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Exploring the Uses of Arts-Led Community Spaces to Build Resilience: Applied Storytelling for Successful Co-Creative Work

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In a time of many extremes — climate, pandemic, isolation — there is strength in community linkages that can provide resilience through arts-generated connections. The arts-led recovery approach to communities suffering extreme events and social isolation offers the capacity to use applied storytelling as both individual and social practice, and to generate creative contributions to social change. This paper will explore the extent to which, in bringing people together, the arts can create spaces that are open and conducive

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to real dialogue and engagement, developing resilience with wider applications. Monkivitch (EO of Creative Recovery Network) talks of listening to the ecology of voices, advocating for the voice of the artist to be central to government recoveries from extreme events. The intent of looking at co-creative systems or ecologies is to explore beyond disciplinary boundaries and articulate a social purpose both for the artists and the community involved in the curation. The creative arts process, in extreme events contexts, offers engagement with and empowerment of the community to develop and sustain resilience and adaptability. In this paper, a team of artists and academics with expertise in community participation, applied storytelling, socially-engaged arts and water risk management, will reflect on a variety of approaches to co-create arts-led community spaces. Two case studies are described to explore collaboration and co-production between creative artists and their communities as a participatory process to develop emotional resilience. The UK-based case study, 'The Reasons in the Fens', brought together diverse members of the community to develop and share personal stories and to work with a songwriter to compose a community song about the impact of the flood drought nexus in their region leading to developed empathy for diversities of views. The Australian case-study, the digital Regional Arts Park in Victoria, enabled co-curation using a creative ecosystem design which related strongly to storytelling for resilience. Both case studies offer opportunities to reflect on how a creative ecosystem provides a framework for exploring the disruptive role of the cultural sector in space/place resilience-building. The ongoing purpose of a creative ecosystem, as described in this paper, is in fact to strengthen creative organizations and individuals, which will develop a complex system 'involving a multitude of people, institutions and places. To flourish, they require access to a suite of interconnected resources and capabilities' (Creative Victoria (2016). Creative State 2016–2020, p. 19. https://creative.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/54349/creativestate.pdf). The requirement is for the cultural, creative, social and commercial parts of this ecosystem to have meaningful interactions. This creative ecosystem potentially leads to a dynamic model with a vibrant or creative interplay between cultural values and stories. As Hartley and Potts (2014). *Cultural Science: The Natural History of Stories, Demes, Knowledge and Innovation*. London: Bloomsbury, p. 70) indicate, 'culture is the "survival vehicle" for groups (and) stories are the survival vehicle for culture'.

Keywords: Applied storytelling; resilience; co-creation; community participation; arts-led research; creative ecosystem.

1. Introduction

This paper investigates how an applied storytelling approach to arts-led projects can build sustainable community resilience for disaster recovery. 'Applied Storytelling' is a term that has evolved out of the practice of 'Applied Drama/Theatre', which in the 1990s became the accepted umbrella term to describe a wide range of socially focused, participatory practices from community theatre and dramatherapy to theatre-in-education and theatre-in-prisons. It refers itself to the application of democratic creative practice to collective priorities. Applied Storytelling is likewise now commonly used to describe narrative-based work that seeks to use storytelling as a means of driving wider public engagement in major societal

challenges and other forms of social change, by bringing previously unheard voices and experiences into the public discourse. Arts-led recovery focuses on social preparedness for unexpected disruption inherent in extreme events, through co-creative reflection on those events. Hou (2019) argues that 'ongoing disasters and risks require a long-term, sustainable approach to storytelling to mobilise audience agency in building community resilience'.

There has been much research into the value of establishing healthy communities, to develop stronger resilience in times of social change and disruption (Patel *et al.* 2017; Della Bosca *et al.* 2020; den Broeder *et al.* 2021). The contemporary environmental disaster situation replicated globally — bushfires followed by floods then global pandemic — indicates cascading pressures on community resilience. Patel *et al.* (2017) identified nine core elements of community resilience: 'local knowledge, community networks and relationships, communication, health, governance and leadership, resources, economic investment, preparedness, and mental outlook' (Patel *et al.* 2017: para 3). In the special issue introduction to 'Creative Disruption in the arts', Borrup (2018) indicated the effect of the 2011 earthquake on Christchurch, New Zealand, which 'shook the foundations of the city, devastating lives and physical infrastructure but not the city's creativity. Creative rebuilding there is profound and substantial' (p. 224). The creative rebuilding was about maintaining the city's spirit as well as investing in human creative capital. A past State Emergency Service Commissioner within Australia, Bruce Espin, endorsed this form of arts-led recovery: 'In my experience arts plays a critical, but hugely undervalued role, in this process (disaster recovery). . . .it is the participation, the involvement in the creative process that makes the difference' (Creative Recovery Network 2018). The Creative Recovery Network is an Australian service provider and 'advocate for culture and the arts within the emergency management sector' (https://creativerecovery.net.au). Scotia Monkivitch (EO of Creative Recovery Network) states 'we think of ourselves as an ecology that houses the artists at the centre; it's very easy in these government relational processes for that to be buried, so we're strongly trying to advocate for the voice of the artist' (Monkivitch 2018).

