilience because it can reflect, explore, create, and communicate shared meaning and identity, as well as generate interest, understanding, and respect [10]. The arts 'builds identities, creates spaces of community and belonging, and has the potential to challenge paradigms and empower agency' [11].

Though, as much as the benefits of the arts can be cited in the literature, ultimately individuals engage in the arts because they enjoy it, it gives them pleasure [12], and it's because of these intrinsic reasons that the arts can be used as a way to bring people together to achieve community development outcomes, without necessarily acknowledging that this was the intention of the project from the onset [13]. As explained to me by a rural shire's Community Development Officer, an arts project can have a 'hidden agenda' or a 'secret mission'. In this sense, arts projects can be seen as a way of achieving community development outcomes without necessarily acknowledging that at the start of the project. Which, while helps you to achieve outcomes that wouldn't otherwise be possible, is also problematic because those outcomes can be so hidden that it makes it difficult to gain the support to be able to deliver these projects in the first place [13].

Getting support for the arts

It often comes down not to a question of what works, as communities, practitioners, artists, and so on already know what works, but in getting the support needed to make it work. This support includes money and resources, but also the human capital needed to drive, coordinate, and continue to facilitate projects. The main barriers to instigating an arts project include convincing funding and governance authorities and communities themselves of the value of the project. For many regional communities, particularly those that are either in more remote areas, have limited employment and educational opportunities, and/or a higher proportion of Indigenous residents, there are also underlying social, cultural and discrimination barriers that need to be overcome in order to instigate and sustain engagement in the arts.

This paper focuses on the difficulties in communicating the potential impacts and benefits of arts engagement. Particularly when these types of activities have not been experienced previously by governance or funding authorities, or even the communities themselves. This is particularly true of my focus region for this research, the Mid West of WA, where it was suggested that the local people are not typically creative or artistically minded:

Creative and artistic people go down south. Very practical people move here. People like geologists and that. (butcher's wife, mid 40s)

While some managerial staff were quite supportive of arts activity, this was seen as a rarity and not the norm:

I'm very lucky with the CEO here. He believes in the arty-farty crap, as he calls it. He's really good, and he's seen lots of outcomes from that stuff so I don't have a struggle at all here, and that's rare, that's very, very rare. (female, shire employee, early 30s)

These sentiments were reflected even further up the governance and funding hierarchy, as stated by a former Shire CEO who was frustrated at the lack of understanding of the impact and benefits of an arts festival:

That was always one of the challenges, it was almost like a metaphor for something else. It wasn't about what people were doing, it was about the effect of having them doing that on community spirit and cooperation and all those other kinds of things... Because you cooperate on an arts project you've got the relationship where you can cooperate on other stuff as well. (late 40s, male, shire employee)

Criticism of arts impact research

There is a tendency for government to underestimate the importance of the arts, which is reflected by a lack of empirical data at a regional level [14]. However this data is not easy to obtain and has been criticised with respect to the methods of data collection, including the choice of the sample and the purpose, intention and bias of the researchers [15]. Overall there is a lack of robust data and evidence and this has been attributed to the difficulty in quantifying impacts, particularly in developing indicators and identifying outcomes, as well as various problems with economic impact measurement [16-18] to the point where, 'ways of demonstrating benefit have become tortuous, employing 'complicated and contested assessments of causation' [19].

The artistic integrity of the work is also of concern when subject to the scrutiny of research as it is felt that 'too much concentration on impacts and outcomes downplays the role of artists and curators in favour of audiences and non-attendees' [19]. Furthermore, the quality of the art is thought to be threatened by this process, as was found in a review of arts in health projects in the UK where there was an attitude among some arts organisations that 'using art to deliver particular health outcomes will simply result in bad art' [20]. Newman and colleagues suggest that this is question of values, and questions to what extent should, or can, creative processes be managed and controlled in order to produce the desired outcomes [21].

