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Pivots, arts practice and potentialities: Creative engagement, community wellbeing and arts-led research during COVID-19 in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Pre-dating COVID-19 it was widely acknowledged that there was a loneliness epidemic and that prolonged loneliness and reduced human touch results in increased propensity to heart disease, stroke and clinical dementia. Given such statistics, and the use of isolation and shielding as a health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative that creative projects or research investigations embed strategies to address the potential fragmentation of community and increased difficulty of social connection. This discussion examines two Australian art-based projects – ‘A Place in Our Art’ and ‘Shorewell Presents ... Dear Friend’ – to illustrate the use of arts and cultural activities to maintain and support social connection. The article draws on arts-health and performance theory to unpack project design and outcomes of using both physical and virtual creative art-based engagement strategies in a crisis to entice continued participation and support wellbeing.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought unprecedented disruption to all aspects of life across the globe. Conducting research, particularly art-based fieldwork, was impossible in Australia for most of 2020 and into 2021. As much of the power and benefit of art-based research methods comes from the relationships formed through face-to-face activities and data collection, this disruption demanded innovation of processes or abandonment of projects. The two projects discussed in this article chose to pivot towards solutions to engage with communities during lockdowns in Australia, and each demonstrates potentially enduring ways of doing more such people-centred and inclusive arts and culture activities in ‘normal’ times.

The past twenty years has seen a dramatic increase in research into the effects of arts and cultural engagement on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities (Fancourt and Finn 2019: vii). Art-based researchers aim for an understanding of universal conditions and recognizable patterns where possible, as well as using methods that can be adapted and repeated by others, while also encouraging variation and even uniqueness in both methods and outcomes (McNiff 2011: 387). This is quite a lot to ask of any research methodology; however, art-based approaches do have the potential to shift and expand according to circumstances in community-based projects. The dynamic nature of art-based approaches makes room for the changing nature of communities such as participant attendance due to external issues, natural disasters and tragedies through ‘foregrounding lived experience’ to incorporate these events into the activities and outcomes (Killick 2020: 257). The combination of creativity and working with communities has always required adaptability, and this was tested further during the COVID-19 pandemic requiring unprecedented flexibility on the part of researchers, project leaders and participants.

This article discusses how two projects, initially conceived for face-to-face delivery, maintained a people-centred focus in response to COVID-19 and demonstrate the adaptability and inclusivity of art-based approaches discussed above. The two case studies included in this analysis are ‘A Place in Our Art’ – a digital creative community engagement strategy designed by the research team of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project – and

‘Shorewell Presents ... Dear Friend’ and ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’, a community-led arts project in Lutruwita (Tasmania). The outcomes from both projects provide examples of resilience in reshaping community engagement that maintain the integrity of the original concept for the ventures that are applicable to researchers, funding bodies, arts organizations, governments and communities. To begin the discussion, we outline key concepts about wellbeing arising from arts, cultural and creative engagement to inform the analysis of the two case studies.

ARTS, CULTURE AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING

A quarter-century of data verifies the link between participation in or access to appropriate arts and cultural activities and positive outcomes for individual and community wellbeing, particularly in relation to public health crises such as social connection, depression, anxiety and dementia (Meeting of Cultural Ministers 2014; Harvard Health Publishing 2017; APPGAHW 2017). Along with this, the potential benefits of integrating arts and culture into healthcare are numerous, including: improving health literacy; providing arts and culture-based strategies to make information clearer and more accessible; increasing participation in health and wellbeing promoting activities; facilitating dialogue between diverse groups in the community; connecting services through arts events (Sonke et al. 2019: 6). Wellbeing – understood as happiness and positive affect, feeling a sense of purpose and meaning in life and general satisfaction with life – is a key contributor to good mental and physical health and ‘now lies at the heart of the research and policy agenda of many governments globally’ (Fancourt 2017: 32–33).