The arts-led approach described within this paper is not instrumental or externally driven, it is a complex process ensuring agency and is shared between that 'voice' of the creative artists and the local community. The methodology employed in the arts-led projects described in this paper is transdisciplinary, illustrating different forms of arts genres (music-based and digital story-based) and applications of research into applied storytelling as a means of developing resilience. Our narrative also implies that the findings from the two case studies discussed in this paper may have relevance across further transdisciplinary research approaches to

the development of community resilience in handling extreme events. This research reflection is a development of discussions that took place during a CASCADE-NET seminar (7th February 2020) entitled: 'Co-creative strategies with Civil Society for resilience: role of the arts and humanities'. The authors bring together expertise in community participation from applied storytelling, socially-engaged arts and water risk management.

2. Extreme Events, Community and the Role of the Arts

Extreme weather events are increasing in frequency globally, with local impacts highly dependent on the character of people and places — their social vulnerability and exposure (UNDRR 2015). Such events include not only both highly emotive, sensory visual events like floods and bushfires, but also more diffuse, hidden and creeping risks like drought that are well underway before signs are noticed. Increasingly, compound risks will be complex, overlaid or cascading. Formal management of 'events', like floods, moved from paradigms of 'protection' and 'defense' to risk management, with growing emphasis on the efficacy of both community-centered strategies for managing local risk and uncertainty. Here the focus is on dealing with 'residual' risk — risk remaining after any risk management actions (i.e., by statutory organizations) have been implemented. Such risk is frequently beyond awareness in the public psyche. Attention has also moved from a major focus on emergency planning for 'during acute events' to strong emphasis on preparedness and anticipation during cold phases of the disaster resilience spiral.

Resilience to risk is a contested term that can be construed in diverse ways: as resistance, bounce back, bounce forward (adaptation) and transformation — socio-ecological, flexible and evolving. Community too is a contested word with many different takes — communities of place, communities of interest, and communities of solidarity being three. Put together in 'community resilience', the complexity of interpretation is ramped. Historically management of acute events was the realm of specialist scientists and engineers; within hazard research, this was developed to work at the interface of the natural and social sciences, recognizing that perception and experience matter. Increased resilience is not about dealing with knowledge deficit (the fallacy that knowledge leads to rational action), but about exploring values, emotions and deeper connections with place. It is about how these might connect with individual and collective alertness and agency, and with citizenship that embraces care of both community and place.

In exploring new settings for transformation, we need to explore how creative disciplines, their ethos and practices might contribute to step-changing participatory engagements with communities about dealing with changing risk, exploring

connections with senses of place, and what local resilience means. This includes creating safe settings for opening up about difficult dilemmas, exposing different vulnerabilities but also allowing creative reflection on how past residents lived with risk, alongside scenarioing of possible adaptive futures (e.g., Liguori *et al.* 2021).

The arts have long been questioning their relevance in environmental and climate crises (Holmes and Dobrzynski 2021; Tyszczuk and Smith 2018). Increasingly, arts researchers, and those that co-work with them across disciplines, have been reflecting on their possible role in re-visioning 'co-working' with communities in different co-production models (Banks *et al.* 2019; McEwen *et al.*, in press). This territory requires strong attention to power relations, language, and settings for dialogue, for example. Particular attention has been given in the socially-engaged arts to exploring the value of narrative ways of working and personal storytelling in its different forms — traditional, digital, and theatrical — as ways of promoting dialogue within and beyond communities, and bringing less heard voices into conversation about local risk and resilience. This involves garnering and sharing stories of living with past risk; and those invented stories in anticipation of projected future extremes.

These research processes have involved academics working with artists, communities and risk management agencies in new ways that break down barriers between different forms of knowledge systems, e.g., blurring the distinction between specialist and local/lay and questioning who is considered an 'expert'. This involves highlighting communities as co-researchers, co-creators and users of knowledge (cf. Facer and Enright 2016) — in processes strongly tied to place. Different forms of storytelling are increasingly being developed in 'narrating resilience' for local transformation (see Goldstein *et al.* 2015; Morris 2020).

Examples of exploratory storying research in extreme weather risk include the co-working of Holmes and McEwen (2020) with flood risk communities after the UK Summer 2007 floods to create digital stories of 'preparedness'. These stories were found to travel, exchanging knowledges and emotions, within and between communities at present and future flood risk.

