Chapter 2
Celebrating Worthy Conversations

## Universities and Their Multiple Communities

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a case study that demonstrates how an oral history project was able to uncover local, vernacular and indigenous knowledge and get them more effectively applied within a local planning context. It identifies the voices of some key stakeholders that are generally under-heard in the public policy and planning domain. The social capital generated through a series of participative activities with residents of a regional community was encouraged by the intervention of a local university. The university facilitated the co-production of knowledge through two specific activities that created a community knowledge asset from which on-going relationships could be negotiated safely and confidently. The university–community engagement also contributed innovative approaches to the development of policy and planning for an under-developed community public amenity.

The staff and students at an Australian regional university recognised the value of interaction with multiple communities of interest. The complexity of social and cultural partnerships and their influence on planning practice, place creation and management and documentation of knowledge to be shared with a wider audience is examined. The network of players involved—some formal, others informal—shaped the research and decision-making, providing both bottom-up and top-down responses to strategic initiatives through a variety of communication tools.

The university provided a number of services to this exercise. These included story-making workshops, public space-use inventories, the friendly accessible use of technology, site exploration and its facilitated analysis, interpretation and engagement with culturally diverse community groups through creative approaches ensuring the lived and living memory of the local collective identity. Community participation was encouraged through documentation of oral history, shared food from diverse cultures, information sharing and media promotion, and critical reflection by linking storytelling and planning. By creating narrative knowledge and

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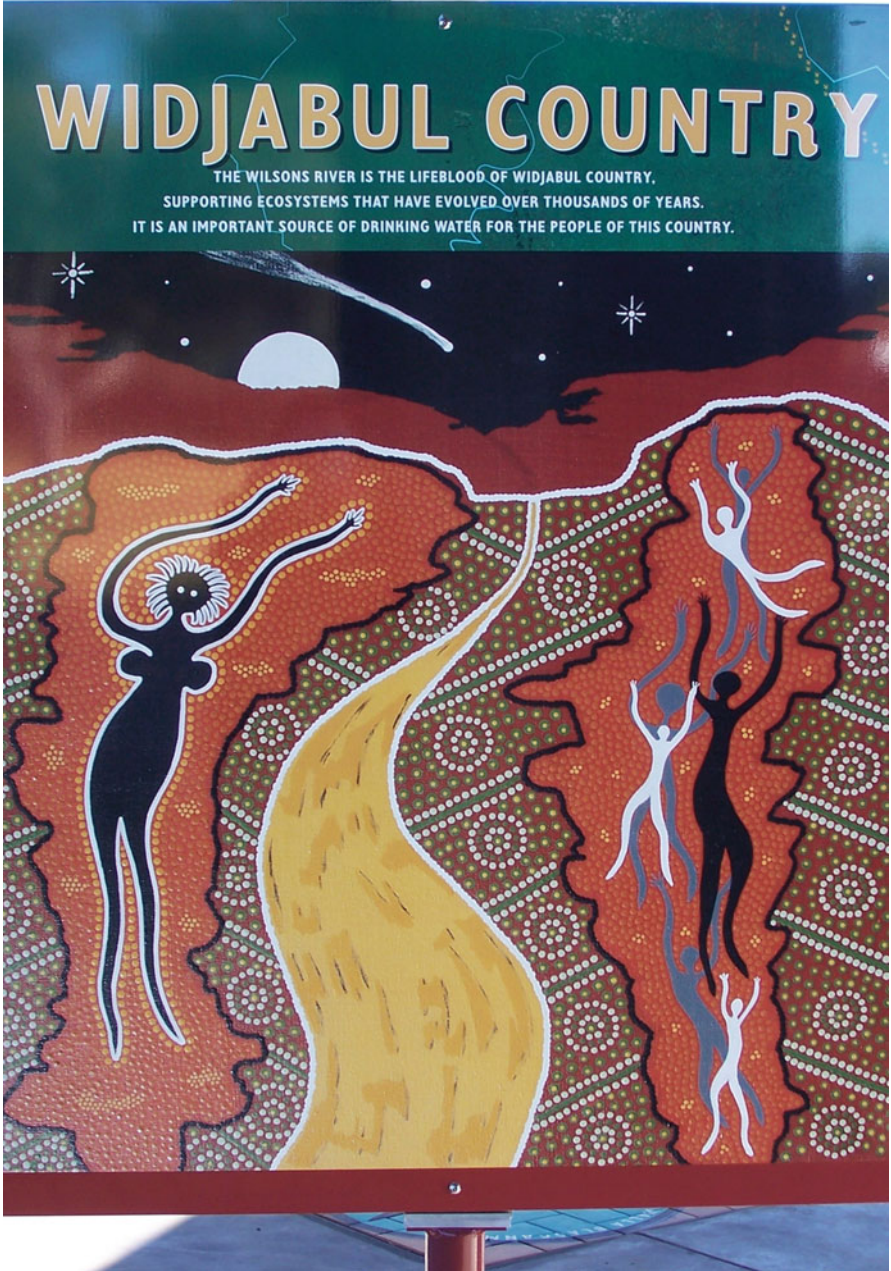
theoretical approaches to persuasive planning techniques like using images, designs and maps, resultant plans were invested with qualities that other instruments of public policy often lack (Neuman 1998, p. 214).

