Conferences: Building a reflective learning community through creative interventions
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Abstract

Through a reflective practitioner -led perspective, this paper looks at five conferences in which creative learning processes were incorporated and used as participative experiential learning community building processes. The paper explores how creative interventions were designed and used to connect conference participants and to encourage mutual inquiry, reflection and other ways of knowing.

Key words

Conferences, creative learning community, TEDX, collaboration, participation, City of Thought, embodied learning, art

A practitioner's reflection

This paper is written from a practitioner/practice-led perspective (Gray, 1996; Haseman, 2006; Haseman and Mafe, 2009; Lloyd, 2011) and reflects on my experience of designing and facilitating creative interventions in five conference environments. It reflects a practice-led inquiry approach which is where inquiry and reflection on practice, loops back to draw on appropriate theories and or to create new theories. As a hybrid practitioner/researcher, I identify with the notion of the "bricoleur" (Lloyd, 2011) whereby I draw on different theories and practice for my praxis. My agenda for each of these conferences was to introduce creative ways for participants to connect, build a creative learning community, and reflect on their conference experience. In doing so I draw on experiential aesthetic and arts-based learning processes and

methodologies (Darso, 2004; Heron, 1989; Lloyd, 2011). The interventions include the use of images, stories, metaphors, movement, human sculpture (Lloyd and Hill, 2013), and other creative processes. The artistic methods provide a creative way for conference participants to engage with one another in a process of mutual inquiry and expression (Reason, 2001).

Creative conference communities

When I started to write this paper I was still buzzing after having spent the day at a local TEDx Conference, entitled TEDx Kurilpa. To provide a little background, TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) is a non-profit, non-partisan foundation conceived in 1984 by architect and graphic designer Richard Saul Wurman, who saw the possibilities within the convergence of three worlds: Technology, Entertainment and Design. He thought it would be a good idea to have an event that explored these areas through a range of speakers, who were doing lots of interesting things. TED's aim is to provide a platform for thinkers, visionaries and teachers, so that people around the globe can gain a better understanding of the biggest issues faced by the world, and feed a desire to help create a better future. Core to this goal is a belief that powerful ideas can drive change in the world (http://www.ted.com/about/our-organisation/how-ted-works).

Since its inception, TED has broadened its scope to include two annual conferences and a TEDx program, which gives communities, organisations and individuals the opportunity to stimulate dialogue and independently organise TED type conferences at a local level. The TED talks and conferences are a global success and have captured a lot of peoples' imaginations, particularly as the live presentations are recorded and then become available via the Internet. In general the presenters are mostly very engaging, articulate, knowledgeable and passionate about their topic, and are often creative leaders in their field of interest. Over the years I have watched and enjoyed many of the videoed TED talks that are available.

Over the past couple of years I have also had the opportunity to attend two local TEDx events in my city. While both were

interesting there was a strong format of conference delegates sitting and listening to the presenters.   As a result, in my mind there was limited opportunity to engage in other meaningful ways with my fellow delegates. Therefore much of my enthusiasm in relation to this TEDx Kurilpa event, was coloured by two elements. A serendipitous meeting with the TEDx Kurilpa licensee, provided a chance to share our thoughts on how we both felt there was a need do something a little more creative and different to the standard TEDx format within the TEDx guidelines (http://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/tedx-rules#h2--general). The TEDx Kurilpa conference seemed the perfect platform to do this.

The conversation led to an invitation for me to design and facilitate a creative community building process for the opening and closing sessions of the conference. As I began to think and reflect on my involvement and how I would design and facilitate these sessions, two intentions were paramount in my mind; firstly, I gathered that the sessions needed to be experiential and participative, and secondly the creative interventions should encourage delegates to connect with one another, help build rapport and develop a sense of community. Why did I think these ideas were important? This thinking underpins my professional practice and it reflects how I want my conference experiences to be. I want my conference experiences to be a holistic learning environment. Not only do I want to learn from the formal presenters, I also want to engage and learn from my fellow delegates in other sorts of ways.

What are conferences for?

I reflected on the question of the purposes of conferences. As I began to write this paper I undertook a quick search of the scholarly literature. The search revealed very little. This is curious given the huge number of conferences on offer around the world. Does this indicate an implicit understanding that conferences are worthwhile and do not require research and reflection? A general Internet search provided a few links that outlined some of the reasons why conferences are worth attending. Some of the obvious reasons include the opportunity to meet people and network, to learn and gather new information, and to showcase

one's research or professional practice. These are the obvious reasons why conferences exist and why people attend. I appreciate that conferences provide a place where these things happen, although I am often left with a sense that in many instances these things could also happen more creatively and effectively.

Currently there are many conferences that continue to follow a particular structure: the keynote speaker, multiple streams, and in my opinion limited time to meet to engage with delegates in other experiential ways. This format has developed over time and serves a purpose for the delivery and exchange of knowledge and ideas. As much as I appreciate the opportunity to gain new knowledge from my fellow delegates through a workshop or presentation, I now seek other ways I can connect and learn from those who are not formally presenting. I am curious about my fellow delegates. I want to know what brought them to the conference: what they hope to get from it, what their interests and ideas are. I also would like to share my experiences, as I am interested in how we might create and take action as a learning community.

