



CD QLD Community Development Conference

Moreton Bay

Monday 16th October 2023

Building Better Communities

Les Halliwell Memorial Address
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Community Praxis Co-Op

This year's community development conference theme is *Regenerating our community: getting our hands dirty*.

There's something about this theme that resonates with anyone who's attempted to engage with and build community where they live, the theme reminds us of the grounded nature of this work – it's not something you can do from afar, in your head, in your office, or in front of a computer screen. It requires being present in the dirt, it challenges our avoidance and reminds us that the work is often messy, and a bit raw and uncomfortable at times. The theme also reminds us that, like all life, it requires regeneration.

Unfortunately, most of the investment in the name of community goes to institutions, infrastructure and services, yet for all the attempts to regenerate community through mechanistic processes like these, very little really changes. When was the last time you saw a **restructure** revitalise your community or a new **service** reinvigorate people to create change? Hmmm, I don't think so.... Our

systems are challenged by the messiness of community, so we need alternative ways to foster regeneration.

For many years we've grappled with how we bring relationship building to the forefront of our work, and concepts such as "place-based approaches", "citizen-led action", "community leadership" and "community empowerment" have emerged as mantras to try to capture this evasive element in community work. At the heart of all these approaches is the focus on "the people".

It is fitting that at each CD conference this address is given in memory of Les Halliwell, a man who had a simple but profound mantra:

"Go to the people, listen to the people, trust the people".

In understanding who Les Halliwell was I quote from Lynda Shevellar's address at the 2015 CD conference held in Logan:

What makes Les Halliwell so important to us is that he was the first person to be appointed to a speciality position in CD in Queensland and his interest was in building community organisations. He is responsible for so many of the organisations that continue today.... One of the reasons we celebrate his work through this address and at the CD Qld conference is that his work was unashamedly local community development work. (Shevellar 2015:4)

In attempting to keep with this beautiful tradition, the story I will tell this evening is about a community building course that invests in people at a neighbourhood level – not just in individuals or institutions – an investment in people in their place, where they live, work and play.

If we think of our communities as the soil where regeneration takes place, then surely the practice of community building is "getting our hands dirty".

Outline of address:

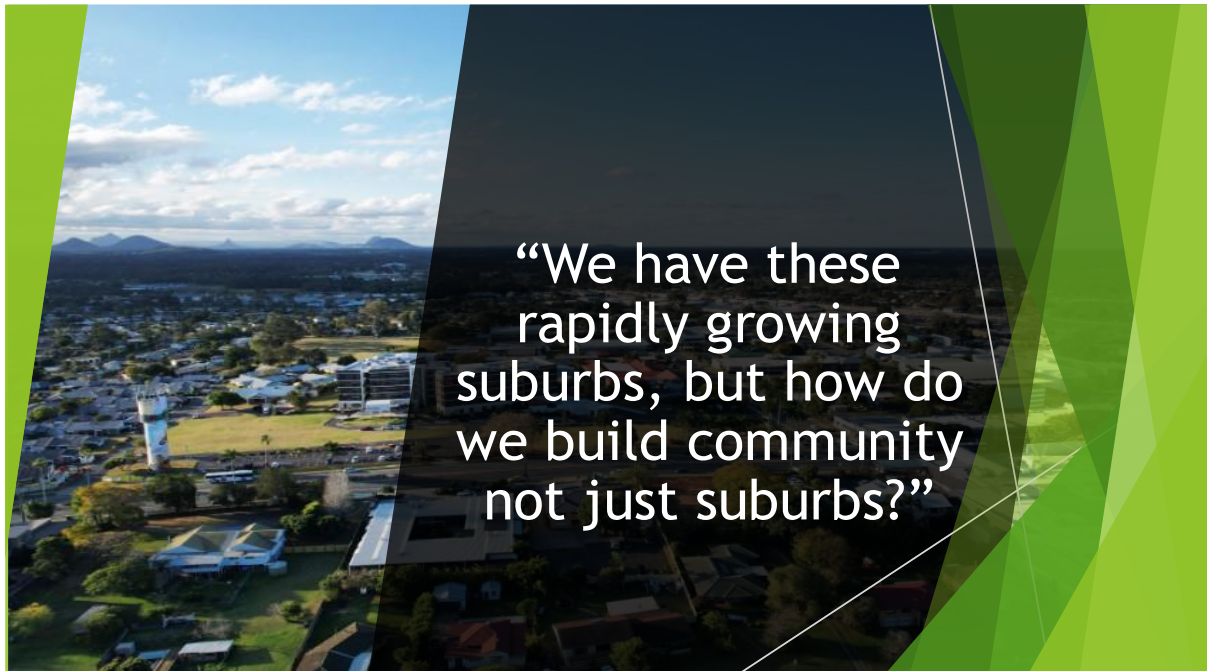
So, to tell the story of this community building course tonight we will have a look at the history and a brief overview of the purpose of the course. We'll then hear from a panel of course participants who are sitting with me here tonight, and they'll share about their experiences of the course. I will then outline five key processes at play in each community building course and I'll provide a snapshot of the course contents, and then to finish I will leave you a simple yet profound challenge – one learned from the course through our experimenting in community building.

