

Arts Based Community Development

The following is excerpted from a keynote address given by William Cleveland at the Assembly of BC Arts Councils' Building Community-2004 Conference, held in Victoria during Arts and Culture Week 2004.

The central question that confronts the work that we do at the Centre for the Study of Arts and Community (and the people that we work with and all of the people trying to make arts more of a part of everyday life in their towns and cities; the central question that lives in our work) is:

How can the arts contribute to the development of caring and capable communities?

More and more of your colleagues from around the world are grappling with this question.

My experience with local arts agencies in North America and overseas has taught me that this important question has many, many answers. There are hundreds and hundreds of different ways that different artists, arts organizations and communities come to the answer of this question. At the Centre of the Study of Arts and Community, we work with folks like you to explore all of the different ways this question can be answered. Simply, we work to build bridges and make translations between community arts resources and people of the broader community. We call the work, and this is just one rubric that we use, "Arts Based Community Development."

Over the last two decades this is a field that has grown enormously. In the 1980s the activities of artists and arts organizations working in partnerships with other community sectors, not necessarily in the arts, were barely recognized in the arts world. Today there are thousands and thousands of arts organizations and local agencies throughout the world that actively support some kind of community-based arts program. Many of the ideas and impulses that were considered really wacky in the 70s are now showing up in the guidelines of national and regional funders all over the world.

But as this work has proliferated, so has a lot of confusion about what it is and what in the world we're trying to do and how to define it. So, we at the Centre and the people that we work with have really pushed hard on articulating clarity of intent and purpose in the work. In the process we have found that this field, Arts Based Community Development, does not make a lot of sense without a bit of translation.

Before I go any further I'd like to share some definitions that we use in our work. They are not the only definitions. There are many other definitions and often people have things to add and subtract. But this is a place to start. Let me begin with "**Community**":

Groups of people with common interests defined by place, tradition, intention or spirit.

Next is “**Arts.**” People outside of the arts tend not to know what you are talking about when you say the arts (they just think watercolour). And so it’s important to iterate this kind of dry definition:

Activities or icons related to the visual, performing, literary, media or interdisciplinary arts.

“**Arts based community development**” is then defined as:

Arts centered activities that contribute to the sustained advancement of human dignity, health or productivity in a community.

Even saying this, it doesn’t make much sense to the average person. We actually decided to start drawing pictures of the four neighbourhoods of arts based community development:

- 1) Activities that nurture and heal people;
- 2) Activities that educate and inform us about ourselves and the world;
- 3) Activities that build and improve community capacity or infrastructure;
- 4) Activities that inspire and mobilize individuals and groups

We created this map and actually showed some of the kinds of things that show up in different neighbourhoods. At the top is the economic realm, on the left, the healing realm, the right is the educational realm, and the bottom is the advocacy/political realm. These are all sectors that the arts in our community can and do affect and interact with.

A couple of foot-notes:

First, we don’t see the work of studio artists and arts organizations that are making and presenting artwork in traditional theatres, galleries and the like, as operating outside of this ecology. They are, in fact, critical. We take the position that many of the outcomes included in this ecology are intrinsic to art making in consumption. We do, however, draw some distinctions: that the kinds of art-centered activities from arts based community development, designed with the intention of addressing one or more community development issues are somewhat different.

We also posit that arts based community development cannot ride outside of a robust arts community. We also state unequivocally that Arts Based Community Development is not for everyone. By that we mean it’s hard work, it requires a range of skills and capacities that are often unfamiliar with many artists and arts administrators. Given then our work at the Centre, we actually spend as much time cautioning and discouraging in certain circumstances as we do encouraging. So we DO NOT see arts based community development as the silver bullet. It is a way of moving in the world as you try to support and integrate the arts into the community; it is not THE way.

Second footnote, basically an historical footnote:

We see arts based community development as the modern iteration of perhaps the oldest human creative practices, with a lineage that stretches back to prehistoric shamanism. I think this is very important for us to understand and remember. All of these functions existed in the form of the pre-art arts. So, there is an element of the shaman practice that is very much akin to artists working in service to community revitalization.

One of the shaman's important jobs is to mediate the relationship between the community and the spirit world. A good part of this work involves the invocation of benevolent spirits as protection against the destructive forces loose in the world.

I've been privileged to spend more than two decades of my life in support of this transformational work, as have many of you. Some recent projects that I've been involved in have provided me with the opportunity to study exemplary creative processes and partnerships that use the arts to address a whole range of community priorities.

I've learned a whole lot and will finish with what I feel some of the important lessons that have risen up, so simple that they can be summed up in five words: respect, excellence, accountability, sustainability, and trust.

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