

Engaging creativity through an Action Learning and Action Research process to develop an Indigenous art exhibition

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Abstract

In most art exhibitions, the creative part of the exhibition is assumed to be the artworks on display. But for the Capricornia Arts Mob's first collective art exhibition in Rockhampton during NAIDOC Week in 2012, the process of developing the exhibition became the focus of creative Action Learning and Action Research. In working together to produce a multi-media exhibition, we learned about the collaborative processes and time required to develop a combined exhibition. We applied Indigenous ways of working – including: yarning, cultural respect, cultural protocols, mentoring young people, providing a culturally safe working environment and sharing both time and food – to develop our first collective art exhibition. We developed a process that allowed us to ask deep questions, engage in a joint journey of learning, and develop our collective story. This paper explores the processes that the Capricornia Arts Mob used to develop the exhibition for NAIDOC 2012.

Keywords

Capricornia Arts Mob, CAM, Capricorn Coast, Rockhampton, Artists, Indigenous, Australia, collective, Action Learning, Action Research, creativity

Introduction

For art exhibition visitors, exhibitions tend to be about the artworks on display. They have little opportunity to think about the process leading up to the opening night, of developing the works and ensuring they are perfectly hung in a spotless, serene gallery. For artists though, the journey of getting to opening night is critical. For the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM), getting to our first opening night and first art exhibition in Rockhampton during NAIDOC Week in 2012, was a journey of Action Learning and Action Research that helped to form us as a collective.

CAM is a collective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual artists, sculptors, photographers, carvers and writers; based in the Rockhampton region of central Queensland. Our first work together involved developing an exhibition and working towards the embodiment of the NAIDOC 2012 theme (*Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on*). As we worked, CAM developed an interactive, dynamic and inclusive way of working, which has since extended beyond CAM to the wider central Queensland community.

For the artists involved in CAM, the process of working together to develop and design the NAIDOC exhibition was equally as important as having a successful exhibition available for visitors. We needed to learn how to work together and how to work collectively towards a common theme. We used a number of Indigenous processes, such as yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Fredericks, Adams, Finlay, Fletcher, Andy, Briggs, Briggs, Hall, 2011), following respectful protocols (Martin, 2008) and sharing food within Indigenous environments. We also used: broader artistic practices to develop and select our artworks,

photograph the collection, prepare the didactic panels, artist biographies, curate and market the event, and plan an opening event that was attended by over 150 people. The processes that we developed for our NAIDOC exhibition are now used to actively involve, inform and inspire others within our community. CAM has emerged as a strong group of artists who can hold our own in Queensland's regional arts scene.

In this paper, we reflect on our creative research processes in leading up to the opening night of our NAIDOC week 2012 exhibition. We explain the Indigenous values that underpin our work and explore the creative platform that is enabling us to engage with the broader community of central Queensland.

What is NAIDOC?

Every July, NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Observance Day Committee) celebrations are held around Australia to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (NAIDOC, 2014a). Each year, NAIDOC has a theme that focuses on some aspect of Indigenous Australian issues, cultures and history. Everyone who participates in NAIDOC is encouraged to plan activities that centre on the theme and bring it to life for NAIDOC participants (NAIDOC, 2014b; 2014c).

NAIDOC has a strong arts base, and part of its annual activity involves organising a national poster competition. Artists submit work that is relevant to the theme, hoping that theirs will be selected as the annual poster. Once the artwork is selected and announced, it is printed, circulated and displayed in communities across Australia in the lead up to NAIDOC. People keep the posters as a memento, while the official NAIDOC website proudly displays a poster gallery (NAIDOC, 2014d).

NAIDOC is celebrated throughout Australia by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and is now part of the national calendar of events. The week is a great opportunity for Australians to participate in a range of activities together. An increasing number

of government agencies, schools, local councils and workplaces celebrate NAIDOC (Australian Government, 2014).

What does NAIDOC mean to CAM's members?

For the members of CAM, NAIDOC represents an opportunity for us to display our art, celebrate and share. It provides a focus for us to share with each other as members of a collective, showcase our artworks publicly, and engage community members in our arts practice. Each member of CAM can celebrate NAIDOC through their own artistic medium, while drawing on their own interests and incorporating other aspects of their lives.

