

WEAVING TAPESTRIES



A Report on Community Arts Ontario's Community Building Workshop Series

by
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Introduction

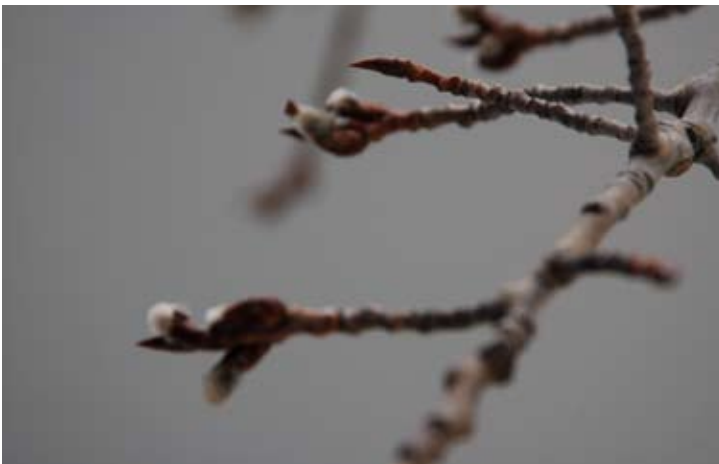
Although this report focuses mainly on the work I undertook with CAO from February 2006 to June 2007, it is also informed by the community arts forums and conferences I attended during this period in Ontario, across Canada and internationally and by my position as lecturer in York University's CAP Practicum Program. All of the above combined with my own experience in the field has contributed to my findings in this report.

Waiting sometimes seems unbearable and then all of a sudden in a gust of wind or a gentle breeze the thing we've been anticipating arrives.



As cultural development coordinator I interpreted my role quite literally: To coordinate (match up, synchronize, organize, manage, direct, bring together, harmonize) the cultural development of CAO and its constituents. I believe that through this process I have done exactly that. By this I mean that through my work I endeavored to embrace the following key qualities of a good coordinator: non-directive, flexible, organized, open-hearted, and above all to be an available witness to change or a community's desire for (or in some cases resistance to) change. This report serves as a document of this process to date.

The first snow blanketing the browning sure and continual grey dying of winter;



There is much work to be done. The Weaving Tapestries project was just a warm up.

The intention behind this document is to offer a sense of the many and varied approaches and responses to the topic of diversity. It is meant to support you in your own processes and to encourage you as you go about the business of tackling this contentious issue in your organizations and practice.

It is important at this point to expose the limitations of this project. It should be noted that although ev-

...the first buds of olive spring, the burst of full jade that promises joy and shade through the gentle breeze and the sweet orange of summer;

... the reds and yellow and burnt umber assortment into lilting falls and crisp gusts cycle us back to the end and the beginning.



ery attempt was made to address a cross section of issues and “isms” in these workshops, there was little initial or follow-up outreach done into the differently abled communities.

Although I didn’t set out to focus on the racial and cultural divide, this focus emerged out of my discussions with community members in the regions. What I discovered first and foremost was that racism and the impact of colonialism are still such difficult but necessary issues to confront especially as it relates to our practice of Community Arts. This

project has, for me, dispelled a popular assumption that Community Arts is a ‘happy smiling place’ where everyone has an equal voice and equal access to the arts. The project has also, by virtue of giving first voice to those who are so often voiceless in these workshops, opened my eyes to new ways of seeing, new ways of negotiating space. It has also inspired in some organizations and communities a fundamental paradigm shift from a colonial mentality to an anti-colonial/anti-racist perspective.

My hope is that what was discovered here can be transferred to other contexts.

Project Summary

As a follow up to the Leading Community Arts into the Future Report and the Cultural Mapping Report I was hired to conduct twelve community building workshops in regions across the province (6 in Southwest, Eastern Ontario and Toronto, 6 in Central, Northeastern and Northwestern Ontario) for member & non-member organizations. In these workshops I was asked to address:

- Building relationships with diverse communities and groups
- Diverse Board/Volunteer recruitment and retention
- Recruitment and retention of diverse staff
- Policy development
- Needs assessment
- Program & service development

These workshops were forums for community artists and community organizations to address their burning issues around the role of community arts in inclusive societies, to share success stories and tools, and to grapple with the barriers that prevent them.

Methodology

From the outset of the program, targeting the ideal audience for this project was a challenge. I vacillated between approaching communities who have in the past resisted discussions about diversity and approaching communities with organizations that could model diversity.

