Title

'The power to heal us with a smile and a song': senior wellbeing, music-based participatory arts and the value of qualitative evidence

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Abstract

Sweet Tonic is a singing-based participatory arts initiative based in the south-west of Sydney, Australia. This paper reports on a qualitative evaluation of the 30-week workshop series. It provides qualitative evidence of the outcomes of the program, linking these to recent debates about 'evidence-based policy' approaches. It argues that, although Sweet Tonic is undoubtedly a beneficiary of the instrumentalist turn in arts policy, this framing also traps the program into defining its success or failure in instrumentalist terms. It is suggested that, although such accounts are often dismissed as 'anecdotal', in fact the most powerful evidence of the impact of a program like Sweet Tonic is contained in the accounts of personal experience of participants in the program. It is therefore necessary to understand the complexities of evidence in cultural policy, and to develop new language to talk about evidence that doesn't unnecessarily privilege quantitative or statistical forms at the expense of qualitative evidence.

Keywords

seniors
wellbeing
participatory arts
singing groups
creativity
qualitative evidence

Biography

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'The power to heal us with a smile and a song': senior wellbeing, music-based participatory arts and the value of qualitative evidence [1]

Introduction

In 2007 Musica Viva, a non-profit organisation promoting fine ensemble music across Australia, formed a partnership with the Campbelltown Arts Centre (CAC) in south-western Sydney to deliver the 'Sweet Tonic – Music for Life' program. Sweet Tonic is a singing-based participatory arts initiative, and its 2007 program was comprised of a 30-week series of music workshops with vocalist and teacher Linda Marr at the CAC for self-identified seniors. In these workshops, participants were exposed to musical concepts, singing techniques and a variety of musical styles and genres, particularly folk, world music and musical theatre. The series culminated with a concert for family and friends, showcasing the achievements of the participants and the repertoire developed during the workshops. The practical workshops were complemented by a series of public morning concerts at the Centre, which afforded a broader musical experience for participants, and connected the Sweet Tonic program to the wider community.

The author was approached in early 2007 to undertake a qualitative 'evaluation' of the 2007 workshop series. A research strategy was developed which included observation, focus groups, a short questionnaire and follow-up interviews by telephone with workshop participants and stakeholders.

The core objective of Sweet Tonic was to develop a community-based process involving new techniques, high quality skills development and a multi-stranded educational program that would enhance the wellbeing of seniors. The 2007 workshops were anticipated to be a pilot for a longer-term, eventually national, program extending the work of MVA, which has a well-developed series of school-based programs for children. In establishing the Sweet Tonic program, CAC and MVA were responding to the sense that, as Australia ages and demand for health and ageing services grows, the cultural sector shares responsibility with the rest of the service sector to try to respond effectively to the needs of older citizens. In commissioning research to evaluate the program, they clearly had an interest in a particular outcome for the findings of the research – essentially they were looking for evidence of the success of the program. This interest is quite understandable – they wished to demonstrate that such programs could provide good value for taxpayer dollars, and support in their aim of a broader roll-out for such programs.

While the concept of 'wellbeing' was central to the aims of Sweet Tonic, it remained a vague and fuzzy concept. It clearly, however, reflected a growing interest in the links between the arts and wellbeing in Australia. In *Art and Wellbeing*, a report commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts (the funders of Sweet Tonic), Deborah Mills and Paul Brown describe their understanding of wellbeing as something 'which builds on a social and environmental view of health, and recognises the inter-relatedness of environmental responsibility, social equity, economic viability and cultural development' (2004: 4). This vagueness in the central aim of the program would undoubtedly prove challenging for the evaluative research. How would one know whether the wellbeing of the participants had been enhanced? How could this be demonstrated?

As a number of writers have pointed out, in recent times government policy debates have been dominated by an 'evidence-based policy' approach (Oakley 2006, Mulligan et al 2008, Caust 2003). Craick has recently argued that 'numerous governments have adopted a compromised or "instrumentalist" approach that uses art and culture to leverage broader social outcomes in other more demonstrably "needy" or "deserving" portfolios' (2007: 50). Evaluation has become a key instrument in this linking of arts processes to social outcomes.