There is a lot going on during NAIDOC week, and both visitors and artists need to be prepared. For example: performers are booked to dance, play the didgeridoo and read poetry while others work with schools, Elders, the Rockhampton NAIDOC Committee or act as a judge for an organisation. By the end of the week, people generally feel tired but happy. In particular, they feel good about being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person.

At the 2013 NAIDOC Ball, people were asked what NAIDOC meant to them (Australian Government, 2014). Their comments included:

NAIDOC's an opportunity for us to actually share our culture and we share that with the rest of Australia, so it's actually a very significant week in the year for us... With our history and knowing what's happened to Aboriginal people, to actually be a strong, thriving, growing culture, I think that's a testament to the resilience of us as a community. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 6)

Aboriginal recognition, everything we do in the sport and media and business, and just celebrating being us, and celebrating our land and who we are as a people and our culture, and us just getting together and having a good time. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 7)

NAIDOC to me is really a celebration of life. It's a celebration of being an Aboriginal person and it's the one week that we actually get to showcase all of the

achievements of individuals and the successes and to really showcase what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can do – there are no limits. (Australian Government, 2014, VOX POP 8)

When CAM formed in early 2012, we quickly decided that NAIDOC would be our initial focus as a collective, and that we would showcase our individual creative works through a collective exhibition in Rockhampton.

In Rockhampton, some of the other long-term NAIDOC activities include: the NAIDOC Ball on Saturday, the Aboriginal and Islander Community Resource Agency Baby Show on Sunday, a flag-raising ceremony on Monday, a Church Mass on Wednesday, an Elders morning tea, a big breakfast, a rally march through town to demonstrate our pride, plus much more. In past years there have been: health expos, library sessions, a women’s only gathering, specific screening sessions undertaken by the mobile breast clinic, football matches, a netball tournament and other events. CAM’s members were conscious that our work needed to complement what was already planned and had to fit into a busy schedule. We knew very early that we needed to have our event locked into the timetable for 2012 so that it could be included in marketing material and the published timetable. We also knew that advising the Rockhampton NAIDOC Committee of our plans would mean that we were committed. If we didn’t deliver, it would not be well received by community members, including funding representatives and arts decision makers for the region. This was our first major opportunity to shine and show our commitment and professionalism as regional artists within our home region.

CAM working towards NAIDOC

CAM is a disparate group that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from different clan groups and different nations. Our different cultures bring added complexities to working together, even though we all work within an Indigenous context. Like any new group, we had to learn to work with each other on this project. We experienced tensions and struggles, and

also experienced the exhilaration of working, collaborating, learning and developing as artists from diverse Indigenous cultures who use different mediums and media.

The founding members agreed that artist and curator, Pamela CroftWarcon would be the curator of this exhibition and that Kaylene Butler would be the assistant curator and be mentored by Pamela. This arrangement aligned with one of our goals, which is to develop and support each other in areas of the art industry.

Our working base for the NAIDOC preparations was the Sandhills Studio, about 40 kilometres out of Rockhampton, near the Keppel Sands village along the Capricorn Coast. This is within the Country of the Dharumbal and Woppaburra peoples of the region. The studio is owned and managed by CAM member Pamela CroftWarcon. It is set on 100 acres of land and the studio itself has several large workspaces, including a large table to sit and talk, eat and drink, and spread out work. There are other areas to display and select work, photograph, wrap and package artworks. There is also space just to be together as artists and Indigenous peoples.

The studio is culturally affirming and Indigenous centred. It is a place that allows us to acknowledge our existing relationships, the new ones being created, and the outcomes we expect to achieve from our exchanges, processes and projects (Martin, 2008). In this way, we were able to maintain a sense of order about our work and our interactions with each other. We are able to maintain accountability and relatedness between us, as Indigenous peoples who are also artists (Martin, 2008). Figure 1 shows the large worktable and gives an idea of how we worked together in the Sandhills Studio to prepare for our first exhibition.



Figure 1. Gathering around the table to work at the Sandhills Studio. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.

As we began to prepare for the NAIDOC exhibition, we explored the 2012 theme: *Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on* (NAIDOC, 2012). Not everyone knew about the Tent Embassy, which is reasonable as some of them were too young or not even born at the time. We started our work by looking at books and journal articles and talking about the Tent Embassy. We also looked for other materials and images from this time in history. This process was facilitated by Pamela CroftWarcon, with contributions from all of CAM's members.

