



Milk Crate Theatre Research Project Final Report

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Executive summary

This small scale project was commissioned by the Milk Crate Theatre to undertake an exploratory study into the impact of its workshop program for women. The Milk Crate Theatre is an example of the participatory arts which works with people who are homeless and disadvantaged to enhance lives and build connections.

Research into participatory arts is still in its infancy and the existing evidence base is quite small. There is, however, an increasing recognition of the value of arts practice in improving personal (identity) capital, human (educational) capital, and social capital.

24 women participated in this project, although attendance was sporadic for most. Short surveys were used as the principle methodological tool, and responses were collected from participants in three ways:

- An entry survey conducted at or about Week 1;
- An exit survey conducted at or about Week 8;
- Completion of a three-question 'postcard' survey at the conclusion of each workshop.

The interview responses identified a number of potential areas of impact that could be explored in future research projects. Themes emerging from the interviews can be condensed into four main areas: personal growth and development; skill and knowledge acquisition; social connections; and operational issues (workshops, performances, and the Milk Crate Theatre company).

Drawing on interview results, suggestions from participants and a review of existing research a number of recommendations are made:

Recommendation 1: That contact details be collected (non compulsorily) for interested participants at the first session they attend.

Recommendation 2: That SMS or email reminders be sent to participants on the day prior to workshops.

Recommendation 3: That consideration be given as to a convenient, central location and opportunities for transporting interested participants to the venue.

Recommendation 4: That issues pertinent to the lives of participants continue to form the basis of workshops and performances.

Recommendation 5: That programs continue to be run for women only.

Recommendation 6: That consideration be given to the conduct of larger scale research projects involving study of:

- i. The impact of the Milk Crate Theatre workshop and performance on participants; and
- ii. Quantitative and qualitative measures of change over time in participants.

Recommendation 7: That the following themes identified in this study be explored further as key domains in future research projects:

- i. Personal growth and development (self confidence, self esteem, self image; enjoyment/fun or relief from boredom; creation/achievement; expanding horizons).
- ii. Skill and knowledge acquisition (learning about theatre; applying skills and knowledge in other areas of life).
- iii. Social connections (connection with other people; experience of commonality; insights into the experience of others; working with a group; working with other women; expand and improve personal social networks).
- iv. Operational issues (attendance; theatre company and director).

Recommendation 8: That consideration be given to implementing the use of a short evaluation survey as part of future workshop programs.

Introduction

This project was commissioned by the Milk Crate Theatre to undertake an exploratory study into the impact of its workshop program for women. The Milk Crate Theatre (MCT) is an example of the participatory arts that works with people who are homeless and disadvantaged to enhance lives and build connections.

The existing evidence points to the beneficial impact of the general MCT workshop program. However, while drawn from participants as well as agencies, this evidence is anecdotal. Recently the MCT successfully applied for funding to carry out a women-only workshop program, and funding was also allocated to a research project into the impacts of the program.

Aim

The aim of this project is:

- To undertake an exploratory study into the impact of the Milk Crate Theatre workshop program for women.

Methodology

The methodology remained fluid throughout much of the project. There were a number of uncertainties prior to and in the early stages of the workshops, including:

- The likely number of participants;
- The likely frequency of attendance by participants;
- Whether the workshops would be structured as one 16-week program or two consecutive eight-week programs;
- Whether the same venue would be maintained throughout the program.

During the program it became clear that the number of participants and frequency of attendance fluctuated weekly; additionally, it was decided that the workshops would be structured as two eight-week programs and that the venue would be changed from A Woman's Place at Kings Cross to Samaritan House at Surry Hills.

Short surveys were used as the principle methodological tool for the project. The survey questions are provided in Appendix 2. The following interview schedule was implemented for each of the two eight-week programs:

- An entry survey conducted at or about Week 1;
- An exit survey conducted at or about Week 8;
- Completion of a three-question 'postcard' survey at the conclusion of each workshop.

Patterns of participation in the research are outlined in Appendix 1.

Participants

24 participants took part in the research project. Demographic information was collected during entry interviews (or exit interviews for those who did not complete an entry interview). Not all participants answered all questions.

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 63: the mean age was 40. 70% of the women involved had children. Two participants identified as Aboriginal, none as Torres Strait Islander, and the majority (90%) as neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander. 70% of participants were born in Australia. None were employed, and 11 of 20 indicated that they were not looking for work and therefore not in the labour force. All participants received a government payment as their main source of income. Nearly three quarters were living in short term crisis accommodation, and of those, most were at either A Woman's Place or Samaritan House.

Table 1: Participant demographics

	No.	%
Age (N=19)		
21-30	3	16%
31-40	6	32%
41-50	4	21%
51-60	5	26%
61+	1	5%
Children (N=20)		
Yes	14	70%
No	6	30%
ATSI identification (N=20)		
Aboriginal	2	10%
Torres Strait Islander	0	0
Neither Aboriginal nor Torres Strait Islander	18	90%
Country of birth (N=20)		
Australia	14	70%
Other	6	30%
Employment (N=20)		
Unemployed	9	45%
Not in the labour force	11	55%
Source of income (N=21)		
Age Pension	2	10%
Disability Support Pension	10	48%
Newstart	7	33%
Parenting Payment	2	10%
Place of residence (N=21)		
SAAP/CAP crisis/short term accommodation	15	71%
With friends/relatives	1	5%
House/flat	5	24%

Background on the participatory arts

In defining 'arts', Barraket (2005, p.3) notes that

'The arts' is a broad term which embraces many forms of creative expression. It includes visual, performing and literary forms, and ranges from the 'high' arts to community-based creative activities.

