



**CONNECTING INTERGENERATIONAL
COMMUNITIES THROUGH CREATIVE
EXCHANGE
26th – 29th JUNE 2006**

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia
with ICIP, the
International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes

Report on an International Conference

By Susan Langford



INTRODUCTION

The 3rd International Conference of the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes was organised and hosted by Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia in June 2006.

This report describes my personal experience and journey through the conference, and outlines key themes and issues that I noted within the growing field of intergenerational work.

I am the Director of Magic Me, the UK's leading provider of intergenerational arts projects, based in east London. We specialise in running arts projects which bring together young people aged nine plus and older people, for mutual benefit, learning and enjoyment. The history and population of our local communities mean that intergenerational work also links people of different ethnicities, cultures and beliefs, a new experience for many.

Given the arts focus of Magic Me and of my own work, this report focuses on the role and place of the arts and artists in the diverse world of intergenerational programmes. I was keen to compare the position and approaches of English and UK artists and practitioners working on intergenerational arts initiatives, with the situation and practice internationally, and the final section of this report summarises my thoughts on this.

I am very grateful to Arts Council England for their financial support towards the costs of my travelling to, and attending the conference. In particular I would like to thank Seema Patel and Karen Drezgic of Arts Council London for their support in facilitating this.

My thanks to Dr Susan Feldman and her team at Victoria University for their dedication and hard work in convening and organising such an inspiring and timely conference on ICIP's behalf.

Susan Langford
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1.0 THE CONFERENCE AND THOSE TAKING PART

1.1 Background and history of ICIP

ICIP (International Consortium of Intergenerational Programmes) is a small, but growing membership organisation, founded to bring together people engaged in intergenerational practice, policy making and research around the world.

In the United States intergenerational work has been a part of the voluntary, public and academic sectors since the 1960's and is a well-established concept. Examples include: large scale programmes within social services, education and other public services; education and academic study at graduate level and beyond for specialists in intergenerational practice and within broader social science courses; high profile campaigning on issues of grandparents' rights and how generations can support and serve one another.

In the late 90's dialogue between US and European practitioners and academics with an interest in intergenerational practice and policy, led to the founding of ICIP. The organisation aims to be a networking tool, providing ways for members and others to promote the potential and benefits of intergenerational approaches, and to compare situations and solutions in different countries. Members and supporters have been recruited from all continents, though the majority are still from North America and Europe.

ICIP conferences at Keele University, UK, in 2002, and University of British Columbia, Canada in 2004, have been the focus of the organisation's work to date. This 3rd conference in Melbourne aimed to bring together people already involved in intergenerational practice, policy and research and to reach those new to the subject, particularly people from Australasia and the Pacific region.

1.2 Those taking part

Around 130 delegates attended the conference, with approximately 38 from overseas, 69 from Victoria, the host State, and others from the rest of Australia. Overseas delegates included individuals from Spain, Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Botswana, Norway, India, Sweden, South Korea, Germany and Israel, six delegates from the UK and about a dozen from the US. Older people were involved as speakers, presenters, workshop leaders and delegates, and younger people to a lesser extent; the youngest were Phd students in their 20s.

The group and the invited speakers included practitioners, academics, managers and community activists working in many fields and the organisers aimed, and succeeded, in generating discussion and relationship building between delegates of very different backgrounds and specialisms. I estimate around 20 people were artists, working with artists or had an interest in cultural and creative work and issues.

1.3 Themes for the conference

Conference Convenor Dr Susan Feldman and her team at Victoria University organised the four day conference around the following themes:

- Community Well-being and Health
- Community Capacity
- Social connections, Sport and Leisure
- Community Development
- Policy and Programmes
- Spirituality, Culture, Identity, Language, Community Memory

Throughout the programme there was a strong emphasis on indigenous peoples and culture including a formal opening acknowledgement of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the land on which we met, contributions throughout the conference from indigenous Australians, and a traditional smoking ceremony to close the proceedings.

2.0 WHAT I GAINED AND LEARNED FROM THE CONFERENCE

2.1 My involvement in the conference

I attended throughout the four days of the conference, and gave a 90 minute presentation / workshop on Day 2. During the 'contributed papers' sessions (smaller break out groups) I chose to join mostly arts based sessions or those focused on cultural groups and ethnic minority communities.

I found that over four days patterns and themes emerged, putting my own and Magic Me's work in a clear context, within the global, post-modern world. Many of the same issues are impacting on communities, families and generations around the globe. I found that looking at issues such as the impact of increasing migration, or growing urbanisation, through an intergenerational lens helped me to make more sense of what the changes or problems are and perhaps where solutions lie. The beneficial role of artists and the arts, was raised by many speakers, on non-arts subjects; examples are given below.

Rather than discuss individual presentations or conversations I have grouped my findings and thoughts under the headings below.