The history:

It began in 1999. I was working as Social Planner with the then Caboolture Shire Council in a role that provided me with scope to work with elected Councillors around social issues in their communities.

One Councillor I had the delight to work with in my time at Caboolture Shire Council was Chris Minetti, whose area took in Burpengary Narangba. At the time the growth rate in this area was one of the fastest in the nation and houses were going up more quickly than you could spell the word COMMUNITY!!

Chris was a very grounded local government councillor and was actively involved with the community groups in the area. One day she was talking with me in frustration about the population growth in the area and posed a very wise question:



It was this question that led to the idea of bringing together residents to explore this notion of building community in Burpengary Narangba. So, I asked my friends Dave Andrews and Peter Westoby who had recently formed Community Praxis Co-op to develop a short course for residents. It became known as the Building Better Communities (or BBC) training.

Dave Andrews at the time stated that the training was:

intended to help people explore their potential to develop acceptance and respect, spirituality and compassion, solidarity and participation, responsibility and competence, both individually and collectively, within the context of their own community. (Andrews in Community Praxis Co-op 2006:9)

Peter Westoby added to this, that the training would be:

experiential, practical, relatable, a mix of stories and ideas, dialogical, experimental. (Westoby 2023)

The first course was a resounding success and all 12 participants revealed that their capacity to get involved in their communities was enhanced through:

- increased confidence,
- improved skills and
- new connections.

These three outcomes have become the base indicators to measure the value of courses to participants.

A fourth indicator that flowed on from achieving these three was an increase in the quantity and quality of community initiatives and projects.

Outcomes



Increased confidence of participants



Enhanced community work skills



Improved connectedness between people & groups



Increased number of community projects undertaken.

Once word got out others wanted their own BBC course in their neighbourhood, so Caboolture Shire Council explored ways to resource the running of courses across the Shire. Meanwhile, Community Praxis Co-op was looking at ways to enhance and deliver the training and set it up as a course that could be run in any location. Over time as Caboolture Shire amalgamated into Moreton Bay the course also became known as Connected Communities. The course has since been run over 100 times in a variety of locations across QLD. I finished working at Caboolture Council in 2002 and since then have joined Community Praxis Co-operative and delivered many courses.

Over 100 locations

Suburban neighbourhoods

Rapidly growing new communities

Young people and schools

First nations groups

Rural towns & regional settings

Residential caravan parks

Communities diagnosed as disadvantaged ☹️

People with diverse cultural & linguistic backgrounds

The BBC Course (an overview):

The premise we begin with in a BBC course is that no one can build community, but we can create the environment in which community is built. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said:

A person who loves their dream of community tends to destroy it. But a person who loves people creates community wherever he (or she) goes, (Bonhoeffer 1939/2009).

We are all perhaps guilty of the former (whether intentionally or innocently) but the more we attempt to fill our community spaces with ideology about what community is, how it's supposed to look, and we passionately promulgate such, we can become guilty of destroying the very thing we seek to create.

The more I am involved in running BBC courses the more that the latter part of Bonhoeffer's comment resonates and is actually liberating, as our mandate becomes to 'build capacity of people **to love** people' as that is what will build community.

In 2012 I wrote a chapter about the BBC course in Peter Westoby and Lynda Shevellar's book *Learning and Mobilising for Community Development*. I wrote then:

We wanted to promote the idea of community building as a process rather than an outcome.... One way to create such spaces and to enable community members to shift from passive citizenship to active leadership is to initiate community leadership training. (Buckley in Westoby & Shevellar 2012:95)

11 years on and this still rings true... in a nutshell the course has been a catalyst for active citizenship.

Our Panellists:

There have been many, many people who have participated in a BBC course. This evening I have invited three previous participants as well as Jody Blackburn from Caloundra Community Centre to join with me to talk about their experiences of participating in a BBC course and what community building means to them. We had four but unfortunately, Rebecca Bellis had to pull out for personal reasons. They will share aspects of their experience of the training and share some key learnings about how the course has assisted them to build community where they live. Each of them attended very different types of courses in different contexts. I will ask them to introduce themselves to you and share their experience:

Our Panellists

- ▶ Jody Blackburn from Caloundra
- ▶ Nariah from Baringa
- ▶ Liam from Baringa
- ▶ Feather from Pomona



Jody Blackburn – Caloundra Community Centre (CCC) speaking about the role of a host agency in running BBC courses in the Glass House Country region on the Sunshine Coast.