The term 'participatory arts' is used throughout this report to describe arts programs which actively involve people in developing or undertaking such activities.

Research into participatory arts is still in its infancy and the existing evidence base is quite small. There is, however, an increasing recognition of the value of arts practice in improving:

- Personal or identity capital (positive self image, improved self esteem, confidence and self worth);
- Human or education capital (knowledge, skills and awareness); and
- Social capital (social inclusion, community cohesion and awareness). (See Newman and Stephens, 2003, Callard, 2005, Parr, 2006, Goodland and Hamilton, 2002).

Limitations of current evidence

Historically, evaluation of the arts has focused on economic impact and urban regeneration, which is primarily financial in nature. The contribution of arts to broader social policy has been emphasised by a recent shift to focus on people and social inclusion (Landry, 1996).

For people who engage in arts-related activity, there is often a resulting sense of well being that is difficult to explain or quantify. When asked about their experiences, it is common for people to express a combination of physical, social, emotional and spiritual outcomes (Rosenberg, 2008). The mechanism for collecting these outcomes and attributing them to the program is in its infancy, with evaluation not yet central to arts practice (White, 2006).

Limitations to existing research include: a reliance on anecdote, small sample size, limited hypothesis testing and lack of longitudinal components (McQueen and Zingaras, July 2002).

The impact of participatory arts

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the literature suggests that arts can have an impact on a variety of areas. Barraket (2005) examined the reported impact of arts participation on seven indicators of social inclusion and concluded that a strong positive impact was often reported on:

- Educational participation;
- Personal development;
- Job readiness;
- Social cohesion; and
- Active citizenship.

Further, there was more limited evidence of a positive impact on:

- Health;
- Reduced crime;
- Increased employment rates; and
- Enhanced educational performance.

While noting that it is unclear from the existing literature whether the impact of arts programs are made specifically because of their arts focus, or more generally because they are effective community development tools, Barraket (2005, p.13) concluded that arts programs were likely to be effective in increasing social inclusion in two ways:

- *By facilitating engagement:* “...the literature consistently suggests high levels of interest in, enjoyment and retention in a range of arts activities in diverse settings. Involvement in arts projects often stimulates participants’ creative interests and thus facilitates high levels of active engagement.”
- *By building bridging social capital:* “Arts-based initiatives seem to be particularly effective in building networks amongst diverse groups and providing the social frameworks in which significant conflict can be resolved.”

Matarasso, a leading researcher in arts impact studies, has written that arts programs differ from other social programs in encouraging imagination and creating opportunities for self expression:

The greatest impact of participation in the arts – and the ones which other programs cannot achieve – arise from their ability to help people think critically about and question their experiences and those of others ... with all the ... magic, symbolism, feeling, metaphor and creativity that the arts can offer. (Matarasso, 1997, p.xx)

The impact of participatory arts on disadvantaged communities

Barraket (2005, p.10) reports that the impact of participatory arts is less well-documented for the most marginalised members of society than it is for those who are less isolated. However, there are examples of arts activities that have been reported to have had positive impacts on disadvantaged communities.

A VicHealth report noted that art can act as a powerful advocacy tool on issues such as discrimination, homelessness and violence, and when done well, can add to the audience's understanding and knowledge of the community it lives in (VicHealth, Winter 2004). There is an emerging consensus that exhibitions, festivals and performance arts can act as a strategy to promote community cooperation, community pride, raise awareness of issues and reduce the isolation of individuals and groups within the community (Kelaher et al., 2007, Jermyn, 2001, South, 2004).

Blake Stevenson Ltd (2000) conducted four in-depth case studies to investigate the role of arts-based projects and partnerships, and to ascertain the long-term and sustainable impacts of arts-based projects on the regeneration of deprived areas and social inclusion. The authors suggest the arts were seen to be able to operate in a number of different ways: they could increase individuals' personal development, improve an area's image, attract economic investment and lead to training and employment. Ultimately,

...arts activities can provide opportunities for people to take greater control over their lives by exploring and expressing social issues of relevance to individuals and communities. (Blake Stevenson Ltd, 2000)

An international example is the *L'Art pour l'Espoir* project supported by the Section for Universal Values at UNESCO, as a means to empower children and adults through creative strategies. A circus-training program was established with children from Parisian refugee communities, with mentorship from a professional Ethiopian Circus Team. Regular performances around Paris broke down issues of rejection and suspicion, raising community awareness of child refugees. Anecdotal results for the children themselves included a sense of fulfilment and empowerment by their achievements in their new community, to improve mental and physical well being (Joubert, 2008).

Photovoice is a creative process by which people can identify, represent and enhance their community through photography. 'It is designed to create and discuss photographs as a means of catalyzing personal and community change', creating an opportunity for disadvantaged people to speak from their own experience (Wang et al., 2000) (p. 83). It has been used to engage Indigenous people, women, youth and the homeless in social issues by taking pictures, telling stories and informing stakeholders about issues at a grassroots level (Spence, 1995). Everyday health, work and life conditions and struggles are documented to promote dialogue about community issues and reach the broader public and policy makers.

Wang et al (2000) carried out a multi-method evaluation, which involved surveying homeless participants pre and post photovoice workshops. They found that many participants involved in the project found that being involved in a group process of critical reflection and quality discussion gave them increased stimulation, engagement, motivation and self esteem to improve their lives, and advocate for their well being.

