

Working with Recently Arrived Horn of Africa Youth: An Intercultural Partnership Approach to Community Cultural Development

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Abstract: This paper documents and evaluates an intercultural arts partnership program that was directed towards improving settlement outcomes for Horn of Africa youth recently arrived in Melbourne, Australia. The paper presents the conceptual framework within which this program was developed. It examines the processes used in the project and evaluates the outcomes based on interviews and observations. It presents a model for individual and community development through the arts that is based on a collaborative approach that empowers young people to take responsibility. It argues for sustained interventions, based on principles of cultural empowerment, leadership development, and intercultural understanding, in order to maximize the capacity of young people – previously marginalized and disempowered – to contribute to the social sustainability of the communities in which they live.

Keywords: community cultural development, refugee youth, empowerment, intercultural partnership

Résumé : Cet article documente et évalue les effets d'un programme de partenariat interculturel destiné à favoriser l'intégration des jeunes de la communauté Hom d'Afrique, récemment arrivée à Melbourne, en Australie. En plus de présenter le cadre conceptuel dans lequel ce programme a été développé, cet article met l'accent sur les résultats de l'évaluation de l'impact de ce programme à partir de données produites dans le cadre d'entrevues et de séances d'observations. Cet article met en évidence les caractéristiques d'un modèle de développement individuel et communautaire basé sur les arts et la culture qui favorise l'estime de soi des jeunes. Enfin, cette recherche suggère toute l'importance du développement culturel, du leadership dans le développement local, ainsi que la primauté de la communication interculturelle afin de maximiser les conditions de vie des jeunes provenant de milieux défavorisés pour en arriver éventuellement à construire des communautés socialement durables et inclusives.

Mots clé : développement culturel communautaire, les jeunes réfugiés, empouvoirement, partenariats interculturels

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Introduction

My name is Ezeldin Deng. I come from Southern Sudan. I have been interested in the arts and performance since my arrival in Australia in 2004. What do the arts mean to me? This is a good question. The arts let me see things differently in the world around me; things other than human self-destruction. Things we can believe in when we see them. Art shows me the individual and the collective creation of the people we are. Art, to me, means culture, respect, emotion, happiness, relationship with others and confidence. It is in my body and in my blood.

The Horn of Africa Arts Partnership Program is a community cultural development program bringing together the Centre for Cultural Partnerships (Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Music, University of Melbourne) and the Horn of Africa Community Network Association, a community-based organization bringing together people from the different Horn of Africa communities (specifically Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and the Sudan) in Melbourne, Australia. Over the past ten years, refugee resettlement from these countries has brought significant numbers of people from these countries, many of them settling in one of two outer-urban areas of Melbourne. While they represent a very small proportion of the total population (0.3% of the total State population in the latest [2006] census statistics) they represent some 5% of recent arrivals and in particular regions represent up to 2% of the local population.

In establishing the partnership, the two organizations were interested in exploring whether an active arts-based experiential program might be effective in engaging Horn of Africa youth, empowering them in their capacity for creative expression, and, in this way, contributing to their resettlement in Australia. Many of these young people had experienced violent upheaval in their young lives. Some had been separated from their families. Others had lost parents and other family members. Many had spent a number of years in refugee camps. Their education had been intermittent.

On their arrival in Australia, many experienced poor performance at school, due to difficulties with written English and their previously interrupted schooling. They found themselves torn between two cultures, wanting to integrate into mainstream culture, but with strong family and community pressure to maintain their culture, customs, and religious practices. Due to their better language skills, they also have to take on significant responsibility within their families and act as a liaison person between their families and the social support structures of the wider community. Once they have finished school, it is difficult to get jobs and while they may wish to continue their studies, they do not have the pre-requisite qualifications (Oliff & Mohammed 2007).

All these factors contribute to this group feeling marginalized and disempowered in a society to which they would like to be able to make a positive contribution. It was in response to these circumstances that the proposal for an arts partnership program was developed.