Glass House Country identifies as the communities from Beerburrum in the south, Peachester to the west and up to Mooloolah in the north – the area between the coastal strip and the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. This is a fast-growing area which is attracting residents from across all age groups and diverse cultural backgrounds and has many local groups and organisations. The Hinterland Community Development Program, currently held by CCC, has its origins in a grassroots community-led and held initiatives. It funds a community development worker (CDW) to continue their original work which aims to strengthen community capacity to connect, participate, and respond to issues affecting them.

The CDW works primarily across the 3 communities of Glasshouse Mountains, Beerwah and Landsborough, alongside a range of volunteer-run formal and informal groups. These have included unfunded neighbourhood centres, community-initiated associations, seniors groups, residents action groups, housing advocacy groups and environmental groups to name a few. These relationships have informed the partnership with Community Praxis Co-op, with the BBC being the fertilizer that can nurture the seeds of healthy and grounded community building.

The role as host in this work:

The host role in the BBC had 5 key functions -

1. To generate interest through intentional conversations and extending personal invitations to participate to people in the CDW networks, as well as through the people's own networks.
2. To undertake general promotion and administrative tasks such as sharing on social media platforms, writing stories for local newspaper and generating promotional flyer; and emailing details to participants, organizing and funding room bookings and refreshments.
3. To be the key connection point between participants and the facilitator.
4. To support the facilitator with group dynamics and clarifying the local context as needed. This is reflective of the CDWs relationships and knowledge of participants and local issues and needs.
5. To follow-up with participants post-course through formal reflection on their experience, encouraging opportunities for ongoing peer support and connection between course participants, supporting them to apply what they've learnt to their initiatives, listening for interest in further learning, and feeding all this back to the facilitator.

I could add a 6th function in there, that being to make sure you laugh at Howard's "dad" jokes!

Our learnings about the BBCs:

- They create great opportunities to meet other locals, expand connections and develop new relationships that generate both bridging and bonding networks between participants.
- They enhance people's skills and confidence, and awakens their enthusiasm, to engage in another way of working and being with their communities and neighbourhoods.
- People gain skills and knowledge to transition beyond volunteerism to active citizenry.
- It can lead to more meaningful and relevant activities, projects and actions in their communities.
- It enables a shared language between community members that is nuanced and shared with the CDW, supporting how they work together and nurturing bonding social capital. This in turn contributes to building a community of people who have a shared understanding of a process for community building and so can support each other in their community work.

- Benefits can extend beyond people's original intention for participation. For example, one participant shared the course had led to significant changes in her personal relationships, providing her with a process to re-shape how she interacted with a family member that enabled her to re-establish a relationship with them after many years.
- Personal invitation through conversations with people with whom we have a relationship is by far the most effective way of generating interest in the course, regardless of whether the invitation is from the CDW or past participants.
- The value of investing in people, trusting that they are best placed to address the issues and opportunities presenting in their community.
- The importance of local, place-based agencies in hosting the courses – they know the people, the context, the resources, the capacity, the challenges and strengths. They are often in a relationship of reciprocity with their communities.

On a final note, from my experience of hosting the BBC course, I've observed it has a regenerative capacity, revitalizing and renewing the potential for active citizenry and stewardship of our communities and neighbourhoods.

Narlah & Liam, students from Baringa State Secondary College (the school has asked us not to use their surnames):

Both Narlah and Liam participated in a BBC course that comprised of eight students from Baringa State Secondary College and eight adults from the wider community who had expressed interest in wanting to work with young people by listening to them and developing projects together.

Narlah:

I am a Grade 8 student at Baringa State Secondary College, and I am here with my friend Liam to talk about community. Around mid-June this year I was lucky enough to take part in the Building Better Communities course in Aura. I came to the course looking for ways I could better involve myself in the community. Being new to the Sunshine Coast it was a great opportunity to meet people and make lasting connections.

It's the reason I am here now. As a student, this is all a learning experience, and during my time in the BBC course I have learned so much about what it really means to be part of a community. I'll admit at first, I wasn't as open to the idea of working with adults, but their welcoming nature and creative teaching methods inspired me.

Even now, after the course has ended, I continue to be positively influenced by these amazing people as I have become more confident expressing and involving myself in community.

Liam:

I am a Grade 9 student at Baringa State Secondary College. When I started the BBC course, I wasn't fully open to the idea of working with adults because of the age gap and the difference in skills and experience. Howard, Juanita and a few of the other people were very accommodating and kind to us. The Building Better Communities course helped us learn some great skills from communication skills to networking skills. Overall, I would recommend this course to everyone. Thank you.

Feather – participant in a BBC course run in Pomona (a small town in the rural area of the Noosa hinterland) in 2023:

Becoming a parent awakened me to the concept of community. Until then I had lived where community had not been modelled well within family and education settings. In the early 2000's with two small children, our family moved to this area looking for alternative education options. Raising children created opportunities for us to invent our own wheel, through a needs-based practice, to define our family's manifesto or curriculum through conscious parenting and a natural learning philosophy.