2.2 The context for intergenerational work.

Challenges and trends affecting communities around the world include:

- An ageing population and falling birthrates in developed and developing countries, raising concerns about how resources should be shared, and debates about the age of retirement and future pension provision.
- A wave of 'baby boomers' now in their 60's, an increasing number of active 3rd Agers with greater expectations, living in diverse situations and lifestyles.
- Urbanisation and breakdown of traditional support systems and values within communities, within both developed and developing countries.
- Changing family structures, because of longevity of older members, smaller numbers of children, divorce and family breakdown, increasing mobility and the impact of these on patterns of care, support giving and the community.

- Globalisation, migration, diasporas and issues of identity and citizenship.
- Growing understanding of the need for holistic solutions and renewed emphasis on cross-sector or cross-disciplinary working and services.
- The growth of new technologies and means of communication which are not accessed equally by all generations.
- The negative effects of ageism on young and older people, and the continuing struggle of our cultures to take on, understand and be comfortable with living longer, for instance the fast growth in cosmetic surgery, botox and anti-ageing products.
- Disasters where intergenerational work is not chosen but is the situation that arises, for example in sub-Saharan Africa where the middle generations have died from HIV Aids, the grandparents and grandchildren are forced into caring roles, the new 'Heroes of Africa'

2.3 Current or emerging trends and themes within intergenerational work

- Increasing recognition of older people as active citizens: assets and givers, not 'burdens' and receivers.
- Shared sites and services, with basic provision designed for both the younger and older generations, in ways which encourage appropriate and more natural interaction, rather than 'intergenerational' being added on afterwards.
- Relatives as parents, the growth of 'grandfamilies' and the need for services and systems to recognise and work with the reality of people's diverse lives.
- Migration and identity: the impact of migration on different generations in a family or community and the affect on relationships between them. The impact on host communities of receiving new arrivals, particularly where the generations are then culturally very different.
- The key role of the creative arts and cultural practices in maintaining or rebuilding a sense of community and passing on identity to new generations.

2.4 The role and place of the arts in the conference

- 13 presentations and workshops specifically focused on the arts or referred to the arts as an element within a broader programme. These included practical experiences in dance, creative writing and storytelling, demonstrating approaches used successfully with intergenerational groups.
- Presenters from three Melbourne Museums showed how they use artists and cultural activity to engage with wider audiences. The Immigration Museum, for example, hosts community celebrations providing an opportunity for young people to learn about their roots and 'mother' cultures from the elders of their communities. This has also been an opportunity to adapt and to keep alive traditions and rituals, not as museum pieces but as living art forms, for example by making traditional floral tributes from modern materials.
- Speakers and presenters from other non-arts professions and backgrounds chose to incorporate arts examples into their presentations. Most notably Hon Gavin Jennings, Minister for Aged Care and Senior Victorians, showed 'In My Day' a short animated video combining older people's reminiscences of their school days with wonderful animated drawings and sound effects created by

school children. The video project, funded by Victoria Arts, had community development aims, part of a statewide push for an 'Age Friendly Community.'

- Dr Harry (Rick) Moody's presentation to the conference on images of ageing and their meanings throughout the lifecourse, used as examples a series of self-portraits by Rembrandt from his youth to his old age, and explored the notion of artists as people who do not retire, but continue to use their artform to explore their own changing view of the world for as long as possible.
- With its continuing focus on Australian indigenous cultures and peoples, the conference contained examples of programmes and organisations using theatre and storytelling at the heart of community building and health promotion work. The traditional role of elders within communities carrying and passing on the stories of their people and lands to educate the younger generations is maintained and incorporated.
- Besides the fun, laughter and group building of the dance workshop run by Diane Amans which I attended, the power of the arts in building our own conference community was also clear to me at two other very different moments. At the conference dinner an Australian 'Bush' entertainer invited us to join him in what became a wonderful crazy song. Most memorably one morning the entire conference rose to stand and sing Happy Birthday to honour a soon-to-be-90 years old Holocaust survivor, who had just told us how he uses his youthful experiences of Auschwitz to teach school children and other visitors to Melbourne's Holocaust Museum, not just about history but about how to live now. The simple song was an affirmation of survival and a life lived well and I found our singing of it deeply moving.