As we learned about the historical period, we began to develop a story and images. We talked about how the people might have felt, how we felt about it, the policy timeframe, the government's actions and more. Our Action Learning process went beyond sharing information or being a group think tank. We worked together to build a common thread of analysis about where we fitted within this part of our history as Indigenous peoples and artists. We sought to challenge and develop knowledge through the group process and through the creation of artwork (Baldwin, 1985). By holding these gatherings at the studio, CAM members had a culturally safe place to tell their stories and their family's stories of the Tent Embassy. It is unlikely that we would have been able to achieve such depth of discussion in a more public or less culturally safe place.

We began to weave our individual stories into a public, collective story of the Tent Embassy. We asked deep questions throughout the process – yet not the kind of questions that seek simple responses for the sake of gathering information. The questions asked were considered, ordered and designed to develop a deeper sense of wonder and analysis. These questions became a platform for others in the group to develop their own sets of questions. Westoby (2013) states that, in ‘creating a space of questioning the quest for learning is animated’ (p. 132). For CAM, the questioning brought a blurring of learning, co-teaching, research, politics and cultural processes. This questioning process was developed by Pamela CroftWarcon and Kaylene Butler.

As we worked towards developing our collective story, we found that some CAM members were involved in helping others, pulling them along in the journey of learning and challenging them in their thinking. There was sometimes a sense that a member might need some help to move along. This was particularly relevant for the younger members of CAM, who had grown up in a different time period. They were shocked by some of the stories of what had happened in the lifetimes of older CAM members. The younger group members may have experienced racism, but they had benefitted from growing up in a time with legislative protection and specific programs to address such inequities. They had comfort in their Indigeneity – one that wasn’t developed from fear for their life simply because they were born Aboriginal. Some of us needed to move in and out of these conversations, uncertain of where we would end up. We recognised that we have the right to claim and reclaim these stories, experiences, emotions and histories, and to articulate what they mean for us as individuals and as a collective (Cram, 2009; Dulwich Centre, 1995; Rigney, 1999). Through our participative Action Learning, we began to transform the stories within their social, political and cultural contexts, and within the whole.

As we shared our stories, it became clear that the younger members of CAM needed nurturing and care. This was especially in terms of what they were ready to talk about and hear about, and

in terms of whether they were being placed at risk. We did not want the young people to slide into a form of resistance to 'avoid self-defeating outcomes while striving for social advancement' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, p. 2). Instead, we wanted to support CAM's younger members to 're-vision and denaturalise the realities of their social worlds and then undertake forms of collective challenge based on the knowledge garnered through their critical inquiries' (Cammarota and Fine, 2008, p. 2). In fact, we needed them to do this if they were going to develop into critical adults and wise Elders (Berman, 1997; Wyn and White, 1997).

The conversations were also frightening for some of the older people in CAM, and we needed to focus carefully on cultural safety. Some older members needed to be moved from their positioning of the past, to unlock the past that kept them as victims and move to a higher form of wisdom about the events. We needed to provide a safe way to minimise anxiety, because anxiety would undermine any opportunities for learning (King, 2005). Over time, our process enabled everyone to gain a greater consciousness about the past, including at times the past of their ancestors and their real life situation in relation to the world (Friere, 1974).

Only after we developed a common understanding of the history of the Tent Embassy and our relations to it (Martin, 2008), could we commence our discussions of how to incorporate the concepts and passion of the Tent Embassy within our artworks. We changed direction several times in our process of learning and action. We needed to develop an exhibition with a sound concept and a strong collective story that we could achieve as our first exhibition, and that would fit in the gallery space. There was absolute disagreement at times, along with enthusiastic agreement with the yelling of the 'yes, yes, yes!' and 'let's do that, we have to do that!'. Then we would change direction again. In working together, we came to understand that we have different skills and abilities, and we needed to trust those with more experience. We needed to manage any conflict that happened when an individual's ideas were not embraced by the group, or when individual artwork concepts were not included for the collective exhibition.