3. Applied Storytelling for Resilience

It would seem that storytelling is constantly on the verge of collapse and extinction, under threat from the very social forces and technological advances that give us new stories to tell and new ways of telling them. Just as Web 2.0 and interactive social media platforms were first emerging, Gold (2022), a professor of literature, suggested that our emotional intelligence and storytelling literacy were under threat from what was then still called the Information Superhighway. Yet 20 years later,

the technology has moved on even further than we could have imagined and storytelling remains in as rude a health as ever. We have, over the past 20 years or so, witnessed what sociologists have called the 'narrative turn' (Salmon 2010: 39), a cultural shift toward more narrative-based ways of thinking and communicating. As political scientist Polletta (2006) proclaims: 'In recent years, storytelling has been promoted in surprising places' (p. 1).

But there is likewise nothing new about the concerns that Gold was expressing. At the time they seemed well-founded and were widely shared, although similar concerns were being expressed in the 1930s. The theatre critic and playwright Ervine (1933) feared that the arrival of the wireless into the living rooms of Britain would lead to the demise of the art of conversation and in his famous essay of 1936, 'The Storyteller', the German philosopher and cultural commentator Walter Benjamin announced the death of storytelling traditions at the expense of the mechanization of society (Benjamin 1973). Going back even further into the early to mid-19th century, the wave of industrialization that swept Western Europe inspired antiquarian collectors to travel into the remote, rural corners of their countries to collect folktales before they died out completely due to the depopulation in the countryside, as people moved to towns and cities for work.

It seems, in other words, that in spite of our fears, storytelling is so essential to our functioning as individuals, communities, societies, that it survives, and even emerges strengthened from whatever happens to be the latest threat, embracing new technologies to evolve new ways of telling each other our stories. Storytelling continues to evolve in response to the circumstances, because that is what it is designed to do. Our human instinct is always to provide a narrative response to our current conditions, as a way of finding our way from the past, through the present and into the future. This is storytelling as a complete knowledge system: knowing the world as it was, understanding the world as it is, and imaging the world as it might be. It is what Bleakley (2005) calls 'thinking about stories (. . .) thinking with stories'. Storytelling is, therefore, not only a resilient tool, but a tool for resilience.

At the heart of this idea of storytelling for resilience (accepting that resilience is itself a contested term) is how the very act of storytelling processes personal experience into collective capability, or what the psychologist Bruner (2003) called the conversion of 'private trouble into public plight' (p. 35) which lies at the core of effective storytelling. When a story is shared, there is a relinquishing of ownership of, and responsibility for, the story from the individual to the wider audience. For a story to have currency and traction, for it to have longevity and application, then it needs to be simultaneously born of the individual, while speaking truth to the collective reality. In this way storytelling is not just the promotion of an individual perspective, but the co-creation of community identity.

Storytelling can help build and maintain communities, but can also challenge and reconfigure them (of course, storytelling can also do the opposite of these things). This is the case in both 'live' storytelling, where the shared human encounter creates opportunities for the expression of *communitas*, and also digital storytelling where the slowness of the practice privileges the reflective and evaluative nature of storytelling (Wilson 2021).

Stories such as 'connectors' (Fabritius and Hagemann 2017) are a key concept to consider when applying creative approaches in community spaces. Recognizing this peculiar characteristic of stories and expanding its potential throughout the story-telling and story-listening process will allow researchers and artists to unpack the complexity of that creative and social process while expanding the impact on individuals and communities. Stories connect us with our inner selves, with others and with society (Atkinson 2007). They make both the teller and the listener relate to a particular place, but allow others to interpret those experiences by navigating their own across different spaces. Previous UKRI-funded research projects have demonstrated that stories of local flood resilience allowed personal stories to travel beyond flood-affected areas, and be shared within communities and flood risk management organizations, allowing peer-to-peer communication of flood resilience knowledge beyond the local (Holmes and McEwen 2020). Sense of place (Shamai and Ilatov 2005), as it emerges in personal stories, is an important factor in the way that people respond to extreme weather and disruptive events in their communities; in fact, 'local distinctiveness' is perceived as a reason for different responses and ways of coping and adapting. Nevertheless, applied storytelling, as a participatory approach driven by — and enabler of — new connections, allows all the actors involved in that process to triangulate personal experience, place attachment and crisis response well beyond the 'locality' of the information shared in the stories (Liguori 2020). This happens because what makes the sharing of local knowledge beyond the local possible and personal stories relevant to wider communities beyond a particular place is the social learning essence of storytelling that is unlocked during the co-creative process. Elucidating personal stories, in fact, involves opening up of self and sharing which can help form bonds and supportive networks. With reflection, these can help to develop resilience (East *et al.* 2010). The role of storytelling as a connector between personally relevant stories and collective views of possible futures is in fact one of the key aspects explored in the first case study included in this paper, in particular when resilient behaviors for extreme events are identified as objective for arts-led interventions.