Wright and Palmer (2007) have reported on the activities of Big hART. Big hART is a multiple national award winning arts company which uses theatre, film, television, paintings, photography, dance, range of other creative processes to support disadvantaged groups and communities. It uses the creative process to tell people's stories and give them the opportunity to connect with others, addressing social problems such as domestic violence, drugs misuse, suicide, low levels of literacy, truancy and intergenerational addiction and homelessness. An example of Big hART's work is the *Northcott Narratives*, undertaken from 2002 – 2007, in partnership with the Department of Housing's Community Development team and Surry Hills Police Crime Prevention Officers on the Northcott Public Housing Estate. The aims of the Northcott Narratives interventions were to:

- Use skills based initiatives in film, text, music, sound and photography to facilitate tenants telling their stories, increasing their sense of community, resulting in a decrease in violence and isolation and an increase in feelings on safety;
- Create an opportunity for the life experiences of tenants to be validated, empowering them to move into the next phase of their lives with increased personal skills to make choices and therefore avoid the atrophy that can be triggered by a culture of dependency; and
- Affect social and departmental policy in regards to the community development, partnership and service delivery for tenants and public housing.

An Evaluation of Big hART's work at the John Northcott Estate describes the social impacts of the project (Wright and Palmer, 2007). Although the quantitative data for criminal activity was not available for Northcott Estate specifically there were reports of:

- A decrease in criminal activity and the creation of a safer estate;
- Accreditation as a World Health Organisation (WHO) Safe Community, the first public housing estate to have achieved an official endorsement;
- A national crime prevention award from the Institute of Criminology; and
- Endorsement by The NSW Department of Housing.

The quality of the cultural and performance based activities carried out at Northcott, such as the *StickybrickS* performance at the Sydney Festival and *Tenant by Tenant* portraits was important in prompting a wide audience to "listen" to the Northcott residents accounts and give the tenants a sense that their lives were taken seriously by their community. (Wright and Palmer, 2007)

The impact of participatory arts programs for women

There is some evidence of the impact of participatory arts programs for women. For people who experience negative self-image, participatory arts can provide the freedom to “reinvent themselves” and enhance their self image (Hughes and Wilson, 2004). One example of a participatory arts program for women is Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company, which provides drama, music and arts programs in prison and post release, allowing ex-prisoners reconnected to community through participation in creative arts, skill development and presentation.

Williams (1996) reports improved self-esteem outcomes for women ex-offenders involved in one of the plays, *Tell Her That I Love Her*, concluding that the project helped the women in “developing their self-esteem, coming to terms with unacknowledged trauma, gaining public acceptance of who they are.”

In their preliminary research, Kelaher et al (2007) report that the Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company:

- Creates high quality, music and art;
- Provides pathways back into formal education, training or employment for female ex-prisoners and marginalised youth; and
- Promotes public awareness in the wider community of the complexity of issues that lead to mental ill health, addictive behaviour, violence and intergenerational poverty.

The social circus model has a philosophy of acceptance in a respectful and supportive environment and has been cited as an international model of community arts best practice. In Australia, the Women’s Circus began in 1991 and works with women survivors of sexual assault and violence, women from disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances and culturally diverse backgrounds. In particular, ‘circus is used as a recovery tool for survivors of domestic and sexual assaults, helping women reconnect with their bodies instead of living outside them’ (VicHealth, Winter 2004) (p. 7). There are more than 125 women in regular training to gain circus and performance skills. The annual show attracts audiences of over 1000.

In preliminary research, (Kelaher et al., 2007) found that the Women’s Circus:

- Reaffirms women’s control over their bodies;
- Builds self esteem through physical and performance work;
- Creates a safe, non-competitive environment for women to work in;
- Enables women of different ages, abilities, shapes and sizes to come together to create a theatre event which is of a high standard; and
- Communicates feminist ideas in an entertaining and challenging fashion.

Good practice

A number of authors have identified principles of good practice in designing and running participatory arts programs. Some of these are set out in the table overleaf. Common themes include:

- The provision of supportive, welcoming and safe spaces for people to participate;
- The involvement of high quality and committed staff;
- Encouraging and valuing participation and the contribution of individuals;
- Discipline in requiring personal responsibility and commitment to the work and the group in preparing, attending and participating; and
- Valuing diversity and encouraging people of different backgrounds to build relationships.

Table 2: Good practice in participatory arts programs

Barraket (2005, p.13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing the quality of artistic input: the involvement of established artists was often noted as an important factor in engaging participants; • Facilitating successful risk taking: some authors emphasised the need to “...support participants to establish, and meet, artistic and social challenges”; • Fostering collaboration and group ownership; and • Evaluating outcomes as well as outputs.
Hughes and Wilson, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer groups and informal settings offering opportunities for participation; • Informal networks of support encouraging personal and social development; • Emphasis on the importance of voluntary and purposeful nature of involvement; • A creative culture that promotes acceptance, tolerance, equality and teamwork; • Opportunities to take part in creative processes that utilise abilities, ideas and skills; • Providing a safe environment for people take risks and responsibility and assert their independence; • Quality participatory art environments that are work-like and professional environments that impose high expectations levels of motivation and commitment; • A structure where people are required to commit, turn up, be prepared, perform, work with a range of other people, participate, give and take ideas, respond to challenge, take risks, make decisions and contribute; and • Allow people to mix with other people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, social and cultural backgrounds

Heath et al., November 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A combination of “roles, risks and rules”.
ARTSUSA, 2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering small classes with opportunities to develop close and interactive relationships; • Placing a premium on giving people a chance for success as a way to build their sense of worth and achievement; and • Building on what participants value and understand and encourage voluntary participation.
HDA, 2000, Smith, 2003	Strong partnerships, high quality and experienced coordinators, commitment of participants and staff, new ways of working and monitoring and evaluation.
Everitt and Hamilton, 2003	A congenial space that is welcoming and supportive, being holistic and person-centred, being flexible, encouraging creativity and innovation, leadership, acknowledgement of contribution and loose boundaries between staff and participants.
PAT, 1999	Valuing diversity, embedding local control, supporting local commitment, promoting equitable partnerships, working flexibly with change, securing sustainability and pursuing quality across the spectrum and connecting with the mainstream.
Secker et al., 2007, Harris, 2006	The importance of providing arts activity in a safe, supportive, unthreatening environment.
Seidel, 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People share a common interest; • Each individual has important contribution to make the group work; • Rules, expectation and discipline • A safe environment (physical and emotional); • An environment where all ideas are considered and valued; • Hard work is mixed with humour and playfulness; and • A discipline and work ethic that fosters a sense of personal responsibility to the work and the group.