This homeschool lifestyle allowed us to operate within the community setting, with a focus on helping people, not only supporting other HS families, through rather experiencing how our Selves fit into the bigger picture of the different layers of community. For example, we regularly visited old people's homes to play and read and dance and sing with the clients.

My children are now in their early twenties. I continue to offer service in the community, often through artistic endeavours, like leading Carols in the Park at Christmas, or MCing the local talent night, or on the volunteer committee managing the local hall.

I found myself at the BBC course offered through the Pomona Community House earlier this year. Two lessons leap out for me:

1. That the term "active citizenship" really explains what it is that I have been doing all these years, and
2. I learned that in the past my method of doing community things, I have been a Community Hero type person - someone that leads the organising of things in an alone state. I now realise I need to create opportunities with teams of people, creating community memory, leading others to practices of making things happen.

COMMUNITY

A song written and performed by Feather during the address:

It wasn't long ago that we were living in a way that we knew just what to do
Being in smaller groups with long rich cultures, each of us had our value, so true
We've populated very fast and, in a few generations, lost our Selves
Now we seek connection and meaningfulness instead of sitting on the shelf

Consequently, we need courses to remember
Subsequently we need to change back very fast
Very gently trusting people and natural processes
At grass roots level where needs form the tasks at hand

Community (1st chorus)

- Is the blood of humanity (clap 1 2 3)
- Is the place where we need to be (clap 1 2 3)
- Remember what to do right now (clap 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 yay)

Community (2nd chorus)

- A place where life is strong (yes!)
- Giving service all day long (yes!!)
- Value all with their special job to do (1 2 3 4 5 6 7 yes!)

Throughout this next section, I will quote from course participants which have been gleaned from the three formal evaluations and numerous post-course surveys.

Evaluations

-  Reviving local communities: an evaluation of the community leadership training project
- August 2003 (10 courses)
-  Building Community on the Sunshine Coast evaluation report & video
- 2005 (6 courses)
-  Reweaving Connections: Evaluation Report
- Prepared by QUT 2019 (3 courses)

The Five Core Processes at play in each BBC course

5 core processes

- The role of story
- The role trainers play as animator and provocateur
- Learning from doing
- The role of being process educators
- Exploring the practice of discernment

I begin this part of my talk by stating that these five key processes are all based on a foundation of community understood through the lens of our **values** (what's important about community) and developing a **vision** of our hopes of what it could be.

We purposely avoid the often-unhelpful task of defining community. It is the process of shaping and re-shaping our understanding of community through interaction with others that is a key part of the learning methodology.

1. **The role of story** - a fundamental premise of each course is that it uses participants' stories and stories of practice from trainers that weave in theoretical underpinnings and transferrable concepts.

All of our experiences when woven together become a tapestry of stories. Some stories are easy to tell as they piece together nicely, yet some stories need to be re-woven by awakening our memories and imagination. The course always starts with and builds on the stories of participants, using activities that draw on participant's experiences of being part of something with others. Again, I quote the 2012 book:

The trainers will also use their own stories of community building experiences, often relating their own struggles, in an attempt to create a space in the group where it is safe for participants to share their painful or confronting stories. This acts as a leveller and helps break down the 'my story is not really worth sharing' syndrome. The use of this strategy also requires the trainers to become vulnerable to the group. (Buckley in Westoby & Shevellar 2012:98)

Often these stories are about **building on the strengths** of what already exists. The mantra of the Assets Based Community Development approach articulated by Cormac Russell comes to mind:

Focus on what's strong, not what's wrong (Russell, 2022)

This is key in the beginning of the course. We intentionally ask participants for their **positive** stories as that helps build the vibe in the group.

They are often stories of **mutual support**, echoing the notion that a chord of three strands is stronger than one. So many beautiful stories of community building have come from the tradition of people providing mutual support for each other.

I need to inject a caveat here, clarifying the difference between mutual support and delivering services to people. One of the classic mantras of community development practice is the movement away from **services to and for others** to creating relationships based on reciprocity and mutual support – the notion we call "**with**".

Again, to abbreviate Cormac Russell in his wonderful book *Rekindling Democracy*,

we all love good services, but services do not make a good life...they cannot build community (Russell, 2020)

It is interesting that the people who have struggled most to settle into the rhythm of community building are those entwined in a service tradition who can't step out of 'helper' mode. They're too institutionalised. Again, I quote Cormac Russell,

Don't be helpful, be interested (Russell, 2020:159)

Often stories are of **resistance** – moments where people are brought together to challenge and address forces that seek to destroy or inhibit the building of community.