A major premise of creating community spaces to build resilience through applied storytelling consists in recognizing that stories are much more than entities: in fact, they are by their own nature actions or better, an active invitation to specific

actions, such as generating multi-layered connections, and starting a new process that involves creativity and interaction. Wilson defines storytelling as the art form of social interaction (Wilson 1998) in fact, even if they are personal, shared as a first-person narrative, and attached to individuals' experiences, they engage listeners and generate empathy. This is because they convey values and emotions, and can reveal the differences and similarities between people's experiences (East *et al.* 2010). When Baker (2016) wrote that 'listening to a story is not a passive act', her main focus was on the educational value of storytelling, and in particular on the role of imagination and abstraction. Yet it can be deduced that the effect of creating a community coincides with the social function of the story-sharing for social learning.

In addition to the spatial dimension, time is one of the main pillars whose stories are built upon. Stories connect tellers and listeners with their own past because they encapsulate and trigger memories, but they also project us into the future, because they stimulate imagination. After a disaster or a crisis, by virtue of the fact that stories enable people to travel both back in time and in the future (Ciancia *et al.* 2014), stories preserve the experiences of the community for those in the future (McDowell *et al.* 2021). They also provide a platform to imagine, interrogate and plan for a future that communities might collectively wish to subscribe or adapt to (Liguori *et al.* 2021). A further aspect of storytelling for resilience is in its use as a tool in 'futuring', a technique for imagining desired futures (see, for example, Oomen *et al.* 2021). The eminent storytelling scholar Zipes (2020) discusses how the German philosopher Ernst Bloch considered daydreaming as a form of optimistic or Utopian storytelling that could plot the way to a more desirable future. The idea of 'storying' the past as a way of constructing and understanding memory or history can thus be applied to storying the future to help create consensus amongst communities as to what the future should look like, and then how such a vision might be achieved.

Stories of community cohesion and agency reassured communities that when past socio-environmental shocks happened, they did pull together. This happens when storytellers and active listeners in the co-creative and story-sharing process shift in their roles. Holmes and McEwen (2020) found more fluid versions of co-production were needed: even the roles of researcher, participant and organization involved in their project continually shifted throughout the process, with a 'knowledge brokering/ technology capital' role for the researcher. It is the process of story-telling/story-listening that makes information more understandable, memorable and persuasive; it is the process of story-creation that is the key to unlocking grassroots knowledge; it is the process of story-sharing that delivers trustworthy messages. Storytellers embody the power of emotions and hence their

views are perceived as additional 'reasons' to make meaningful and informed decisions (Liguori 2020).

By proposing applied storytelling as a social process that generates multi-layered connections, in the following case studies we explore how arts-led community co-creation models for resilience building can provide responses to extreme events and enhance community resilience by connecting personal experiences with social interest and stimulating a shared and communal 'holistic thinking' (Meadows and Kidd 2009).

4. Case Studies as Narratives of Resilience

The two projects we are reflecting on as case studies are both practice- and community-led: in both cases we aimed to serve our co-producers/stakeholders/storytellers and be led by them. Facer and Enright (2016) describe a 'commitment to encouraging exploratory and open-ended projects' (p. 1) and our methodology working with open-ended explorations has been to allow the projects to unfold, then reflect on the practices and outcomes. In inviting participants to be co-creators, our case-studies can be understood as embracing the 'participatory turn' that Facer and Enright point to as a growing tendency in current thinking on knowledge production (p. 144).

One major element of our work with local communities is the need to develop contexts (the issues and disruptions), trust in the co-production team and respect for all participants including the creative artists. In Case Study 1, the research group was already working with members of the local community before the event that was the culmination of the project was introduced. For Case Study 2, the community artists/participants demonstrated the need for a digital co-creative space then tested a prototype with the researcher.

In Case Study 1, the project songwriter was initially brought in to act as a practitioner, not a researcher. She brought a skillset but as much as possible refrained from imposing her own style, 'voice' or creative vision, instead aiming to enable the storytellers' voices to be heard. This involved a kind of humility, a self-effacing approach very different to most other forms of songwriting — the confessional singer/songwriter style of songwriting, which draws directly on one's own experience, for example.

Case Study 2, the digital storyworld (DSW), by providing an Australian context related to community co-creation, was a prototype or test digital space for skilling up artists in a central Victorian network of councils, artists and government focused on future creative resilience. That resilience was linked to a creative ecosystem which enhances 'education and skills, entrepreneurship, research, infrastructure and finance' (Creative Victoria 2016: 19; Hartley and Potts 2014).