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[1] 'The power to heal us with a smile and a song' is an excerpt from 'Sweet Tonic,' a song written collaboratively by participants in the 2007 Sweet Tonic program and discussed in further detail within this article. I would like to here acknowledge research assistant Joanna Winchester's work on the qualitative research component of this project, and research assistant Michelle Kelly's editorial work.

In an important article discussing 'instrumental cultural policy' in its relation to changes in the British public sector over the last two decades, Belfiore (2004) links the increasing emphasis on evidence-based policy to the sense that postmodern notions of relativism have resulted in a loss of legitimacy, even a crisis of cultural authority. This has had the effect, Craik suggests, that 'a bureaucratic culture of arts administration has burgeoned, bringing with it myriad managerial-style interventions in funding and evaluation' (2007: 51). This instrumentalist orientation in the bureaucratic culture of arts administration has shifted the terms in which funding decisions are made by undermining 'the possibility of justifying any longer cultural policy decisions grounded on uncontroversial principles of "excellence", "quality" and "artistic value' (Belfiore 2004: 188).

Sweet Tonic, it must be acknowledged, is very much a beneficiary of the instrumentalist turn in arts policy. It is explicitly designed as an arts program which aims to make a difference in personal, community and cultural terms, that is, to have social as well as artistic outcomes. However, this framing also traps the program into defining its success or failure in highly instrumentalist terms.

As Belfiore puts it, 'public "investment" in the arts is advocated on the basis of what are expected to be concrete and *measurable* economic and social impacts' (2004: 189, emphasis in original). Yet one of the major challenges for arts administration internationally is 'the difficulty of justifying and measuring whether different policy options actually work' (Craik 2007: 53). The Sweet Tonic funding application explicitly linked the enhancement of 'wellbeing' for individuals and the community to hard-edged economic outcomes, in making a case that 'healthy' ageing, or 'ageing well', could be expected to result in lower costs to the community than would otherwise be the case. This seemed to be a particularly easy case to make for singing, as a physical activity which involved breath control and gentle movement, than it would be for, say, painting classes.

But how, then, to provide the kind of evidence of the success of the program that the stakeholders were clearly hoping to get?

Mulligan et al point out that, 'the evidence for the benefits of participating in community arts and cultural activities remains unconvincing and attempts to define the health and well-being benefits of the arts have borne little fruit' (2008: 49). Inevitably, because of the small scale of many community-based arts programs, that evidence is qualitative, rather than quantitative. On the basis of a large-scale project which investigated the ways in which community-based arts projects can enhance community wellbeing, this group of researchers concluded that the 'open-ended nature of the arts can help to generate and sustain webs of meaning at a time when shared narratives and frameworks of meaning of community are being challenged' (2008: 50). Since this was a large-scale study, Mulligan and his colleagues were able to design a strategy integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods across four case study communities. Sweet Tonic, by contrast, involved a commencing group of around 35 participants, which had dropped to 26 by the completion of the program.

Instrumentalist discourses of 'hard evidence' for program success or failure are often underpinned by an assumption that this necessarily means statistical analysis or quantitative 'indicators'. There was certainly some discussion in the early negotiations about the Sweet Tonic research about whether it would be possible to 'prove' that the program made a difference. This explicitly meant 'provide some quantitative evidence' of outcomes. Although the impossibility of conducting a statistically rigorous quantitative analysis with such a small sample and no possibility of a controlled randomized methodology was pointed out, it was clear that a qualitative methodology, based on observing, describing and analyzing the participants' experiences, was acceptable but not ideal.

The issues of rigour and quality in qualitative research will be taken up again later. For the moment it will suffice to point out that the limited aim of the research to evaluate the 2007 Sweet Tonic program was to provide sufficient evidence (if it could be found) to demonstrate the value of the program at the pilot scale, in order to support the intentions of the project partners to take the program to a scale where a quantitative analysis would become possible.

The ageing population and cultural development

As Belfiore points out, the instrumentalist transformation in arts and cultural policy means that 'regrettably, the way out of the justification *impasse* that the arts have chosed, or have been forced to follow, has been to "attach" themselves to other policy spheres that carry a heftier political weight' (Belfiore 2004: 200). Sweet Tonic certainly benefitted from the fact that the ageing of the population is something of a 'hot' topic.