These stories are not those that yell 'victory' from the roof tops – they are those of resilience, of solidarity with those who have been wounded by the loss of community and of a deepening ache for change. These stories like no other reveal our common struggle and awaken our connection to broader movements. Often these stories echo the words of the gifted songwriter Leonard Cohen's in the magical song "Hallelujah":

love is not some kind of victory march, no it's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah (Cohen 1984)

How many battles are lost when tangling with the powers of corporate greed, bureaucratic inaction, or the narcissistic egos of those wielding power, yet there is a sweetness experienced through the power of people coming together.

And sometimes our stories are about **mourning** our loss of community. These stories can lead us to a rich, deeper connection when they become reflective moments for change. However, another caution: we need to be careful that our reflection doesn't drift us into the dreamy space of romanticising the past, and myopically beating a drum for 'the good old days'.

No-one pines for the glory days of the past more than someone not being alive to opportunities of the present.

The use of storytelling in BBC courses enables participants to really hear each other. One participant shared that:

Hearing other participants' ideas, stories and plans for community building, and then applying/discussing the methodology in relation to each person's ideas, and analysing pitfalls was really useful. (BCOSC, 2005:5)

This is summed up so beautifully by another participant:

I loved the whole experience from start to finish. I enjoyed the people. My fellow participants all brought something unique to the meetings which I later realised were the different seeds that you plant in the forest that makes up community. Each had different agendas, ideas and inspirations but there was a kindred spirit. (Powers, 2023)

2. **The role the trainers play as animator and provocateur** – to build a collective safe space for learning that enables gentle challenge of both our understanding and practice.

The trainers do not assume a role as experts, but rather enablers guiding the group through an enjoyable journey of participative learning together. During this journey the trainer is sometimes the animator, sometimes the provocateur, but never the expert.

The animator:

Animating is quite different from group facilitation and much different to teaching or lecturing. In animating, or "bringing the group to life", we create a safe space for participants to reveal who they are to others in the group at a comfortable level. One participant wisely shared with us in an evaluation:

It's like discovering ourselves in relationship with others (Post-course survey)

We often half-jokingly remind most groups at some point during a course "the course doesn't offer group therapy..." But... it is a safe place to explore some of our vulnerabilities that intersect between the private and public nexus when we get involved in our communities.

As one participant told us:

On a personal level, with all that shit that goes down – sometimes I feel like we're going to hell in a handbasket. So, it was very inspiring and rewarding to get together with other people who want to make a difference and will give up four nights [of their life]. It fuels up the hope tank. Humanity is worth it. (Reweaving Connections Report, 2019:10)

We are often dealing with serious issues or matters that tend to evoke earnestness so we intentionally inject humour (most of it very bad) and try to make the activities light and energising.

When people are energised, they will act and usually those actions will build further energy, when people are depleted of energy they may still act but as the tanks gets closer and closer to empty the actions feel harder and are less enjoyable. Finding joy in what we do is critical for our sustainability in community building.

The provocateur:

The provocateur role is played out when challenges are required with the goal of transformational learning. This gentle art enables people to learn new practices.

For example: each BBC course introduces people to the practice of dialogue. Our evaluations reveal that it is probably the most valuable practice learnt in the course. We use activities that assist participants to shift their communication behaviour to be more dialogical. Sometimes it is confronting.

One participant reported this effect about dialogue method:

Dialogue!!! Was really helpful. It didn't affect my existing community group, as we were already established. But it .. prompted me to question how I communicate in other groups and relationships. How am I communicating? Am I listening? Or not letting the conversation evolve? (Reweaving Connections Report, 2019:15)

We often hear feedback lamenting why they people hadn't learnt this practice earlier in life. A recent course participant shared this common retort:

We don't learn these skills at school. (Hoge 2023)

The end goal is to bring about a transformational mind-shift that leads to a change in practice. This transformative education is expressed in this feedback:

It was a truly wonderful experience, one I am very grateful for, thank you to all involved. In my 10 years of volunteering in our local community the things I have been taught in the course were not things that I could have ever been learnt 'on the job'. I feel much better equipped to continue work in the community having completed the course. (Glass House Country BBC participant post-course survey: 2022)

3. Learning from doing – the notion of experimenting and being courageous enough to try new things and gracious enough to learn from our mistakes.

We aim to create spaces for experimentation. The Gandhian phrase “**Experimenting with truth**” is one that is introduced to each course. It's a mantra that captures the essence of learning through doing. It gives us the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them and then have another go.

The course has built in opportunities for participants to experiment in their community by either connecting with someone they don't already know in their neighbourhood to build a new relationship; Developing an initiative in a group that they are already part of; or Starting a new initiative or community project from scratch.

The most successful courses are where participants have embraced this notion of *learning from doing* and applied their community building experiments to enact change where they live. This feedback reveals how this worked for one participant:

The knowledge and skills we learnt allow us to work with our community in a more informed way. The BBC course reminded me of my values around building community and increased my passion and motivation. It also increased my confidence by giving me a framework to guide my practices. I learnt new skills and found out I was already doing some things in line

with community building principles. I came away from the course with new tools that I actually apply in my volunteer roles and a thirst to learn more about community development theory and practice. (Hoge 2023)

The role of reflective practice is essential for people to learn through doing.