My aspiration is for a conference to be a place where our bodies, hearts and minds are aroused and where we are inspired to take action. To me a conference should also be a place of surprise, a place to wonder out loud, to ask and explore "What is Possible", a place to experiment, and take risks. A conference should be a place where our individual and collective imaginations (Heron, 1989) and moral imaginations (Lederach, 2005) are free to roam and where a "creative learning community" is formed.

The idea of a moral imagination has great resonance for how we might cultivate conference experiences. Lederach calls on peace-builders and conflict resolution professionals to "envision their work as a creative act" and exercise their "moral imagination". He suggests they have "one foot in what is and one foot beyond what exists"(book cover). This is an inspiring and imaginative way to think about how we might creatively interact and learn from each other. With those aspirations in mind, that is how I envisaged my small contribution to the TEDx Kurilpa conference and is discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Connecting and creating with others

The idea that "life [and knowledge] is created from interplay among different participants who make contact, influence one another, exchange their essential natures, merge, and generate new forms" (McNiff, 2003, p. 2) resonates strongly for me. This is the work I am motivated to do. I facilitate creative learning experiences for a range of people, groups, and organisations and all for different reasons. These learning experiences are designed to help people build relationships, make meaningful connections, and tap into their creative potential regardless of the work they do. I find that at the heart of all human endeavour is creativity, and the work I aim to do is to support people in their learning, change, and creative pursuits both individually and collectively. This is the thinking that underpinned my doctoral research, *Artful Inquiry: an arts-based facilitation approach for individual and organisational learning and development*" (Lloyd, 2011). My own learning and professional practice are works in progress and constantly evolving. I continue to draw on an experiential, aesthetic, and arts-based learning "philosophy" that includes action and reflection to design and facilitate adult learning experiences (Darso, 2004; Daudelin, 1996; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Eisner, 2002, 2008; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Heron, 1989; Kerr and Lloyd, 2008; Kolb, 1984; Nissley, 2002; Schön, 1983).

In that context this paper offers a brief exploration and description of some of the ways I have facilitated, contributed, and endeavoured to make the conferences I have been involved with inclusive, creative, meaningful, connected, and a flourishing experience for the delegates.

The Ideas Festival

In 2009 I approached the Brisbane Ideas Festival with an idea. The Festival was a public event and promoted as a place where recognised speakers and writers would present ideas and encourage public debate. From my observations the presentations seemed to be taking a fairly traditional format, such as lectures and panel discussions presented to an audience. Increasingly I began to feel strongly about the need for an open public workshop – a place

that the community could come and share their ideas in a creative and collaborative way.

The idea I presented to the Director of the festival was a two-hour workshop positioned at the end of the festival. The inspiration for the workshop was driven by the various descriptions I had seen about the festival being a driver for "new ideas, old ideas in new manifestations and the exchange of ideas across sector, across industry, across generations and across the room". What better way to do this than bring the public, the community, a group of strangers, from diverse backgrounds into a "neutral" space and allow them to meet and converse about the ideas that mattered to them. I felt sure that after a few days of listening to others presenting their ideas, the festival community would appreciate and respond to the opportunity to express and share their ideas.

The workshop I proposed was a semi-structured and yet flexible creative process. I believed this would help people connect with one another in a relatively short time and engage in meaningful dialogue (Clouder, 2000). The Director of the festival could see the possibility of the workshop. Although I sensed an initial apprehension about the perceived slightly unorthodox and unstructured nature of the workshop, he was prepared to support it. I shared my vision for the session workshop and so "Creative Collaborations – Ideas that Matter", a two-hour public workshop was held at the end of the Ideas Festival and made available to the local community. The marketing material promoted the workshop as an interactive and collaborative session.

The workshop attracted a diverse group of approximately sixty people. Given there were other presentations on offer it showed me that people were eager to interact and share their ideas with one another. It highlighted that people were ready to come together and find other ways to engage with their community. The process I would offer would be based on some strategic and minimal intervention, and where I would hold the space for people to explore the festival themes ("self and society", "invention and innovation", "development and design", "ecology and ethics", and "action and advocacy").

At the beginning of the session I shared with the group the workshop approach and suggested a few ground rules for engagement, which the participants agreed to with a couple of additions. I began the session with some quick spontaneous improvisational activities that were playful and helped build rapport quickly and I provided some basic props for participants to work with such as images, chalk and some paper and pens if they required them. The rest was up to them, to self-organise into groups inspired by the festival themes. They were left to negotiate how they would interact and how they would share their ideas to the rest of the group later in the form of a creative act. My bold statement to them was that this was not only about sharing ideas with their fellow participants but also it was a place to engage their bodies, hearts and minds and to act. It proved to be a highly engaging, reflective, energetic and creative session where those who committed to the process seemed to participate fully.

