

CONFERENCE THEME: ARTS AS A VEHICLE FOR STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES AND FACILITATING SOCIAL INCLUSION

SESSION: Common concerns for local government officers: dealing with diverse communities: Issues Arising From Practice.

Beyond the Cringe

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1. Introduction

Many people with disabilities are artists. They are performers, visual artists, musicians, writers. This paper explores how local government can assist in the development of these artists by providing artistic opportunities for people with a disability that is based on their abilities, skills and desire to become practising artists. As well as this some strategies are outlined which help to increase participation of people with a disability as audience members at local government cultural events.

The most common practice for the inclusion of people with a disability to participate in local government cultural programs is either via a **disability specific** activity or program, or to include people with a disability as audience members at Council festivals and events.

The target group for disability specific programs is mostly people with intellectual disabilities or people with mental illness who are disability support service users. Activities are identified, classes are run and participants are recruited from agencies or organisations funded from social welfare services. The activities are undertaken to provide people with disabilities with recreational and artistic opportunities. The arts activities fit neatly into the disability support system as they are already structured and programmed based. The disability support system encourages this type of group activity as it is an easier and cheaper option than providing individual support for people to participate in mainstream arts activities.

There is a well established field of agencies and organisations who carry out service provision for these groups. Disability organisations tick the arts box, by funding such programs and organisations; and arts organisations tick the disability box by funding the same programs and organisations. What of the independent artist with a disability?

Whilst the approach of providing targeted arts programs has legitimacy it remains fairly static and is limited in terms of the artistic skills' development of people with disabilities. In addition disability support service users are a very small percentage of people with disabilities as a whole.

2. Four Case Studies

Case Study One – A Council Event

Programming a Cultural Event and Inclusion of People with a Disability.

Recent refurbishment of the City of Yarra's Fitzroy Town Hall, was the site for major Council celebration which included a week-long program of events and activities to mark the occasion. The main responsibility for this planning was with the Cultural Planning Branch and the finalised program included activities such as:

- Public launch and opening event
- Historic Lectures
- Entertainment
- Exhibitions

Emphasis on inclusion and diversity was part of the general theme for this celebration. One significant feature of the refurbishment of the building was that it now had a lift and that disability access had been finally created for this community resource.

- Level entrance
- Lift access to all levels
- Accessible toilets on all three levels

Planning for the inclusion of people with a disability had involved the Access for All Abilities worker in the pre-planning phase and had focused on a disability specific activity as part of the program. The activity was an African drumming workshop and was targeted to organizations running funded day programs for people with an intellectual disability in Yarra. The workshop was coordinated by Club Wild, was very successful, well attended and looked like a lot of fun.

However, Council now had the facilities for inclusion of people of *all* abilities but planning only went as far as providing for this one targeted disability group. This might have been perceived as a limited outcome by the diverse Yarra community.

Prior to the event, the problem was addressed by the Disability Planning Officer and MetroAccess Officer who set about liaising with the Cultural Planning Branch to include promotion of the program to people of all abilities. Liaison involved advising on how to promote the event to community residents with disabilities by providing information on accessibility in all promotional material and on the website. Even after this intense level of advice and consultation, disability access features were left off the promotional material and no additional accommodation of people with a disability was considered in the rest of the activities:

It was important to get accessibility onto the promotional material which covered general features; transport (parking and public transport); access at

venue, accessible facilities (such as toilets, lifts), sign interpreters and live captioning for visual materials, attendant support, pensioner discounts, wall texts for exhibitions etc. Unfortunately, final drafts were not made available in sufficient time to ensure these features were prominently promoted in the communication materials. Consequently promotion for the event did not reflect the celebration of the new and “accessible” town hall facility.

As a result of this, the Disability Planning Officer has worked closely with the Cultural Planning Branch and organised accessible arts and events training for branch members. As well as this, the DPO assisted the Cultural Planning Branch to produce an *easy to use* access checklist for Council organised events and the promotion of accessible planning for external festivals and events funded by Council.

Case Study Two

Darebin Community and Kite Festival

In 2006, the City of Darebin engaged Club Wild to assist Council in programming artists with disabilities in its festival program. The project was assisted by a grant from VicHealth.

