

Case Study 8

Weaving inclusion into the community

Mundaring Arts Centre in partnership with Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADAA) and the Hills Community Support Group.

Mundaring Arts Centre has been connected with DADAA since 2006, working on a one-year program designed to promote inclusion and increase access to their services. When participants from the Hills Community Support Group started attending the art workshops, the three organisations set about stabilising their relationship for future projects.

While not part of the DAII Pilot Project, the Mundaring Arts Centre has echoed the DAII model by firstly conducting a disability audit, partnering with disability services organisations and then introducing a program to promote inclusion.

Director of Mundaring Arts Centre Jenny Haynes, along with local artist and workshop assistant Anne Williams, reflect on the work they have been involved in over the last three years.

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Due to the success of the previous partnerships with Hills Community Support Group and DADAA, the Mundaring Arts Centre identified a need for a more inclusive approach to their workshops. The three project partners set about cementing their relationships, commissioned an accessibility audit, and outlined a series of inclusive workshops named 'Convergence'.

The Mundaring Arts Centre and Hills Community Support Group had developed a productive working relationship over the past 25 years, working in a sporadic nature

from project to project. Recent arts projects with DADAA enabled the Arts Centre to strengthen this relationship and further the two organisations' commitment to providing recreational and arts experiences for people with severe difficulties.

"When the projects were over, DADAA assisted us in an advisory capacity, strengthening existing relationships and internal procedures," explains Ms Haynes.

Techniques employed by DADAA were integrated into the Mundaring Arts Centre's existing workshop structure refining procedures, artist training and the scope of programs offered, making the Arts Centre's entire program more inclusive to people with significant needs.

"The changes were more than simply wheelchair access to the Centre," says Ms Haynes. "An audit of all the barriers to access was also completed to see what needed to be done to make the Art Centre's Gallery Gift Shop and public programs more inclusive."

Valuable training

Before the changes were implemented through the Convergence Project, the Arts Centre had encountered some behavioural issues and difficulty working with people with severe disabilities in the normal workshop structure.

"To improve the skills offered and the atmosphere created in the workshops the Convergence partners set up training workshops for the presenting artists, generating a large pool of skilled workers to call upon," recalls Ms Haynes.

The training revolved around sharing the information and expertise from all three organisations and structuring a year long program of six-week workshops in all arts mediums. The artists adapted their approaches to lesson plans to ensure they provided a broad range of activities for all skill levels.

The six-week workshops were led by a fully trained arts worker working in partnership with a mentored arts worker. This enabled the sharing of ideas, creating a larger group of skilled workers and provided more people to assist participants.

“The people that had more severe needs also came with their own support workers, providing an opportunity for Hills Community Support Group’s carers to learn new ways of engaging their participants and create new artworks of their own”, says Ms Haynes.



Photo courtesy of Mundaring Arts Centre

Support workers commented that the project helped them to see themselves as individual artists working alongside the person they were caring for. They were encouraged to use these skills after the completion of the project.

Community awareness

The Convergence Project was promoted to all members of the community, explaining that the focus was to provide accessible workshops for people with disabilities but also to encourage participation from all ages and skill levels.

“The way it was advertised said, ‘this is for everyone in our community’, but it is specifically tailored for people with disabilities’, so the people who enrolled knew that when they walked into the room there was going to be a whole range of ages and abilities,” Ms Haynes explains. “Because of that, we attracted people who were really open and welcoming.”

Due to previous experiences where workshops with diverse groups could be confronting for some of the participants, the Arts Centre recognised it was important to be sensitive to people’s expectations at the point of enrolment.

“The Convergence enrolment forms were carefully constructed to ensure all participants’ needs were met and that workshop artists were fully aware of the experience and preferred methods of learning of all people enrolling,” says Ms Haynes.

Tailored program

From the organiser's perspective, some familiarity with the participants with disabilities from previous projects with the Hills Community Support Group, assisted in constructing programs which were tailored to the skills of individuals.

"There are lots of things you need to be aware of when working with people who have severe needs. For example, the carer can have a tendency to jump in and do the project themselves," explains Ms Haynes.

"During the Convergence workshops the carers were there as participants, so they thought of themselves as an artist, and the person they're working with as an artist. If the person needs help, the carer is there to support them, but mostly to leave them alone and let them create."

In several cases the tutors in the workshops had to modify their approach in order to instruct the participants more than leave them to explore themselves. It was found that participants with autism required more of a structured learning environment.

Artist Anne Williams, an assistant in the weaving classes, explains that the inclusive nature of the workshops worked well.

"I don't like the word 'inclusive' much, but I think it applies because we had a mixed group, but everyone seemed to fit in," Ms Williams says.

"The other thing we would do was say to carers, 'you're not just here to sit back; you're here to do things as well.' We found that several of the carers worked on their own projects with members of the class and thoroughly enjoyed it.



Photo courtesy of Mundaring Arts Centre

“We had a wonderful man and his carer who were both really keen participants, side by side. If you came into the group you wouldn't have been able to identify who was the carer. They were just two people working on their own creative thing and I thought that was very valuable to see.”

The project launched with an exhibition of paintings by members from the Hills Community Support Group, inviting the public to view the range of artworks created with an artist in residence held at the Pinewood Centre in Maida Vale.

A further two exhibitions were held as part of the Convergence project to allow the public and participants to see the broad range of work created throughout the year.

“It was very rewarding to see how many people came to the opening as some of the participants have a fear of crowds. To allow family and friends the opportunity to view the works properly we had an early showing for the participants at six o’clock with the main exhibition opening the same night at 7.30pm,” Ms Haynes says. “We had anticipated that after the speeches many participants may leave as openings can attract around 150 people, but many of the participants stayed on until 11pm enjoying the live music and wonderful atmosphere.”

Ongoing results

As a result of this project the Mundaring Arts Centre’s workshop structure will remain

accessible and new workshops are planned to continue building on the relationships between the organisations, participants, and artists, pending funding.

“We are hoping for funding support to enable a steady three-year transition into our core program. One of the limitations of the project is that it is free for the community and it requires two arts workers to provide assistance for ten to fifteen people, so it is very cost exhaustive,” explains Ms Haynes.

For Anne Williams and the weaving workshops, the relationships and friendships forged through finding what the participants have in common – including brushes with cancer and bushfires – has meant that the group has continued to meet.



Photo courtesy of Mundaring Arts Centre

“Joyce Tasma, (who worked as the primary artist with Anne) continued to invite participants into her own home to create woven works and share stories,” Ms Williams says. “People who were in that workshop came along and we brought our own stuff to do. We brought something nice to eat and it became a very warm social occasion.”



Photos courtesy of Mundaring Arts Centre

Outline of project

Increased awareness and access to Mundaring Arts Centre and its venues. Strengthening networks between local organisations, inclusive workshops and increased training for tutors.

Partners

Mundaring Arts Centre champions local artists and crafts people by promoting and exhibiting their work, fostering and advocating their inclusion in activities and cultural development in the Mundaring Shire and the eastern metropolitan region of Western Australia.

Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADDA) is a not-for-profit community cultural development organisation, which has been a catalyst for the development of an inclusive approach to the arts and culture of Western Australia for more than ten years. Their focus is on creating opportunities and significant beneficial social change with people who have a disability and / or mental health issue.

Hills Community Support Group is a charitable organisation, which provides services to youth at risk, frail older people, people with disabilities and carers.

Outcomes

The project has created a more accessible Arts Centre and venues due to the accessibility audit.

Inclusive exhibitions were held at the Mundaring Arts Centre in April and May 2009.