Toward the end of the session I asked people to make a public declaration and commit to an action over the following week and beyond. The entire group individually responded in different ways, with one person saying they would contact their brother who they hadn't spoken with in three years. Another made a commitment to cycle to work and another said they would start their vegetable garden. Another group of people, who lived in the same area and had never met, said they would meet again to discuss what sort of community action they would undertake. The response to the session was very positive and people appreciated the opportunity to "have their voice" as part of the conference festival. Many commented that the session had been an "absolute surprise" and that they were pleased they had made the choice to attend, even though they were initially unsure what it was going to entail. This was a self-selected group and I knew there were a couple of people who arrived and left with one person telling me "this was not the session for them". Those who came and stayed were motivated to do so. They took a risk to attend an open conference session that explicitly promoted the idea that people should be prepared to actively participate and interact with their fellow festival attendees.   It suggests to me that people were looking for other ways to connect and contribute. This was highlighted by unsolicited correspondence I received from some of

the participants, informing me how much they appreciated being part of the session:

> I've been meaning to write to you and thank you for a fantastic session. It was completely unexpected! I think everybody at the festival was surprised at how easy it was to talk to each other, considering we were strangers… and a lot of us were from different backgrounds, ages, etc. I learnt a lot from the experience and think your concept of arts-based learning is a fantastic one, a good way to break the boundaries of logical thinking that we endure during the week.

> Just a quick e-mail to let you know how much I enjoyed the session you facilitated on the Sunday of the Ideas Festival. We had a great time with some wonderful enthusiastic people, and your movement and trust games made it all so much easier to connect.

This was not a passive session where people listened, participated, and contributed. It was a creative and collaborative learning experience within a conference festival, and it highlighted to me that room should be made to provide creative ways for communities to connect, and to have a public place to share dreams and exchange knowledge.

Art of Management and Organisation Conference

Having previously presented at the 2008 Art of Management and Organisation (AoMO) conference in Banff, Canada. I was keen to attend the next one as I had a sense that I had connected to a "tribe" of people working and researching in the areas I was deeply interested in. With the announcement and call for papers and presentation for the 2012 AoMO Creativity and Critique conference to be held in York in the U.K. I sent an email to the AACORN (Arts, Aesthetic, Creativity, and Organisation Research Network) email list; I knew there would be people on the list who had attended the previous AoMO conferences and could be potential delegates for the 2012 conference. The email was a request asking if anyone would be interested in collaborating on and facilitating an arts-based community building process for the whole conference. My initial idea was that this would be a creative

project that would run over the life of the conference and encourage people to learn, reflect, and connect with one another at various times throughout the conference.

Two people, Daved Barry[1], an academic researcher based at the Copenhagen Business School, and Henrik Schrat, an artist/academic based in Berlin became project collaborators. So from afar we developed our interactive and participative community building process via email and Skype. In itself this was an interesting exercise as we had to overcome time differences and more importantly gain an understanding of how each of us saw the potential of this project. It took time to progress a coherent understanding of all our ideas and develop a cohesive and creative process of value to the delegates. The proposal was a collaborative effort with each of us drawing on our areas of expertise and interest such as: design-led innovation, the arts, aesthetic and arts-based learning, arts and management education, leadership and organisational aesthetics and design. We submitted the following outline as our "Community Buildings" proposal and waited to hear back from the organisers.

> We would like to run a "community-building" project with the AMO participants, one that lasts over the duration of the conference. We have discussed many alternatives and have settled on using an architectural motif, where participants create representative structures of a paper, a research direction, and/or a practice—e.g. a house, theatre, office structure—something with rooms and connections. With this, we invite participants to experiment and consider new tools and strategies for taking concepts, theories, and methodologies presented in their papers and to explore other tangible ways to present that material, engage people, and transfer knowledge and understanding. We think the "architectural +township" perspective, with its mix of artistic gaze, fixed rules and looseness, hands-on building, and collectivity, could be a good way to accomplish this, plus advance our aesthetic and artistic thinking and practice.

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[1] Permission has been sought and given to use names

> Process-wise, the four of us would form a support team that provides guidelines, compositional help (both conceptual and tangible), pushes up the artistic merit of the overall work, and facilitates the discussion processes around it. On the first day of the conference, we (anyone from the conference who would like to participate) would begin making structures and a township. Structures would be placed in a landscaped space (perhaps a floor or large table with various landscape features—ocean, mountain, river valley). The placements would be partially dynamic, like a chess game perhaps, moving around as they and the landscape develop.

> Halfway through the conference, we would invite those who've made structures to make an extension to someone else's creation—an add-on room, a space, a path, decoration, lighting, you name it. The extension work would be a way to advance participants' thinking.

> At the beginning, middle, and end we would facilitate reflection, discussion, and interaction. We might also use a stop-motion camera to capture the development and show the film at the end.

When our proposal was accepted it was time to get serious. It is one thing having an idea; it is another bringing it to fruition particularly when we were doing this from afar. As we developed and refined our ideas, the "City of Thought: community building through co-developing an architectural model" emerged from our collective mindscape. The "City of Thought" (CoT) was intended to serve two purposes; firstly, as a community building process, and secondly as a way of researching the relationship between thought, and its representation as a three-dimensional object; that is as an artefact. As a community building process it would allow delegates to meet and connect through creative practice. At the same time it would provide a place of learning, another way for delegates to represent or present their papers and/or research, and another way in which information and knowledge could be exchanged.