4.1. *Case study 1: Singing, stakeholders and story*

4.1.1. The Reasons in the Fens: 'A River is a Snake' — the making of a community song

'The Reasons in the Fens' consisted of a series of public engagement events, co-designed by the UK-based authors of this paper and local stakeholders, in which a traditional form for conflict resolution from Sardinia, Italy, was re-imagined to create a forum for public storytelling and explore diverse views on issues of common interest (Bakewell *et al.* 2018). It was linked to the emerging themes and issues explored by the DRY Project's (Drought Risk and You) core research team and one of its Local Advisory Groups. 'The Reasons' brought together diverse members of a rural UK Cambridgeshire community with the aim of enabling them to share their perspectives on water usage and drought with the project interdisciplinary team and each other. It was hoped that the project would encourage conversations between people who though living in the same area may never have engaged with each other before. We made contact with a range of different local inhabitants of the Bevills Leam catchment area, south of Peterborough, who became our stakeholders or 'storytellers'. They were asked to prepare a short story, anecdote or viewpoint relating to water and drought that they would share at a public event that would be the project's culmination. The storytellers included farmers, local historians, environmentalists involved in local projects such as The Great Fen Project, anglers and water regulators.

The community event at which the storytellers shared their stories was called 'There's Something in the Water. The Reasons: Community Stories & the Fens'. It was held at the Ramsey Rural Museum, a small local museum in the village of Ramsey. The event was open to all and was attended by local residents as well as the project organizers and participants. Locally sourced food was shared and while eating together participants were encouraged to talk about the viewpoints and stories they had heard and to weigh up arguments and sources of conflict, for example, between farmers keen to maximize the amount of land kept in farming use and environmentalists keen to rewild some of the farmland of the Fens.

The stories told by the storytellers were taken as the starting point for the writing of a community song which was sung at the event. The project's songwriter (one of the authors of this paper) had access to recordings of the storytellers talking about and telling their stories in advance of the event. In listening to these recordings, her aim was to gain a more than superficial understanding of the views, values and concerns of the storytellers; to gain a deep enough understanding of the people behind the stories to write lyrics that could 'speak for' each storyteller and be true to the essence of what they were bringing to the project.

As well as engaging with the storytellers and their stories, the songwriter researched the history and geography of the local area, and spent time walking and exploring, photographing and filming the waterways, farmlands and nature reserves. Her aim was to get under the skin of the place and understand the context in which the storytellers' stories emerged.

In writing the song, it was important to give each storyteller a voice. Different verses of the song focused on different viewpoints or stories, one describing the relationship between farmers and the land, another encapsulating an oral history of the area and the changes that have occurred over time, for example. The real challenge was unifying these different verses, bringing these different voices into some kind of harmony and creating something that would honor all of the contributors and not 'take sides'.

The song was written in the first-person plural, the 'I' of each individual story being brought into communion with the others and subsumed in a community 'we'. In telling its story, the song linked each storyteller with the other members of their community — 'we pushed back the sea, brought in the plough', 'we control these channels, make the water flow uphill', 'the uphill struggles that we face can be overcome if we've a will', and so on.

In advance of the song being performed, lyrics sheets had been handed out to all the event attendees in the hope that they would want to participate and join in on the choruses.

Given how self-conscious most people tend to be of singing in public, it seemed very likely that no one would sing along. In actuality, the museum hall was filled with singing; people joined in enthusiastically each time the chorus came round.

Figure 1. 'A River is a Snake' by Sharron Kraus. A Screenshot Captured from the Video of the Song Co-Produced with Local Community Members

Afterwards we received feedback from participants who had felt that the song was 'their song'. In addition, when the song was later recorded, many of the storytellers and other community participants added their voices to the recording and some contributed photos to be used in an accompanying video (Kraus 2017; Liguori 2017).

The co-creation of the video for the song demonstrates how the public event had grown into something else, a discrete artefact that prolonged and expanded the impact of the event and also captured the essence of the participatory process. Yet the video documentation of the event has the additional merit of supporting the replicability of it.

4.2. *Case study 2: Digital storyworlds reflecting on resilience*

The DSW as an arts project is a microcosm of a regional community creative ecosystem, 'a suite of interconnected resources and capabilities' (Creative Victoria 2016: 19) encouraging empowerment through storytelling. Narrative or story in this instance is, as the cognitive psychologist Bruner (1986) states it, 'how we come to endow experience with meaning' (p. 12). The experience of the DSW comes via non-sequential and non-chronological storytelling, with multiple story paths and transitory endings or moments of pausing to reflect. These experiences reflect the interactive digital narrative research (Ryan 2014; Murray 2018; Roth and Koenitz 2017) indicating a multiplicity of story fragments that cohere for the individual to form the meaning of the story they construct. The scenario in the DSW becomes the playful ficto-factual element providing an alternative world perspective on reality, based on elements of real settings and situations.

