Community Arts and Cultural Development: A Powerful Tool for Social Transformation

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Figure 1. This Is Our Life

Photographer: Mat De Koning

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Abstract

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Community arts and cultural development is a collaborative process between artists and community whereby direct participation in art making is as important as the creative outcomes. Worldwide, community arts theory and practice has been linked to civil and human rights advocates, most notably Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. In Australia, research into community arts highlights the social benefits of the practice and the role that government has had in its evolution. There is however very little research that focuses on understanding how the process of community arts and cultural development unfolds in communities, especially when working with disadvantaged groups. This thesis addresses this research gap by examining the practice of a leading community arts organisation in Western Australia, the Community Arts Network WA (CAN WA). Through the use of case studies, framed by critical ethnography and reflective practice, the thesis illuminates CAN WA’s community arts practice and highlights its outcomes for individuals and communities.

The thesis research reveals how CAN WA’s practice embedded values and principles that were fundamental to building relationships and gaining trust with Aboriginal communities. The research finds that community arts and cultural development practice is a powerful vehicle for marginalised voices to tell their own stories and in doing so the process has social transformative qualities for individuals and communities. At the individual level, practitioners, participants, and community members report increased cultural competencies and awareness, articulation of hope, healing, enhanced artistic skills and a renewed sense of possibilities. At a community level, there is evidence of strengthened cultural identity, having fun and improved social interactions amongst groups.

This thesis is an example of reflective research that contributes to a deeper understanding of community arts practice from a practitioner’s standpoint. The thesis suggests that community arts and cultural development practice can be better understood as a tool for social transformation when recognised as a continuum from interpretative to transformative practice and when set against theories of empowerment and liberation.
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I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Carmen González Sepúlveda. As a young woman she desperately wanted to study but she was not able to do so. Later in life she has done many amazing things and has been an inspiration to many women – her positive energy and her enthusiasm for life is contagious!
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