This paper documents the process of this arts partnership program over a two and a half year period and assesses the extent to which it has contributed to better settlement outcomes for the young people who have been involved to date and to improved intercultural understanding as a key component of community sustainability. The evaluation draws on the observations of workshop

leaders, interviews with key personnel, question and answer sessions following the two showcases, and de-briefing and planning sessions held at intervals throughout the project.

The arts partnership program – a collaborative approach

From the start, this program was seen as a collaboration between two organizations: the Centre for Cultural Partnerships (CCP) of the University of Melbourne and the Horn of Africa Communities Network (HACN). Both organizations committed to a long-term investment, acknowledging that the desired outcomes could not be achieved through a short-term project. Both agreed to an empowerment model, with a set of ethical principles and protocols that would guide the program as it evolved. These included respect, openness, and acknowledging the diversity of cultures, as well as a commitment to cultural exchange and to the discipline of arts practice and the principle of artistic determination. The project's aims were formalized as:

- providing a '*creative space*' in which artists and young people can explore issues of settlement,
- activating *transformational learning* through the artistic processes of imagination and creativity,
- exploring possible *pathways to employment* for young people from Horn of Africa refugee communities, and
- building *youth community leadership capacity*.

A reflective approach to program implementation

The program activities initially focussed on an open-access weekly workshop. The workshops were run by professional teachers in dance, music and theatre and encouraged the young people to explore their skills in these different forms and to use them for the purpose of storytelling.

After an end-of-year break, the workshops resumed with a focus on working towards the development of a theatre piece to be presented at a showcase at the end of the semester (July 2008). The theatre piece evolved through a collaborative script development process with the young people working closely with the program's Artistic Director. Towards the end of the semester, a small group of people interested in developing their production and promotion skills became involved in production workshops to support the showcase.

Three young people were given the opportunity to participate in the Digital Story-telling module of the diploma course in community cultural development offered by the Faculty. They worked alongside other students to develop their skills in story-board development, filming and editing to produce three-minute digital films. These films were included in the showcase program.

Throughout this semester, there were a number of one-on-one mentoring sessions between the young people and members of the project team, including the Horn of Africa elders. These sessions focussed on leadership issues, the difficulties they were facing integrating the project into their other commitments (school, family, and cultural), and their aspirations.

The showcase in July 2008 was an important milestone in the project. It demonstrated the ability of the young people to use both theatre and film to convey their stories of dislocation and cultural identity in ways that made a direct connection with the audience. The performance was followed by a lively Q&A session when the actors and filmmakers talked about the process of

working together towards the production and their motivations for making the films. Audience response to the showcase was positive: an audience survey revealed that for 78% (n=29), the performance had made them feel differently towards young people from the Horn of Africa and had changed their perceptions about African communities and their culture.

The drama workshops continued through the second half of 2008, along with increasing involvement of the young people in digital media activities. A second showcase was held at the end of the year (December 2008), focussing on the digital films that had been made during the semester and a number of short reflective monologue presentations by participants in the drama workshops.

In 2009, the direction of the program shifted. A digital media lab was established one afternoon per week with six to eight participants attending on a regular basis. They worked together as a collective, devising and creating short films, and sharing among themselves the different roles of writing, directing, editing, filming, sound recording, and acting. They completed a further three short films about their experiences settling into life in Australia and the ups and downs of life as young people in a new culture.

In order to advance progress on the theatre piece, the first part of which had been presented in the first showcase, a semi-professional process was set up. Following an audition, the selected performers, who included a couple of people with professional experience, worked in an intensive rehearsal period over four weeks leading up to the third showcase, held in July 2009. The intention was to expose the whole group to a professional process and to challenge them with professional expectations. The finished product, *What's Your His-Story?*, completed the story that had been begun 12 months previously. It was a powerful piece of theatre that met with very positive audience response and demonstrated the skills, commitment, and professionalism of everyone involved. This showcase was the subject of a short documentary that was produced by the national broadcaster, ABC TV, and shown on national television a few weeks later.