I struggled with balancing rural and urban representation. I pondered the value of diversity 101 training, ultimately preferring to focus on cross cultural development within Aboriginal and racialized communities. It soon became clear that my preferences alone could not drive the project. So, by relinquishing control over what I believed the focus should be, I was led in some cases into new territory. Eventually, following the advice of one of our members, I realized I needed to respond to each community's needs.

Determining need was a very involving process. It consisted, first, of identifying key resource people within any given community who could provide an orientation about the issues and challenges in the region. CAO board members and regional reps were my first source of information. My second and third sources were the Cultural Mapping list and general membership list. I relied on these first contacts to provide me with information about potential host organizations, potential workshop facilitators, and potential workshop topics. My initial contact with a community would typically begin with an introductory e-mail—one that I eventually standardized for ease. This friendly and personalized e-mail would introduce the project in broad terms, inviting the recipient to get in touch with me. Later in the project, as I began to generate more concrete orientation materials, I would attach them along with past workshop outlines as a sample of how other communities used their workshop. In a follow up phone call, referring to the e-mail and attachments I had sent, I would break the ice by asking what their initial responses were. As I described in a project report to the Board, these conversations were like a dance.

Consistently I've had trouble describing these workshops to people across the province. I have had to find creative ways of contextualizing and re-contextualizing the work. This speaks in part to the diverse nature

of the project and also to the complexity of the issue. Because a large part of the process involves

"When you dance around in that circle of life—that fire that we dance around represents unconditional love for everything and everybody in the universe. That's the fire that our people dance around."

Workshop Participant, Muskoka

sussing out community needs, the conversations I have are like a dance toward meaning. We two-step back and forth trying to figure out where each of us is coming from. When I try to revert to the language I've absorbed through my reading and theorizing, I miss a step and end up stumbling on my partner's toes or having my own feet mashed to bits (metaphorically speaking of course). Then I'm forced to start again. "So what are these workshops about", they ask? "Well, you tell me", I reply, somewhat craftily. By the time we reach a consensus we realize that through this dance, this struggle toward meaning, we've already struck a flint.

The more successful workshops started off with a bang. The key resource person, fired up by the idea of the workshop,

put me in contact with key community members. S/he maintained his/her involvement; joining and/or leading the planning team,

"We're all here for whatever reason we are here today. We work together—we're not asking to go away and have coffee and tea with everybody—we're just asking to be understood. And I think if people could work in a community like that, that's really all anybody wants."

Workshop Participant

recruiting workshop participants and presenters, participating actively in the workshop and following up with the outcome. Other workshops started off with a whimper but grew, once we were in the room, to be highly significant and impactful. Still, other workshops seemed to blow up in my face but upon reflection were highly successful in turning the tide at least in the room.

A total of nine regional workshops took place between November 2006 and June 2007 covering the vast terrain of the Province of Ontario from Moose Factory to Windsor. Although this was a reduction from the originally proposed twelve, during the consultation process WT reached over 20 communities and over 150 organizations, individual artists and community members. Through the workshops and process of needs assessment CAO made itself known to community organizations such as economic development offices, child welfare groups, immigrant women's organizations, social and welfare organizations, Aboriginal health and band offices, tourist associations etc...; inspiring an interest in and knowledge about the wide and varied approaches to community arts. By the time of the CAO Forum in June 2007, practically everybody had heard about or participated in a Weaving Tapestries workshop. A fuller explanation about the reduction in workshops can be found below under Trials and Triumphs.

Key Outcomes

- CAO effectively expanded its profile and the profile of community arts outside of its catchments area directly and indirectly educating communities about the function and purpose of the organization

- CAO received practical and immediate feedback on the needs within communities applicable to programming, strategic planning and advocacy

- A profound conversation was sparked around the issue of diversity encouraging a deeper engagement

with some of the underlying issues (i.e. the legacy of colonialism, dynamics of power, need for shifting values etc...)

- New voices were heard throughout the province
- New partnerships were forged within communities, across communities, across sectors, across culture, across inter-generational dividing lines
- A renewal of spirit was reported within communities
- Tools and strategies for inclusive practice
- Emerging and new workshop facilitators were discovered
- A space and process for community dialogue was created



Note to the Reader on Format

In this report Participant quotes are italicized with quotes. I chose not to put specific names to the quotes except in the rare cases where I was given permission. The other italicized bits without quotes are my own musings on the road or commentary.