At the 2006 census, 13% of the Australian population were aged 65 years and over, and 18% were in the 50–64 years age range. A significant proportion of people in Australia (6.2%) are aged 75 years and over (AIHW 2007: 2). The older population is also highly diverse, with 35% of older people born overseas; 61% of the overseas-born population come from a non-English speaking country (AIHW 2007: viii). As the proportion of those in older age groups continues to grow relative to the rest of the population, the changing age structure of the population will have a fundamental impact on all areas of public life, including the cultural sector:

> the capacity of cultural institutions to provide people with opportunities to develop in ways that enhance their happiness – a key government concern – is not yet researched. However, there is no doubt that museums and galleries can … be ordered and tranquil places in contrast to many of the more challenging aspects of modern society, contributing to the achievement of happiness and other desirable ends. (Travers 2006: 13)

According to data collected by the National Centre for Culture and Recreation Studies at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of people aged 60 years and over participating in community activities increased slightly between 1998 and 2003.[2] Participation in performing arts groups increased from 3.5% to 4.6% (NCCRS 2007: 21). Although this proportion is still quite low, it is clear that the activity is growing in popularity among the 60 and over age group, with an increase over the 1998–2003 period of around 30%. This growth rate indicates a clear imperative for further research into arts activities for older citizens, and for increasing responsiveness by participatory arts practitioners to this group in program design and delivery.

Creativity in later life

A number of studies have shown that when older people experience a sense of control and mastery over what they are doing, or when they engage in meaningful social engagement with others, then positive health outcomes are observed (Cohen et al 2006: 727; Rodin 1989; Glass et al 1999). One of the most important ways to maintain optimal ageing is for older people to continue to function at the highest possible level (Christie 1992). The myth is that older people cannot learn new skills, cannot absorb new knowledge, cannot develop and cannot produce new ideas; a myth perhaps most effectively reflected by the aphorism 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks.' A 1989 longitudinal study in Gothenburg studied the creative capacities of 181 70 year old subjects in 1971 and again thirteen years later. The subjects 'showed no significant differences on the composite score between the two points of measurement,' and also no age or gender effects (Shearring 1992: 14).

It is clear that self-belief and self-doubt, and the influence of other people's expectations, are major determinants of success or failure at any age. One of the powerful inputs to belief about our capacities in later life is a lifelong programming that scripts us to accept a negative image of our prospects for development as we age, or indeed, in relation to our capacities for creative and artistic expression at any age (Shearring 1992).

Gene Cohen is a US-based psychiatrist who has worked for many years on creativity and ageing, and who has written many books and articles on the subject. Cohen points out that 'as we age, some key ingredients for creativity — life experience and the long view — are only enhanced' (Cohen 2000: 10). Cohen defines creativity broadly, as the capacity to bring

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[2] Keaney and Oskala (2007: 335) provide a comparable breakdown of types of arts participation in England from the 'Taking Part' survey commissioned by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

something new into being, although this can be 'a solo experience in which we develop a new attitude or facet of self-understanding … [and] may also alter our thinking, our behaviour, or our experience of our community or culture' (2000: 12).

Cohen suggests that creativity strengthens morale because it allows us to alter our experience of problems, and no matter what our physical condition, we feel better when we are able to view our circumstances with fresh perspective. Cohen argues that creative activity makes us more emotionally resilient, and just as physical exercise improves fitness and muscle tone, creative engagement elevates emotional tone. Cohen notes that the significance of art programs in particular is that 'they foster sustained involvement because of their beauty and productivity. They keep the participants involved week after week, compounding positive effects being achieved' (Cohen 2006: 4).

