

What can the creative arts bring to the engagement agenda of Australian universities?

Brydie-Leigh Bartleet

Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre, Griffith University

When I asked the organisers for some guidance about what theme might be appropriate for my keynote at the STARS conference, it was suggested that I share my philosophy around student engagement. They also suggested I could talk about how I use music in my teaching. In this keynote, I will share a little about my approaches to engaging students through music, but I'm also keen to stretch the discussion to consider engagement in Australian universities more broadly, and what music and the creative arts can bring to this agenda.

I speak to you as an educator coming from the coalface, and what I have to say about the topic of engagement is deeply informed by practice, scholarship, and the day to day realities of undertaking this work. My hope is that it might have some resonance with the phenomenal work that each and every one of you do in enhancing students' transitions, achievement, retention and success.

My philosophy around student engagement is complex and multifaceted. However, at the heart of it is the multi-faceted concept of relationships. After years of learning and working alongside Aboriginal artists and Elders, I have come to realize that learning and teaching (and student engagement, in particular) begins and ends with relationships. Relationships with one another, but just as importantly relationships with the world around us.

For me, there's a quote that beautifully encapsulates this. It's a quote about love. It says, "Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction" ~ Antoine de Saint-Exupery. For me, if we replace "love" with "student engagement" it starts to get close to my philosophy: "Student engagement does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking outward together in the same direction." Student engagement, for me as an educator, is not about my students lovingly gazing at me as the knowledgeable teacher and facilitator of their learning and self-actualization. Nor is it about me lovingly gazing at them as the sole reason for my existence as an educator and academic. For me, student engagement is about us standing closely together, sometimes gripping each other's hands, other times letting go, and looking outward *together* and asking deep questions about what our role as musicians in society should and could be. This is not an abstract looking outward, but rather a concrete reaching out and collaborating with people and partners outside the university walls in order to address the most pressing issues of our time.

This philosophy is deeply embodied in how I have moved in and between many varied settings from traditional Conservatoire classrooms to remote communities, and why I am such a strong believer in the importance of taking my students and colleagues on these learning journeys alongside me. Over the past decade or so this has involved service learning programs with First Peoples in Australia, community festivals and events, student internships on community engagement projects (such as the production of CDs and training workshops), global mobility programs, and community initiatives and research projects that haven't necessarily been conceptualised as "student specific" projects, but have actively involved my students as collaborators in them.

Like all of us here today, this philosophy of student engagement comes from a very deep and personal place. How we engage with our students and the world around us, certainly is an expression of who we are, what our values are, and the life experiences we bring to bear in our work as educators. For me, this focus on engagement and social connection goes back to my early formative experiences growing up in politically turbulent apartheid South Africa. I grew up in a place called Kwa Zulu Natal. In my early primary school years, we emigrated to Sydney, but returned to South Africa in the early 1990s and in my formative teenage years we lived through the crumble of apartheid. Growing up during this turbulent time, I learnt how the arts, and music in particular, could be used a vehicle for *connecting* and *engaging* people in protest and self-determination, a way of subversively spreading an anti-colonial agenda, and a way of healing the past but also reimagining a different future. From a young age these experiences sparked an intense interest in the ways in which music facilitates cultural connection and allows people to learn about one another and find strengths and appreciate differences in one another, and facilitate new intercultural understandings. The music of intercultural groups, which I grew up listening to, such as Jaluka and Savuka (led by Johnny Clegg) were major activists and instrumental in bringing about awareness of the need for change. As an educator, I've long been inspired by the way in which these musicians called for South Africans to connect with one another across cultures. And it is this music, and these formative experiences, which continue to ignite my passion for encouraging students to engage with the world outside the academy.

Coming from this deep and personal place, my focus on relationships involves encouraging my students to learn in a way that appreciates the connectivity between things (whether it be people, nature, the land, the spiritual world, society, culture, politics, economics, knowledge systems and disciplines). To do this, we have to look outwards, and think deeply about our sense of social responsibility, and how we can make a difference in the world.