Results

In this section, the results for each question are presented on a question-by-question basis. Key themes are drawn out in the *Discussion* section.

Entry survey results

What are you looking forward to about the workshops?

Responses to this question fell largely into five categories: those that expressed no expectations or an opportunistic joining of the workshop group; those that anticipated personal development; those that looked forward to enjoyment or fun; those that anticipated learning or skill development; and those that centred on working with the group or some feature of the group, such as working with women or being part of a team.

What do you hope to get out of the workshops?

Responses for the second question could be categorised similarly to the first. Participants either: had no expectations; spoke about personal development (particularly in terms of self confidence or self esteem); hoped for enjoyment or fun; or spoke about learning or skill development. Learning/skill development was a popular response to this question, some focusing on what they might learn about the theatre and others focusing on learning other skills.

What are you not looking forward to, or nervous about?

A small number of respondents indicated that there was nothing they were nervous about or not looking forward to. Other responses tended to fall within four categories: meeting new people; opening up about personal history or circumstances; being nervous about the performance; and general shyness or nervousness.

What are your reasons for coming along to the workshops?

Responses to this question were somewhat similar to those for the first and second questions; additionally, however, they often focused on the manner in which participants had come to hear of the workshops, for example, hearing about it through a friend or seeing a flyer. Responses to this question could be grouped according to the following: curiosity/opportunistic; personal development; release of negative emotion; enjoyment/fun; relief of boredom; and interest in theatre.

What would make it easier for you to attend? What would make it easier to come along every week?

Responses to this question most frequently indicated that there was nothing further the participant required in order to make it easier for her to attend. Those who made alternative responses mostly spoke about location/transport, time considerations or reminders. Most of those focused on the present week but one participant looked ahead to the end of the program and commented that, because

the workshops were taking place at a crisis service with limited accommodation timeframes, no one knew where they would be in eight weeks or whether it would still be convenient to attend.

One woman, who completed a written survey, wrote about the personal and emotional circumstances that might make participation in the group easier:

Confidence building. No sadness or hurt or pain.

Because she completed a written survey rather than an interview we do not have any further information on this. All other responses can be divided into the four categories mentioned above.

What does the topic 'boundaries' mean to you?

This question was only asked of the women who participated in the first workshop program, as the topic for the second program had not yet been determined at the time of interview. The topic for the first program was "boundaries"; for the second program it was "normal and abnormal". A variety of responses were given for this question. The relatively small number of responses for this question coupled with their diverse nature makes categorisation somewhat difficult, but the major emergent theme was boundaries as a means of self protection. Other responses include: physical and psychological boundaries; language barrier; a lack of boundaries (openness and honesty); and the range of issues that could be considered boundaries.

When you were thinking about coming along to the workshops, did it make a difference that it was a women-only program?

There were four main categories of response for this question. A majority of participants indicated that they preferred that women only were involved in the workshops. A small number indicated that they would also prefer if men were involved. Some indicated that they had no preference about the gender make up of the group, and others noted that, although they personally would not mind if men were involved, they recognised that it would be difficult for other women. Within each of these it was recognised that the gender make up of the group would have an influence on its dynamics.

Exit survey results

What did you get out of the workshops?

Responses to this question were very positive and ranged across a variety of topics. They fell into five main categories: personal development; artistic creation or experience; expanding horizons; connection with others; and experience of commonality.

What's changed for you as a result of the workshops?

This question elicited responses that were similar to responses to the first question. A sense of doors opening or re/awakening was common to a number of responses. Common themes included: personal development; expanding horizons; connection with others; and experience of commonality.

What have you learned about yourself or others as a result of the workshops?

Again, responses to this question were similar to those for the first two questions. They focussed on learning (either about the theatre, or more generally), insight into the experience of others (and especially gaining “different perspectives”), and the dynamics of working in a group.

What kept you coming back to the workshops?

A variety of responses were given to this question, including enjoyment, learning, and connection to others. They can be categorised into six main themes: enjoyment/fun; expanding horizons; learning about the theatre or creative skill development; general learning; group dynamics; and connection with others.

Would anything have been different for you if men had also been involved in the workshops?

This question elicited similar responses to that of its counterpart question in the first survey. About half the participants preferred that women only be involved; others preferred that men be involved; some did not mind either way and others recognised that, whatever their own preferences, some women within the group would be uncomfortable if men were involved.

How have the workshops changed your understanding of ‘boundaries’ or ‘normal and abnormal’?

Similarly to its counterpart question in the first interview, responses to this question defied easy categorisation. Broadly speaking, they could be divided into three groups: those for whom the workshop had not had an impact on their understanding of the topic; those for whom the workshop had led to a personal change in attitude towards the topic and/or a greater awareness of the topic; and those for whom it led to reflections on the nature of the topic.

Is there anything you think should have been done differently?