The partnership with Club Wild was a capacity building exercise. Previously Council had engaged Club Wild to run their very successful dance events and creative workshops. However, in this project Council wanted to utilise the expertise of Club Wild to source, train and support people with disabilities as performers and behind the scenes crew.

The Darebin Community and Kite Festival was the first festival involved in the project. The first task was to build a database of local arts workers with disabilities. Participants were sourced through existing networks and a communications strategy.

The next step was to engage people as performers and as behind the scenes staff. A key element of the project brief was to ensure that, if necessary, people would receive additional training and skills development and that they would be supported on the day of the festival. It was decided that an effective way to carry out extra skilling-up would be to partner selected performers or crew with professional mentors.

Mentoring Performers

- The project assisted in the mentoring of an MC for the main stage. Performer Paul Matley was mentored by professional actor and MC Trevor Major. Trevor and Paul had already been training and working as MC's at Club Wild events. Trevor worked with Paul to develop a routine for MC in a one day training session in the lead up to the festival. On the day Trevor and Paul MC'd in tandem.

- Roller Coaster Theatre Company was engaged as roving performers. Roller Coaster is made up of graduates of the Ignition Theatre Course at NMIT which trains people with disabilities as theatre workers. Roller Coaster was formed in 2006 to further the employment prospects of graduates of the Ignition course. The Darebin Festival project funded a skills development session with Roller Coaster conducted by artist/trainer, Katrine Gabb and a roving performance routine was devised for the day.
- Rap artist Sam Faraci was assisted in the development of a routine inspired by the Reservoir region which was performed as part of the main stage program.



Mentoring Behind the Scenes

Four behind the scenes areas were identified as suitable for people with disabilities to be mentored. These were:

- assistant stage manager in the Dance Tent
- assistant to the buggy crew
- assistant in the Food Stall Area
- assistant in the Sustainable Living Village

People were recruited through an application process. As the project was keen to find people outside of existing networks, advertisements were put in the local paper as well as mail outs to disability networks. A media release was also sent to the local papers and articles resulted from this.

Four people were selected. These people had a variety of experience ranging from professional to just starting out as festival workers. Although two of the mentorees were professional, their work opportunities were limited due to attitudes and lack of access at venues or other professional agencies.



Dance tent instructors

Club Wild undertook disability awareness training with the dance instructors in the Dance Tent. This training consisted of working with the dance teachers to come up with steps suitable for people with disabilities should they wish to participate. Dances included Indigenous, belly dancing, Bollywood, African dancing, traditional Chinese dancing and boot-scooting.

The awareness workshops met with mixed reactions by the dance instructors, from warmly embracing the idea - to a lack of understanding as to what the training was for - and to hostility. Because the instructors had been engaged before it was decided to do the training it meant that it was difficult to incorporate this awareness training into the terms of employment. Finally however, all the instructors undertook some form of training with the result that on the day Deaf people and other people with disabilities were able to participate in the dance workshops.

Disability Awareness Training

As well as the dance instructors, disability awareness training was conducted by Club Wild for all event staff working on the day as part of the staff briefings.

Case Study Three

Art of Difference 2006 – A Benchmark



The Art of Difference has been managed by Gasworks which in 2006 appointed a committee of artists with disabilities to lead the vision for Art of Difference held that year. This was teamed with the professional support and infrastructure of Gasworks staff and resources.

Previous Art of Difference events had focussed on showcasing the work of people with disabilities some of whom had little professional artistic development. Whilst there were at times excellent performances much of the work was not of a standard to show publicly. It reinforced the undesirable stereotype of people with disabilities' incapacities and that such work should not have to engage an audience's critical view.

The Steering Committee for the Art of Difference 2006 took the position that if people with disabilities are to be seen as artists first, and people with disabilities second, then a change in approach was needed.

The Committee decided to showcase only work by artists with disabilities that was of a high standard, and work by emerging artists would be developed in workshops or training sessions. Artists both from interstate and overseas were invited and selected to participate.

Art of Difference 2006 became a multi-faceted event which included performance, comedy, dance, visual art and spoken word in the arts program. All disabilities were represented in all art forms. All art forms were made accessible by sign interpreters, audio description, accessible seating and way finding.

As well as this there were four pithy conference sessions which focussed on:

- professional practice and career development for artists with disabilities;

- community arts/arts and disability programs and organisations;
- politics of identity and disability;
- current contemporary practice with an international focus.