The university affected the roles of broker and mediator to demystify the confusion and complexity in the public domain that often surrounds knowledge generation. Through an interdisciplinary approach as collaborator, mediator and provider of independent critical analysis (Onyx 2008, p. 91), the university played a dynamic role. The stories told were built on the issues and ideas generated by the values, interests and aspirations held by a host community. The oral tradition particularly offered a springboard to understanding change.

The stories elicited through a series of engagement activities encouraged residents to feel empowered to participate in a significant civic development. This approach is often represented in social capital research (Cox 1995, Onyx 2008) where merit is seen in encouraging a bottom-up approach to practical projects. The story sharing allowed links to be established within and between community members; embedded connections between professional and lay networks and generally enhanced the multiple stakeholder partnerships that the regional university had sought to develop in recent years. The perspective of each participant was respected and each contribution enriched the narrative that was transformed into accessible formats that dispersed the knowledge.

This chapter seeks to position the case study experience as an example of effective engagement proving to be less about structures and more about people actually wanting to ensure that relationships are developed, managed and sustained (State of Victoria 2009, p. 81). It builds on the concept of socially robust knowledge suggested by Gibbons and opens universities up to the notion that they are not the repository of all knowledge and that a shared approach to decision making can have a healthy influence on curriculum design (Gibbons 2006; cited Favish and McMillan, 2009, p. 98) for example. The collaboration between researchers, practitioners and local communities can generate a set of new and different perspectives to create new knowledge (University of Cape Town (UCT) 2006, p. 11, cited Favish and McMillan 2009, p. 97). This engaged-research had an intentional public purpose. Its outcomes offered both direct and indirect benefits on participants and opened up a better understanding of how sources and forms of knowledge relate to one another.

2.2 Involving Communities in Scholarship of Engagement

This experience sits well within the growing literature on the scholarship of engagement (Boyer 1996) that refers to the use of university–community partnerships as the foundation for research and teaching activities. Boyer and others (Powell 2006) recognise the importance of engaged scholarship to underpin important research and student learning outcomes as a university's core business. The engaged scholarship that addresses solutions to challenges in the civic space described by Gibson (2006), Boyer (1990, 1996), Ramaley (2004), and Schon (1995) and Gelmon et al. (2009)

suggests that discovery contributes to the search for new knowledge; integration that connects disciplines and communities of interest; application that uses societal realities to test, inspire and challenge theory; and the transmission of knowledge through teaching beyond the institutions. Gibson (2006, p. 2) cites Holland (2005, p. 7) who suggests such engagement is based on partnerships, distributes new knowledge, can be long term, complex, episodic while crossing disciplinary lines which can be a challenge within the university.

Wessell (2008) and Bowen (2005, pp. 4–7) address different forms of enhanced student learning, for example, that encourages engagement with the learning process (or active learning); engagement with the object of study (or experiential learning); engagement with contexts (or multidisciplinary learning) and engagement with social and civic contexts (also known as community engagement). Theories of learning that view learning as a process that transforms both the learner and the socio-ecosystem through a series of positive feedback loops and resilience theory provide a useful lens for understanding community responses to changetheir environment. Boyer (1996) suggests that the scholarship of engagement offers a balance of four general areas of scholarship: discovery, integration of knowledge, teaching and service. The scholarship of sharing knowledge recognises the communal nature of scholarship and also recognises other audiences for scholarship than the scholar's peers. The mutually beneficial partnership recognises expertise outside the academy through dynamic interaction and shared curiosity.