The 'Creativity and Aging Study' examined the impact of professionally conducted cultural programs for older adults at three sites across the US: Washington DC, Brooklyn and San Francisco (Cohen 2006). The research at each site involved both an intervention group and a control group, giving a level of statistical rigour not possible in the Sweet Tonic program. Participants in this program were between 65 and 103 years old (average about 80), and all were interviewed at the start of the study, a year later and two years later. Participants were involved in intensive participatory art programs conducted by professional artists across a range of art forms, including painting, pottery, dance, music, drama, craft and oral history. Results revealed strikingly positive differences in the intervention group, with participants reporting better health, fewer doctor visits, less use of medication, a decrease in falls, more positive responses on mental health measures and more involvement overall in activities. The final report of the project concludes that 'these community-based cultural programs for older adults appear to be reducing risk factors that drive the need for long-term care' (Cohen 2006: 1). Because the average age in this study was around 80 years old (greater than the average life expectancy in the US), the program would have been considered successful if there was less decline than expected in the participants. After the first year, those participating in the cultural programs reported a statistically significant increase in overall health, while a decline in health was observed in the control group. After two years, those in the cultural program essentially reported stabilisation in overall health, while those in the control group reported a significant decline.

Music and wellbeing in later life

> Music both articulates and offers the immediate experience of collective identity. … In responding to a song, to a sound, we are drawn into affective and emotional alliances. … Music is especially important for our sense of ourselves because of its unique emotional intensity – we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies. … Identity is always an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are. … What makes music special is that musical identity is both fantastic – idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits – and real: it is enacted in activity. (Frith 1996: 273–4)

It has been proposed that music helps people engage socially, form friendships and social networks (Blacking 1995), and feel accepted, valued and needed (Kahn 2001). Australian research on music and wellbeing in later life has been conducted by Hays (2005), who proposes that music can justifiably be regarded as a branch of preventative medicine in that it serves two primary roles for older people, firstly in evoking emotions, memories and connections in their lives, and secondly as a facilitator for people to enjoy shared interests and activities. In a qualitative study of 38 people aged 60–70 years (nineteen men and nineteen women), Hays concludes that while the experience of music is intensely personal and related to perceptions of identity, self-expression and personal wellbeing, it also had a functional role and facilitated connection to life experiences, other people and intellectual stimulus. The participants in Hays' study believed that music 'merged the intellect, emotions, life experiences and spiritual self together as one' (2005: 29). For many, music had been an important part of redefining their identity since retiring from full-time work, and had occupied an increasing proportion of their daily lives, as a post-retirement occupation which provided a focus in life, facilitated socialising and provided a way of contributing to the community.

Many of the participants in a further Australian study of music and seniors, by Hays and Minichiello, spoke of how music made them feel more 'whole,' 'in tune,' and 'competent' (2005: 275). These authors stress that music is more than a therapeutic tool, and can be a symbolic and meaningful medium for promoting wellness (275). One participant felt that there was 'a common link between her experience of music and her understanding and experience of spirituality.' This experience is 'much deeper than pleasure, distraction or intellectual interest' (273). This description suggests music can be a kind of everyday spirituality, which lifts us out of the day-to-day realities of living to experience a sense of something beyond the here and now. To be fully engaged in music is to experience an uplifting sense of timelessness. Participants who did not see themselves as religious believed that music brought them close to an understanding and experience of spirituality (273).

In investigating the Sweet Tonic program to gauge its impacts, it is the kinds of effects observed in these earlier studies of arts, creativity and ageing that we were hoping to observe.

The Sweet Tonic program

> This was an invigorating experience. I looked forward to the sessions with joyful anticipation, and although there were daunting experiences at times, I left with a song in my heart every time.
>
> – Sweet Tonic participant[3]

The Sweet Tonic workshop participants all self-identified as seniors in enrolling for the program, ranged in ages from 51 to 83, and were drawn from the greater Macarthur region in the south-west of Sydney. The participants were all 'well seniors' (none of them frail or mentally impaired), since the workshops required participants to stand for much of the three-hour period, and to learn complex harmonies. The workshops were held weekly at the Campbelltown Arts Centre, commencing in May 2007. The workshop program commenced with approximately 35 participants. Attrition through sickness and other commitments by participants meant that this stabilised to 26 participants who completed the program and performed in the final concert. The reasons for discontinuing the program included family bereavement, long-term illness, and expectations that the program would be for more advanced musicians.