A variety of responses emerged from this question. Consistent workshop attendance was the most prominent theme of these responses. The others picked up on different issues including: being able to work in a group; making sure that everyone is included; praise for the director; recording workshops and performances; and providing catering.

What else would you like to tell us about?

Some of the responses to this question mirrored those of the previous question. A number of participants had nothing else they wished to add. Other comments focussed particularly on operational issues: the sporadic attendance of some participants; and the contribution of the MCT director and company.

Postcard results

The intention of the postcards was to be able to keep track, on a weekly basis, of any developing issues or themes arising from each of the workshops. The aim was to engage participants in the research with a visually arresting design and brief questionnaire.

Responses to these questions picked up on some of the particular events, activities and discussions that took place on the day of the workshop, in contrast to the exit interviews in which participants tended to address issues more generally.

Today, the best part of the workshop was...

There were a variety of responses to this question, which often referred to particular events or activities that had taken place on the day. Common themes to emerge from this question included enjoyment or fun that the participants were having, a sense of camaraderie or fellowship and expanding social networks, skills being learned, having access to different ideas and interesting discussions, and being able to create something special.

Today, the worst part of the workshop was...

Again, responses to this question often referred to particular events that had happened that day. Responses included disappointment over the number of participants, the difficulties of working in a team or interacting with others, some aspect of the participant's own behaviour or involvement, or grappling with the technical aspects of workshop participation including remembering lines or understanding the theme.

So far, my whole journey with the Milk Crate Theatre...

Responses to this question were generally very positive. Sometimes they were general comments such as "getting better and better" or "absolutely wonderful"; other responses focused on particular aspects of the experience such as being on a creative journey, an opportunity to relax or have fun, a prompt for thinking, a platform for confidence-building, or a new and rewarding experience.

Case study

A case study has been compiled to draw together some of the interview responses and to illustrate the journey that participants took during their involvement with the Milk Crate Theatre women's program.

Marion

Marion is a 45 year old woman who has two children. Her main source of income is the Disability Support Pension and she is living in crisis/short term accommodation. Marion came to the first theatre workshop out of curiosity when another participant told her about it, when she hoped that it would provide some relief from the stress of living in crisis accommodation. She also thought that skills she learnt could be applicable to work that she was hoping to get, and might help her gain in confidence.

An important theme to emerge from Marion's survey responses was that of being able to have some time out. Marion's initial reasons for coming along were centred on getting out of her stressful housing situation for a while and get involved in other activities. During the following weeks her postcard responses also indicated that comfort and relaxation were really important to her and that the MCT workshops helped her to achieve those.

Another important theme to emerge from Marion's interviews was that of expanding horizons. Marion said that that workshops allowed her to do something different, and to feel like she was part of something special in creating the theatre production. Being involved in the MCT workshops had also lead her to be involved in other creative activities, and had stimulated her interest in writing and performing.

Marion enjoyed the opportunity to be involved in a theatre group for women. Working with women made her feel free to talk about things openly and to express herself. She felt as though her opinions would always be valued and that there was a shared understanding between women that would not have been possible in a group where men were also present.

Marion found that her understanding of and empathy for other people had also been affected by her involvement in the workshops. She found that she was able to be more patient with other people, respectful of their views and background, and aware that different people can have different perspectives.

During her exit interview, Marion's responses emphasised aspects of personal development that she felt the workshops had helped her with. She spoke about being able to think on her feet more, getting a bit of confidence, and having the feeling of doing something out of the ordinary. These changes had enabled her to expand her understanding of her own capabilities.

Discussion

This section draws together the responses reported in the *Results* section. The themes identified here suggest areas of impact that could be further explored in future research projects.

Themes emerging from the interviews can be condensed into four main areas for discussion: personal growth and development; skill and knowledge acquisition; social connections; and operational issues (workshops, performances, and the Milk Crate Theatre company). These four, and particularly the first three, are heavily interrelated but have been distinguished here in order to better facilitate discussion. The first three broadly mirror personal, human and social capital, which have been identified in the literature as three areas of impact for participatory arts programs.

Personal growth and development

Personal development was a prominent theme in responses to both the entry and exit surveys. A number of participants spoke about issues such as self confidence, self esteem, and positive self image. This is very much in keeping with Barraket's (2005, p.9) finding that positive impacts of participatory arts programs on increased self esteem and confidence have been widely reported in the literature.

Participants' discussion of self confidence, self esteem, etc, was framed in different ways. It was sometimes expressed as a general desire to improve self confidence or esteem, as in, for example:

Growth. Better understanding of my capabilities. Better self esteem and confidence.

On other occasions, participants specifically referred to needing the confidence *to do something*, such as meeting new people or making friends, acting in a performance or public speaking. Responses pertaining to this theme often emerged as part of responses to the question "What are you nervous about?" For many participants, the idea of meeting new people, opening up about their personal history or circumstances, or the performance itself were sources of concern that they hoped involvement in MCT would enable them to overcome.

A number of participants felt at the end of the program that the workshops had been helpful in developing their confidence. For example, one woman said:

I think my confidence is growing, and that's important ... Whereas before I might be just a little bit more timid, a bit shy ... this way I'm able to come out a little, step outside that door a bit.

Personal development underpins most of the claims about the impact of participation in the arts in the literature: the development of new interests,

increasing self-confidence, learning of transferable social skills, lateral thinking, empowerment, a sharpened sense of identity and a new sense of purpose (HDA, 2000).