2.5 Themes that ran through the conference for me

- *The Power of Stories* as carriers of cultural identity, and sense of place in an increasingly 'international brand' dominated world; as a way to value and celebrate individuals; in evaluation and as a way to share our work and its impact with others.
- *The Importance of Evaluation* to understand what we are doing, know the impact of our work and be able to provide evidence of its effectiveness, so that intergenerational work can be used appropriately, get greater recognition and the level of mainstream funding it needs to be sustainable.
- *The complexity of people's lives* and how services, politicians and the media try to simplify and group people. We heard from a member of the Melbourne Sudanese community, one of the fastest growing immigrant communities in Australia, about his struggle to raise a family of children, working out how to balance their Australian and Sudanese cultures and lifestyles. The World Cup was happening just outside the conference doors with thousands of fans converging one night to watch Australia v Italy on the big screens at 2.30am. Given the large Italian community in Melbourne there was much debate in the media about identity and loyalty and who people cheer for – though it must be said with a much lighter touch than Norman Tebbit's infamous 'cricket test.'
- *The role of intergenerational relationships* and interactions in building resilience in individuals and communities. The final session of the conference was about disasters and how communities respond to 'lost' generations.

The examples given included:

- The 'stolen' generations of young indigenous Australians taken from their families and put into 'care' or given for fostering or adoption, as recently as the 1960's, resulting in ongoing pain, sense of loss, and the disruption or breakdown of community cohesion and networks.
- The sub-Saharan communities struggling with the impact of the deaths from HIV Aids of the majority of their middle generations, where the children and grandparents now care for each other and are the focus of much aid and redevelopment work.
- The impact of Hurricane Katrina on the community of New Orleans, contrasting the situations of those older people who were socially connected through family, church or other community networks and those who were not. It was the former who were more likely to evacuate and therefore to survive, not just because of practical support but also because of people urging them of the importance of leaving.

What I took away from this final session had already been a strong theme throughout the conference for me. I was struck by the vital role of intergenerational relationships in building strong and resilient communities, with a sense of where they have come from and a solidarity between people of all ages, enabling the group and individuals to cope better with change, with difficult times or emergencies. I also felt very strongly the role of the arts in this community building, as a vital part of the development of shared identity and the documenting and celebration of what is important to people.

3.0 AFTER THE CONFERENCE

3.1 The continuing work of ICIP

The election of a new Management Committee of ICIP was held in June and the results announced at the conference. Those Committee members present, including myself, spent much time before, during and after the conference discussing how best to carry forward and grow the work of the organisation. We set clear goals and realistic targets for the next five years, and presented these to the members and potential members present.

The next edition of the ICIP Newsletter, of which I am Editor, will spread news about the conference to those many members who could not attend. The Newsletter goes out three times a year in English, French and Spanish.

The day after the conference Convenor Dr Susan Feldman invited key speakers and delegates to meet with local policy makers, service providers and campaigners to debate the benefits of intergenerational work, with the aim of establishing an Australian Intergenerational network. Commitments were made which will make this a reality in the coming months, a very practical outcome of this excellent and inspiring conference.

3.2 Intergenerational Arts in England

I was asked by Arts Council England to use the conference as an opportunity to get a sense of where intergenerational arts practice fits within the work that is going on worldwide. The UK has a growing and increasingly well-networked group of practitioners, academics and others working on intergenerational initiatives. The Centre for Intergenerational Practice has over the past five years, been a real focus and force for developing intergenerational work as a field in the UK. The Centre, based at the Beth Johnson Foundation in Stoke-on-Trent, has also played a key role in enabling ICIP to survive and grow, thanks to the concerted efforts of the Director, Alan Hatton-Yeo, and his staff. An evaluation of the Centre, completed in 2006, is available on their website. A Wales Centre for Intergenerational Practice was established at University of Glamorgan in 2004.

Artists and community arts practitioners have always been at the forefront of intergenerational work in the UK, though much of what has been achieved is short-term, and not well enough documented. The arts sector needs to develop best practice in this field to be sustainable and has much to learn from the achievements and experiences of non-arts intergenerational initiatives.

My sense from what I heard at the conference, during formal sessions and informally in conversation, is that the same processes are happening in other countries, but that we are a few years ahead of some places. There are growing intergenerational networks in Spain, in Germany, and cross-Europe, all involving creative people and artists amongst others. In the US as I have already noted intergenerational work is well established, however the website of 'Generations United' the US umbrella organisation for the sector, lists only 11 organisations running arts activities in its database of programmes, of which two are Age Concern England and Age Exchange in London. US entries include Elders Share the Arts, in New York, the pioneering intergenerational work led by Susan Perlstein using theatre and other artforms. The arts as a tool for community building work are not so established in the US as in the UK and this has presumably had a knock on to intergenerational practice.

A conference is obviously a snap-shot of what is happening, and known, to those present, and not a piece of research. Much of the intergenerational work that happens at the moment, in the UK and abroad, is led by individual artists or small, local organisations, and does not receive wider attention. In addition many people and organisations are doing what we would term 'inter-generational' work but do not recognise the phrase and do not therefore engage in the growing networks and support mechanisms. A precise idea of the amount of intergenerational activity is therefore hard to establish. To engage with these people is one of the challenges for ICIP as the organisation continues to grow.

Susan Langford
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