The broader engagement agenda of universities

Of course, I'm not alone with my interest in engaging students and communities in this way. Arguably, *engagement* more broadly, has to be one of the biggest considerations in higher education today. That could be partly due to the government's recent *National Innovation and Science Agenda* and its announcement of a national engagement and impact assessment, which will examine how universities are translating their research into economic, social and other benefits. Beyond this, many commentators have noted that in recent decades there has been a discernible re-imagining of how our universities conceptualise their engagement agendas for reasons beyond politics and policies. Most of our universities recognize they can no longer operate as 'ivory towers', and are increasingly seeking new ways to cultivate their university-community relationships and connections with industry in order to produce tangible results for society and graduates that will become responsible global citizens. While not yet a completely coherent or settled attribute – and without precise language, metrics and funding – in his recent piece for *Griffith Review*, Glyn Davis (2016) notes that engagement has found an institutional home in most universities in Australia.

Academic workloads are now increasingly devised around teaching, research and *engagement* rather than *service*. Australian university strategic documents are increasingly highlighting the importance of engagement. In a scan of the current strategic documents of the *Group of Eight*, the *Innovative Research Universities* network, and the *Regional Universities Network*, all mention engagement, and some have designated engagement plans. That said, the way in which engagement is discussed and conceptualised in these strategic plans varies significantly, and ranges from being mentioned only once by some universities to as many as 71 times by others.

On the ground, engagement takes a multitude of forms in Australian universities, whether this be:

- student-focused programs (such as WILs, service learning, internships, student-led clinics, student performances, volunteering, and now increasingly global mobility);
- outreach initiatives (such as school programs or professional development opportunities for community members);
- industry-related collaborations and commercial ventures; or
- infrastructure and events open to the public (such as galleries, performances, community spaces, and interactive zones), amongst others (Hart, Northmore & Gerhardt, 2009, p. 12).

In some contexts, engagement is also conceptualized as part of broader university agendas, for example widening participation, social inclusion, or global citizenship (Hart, Northmore & Gerhardt, 2009, p. 12). I've also been impressed to see how engagement has been a recurring thread in the

presentations at this conference. Indeed, it seems to me that STARS provides the perfect forum for exploring both the potential and the challenges of engagement in Australian universities.

This engagement agenda is not unique to Australia, and is part of a world-wide phenomenon, or as Rob Hollister (2013) calls it: “an invisible worldwide revolution.” Nowadays, engagement programs are becoming increasingly more significant internationally, particularly in relation to questions of citizenship, employability and social justice (Millican & Bournier, 2011, p. 91). The broadening mission of universities has sharpened the focus on engagement as a quality that is fundamental to the public relevance and sustainability of the academic enterprise worldwide.

Rather than seeing these efforts as an add-on or added-bonus, universities across the world are increasingly positioning engagement as their ‘third mission,’ alongside teaching and research (Davis, 2016, p. 254). In this ‘third mission’ there’s tremendous diversity in the types of engagement projects, partnerships and purposes that can be found in Australia and internationally. However, the types of engagement initiatives I’m keen to explore a little further today stem directly from my philosophy of student engagement, which I’ve just outlined. I’m keen to now turn our attention to university-community engagement initiatives that focus specifically on social change.

Internationally, there is a growing awareness of the social responsibility of universities and the emergence of programs and initiatives which link university study and research to current issues of local, national and global concern. As Millican and Bournier (2011, p. 95) have argued, what is becoming increasingly clear is that none of the major issues on the global agenda will be resolved without the participation of universities, since they provide the environments that not only foster knowledge but also foster proposals for social action. As such, you’ll now find socially engaged programs in universities in Brazil, Palestine, Israel, Vietnam, South Africa, Australia, and the world over, as universities increasingly seek to interact, debate and collaborate in order to play a role in tackling the pressing issues of our time (Hollister, 2013).

The importance of this type of engagement has been recognized by UNESCO. In 2009, ten years on from the 1999 World Declaration, UNESCO held a series of follow-up conferences focusing on two overarching themes: the role of higher education in addressing major global challenges and higher education’s ongoing social responsibility. Amongst UNESCO’s (2009) recommendations was the following call to action:

- Faced with the complexity of current and future global challenges, higher education has the social responsibility to advance our understanding of multifaceted issues, which involve

social, economic, scientific and cultural dimensions and our ability to respond to them. It should lead society in generating global knowledge to address global challenges, inter alia food security, climate change, water management, intercultural dialogue, renewable energy and public health. [...]

- Higher education must not only give solid skills for the present and future world but must also contribute to the education of ethical citizens committed to the construction of peace, the defense of human rights and the values of democracy (p. 2).

