

## **Education has a critical role in community being the answer.**

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### **Synopsis**

This contribution uses narrative to share experiences that led to the development of a transferable model of community engagement from 'down-under'. The work began as a response to policies based on the mantra that 'bigger was better' resulting in the withdrawal of services from communities of under 3,000 people in Victoria (Australia) in the 1990s. The marginalisation motivated concerned practitioners to form the Centre for Rural Communities. The goal was to enable community views to be visible in public decision-making. Research focused on strategies to inform the design of a study circle kit that shared stories of successful enterprises in a format that educated of ways of working and planning for the long-term within communities. Excitement at the impact of this approach was short lived as the critical shortage of skilled facilitators became evident. To overcome this shortage post-graduate courses accredited by a major university and Technical and Further Education institutions were developed moving the work into mainstream institutions.

The post-graduate course introduced students to resources that included a transferable model of 'Collaborative Engagement' (the how) foundational work in community development (the why) resilience indicators (a graphic tool) (evaluation), a professional development manual (for facilitators) and a study circle kit (implementation with community members who determined the direction). Seemingly diverse sectors such as health, education, governance environmental management, engineering, welfare, recreation, indigenous organisations, enterprise and emergency services all work with community members. Previously undervalued work has status, transferable skills and access to resources of a major university. Without relevant skills the outcome can be distressing for all parties and would not be tolerated in other sectors. The focus for skill development and community ownership resulted in community newspapers, festivals, environmental groups, community banks, choirs that continue some twenty years later leading to other ventures. The Centre seeks new partnerships to share this work.

The International Association of Community Development conference advocating that 'Community is the answer' has synergies with the work I have been involved with over the past 30 years. While endorsing the message that it is from within communities that opportunities to engage with the most significant local and global questions can be tackled and transformed I also come with a message that a critical step in this process is access to relevant skills and knowledge (education/professional development) of community development at relevant levels. By this I mean access to the wealth of research and creative thinking within academia at post-graduate levels for those in policy, planning and management. Access to sound foundations of theory and practice in under-graduate programs, the exciting integration of theory and practice resourcing community issues at Further Education sector and within communities strategies to introduce democratic ways of working and planning to enable negotiated views of achievable outcomes to emerge in a timely way.

In Australia and the United Kingdom the level of attention to Community Development as a discipline has flourished and waned according to the energy of individuals, networks and the politics of the day (Kenny 1996, Sheil 2002). The outcome for the Community Development sector is employment, funding and visibility existing on the margins of portfolios, usually operating in bureaucratic systems placing dual responsibilities on workers who are employed on short-term contracts to both transform their work place as well as resource communities. The challenge is frequently destructive of the worker's health and fails to achieve the outcomes desired by program funders or community groups.

Consequently confusion about the nature of the sector and the value of investment continues. In my experience what is lacking in tackling the issues faced by communities in the places that they live: environmental health issues associated with industrial development, water pollution, unhealthy life styles (for the poor and the rich), unemployment and barriers to participate in decision making is legitimate processes to tackle issues which public and private sector organisations who will later face in elections and courts, litigation, personal trauma and shame at past decisions. Yes community does need to be at the table – this is the logo of the Centre for Rural Communities – but in a resourced and capable way.

While rural values were often dismissed as conservative awareness of communities successful in establishing ventures such as co-operative health centres, hotels, marketing co-operatives and financial services such as the Bendigo Community Bank ([www.bendigobank.com](http://www.bendigobank.com)) that had a history of working together for mutual benefit created interest and had broad appeal (Onyx 1996: 99). However, there was little awareness of why, and how, some communities could achieve these primarily citizen led actions outcomes, while others continued to decline. The transition from being a passive recipient of externally provided services, to taking ownership and setting direction from within communities is a significant one. There were few guidelines, little support and usually a high level of distress (Sheil 1997). Frequently communities initiated this work in isolation and despite government policies. This was the challenge.

As narrative is a powerful tool for change I share three stories of circumstances that led me to develop an approach to community engagement that enabled communities to lead change rather than continually react to policies with little knowledge of local impact.

**The context.**

*Just as the key to a species' survival in the natural world is its ability to adapt to local habitats, so the key to human survival will probably be the local communities*

*(Suzuki & McConnell 1997:183).*

It was the 1990s. The combined impact of decisions by the private sector and governments based on the philosophy 'that bigger is better' decimated rural communities in Victoria. Banks, schools and hospitals closed, health and welfare funding was terminated, railway lines closed, local governments were forcibly amalgamated and commissioners appointed. Tertiary education programs (including the Diploma of Community Development where I taught) were withdrawn.

