

# *The Artistry of Community Consultation*

## **Keynote Address, Community Arts Network, Western Australia**

### **July 2005**

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I will begin by acknowledging the Nyungar people, the traditional, and I hope ongoing, custodians of this beautiful country.

I'm going to talk to you today about the artistry of community consultation.

Artistry is about a lot of different things. It is about ingeniousness and it's about prowess, practicality, confidence and craftsmanship. Artistry is "a superior skill that you can learn by practice and observation". In my experience in community engagement, you really need to be operating at all the level of artistry to make your projects "sing".

I have been thinking about the five key aspects of artistry. It seems to me that, from a long list, we could break it down to include: **capacity building, resourcefulness, efficiency, artfulness**, and, underpinning all these aspects, **wit**. I'm going to talk about them in that order and to help you remember these five important points, we can call it CREAW – I thought we could pretend it's Celtic: "*CREAW*" like a rowing crew.

### **Capacity**

The first in my **CREAW** list is **capacity**

I am going to start by explaining a project that some of you may have already have heard me speak about. But my staff tell me that no matter how often they hear this story, they always get something out of it. The story of this project is like a metaphor and if you listen carefully, you will gain powerful insights into how you can make the most of capacity building projects in your community. In 1999 and 2000, we undertook a project for Queensland Health in a place in Queensland's Gold Coast called Eagleby. We were looking at how to foster a supportive environment for incidental physical activity. The overarching aim of the project was to increase incidental physical activity in a low-income, mostly public housing, estate of about 8500 people, just at the top of the Gold Coast. It was an area that had been pretty much forgotten by the Gold Coast City Council.

When we started work in Eagleby, I was working with a community artist, Graeme Dunstan. The initial process yielded some very depressing comments from the local people. They said, "*We are the forgotten end of the Gold Coast, dry and dusty, depressing and appalling*". I'm happy to report that there wouldn't be many people in Eagleby who would say "We're dry and dusty, depressing and appalling" anymore.

But back then, those were the stories that people were telling about Eagleby. That's why Graeme Dunstan suggested we take a storytelling approach to building capacity. His rationale was that the stories tell about their communities - the *myths* of the people and the place - determine how people interact with, perceive and use public space. We figured that if we wanted people to undertake more physical activity, they needed supportive environments to do that. The physical environment is not the only environment. At a symbolic level, the environment of stories is just as fundamental as the physical environment. At Eagleby, we discovered just how important the symbolic environment really is.

Now Graeme is very much influenced by the work of Welfare State International (WSI). Welfare State International is the leading organisation promoting community art and cultural development, on a large scale, with puppets and masks and festivals and celebration. They do large projects that represent where and how places are through myth, story and archetype. Here is what they say about their work:

*Currently we live in a materialistic society, religious beliefs are declining and there is no structure of myth. We try to find archetypes that are universally shared and present them in an idiom accessible to a broad audience.*

So in Eagleby in 2000, we elicited and worked with the fundamental story that people were saying about this community. It went something like this:

Nobody's using the parks and public spaces because they're dangerous. We don't know if they're really dangerous but there's a perception, there's this thing we're all talking about called a "stigma". People keep putting Eagleby down and we're frightened and it's all somehow connected and therefore we're not walking to the shops.

Whenever people mention a community stigma, our ears prick up. A stigma is generally defined as "a mark or token of infamy or disgrace". It has a powerful ability to quell the potential of otherwise resourceful individuals and communities. Graeme spent a lot of time talking with local people about what this "stigma" would look like if you encountered it on a dark night. He went to church with people and he went to their homes and he hung out with them in the community centre. Eventually they said,

The "stigma"? Well it's what *other people* think about Eagleby. It's other people putting Eagleby down. Eagleby's a nice little place but everybody puts Eagleby down.

Graeme said, "What would this "stigma" look like if I ran into it in an alley?" Finally one of the members of the community said:

It would look like an eagle that couldn't fly, because other people were keeping it from flying. Thumbs down on Eagleby.

As soon as someone had named the *Stigma*, it was like a light bulb went off inside! Finally, the invisible thing that had been powerfully influencing life in Eagleby had been made concrete. Now we wanted to make it visible. With the help of my beloved husband, Karl, we set about building a visual representation of the "stigma" of Eagleby: a huge eagle ready to soar, being held down by the thumb of other people's negative judgements.

Now while this work was happening on the symbolic environment, we were also addressing the physical environment. Cec Clark Park was the most maligned park in Eagleby – and we wanted to change that. We undertook community arts projects in the park, with local adults and children making silk banners and hundreds of paper lanterns. The culmination of three intensive months of community cultural development work was the day that we reclaimed Cec Clark Park. Like fire taking the night back from predators, we were taking the park back from fear and negative perceptions. In fact, despite its reputation, there wasn't really drug dealing, shooting up, paedophilia or other terrible things happening in this park at all. It was mainly made up. The crime statistics didn't match people's perceptions.