Another participant put it this way:

There was just the right mix of theory and practice, talking and reflection and being and doing. (Powers 2023)

1. **The role of Process Educator** - trust in process, trust in the method.

Becoming a **process educator** is a significant shift for many doing the course. As we all know when we are in the thick of community building it is a difficult thing to be able disentangle yourself from the manic quest of outcomes and outputs, and actions and reactions. We can get lost in the doing, doing, doing...

The role of being a process educator is an intentional one. It requires a person to be engaged by being present and involved (yes getting their hands dirty), but at the same time it requires that person to be observing what is going on around them, to consider 'what we see and how we see' as well as the famous Tagore principle of "seeing through the eyes of the other".

We can then be more considered and intentional in what we're doing as one participant stated:

she was able to fine-tune some strategies, and use these "deliberately" in her discussions, "rather than accidentally." She reported that, in her community role, she had consciously used the 0-1-3 principle taught within the course when making links with people in an effort to begin a book club. (Local Answers Project Report, 2005:2)

Another example of this was how a participant embraced the practice of "Holding your agenda lightly".

This simple phrase has become a guide for everything I do - whether it is community-building projects or in my personal relationships. At our community organisation, it's become part of our everyday language. (Hoge 2023)

In taking on a process educator role many participants have made significant contributions in their communities, not by being a leader or hero 'out the front', but by being the observer, the enquirer, the challenger, the one who is able to use their reflections to create a common leadership and learning for others involved.

2. **Exploring the practice of discernment**

Understanding vested interests versus community interests comes up in nearly every course. It arises because community cannot be considered in a vacuum and will always be shaped and influenced by politics of some type.

As our Foreign Minister Penny Wong once said:

You can choose not to be interested in politics, but you can't choose not to be affected by it. (Wong in Russell, 2020:87)

The very notion of community building is a political act, as even the act of building social connections and growing our social capital is an affront to the neo-liberal systems that dominate our world order. Therefore, it is incumbent on anyone who seeks to be involved in community building to be aware of the influences shaping, building and destroying community. We know there are those who seek to

use their vested interest to influence community outcomes under the pretence of community building.

They are like rats scurrying behind the skirting boards of democracy gnawing away at the wiring of good governance and eroding trust in our institutions. It's no wonder we have such significant levels of political apathy and citizen fatigue in our society. Barry Jones summed this up in his autobiography, *A Thinking Reed* in 2006:

The political process has been deformed, parliaments have lost much of their moral authority, the public service has adopted the cult of managerialism and been increasingly politicised, universities have become trading corporations, the media is preoccupied with infotainment, while lobbying and use of consultants ensures that vested interest is more influential than community interest (Jones, 2006).

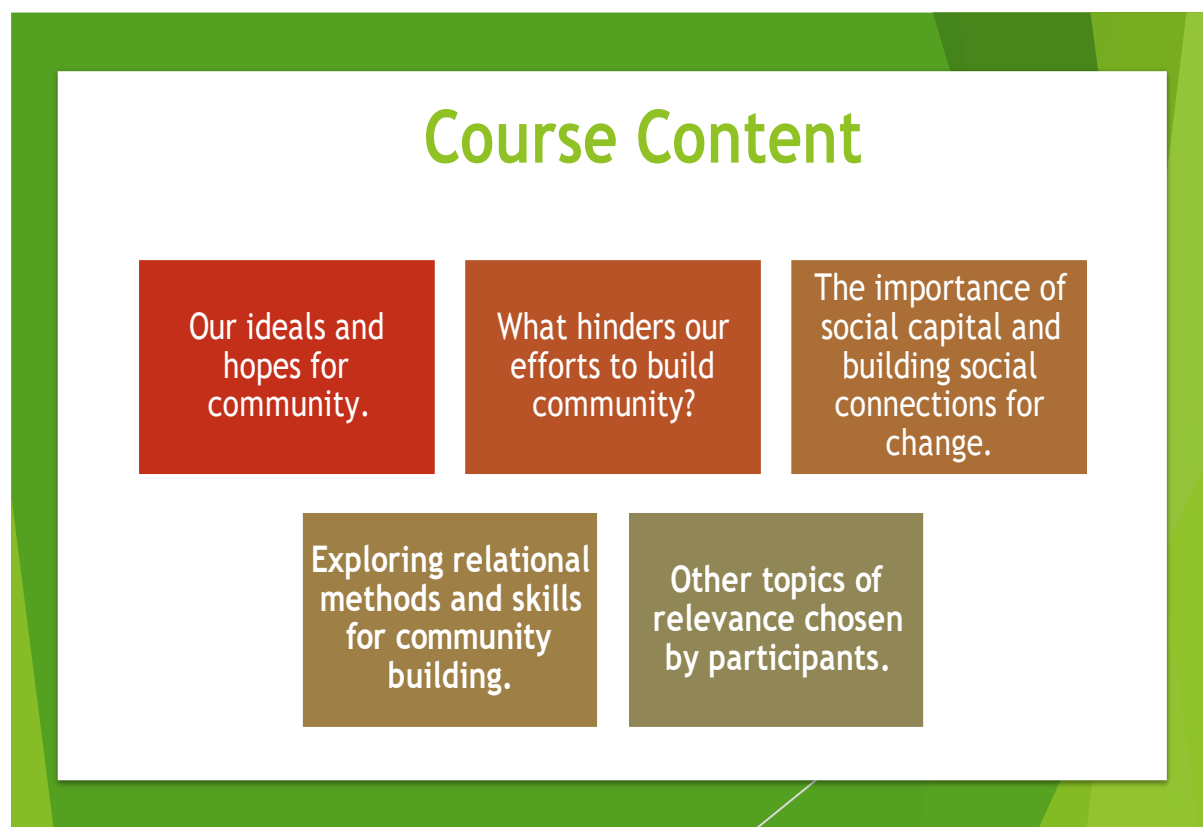
Sadly, he could have said this yesterday...