Debate raged around the idea of *disabled artists* versus *artists with a disability*, engagement with the mainstream and the politics of funding bodies.

Those at the conference recognised that whilst people with disabilities may be very talented, they may not be able to reach their artistic potential due to limited opportunities to acquire training in the arts, and sustainable career paths. Therefore, a key message from the Conference was that skill development and support for artists with disabilities' career development was necessary. This could involve mentoring, new training opportunities, and affirmative policy in funding programs.

In its programming, Art of Difference 2006 incorporated elements that should have a lasting legacy in the community as well as a wider influence across the state. These included the involvement of professional artists with a disability, funders, government departments, DHS initiatives (Rural/MetroAccess) community groups/artists and participants with a disability. To help deliver its objectives the conference strategy included conference role reversals (arts administrators and funders to assist and facilitate, not lead), a mentoring stream, a workshop program which had a "take-away" emphasis (workshops developed for Rural/Metro Access and arts workers to take back to regions and communities).

By and large the conference was successful on these fronts. Unfortunately, there were very few people working in mainstream arts there to hear the debate and see the work. This was disappointing and will be addressed in future planning for the event. Whilst the event has not yet developed a profile in the mainstream arts sector this can be assisted by showcasing very strong work thereby enabling the Art of Difference to grow in reputation to the sector.

Case Study Four

Expanding Cultures Conference 2007

The Expanding Cultures Conference presented a good opportunity to raise the issue of disability within a broader cultural context. The conference over its two day period brought up many thought provoking and challenging issues. The discussion around disability however was relegated to the presentation of this paper in a concurrent session. It was an opportunity lost to discuss with local government and other arts planners and organisers the place of disability within culture. In not addressing this issue in the main sessions of the program it denied the existence of twenty percent of the population as practising artists and community members.

- How do we know what the role of people with disabilities in a cultural context is if we don't ask the question?
- What does community look like?
- How can we talk about community if we are excluding 1 in 5 people?

- How do we know what community looks like if 1 in 5 people are excluded from it?
- Do people with disabilities form a unique culture?
- Will the expression of culture in all of its manifestations be different when there is full participation by all people including people with disabilities?

These are some of the questions that could have been posed in the main sessions of the conference. If they had been not only the conference but the future expression of culture within local communities would have been so much richer. The conference would truly then have been about expanding culture.

3. Recommendations

Many Councils work to increase participation of people with a disability through their access and inclusion policies. However, achieving carriage of these policies across all departments can be limited. The right to participate as artists as well as audiences remains a struggle for people with disabilities, Councils can make a difference and provide good access as well as opportunities for artists to showcase their work. The following suggestions may help to get things started.

What can local government do?

- Find out who the artists are in your local community
- Initiate festival and event program content to include these artists
- Provide skills development and mentoring opportunities
- Provide disability awareness training to all staff working in cultural departments, festivals and events
- Develop audiences by creating accessible festivals and events
- Audit festivals and events and see what measures are needed to involve people both as performers and audience members
- Promote accessible events to Council funded arts and cultural activities

4. Conclusion

There are already a number of very skilled artists with disabilities in our communities. There are also many other people with disabilities who have remarkable talent who could potentially be on our stages, showing work in galleries, having their work published, alongside of their artistic peers. Successful mainstream arts practice for these people remains a rich untapped cultural resource, which could be brought forth with a few supportive strategies. Audiences can then enjoy and critique the work according to similar standards they set for other artists. The work will then be seen for its true value and not accepted because it is deemed to be 'worthy'. Local government should and can provide opportunities that value people with disabilities as artists and that recognises the artistic contribution they make to the creative fabric of our communities.

5. Useful Resources

Information and general guidelines on accessible events can be obtained from Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission:

www.hreoc.gov.au/media_releases/2006/21_06.htm

Specialised information for arts and cultural venues, events and arts practice can be found at Arts Access Victoria:

www.artsaccess.com.au

Consultancy and advice for all access technicalities can be provided by Access Audits Australia:

www.accessauditsaustralia.com.au

Resources and information on arts and disability can be found on the Australia Council for the Arts website;

www.ozco.gov.au/search.aspx?ddArtform=&ddCouncilPriority=&keyword=Disability