A commitment to a strong local knowledge base needs to be created and nurtured. Sutz (2005, p. 2) highlights the steady acceleration in the rate at which knowledge is accumulated, diversified and disseminated and how learning is no longer concentrated at a single location. Social learning processes are bringing about innovation in the merging of academic and non-academic interests (Rist 2008) and interaction such as identified in the case study that contemporary university embeddedness in local society is just another model for addressing locals' needs in university research agendas. By extending the university 'campus' out into the community (Lawthon and Duckett 2008, p. 2), they also raise issues associated making knowledge relevant, pertinent and useful to host communities through collaborative processes (Lawthon and Duckett 2008, p. 3).

For academics in some institutions, the conduct of community-based participatory research risks censure. Seifer cites literature addressing the experience of staff trying to achieve professional review, promotion and tenure (Israel et al. 1998, Maurana et al. 2001, Gelmon & Agre-Kippenhan 2002, Gelmon et al. 2005, Calleson et al. 2005) with a portfolio of community-based research interests. She invokes the research of Israel et al. (1998), who report on the tension that exists for academics wishing to reach out into communities of interest for research partners in new knowledge creation:

> Our experience suggests that even those faculty with the belief that a participatory community based approach to research is appropriate and relevant to their work may find the process daunting, given the pressures of academic institutions on faculty to publish and obtain grant money. (Israel et al. 1998)

Seifer (2008, p. 426) suggests community-engaged scholarship requires the scholar to be engaged with the community in a mutually beneficial partnership. The role of expert is shared, the relationship with the community must be reciprocal and dynamic and community-defined concerns direct the scholarly activities.

2.3 University Community Engagement in Practice

Universities can play a number of roles in generating new knowledge in communities through partnerships with local stakeholders. This suggests that knowledge is socially constructed (Onyx 2008, p. 92). So, the production of knowledge now not only encompasses the traditional, scientific approach, but also focuses on knowledge that can be produced in the context of its application (Gibbons et al. 1994, p. 4). By giving public space a story shared by many requires attention to nuance in changing attitudes, needs and engagement strategies. Such practices can result not only in enhanced 'natural capital,' of a community, but also foster social capital (Krasny and Tidball 2008).

The different worlds of universities and community agencies and individuals present separate worlds of primary mission, culture, expectations and motivation and the impacts that can easily be mismatched; however, worthy are the intentions for collaboration. Tableman (2005, pp. 3–4) recognises dimensions of mission, focus, resources, control of time, reimbursement and reward system that can affect the levels of involvement in what can be one off-one time efforts, time-bound assignments and on-going partnerships. For the latter to be mutually beneficial, an environmental scan conducted by potential partners can assess the viability of the proposed collaboration through recognising the commitment, capacity and expectations of each. Clearly defined project understandings and expectations need to be documented to avoid conflict and disappointment during operationalising and monitoring of the relationship.

2.3.1 Case Study

The Northern Rivers region of NSW, Australia has experienced the intensity of the shift to a sea change lifestyle since the 1970s. The regional centre of Lismore is 50 min inland from one of the most dynamic and conflicted sea-change centres, Byron Bay. It is therefore in the heart of a region which has seen great demographic transformation in the last 30 years, as internal migration from southern states to the warm north coast has brought alternative lifestylers, hobby farmers, retirees and young city families into the rural countryside with a large indigenous population of traditional custodians (Kijas and Lane 2006).

Participants in the case study identified the value in connecting the intellectual assets of the university to community needs and aspirations. They believed that academic learning and research were enhanced while public interests were served.

The interdisciplinary nature of the engagement demonstrated a breakdown of a traditional barrier to such research endeavours. The whole-of-university Office of Regional Engagement unit brokered the internal and external relationship building that allowed for a breaking down of the silos that often exist in higher education. The engagement was based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the university and the local council. It had been in place for some years. It provided a symbolic mechanism to be appropriated for practical benefits. Harkavy (2004) suggests an approach that encourages the 'real world practice' invoked by the Dewey notion of education as participatory, action-oriented, and focused on 'learning by doing'.