The digital Regional Arts Park (d-RAP) originated from a community project aiming to develop the resilience of regional artists in their work and career pathways. The project was part of a PopUpArt/ArtsAction not-for-profit series of Professional Development short courses for artists, building on their capacities to market themselves, work with others and develop a resilient digital community (JumpLeads/PopUp Art 2019). Ironically, the first PD short course was held just after the Black Saturday bushfires of 2019–2020 across south-eastern Australia, and the last short course had to move to a digital zoom session after the pandemic caused lockdowns in March 2020. The resultant DSW prototype of d-RAP has become contextualized within a global pandemic restricting interpersonal face-to-face communications, and unleashing unanticipated digital connectivity. The challenge of a pandemic reflects other challenges this community has faced: summer fires, floods and community economic and social rebuilding. The DSW model of a connected community encourages communal storytelling, where there is participation in and extension of creative responses to disruptive events and

Helen Fraser at the *tHE JEFFERSON GRId* exhibition 2020 Hume Global Learning Centre, Sunbury (photograph Karen Le Rossignol)

Figure 2. From Resilience in Regional Creative Arts Communities Case Study Helen Fraser

issues, encouraging an arts-led resilience development. The voice of the central Victorian tapestry artist Helen Fraser is representative of finding a broader view, speaking of making art '. . . as a symbolic act of healing a scarred earth and mending the fragments in my inner world. . . .' (Le Rossignol 2020a).

Indigenous artist Janet Bromley (working with found objects from her country) talks of looking backwards, looking forwards: 'In aboriginal art, going to the past is important, but there needs to be a future view. After the traditional there needs to be storytelling for the generations who follow.' (Le Rossignol 2020b).

These Resilience in Regional Creative Arts Communities case studies form part of the fragmented storytelling of d-RAP, allowing the personal voices of selected artists to emotionally engage with their community. They each have a digital gallery and an audio commentary bringing both their artwork and their artist statements into this shared digital space.

Regional Development Victoria (RDV) has espoused the development of stronger regional communities through 'community-led initiatives and partnerships that create or enhance the conditions for economic growth and build resilient, diversified and sustainable economies' (Regional Development Victoria 2016). Resilience is variously defined as the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, which may include toughness and elasticity. Elasticity suggests the ability of a substance or object to spring back into shape. Engaging with these strategic directions in a regional community, and motivating artists and other key stakeholders through the elasticity of digital storytelling, became central to finding

Figure 3. Digital Regional Arts Park Entry

an ongoing digital story space to creatively confront the rising tide of pressures on regional artists and their communities.

This prototype of an ecosystem starts from an entry point of potentially shared values which encourages an innovative leap into another 'world' (see Figure 3) paralleling the real regional arts community. Within d-RAP there is a sculpture park, a pavilion, artist residencies, the Elements gallery and a Sensorium which have the capacity to sustainably develop the multiplicity of storylines, sounds and visuals in the dynamic interplay suggested by Creative Victoria, a complex 'mess' of storytelling referred to by Wilson (2014) to provide meaning-making and perspective.

This project began as part of a professional development for local, regional and remote artists to improve their own resilience, but has since morphed into a digital creative storytelling space or creative ecosystem for creating stories of regional resilience.

5. Reflection and Discussion

These case studies indicate that there are significant ways in which the arts can facilitate engagement with and empowerment of a community and enable it to develop and sustain resilience and adaptability. They also demonstrate that the arts create spaces that are open and conducive to real dialogue and engagement, and enable the development of an empathetic response across the participants, both storytellers and listeners.

In this section, we highlight some observations made by the artist practitioners and academic research teams involved in each case study.

5.1. *Case study 1*

There were five key stages to the process that began with engagement with members of the community and culminated in the singing together of the community song. Reflecting on the salient features of these stages yields some insights into the role of the arts in community empowerment as well as questions for further investigation.

(1) Engagement

The first step in the process was finding and engaging diverse members of the local community and bringing them together, getting them on board. Various local organizations were contacted by the project team and a number of local 'gate keepers' were identified to generate local interests on the core research themes. No incentives were offered to engage participants and get them to give their time to the project: in fact, the relationship was established on mutual exchange and support, as the project team members immersed themselves in the community by offering their time and skills to support existing local initiatives.

The creative aspects of the project were a key part of what drew people in. Giving people the chance to play a creative role in an event, to offer input and contribute to the making of a song is an interesting invitation. In general, inclusion of the arts into a project such as this makes it easier to engage people and draw them in. Yet the fact that co-creation was explored from the first time community members were approached meant that these creative interventions were immediately perceived as being driven and owned by the community: this aspect had a strong impact in terms of commitment and longevity of the collaboration.

The importance of this step should not be under-estimated: involving people and asking for their input is flattering and makes them and their knowledge feel valued and included. If the individuals that make up a community feel included, valued, and are made aware that they can make a difference, the community itself benefits.

