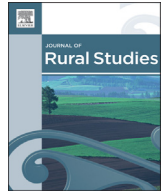




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The social impact of a regional community contemporary dance program in rural and remote Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of cities as the centre of the knowledge-based economy in Australia has led to migration of creative artists away from regional centres and smaller cities. While the evidence is limited, it is suggested that the arts positively impact both economic and social sustainability of rural communities. This research sought to establish the social impact of a regional community contemporary dance program, Ausdance WA's Future Landings 2013. Specifically, whether the project enabled participants to 'belong' more to the local community and whether the projects increased capacity for contemporary dance in regional Western Australia. In 2013, Future Landings comprised of three projects representing communities in the Kimberley, Pilbara, and Great Southern regions of rural Western Australia. Data were collected on the extent of activities, partnerships, and media associated with the projects. Self-complete surveys to determine the social impact of the projects were collected from participants at baseline and post-project, as well as from audience members. Finally, focus group interviews were conducted at the project debrief to gather more in-depth information from participants. The findings suggest that the three Future Landings projects were successful in achieving the stated aims. That is, more than 90% of post-project survey respondents felt they had a good bond with, and were connected to their community, and over 80% of audience survey respondents felt the performance had a moderate to strong impact on their opportunities to socialise and feel part of the community. All the participants who responded to the post-project survey stated that their views on contemporary dance had changed as a result of participating in this project. These benefits were thought to extend to the audience as well, whose understanding of contemporary dance changed to something that is more accessible, relevant, and something that they can enjoy. Future Landings 2013 has provided a project development, implementation, and evaluation framework for future Community Arts and Cultural Development projects in regional Australia.

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1. Introduction

While art-led initiatives are common in rural community development, their impact on community beyond economic outcomes has received little attention (Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016). Yet, the social impacts of engaging in the arts have long been acknowledged by community artists and artworkers, and evidence supporting these impacts, among other benefits of arts engagement, continues to grow. The arts are a vehicle for both social and civic participation at the professional level and for recreation

(Anwar McHenry, 2009), and thus are thought to play a role in rural sustainability for their ability to explore and redefine a sense of individual and collective identity as a way of re-envision or re-positioning small communities (Duxbury and Campbell, 2011). Both collective and individual identity is sustained by creativity, which contributes to belonging and place-making (Waitt and Gibson, 2013). The arts provide a means for sharing, contesting, and constructing personal and collective identities, for example, photography was utilised in a community arts project to give meaning to community and sense of place by providing insight into place identity by residents (Sonn et al., 2015). The arts create connections and foster understanding, allow us to imagine and empathise, and communicate ideas and feelings that cannot be expressed with

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words (Matarasso, 2015). Furthermore, for as little as two hours a week, engagement in the arts for enjoyment, entertainment, or as a hobby is associated with good mental wellbeing (Davies et al., 2016). Thus, by both providing entertainment and helping define community, the arts are said to enrich our lives (Johnson, 2006).

Rural life is often idealised by the romantic imaginings of urban city dwellers (McDonald and Mason, 2015). Yet, much of the literature focuses on disadvantage from regional restructuring and the role and use of the arts for rural revitalisation and gentrification (Anwar McHenry, 2011a). Rather than being culturally and artistically desolate, the regions abound with innovative opportunities for cultural development (McDonald and Mason, 2015). Due to differences in both access and opportunity, however, how cultural activities are structured in a rural community will differ from a large city (Rosewall, 2006). There is evidence to suggest that arts and cultural activity have an important social impact on rural communities (Radbourne, 2003). For example, the arts have been used as a growth stimulus to attract and retain residents, stimulate local economics and civic participation, and for aesthetics and entertainment (Markusen, 2007). While criticised for not attracting large audiences like sport and racing events, the arts appeal to diverse segments of the community and thus can “bring a lot more people out of the woodwork” (Anwar McHenry, 2011b, p42). For example, festivals are thought to contribute to social inclusion because they provide opportunities for local participation, learning new skills, and access to education about social justice (Laing and Mair, 2015), rather than necessarily drawing large audiences.