The following description is an excerpt from the hand out we intended to give to the conference delegates, which provided an

overview of our intention and a number of key instructions for how to engage with the CoT.

> We can think of the City of Thought as a heuristic device; where heuristic denotes an experience-based technique for learning and discovery, and where architecture and urban space are used as ways of thinking about the multiple functions of one's research. As in all translation, a lot will be lost and different ways to express things will be gained. By temporarily dodging language, new insights might be triggered – for instance, the private/public dimensions of research, streets of research, leisure areas, work/office dimensions.

We would provide some creative constraints through a limited range of materials and some overarching guidelines for an artistic approach. Rather than leaving it as an "anything goes", we were suggesting that artistic methods offer ways to "find structures in and map unknown territory". In that way we were aiming for the CoT not only to be a community-building process but a "sense-making" (Barry and Meisiek, 2010) process and a vehicle for "presentational knowing" (Heron and Reason, 2006). It would provide delegates with the potential to reveal their ideas, share their research, and make connections via a visual and metaphorical artefact allowing them "to reach beyond the confines of conventional intellectual positivism to embrace the pre-verbal, manifest and tacit knowings we might associate with artists, crafts people and our own guts and hearts and bodies" (Seeley and Reason 2008, p. 4).

While we had a relatively clear picture in mind as to how this community building could be offered and facilitated; it is impossible to know how people will respond, interact and welcome such an intervention. There is always hope that offered in good faith, and with the intention to provide a meaningful experience, people will participate. I certainly was hopeful that this would be the case and that they would find value in the experience.

Figure 1: The "crucifix" platform: laying the foundations

At the beginning of the conference we were asked to explain the CoT to the delegates. We lead them to our sturdy cardboard crucifix table that we had built as a learning platform from which the city would be built. It was strategically positioned in the middle of the university space where the conference was being held. In the initial "induction" we outlined our project and some of the objectives. We informed them of the creative constraints we had devised such as the materials available and the size of land people were able to "claim". I wondered how people would perceive it and how they would interact with it and their fellow delegates. Would it provide all the outcomes and possibilities we assumed it could?

We were now into the next phase of co-creation. While we were the initial instigators and facilitators of the project, the conference delegates also needed to bring their moral imaginations and willingness to the project. At some stage whenever we create something and set it free in the world we inevitably have to let go and see what comes. Given it was front and centre at the conference people could hardly miss it, so there was ample opportunity to be involved if people were motivated to do so. Part of our process was to facilitate reflective conversations in the middle and at the end of the conference. This was to encourage

people to share their experiences, to help make connections, and to encourage meaning making. What happened in the many hours between these "formally" facilitated discussions was up to the delegates, although we aimed for at least one of us to be present at the CoT as much as possible so that we could discuss the process and offer some general guidance if required.   So it was to my delight when I arrived early the next morning to see the beginnings of a building and two delegates quietly working away together at their model.

Figure 2: Collaboration: Two delegates working at their model

Over the course of the conference others gathered and piece-by-piece a "city of thought" emerged. This was a project that in many ways had a life of its own. People came and went, either silently observing, or talking about the emerging world, and or other areas of interest. Some would make something and or add something to some else's creation. There was always some sort of activity or interaction taking place around the CoT. It became a focal point in many ways although it did not take over the conference. People continued to engage in all the other ways people generally interact at conferences. Over the session breaks people would hover around and peer at the buildings, take photos, write comments and begin or continue creating their artefact. Many conversations took place and it is impossible to know all of them. One person I spoke with had just presented her paper and decided to use it as part of her structure. She commented that she found the

destruction of the paper and then reconstructing it as part of her artefact somewhat "cathartic". One of the delegates offered a rich description of the CoT's emergence:

> The COT is still rising and we heard the intentions and visions of our co-builders. Some created buildings alone, representing a built version of their own work activity or take on life. A church rises in the centre, roofless and someone wants to place a madonna in it – some negotiation may be needed. Towers rise up and even an underground, trap-doored realm where "here be dragons". The city is both a collective and a thing of separateness, but the building is not done yet.

Figure 3: A church emerges from the City of Thought

At one point some of the delegates arrived with "poem dwellings". These were small "poetic" houses they had made in one of the sessions. They asked if their houses could become part of the CoT. While they were different to what our guidelines specified (for instance we had provided certain materials, a limited range of colours, specified a size for individual artefacts) the "poem dwellings" were inspired and created in a different way, their origins manifesting from a different source and were more decorative.

I felt it was a rather coincidental connection that another session would work with the idea of small dwellings as a creative way of

reflecting and learning. I thought they were an appropriate addition to the landscape. After all this was the conference in action and what does one say to such a request? Wasn't the CoT also offered as a community-building process? How might the community have been affected, and or effected, had the request been rejected? Along the way there were all sorts of opinions, robust exchanges, resistances and engagement about the CoT. At one point someone said to me that our instructions "inhibited her creativity". There were conversations about many things. One such passionate discussion was focused on the CoT's perceived lack of "town planning" and as a result it was just a jumble of buildings and ideas with no heart. One of the delegates suggested that it be named "A City of Thinking", which he believed was more dynamic and ongoing than a static thought. These obvious and other less obvious interactions, discussions, and feelings manifested through this provocative project.