We scheduled a Community Celebration for the Winter Solstice. On that day, we held a children's lantern parade through the park at sunset. There were *four hundred lanterns*, so each child could carry one. They had made the lanterns in the primary schools and they painted the lanterns during the day of the celebration. We had some large lanterns on large poles. And every child had probably two or three adults walking with them, so there were twelve to fifteen hundred people walking through the park that particular night.

Then, in the centre of the park, Graeme, the exhausted hippy storyteller told redemptive stories to the enchanted children who sat in the park that they have never been allowed to go into. It really was one of those astonishing moments that you could never forget. I was standing on the hill with Bob, who use to be the pastor of the local Christian evangelical church, and we watched the lantern parades snaking through the park, the bobbing lanterns and the laughing children and he was just crying openly. And so was I.

But there's more. Remember that stigma that we built? Do you think that, having reclaimed their park, the people of Eagleby wanted other people's judgments holding them down? Absolutely not! This is what the stigma looked like; it was one big mother of a stigma. It was really huge and took six men to carry it. They brought it into the centre of the park, and...

They promised me there was no accelerant, but I have to tell you it went up like a rocket. During the day, I walked around with a basket with paper and pens and people wrote their disappointments and posted them in the belly of the stigma. So when the stigma was raised and burned, we burned people's individual disappointments at the same time. To a chanting group of probably 2000 people, chanting "Burn the stigma, burn the stigma", we burned the Eagleby stigma.

Local resident and minister Bob talked about the positive changes that resulted from this symbolic process:

*That night something changed. People use to be ashamed and now they are proud to be Eagleby residents. Something lifted that night. There was a change in the people you could almost feel, especially in the young people. There was a cleansing. Where the residents could discard the negative things they were hanging on to. They put them in and watched them burn.*

Now it may sound like this was all happening on a symbolic level, but that's what capacity building is about. Community capacity is not a solid thing - but it is a critical and tangible thing. *Once the symbolic environment and people's stories have changed, concrete physical outcomes naturally follow.* Out of this and many other interlocking community development and community renewal projects from the local Council, Queensland Health and Queensland Housing, came significant improvements to Eagleby. This included providing safe public access to the local river (in a low-income community where fishing is very much appreciated). Additionally, the Community Jobs Program has redeveloped many of Eagleby's public spaces integrating Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles. This is capacity building.

### **Resourcefulness**

In 1998, the Shire of **South Lanarkshire** in Scotland published this fantastic model called *The Wheel of Participation* in the British journal, *Planning*. The article is called 'The Wheel of Empowerment', and the Wheel is offered as a kind of antidote to Sherry Arnstein's endlessly articulated 1969 *ladder of citizen participation*. In the Shire of South Lanarkshire's Wheel, there are four quadrants: information, consultation, participation and empowerment. From a resourcing and resourcefulness point of view, one of the most important things to ask yourself is:

- *Where are we on the Wheel?*

Not only that, but:

- *Where do the residents and the local people think we are on the Wheel and therefore what might we do?*

The important thing about a wheel is that it doesn't always make you feel a failure if you're not at the top at the ladder. It allows you to choose and resource your approach in a way that is *appropriate to your circumstances*.

Now resourcing is something that is very rarely talked about or handled well. I can't tell you the number of times that I've been asked to do consultation with no budget for disbursements. As if, somehow, out of the generous heart of the consultation person, will come mailing, postage, paper, printing, cups of tea, all the food, rental of all the furniture; that it will all somehow emerge.

In late 2003, as part of a consultation we undertook in Kennedy Bay, Western Australia, we held a Community Day and in one day we did about five different activities in the community. There were three separate marquees established: one for the kid's activities, one for the SpeakOut workshop and one for the participatory design workshop. And the resourcing for this was critical.

We believe food is very important so we had an ice cream truck and a mini café serving drinks, right there on the otherwise empty development site. People were saying, "Oh, it's wonderful - coffee and ice-cream!" - and "isn't this a treat!".

"Well," I said to the residents, who were mostly neighbours of the proposed development, "this is exactly what you can expect when the project's built. You'll have ice cream and coffee. This is not so irregular." You see, well-resourced events create a win/win situation: community members feel comfortable in an otherwise alienating environment. They have an opportunity to experience, firsthand, the benefits that a future development might bring. And in return for their valuable time, they get a fun day out. The developers get to build rapport with the community. And they get more back because people contribute more, are more creative and more open to participation when they are comfortable and well fed.

When thinking about resourcing, it is also important to think about how you will make things accessible to *everybody*. This is what the British planning theorist Patsy Healy calls "inclusionary argumentation": ensuring

that you have the resources to provide the opportunities for *all community members*, including children, young people, older people, people with special needs, people with English as a second language etc., to comfortably and actively participate in community consultation processes and events.

## **Efficiency**

The next part of our CREAW is **efficiency**.