Questions around the value of the arts and humanities to society are increasingly central in a number of disciplines, yet there are issues over the measurement of such public value (Belfiore, 2014) and its implications for funding and policy directed towards the arts (Belfiore, 2002). Close association with the land and familial connections that frequently span multiple generations are at the heart of regional communities sense of self (McDonald and Mason, 2015). Yet these deep social connections and the organic development of regionally-based arts practice are rarely incorporated in such opportunities or policy development. There is, therefore, an imperative to recognise that economic benefits are often secondary to, or at least inseparable from, social outcomes (McDonald and Mason, 2015). Community arts and cultural development is a participatory and inclusive process that builds on and responds to the aspirations and needs of communities through creative means (Sonn et al., 2015). Through community arts and cultural development, the arts are a vehicle for exploring, identifying, and addressing policy and developmental issues. For example, one such community arts project captured meaning that reflected individual and collective constructions of place based on positive experiences and emotions tied to the natural and built environment (Sonn et al., 2015). Such projects foster local community participation, which have flow-on effects for voluntary groups and organisations, and social networks (Sonn et al., 2002). The arts are more easily justifiable for social and environmental development in terms of raising awareness of issues, the dissemination of information, and as a means of engaging communities to work towards creative solutions (Anwar McHenry, 2009).

Even though the arts can be readily used in this way it is important to consider who is constructing these notions of place. The presentation of place identity for tourism markets, for example, if not driven by locally-based artists, can be at odds with locally-constructed notions of place (George, 2015). The dominance of cities as the centre of the knowledge-based economy in Australia, however, has led to migration of creative artists away from regional centres and smaller cities. These artists are ‘pushed’ by limited local opportunities and geographic isolation and ‘pulled’ by networks, experience, identity, and established industries and clusters of

activity (Bennett, 2010). Lest, it has been argued that smaller communities do not have the critical mass to support arts activity and therefore must market to neighbouring communities (Rosewall, 2006). The situation in rural Australia is uniquely exacerbated by the “tyranny of distance” and extremely low population densities (Blainey, 2001) making a far more isolated and dispersed arts market, decreasing potential audience and increasing costs (O’Hagan, 1996). For example, it is estimated that theatre production is 30 per cent more expensive in a regional centre than if it was produced in a city centre (Milne, 2003). Yet, it is the locally-generated constructions of place that have the potential to connect in real and meaningful ways with audiences (Terracini, 2007). Active involvement of communities in the arts is key for the generation of meaningful community-owned expression (Hawkes, 2001). Terracini (2007) further stipulates that encouraging work at the grassroots level enables the creation of work that connects locally, and resonates globally, and thus grows audiences.

In taking a labour-centred view of the arts economy, it is suggested that artists make a choice about location, not necessarily based on employment opportunities, but on cost of living, available amenities, and an artistically supportive community (Markusen and Schrock, 2006). They seek not just economic, but physical and emotional space for their work, with multiple contingencies of place negotiated in the richness afforded by regional, rural, and remote locales (Luckman, 2012). Regionally-based artists commonly understood themselves and their interaction with others in relation to their geographical positionality. That is, whether isolation was viewed as an advantage (creative freedom) or a hindrance (lack of a competitive environment) (Gibson et al., 2010). Artists in rural areas are afforded space and freedom to create away from the dominate centres, however they can feel professionally isolated (Matarasso, 2005) and are not always paid well, often having to reduce or cease their artistic activities due to working careers and mobility decline from their mid-30s onwards (Bennett, 2004, 2007).

This research focuses on the social impact of a regional community contemporary dance program, Ausdance WA’s Future Landings. Part of Australia’s national Ausdance network, Ausdance WA is the peak body for dance in Western Australia (WA), delivering programs that are responsive to the needs and contexts particular to WA. As an art form, dance has a fundamentally spatial character and is the most physical in its expression and communication of values (Matarasso, 2005). Future Landings is a large-scale project that combined contemporary dance, visual arts, and music to create original community-created performances. An important focus of Future Landings is the skills development of regionally based choreographers in Community Arts and Cultural Development practices. Through the use of mentors, a training residency, and shared learning via teleconferences, Future Landings sought to empower and build the capacity of artists and arts-workers living in regional areas, so that they may lead projects that express the ideas and stories of regional Western Australia. Presented every two years since 2011, this research focuses on Future Landings 2013. Specifically, the research sought to answer the following questions:

1. Does the project enable participants to ‘belong’ more to the local community? That is, does the project change both audiences and participants experiences of social inclusion within the local community and does the project have an impact on strengthening sense of individual and collective identity for those engaged in the project?
2. Does the project increase the capacity for contemporary dance in regional Western Australia? Specifically, does the project support and grow regional dance artists to lead dance in their

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