Hughes and Wilson (2004) write that the theoretical basis for increased self-esteem resulting from individual creativity originates in theories of 'self-actualisation', a state of personal mastery and self development. The process of creativity invites people to explore feelings, thoughts, experiences and attitudes. Creativity can be used as a unique and powerful tool for self-expression and emotional engagement (Nunn, 1993).

Issues of personal development were sometimes linked in the interviews to **enjoyment/fun or relief from boredom**. Not all references to enjoyment or fun were built around self development ("Oh just enjoy myself I think. Enjoy myself doing it.") but a small number were. This was sometimes quite a profound response and evidently very meaningful in participants' lives. Involvement in the theatre workshop was conceived both as a means of escape from life in a service and an opportunity to "express creativity and a bit of passion":

... We just get, I just get so bored, and I look forward to all the workshops that are here. This one in particular, I don't know what it is, it's just so much fun, just to express creativity and a bit of passion... 'Cause otherwise we're sitting up in our rooms, and just feeling pathetically sorry for ourselves... and self confidence goes down, self esteem, and, you know then we end up feeling more depressed, and this just brings us all out.

Barraket (2005, p.9) found that in the literature "There is a recurrent theme that the 'fun' aspect of involvement is a critical element in effective personal development through arts activities." The element of fun or creative interest is often what keeps people engaged in arts programs:

...the literature consistently suggests high levels of interest in, enjoyment and retention in a range of arts activities in diverse settings. Involvement in arts projects often stimulates participants' creative interests and thus facilitates high levels of active engagement. (Barraket, 2005, p.13)

A sense of **achievement related to the creation of something special** was another theme that emerged from the MCT interviews. Creating a performance from 'nothing', and the capacity of people to become involved in the theatre production even when they wouldn't have considered themselves 'creative' was spoken about by a few participants. In the words of one:

Because there was something being born, or something being created, something I can look back on and I've done something other than ordinary.

A related issue arising from the interviews was the potential for involvement in the Milk Crate Theatre to lead to **expanding horizons** (usually involvement in other creative activities). Some participants thought that involvement in the workshops

might lead to further acting opportunities; another woman had joined a choir and a third had begun writing plays. One other simply said “...opening doors to various potentials rather than the doldrums of life.” This echoes the results of one area of Secker et al’s (2007) study on the impact of arts participation for mental health, in which arts programs were found to have a positive impact on participants’ engagement with other aspects of life, and reducing inactivity.

Skill and knowledge acquisition

The acquisition of skills or knowledge was another common theme to emerge from the MCT interviews. Broadly, comments about learning fell into three categories: learning about the theatre for its own sake; the application of skills or knowledge acquired as part of the program to other areas of life (for example, employment); and general (unspecified) learning.

Some participants indicated that they thought they would learn ‘something’ from being involved in the workshops, but did not or were not able to say what that might have been (“...just learn something from it. You know, learn something from it.”)

Learning about theatre itself was a source of enthusiasm for others, who were excited about the prospect of being able to develop their skills in this area:

This is going to be a mind blowing situation for me. Learning a lot from other experienced theatre-trained people.

Others saw that there would be opportunities to take what they learned from the workshops and **apply skills and knowledge in other areas of life**. Responses in this vein were mostly around the communication skills that would be developed and could be applied variously to work or to other creative endeavours (either writing or performing).

I’m in the choir so it’s been helpful in that respect. It’s shown me how to perform a little bit better. And I need to be able to do a little bit of acting in presentation and things like that.

There is evidence in the literature that participatory arts programs can lead to greater opportunity for employment. The generic and arts-specific processes involved in arts projects have the potential to increase the employability of participants, by developing confidence, arts-specific skills and generic skills related to involvement in projects, such as planning, team work, management and negotiation (Matarrasso, 1997). Jermyn (2001) agrees that participation in the arts enhances educational attainment by increasing the employability by increased transferable skills, including creative, social, organizational and communication and expressive skills. She found that the vocational benefits of the arts, such as the progression to further training or employment are related to increased confidence and job skills.

Social connection

Connection with other people and, in a few instances, **connection with the broader community** was another theme that emerged from responses. Those that focused on the community were centred on the contribution that the individual could make to their community via involvement in the Milk Crate Theatre and other projects:

It's been really good. And the choir's a community thing, and I just love that all of it's community-based, and I feel like I'm working and helping in the community which makes me feel good about myself.

This is related to Barraket's finding that arts programs can have an impact on civic engagement (2005, p. 12). Although the research is limited in describing whether arts programs might be effective in developing active citizenship because they are arts-based or more generally because of a community development focus, she reports on the work of Matarasso who found that arts programs provided an opportunity for people to express their ideas through the arts. He "...describes this effect as one of 'giving voice' to people as part of a process of 'cultural democracy'."

This idea of 'giving voice' was picked up by one of the MCT participants, who said:

...I think it's a fabulous thing that the whole company's doing, giving people a voice, and a lot of people who don't normally have a voice, giving them voice, getting other people in the audience to understand... whatever subject it is, getting them to understand that subject and to have, you know, a bit more sympathy or understanding with it.

This response also addresses the educative power of the Milk Crate Theatre performances, which was mentioned by other participants in discussion about their **experience of commonality**. References to commonality were particularly made in terms of the subject matter that was addressed during workshops and performances. The importance of choosing workshop topics that were based on real life scenarios was mentioned by a number of participants. They felt this enabled people – both participants and audiences at the performance – to learn about the issues that were addressed. It also spoke to their common experiences and normalised issues that are often on the fringes of public (or even private) discussion.

Another element of this theme to emerge from the MCT surveys was **greater insight into the circumstances or experiences of other people**. For example, one woman said:

It helped me be a little bit more patient with other people I think, and respectful of their views and whatever their background is ... there are different ways of seeing things, different perspectives...