This dialogue at the boundaries of relationships was refined over time as partners looked for points of interdisciplinary connection. All parties brought into the conversations sought to identify what elements of a shared agenda they could best commit to and applied resources appropriately. The arts, heritage, tourism offered a cluster to the university which allowed inputs that could not be delivered by the local government authority or business and community special groups who were other key stakeholders. The negotiations to ensure best fit for the project were protracted, but useful, as they addressed the desire to satisfy corporate social responsibility on the part of some players while others sought strategies for mutual learning through acknowledgement of external sources of knowledge.

The Southern Cross University preparation for involvement reflected a framework identified by Powell (2006) in the Thematic Questioning Framework that addresses the University's engagement agenda:

- What is truly creative in the project?
- Who are the major players/actors in the relationship between you and your external city/region and what is their role?
- What are the indicators of creative success, critical success factors that enable to determine the quality, range and success of your creative outreach projects?
- How have you built the necessary capacities for successful outreach?
- What has hindered you (internal and external) in your developments and what actions have you taken to overcome these obstacles?
- Can you include partner or client endorsement in your case studies?

The university engagement sought to contribute to public policy by embedding creativity in the planning context. The university was keen to ensure that their engagement was not viewed as a one-way flow of knowledge to external partners, but that it became an opportunity to create new knowledge from research questions stimulated by emerging relationships. As Powell (2006) suggests, there were complementary networks to achieve goals in three spheres:

- Creative partnerships: Between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their external stakeholders. This network focuses on ways in which HEIs can improve their creative potential and innovative output by involving stakeholder groups in the creative development process of products and services. It explores the development of creative lifelong learning provision, research partnership with industry and the impact of cultural activities on the creativity of local communities.

- Creative learners: Innovation in teaching and learning. This network is exploring the possible ways in which creativity can be fostered through the teaching process. In addition, although the arts have been seen as the creative field par excellence, little attention has been paid to their contribution to the overall creative potential of HEIs.
- Creative HEIs: Structures and leadership. The network is focusing upon the internal environment of HEI and the factors that can boost creativity, particularly those issues that bear directly on academic enterprise, such as internal structures, leadership and group dynamics (Powell 2006, p. 6).

2.4 Co-production of Knowledge

Two aspects of the interaction focused on the development on the over-arching community-based collaborative planning framework to be adopted by council and some specific implementation modules of the resulting Master Plan. To demonstrate how academics progressed their participatory engagement through the co-production of knowledge, this chapter, draws attention to two specific aspects of university engagement with the revitalisation of a civic development. One was an **oral history exercise** and the other was the design and delivery of **interpretative heritage signage** human and natural heritage and incorporated into a specific riverside location specifically for tourism purposes and resident recreation. Each deserves reflection as the knowledge generated, and the perspectives shared inform the transformation of a space into a place embraced by the host community.

2.4.1 Conversations on the River

Conversations on the River was an event organised by Southern Cross University as a public consultation and research tool. The community was invited to celebrate, share and record stories about the Wilson's River and its upstream tributaries. In and of itself, the exchange was valuable in getting a large group of people down to the river and in showcasing work that has been done over the years by the local Land Care Group and the Council. For many people, it was an opportunity to see Lismore from the river for the first time for a long time. Hospitality was a key consideration. Engaging the community is based on a reciprocal relationship—serving the community while achieving academic goals. Free food and entertainment, boat rides and music were arranged. The food was provided by an Indigenous business, Gunnawannabe. Bunya nut damper and homemade jam was a good symbol of what was being attempted, an informal gathering with serious and long-term implications (Geertz 1985, Wessell 2008).

A major contribution by academics and students came in the form of the research, design and implementation of huge colourful interpretive *Story Site panels* on the

riverbank. They measure 3.6 m by 1.2 m each. They tell the integrated story of the settlement of the Northern Rivers region in an innovative project that showcases the community's heritage. The public recreational space close to the city centre being redeveloped transforms 'living history' into a 'class room' for residents and visitors. The billboard-sized installations provide verbal and visual snapshots of the history of diverse European and Asian settlement of the region and also depict the Bundjalung stories of the Dreamtime, celebrate Widjabul culture and paint a picture of the Indigenous lifestyle and how it interwove with the emerging European settlements into the future.

Indigenous consultants and historians worked on consolidating text for story site panels.