The ways in which art-based community-led approaches can positively impact collective wellbeing, and particularly social isolation, have gained widespread recognition. In 2019, the World Health Organisation Health Evidence Network synthesis report, *What Is the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being* (Fancourt and Finn 2019), acknowledged the capacity for intentional and targeted arts activities to intersection with community experiences to uncover solutions and approaches to health and wellbeing challenges. For the purpose of this discussion, the two Australian art-based projects – ‘A Place in Our Art’ and ‘Shorewell Presents ... Dear Friend’ and ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’ – are arts projects designed to promote health outcomes particularly related to social isolation and loneliness. The compounding effects of social isolation and loneliness are acknowledged internationally as two of the more important social determinants of health, which further compound mental health outcomes and are as damaging as smoking or obesity on life expectancy (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2019).

Pre-COVID-19 there were already a number of possibilities to examine and embrace hitherto underestimated ways to ‘value’ arts and culture in relation to community wellbeing. Understanding wellbeing as a collective concept and experience offers greater potential for embracing arts and culture as a critical resource in addressing health inequities for entire communities. Taking this position supports Jill Sonke et al.’s (2019: 8) viewpoint that arts and culture offer some of the most nuanced and inclusive models of community engagement and for advancing community-led approaches to change, which are noted as particularly appropriate for advancing health and wellbeing amongst underserved or marginalized communities and cohorts.

MEANING-MAKING, EXPERIENCE AND CONNECTEDNESS

Arts and culture represent fundamental practices of meaning-making, experience and engagement and are uniquely powerful for exposing root issues, centring under-represented voices and shifting sociocultural norms (Sonke et al. 2019: 6). This people-centred approach to community engagement is evident in each of the following short case studies. Case 1 is derived directly from 'The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model' (RAASI), which is an ARC Linkage project with a lifespan of three years (2019–22) and focuses on a set of community engagement activities, which were due to take place in remote Queensland communities in 2020 but needed to be re-imagined as a result of COVID and subsequent travel restrictions and lockdowns. Case 2 is located in the second research for RAASI, North West Tasmania, and is part of a larger case study of the Ten Days on the Island festival for the RAASI project.

The value of creative and participatory approaches to research data collection with vulnerable or minority cohorts has been identified (see e.g. de Jager et al. 2017; Hammond et al. 2018), and this work helps demonstrate the ways in which the features of arts and culture can offer approaches that are more culturally appropriate, inclusive and participatory. Existing and emerging social and health challenges require research approaches, which are able to understand and deploy methods for collecting information and insights that are appropriate and accepted by the community or cohort.

Relationship-focused community engagement requires, from the outset of a project, that potential participants or community members are supported to determine for themselves how to frame the project, how to approach its design, how to include the people who will contribute and/or benefit most and how to determine if the project was a success. This means that topics of discussion and debate will be different from those that are decided by people from outside the community and often focus on strengths and capabilities in the community rather than deficits and challenges.

CASE STUDY 1: 'A PLACE IN OUR ART'

The COVID-19 pandemic required all sectors of the economy – professional, personal and cultural life – to 'pivot' and rapidly respond and adapt to almost daily changing circumstances and rules. This disruption was writ large in the arts and cultural sector and in community-based research projects. The first case study 'A Place in Our Art' straddles both areas and in 2020 used necessary social distancing and travel restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to trial digital community engagement tools. The team rapidly prototyped and deployed a digital platform for community engagement and data collection. This discussion explores how applying 'beyond text tools' (Goldbard 2015: 226) or 'non-text based tools' (Gattenhof 2017: 3) enabled the research team to remain connected with research sites and participants and provided a temporary online community to support well-being. The length of the inevitable delay was unknown, and it was important to the team to retain the energy, timeline and human connections of trust that had been built, as we acutely knew feelings of loneliness and isolation can rapidly impact on wellbeing.

The RAASI project, an ARC Linkage project spanning three years (2019–22), is led by three authors of this article (Hancox, Gattenhof and Klaebe) with the fourth author (Mackay) taking the role of the research project manager.

The project aims to address the long-standing problem facing regional and remote communities in Australia of how to strategically communicate and effectively evaluate the social impact of the creative arts in their communities. The purpose of the project is to enable regional communities to use evidence-based research on arts engagement to develop future investments by government and philanthropic funders to enhance jobs growth, liveability factors and visibility of arts and culture in regional Australia. The overarching goal of this project is to develop avenues and methods to include community end users in the decision making on what regional arts funding is allocated and dispensed for.