It was Christmas and I was unemployed with a dependent family. After the shock of dismissal subsided, I began to search for ways to work with my own and other rural communities. If community development was the substance of my work what did I have to offer those challenging the conventional wisdom that rural communities were an unnecessary liability and their terminal decline inevitable? Generalisations, myths and overlapping government portfolios created barriers for the diverse reality of Australia's rural lifestyle to be present in public planning (Sher & Sher 1994). The challenge was to be present at the table not outside the bubble of decision makers.

**What did I know?**

***[I]n times of transition education becomes a highly important task.*** (Freire 1974:7)

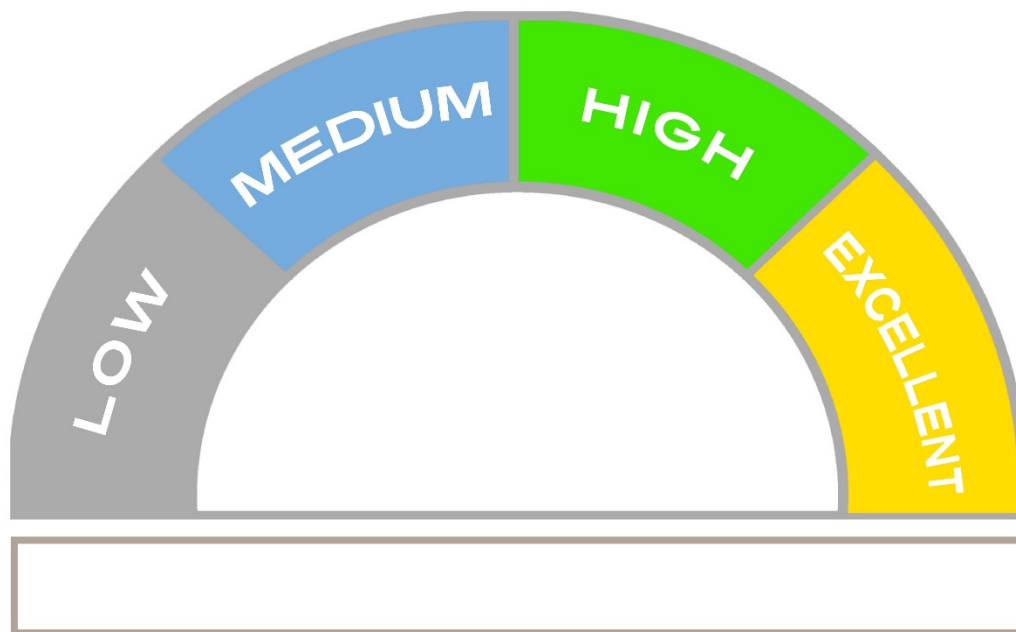
A framework for looking closely at the resilience of geographic communities originates from community development theorist Jim Ife (12002/http://www.scribd.com/doc/17103404/Jim-Ife-Linking-Community 2011). The framework simplifies the complexity of community life by examining the social, economic, political, environmental, cultural, personal and spiritual without undermining its connected nature.



acknowledgement to Jim Ife, 1995

I used this framework to look more closely at circumstances in my community by adapting a familiar symbol. In Australia where wild fire is a regular event each community displays an indicator registering the degree of fire danger on a daily basis: low/moderate/high/extreme. I used this image to invite people to comment on their experiences across the six aspects of community life (Ife 1995). In 1993 my community was struggling on each aspect.

## COMMUNITY INDICATORS



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### Resilience indicator

Knowing the low state of the community went beyond my personal situation I began to think about programs that had made a difference.

#### What did I know that could make a difference?

I had previously been involved in a Rural Women's Program that was memorable for the way people previously uninvolved in public life participated and the dramatic impact it had on our lives. I began to look more closely at this experience as it was so different from the myriad of studies and reports that had been done on our declining timber community with the only outcome being further divisions. The well organised timber industry silenced ideas for diversity while mills became mechanised and owned by corporations already investing in other areas – few people within the region prospered.