Reflections on the process and the outcomes

Transformative learning

In their important report, *The Creative Age: Knowledge and Skills for the New Economy*, Seltzer & Bentley (1999) argued that the central challenge for the education sector is to find ways of embedding learning in a range of meaningful contexts, where students can use their range of skills and knowledge creatively to make an impact on the world around them” (p. viii). They proposed a shift in education away from what people should *know* to what they should be able to *do with their knowledge*. In doing so, they argued for a focus on fostering creativity. Being creative, they argued, doesn't necessarily imply artistic sensibility or talent. Nor does it imply brilliance. Rather it is “the ability to formulate new problems, ... to transfer what one learns across different contexts, to recognise that learning is incremental and involves making mistakes and to focus one's attention in pursuit of a goal” (p. 19).

In implementing this project, the team was committed to providing an environment in which Horn of Africa youth would learn new skills that would allow them to rise above the limitations they currently felt in their lives, where they would be encouraged to experiment in a trusted environment where they felt secure and, most importantly, where they were required to take responsibility for the outcomes. As one participant commented:

We learn from each other. Every time we make a mistake somebody would tell us. If Shahin (the Artistic Director) is not there, we sit by ourselves and we talk about it and we communicate with each other as a team. (project participant)

In a de-briefing session about their involvement in the digital media lab, the participants commented on the value of the process of learning through doing, where they were all working as a team and able to help each other to develop their creative and critical abilities. Having their films shown publicly in the showcases, as well as in presentations to schools and other community groups, was an important part of the process, as were the Q&A sessions that followed all these, when they talked about why they had chosen particular subjects and how they had developed the films. From the start, they knew that they were working towards a real product that would be shown publicly.

Theatre as 'third space'

Recent work in cultural theory claims that an 'in-between' 'hybrid' region or *third space* is a fertile environment in which participants can combine diverse knowledge into new insights and identities. Various researchers have referred to this 'in-between' space – the space between subjective and objective reality, or as the space “where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third space knowledges” (Pane 2007, p. 79).

O'Neill (2008) presents examples of how this “potential space” can hold transformative possibilities for both participants and audiences. In a series of projects where she employed ethnographic narrative and arts-based practice (specifically photos, installations, and writing) working with two groups of refugee/asylum seeker communities in the U.K., she found that this process created a “potential space,” a “reflective space for dialogue, narratives and images to emerge around the themes of transnational identities, exile, home and belonging” (p. 11).

In theatre, the concept of *third space* aligns with the concept of *creativity space* in which people are free to experiment, to assume new personae, to explore new realities, and to engage with the past and the present through stories, images, and metaphors that transform personal experience into a new imagined reality. Through the creative process, participants integrate new knowledge and insights.

Salverson (1999) addresses specifically the role of theatre in bearing witness to the experience of refugees. Drawing on her own experience working with refugees in Canada, she highlights the difficulty of going beyond an “aesthetic of injury.” The challenge for this sort of theatre is to bear witness, but to do it in such a way that acknowledges the complexity of individual situations, that speaks to issues of power and, while not dismissing empathy, looks to find different role models for the encounter between audience and performer – role models that are more about acknowledging responsibility (or obligation) and individual freedom.

One of the key objectives of this program was to contribute to better resettlement outcomes for these young people. The team saw this happening in a number of ways – by providing the young people with a sense of purpose and focus, by opening up new pathways for professional development and employment, by enhancing their sense of personal value and self-confidence and, most importantly, by providing a space in which they could safely tell their stories in ways that were true to their own experiences and to the reality that they wanted other people to understand.

The program wanted to provide the young people with a safe space where their stories could emerge and where they could begin to engage in a process of personal healing and intercultural dialogue.

The evolution of the theatre piece *What's Your His-story?* allowed this to happen. The story evolved through a series of storytelling workshops. Storytelling is part of African culture. One participant recounted how in the refugee camps they would all sit around at night telling stories to take their minds off the fact that they were hungry. Previously, in their villages there had been no films and no television and so telling stories was the village entertainment. Laughter was an important part of these stories.