Little by little, over several yarnning gatherings of shifting, altering, reflecting and critiquing, we reached agreement on what we would develop. Throughout the processes, we needed to focus on the protocols of working with each other as Indigenous peoples, to maintain the shared vision of what we were trying to do and also to maintain a respectful way of working with one another (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010). We worked to affirm our identities and our processes, and to culturally embed Indigeneity within the process and the exhibition itself. This relied on us following cultural protocol and being conscious of the relationships between people, groups and outcomes (Bessarab and Ng'andu, 2010; Fredericks et. al, 2011). For the younger group members, it became a form of being mentored within a cultural process, where everyone became bound in relationality and accountability to each other as members of CAM (Grace and Wells, 2007; Martin, 2008; Wilson, 2008).

Having sufficient time was an important aspect of our Action Learning process. We worked on our plan for the exhibition over several months. The final plan included: art on canvas, photographic works, fibre arts, carving and mixed media and digital installations. We also decided that one group member would write a poem, which would be staged as a performance and produced as a short film by another member of CAM. This was played as part of the exhibition. We planned that all the work would be done by members of CAM, and everyone's talents would be showcased in some way. Some of the works would demonstrate collegiality through joint art projects within the larger exhibition.

Embodying the Tent Embassy

After developing our work, we needed to enact and embody the *Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on* within the gallery environment, at the Walter Reid Cultural Centre in Rockhampton. We wanted to express our individual and collective sovereignty as Indigenous peoples and most importantly, demonstrate commitment and ongoing allegiance to the impetus and passion that started and maintained the Tent Embassy. We were also

guided by our desire to engage our audience with the artworks and with the exhibition as a whole. As Hooper-Greenhill (2000) demonstrates, it is possible to develop approaches in art museums and galleries that can be seen as Action Research and Action Learning where the audience is active in their learning within the space. Similarly, Piscitelli and Weier (2002) describe how Action Learning can take place through the collaboration of those undertaking the artworks and those engaging with the artworks. We sought to engage the audience with us in the process of Action Learning. Figure 2 shows CAM members designing our Action Learning space in the gallery.

We sought to unite hearts and spirits around the historical moment of when four Aboriginal men (Michael Anderson, Billy Craigie, Tony Coorey and Bertie Williams) planted a beach umbrella to form the Tent Embassy on 26 January 1972 (Koori History Web Site, 2012). The men had travelled from Sydney to Canberra to protest about the government's Aboriginal policy, Aboriginal infant mortality and the rejection of Land Rights. They started a movement that still continues. Today, the Tent Embassy remains a powerful symbol of unity and represents one of the most significant movements for Indigenous land rights in Australia.

As a group, we talked about how we might be able to set up a tent in the gallery space. This was going to be difficult, as there was no soil to push in tent pegs and no trees to tie off ropes. Pamela CroftWarcon and Kaylene Butler lead the conversation about how we could achieve this and then also lead the process within the Gallery space. Figures 3 and 4 show the freestanding tent that we put up, with ropes wrapped around the cement pillar to make it look part of the tent. We chose a tent that visitors could walk in and through. Inside the tent were photographic images from the 1972 tent embassy and the years that followed. An installation inside the tent featured the video recording of our poem, *40 Years Ago, 40 Years Since: The Tent Embassy*, written and performed by CAM member Bronwyn Fredericks (Fredericks, 2012).



Figure 2. Installing the exhibition in the gallery required all CAM members. Photograph by Howard (Joe) Butler, 2012.



Figure 3. The tent in the Gallery. Photograph by Kaylene Butler, 2012.



Figure 4. The tent in the Gallery. Photograph by Kaylene Butler, 2012.

Bronwyn's poetry performance was complete with props and costume. She tied a 1970s scarf with burnt orange and lime green around her crown, wore beads from the same era, and had a crocheted blanket from the era to throw over her shoulders. We chose a filming location that gave the impression of Bronwyn sitting on the lawns opposite old Parliament House in Canberra, the site of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy. The digital recording was produced by Kaylene Butler and displayed using an old computer shaped as a television and projected onto the wall and roof of the tent.

Bronwyn's work is a creative, non-fiction poem that moves from autobiographical to biographical and to the collective voice of 'we' within the one piece of work. It contains documented evidence of real people, events and time frames covering the last 40 years. During the exhibition, the work could be heard throughout the gallery space and formed the backdrop for the entire exhibition.