So what did this CoT community building and knowledge creation project achieve? From my perspective the CoT did much of what was intended. It offered a reflective and creative place for people to gather and return to. It worked as a catalyst for igniting discussion about many things: the project and process itself, the conference, what the Art of Management and Organisation community is about, and also peoples' research. People commented about the aesthetics, the look of the city, and what they perceived as a lack of design, coherence and planning (strongly articulated through the eyes of an architect). One could see the positivist discussions in action while others enjoyed and appreciated its eclectic and organic nature. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and I found it beautiful and intriguing because it was all of those things.

As an artefact it was an individual and collective creative expression of the people who participated. It represented the random and at times incoherent nature of ideas, imagination, creativity, knowledge and how connections are made - or not. It showed the convergence and divergence of connections and ideas. This was an artefact that moved beyond everyday language. Ideas were presented and represented in a three-dimensional visual form without the constraints of having to explain, which at times

worked and other times was less successful. Some people adhered to the guidelines while others "broke the rules" or improvised. Some people liked the creative constraints while others wanted more planning, structure and adherence to the original guidelines.

These competing preferences, in my view, reflect so many aspects of organisational life and life in general as we try to make sense of the world around us. There were ideas that got lost in visual translation but other interesting and unusual connections and ideas were also found. As I reflect on the CoT I ask myself the question "could we have designed it differently?" The answer is "yes" of course. There are other ways it could have been developed and designed. Could we have facilitated it differently? Again yes, there are other ways we could have facilitated. We could have been more lasses-faire or we could have been more prescriptive. We could have rejected the "poem dwellings" which given the inclusion of, may have directed the CoT in a way that had they not been there, may have been quite different. Whichever way we facilitated there would be those who would respond or not. Did we push it far enough? In some ways yes, we did as it was given space-time in the conference programme; but we also had to share with other conference activities, presentations and displays. One of the participants posed a provocative question as to whether "we" had the courage to destroy it and begin again:

> I proposed we burn it – together, and then go off to our
> night sleep, in order to come back together tomorrow and
> then build. The first is a draft. Do we have the courage and
> the resilience to suggest away this first draft? Would the
> post-sleep second draft be the more needed city? I think
> artists used to make more drafts in their work. Some still do.
> But many people are so tired by the call of media-flooded
> life, and being in the machine of a techno-driven society,
> that first drafts are often put out as final drafts. There can be
> something beautiful and compelling in that rawness,
> something essential and fresh in that coarse first-ness. But
> also something lazy. Something that fears to go further.

Reflecting on that question I am drawn to the words of poet and author, David Whyte who suggested that: "the cycle of making, disintegration, and remaking that is the hallmark of meaningful

and creative work" (Whyte, 2001, p. 77). I do think of the CoT as meaningful work and as a work in progress. The 2012 AoMO conference allowed for the first iteration. I recognise that as a creative community building process and a place for learning the CoT process has much to offer. I am aware that some delegates have considered using the idea in one of their professional management programmes. It is encouraging to see how ideas and knowledge can be built on and reconfigured for different purposes.

For me the CoT certainly had a beauty and rawness to it as a conference community-building and sense-making creative representation. One of the highlights for me was that it seemed to attract "outliers". As the CoT was front and centre in a university communal building, I was aware that "visitors" also arrived and made their mark. One such visitor was a university porter who had witnessed the evolution of our city. He had watched over and seen the CoT transform and was finally moved to make his own contribution. I take heart in the fact that he felt interested and inspired by what we had seen happening and more importantly that he felt able to include himself in the process. One of the conference organisers had a similar observation:

> As for City of Thought - It was such a great contribution to the conference. I think the thing that captured this for me was the contribution made by one of the university porters - demonstrating the collaborative and barrier-lessness (is that a word?) to the project. I also think it was poignant given this was a re-launch of the conference and the project was almost a metaphorical re-building of the community.

Figure 4: An "outliers" reflection in poetic and metaphorical form

Her comments about the approach being a metaphorical re-building of the AoMO community resonate as it had been four years since the last conference and during that time the AoMO "community" had faced a number of challenges. This re-building or re-thinking of a learning community was not lost on one delegate who commented:

> I'm not sure what [the CoT] offered the conference. I guess it had the potential to be a point of intersection and a meeting place to exchange ideas, but I'm not sure it effectively achieved that. I didn't experience much of that at any rate. What I took away from it was individual learning and inspiration from the process of constructing my individual piece. What I saw in the City itself both elated and depressed me, as I was left feeling part of a really interesting and creative developing community, but somehow quite alone and a little isolated at the same time.