Prior to COVID-19, fieldwork for this project was undertaken face to face in the remote and geographically dispersed regions of central western Queensland on the lands of the Iningai, Malintji, Bidjara and Kuunkari people in towns of Tambo, Blackall, Barcaldine and Longreach; in the northwest corridor of Tasmania, with participants from the towns Burnie, Wynyard and Smithton, which lie on Palawa country. Both these communities have existing active arts ecosystems while also experiencing significant economic disadvantage and low rates of social inclusion due to geographic remoteness, ongoing drought, the loss of manufacturing and limited access to higher education. Border restrictions and social distancing implemented during COVID-19 have compounded a sense of isolation for regional, rural and remote communities.

After cancelling a series of in-person community creative engagement workshops that formed part of the data collection cycle of the funded project, and which would examine the impact of the creative arts in regional communities, we had to consider a range of alternatives. There was no way to know when we could travel again, so simply postponing the workshops was not a viable option. Sharing a set of online surveys asking participants about their community was also not something we wanted to do, as we had publicly discussed the problematic nature of surveys as data collection with communities who are marginalized and already feel misunderstood or overly policed by official agencies. In the end, we chose the most challenging and untested option: a series of online weekly creative activities, which supported participants to respond in the ways that were relevant and meaningful for them and hopefully delivered the data we needed. Part of the challenge was to develop an online platform that engaged 'non-text-based tools' (Gattenhof 2017: 4) such as storytelling, yarnning, performance, visual response and imagery, which may assist communities to 'convey cultural value and meaning with the tools best suited for that purpose' (Goldbard 2015: 226). The research team has also re-assessed our role as researchers in the engagement processes and the potential of hybrid remote/in-person data collection as we face continued disruption to travel.

The project team established a digital platform called 'A Place in Our Art' (<https://www.aplaceinourart.com>) and the site rolled out four provocations on a weekly basis that allowed individuals to 'show and tell' us about what arts and culture meant to them and their community. Invitations to participants to interact with 'A Place in Our Art' were distributed through our research project partners via newsletters and social media. The site was open to any interested party. Individuals from outside the project's target communities in central western Queensland and North West Tasmania were able to subscribe to the digital platform, and direct invitations to participate were supported through a social media campaign on 'The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia' project webpage, Facebook page and Instagram. The team used this

opportunity to collect insights from a broader audience, knowing that we would be delivering targeted engagement inside the communities in 2021 (either remotely or in person) and to trial a digital approach with a larger number of participants to identify strengths and limitations of the platform. Mark Larsen et al. discuss the pros and cons of leveraging digital platforms to engage with a wide audience about a specific issue and to gather perspectives and insights stating ‘there are limitations, which include a certain vagueness and brevity’ (2018: 94). While this was somewhat evident in ‘A Place in Our Art’, the creative nature of the activities added depth to create more evocative responses than possible through online surveys or comments. There was also a focus on ‘making’ a creative response rather than simply replying. This was an experiment in using art-based activities to articulate the impact of arts and culture on wellbeing and community cohesion at a time of unprecedented uncertainty. We believed that to address complex questions at a complicated time required all the capacity of art-based methods described in the Introduction.

The project rolled out each week in July 2020 with a different activity that invited participants to share their experience of arts and culture in creative ways. As the new provocation was released each week, a compilation of the responses from the previous week was available to participants on a carousel on the digital platform. The decision to share the responses in this way further develops both presence and immediacy for participants by positioning responses in a community or shared context that sought to mimic participant sharing in face-to-face workshops. The four provocations were framed as follows:

Activity 1: ‘All the Feels’ – in 50 words describe your last memorable experience of creativity. Which feelings do you associate with this experience? Responses could include being part of a creative event, attending an event, viewing something online, enjoying something made by a friend or family member.

Activity 2: ‘Show and Tell’ – show us a place that represents the unique culture or heritage of your community. You could share a photo, link to a website, link to a video or even an illustration of this place.

Activity 3: ‘Celebrity Head’ – find a photo of a celebrity who looks like the people you see most frequently at local events. Consider which celebrities represent your community – who would fit right in at a regular event?