(2) Story Development

Once we had found our stakeholders, the digital storytelling team talked with them in depth to help them develop their stories. These initial sessions offered encouragement, feedback and direction and in developing their stories, our stakeholders focused and clarified their thoughts and priorities and developed their storytelling skills. In addition, they were listened to and their thoughts and concerns were acknowledged and reflected back to them in the process.

There has been much work done in the field of creative writing for therapeutic purposes about how an individual's wellbeing is enhanced by creative or narrative writing and storytelling. In developing the stories they would share, our

stakeholders developed transferable skills, in particular communication skills and the ability to reflect on and process their thoughts and feelings (see Pennebaker *et al.* 2007; Williamson and Wright 2018).

(3) Storytelling

At the event, each stakeholder was given a platform and allocated an amount of time to tell their story. No distinction was made between specialists and lay people: everyone was telling a story and each story was as important as each other. Using stories in this way has the effect of dismantling knowledge hierarchies and blurring the boundaries between knowledge producers, knowledge implementers and knowledge consumers — we can all partake of any of these roles and real dialogue between participants becomes possible. When a multiplicity of voices is heard and valued, our decision-making processes can no longer ignore the voices which were previously unheard.

Unlike events in which scientists and other experts make presentations or give lectures and the rest of us are mere audience members, not participants, a storytelling event invites people to share their ideas in ways that will be accessible to experts and non-experts alike. Instead of presenting facts and figures, the storytelling context is a more human space and so demands more of us than an informative lecture. We are encouraged to give a performance that is personal, that not only informs listeners but also engages and moves them. Being told the average yearly income from farming in the UK will not make us care about the plight of struggling farmers, but hearing the story a farmer tells of their difficulties in making ends meet will do, for example. When people come together and listen to each other's stories, empathy and fellow-feeling increase.

The storytelling arena, then, is a space in which not only can a true 'levelling up' happen, but also one in which we come to care about issues affecting others and the community in general. This latter point is key to understanding how storytelling, and the arts in general, can facilitate social change — it is only by making us care that we will be motivated to do something about a situation.

(4) Community Songwriting

The move from personal to collective that is made in songwriting and other creative work is fundamentally different from the way we move from the personal or particular to the general when we analyze data or compile a report. In the latter, the personal or particular is not important and we discard the details, abstract from them, in order to reach general conclusions. In contrast, the process of taking people's personal stories, bringing them together and creating something collective — a community story or song — is different. Here instead of the individual details dropping out of the picture, the particular details are what we need to focus

on and highlight in order to engage and move listeners. It is precisely because the details of someone's story can resonate with and affect others that we think of stories as having universal appeal. As described above, the songwriting process for this project aimed to incorporate elements of all the stories told by our storytellers, to bring the individual stories together without losing the particular, the personal.

For a song to work, there must be a unifying theme or structure of some kind. If the songwriter starts with a number of disparate or conflicting elements and aims to bring them together into a song, she needs to do more than just include them as items in a sequence — a shopping list of items, verses, sections. The songwriter must bring them together in some way, mediate between them, create a unified whole. In order to write the song, then, the different, conflicting views needed to be brought together in a meaningful way. To some extent, if this unification can happen in the creative work, will we, in this process, be taking some steps toward understanding how the conflicting views can be brought into dialogue in reality? This seems an interesting question for further research.

As well as the delight the storytellers reported feeling at the way the song expressed their stories — 'This is our song!' was the reaction of a number of the participants — there's an additional element at play when something is transformed into art, brought into a performance context and presented to an audience, that was also invited to be part of the live performance. This process confers validation and worth in a way that can seem almost magical — there is a glamor to the performance space that is cast over whatever is taken into it. An honor is conferred on our storytellers when their stories are transformed and given back to them in this way. This is an empowering and moving process to experience. How and why this is another question worth pursuing in future research.

(5) Singing Together/Entering into Performance Space Together

What happens when people with different and in some cases opposing points of view find themselves singing the same song together? We pose this question in the expectation that singing together in this way is conducive to bridge-building and the recognition of shared interests, common ground.

The performance space is a space in which risk is supported and shared. When we step onstage to perform, we trust our fellow performers to play their parts and to support us in playing ours, and we also — perhaps with a leap of faith — trust the audience to respond with open hearts to what we offer up to them. Our storytellers became performers and entered into this space. Likewise, the participants who, with no previous experience or preparation, willingly sang together took that leap of faith and trusted us and each other. Experiencing trust and fellow-

feeling in this way is a powerful and life-enhancing legacy and can only benefit individuals and the communities they are part of.

5.2. *Case study 2*

5.2.1. Creative ecosystem for developing resilience

Opening up new views, acknowledging diversity of opinions, is central to developing a healthy ecosystem or community. The Australia Council for the Arts (2018) puts forward an evolving environment based on exploring new ways of working and thinking, negotiating a shared understanding through diverse people and perspectives, and developing a web of intersections and multiple viewpoints. The key terms here, combinations of new and evolving ways of sharing understanding, diversity and multiple viewpoints, suggest the thread which links creative ecosystems to the DSW process. As the Creative Victoria (2014) publication *Making Art With Communities* indicates, '[c]ommunities that embrace diversity, creative expression and cultural activity are richer, stronger and more able to deal with social challenges' (p. 8).