In terms of the artistic experience, it is often that raw emotional experience, particularly of the performing arts, that is overlooked. This is a defining factor in building a case for the arts that is unique or different from other forms of engagement. It is difficult to put those raw emotions into words, therefore the intangible nature of the benefits makes it difficult to communicate in any other way than through the experience itself. Wood and colleagues found in their research on the geographies of music that the experience is 'unspeakable'. Their on-the-spot interviews during the interval of a classical music performance captured the raw emotions of

the experience. However this experience was short lived as subsequent follow-up interviews were more articulate, but said less about the affective qualities of that encounter [11].

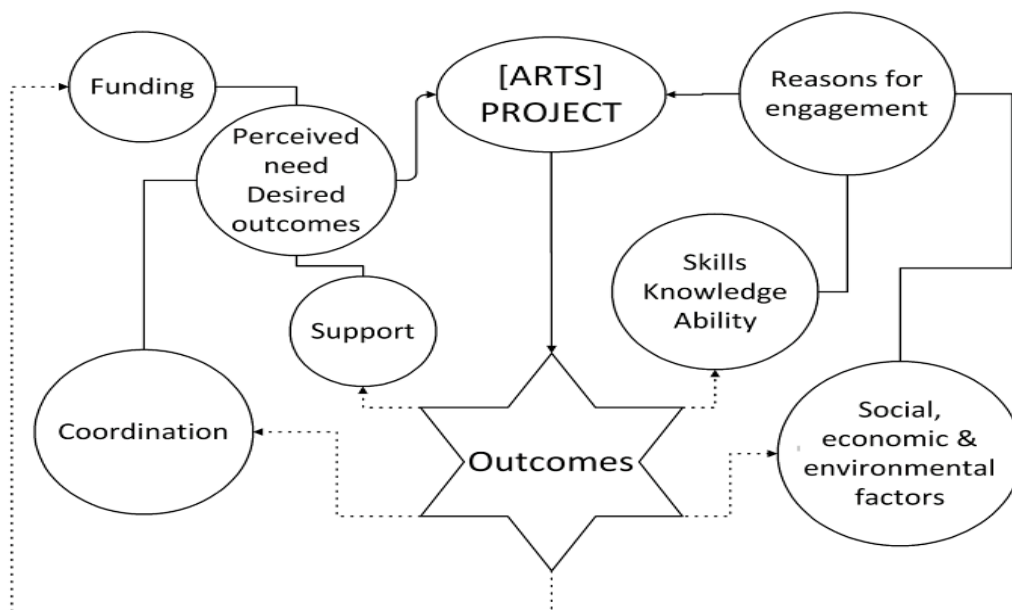
There is a tension between an instrumental approach, that is the arts is a tool, and a transformational approach, which trusts in the process of arts engagement to deliver the outcomes [22]. This results in a division between those who wish to utilise the arts specifically to achieve non-arts related outcomes, and therefore risk the production of 'bad art' as per the previous quote, and those who purport that 'art is regarded... as good in itself and does not need to be justified by an evidence base' [22]. There are also difficulties when particular outcomes are tied to funding requirements with the risk that applications and evaluations will be adjusted to match these, thus skewing the 'real' impacts and putting pressure on the delivery of the project.

Towards a workable methodology for future research

For my own research I have undertaken a reframing of the language from a consideration of the 'impact' of the arts on particular outcomes to determining the 'role' of the arts in rural resilience. 'Role' suggests that the arts forms an integral part in adapting to change and the aim of the researcher is to determine how and where the arts fits, among other factors, in contributing towards the social sustainability of rural Australia. Whereas 'impact' implies that the arts is something which is external to rural life and should be administered in order to effect change, rather than work with what arts activity is already taking place.

I have developed a conceptual framework as a model for my research approach as shown in Figure 1. This model suggests that the reasons for wanting to instigate an arts project may be completely independent from the reasons why people will engage in that project. The outcomes from this project may, again, be completely independent of the reasons for engaging and the reasons the project was started, but it nonetheless feeds back into those factors which support and sustain both future projects and an individuals desire to engage with the arts [13].