This observation is rather telling in that it reveals one person's story about their conference experience. I suggest it could at times reflect how people might respond to other conferences. This comes back to my question about how we develop a creative learning community. What are the ways we can help people build a sense of community at conferences? What I take from this is that

the CoT provided a creative way for this person to reflect on their own learning experience, and to also reflect on the AoMO learning community at large. From a facilitation perspective, had this been articulated more obviously at the time, had we been given more whole of conference time, and if we had reflected more effectively at the time in what and how we were facilitating the interactions and discussions taking place then this and other insights could have been explored in more depth. In turn it may have provided the AoMO organisers and community with a greater understanding of and what might be needed for the future.

The CoT provided a touch point, a place that could be revisited. It became a place for people to meet over a cup of tea, a place where you could flex your creative and intellectual muscle, a place where you could simply stand and reflect. It became a place where ideas and thoughts were made visible and people could interact with them by simply observing or adding to. People were free to come and go from our city, from their city. As a result, the CoT grew and developed its own creative energy and expression, and isn't that what a creative learning community should offer? The following comments provide further insights about the experiences of those who chose to actively engage with the CoT:

> I loved the idea of the City of Thought, and I also liked that there were some guidelines/rules set out at the beginning. Because of the packed itinerary it was hard to find the time to actually make something, but once I put my mind to it something began to form. What I created wasn't really what I started out thinking I'd do, and I found myself partly responding to the materials provided and as I worked a vision began to form around a kind of Mexican mandala-like snake picture I'd been given as a gift. I mention this, as the image has since become something which continues to sustain me, and as soon as I got home I found the mandala and placed it opposite my bed so it is the first thing I see each morning and the last thing I see at night. I find an energy in it, that didn't exist for me before.

> I thought the installation was well situated, and it was good to see creations appearing each day, giving something new to explore and reflect upon all the time. I think on the whole it was pretty difficult to figure out what many of the

individual pieces represented, but that provided conversation starters when the creators were present. Many people didn't stick within the original constraints and I thought that was to be expected but in some ways a shame, because as a designer I like the extra creative effort that having constraining demands. On the other hand I think there was a point at which either the rules needed to be explicitly lifted or changed. With an emergent installation like this I think it does well to have a narrative or story, so that participants can experience a journey of sorts, and I feel that aspects of that could have been (better) facilitated. Given the time constraints there wasn't enough time to see something properly, self-organise and evolve so I think it ended up still in its initial phase of semi-chaotic construction – possibly a reflection of where the field of arts in business stands.

On the train back from York in September, I could think of nothing else apart from the City of Thought (COT). COT had a profound effect on me and I had taken a lot of photos and had a lot of ideas about the experience, the process, how the process could be built upon, how I could use with my own students. I found the disagreements over town planning to be intriguing. I felt it was no bad thing at a generally very appreciative conference to have a bit of tension/argument creeping in. The issues actually mattered to participants, they were not just debating points. Leaving aside the dated inappropriate harsh criticism that some academics are capable of, there is perhaps too little emotional content in a modern academic conference. I like the way that someone put their painting into the church. Improvised beyond the rules.

I think the CoT was a bold idea. It did need a stronger set of community building efforts around it. I loved where it was located and I enjoyed the debate. I'd prefer it to be called a "city of thinking". Also I wonder what would happen if you just did it minimally and made it even more emergent. Just the materials, a big space and a big sign "City of Thought" and no other instructions - what might emerge then? But I think you could really experiment more with the idea - it was a bold thing at our conference.
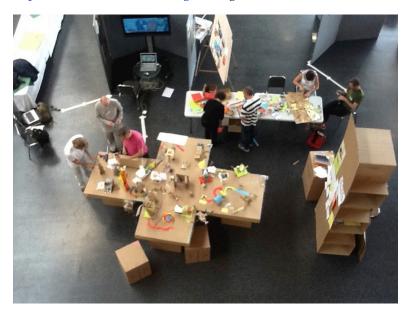
Figure 5: The City of Thought in action

From my observation the CoT project was a valuable and rather unique offering to the AoMO conference. Hindsight is a great teacher and although it did many of the things we intended, I do think it could have done more. However, it provided a creative place for people to engage with their hearts, minds, emotions, and their intellect and with one another; it provided a way for some of the AoMO community to self-reflect.

2011 and 2013 ALARA conferences

ALARA (Action Learning and Action Research Association) is a strategic network of people, interested in using action research and action learning to generate collaborative learning, research and action to transform workplaces, schools, colleges, universities, communities, voluntary organisations, governments and businesses. ALARA's vision is that action research and action learning will be widely used and publicly shared by individuals and groups, creating local and global change for the achievement of a more equitable, just, joyful, productive, peaceful and sustainable society (http://www.alarassociation.org/).

I've now had the opportunity to facilitate a creative community building process for both the 2011 and 2013 ALARA conferences. In 2011 I designed and facilitated a process whereby delegates worked with a range of images at the beginning, middle and end to introduce themselves and to reflect on and share their experience of the conference. Images were chosen as the tool of articulation (Lloyd and Hill, 2013) as they provide people with other ways of reflecting and knowing and have the potential to provide insight into the human condition (Weber, 2008). At the opening of the 2011 conference, the images were used as a community building process and a way to encourage people to connect with one another beyond everyday language. Given the conference was based on workshop presentations and discussions, this was an opportunity for delegates to work in silence and to experience another way of connecting with their fellow delegates. At the end of the process there would be time for people to discuss the process and their images.

