

## **Creating with Complexity** **14 November, 2 pm- 5.30 pm**

**The Creating with Complexity workshop and the content in this resource is by Kamarra Bell-Wykes (Yagera/Butchulla) and Shiralee Hood (Gunditijimara, Gunai/Kunai, Noongar).**

### **Overview**

Young people bring their whole selves to art making projects and many have complex personal backgrounds and needs. In this artist learning session, Kamarra Bell-Wykes and Shiralee Hood shared their approaches to how to work sensitively and effectively with Indigenous young people and vulnerable young people with diverse needs. During the session, participants learnt about cultural sensitivities and protocols, shared and explored strategies for establishing relationships and creating safe spaces for creative expression, and deepened their understanding of the reasons why someone might not participate in the way you may hope for and how to negotiate such situations.

### **Introduction**

Firstly connecting on a “human” level is needed to begin to establish relationships and trust within the group and between the facilitator and the group. Secondly, facilitators need to take the approach of teaching skills for empowerment – giving participants the tools so that they can lead their own growth (not here to “help them”). Facilitators can then offer engagement for extending that growth depending on the situation.

The facilitator needs to be prepared for rejection – remember it’s not personal. The participant may not be ready to accept your offer yet. For some it may take multiple sessions, for others it may take 10 years or a lifetime. For this reason, it is important for the facilitator to exchange ideas and de-brief with other doing similar work.

### **Before you start**

Know about the people and the community you are working with – do your homework! What is the local language, history and mob/s. Most Aboriginal people want to be called Aboriginal, not Indigenous, but check in with the community you are working with and ask them how they would like their community referred to by you / the facilitator. Apply this approach to whatever group you are working with.

Think about the space that the session is going to be held in. Ideally an open space that doesn’t feel hemmed in is best – where participants can easily remove themselves to another space if they feel the need. For participants carrying trauma, there can be a fight or flight instinct so not feeling trapped is important.

### **How to begin**

Create a ritual at the start of each session – for example sharing food gives everyone a chance to settle into a space. Give people time to “land” and try to create an atmosphere where everyone is on the same level energetically.

Don’t create a sense of urgency or pressure at the beginning – be observant and get a sense of each individual and of the group. Be aware that for some, just getting themselves to

the session is an achievement; and that there may be some very anxious individuals in the group and even some who self-exclude by removing themselves from the group – that's okay. Time is needed to build relationships and trust and to create a sense of safety.

### **Getting to Know You**

Once everyone has settled – have a yarn. Sit in a circle so that everyone can see each person and look at each other.

(But be aware that for some people circles can represent therapy and sitting in a clump may work better. Or re-author the circle by putting an object inside it that differentiates it from a therapy circle. Use object/s that suit the group's background and age group e.g. gum leaves for an Aboriginal group.)

An introduction circle can work well where each person introduces something about themselves and their family. This gives everyone, and particularly the facilitator, a chance to gauge where each individual is at and gives the opportunity to make a connection with each person by finding out some personal details about each of them (can make connections between people through similarities and differences e.g. number of siblings, where you were born etc.) Note the different personalities in the group.

The next step, or next session could be to play group games to break the ice and begin to bond the group.

E.g. Name game – say your name and make an action and the whole group copies and go round the circle, repeat as many times as feels appropriate. The action can be small at first and build from there as individuals build confidence.

E.g. Clap, clap game – sit in a circle with knees touching (don't force touching of course if some don't want to) and follow the facilitator as she does a call and response with various clapping, clicking and verbal patterns.

E.g. Object game – ask participants to bring (or find in their bag or in their pocket) and object of sentimental value or importance to them and give a 30 or 60 second story about it. Use a timer so that everyone is on the same level (including the facilitator). Be authentic and connect with each individual by acknowledging each story in some way. If a participant is too shy, give them another job like operating the stopwatch. The facilitator knowing a bit about the participants and vice versa helps the facilitator hold the space. It is a great way for individuals to introduce themselves and for the facilitator to gather more insight into each individual and to make connections in the group.

### **Extension exercises**

The time taken to explore alongside each other is vitally important so that it can lead to drawing out ideas from the participants for art-making - and to then be able to deep dive into meaningful story-making.

Some exercises to do this include:

Mapping (the World, Australia or local area / what is relevant to the group

Place is so important for people, particularly Aboriginal people. This exercise can be used in different ways to explore connection and / or identity or can be used to introduce a social or political conversation. It can also be a great starting point for participants to tell stories outside their own personal experience by seeing a visual representation of other people's stories.

You can use natural materials outside or drawing and/or objects indoors. The important thing is to include non-verbal approaches alongside language so that participants have various ways to express themselves and this approach gives them different points of entry into a story.

The following example uses Australia and objects placed in a room:

Use various objects to represent significant locations on an imaginary map of Australia. Start with representing Uluru as the heart of the country.

Then ask participants various questions - for example to:

- stand where they were born (group acknowledges everyone's birthplace)
- walk the path through their life journey so far (where were you at 5 years, 10 years etc.) – acknowledge similar and different paths
- where would you go by land?
- where would you go on holiday?
- take 5 objects to represent 5 events in your life and place them where they happened on the map – then partner up and walk through the story from place to place.

The above exercise can be used as a base to then create one or a few story-making experiences by adding other layers such as music and performance.

### Mask and Puppetry

Another way to break down participants inhibitions is to use masks or puppetry. In this way participants can represent their stories or ideas through other characters, grow their confidence and then potentially perform as themselves (if that is something they want to do). Make sure you keep activities relaxed and grow familiarity with the art-form before introducing timed elements.

### **Final Words**

Remember there are no short-cuts to building relationships, connections and trust. You need to establish trust before you can begin making creative work.

Remember:

- don't be the expert
- don't be the expert of other people's lives, only your own
- don't go in to "help" or "save"
- don't say "other people"
- remember that Aboriginal people have faced genocide for the past 250 years

- remember that some Aboriginal people have been denied access to their own culture and may not know their own culture or may be on a journey to discover their culture
- give participants space
- give participants time
- don't assume anything
- be conscious of the tone of your voice
- every blackfella is different
- every person is different
- be playful
- be human

### **Artist Biographies**

**Kamarra Bell-Wykes (Yagera/Butchulla)** has been a playwright for over 15 years. Combined - her community targeted works have been seen by over 50, 000 people across Australia. In 2012 Kamarra graduated with honours in a Bachelor of Education and in 2014 worked with ILBIJERR Theatre Company to build their arts/education program in 2017. Kamarra was appointed ILBIJERRI's Creative Director and works as a playwright, performer, director and dramaturg, and Colonisation and First Nations education and development workshop facilitator.

**Shiralee Hood (Gunditijimara, Gunai/Kunai, Noongar)** is Australia's #1 female Aboriginal comedian, she has performed her award- winning comedy nationally and on countless television, festival and corporate spots, including in the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. This seasoned performer is also an accomplished actor, improviser, director and radio presenter, as well as being a renowned community and cultural workshop facilitator.

Together these two artists have delivered extensive workshop programs with complex community groups including prisoners, children in care and various First Nations groups.