The workshops involved a physical warm-up of stretching and gentle movement, followed by vocal exercises, including warming up the voice, increasing its range, singing louder and softer, and using different tonal qualities. The core of the sessions was learning songs and singing a cappella, with the repertoire ranging from traditional lullabies to musical theatre, jazz and songs from around the world. Songwriting was also a component of the program. Other training involved rhythm and improvisation (call and response exercises), and breathing and body anchoring work. Song selection was an ongoing process throughout the period of the workshops. Many people wanted to learn material they were familiar with, such as the 'Brahms Lullaby' early in the workshops, or 'Blue Moon,' which was sung at the concert. However, many in the group were also quite adventurous and open to studying new and unfamiliar material with different tonalities and rhythms than they were used to. The workshops required participants to stand for much of the three-hour period and to learn complex harmonies, so the workshops were quite challenging and provided a good degree of physical and mental exertion for the participants.

The Artistic Director of the 2007 Sweet Tonic workshop program was Linda Marr, an accomplished and experienced vocalist and teacher, and founding member of a cappella group Blindman's Holiday. Other presenters were involved as needed during the program. As the workshops progressed the program was responsive, with the repertoire expanding in line with the interests of the group.

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[3] Response to an open-ended question on the questionnaire administered at the completion of the program. The question invited participants to make additional comments about the program.

The research project

The researcher and a research assistant attended approximately two thirds of the workshops in the program, and fully participated in the activities of these sessions. In addition to this, focus groups were held in the first two weeks of the workshops. These focus groups captured information in the following areas: participants' reasons for enrolling in the workshops; what participants hope to gain from the workshops; previous experience with singing and music; previous experience of programs at Campbelltown Arts Centre; and involvement in other creative and wellbeing-related activities.

For some participants, singing was something they were discouraged from doing when they were young, and this was their opportunity to do something that they had always wanted to do. For others, limited social networks and chances to interact with others made the social aspect of the workshops a great attraction. Some feared that they wouldn't be able to learn the new skills, or that they would have difficulty memorising lyrics.

These factors, and others identified in the literature review, were incorporated into a questionnaire which was completed by participants at the conclusion of the workshop series. A total of nineteen completed questionnaires were received and analysed.[4] The sample size of the questionnaire responses, like the workshops themselves, was too small to enable tests of statistical significance to be conducted, however the analysis below aims to give an indication of trends and differences in the areas covered by the questionnaire.

In-depth telephone interviews with five participants were held in the weeks after the program was completed, in order to gather first-hand accounts of workshop experience, and to gauge the short term outcomes of the program in the lives of the participants. Other telephone interviews were also conducted with the artist and with stakeholders from the Campbelltown Arts Centre and Musica Viva.

Outcomes

Three areas of 'wellbeing' were identified to assess outcomes from the Sweet Tonic program: outcomes relating to physical wellbeing, to social wellbeing, and to creativity and creative activity. The description below is integrated from the observations, interviews and questionnaire responses.

Physical wellbeing

Subjective experiences of health benefits

By midway through the Sweet Tonic program, participants were already reporting that they felt the benefits of weekly singing, physical stretching, and breathing and vocal exercises. This observation was confirmed by the questionnaire at the end of the program. Of the nineteen participants who completed the questionnaire, all but one felt there had been subjective improvement in their level of physical fitness (judged by the distance they could walk easily, or their ability to climb stairs), and all felt that their flexibility and ability to stretch had improved. One participant felt that their physical fitness had deteriorated, and it is perhaps surprising for a group of this age that this was confined to one person. Seven participants (37 per cent) reported a large improvement in physical fitness, and seven in flexibility – notably, these responses do not reflect the same group of people. The person who noted deteriorating physical fitness reported a large improvement in flexibility, and in total ten people said either their physical fitness or their flexibility (or both) had made a large improvement.

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[4] Of these nineteen participants, seven were aged under 60 (37 per cent), six were aged between 60 and 69 (31.5 per cent) and six were aged over 70 (31.5 per cent). The majority of questionnaire respondents had little previous formal training in music. Two thirds had no previous training, or school training only. Six of the group had taken private lessons at some point. None had undertaken training at a tertiary level.