#### 1) A story - Dynamic community engagement (what worked)

[Our understanding of the world is] *dependent on where we stand in human history, what varieties of men and women prevail in society at this time, the factors that determine the structure of the society and the ways in which it is changing* (Mills 1970:78).

In 1985, while employed by a Community College to improve access to post-compulsory training, I was asked to establish women's study groups in nearby rural communities. This initiative was a response to low participation rates in tertiary education by rural women. It was funded for 3 months and a feminist educator Helene Brophy was employed. With little knowledge of what was involved, but impressed that these would be local groups, I agreed.

Participating in this program changed my life and the lives of the many women in the 35 groups established across the region (Brophy 1986). Right from the beginning Helene applied the adult learning principles of ask don't tell to engage us in conversations, beginning our journey of determining the content of our learning (Vella 2002). We were invited (not told) to consider how institutions such as health, media, law, education or politics impacted on our lives (Brophy 1985). We were asked if there was shared interest in a topic that would inspire us to continue meeting. Helene repeated this process as she met with women in local halls or homes across the region. Previous research had identified that rural women experienced barriers of distance, lack of child-care, prohibitive cost and an alien academic culture. Helene's course operated in local venues, focused on local issues, provided child-care and was without cost. It overcame the identified barriers (Clarke 1984).

In my group some women began speaking tentatively of health issues they thought may be connected to aerial crop-dusting. Three had experienced miscarriages, others spoke of children having diarrhoea. A milk company had rejected milk from a dairy farm due to the high levels of pesticide – all at crop-dusting time. We began to research the effects of sprays and chemicals on ourselves and our families. We had determined the content of our own learning.

Private concerns and interests became public action as each group identified a topic and was motivated to engage in learning relevant to their lives. 240 women were actively involved in developing the skills, confidence, language and contacts to enable further research and exploration of local issues or events. A regional network, newsletters and festivals supporting this involvement continued for 16 years. **This briefly funded short-term program invested in our resilience but was not regarded as formal education and after a succession of pilot programs funding ceased. The experience of this dynamic learning inspired my search to determine if this approach could be implemented more broadly?**

## **2) Theory informing practice (why)**

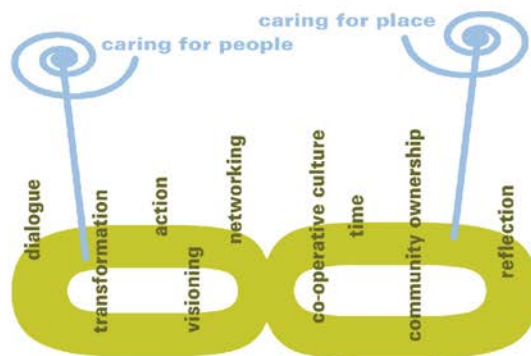
In 1992 I had begun teaching in the Associate Diploma in Social Sciences – Community Development. To gain the relevant teaching qualifications I also enrolled in a Graduate Diploma in Adult Education. I became aware of the theory underpinning the learning strategies I had experienced in the women's programs: the importance of creating a safe learning environment, of engaging in dialogue (Freire 1974) through questioning and of the personal development that occurs when adults have the opportunity to be actively involved in determining their futures (Belenky et al., 1997, Peavey 2001, Vella 2002).

The dual goals of community development to 'assist people to live in harmony with each other and with the environment' (Ife 2002) is concerned with identifying barriers experienced by community members in participating in decision making rather than focusing on personal deficits (Ife 2002, Kenny 1999, 2011). The emphasis is on changing structures rather than moulding people to accommodate organisational frameworks. This perspective recognises the barriers created by institutions when they attempt to impose singular approaches on diverse populations and landscapes. As a rural woman I had experienced the problematic nature of urban frameworks being imposed on rural populations (Kenny 1996: 109, Gamble & Weil 1997). The work of Deborah Bird Rose opened my eyes to the systematic way select language, laws and myths promote the superiority of some groups at the expense of others and how this has shaped attitudes and access to decision-making (Rose 1997). It was clear that strategies to facilitate two-way conversations across these divides was urgently needed if a more inclusive society were to emerge.