When we talk about efficiency, part of being efficient is dealing with the issues of inclusion and representativeness up front. I personally do not facilitate consensus conferences, and citizen's juries, but I greatly admire the work of Lyn Carson who does. I think Carson is the best academic theorist practitioner in this country. Her concern is very strongly around representativeness and this is a major part of the consultation discourse. *If we are going to be efficient, we really have to reach everybody from the start, otherwise the project can become unstuck later on.*

We have to think about who makes up the stakeholder pie, and not just the "usual suspects". In fact, I rarely use the term *stakeholder*, because I think there's so much more to life than just the "usual suspects". There are lots of different people who need to be involved. We focus on designing our projects so that *everyone* can be listened to, with a healthy mix of slight indifference and unconditional positive regard.

## **Artfulness**

The next component is **artfulness**.

In my experience, artfulness is largely about dealing with emotions and conflict. It is critically important to deal with this effectively rather than trying to run away from it. Misunderstanding and mismanagement of emotions in community engagement are what cause most conflict. It can also cause processes to become drawn-out and inefficient. It can create all kinds of expenses that could have been avoided with more artfulness. This type of mismanagement can essentially become the biggest waste of time, money and energy for both community members and agencies.

Therefore, it is important that we build the model of emotional intelligence into consultation and talk directly about the components of emotion that we can work with. This is a very important part of our practice.

The **Energy Wheel** is a diagnostic tool that I use to support my work in consultation and communities. It defines four types of emotional states: hot negative, hot positive, cool positive, and cool negative. When you look at communities, you will always find that they are somewhere in this circle.

In the **hot negative** sector, people feel: betrayed and untrusting, righteous, fearful, angry, worried, attacking, stressed, heartbroken, terrified, frustrated, sabotaging. And at the same time, we and the proponents may also be hot negative. We may feel frustrated, angry, vengeful, know-it-all, resentful, proud, obligated, indigent, annoyed, intimidating, betrayed or sabotaged. There's a lot of stuff going on with hot negative.

At **cool negative**, people feel unsupported and forgotten, sad, disappointed, dispirited, disempowered, intimidated, stigmatised, wary, fearing the worst, incredulous and sullen. And the proponents may feel bored, puzzled, cynical, dismissive, guilty, powerless, impotent and so on.

At **hot positive**, people feel excited, loving, passionate, they are recognising their own worth, they are hopeful, happy, thankful, loyal, strong, proud, inspired. And for the proponents and people like me: hopeful, loving, joyful, elated, friendly.

At **cool positive**, people feel frank, satisfied, confident, valued, valuing, and curious, empathic, humble, balanced, accepting, and so on.

There are specific approaches you can use to deal with hot negative situations. For example, you can: probe the outbursts; use hypotheticals; seek help. You can train people in community engagement to deal with strong negative emotions and reactions.

Dealing with cool negative, you can: probe the sullenness; ask questions in new ways; use creative ways to engage people; ask if others agree. One of the emotions that we often see, particularly in dealing with consultation with Indigenous people, is extreme shyness, sometimes called "courtesy bias". Again these are methods that can be supported by training.

You can also learn to support hot positive states; acknowledge the positive emotion, ensure that the energy doesn't swamp, suggest a break, capitalise, seek help and enjoy it. Sometimes you can just bask in it.

Equally, you can learn to support cool positive states.

The “artfulness” of this work is ultimately about deep listening. And deep listening can be challenging, particularly when people are being hot negative. But it is so important, that it is worth the challenge. Learn to listen generously with both ears and heart. My friend Angela gave me this Chinese symbol for listening which she explained involves the four components that you listen with: you listen with your ears; you listen with your eyes; you give your undivided attention, and you listen with your heart. This is really what our work as community consultation practitioners is about.

## **Wit**

And finally I want to end with wit, that’s the “W”.

In 1990, we held a seminar on the problems with Melbourne’s arterial roads for the Victorian Roads Corporation, You may think this is not a place for wit, but we decided that, as this would be the first time that VicRoads had ever invited their “enemies” into their building, we had to infuse their Search Conference with a little bit of levity. So we decided that we would hold it on Mount Olympus, with the Major and Minor Gods in attendance.

We convened the gods of Melbourne’s arterial road users and other advocates and activists, on Olympus, with Zeus (an engineer and our client), who was in charge. We had the minor gods and we had the major gods. We had *Bureaucratis* (the god of economic rationalism), *Roadeometheus* (the god or road infrastructure), *Taxidermis*, *Bicyclops* (you can imagine who they stood for), and *Pantechnichon* (God of Truckies). After the laughter at the hopeless attempts of the negotiator Hermes to gain agreement about Melbourne’s arterial roads from the squabbling gods, everyone got down to business, infused with a new sense of urgency.

So, as you can see, humour and wit are also a very important part of effective community engagement.

## **Conclusion**

Artistry in community engagement is about ingeniousness; it’s about prowess, practicality, confidence and craftsmanship and it is essential for successful community consultation processes. The five key aspects of artistry are: **capacity building, resourcefulness, efficiency, artfulness** and **wit**. They can be summed up by the acronym **CREAW**.

The Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy at Murdoch University publishes the books that I and my colleagues have been writing on these topics since 1994. If you would like to access these valuable resources, you can email them at [istp@murdoch.edu.au](mailto:istp@murdoch.edu.au) or ring them at (08) 9360 2913 (international + 61 8 9360 2913) and they will fax you an order form.

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