Hugh Mackay's 2019 book *Australia Re-imagined* takes up this theme and puts forward a compelling analysis of how over the past few decades Australia has lost trust in its religious, political, civic, educational and financial institutions. We need only look at the last decade of royal commissions and government enquiries that have revealed a greater and deeper level of dysfunction thriving in these institutions. This insidious erosion of trust can only be healed by elevating community interest above vested interest.

The inevitability of being entangled in politics needs to be explored so people can sharpen their ability to discern vested interest from community interest, so they can intentionally and thoughtfully build the connections and alliances that are helpful and strategic to enhance that community interest.

The BBC Course Content:

I'll now briefly provide you with an overview of the course contents of the BBC course.

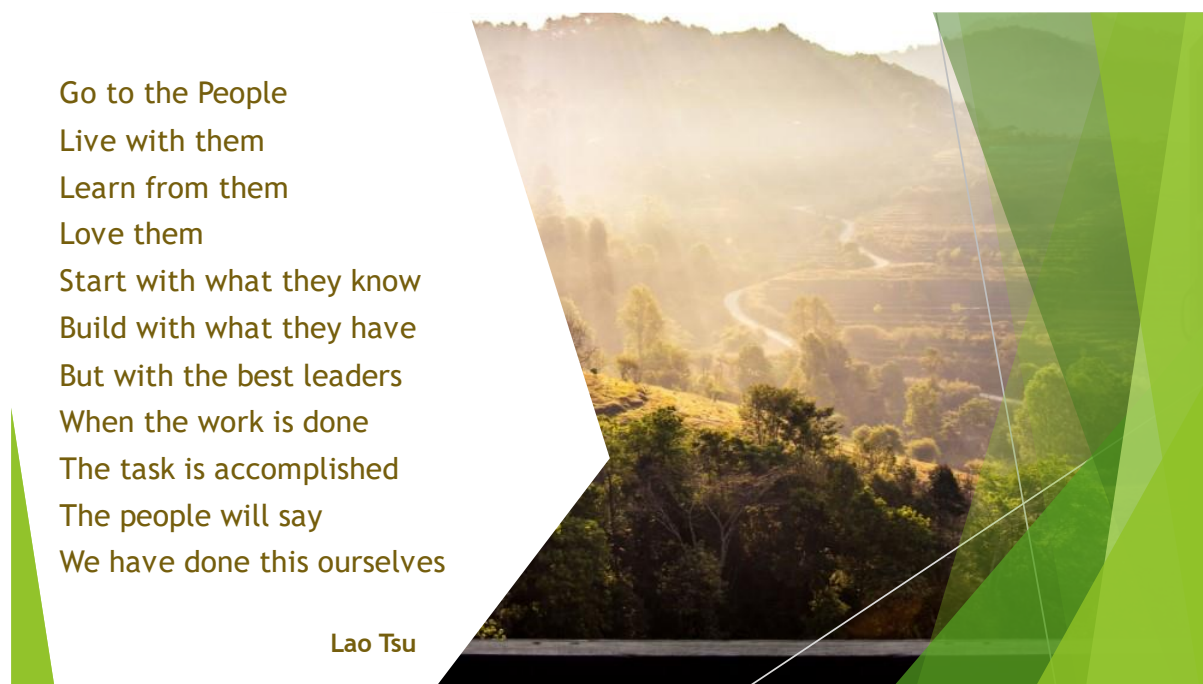


There are 4 key content areas in each course:

1. Our ideals and hopes for community.
2. What hinders our efforts to build community?
3. The importance of social capital and building social connections for change.
4. Exploring relational methods and skills for community building, and

In the remaining sessions we explore other topics of relevance chosen by participants.