### 3) **Margins to mainstream - developing a transferable model - (the how)**

The third story shares the answers I found through research, implementation and evaluation that led to the development of a transferable *Model of Collaborative Engagement*, the basis of my PhD. I now had a language and theoretical understanding of the very different relationships and outcomes that emerged if an investment in facilitated self-directional learning occurred within communities. I had identified nine contributing strategies in this process: dialogue, time, local community ownership, co-operative culture, visioning, networking, action, reflection and transformation (Sheil 2000). Each of the strategies contributes qualities that combine to achieve transformative change. Many programs implemented only on one or two strategies such as dialogue and networking that raised expectations but failed to achieve the anticipated level of outcomes. In theory this had application as a transferable model.

## nine steps of community engagement



### checklist

- dialogue**  
**Ask and listen. Respect differences.**  
**Support language development. Find common ground.**
- time**  
**Invest time to: establish trusted relationships,**  
**facilitate personal and community development.**
- local community ownership**  
**Offer support not direction.**  
**Nurture ownership of ideas relevant to that place.**
- co-operative culture**  
**Be open and generous. Learn and practice group participation**  
**skills; clear communication and clarity of roles.**  
**The goal is mutual development.**
- visioning**  
**Create a safe environment.**  
**Then invite people to share their hopes and dreams.**  
**Visioning enables communities to plan their futures.**
- networking**  
**Meet with other communities. Use newsletters, internet & radio.**  
**Invite decision makers to visit.**
- action**  
**Change requires action. Begin in small achievable ways.**  
**Celebrate the milestones. Take a break. Begin again.**
- reflection**  
**Evaluate constructively. Before and after records are valuable**  
**(use photos/stories/financial records/etc).**  
**Evaluate both processes and outcomes.**
- transformation**  
**Is there new confidence and involvement? Are there new words**  
**and new stories? Both set the groundwork for the future.**  
**(Repeat only when ready).**

### **Study circles –a democratic way of working.**

In Australia study circles had been used by the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council (1993) to facilitate pastoralists and indigenous people sitting at a common table listening to each other. It was a radically different approach to the traditionally adversarial public forums where one party benefited at the expense of the other. The values of democratic engagement underpinning study circles enabled groups to find common ground on potentially divisive issues. The philosophy appealed and the format provided local access, was inexpensive and non-threatening. As people became familiar with this way of working and met regularly they began to listen to each other and respectful relationships developed. The contribution of study circles to strengthen community relationships is

well documented in Sweden which has a long tradition of study circles (Larsen 2001).

### **Building Rural Futures through Co-operation (the implementation)**

*Equality is the heart of the matter of democracy* (Larsson, 2001:176)

The 'Building Rural Futures through Co-operation' study circle kit (funded by Philanthropy) was designed to provide an experiential approach to the nine strategies (walk the talk) to introduce community members to this democratic way of working in planning the future of their community. This was the first time this open ended approach had been used in study circles to envisage the future of community life.

The study circle begins by taking time for participants to become familiar with the guidelines that underpin respectful relationships. The developmental process enabled people to gain confidence in speaking about their circumstances, and develop the maturity and tolerance to listen and respect the views of others. The unique heart of each community became visible and featured in policy and planning in a negotiated manner. In every community activities continued beyond the completion of the 'Building rural futures' project and many initiatives continue some 20+years later. However, a serious factor limiting the widespread use of study circle kits was the scarcity of skilled facilitators. Without skilled facilitators the kits remained unopened.

### **A co-ordinated regional approach.**

*In a knowledge based economy, innovation and learning are vital to communities leading their own development* (Garlick & Pryor 2003:7).

To meet this demand an alliance was developed with a major university and an accredited Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development developed from my research was launched. A professional development manual 'Growing and Learning in Rural Communities' (Sheil, 2000) again funded by Philanthropy, introducing workers to the theory and practice of the model became a text.

### **Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development**

*Continuous enhancement of capacity building depends on the availability of skilled practitioners, on their reflective practice and on research into all its aspects* (Macadam et. al. 2004:xvi)

The contribution of tertiary education was critical as it provided Graduate Certificate students access to the resources, skills and knowledge of a major university, enabling them to integrate current issues with theoretical strategies of collaborative engagement.

The Graduate Certificate gave workers professional recognition for work that had frequently been dismissed as of lesser value than technical expertise. Their experience as facilitators of collaborative engagement complemented and informed policy development within their organizations. Workers felt less isolated and initiated partnerships of benefit to communities. Students commented that frequently within their organisations hierarchical charts placed them community members and community workers at the bottom. However, when walked in the door of the University they were treated as professionals. It was an affirming status they took back to their work places.