Activity 4: ‘Postcard from the Future’ – using the box below, write a postcard from 2030 describing how your community solved a challenge it is currently facing. Your message could be detailed and realistic, or fanciful! Consider what a bright future for your community might look like in ten years’ time.

Each of the provocations were supported with an example of a possible response delivered through a pre-recorded video available on the platform. The intention of the example was not to provide a template but rather to stimulate ideas for a possible response when employing a creative consultation strategy through the frame of ‘digital liveness’ (Auslander 2012: n.pag.). Digital liveness is concerned with the way attributes of liveness can enhance

and deepen the user experience when online, and how real-time presence is mediated through the engagement with the digital more generally. By using the frame of digital liveness, the project developed a 'model' of engagement rather than a 'definition' for the process considering that that engagement is a set of choices and a continuum of practices rather than a fixed and homogenous activity. Helen Nikolas (2014: 192) also refers to a face-to-face arts engagement as a model encompassing a number of fluid processes for supporting maximum participation. The intention is that participants may 'join in', participate and contribute to the extent they feel comfortable.

This approach was generally successful. The provocations that allowed the most input from participants were overwhelmingly more popular than the others. This re-iterated in no uncertain terms our sense that communities wanted more agency and control over the arts and cultural activities in their region. Prompts that allowed for both individual and collective experience to coexist organically ('All the Feels' and 'Show and Tell') were the provocations that both elicited the greatest number of responses. The two participant responses below – top 'All the Feels' and, bottom 'Show and Tell' – reveal how through a combination of images and words the submissions were imbued in a non-didactic response.

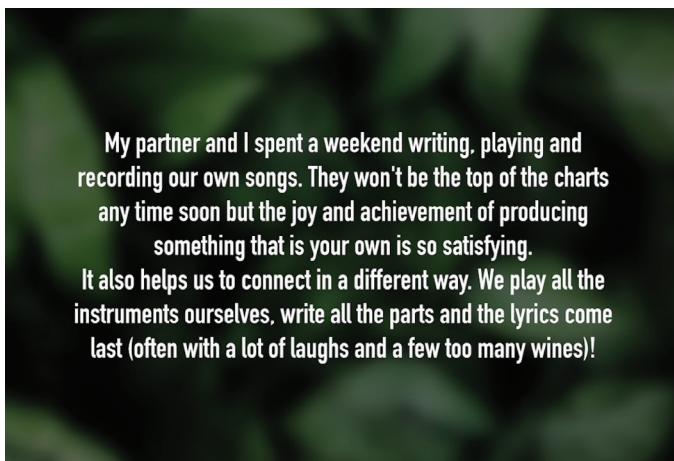


Figure 1: Participant response to 'All the Feels' – in 50 words describe your last memorable experience of creativity. Which feelings do you associate with this experience?

My partner and I spent a weekend writing, playing and recording our own songs. They won't be the top of the charts any time soon but the joy and achievement of producing something that is your own is so satisfying. It also helps us to connect in a different way. We play all the instruments ourselves, write all the parts and the lyrics come last (often with a lot of laughs and a few too many wines)!

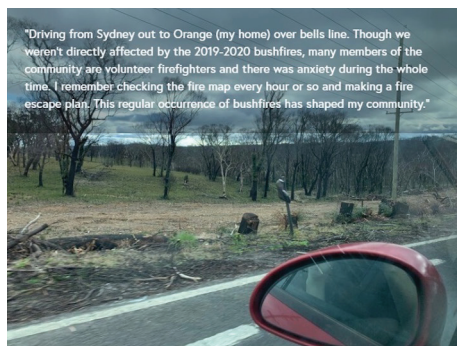


Figure 2: Participant response to 'Show and Tell' – show us a place that represents the unique culture or heritage of your community.

Driving from Sydney out to Orange (my home) over bells line. Though we weren't directly affected by the 2019–2020 bushfires, many members of the community are volunteer firefighters and there was anxiety during the whole time, I remember checking the fire map every hour or so and making a fire escape plan. This regular occurrence of bushfires has shaped my community.