The story that evolved derived from this tradition. There was pathos and tragedy, but there was also humour. It was a story that melded together the experiences of different people, no one person had actually lived this story.

For the young people, the healing came through the telling of this story, through a process of objectification that happened as the story took on a reality of its own that was beyond the personal reality of the individuals. It also came through the realization that this was not only their story, but also the story of many people around the world. As one of the participants said during the Q&A session at the end of the first showcase,

This story has a large message. It is all about war. If there wasn't a war it would have been easy and we would have all been living together. But this story is not just for Africans. There are all different people coming from here and there and everywhere and the war affects them and this is why I am very happy because this is not just a story for us, it is a story for all those who have been suffering. (project participant)

The Artistic Director of this project was himself a refugee. Working with him reinforced this message of the universality of their experience:

I found that there was a link between me and Shahin, as we are both refugees and it was not just my story it was all our stories woven together. (project participant)

For the audience, storytelling allows them to surrender to the story, to be immersed in the rhythm and in the images. As one audience member said, *"the awareness you gather from the news, from print, from observation does not even touch on the experience of sharing a story in this manner."* The story provided a space for dialogue and exchange between equals. Another member of the audience wrote:

I am grateful for the willingness of a group of young Africans to make themselves vulnerable by opening up their hearts to me and trusting that I will embrace their story without reservation. I was uplifted by the mutuality of the meeting.

Leadership development

In 2004, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation undertook a review of leadership needs for the twenty-first century (W.K. Kellogg Foundation 2004). It was particularly focussed on the challenges and opportunities for leadership that would create and sustain social progress. Effective leadership, it found, is moving from hierarchical top-down models to inclusive, participatory leadership styles: "Effective individual leaders are people who commit themselves to tackling challenges, help their community articulate a vision for change, and build the commitment and wherewithal to improve

the lives of people within the community” (p. 3). This review highlighted the need to identify and develop grassroots leaders who exemplify a transforming leadership approach, as well as the need to establish activities within the cultural, historical, and social context and needs of specific communities (p. 7). Others have likewise identified the need for community leadership to be grounded in particular cultural settings and to integrate principles of diversity and inclusion (Kirk & Shutte 2004).

Providing a model for youth leadership was a key objective of this program and was particularly important to the Horn of Africa Communities Network elders. They were concerned about the young people within the community and their potential exposure to violence and drugs as part of alienated and disconnected groups within the society. The young people themselves spoke of the fact that they often experienced negative comments and actions in public places. The elders saw this program as providing young people with the opportunity to develop and model new forms of community leadership, based on principles of self-responsibility, cultural purpose, and direction.

It was specifically towards this end that the elders suggested that the young people work with them to produce a film, identifying this as an opportunity for engagement and discussion about the values that were important to them. This represented a rare opportunity for cross-generational exchange. The elders spoke about the importance of education, of honouring family values, and of being true to your own values rather than trying to please other people. One of the elders was filmed teaching one of the younger participants a traditional board game. As they played, he told a humorous, imaginative story that was a metaphor for taking responsibility for one’s actions and not bending to the whims or directions of others.

For the young people this was a rare opportunity. Without the excuse of making the film, they would not have had access to the elders in this way. For the elders, it was also a reminder of the need to engage with and mentor the younger people in the community.

One participant, in particular, emerged as a young leader. As the project evolved he was given increasing levels of responsibility. He was appointed as a part-time community liaison worker and was the key point of contact for the involvement of people from the community in the digital media lab. Others in the group recognized his role as a leader and he acknowledged the learning opportunity this presented him.