Each course we introduce the Lao Tsu poem as it sums up so much of what we understand about community building and is used to explore key processes leading to a concise and relevant benchmark for our practice:



Conclusion:

As part of my conclusion tonight I pondered the question of what a course like the BBC training could offer our communities into the future. I asked Peter Westoby who co-designed the initial course this question. His response builds on much of what has been said tonight by the panel:

“With the current emphasis on leadership and volunteerism, this course offers a different kind of approach:

- cooperative community leadership (not heroic / individual)
- not volunteerism, but active citizenship - people getting involved in their community
- it offers people an opportunity in a grounded practical space to meet others in their neighbourhoods for in-depth conversation, dreaming and experimentation in change work
- it brings together different kinds of people (people in informal and formal leadership roles, the quiet salt-of-the earth kinds of people) to work together; and
- it's a course proven to be accessible to all kinds of groups. (Westoby, 2023)

I also asked two previous participants who have kept in touch with me via email. This is what they said:

With rates of isolation and loneliness increasing, the importance of providing motivated community members with skills and a framework for effectively and respectfully building community has never been higher. (Hoge 2023)

and

It's about making YOUR world a better place. it's giving you tools, ideas, and means to make something happen that matters to you and has the potential to matter to others. (Powers 2023)

What do I think?

On this past weekend (14 October 2023) we had the Voice referendum. The resounding 'No' vote reveals that there is a myriad of voices in the Australian population but collectively we continue to **not** hear the voices of our First Nations people. The fallout from the No vote will bring much analysis, but one thing is certain, the need for truth telling is paramount. Our communities (not just our governments) need to find ways to listen, respect and respond to our First Nations people. To understand the impacts of colonisation embedded in our nation's psyche. But, I wonder, do we have the maturity and care to create the spaces for this discourse?

Now more than ever we need each other, we need to be together, we need to sit in circles and listen to one another and find ways of building understanding and going forward together. We can continually talk about community capacity building as something we do **to** communities, but that's inadequate.

We need to reframe this and see ourselves **in** our communities, we need to be **in the soil and get our hands dirty**. There is so much distraction in our world today that to be present somewhere, connected with people in their context is needed so much. Social media is connecting people but we're seeing an increase in echo chambers, mostly of right-wing populism, full of divisive discourse.

We need to push back. We need to offer an alternative path – a path defined by bringing people together in safe, respectful spaces, by learning the practice of dialogue, by understanding our role in disruption, and by being brave enough to take collective action.

To conclude my address tonight I want to emphasise something, that in my opinion, is what's needed more than ever in our society today. It is demonstrated in the thoughtful words of one participant:

[The course] got me thinking about what community is. Previously, I had thought it was 'likeminded people', but I was struck by the necessity for diversity in community. (Reweaving Connections Report, 2019:11)

This 'necessity for diversity', can be shouted from the rooftops. The increasing erosion of our social cohesion is fuelled by xenophobia – the fear of strangers, the fear of the unknown.

We know that there is much xenophobia around us, and if we are honest, we will also attest to the xenophobia that exists within us. Some of it may have grown from our own trauma and dealings with others who have caused us pain, so we explain our wariness of strangers as a self-protection mechanism. We can also understand other's wariness as their protection mechanism, but if we all spend our time and focus on self-protection, we get nowhere in building community.

So how do we deal with this xenophobia? According to Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig, we need to create a new word and become Xenophiles – "Lovers of the stranger". We need to take risks, to take steps outside our comfort zone to embrace difference. It's not to convince everyone 'to think like us, act like us, behave like us' or conversely to lose ourselves in other's bubbles of

existence – its more that we need to create spaces where our protection ‘force field’ can be lowered and we can allow some of the “other” into our lives. Again, to quote Hugh Mackay, he advises us how simple activities can help create those spaces:

We build social capital and help to preserve social cohesion whenever we acknowledge another person: whenever we smile at a stranger; whenever we undertake volunteer work in the community; whenever we ask the neighbours in for a drink; whenever we greet people we encounter in the street, in a queue, in a lift, or beside us in a bus or train; whenever we join a local organisation or patronise a local coffee shop, library or post office and engage in some personal interaction with the people we see there. Smile. Say hello. That’s how we help build social capital; that’s how we help build social cohesion. (Mackay, 2018:157-58)

It is these foundational acts of engagement that open us to the possibility of embracing difference. But if you never put yourself in those spaces to use an Aussie euphemism “it aint gunna happen”. We need to not just tolerate or accept difference but to actually embrace it.

To finish I quote Michael Leunig who put this very poetically (as he always does):

If you're becoming weary and disillusioned with Australian values, ... or Western civilisation, I recommend strangers - they're such a glorious, redeeming wilderness to wander into. (Leunig, 2006)

Let’s practice being xenophiles and do some wandering...

Thank You

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