

Running stitch at a walking pace

Simone Penkethman reflects on Skills Caravan 2

On 9 April 2022, I drove to Belconnen Arts Centre for a gathering of artists, a sharing of skills and a meeting of minds.

The [Skills Caravan](#) was a free event for local artists who have a practice or an interest in cross-sector engagement. The focus was on building sustainable, collaborative practices with social and economic outcomes.

It was also an immersive afternoon full of gentle hope and innovation.

Here are five reflections from across the afternoon.

1. Running stitch at a walking pace

Artist and educator [Kiran Grewal's](#) instructions are simple: We are to sew one stitch at a time and not think ahead or plan a pattern.

On the table are small bags of sewing supplies containing patches of calico and colourful embroidery thread like my grandmother used to have. I choose a bag with orange and green thread to match my outfit.

Threading the needle is the hardest task.

I have monocular vision, which means my eyes are like cameras: I can switch from one to the other and see things from different points of view. This superpower is less than helpful when the task at hand requires depth perception.

The eye of the needle is so small I can barely see it.

There's a needle threader on the table. It takes me back to childhood. I remember that it works like a trick: I just can't remember what the trick is.

After a few failures, I push the fine wire threader through the eye of the needle; I pass the thread through the wire, then I pull the wire back through the eye which in turn pulls the thread through the needle: magical success!

I take a square of calico and pierce it with the needle. I draw the thread through the fabric and start to sew a slow, broken, orange line.

There are about twelve of us around the table. Some people already have two or three colours in their design.

There's no competition. We are doing the thing individually and together.

Someone says, "Up until a minute ago, I did a few running stitches at a time. Then I stopped and did one stitch at a time... and my breath slowed."

People laugh and concur.

Kiran and [Michele Grimston](#) are talking about the [Migrant Women's Art Group](#) that they support together. Michele is a textile artist and community cultural development practitioner who has worked in the Gungahlin suburbs for the past several years. Kiran is from India and has led community arts groups across the world.

Kiran and Michele invite us to share our stories of art in communities.

We are making together. You don't have to say why you are here. You don't have to say where you are from.

"Don't plan anything," Kiran gently instructs a newcomer.

2. Recovery and resilience

We are together in a room.

Covid is not the star of this show.

There is food on the table.

And a sense that the comfort of people matters.

There is tea and coffee and space and time to share.

We are allowed to eat and breathe together.

There are people I know and people I've yet to meet.

Art is an ecosystem.

Practice being together again.

3. Ways of working

We put our sewing away and gather to hear the stories of three local artists who have created business models around their art practices.

[Anna Trundle](#) says she is a "small 'a' artist" who developed a graphic design and illustration practice to attract clients and customers rather than an audience.

Anna values collaboration. Her desire to work in a permanent, coworking space for creatives led her to partner with property developers as well as designers and makers to realise their vision. Now she leads [Keep Co](#) in Canberra's Dairy Flat precinct.

She says, "I think co-working, participating in those spaces where you can sit alongside others, work through things and work through the challenges and celebrate the wins together, was really pivotal for me."

[Dr Naomi Zouwer](#) is a visual artist, researcher and creative education specialist who undertook a mentorship to develop her own business model. Her plan was to break a cycle of sessional teaching, short term contracts and having multiple jobs. She planned to make a living from her art with a business model that allowed for family time.

She says that she needed to, “define what I was and what I wasn’t in order to know what I wanted to be.”

Naomi now runs her own business bringing art activities to cultural and educational institutions as well as regularly exhibiting her own work.

[Christian Doran](#) is a film maker with an impressive catalogue whose journey also involved working out what he wasn’t in order to do what he wanted. He broke a cycle of sessional teaching and zombie films to pursue his interest in 3D video.

Now he’s undertaking a research project on the rehabilitation potential of 3D video products for stroke survivors.

All the presentations are made more vivid by the Auslan interpretation by Brett Olzen and Deb Hayes. Their language of gesture perfectly complements the character of the presenters.

4. Pitching to the patron and the value of practice

Throughout the ages, artists have worked in symbiosis with patrons. Religions, royals, governments media and businesses have all played a part in shaping the way artists work and the products they produce.

The stories of each of the of the creative enterprises include at least one successful pitch to a potential patron, power or partner.

[Britt Nichols](#) shows us some of her handy tools and templates to help creative types structure our ideas into something we can sell.

I hear people reflecting on the value of a practice. Sometimes the value could be non-monetary and not everyone has an idea they want to sell.

If your practice is a valuable tool in managing other areas of your life such as mental health or social connection, would turning it into a business jeopardise that benefit?

I scribble down some thoughts about an idea I’ve been brewing onto Britt’s pitch-building template. Reviewing it later, I find that it’s surprisingly coherent – thanks Britt!

5. Access all round

One of the best things about the performing arts is the close connections you develop making shows together and the resilience of those connections over time.

Earlier in the afternoon, I felt a spark of joy when I spied [Gretel Burgess](#), dancer, social worker and so much more. We worked together in physical comedy nearly 20 years ago.

Gretel and fellow dance artist [Liz Lea](#) give the final presentation about their movement work with people of different abilities.

One of the groups they work with is the Deaf Butterfly dance group. There is lively interaction between the dancers and the Auslan interpreters. We learn much about respectful creative interaction with people who are deaf and hard of hearing.

One way that Gretel develops choreography is to have printed copies of song lyrics which can become a structure for the dance.

At the end of a long and rich afternoon, a final highlight is seeing Gretel and Deb Hayes interpreting the lyrics of a Tracy Chapman song as they are read aloud.

The movements of dance and the Auslan come together and apart in a mesmerising, comic and beautiful expression of the spoken words.

The Belconnen Skills Caravan was a thoughtfully curated program with a welcoming feel. Opportunities to come together and share experience, thought and knowledge around artistic practice are like a balm to the soul.

Under the broader umbrella of the ACT Government's Creative Recovery and Resilience Program, it reminded me that as artists in the community, we are part of an ecosystem with deep, resilient roots and verdant new growth.