From my observation this simple process proved to be challenging for some delegates who found it difficult and even rather confronting to work in silence. It took quite some time for people to relax and settle into the experience and to quietly engage and experience each other in another way. There were two other touch points throughout the conference: one at the middle and one at the end where delegates again selected images which provided them with a way to reflect on their conference experience and share that with their colleagues. The idea of having a whole conference community building was well received and it was decided that space would be given to another community building process for the 2013 conference.

For the 2013 conference I had the opportunity to collaborate with a colleague. With our mutual interests in creative expression and "other ways of knowing'" (Eisner, 2008) we were both motivated to design and facilitate a range of experiential and creative modalities such as movement, physical interactions, images, stories and other creative expressive forms. We were both inspired to encourage participants to experience "sensory" responses (Eisner, 2008).

This whole-person learning (Heron, 1989) draws on "bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence" (Gardner, 2004) 'somatic knowing' (Matthews, 1998) "bodily kinaesthesia" (McCaughtry and Rovegno, 2001), "sensuous encountering" and "bodying forth" (Seeley and Heron, 2008). These concepts embrace the link between mind and body, and the meaning and learning that is generated through our bodies. The body is ever present in our interactions, communications, how we learn, and our way of being in the world (Illeris, 2009; Jarvis, 2009). Presentational knowing emerges from experiential knowing and provides the first form of expressive meaning (Seeley and Reason, 2008). This can be seen by way of body gestures (glances, sighs and held breath etc), and through the body as mediated by the materials and tools used as channels for expression such as sound, sculpture, dance, story, drawing and movement (Seeley and Reason, 2008; Heron and Reason, 2006).

Often conferences focus heavily on the intellect and tend to forget about the body. Generally there is a lot of sitting, standing, listening and talking at conferences. On the whole, conferences do not deliberately include the body as part of the learning experience and we both felt strongly about deliberately including the body in the process. The idea is that "knowing is a multiple state of affairs" (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). At this point I would like to bring in the voice of Deb Lange, my co-facilitator and co-designer and share her thoughts on how she also envisaged our community building process. The following is an abridged version of her perspective.

I asked myself how do you create community throughout the conference? This was my intention as Cathryn Lloyd and I designed and facilitated the community creating aspects in the 2013 ALARA conference.

What tends to happen when people arrive at a conference?

They know some people, they don't know others, they may connect with new people and they may not, they may have deep conversations or light ones. Often there is a tendency to sense presenters versus the participants, to feel there are those who talk and those who listen, and for people to be stuck in those roles. There are those with much "wisdom"

and those with little. The idea was to intentionally mess around with this and to create a space of:

- *Equal players*

- *Being seen*

- *Seeing others*

- *Having a voice*

- *Being a listener*

- *Being present in whole body*

This was done through connecting as a whole: giving people permission to look around, to bump into each other, to connect with bodies and eyes before starting rich conversations. Taking on roles as "Leaders" and "Followers"; Followers and Leaders where there was an invitation for anyone to initiate simple hand movements or voices and have others follow along, mirroring movements and voices. Here anyone can be a leader, a follower and roles are interchangeable allowing for a feeling of equanimity. Connecting in pairs one-on-one, where participants could quickly connect to a person's history, have a shared experience in a very short space of time, and connect to a number of people quickly, although at the same time meaningfully.

People are invited to listen for 30 seconds and to talk for 30 seconds on random and as a result have their first experience in the community of having a voice, and being heard. This creates the safety of building relationships on topics where you are an expert in your topic! The intention of the process allows everyone in the community to connect with a small number of people 1:1, and to have an incremental influence of feeling connected to the whole community.

Figure 6: ALARA Conference: delegates make their contribution

With this as a background story, Deb and I developed a series of processes to allow and encourage participants to interact and share their conference experience in other ways. These activities were a mixture of movement, dialogue, no dialogue, gestures, and other embodied relationship-building actions. I created a "graphics" wall, a visual place that people could visit and write their reflection, make their marks and offer their reflections about their conference experience. All of these processes were designed and facilitated to allow delegates to "warm up" to each other, build trust and rapport, help dissolve some of our initial defence mechanisms, and in turn develop an open learning community. I know from experience that not everyone is comfortable with this type of approach. People are always free to participate or not and it is their choice. My concern is that if we play it safe and leave out the experiential, creative and embodied learning processes, then we are potentially missing out on the possibility of new learning and insights due to the inclusion of these creative and artistic methods. "These forms of representation give us access to expressive possibilities that would not be possible without their presence" (Eisner, 2008, p. 5). Overall, the responses we had from

the 2013 ALARA delegates was positive, in relation to our
community-building approach.

Back to the TEDx Kurilpa Conference

We've now come full circle and I return to the TEDx Kurilpa
Conference. There are a number of factors that I found helped
cultivate and build relationships at this conference. There was a
deliberately facilitated "meet and greet" by the conference
organisers and volunteers for the delegates as they arrived.
Delegates were randomly placed into small groups and
encouraged to reflect on why they had applied to attend the
conference and to share their views and ideas about "A New
Australian Dream", which was the overarching theme of the
conference.