Each student established a study circle or work based project to apply the theory. This was supported through local government (Gay, Pugliesie & Sheil 2004) and non-government regional organisations who employed facilitators from within communities (Sheil, Smith & Lane 2004). Responses to the improved practice in communities and workplaces was immediate (Sheil 2004, Bruce 2005, Caling 2005, Twite 2005)

The multi-disciplinary nature of the course reflected the need for an integrated approach to regional development. Participants came from diverse backgrounds including health, recreation and culture, natural resource management, business, local government, environment, agriculture, youth work as well as from spiritual and women's groups, adult education, neighbourhood houses, community associations and indigenous communities. Each contributed perspectives of the resilience, stagnation or decline of communities.

Multiplier impact - Study circle participants (community members) could receive accreditation in a TAFE communications module. This respected the commitment of the time and knowledge of community members and provided access to educational resources such as libraries and academic staff. 70 study circles facilitated in Gippsland introduced approximately 700 people to the skills of community led facilitation. Participants used these skills in local groups establishing festivals, newspapers and choirs and tackled planning issues such as sewerage and recreational facilities with neighbouring communities (Cartwright & Sheil 2005).

Regional forums demonstrated that communities that learn to work and plan together and are resourced to do so – develop more sustainable, long term plans for their communities and are more actively engaged in their implementation. Communities shared rather than competed for regional resources, attitudes of workers changed - community members were in the planning process. Stories of frustration, exclusion, mistrust and burn-out were replaced with good news stories. The resilience indicators recorded these shifts.

The model proved transferable across sectors, rural and urban communities. The University provided pathways, credibility and rigour to regional development. Graduates had access to skills, knowledge and strategies to work effectively and develop active networks. Study circles invited participants to determine how they would work prior to making plans for activities and enabled each group to establish a sound basis for immediate and future projects.

### **Continuing application.**

In communities that experienced emergencies of wild fire or flood the local facilitators co-ordinated the response with relevant agencies. Accurate information on weather/fire conditions was distributed through local networks and emergency services and later recovery efforts were locally co-ordinated. External organisations carried out their roles with maximum impact and minimum trauma (Davies 2003).

Graduates continue to be employed in key regional positions. It is a cost-effective approach to nurturing trust, skills and knowledge in communities, organisations and governments. For communities in crisis study circles incorporating these nine strategies will enable people to find their own voices and be part of planning for resilient futures. This investment in rural communities

through regional workers, all levels of government, regional service providers and regional Universities was transformative for all participants.

### **The future?**

In Australia Universities increasingly operate under a business model creating pressure to market centrally and internationally. Monash University now offers a Graduate Diploma and Masters of Regional Education and Community Development through external delivery. From a community perspective the regional partnerships and dynamic engagement have been lost and the link to relevant research with communities is more difficult.

Was this a 'generational opportunity'? In Australia a plethora of community building, community strengthening, capacity building (Kenyon 2002, Ife, 2002 :79), leadership, innovation and social entrepreneurship programs independently developed resources that lack transferability and frequently failed to contribute to wider knowledge. Like the Centre for Rural Communities other dedicated organisations such as Borderlands ([www.borderlands.org.au](http://www.borderlands.org.au)) who produce the 'New Community' and offer a Masters course and Commonground well known for group work skills (<http://www.groupwork.com.au/commonground.html>) work in effective but limited ways.

A comprehensive regional report notes that there is limited university activity 'in developing, maintaining and supporting graduates focused on [rural] capacity building... [and] TAFE is not currently relevant in dialogue about [rural] capacity building' (Macadam 2004:.61). The report acknowledges the diversity of situations in which practitioners are engaged commenting that there is 'considerable room for enhancing the connectivity between universities and the communities in which they are located' (Collits 1999, Garlick 1998).

In Scotland my research indicates that since 2010 the Standards Council for Scotland registers accredited courses for both under-graduate and post-graduate Community Learning and Development courses providing students and employers with a reference for relevant qualifications.

I am interested in exploring whether the model, resources and approach developed in Australia could contribute to the resourcing of communities to be active in dialogue from a negotiated community perspective where opportunities to engage with local issues and interests become evident rather than missed opportunities. Not in isolation but in partnership with Further Education, Adult Community Learning, Universities, government departments and organisations. The platform that IACD and CLD combine to offer is such a foundation to facilitate this transition.

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