By taking this position, the openness is extended not just to the participants who made submissions to the site but also to the reader as what is communicated by the work is determined by the audience. The responses shown at Figures 1 and 2 encourage the reader of the text and image to dive into their experience to understand the response. For Australian readers of Figure 2, there is the potential to make sense of the response by refracting the submission through a personal response, as much of Australia was impacted by bushfires in the summer of 2019–20. This prompts an act of the imagination on behalf of the viewer, posing the question – what does this image and text mean to me? In such a moment, the response cracks open an opportunity for shared experience and understanding by conjoining the individual who uploaded the submission and the recipient who encounters the text and image online, thus a micro-community is initiated. These types of interactions dovetail with the broader concepts of social cohesion and inclusion, which refer to connectedness and solidarity among groups and encompass 'the sense of belonging of a community and the relationships among members within the community itself' (Manca 2014: 6026). Arts and cultural activities and events support social cohesion through ameliorating a sense of isolation from others, fostering interaction and connection with others, greater participation in society and an increased sense of shared identity and belonging (Brownett 2018: 77; Fancourt and Finn 2019: 9). Daisy Fancourt (2017) finds that the social benefits of arts engagement most commonly linked to health pertain to decreased loneliness and social isolation. 'A Place in Our Art' was designed as an experimental form of data collection and a necessary pivot in a research project, but the team also hoped that it would provide a chance to make and reflect and connect for the participants. As we made the videos responses to inspire participants, we revealed our own anxiety about the present, a desire to connect and creative optimism for the future.

CASE STUDY 2: 'SHOREWELL PRESENTS ... DEAR FRIEND'

The northwest of Tasmania is one of the lowest socio-economic electorates in the poorest state in Australia, and the suburb of Shorewell Park is one of the most underserved and marginalized communities in this area. It was established in the 1970s as a social housing estate and continues to face stigma in Burnie. Peak Tasmanian biennial arts festival, Ten Days on the Island (<https://www.tendays.org.au/>), commissioned Sydney-based theatre company Urban Theatre Projects (UTP) to develop a community-led project in Burnie for their 2019 festival programme. The community and UTP knew they wanted to deliver a quality event, which made the people and place visible and challenged some of the views, which had stigmatized Shorewell Park since its development. UTP co-created with Burnie Community House and the Shorewell Park community an outdoor community dinner in the park beside the community house. Selected guests (25 from Shorewell Park and 25 from the rest of Burnie) co-mingled in a gala style ambient setting of fairy lights, good food, live entertainment and with card prompts as conversation starters. The concept of the dinner party was driven by the community and takes a performative approach to bringing Burnie to Shorewell Park, whereby primarily controlling their own representation and identity narrative. This event success cemented the community's affiliation and trust with UTP. For researchers and arts workers, the importance of strong relationships with community partners cannot be overstated.

After the success of the dinner party, the plan was for the Shorewell Park community and UTP to collaboratively develop another project for the 2021 Ten Days on the Island festival. This proposed project would see the community work with filmmakers and artist facilitators to author a series of short films to be shown across Burnie in a series of pop-up drive-in theatres. The benefits of this project were skills development in the community and the outcomes would be shared widely in the region. Then COVID-19 hit, and Burnie was one of the first clusters in Australia and endured a strict early lockdown. The filmmaking model relied on facilitators being on the ground with the community, which would not be possible for the foreseeable future, and a new project and a new way of engaging with the community needed to be designed.

The Shorewell Park participants wanted a project that could promote social connection at a time of increased social isolation and that online activities presented multiple barriers to participation and access for their community. A letter writing programme called 'Dear Friend' was conceived and designed so that any resident from Shorewell Park could write a letter and put it in a physical mailbox outside Burnie Community House. Letters were forwarded to one of three artists involved in the project; two of the artists were local to the northwest of Tasmania and one was from western Sydney. The brief was to imagine and share hopes and dreams of an optimistic community future beyond COVID-19 lockdowns. The stories, ideas and emotions conveyed through the letters would inform the development of a new artwork. Burnie Community House project coordinator Shandel Pile said 'Dear Friend' was about 'extending the relationships' forged between people at the dinner, and the artwork created would 'depend on what is uncovered in the stories, what people want to share and what the community wants' (Bennett 2020: n.pag.). The voices, perspectives and needs of the community were as such centred from the outset.