While there was reflection of the past represented in the interviews, much was made of how the riverside site could become more connected to residents and visitors into the future. Such material was of interest to the Riverbank Development Project steering committee and City Council who integrated suggestions through an action learning methodology into planning and policy development. Suggestions were aligned to existing strategic and master planning tools and feedback was subsequently delivered via the project website for interested parties. Participants expressed on-going interest in contributing to the design and policy generation for the enhanced amenity of the location, based on the spirit of nostalgia that had underpinned the conversation consultation.

The material that underpinned the historian's text for the panels was gathered from the archive of the local historical society, interviews with specific interest groups and individuals, site visits to places of historical importance, artefacts in public and

private collections and official documents in the public and private domain. An active team, with solid community links, coordinated the collection of the data and a reference group of regional authorities from the indigenous and heritage sectors monitored the development of the project. Items that could contribute to the council's planning and design of the site were referred on. Such an example was the knowledge of endemic vegetation and Indigenous food production that manifested itself as the Lyle Roberts Memorial bush food garden's cultural interpretation.

The river is very important to the Widjabal people—as Gordon (2005) says, 'it is our friend'. Local Elders see the Wilson's River as an important gathering place for shared learning especially for Indigenous residents (Coyne 2007, p. 16). Traditionally, the information presented was learned through daily living and family connections, from generation to generation. It was Roy's priority that Widjabal understanding, history and knowledge were communicated clearly to the general public and in particular to the local indigenous youth (Lane 2007).

University students were involved in recording the conversations, which provided practical experience of oral history and a means to bring teaching and scholarship together. Engagement in the local community can provide opportunities for more intense and more personal engagement with learning (Wessell 2008). Staff and students situated themselves in local debates and history with a focus on everyday life in the shared geographical places and added a civic dimension to the learning experience. The outputs of the conversations were recorded for use by the local historical society, the university archive, used in media promotion, included in academic publications and incorporated in decision-making by site planners. There was a deliberate focus on the stories related to local indigenous citizens, especially those of the local Widjabel tribe of the Bundjalung nation. Many elders came forward. Many elders from amongst the European settlers came too.

The significance of the project was recognised by the Indigenous Heritage Management section of the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Water Resources, who partly funded the project and came to Lismore with a team to film the opening and interview participants. The protocols developed by the partners in this distinctive heritage project are documented and shared with government departments as potential templates for other communities wanting to embrace and celebrate their Indigenous as well as their European heritage. It presents a holistic historical perspective that adds a great deal of value to tourism in the city. The story-site imagery has been used as part of tourism promotion through cards, websites and council correspondence.

2.4.2 Voice of the Artist

Leonie Lane, the digital arts designer and lecturer engaged with the projects, suggests that 'Place ' and 'reinventions of place' are recognised as contemporary developments in visual arts practice in the traditional genre of 'landscape' art-making. Ideas about the development of personal and cultural identity are tied into notions of 'place'

(Schama 1996). Rivers are evocative places, powerful metaphors—a stage for action as well as reverie. They provide both a parallel to narrative flow and reveal a 'place' beyond civic control at the same time as a space that promotes settlement and social engagement.

I worked closely with writer/historian/lecturer, Kijas (2007) to produce the text, visual content and overall design of the site. We have followed each other's process—words needing images, imagery suggesting more words . . . . Common ground determined that the overall idea was to produce a visually stunning, multi-layered representation of Lismore's social history inclusive of the many perspectives of such a diverse place.

Valuable experience has been gained through listening and negotiating with the interest groups, who came to the table with their own needs, baggage and, in some cases, grudges. Trust in some cases was hard earned through much listening, patience and persistence. Despite all, strong relationships with community members have developed over the past 9 months, ensuring a positive momentum for future work (Lane 2007).

The experience gained has been a mutually rich and challenging experience across all of these groups but no longer so than with the Widjabal people. The process involved and the outcome has given me an extremely rewarding yet demanding, creative experience. For me, the challenge of imaging Widjabal lore has caused me to question my own preconceptions of image representation and a 'white fellas' design process. My role as a designer became one of translators when engaging with these themes (Langton 1996).

The use of early white contact photos carried the weight of indigenous stereotype while white interpretations of language area maps described static boundaries that did n't necessarily equate with how Widjabal people saw their boundaries. It became apparent that the photomontage strategy employed in the design of the other panels was not appropriate to the Widjabal panel. Maintaining the site's stylistic theme was essential to the project as a whole to impress the inclusive theme. Roy and the author discussed spatial representation and how the Widjabal narrative could look. Paramount to the success of this story telling was in the use of language and drawing styles. It was imperative to describe their world as it was and as it is. Many drafts were created with much consultation, questioning and reworking. . . (Lane 2007).