Figure 1: A framework for arts projects' inputs and outcomes [13]



The major dilemma is that all kinds of arts activities are going on all the time. You need to define what you mean by the arts, engagement, and what measures you are going to use to show these benefits. The difficulties in measuring the role of the arts is not just because the arts is so extremely variable, but that these outcomes are not so easily isolated among the myriad of other influences and interactions that take place whilst engaging in the arts. There is a need to build both a tool kit for evaluating and measuring outcomes, as well as building an evidence base from sound research. There is a need to recognise that the impacts may not be immediate or short-term and that the influence may be lasting, long term, or need to be maintained. The outcomes and benefits of arts engagement can accumulate beyond the life of the project, but the involvement, engagement, and exposure to the arts might also need to be maintained.

My PhD research

My topic is the arts and social wellbeing for Australian rural communities, with a focus on the Mid West region of WA. I think it is important to focus on a region, as well as to look across all art forms, because too often research is limited to individual projects either through directly researching these projects, or by assessing evaluation methods. Case studies are also very common, which while very useful in obtaining detailed information on a specific phenomenon, make it difficult to generalise the results beyond that specific organisation, programme, or project.

The Mid West accounts for 20% of WA's land mass, yet only 2% of the total population, of whom 68% live in City of Geraldton-Greenough. The region has a very diverse economy, which primarily relies on mining, agriculture, fishing, tourism and it has a higher Indigenous population (9%) when compared to the rest of WA (3%) [23]. Of the 19 Local Government Authorities (LGA) in the region, 75% are classified as very remote, with a further 24% considered remote or moderately accessible [24]. There is very little data on arts activity in the region. It would be possible to get a list of funded projects and organisations from funding authorities with specific arts programs such as the WA Department for Culture and the Arts, Country Arts WA, Community Arts Network WA, and Healthway, but many arts projects are resourced by non-arts funding bodies such as LotteryWest, Office for Multicultural Interests, and the Department for Crime Prevention, to name a few. Furthermore much activity never receives funding, especially the activities of individual artists and informal or social groups.

This research has combined quantitative and qualitative data in order to capture both the uniqueness of the arts experience and to provide tangible outcomes that could be subject to statistical scrutiny. Qualitative data collection involved personal observation, as well more than 50 semi-structured interviews conducted over a six month period with local residents, indigenous representatives, local government employees, welfare workers, teachers and artists. A quantitative data set is currently being analysed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This data set was drawn from a state-wide audience survey of regional performing arts touring shows (192 responses), and a household survey (756 useable responses) which was distributed to 4000 households in the Shires of the Mid West region. The surveys were designed to gauge the level of arts engagement in the preceding twelve months, as well as a series of satisfaction, social capital, and quality of life measures in order to make a comparison between arts engagement and wellbeing.

Some conclusions so far

The arts have broad appeal because of the diversity of ways of engaging with the arts. Thus, the arts can engage with a diverse cross-section of the community in an even wider variety of settings. The benefits of arts engagement extend beyond the 'face value' of initial engagement. They provide an opportunity for civic and social participation, including bridging and bonding social capital, self-reflection when undertaken as a solo activity, and can build rural resilience by developing sense of place, confidence and understanding among disparate groups [13].

The arts can offer new ways to consider the way things work, to support or challenge cultural norms, and to deal with and understand change. The very nature of artistic practice and the creative process is concerned with innovation [3]. Therefore it is inherently unpredictable and should, by its very nature, be full of surprise outcomes. So it is not necessarily something that could or should be subject to scrutiny in order to affect specific outcomes. However, knowing how many dollars were saved in graffiti removal because of a mural project involving young people, or how many participants have gone on to further study or employment because of the skills and confidence gained from belonging to a community theatre group is invaluable for the future support of projects and programs.

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