As UNESCO's calls suggest, the need for engagement, knowledge creation, translation and exchange has never been greater. Closer to home, [Engagement Australia](#) also echoes this call by suggesting that if we focus more squarely on engagement, "we can collectively realise the role for universities as knowledge hubs and catalysts for future prosperity, wellbeing and sustainable development."

Embracing such engagement not only works to the needs of society, but can also transform the educational experience of our students, and stimulate and develop us as educators. We know that students are looking for a higher education experience that is relevant to the needs of today's society and that will equip them for their future lives and careers. Being involved in such engagement activities – and having the opportunity to build relationships and collaborate with individuals, organisations and communities – will enable them to be co-generators of knowledge, key players in knowledge translation, whilst developing their employability and life skills, and experiencing first-hand the role that they can play in bringing about social change and addressing issues which are going to become increasingly prevalent in their future lives (NCCPE, n.d.). Research also indicates that such engaged learning experiences provide students with a range of opportunities to build graduate attributes in areas of citizenship, employability, resilience, problem-solving and self-motivation (O'Connor, Lynch & Owen, 2011, p. 111).

What can the creative and performing arts bring to the engagement agenda of Australian universities?

As universities continue to invest in these engagement strategies, there is a growing need for discussion around the nature of these initiatives, and the type of relationships and partnerships they foster. In these discussions, the higher education sector could benefit from looking at the creative and performing arts for inspiration, but also for potential collaboration. Within the university context, creative and performing arts (whether this be music, dance, drama, visual arts, film, television, media, and so on) have had a sustained track record of community engagement and there are models of

partnership and approaches to pedagogy that could provide useful insights to this growing area of importance for higher education.

In terms of student and community engagement for social change, the arts have also been a significant player in this space. Throughout history, the arts have always been in flux, changing in response to the world and in turn changing the world. The arts operate in the most complex ways from the cellular level of an individual to the most multifaceted social and cultural structures, and into the natural and spiritual worlds. The arts create empathy, build connection and give hope. The arts provide a strengths-based space where people can cross cultural divides and meet through shared passions and interests. For every major social movement, social change, social upheaval throughout history the arts have been present, sometimes driving change, other times resisting change, other times documenting and commenting on that change. The arts have also brought about global awareness of major social and political causes or health crises around the world. Let me make my case a little further with some concrete examples from Australia and from overseas.

The Winanjjikari Service Learning Program (Tennant Creek)

My first example is the Winanjjikari Service Learning program, which I have led in collaboration with the Winanjjikari Music Centre and Barkly Regional Arts in Tennant Creek since 2009. This program involves Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University students and staff travelling to Tennant Creek for two-weeks, during which they work alongside Aboriginal artists and Elders on a range of community-led initiatives (e.g. recording albums, documenting cultural activities, managing community festivals, staging performances, building community arts infrastructure). This program is designed to realise the rich educational value of university students working in collaborative partnerships with First Peoples in ways that build strong intercultural connections based on reciprocity, mutual respect and learning. As such, this program opens up dynamic spaces where students have the opportunity to build reciprocal relationships with real rather than imagined subjects (Tamisari, 2006). Most critically, from a transformational perspective, by creating direct relationships with Aboriginal people and communities, this program encourages students to carefully and reflectively identify their own cultural biases and assumptions while completing practical tasks (e.g. recording or performances) associated with their study discipline (see Bartleet, Sunderland & Carfoot, in press). As one of our students Codie explained:

I have grown so very much as a person. I could go as far as saying that I learnt just as much in 12 days in Tennant Creek as I have in 3 years of university. Tennant Creek is not just a place, it's a life changing experience, and everybody who has been there will say the same thing. I went there thinking that the community would really learn from someone different

coming into their community, but I left learning a lot more from them instead! Truly a once in a lifetime experience and something that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. (Codie, student fieldwork diary)

This program formed a pilot for a larger OLT project with similar programs at Western Sydney University and at Curtin University (see Bartleet, et al., 2014a, 2014b). The materials that we developed for this program highlighted how such a strengths-based arts engagement initiative (with strong community leadership and ownership) can provide a culturally sensitive approach to engaging students in learning about First Peoples' culture, whilst at the same time directly supporting First Peoples communities in work that is culturally significant to them (Bartleet, et al., 2016).

Rocket Artists (Brighton)

This focus on community ownership and two-way learning can also be seen in my second example, this time from the visual arts and from overseas. The University of Brighton is a key collaborator in an inclusive arts program called Rocket Artists (see Figure 1). Arts Rockets are a group of artists with learning disabilities who make both visual and performance artworks in their own studio alongside a community of over 100 other artists at Phoenix Arts in Brighton.