2.5   Discussion

Stakeholder participation in the co-production of knowledge is nuanced. It has many layers and involves spatial and temporal parameters that need to be flexible prior, during and as residual to any partnership exercise. Inside an institution the management and monitoring of student engagement needs to be grounded in curriculum. The emphasis for students, on the activity being complementary to theory, provides a useful nexus of the research/teaching experience. Brukardt et al.

(2004, p. 12) suggest that optimum curriculum development includes the contribution from the community, including students, in activities that are 'collaborative problem-based, interdisciplinary, intentional and respectful'. Academics need to be encouraged to meet the *publish or perish* imperative through an embedded framework that rewards on-going engagement. Initial success through publications, presentations at conferences and by growing content for lectures introduces more external partners into the formal education paradigm. By taking the classroom into the community, business and government allows new perspectives on the creation and new distribution networks of the knowledge.

The experience of many academics has not been as seamless as those advanced earlier. The challenge for some involves foregoing engagement opportunities to advance careers with little recognition for initiative or encouragement of partnership development and few incentives and rewards within their career trajectory. While some universities invest financially in projects that generate greater inclusivity with community and industry partners through collaboration, others seem reluctant to provide money, time and space to assist in the required integration. In some institutions engagement is seen as a cost rather than an investment. When the integration is not encouraged internally through interdisciplinary connections, it becomes difficult for interested academics to formally or informally deal with potential external partners. So the mechanisms which each university applies to recognising or rewarding the porous boundaries necessary to facilitate engaged teaching and research need to be equitable and accessible to all academics. The support required for the process and the outcomes to be effective need to be monitored institutionally across such professional management factors as recruitment, promotion, academic performance management development reporting and review, so that merit is attributed as it is regularly done for core business of teaching and research.

Student exposure to community partners through the processes explored in this case study alerted parties to the potential value of volunteerism. Students got involved with programmes that further grew the capacity of sub-cultural groups to deliver services, to encourag curiosity and to up-skill their constituencies. It encourages an environment of social responsibility inside and outside the university. It promotes social inclusion that enhances the capacity of host communities. It improves access to university resources for those outside and encourages student activism by focusing on local issues and ideas. Another dimension to the exploration of everyday life that was revealed in the *Conversations by the River* was the common sense knowledge (Gurvitch 1971, p. 28) that allowed elders to participate in the intergenerational transmission of a specific type of knowledge that addressed the consequences of upheaval of daily life over time. The empirical knowledge and the conceptual knowledge generated by the experience had important social and cultural implications for all participants.

The co-learning helped bring different kinds of knowledge together in a way that provided the new knowledge legitimacy especially in the planning sphere. It allowed new voices to be heard and provided opportunities for all players to see the impact of their shared research and discovery. The resultant confidence in communication between party bodes well for on-going exchanges and the breaking down of stereotypes of universities being sole repositories of knowledge.

Community engagement is essential about the development of mutually supportive relationships. In the case of projects involving students and members of the community, an equal consideration must be given to the needs, goals and responsibilities of both groups. People participate in interviews for their own purpose, and acknowledging this has long been recognised as good practice. Student's time is also limited and expectations must be clarified early in the project. The opportunity to make a contribution to local knowledge and their community may be their motivation in becoming involved, but ensuring that this meets the objectives of their studies and sits within their own timeframe is a responsibility of teachers. Semester timetables don't always correspond with research projects, local government calendars or community culture. Having a clear purpose, a compatibility of goals and effective communication between the people involved develops the relationships involved in the project. For it to be mutually satisfying, recognising people's different influences, interests and expectations can help maintain the relationship.

It is evident that the process of engaging with the community in diverse creative ways is unending. By giving public space, a story shared by many requires attention to nuance in changing attitudes, needs and engagement strategies. Such practices can result not only in enhanced 'natural capital,' of a community, but also foster social capital (Krasny & Tidball 2008). Theories of learning that view learning as a process which transforms both the learner and the socio-ecosystem through a series of positive feedback loops, and resilience theory provide useful lens for understanding community responses to change in their environment.

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