The words resonated and connected the artworks within the gallery. The words from one verse are below:

1972

40 Years Ago

40 Years Since

The Sign read

'Aboriginal Embassy'

Proud and loud

'Enough' as the shroud

Canvas tents were established

Symbols of poverty and impermanence

That offered little sustenance

Others arrived

2000 or more

Campaigning and yelling

Passion filled to the core

'Land Rights Now'

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people

Standing in solidarity

No doubts in clarity

Leaders developed and grew

Invigorating the movement anew (Fredericks, 2012, p. 2)

Road testing the exhibition and our multi-media installations was an important part of our Action Learning. Everything was tested by CAM members and our families (Figures 5 and 6). We were happy with the look and feel of what we had achieved, even

though we had some initial reservations and fear. It is likely that fear came from the 'not knowing' and the 'new'.



Figure 5. Viewing the performance by Bronwyn Fredericks projected on the wall of the tent. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.



Figure 6. Kaylene Butler triple checking the multi-media installation work. Photograph by Bronwyn Fredericks, 2012.

CAM's Tent Embassy exhibition was installed in Rockhampton's Walter Reid Cultural Centre Gallery 6 from 2-10 July (CQUniversity, 2012). Opening night was held on 2 July and attended by over 150 people. It was a celebration for CAM as artists and for the broader community; it firmly planted CAM as a contributor to NAIDOC activities.

Conclusion

CAM developed its first collective art exhibition in Rockhampton for NAIDOC Week in 2012. In designing the exhibition, we developed as an Action Learning collective that empowers each other – both as individual artists and as a collective. Through our Action Learning process, we maintained Indigenous control and ownership over most of the process in the lead-up to the exhibition, and were guided by Indigenous values and knowledge processes (Rigney, 1999; Smith, 1999). For us, this process of learning to work together was at least as important as the successful exhibition – if not more so.

We applied Indigenous ways of working to develop our exhibition and develop a process that allowed us to ask deep questions and develop our collective story.

CAM went on to hold another successful NAIDOC exhibition in 2013, and will develop another this year. The strong Action Learning processes that we developed through our first exhibition, formed a platform for our future work and strong community spirit. We create and co-create as Indigenous artists, using Indigenous processes. It was a proud and uplifting moment when we collectively recognised the strength of our work and that the exhibition could have been curated in any capital of the world. We seek to continue our work and to challenge both ourselves and others through art. We transform lives in ripples of consciousness about Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories and Countries.

Acknowledgements

We offer acknowledgement to: the Rockhampton Regional Council, the Rockhampton NAIDOC Committee, Kaima Consultant, Sandhills Arts, Saima Torres Strait Islander Corporation for Torres Strait Islander Cultural Resources and Central Queensland University/CQUniversity, Australia for the support offered to the Capricornia Arts Mob (CAM) for their 2012 NAIDOC Art Exhibition. We offer acknowledgement to the National Indigenous Research and Knowledge Network (NIRAKN) for their encouragement of our practice based research endeavours, which contribute to the overall research efforts of Indigenous peoples.

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Biographies

Dr Bronwyn Fredericks is a Murri woman from SE Queensland. She is a Professor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) and BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) Chair in Indigenous Engagement at Central Queensland University. She is a member of the National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network (NIRAKN), the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and CAM.

Dr Pamela CroftWarcon is a member of Kooma Clan of the Yuwaalaraay people, SW Queensland, who lives / works from her studio in Keppel Sands, Central Queensland. She has practiced as an independent visual artist since the mid-eighties and exhibited regionally, nationally and internationally. Pamela also works as a Lecturer at Central Queensland University, Australia and is a member of AIATSIS and CAM.

Ms Kaylene Butler is a Gungarrie, Wulli Wulli, Iman and Juru woman. She is also of Chinese and South Sea Islander (Motto Lava, New Caledonia, Tanna Island and the Banks) heritage. She has been an artist since 1990 and undertakes work regionally,

nationally and internationally. Kaylene is the proprietor of Kima Consultant (arts mgt) and member of CAM.

Mr Howard (Joe) Butler is a descendant of the Georang Georang, Ijman and Gangulu peoples of Central and CW Qld. In the 1990's Jo's artworks became public through the opportunity of working with communities locally, nationally and internationally and over the years has developed a large body of artwork. Jo is managed by Kima Consultant and is a member of CAM.

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