Lunch was orchestrated in a way that allowed delegates and
presenters to interact. Delegates were given different tokens so
that they had lunch with people they hadn't necessarily met. The
venue organised rugs and cushions for people to sit on and an
inviting atmosphere was created. When I looked around I could
see people eating, engaged in conversation, relaxing and listening
to the music on offer. This is rather simple organisation but it does
require thought and recognition that it might be worth investing
time, energy and money to actively facilitate how people interact
and connect with one another.

I decided I would offer a similar approach to the Ideas Festival.
Delegates would be invited to participate and self-organise by
selecting one of the conference themes and spending time with
other delegates interested in the same topic. The TEDx Kurilpa
conference was called "The New Australian Dream" and from the
various presentations that were scheduled, a number of themes
had emerged: Culture, Education, Creativity and Innovation,
Family and Society, Health, and Environment. These were offered
as the catalysts for exploration.

Delegates were invited to share their dreams and visions with their
groups and finally share their group "stories" by way of a creative
act using limited words. I ran with some of quick, playful

improvisational activities and then delegates had about 45 minutes with their groups. This allowed people some time to get to know each other, explore the topic and find a way to creatively share their ideas with the rest of the conference delegates. In making knowledge visible and moving away from the spoken word some things may get lost in translation but overall, more can be gained. The succinct, creative, embodied, storytelling that took place said so much more in a few minutes than lengthy discussions often do. As the saying goes "a picture says a thousand words" and also allows for interpretation.

Although initially challenging (creative experiential processes can take people out of their comfort zone) the results often speak for themselves. If people are inspired and motivated they will rise to the challenge of engaging with one another in all sorts of creative ways. At this conference we saw six thoughtful, embodied and thought provoking "stories". Later people commented about the creativity and coherence that happened in a very short time with a group of strangers. At the end of the day delegates were invited to return to their self-organised groups to reflect on the day and discuss their experience, to see if and how their thinking had transformed throughout the day. As a public declaration, delegates were also invited to share with one another what action they would take over the following weeks.

Delegates were very positive about their experience. The survey results taken at the time revealed that 73% thought the conference was excellent and there was a positive response to the "community building" process. One of the features that I deduced worked well with community building is that the official TEDx presenters also took part in the interactive session. As a result there were conference delegates and "formal" presenters co-creating. This was an opportunity for the whole conference to establish a shared sense of what was important. It was an opportunity for individuals to work in groups around a theme that they were interested in, to conceive how they could creatively represent their shared dream and vision to one another.

At the end of the day there was an informal gathering at a local bar. When I walked in people were well and truly in a celebratory

mode. The networking was well and truly in motion and the community continued to build.

So what does all of this mean?

The conferences referred to in this paper are ones with which I have creatively and actively been involved. In part my involvement is driven by my own need and desire to have conference experiences and ways of engaging with my fellow delegates that are different to conventional approaches. I have deliberately sought to influence these conferences and bring about a creative and community building agenda. I have offered collaborative and creative learning experiences as a way to engage, inspire, connect and potentially bring people to action. I have sought to do this because I believe it is a worthwhile thing to do. Inevitably there are challenges along the way and there is more that can be done to help make conferences, rich and holistic creative learning communities.

Seeley and Reason (2008, p. 3-4) highlight the dominant discourse in research and the "orthodox empirical and rational Western views of knowing." In many instances I think that discourse plays out in conference environments. Knowledge, information and creativity need to be explored, shared in all sorts of ways and are fertile ground for co-creation. Conferences planned and resourced with creativity and many kinds of artistic expressions and creative interventions have the potential to engage more of people than their heads and in turn, build a collaborative and creative learning community.

While the success of a conference may be what the individual makes of it, and while people will self-organise, it is equally the responsibility of the conference organisers to offer and facilitate innovative ways for people to create and connect. By doing so there is a greater chance of building a more robust and potentially action oriented learning community. This means careful consideration for how people interact, generate new thinking, and find new ways to research and address complex issues. There are self-organising methodologies such as Open Space Technology (Harrison Owen, 1997; 2008) and the dialogic World Cafés (Brown

and Isaacs, 2005) that contribute to a new collective learning paradigm. These ways of bringing people together to share ideas, information and take action are certainly a way forward and are increasingly being embraced as a way to engage communities. We also need places for innovative and inspirational researchers and practitioners to share their stories, dreams and visions, and conferences are a good vehicle for that. There is room for both.

If conferences are places in which knowledge is created and exchanged and where solutions to complex issues might be found, rather than leave it to chance, we need to incorporate creative and reflective learning experiences as a valuable addition to our conference learning environments. In the 21st Century it is time for creative expression and arts-based learning methodologies to be embedded in our conference environments, to help facilitate holistic ways of learning and other ways of knowing.

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Biography

As the Director of Maverick Minds Dr Cathryn Lloyd is an experienced facilitator and creative development coach. Cathryn loves working with others to create a space for genuine inquiry, learning, creativity and change. She has experience across the arts, design, education, and business management sectors. She holds a doctoral degree in Creative Industries.

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