‘Dear Friend’ letters were collected for six months and artists drew from them a series of themes and ideas that would be brought to life in the ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’ project, which featured in the 2021 Ten Days on the Island festival. Once COVID-19 lockdown restrictions eased, ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’ was further developed during an eight-week community engagement process, resulting in a series of public billboards. The billboards are visually striking and are easily understood by the passing public. It was once again important that the community had complete ownership over the project and that the images and words were inclusive of everyone, including children and young people. This meant the choice of phrases used was a participatory, deeply thoughtful process, and the community gave careful consideration, over a seven-week process, to the design and wording.



Figure 3: ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’ billboard in carpark of Burnie Community House.



Figure 4: ‘Gallery of Hopes and Dreams’ billboard in Shorewell Plaza.

The authors of this article attended the 2021 festival and participated in a very poignant 'Gallery of Hopes and Dreams' walking tour in Shorewell Park with a local resident and participant as our guide. Our guide shared their personal story and articulated what both programmes had done personally for their self-esteem, social confidence and wellbeing within their community. They also expressed how important it was for their mental health living in a diverse, often challenged community, to stay connected and supportive of each other through COVID-19 with activities as simple as 'Dear Friend' and 'Gallery of Hopes and Dreams'. In articulating their experiences, our guide revealed how the process of participating in the projects generated wellbeing outcomes that were personal or individual, as well as a collective experience of pride and belonging they shared with others. Warren Lett et al. refer to this as 'what is meant by process being of value, since it can serve personal integration and sense of coherence and build interpersonal relationships' (2014: 210).

These projects evidence the potential for arts and cultural activities to foster social connectedness and wellbeing on both individual and collective levels, through empowering people to identify their personal hopes for their community, then collaborating with others to articulate the values and strengths, which they collectively share. The two events (and the community-led, co-creative processes) that 'Shorewell Presents' has comprised so far are both a counterpoint and a complement to 'A Place in Our Art'. 'Shorewell Presents' reminds us that no matter the obstacles to connecting in person, arts, culture and creativity offer avenues to include, share, connect and belong together.

CONCLUSION

Ben Cameron (2009) argues that arts organizations, and in the context of this discussion, arts researchers, need to rethink their relationship with communities and individuals. Cameron says that arts organizations can no longer afford to 'think of themselves as producers or presenters of cultural product, rather they are orchestrators of social interaction with communities who are seeking opportunities for interactivity, participation, access and engagement' (Cameron 2009: n.pag.). 'A Place in Our Art' and 'Shorewell Presents' embody Cameron's position by placing human connectivity and community-led creativity as the crucial aspects of each project. These projects highlight the value of art, culture and creativity designed specifically for the people they are for. By providing meaningful forms of connection, and accessible and inclusive avenues for sharing experiences and values that they have actively participated in, they were able to publicly share their personal joy and pride and success of these projects in ways that could be recorded by the evaluation team as impactful and even longer-term positive legacies to their communities than a traditional evaluation survey might have captured.

While the two projects had very different means of delivery – one being entirely online and the other being physical artefacts – the similarity lies in the belief that communities are the experts on their communities and the owners of their creativity. Using arts-based processes, complemented by the collection of written and non-text based data (storytelling, photographs, drawings and letters), these projects offer evidence-based methods that can explore and articulate individual lived experiences that might also facilitate better health for individuals (Lett et al. 2014: 216) and promote positive community relationships more broadly.

At the heart of both projects, and in the scholarship around arts and well-being, is the understanding that process is more important than the outputs, and access and participation are crucial for success. Equally important to both projects was a notion of openness and space for participants to establish what is important for them to convey through the creative works and the form it will take. This position of openness is extended not just to the participants in designing, developing or making the work but also to the viewer as what is communicated by the work is determined by the audience. The principle of openness can be equally applied to both the in-person and digital community consultation actions. COVID-19 created an urgency to find new ways of authentically continuing to engage with communities using arts-based methods – to keep the momentum of projects progressing, to maintain forged connections of trust between arts workers, researchers and communities and fulfil an innate need for connection and belonging, which we all yearn for. Both short case studies signal that genuine impact is possible using a mix of engagement methods if collaboration remains participant-led and responsive to the unique needs of their communities.

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