Figure 1. Rocket Artists, Corali, Smudged collaborative performance, Tate Modern:
<http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/inclusive-arts-practice-and-research-discussion-and-2020-visioning-event>

Specifically, Art Rockets work alongside art students from the University of Brighton from the MA Inclusive Arts Practice program and with undergraduate students from the School of Art, Design and Media. Since 2004 this engagement program has been providing a unique platform for engaging students in learning about inclusive practices. This engagement program teaches students important lessons about how disability is experienced and provides a strengths-based approach that allows the Rocket Artists and students to be co-creators of artworks, whilst also learning new artistic skills, developing their craft, exploring new ways to express themselves, and experiencing first-hand how to deliver community-based, inclusive arts initiatives.

Float (Stradbroke Island)

Of course, the concept of engagement doesn't only refer to engaging with people alone. In the arts, and indeed many other disciplines, we are seeing increasing numbers of university initiatives that are designed to engage with the environment. At Griffith's College of Art runs infield trips to Stradbroke Island and provides students (from the QCA and the Conservatorium) with the opportunity to engage with this important local environment, as well as its custodians and caretakers. Each year a group of students travel in the winter semester break to spend a week immersed in the culture, and environment of the Island.

In this program nine to five hours are replaced with sunrise and sunset, and the classroom with the bush and beach. During each trip, the students attend talks by environmental scientists about the historical, social and environmental issues facing the Island community, and engage with local members of the community, including Indigenous elders, who have witnessed first-hand the transformation of Stradbroke Island, through the 2014 bushfires, protests of the proposed bridge to the island, and decades of mining controversies. An important part of this infield program is also engaging with audiences about the lessons learned about the sounds and images of the changing environment. Last October this was presented at a projection event at the Brisbane Powerhouse, in an event called "Float."

White Coat, Warm hART (Canada)

Some of the most innovative engagement initiatives emerging around Australia, and indeed the world, right now explore the intersection of the arts with other disciplines. An example, I'd like to share

comes from Canada and the intersection of visual art and medicine. Since 2010, visual art has found a home in the halls of Canadian medical institutions. Each year, health science students, residents, and faculty from across Canada, submit art to a juried show held in conjunction with the Canadian Conference of Medical Education, which publicly celebrates the integration of science, arts and humanities and engages audiences to reflect on what it's like to be in the medical profession.

The example shown in Figure 2 is a self-reflection piece that experiments with different media and dimensions to portray dimensions of time and space.



Figure 2. A look back forward (Egri, 2015)

A young medical student looks towards the future with nervous anticipation. 20 years pass. She's become an experienced physician her slight smile says "if only she knew it would all be ok". Time inescapably rolls forward. Now a patient, she grips her memories in her wrinkled hands (Egri, 2015)

University arts spaces

The intersection of the arts and other disciplines and agendas can also be seen in some of the latest infrastructure investments made by Australian universities. For instance, Melbourne University is planning to create a dynamic new venue for science and art. Science Gallery Melbourne will open in 2018 and be part of the Global Science Gallery Network (a network of eight Science Gallery locations developed in partnership with leading universities in urban centres). Glyn Davis positions this as a key pillar of the University's engagement strategy. VU at MetroWest is Victoria University's community space in the heart of Footscray. It opened in 2014 and hosts events, exhibitions, seminars and talks, and a range of community services. The Macquarie University Art Gallery has become well known for continually revitalizing its exhibition programs so that it remains relevant and connected with the University's teaching and research, and the community's interests.

Conclusions: A hard question

I hope by this point I have made a reasonably compelling, or at least passionate, case for the importance of approaches to student engagement that are outward looking and focused on social responsibility and social change. Likewise, I hope I have made a case for some of the ways in which the creative and performing arts are contributing towards the engagement agendas of Australian universities. However, now comes the challenging part.

Playing in the space I've described up until now comes with a rather hard, and uncomfortable, question that as educators we need to ask of ourselves. All the current literature both in Australia and internationally points to the fact that it's a question we need to turn our attention to and take seriously if we're going to continue developing engagement initiatives into the future.

How do we know this engagement is any good?