I am comfortable in this leadership role. I know that I am learning with them and without them would not be doing this. I have learnt to be patient as we have worked on the editing and other tasks. We have all learnt the value of working as part of a team. (project participant)

When leadership is seen within a cultural and principle-centred framework that encourages taking responsibility and reflecting on process, this young man has made significant advances. He has taken on roles outside this project – facilitating an arts project for another organization, attending the Youth Parliament, speaking at schools, speaking to new recruits into the police service about youth issues and, most recently, working on a ‘forum theatre’ project with Horn of Africa youth in outer metropolitan areas. The program’s Artistic Director commented on his development:

You can easily see how much this young man has changed and how much he is thinking ahead. He sits down and thinks and comes up with an idea about the future. This is the proper quality of a leader. (Artistic Director)

An empowerment model

From the start, both partners saw this project as a culturally appropriate empowerment model, which would share responsibility and decision-making and empower young people to use the arts to express their concerns, dreams, and aspirations. In the words of one of the Horn of Africa elders:

The project needed to give them a sense of purpose and focus, it needed to engage them, entertain them, but also listen to them and allow them to have a say, so that they could start to take ownership. (Horn of Africa elder)

Adams & Goldbard (2001) refer to cultural expression as a “means of emancipation.” For them it is a “crucible for social transformation, one that can be less polarising and create deeper connections than other social change arenas” (p. 14).

The conceptual framework for the project drew on the theories of Freire (1970) and Boal (2006) where creative activity is seen as a process that allows people “to develop their own identity” and to create their own culture rather than “being captured and servile to other cultures” (Boal 2006, p. 39). “We are what we do and if we make and do only what others have invented, we will be a copy of others, not ourselves” (p 39).

New digital technologies have liberated the means of cultural production. A recent Research Report of the Australian-based Inspire Foundation, *Bridging the Digital Divide*, examined the potential “for information and communications technologies (ICT) to promote social inclusion and civic engagement amongst young people experiencing marginalisation” (Blanchard, Metcalf & Burns 2007, p. 1). The report concluded that “the rapid growth of the internet, access to broadband, creative technologies and the uptake of mobile technology by young people provide great opportunities for organisations and services looking to use ICT to improve the mental health of young people experiencing social, economic and cultural marginalisation” (p. 2).

Filmmaker and human rights activist David Vadiveloo had effectively demonstrated the capacity of ICT to empower an indigenous community in Central Australia, through the development of the online program *UsMob*. He makes a similar point:

Whilst the last five years have been spent trying to fully grasp the potential of this portal (viz. the web), the response of communities, artists and agencies over the next ten could come to represent either the emergence of perhaps the most significant domain for communication, empowerment and agency amongst minority groups worldwide, or, the formalising of the ever expanding digital divide between disenfranchised groups and the mainstream. (Vadiveloo 2007, p.106)

He goes on to say that this potential will only be realized “if it is driven by substantive partnerships with the disenfranchised and disempowered groups with whom we work” (p. 106). Skills development and control over the process – key aspects of all arts training – are critical to fulfilling this potential and these were the principles that underlay the Centre’s approach to this work.

As their confidence increased, the young people began to understand the power of the arts to present challenging issues, to raise questions, and to be a voice for change. The participants in the project had been very disturbed by a violent death of one of their friends and this further politicized their thinking and their approach to the work:

We used to do comedy and traditional stuff and everyone thought we were very good and they laughed. But they weren’t getting any messages. But after our brother died in Dandenong, we

thought it was time for everyone to wake up – time for us to change ourselves. So, we started to do theatre politically, so that people can see the truth of what has happened. (project participant)

They saw the power of theatre to tell people what happened to them in Africa and what was continuing to happen there:

It is good we are doing this and showing people what is happening in Africa and everywhere there is war. Don't let this kill your dreams. (project participant)

Film also became a vehicle for empowerment and political commentary. The short films made by the young people addressed issues that resonated with their experience – the difficulty of getting a job, even when they had qualifications, the fact that the jobs they were doing were mindless, and the challenge of communicating in a new language.

I asked myself 'why can't he find work?' He is talented. I can't find an answer to this question. That is why I made this short film to show a lot of people, so that they can find an answer to this question. (project participant)

An interesting component of the process of cultural empowerment was their capacity to use both theatre and film to laugh at themselves. Humour was an integral part of their storytelling process and was used as a means of detachment or distancing from what were in many respects confronting and disturbing stories.