5.2.2. Developing empathy through point of view

One of the purposes of d-RAP is to play with narrative point of view, to enable empathy with other perspectives and viewpoints. The purpose of this is to understand the actions and subjectivities of protagonists, but also to understand the participant's self or identity as a reflection on these. This leads to consideration of Bruner's (1996: 39) narrative tenet, described as developing a personal world, where the participants may feel they belong.

As Greene (1995: 3) states, '[o]ne of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible'. Greene (1995) elaborates on this:

> We are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing (Bruner 1986: 11ff), of the connection between narrative and the growth of identity, of the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness. (p. 186)

The Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project (Spurgeon *et al.* 2015) linking digital storytelling and Community Uses of Co-creative Media (CCM) provides interesting findings into community arts digital storytelling that support the DSW concept. The purpose of this project was to investigate the potential for

creative digital storytelling at the local and community level. The exploration of CCM was focused on a range of sectors — community broadcasting, Indigenous broadcasting, community arts, cultural development, and community and activist networked media. These sectors shared grassroots or 'bottom- up approaches' for community-based CCM development, reflecting the importance of gaining buy-in from the local community. The research questions of this project applied to some of the issues of the DSW model of engagement. They included asking if contemporary storytelling practices (both as creative story and utilizing communications media) 'generate[d] novel contributions to social change', and whether storytelling could be considered as a 'social practice as well as an individual capacity' (Spurgeon *et al.* 2015: 6).

There were social benefits reported from CCM systems which are directly relevant to the DSW concept and applications (Spurgeon *et al.* 2015). The digital storytelling supported resilience, with 'creative expressions of identity' (p. 9). The move toward creating communities which were 'connected, skilled and adaptable' (p. 9) energized cultural strategies for difficult social problems through the digital platforms. These social benefits suggest that the DSW model requires a high level of curation and participation from the users, as well as capacity to showcase creatively a sense of identity at the personal and community level.

6. Conclusion

Both case studies illustrate ways in which participants move from a personal to a collective dimension and demonstrate that the arts are able to take something personal and make it something others can respond to. In fact, by building emotional ecosystems and allowing various cultural interpretations, the arts provided community members with a co-creative space to experience story-making as individual and collective resilience.

This creative ecosystem, as demonstrated through the case studies, provides a way of thinking or collaborating for exploring the role of the cultural sector in space/place resilience-building. The arts, having the ability to disrupt the norms, thrive in a creative space where risk is supported and shared. They also allow communities to embrace co-creation as an act of generosity and story as a gift, in particular in the instances in which story-making is based on sharing knowledge, skills, and emotions, and implies a human investment. In fact, the co-creative process described in these two case studies is not instrumental and is meant to allow the co-existence of diverse views in a liminal space in which transformative learning can happen and be beneficial to participants, communities, artists, and researchers.

In a context in which storytelling has been applied as a tool for social learning, through the practice of listening and sharing, opportunities for different connections were created, in particular across time, place, various types of extreme events, and generational knowledges.

Some of the reflections shared on past experiences emerged from stories aimed at preparing for more resilient future communities by making us think of storytelling as a tool for social revolution, in particular when storytellers were 're-hearsing' a future event where action may be transferable. It is in fact immediate the analogy with another model worth considering in this respect, that is that provided by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal. In Theatre of the Oppressed, Boal describes his theatre work with poor and dispossessed communities in Brazil as 'a rehearsal for the revolution' (Boal 1979). 'Theatre of the Oppressed' became an umbrella term for Boal's thinking and techniques, out of which emerged theatrical forms such as Forum Theatre, which is now in widespread use, especially throughout Low-to-Middle Income Countries (LMCs) as a tool for community activism, advocacy, collective decision-making, and education (especially in the field of public health). Forum Theatre creates a space where audience members can join the stage, in order to change and develop the play, test out ideas and trial possible solutions. In this way, the theatre becomes a space for communities to rehearse different approaches to various challenges and to debate the direction of collective action.

In our two case studies, storytelling can be seen as a space in which co-creating narratives becomes the technique that enables questions to be posed and discussed and solutions sought. It provides a democratic inclusive space that can build resilience through collective effort and solidarity, rather than individual decision-making or government diktat. Applied storytelling can be used to create agency through the building of shared values at community level. Human investment, mutual learning, and collective decision-making are in fact what we identified as the pillars of an effective creative ecosystem, in which to apply a model for successful co-creative work to improve resilience through the use of art-led community spaces.

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