As theories of change tell us, it isn't good enough to simply say "something miraculous happens". Where there is action (we engage), and there is change (whether it be in students, community members, behaviours, processes, and so on), but there is something missing in the middle, when it comes to understanding what is going on. Those of us who work in this engagement space will argue that indeed in these sorts of engagement initiatives the miraculous does happen. And sometimes it's inexplicable. People's lives are transformed from the engagement experience. However, it is problematic to move into an engagement agenda, particularly one focused on social change, relying simply on the miraculous. There needs to be a deep understanding of *why* we are engaging, *how* we're engaging, *what* change we're trying to make, and the underplaying aims, assumptions and processes behind it. And ultimately whether what we're doing is any good.

We have measures for evaluating and defining quality in learning and teaching, and in research, but such measures are still in their early stages when it comes to engagement. A search of the international literature confirms this, and suggests that the development of effective evaluation tools are still at a relatively formative stage. Many of the relevant tools and approaches currently being developed are largely found in the ‘grey’ literature. Likewise, there have also been important benchmarking exercises undertaken in Australia by the likes of Garlick and Langworthy (2006) which have paved the way for future work in this regard.

As such, there is still more to be done, and as educators we need to commit ourselves to understanding more about measuring the processes involved in engagement, and making this understanding a core part of our future work.

Notwithstanding this hard question, my sense is that engagement initiatives and activities can yield a future world of inspiring change. We can see this with hundreds of higher education institutions in all nations recognizing the importance of this for student engagement and becoming more deeply involved in their communities, partnering with government agencies and NGOs and promoting social and economic development. The arts have a key role to play in this movement, both as an inspiration but also as a key collaborator. By asking ourselves the hard question about the quality and impact of our initiatives not only for our student’s learning but also the communities and issues we seek to engage with, we can leverage our work to even greater affect in addressing some of the most pressing issues of our time.

References

- Bartleet, B. L., Bennett, D., Power, A., & Sunderland, N. (2014a). *Enhancing Indigenous content in arts curricula through service learning with Indigenous communities*. Brisbane: Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University. 150-page report to the Australian Government Office for Learning & Teaching.
- Bartleet, B. L., Bennett, D., Marsh, K., Power, A., & Sunderland, N. (2014). Reconciliation and transformation through mutual learning: Outlining a framework for arts based service learning with Indigenous communities in Australia. *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, 15(8). Available from: <http://www.ijea.org/>
- Bartleet, B. L., Bennett, D., Power, A., & Sunderland, N. (Eds.). (2015). *Engaging First Peoples in Arts-Based Service Learning: Towards Respectful and Mutually Beneficial Educational Practices* (Vol. 18). Springer.

- Bartleet, B. L., Sunderland, N. & Carfoot, C. (2016, in press). Enhancing intercultural engagement through service learning and music making with Indigenous communities in Australia. *Research Studies in Music Education*.
- Davis, G. (2016). Facing the zeitgeist: Dissolving the university?. *Griffith REVIEW*, (52), 247-258.
- Egri, C. (2015). A look back forward. <http://arts.med.ubc.ca/2015/02/22/a-look-back-forward-snapshot/>
- Garlick, S., & Langworthy, A. (2006). *Assessing university community engagement*. Discussion paper prepared for the AUCEA Benchmarking Project). AUCEA.
- Hart, A., Northmore, S., & Gerhardt, C. (2009). Briefing paper: Auditing, benchmarking and evaluating public engagement. *Bristol: National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement*.
- Hollister, R. (2013). The Engaged University—an Invisible Worldwide Revolution. *Tisch College of Citizenship and Public Service*: <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/about/dean-rob-hollister/publications-and-presentations/the-engaged-university-an-invisible-worldwide-revolution>.
- Millican, J., & Bournier, T. (2011). Student-community engagement and the changing role and context of higher education. *Education+ Training*, 53(2/3), 89-99.
- National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE). How engagement enriches the student experience: www.publicengagement.ac.uk
- Mason O'Connor, K., Lynch, K., & Owen, D. (2011). Student-community engagement and the development of graduate attributes. *Education+ Training*, 53(2/3), 100-115.
- Tamisari, F. (2006). Personal acquaintance: Essential individuality and the possibilities of encounters. *Provoking Ideas: Critical Indigenous studies*, Darwin University Press, Darwin, 17-36.
- UNESCO. (2009). 2009 World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research For Societal Change and Development, Paris, 5 – 8 July 2009. ED.2009/CONF.402/2