This project has successfully demonstrated the capacity of the arts to transform consciousness amongst young people and give them a sense that they can take control and make a valuable contribution to their new homeland. One of the elders at the last showcase commented on how the play added an important new 'globalized' dimension to the cultural representation of Africans:

This is the story of a whole generation from Africa. It is the story about what happened here in Australia. Now these young people are African Australians and this is a new experience – culturally and socially. So, they are adding to this experience. Their children, their grandchildren will hear about this, will learn about this. They will be surprised that these things happened to them. (African elder)

The young people have been empowered to continue their tradition of storytelling in new forms and for new audiences.

Discussion and conclusion

This project has modelled a new approach to working with young people from refugee communities to address some of the challenges these young people are experiencing in integrating into a new culture. Sustainable communities are ones where people experience respect and where their voice is heard. They are communities where there is equity between and amongst different cultures and where different cultural meanings are acknowledged. This is not achieved by 'showcasing' cultural diversity through one-off events staged as 'entertainment'. It can only be achieved through a process of cultural empowerment and a focus on strengthening intercultural processes and interactions.

A number of the young people involved in this program had previously worked on arts projects with other groups. They had often found them 'exploitative', focussing on 'one-off' performances

of traditional music and dance as entertainment, with limited attempt to integrate them into a cultural tradition or framework.

From the start this program was framed within an intercultural dialectic. Interculturalism goes beyond multiculturalism's principles of equal opportunity and respect for cultural difference to processes that aim to facilitate dialogue, exchange, and reciprocal understanding between peoples of different cultures (Wood, Landry, & Bloomfield 2006). This program focussed on building skills and capacities for young Africans to communicate across cultures, to create a dialogue with people from the mainstream culture as well as with people from other recently arrived communities so that their experiences and their cultural reality could become a part of the broader culture.

They did not want to speak only to their own people, nor did they want to speak to the wider community in ways that emphasized their difference or their ethnicity. They wanted to engage and interact in ways that emphasized their shared humanity and the universality of their experiences so that, by their actions, they could contribute to cultural integration and community cohesion. This project was the catalyst for an interesting example of how this starts to snowball within the community. The young men needed access to a police vehicle for one of their films. They approached the police in their local neighbourhood and explained to them what they were doing. The police were very interested, and very happy to cooperate with them. The police then proposed that one of them come from time to time to talk to the new police recruits about intercultural issues and how relations could be improved between the police and young Africans.

An intercultural approach goes beyond celebrating diversity to empowering mutual learning and growth. It seeks proactive engagement and interaction regardless of race and ethnicity. This process of proactive engagement was modelled in the project as it worked to build responsibility among the participants – for themselves, for the team, and for the process.

The partnership program is still a work in progress. The digital medial lab continued in 2010 and is evolving into a social enterprise development pilot. Six young people are working with an arts management trainer to develop a web-based co-operative business model for their creative activity. A 'forum theatre' program working with new groups of Horn of Africa youth in outer metropolitan regions of Melbourne is being conducted over the next three years. The theatre piece *What's Your His-story?* will tour by invitation to four regional Victorian communities with significant Horn of Africa refugee communities. The partnership will continue to evolve in response to emerging opportunities that arise out of these and other activities. To underestimate the resources required for such a program would be to put it significantly at risk. Highly skilled and sensitive artistic and project leadership, together with a continuing commitment of resources from both partner organizations, have been critical to the success of the program to date.

Transformational change has occurred for these young people. While they will continue to experience frustrations and difficulties as they map out their paths in a new culture, they go forward with a stronger sense of who they are, their capacities, and the values they stand for. Two of the young participants have gained sufficiently in confidence to apply for funding for their own arts projects. Another young female participant has been instrumental in involving close to 20 young people from her community in a film project. In the words of Adams & Goldbard (2002), they have been equipped to act, to "enter the public sphere and take action to realize their ideals" (p. 26). In

the framework of sustainable communities, they have become agents for integration and intercultural understanding.

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