Barraket found that a greater capacity for reflection or strategic thinking was widely reported in the literature as an outcome of participatory arts programs. (2005, p.9) This is beyond the scope of the current project and none of the participants reported that their *capacity* for reflection had grown (nor were they specifically asked about

this). However, some respondents who completed the exit surveys reported that their thinking in certain areas had changed: that they were better able to understand the perspectives of others and that they had undertaken some reflection on the experience of themselves and other people. This, too, has been reported in the literature:

Perhaps most significantly, arts initiatives that bring together people from diverse backgrounds can provide a basis for communication and learning about others' experiences. Lowe found that 'by having the opportunity to express and discover common concerns, neighbourhood residents identified collectively shared experiences and enhanced collectively felt sentiments of solidarity' (2000, p.71). Joubert (2003) has described this in theoretical terms as a process of building shared cultural values. (Barraket, 2005, p.10)

A number of interview responses focused on the dynamics of **working with a group**. Occasionally references to working in the group were negative, and addressed issues such as the difficulty of maintaining a balance between the individual and group in preparing a performance. More information about negative experiences was derived from the postcards than from interviews. Possibly because the postcards were a more immediate source of feedback, and because they specifically asked about the 'worst part of the workshop', incidents were revealed that were not often mentioned again during exit surveys. These related to friction around issues such as the differing attitudes of participants, differing levels of focus on the workshop and performance preparation, and inclusion in the group.

However, references to the group were generally positive: participants felt that they could be open with each other, and felt supported and trusted within the group.

The experience of **working with other women** was an important component of this for many participants. It was widely felt among participants that the women-only aspect of the program was important. Whether or not participants preferred to have only women in the program (and a majority did), most acknowledged that the gender of participants would make a difference to the dynamic of the workshops. Those who preferred to have only women in the program spoke about being more comfortable around women: about having a shared understanding and being able to trust others with personal information. Sometimes these comments were linked to experiences of domestic violence or abuse by men.

A minority said either they would prefer to have men in the group (sometimes because it was more like 'real life') or didn't mind whether men were involved or not; a significant number didn't mind for themselves but realised that the involvement of men could be difficult or damaging for other women in the group. Authors have noted the importance of providing a safe, supportive and unthreatening environment in which to implement participatory arts programs (see Secker et al, 2007, Harris, 2006), and in the case of the MCT women's program the gender of participants seems strongly connected with feeling secure in their environment.

A number of women who were interviewed also addressed the issue of building personal networks, and the opportunity that involvement in the workshops would present to ***expand and improve personal social networks***.

Barraket (2005, p.10) writes that:

There is repeated evidence in the literature that participation in the arts strengthens and diversifies personal networks. In addition, there are consistent findings that arts activities build social capital and enhance social cohesion within communities. As Williams has observed, the very processes of group artistic production rely on 'identifying common goals, group cooperation and effective communication of complex ideas' (1997, p.9), all of which underpin the generation of social capital.

Operational issues

The sporadic and unpredictable nature of participants' ***attendance at workshops*** and performances was raised by a few participants during interviews. While participants understood why this was likely to occur ("We are people in crisis") it was felt to be disruptive to the progress of workshops and particularly to preparation for the performance.

The literature suggests that discipline in expectations of participants in arts programs is important for achieving positive outcomes. As Hughes and Wilson (2004) note, good practice in participatory arts involves a structure where people are required to commit, turn up, be prepared, perform, participate, make decisions and contribute. This is difficult to achieve in an environment which is in a near-constant state of flux and is an issue that the Milk Crate Theatre may have to contend with. Some suggestions on this are made in the *Recommendations* section.

Another issue that arose during interviews was the value of the Milk Crate Theatre ***company and director***. It is a recurring theme in the literature that the presence of established artists is important in 'engaging and motivating participants' (Barraket, 2005, p.13). Participants suggested that the presence of professional actors gave them confidence and that the opportunity to learn from trained actors was a valuable one. The theatre director, in her capacity as workshop presenter, was also singled out for praise. This was both for her technical skill as well as her ability to negotiate and manage the workshops and participants:

I think she does a fabulous job. And I think she does a fabulous job under extreme circumstances. And ... incredible on-the-spot thinking... not just the drama situation, but the other dramas that can occur!

Summary

Responses to the surveys addressed a range of themes and were mostly very positive in nature. One woman described the workshops as “therapy”, another insisted that “You must carry on!” The results of the interviews suggest that the potential impact of the Milk Crate Theatre workshops may span a broad range of areas, and future research projects could further explore the identified themes of personal development, skills and knowledge, connections with other people and the community, and the workshop operations.

Suggestions from participants

A small number of suggestions for improving the workshops were made by project participants, largely in response to the question “Is there anything you think should have been done differently?” in the exit survey.

The sporadic nature of most participants’ attendance was noted by some participants. Four ideas emerged from these responses:

- One focussed on the **collection of contact information** from participants at the beginning of each workshop session. This should be done in a coordinated manner, rather than having to rely on the presenter’s goodwill in gathering phone numbers as the need arose.
- A further suggestion centred on the idea that **people seeing Milk Crate shows were more likely to get involved in the theatre** and that therefore if more shows were put on, more people could get involved.
- Another suggestion was that participants could keep in touch with each other via a **webpage or online community**, so that when future theatre opportunities arose they would easily be able to keep in contact with each other.
- A further thought was, in order to avert performance nerves, an **information booklet** could be provided to participants when they first joined to better prepare them for the performance and what they were likely to have to do.

Suggestions on other aspects of the workshop were also made. One participant suggested that serving **refreshments at the workshops** would add to the social nature of the occasion and encourage participants to work together.

Another suggestion made was **video recording the workshops and performance**.

Recommendations

Drawing on interview results, suggestions from participants and the review of existing research, a number of recommendations are made below.

For future workshops

Concerns were raised during interviews about the sporadic nature of workshop attendance and the effect that it had on those who attended regularly, particularly in preparing for the performance. The literature has suggested that good practice in running participatory arts programs involves requiring participants to commit to turning up, being prepared and participating. While recognising that many participants are in a state of crisis (most staying in short term crisis accommodation), additional efforts could be made to encourage more regular attendance at workshops and at the performance.

Recommendation 1: That contact details be collected (non compulsorily) for interested participants at the first session they attend.

Recommendation 2: That SMS or email reminders be sent to participants on the day prior to workshops.

Recommendation 3: That consideration be given as to a convenient, central location and opportunities for transporting interested participants to the venue.

A number of participants spoke about the value of basing performances on real life scenarios or issues. This was mentioned in conjunction with feeling a sense of commonality with other participants, re-thinking some of their own prejudices, having a greater insight into the experience of others, and educating an audience on some of the issues that participants have dealt with in their own lives.

Recommendation 4: That issues pertinent to the lives of participants continue to form the basis of workshops and performances.

A majority of participants indicated that they preferred taking part in a program that was developed and run for women only. Some participants who might otherwise themselves have preferred to have men involved, or didn't mind whether they were or not, nonetheless realised that their colleagues had strong reasons for only wanting women involved. The participation of women only was felt to improve bonds of trust and openness among participants, and lend itself to a more comfortable and enabling atmosphere.

Recommendation 5: That programs continue to be run for women only.

For future research

The small-scale nature of this study was suited to its aim of undertaking an initial exploration into the areas of impact of the workshop program. If funding were available and the MCT had an interest in pursuing further research, future projects could be widened to include a larger sample size and longitudinal research design. Drawing also on suggestions for the furthering of participatory arts research identified in Mission Australia's literature review, the following recommendation is made:

Recommendation 6: That consideration be given to the conduct of larger scale research projects involving study of:

- iii. **The impact of the Milk Crate Theatre workshop and performance on participants; and**
- iv. **Quantitative and qualitative measures of change over time in participants.**

The interviews identified a number of areas of potential impact that could be explored more fully as part of future research programs. These include personal growth and development, skill and knowledge acquisition, social connections, and workshop/performance operations.

Recommendation 7: That the following themes identified in this study be explored further as key domains in future research projects:

- v. **Personal growth and development (self confidence, self esteem, self image; enjoyment/fun or relief from boredom; creation/achievement; expanding horizons).**
- vi. **Skill and knowledge acquisition (learning about theatre; applying skills and knowledge in other areas of life).**
- vii. **Social connections (connection with other people; experience of commonality; insights into the experience of others; working with a group; working with other women; expand and improve personal social networks).**
- viii. **Operational issues (attendance; theatre company and director).**

The use of an evaluation survey in future workshop programs could contribute to the collection of information about outcomes for participants without undertaking a substantial research project. A short evaluation survey could be routinely conducted with participants at the conclusion of each workshop program.

Recommendation 8: That consideration be given to implementing the use of a short evaluation survey as part of future workshop programs.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to undertake an exploratory study into the impact of the Milk Crate Theatre workshop program for women. A number of potential areas of impact have been described, under the broad themes of personal development, skill and knowledge acquisition, social connections, and workshop operations.

Recommendations have also been made for the future conduct of workshops and future research projects.

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Appendix 1: Patterns of participation

Participation in the workshop programs was sporadic for most participants: consequently, so was participation in the research. The following table sets out the patterns of interview completion among the 24 participants. Only one participant was interviewed at three time points (entry, 8-week and 16-week). Three others were interviewed at entry and 8-week exit. 14 participants only completed an entry interview; a further three only completed an exit interview. Three participants did not complete formal interviews but submitted postcards on at least one occasion.

Pattern of interview completion	No. of participants
Entry interview + 8-week exit interview + 16-week exit interview	1
Entry interview + 8-week exit interview	3
Entry interview only	14
Exit interview only	3
Postcards only	3
Total:	24

Appendix 2: Interview questions

The interview questions for the entry and exit surveys and the postcards are as below. The exit surveys were modelled as a follow up to the entry surveys: they contain counterpart questions to the entry survey as indicated (by bracketed numbers) in the following table.

Entry survey	
1	What are you looking forward to about the workshops?
2	What do you hope to get out of the workshops?
3	What are you not looking forward to, or nervous about?
4	What are your reasons for coming along to the workshops?
5	What would make it easier for you to attend? What would make it easier for you to come along every week?
6	What does the topic '(topic)' mean to you? Is it important to you, and why?*
7	When you were thinking about coming along to the workshops, did it make a difference that it's a women-only program?

*This question was only administered to participants in the first workshop program; the topic had not yet been determined for the second program at the time of interview.

Exit survey	
1	What did you get out of the workshops? (2)
2	What's changed for you as a result of the workshops? (2)
3	What have you learned about yourself or others as a result of the workshops? (2)
4	What kept you coming back to the workshops? (4)
5	Would anything have been different for you if men had also been involved in the workshops? (7)
6	How have the workshops changed your understanding of '(topic)'? (6)
7	Is there anything you think should have been done differently? (5)
8	What else would you like to tell us about? (N/A)

Postcard	
1	Today, the best part of the workshop...
2	Today, the worst part of the workshop...
3	So far, my whole journey with the Milk Crate Theatre...