Mood, relaxation, self esteem

> As Sweet Tonic was a new experience for me I thoroughly enjoyed it as I couldn't sing – but now I feel I could sing in a choir in tune – so have gained a bit of confidence.
>
> – Sweet Tonic participant

As with physical fitness and flexibility, the large majority of participants experienced benefits for mood, relaxation and self-esteem. Of these three areas, mood (good spirits or happiness) appears to be the most significant area of benefit for participants, with twelve out of nineteen (63 per cent) reporting a large improvement in this area, and all others reporting a small improvement, with no participants reporting a negative effect or no change. Seven participants (37 per cent) reported a large improvement in relaxation and calmness in the questionnaire, and six (32 per cent) reported a large improvement in self-esteem.

Thus an important outcome of the Sweet Tonic process was the development of self-confidence. Older women in particular can be taken for granted within their families, and so by participating in something new and showing people around them that they are capable of success at any age, the program's success becomes an achievement for whole families, and not just for the individuals in the program. The final concert was particularly effective in extending the program's positive outcomes beyond the workshop group. As part of the research project, audience members at the final Sweet Tonic concert were asked to comment on the impact the program had on any family members or friends they had in the group. One woman, aged 36-50, remarked: 'My mum just blossomed with this program. She was very committed and was always eager to go every week. What a pleasure it was to expose my children to this wonderful concert.'

Social wellbeing

Social participation

The opportunities presented through programs such as Sweet Tonic are especially welcomed by the people who live alone and who may not have a lot of opportunity to speak to others on a day-by-day basis. This is a familiar and valuable social outcome of such initiatives. But the benefits are not limited to these people. The Sweet Tonic program had demonstrable positive social outcomes for the majority of participants who responded to the questionnaire. Overall, the participants enjoyed socialising with others during the breaks, although two participants remained neutral on this.[5] All but two of the respondents felt supported by the group at the end of the workshop sessions, with six people agreeing strongly with this statement.

Importantly, these positive social outcomes were not limited to areas in the participants' lives which are directly related to the workshop program. In the questionnaire, around two-thirds (twelve participants) responded that they had increased their level of community-based activity since undertaking the program, and eleven agreed that they had increased their levels of other activity (such as social outings). This finding supports the view that increased self-confidence and motivation, as well as increased physical fitness, has spin-off effects for people in other areas of their lives.

Group development

A sense of group solidarity evolved throughout the workshop series. In programs of this type there is often a need to manage dominant people, who can be quite disruptive to the equilibrium of the group. This often requires the presenter to intervene periodically to manage the group dynamic. In the Sweet Tonic workshops a largely self-managed dynamic was developed, where the group itself effectively managed dominant individuals through good-

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[5] One particular participant disagreed with the statements that they enjoyed socialising, that they made new friendships and that they felt supported by the group, suggesting an individual who by the end felt somewhat alienated from the group. A written comment by this respondent suggested that they had found some members of the group gossipy and that too much time was wasted in socialising. Both of the two respondents who felt neutral about socialising also felt (along with one other person) that they had not made any new friendships.

humoured interjections, or a 'that's enough of that' if someone needed to be 'put back in their place.'

The group was further consolidated as the workshops continued, through the participants' recognition that it was important to them that the final performance be of the best quality they were capable of achieving. The performance as a final goal was an integral part of the workshops, and the participants were eager to know what they would be singing and wearing for the final concert from early on in the program. Thus, one of the achievements of the Sweet Tonic program was that it effectively facilitated the development of strong group solidarity. A stable group dynamic emerged quite early on in the program, with a significant degree of self-management by the group itself.

Creative activity and creativity

Technique

I find I can appreciate and interpret at a more in-depth and subtle way instrumental and vocal music.

– Sweet Tonic participant

I have found my voice again! Range has improved, higher and lower levels.

– Sweet Tonic participant

Differing abilities were apparent in the group, with individuals having strengths in many areas. The participants were in general initially good with pitch but rather less good with rhythm. The vocal ability of all participants improved to some extent, with a pronounced improvement evident for some. All became more confident in their singing and their skills in harmonising grew. Occasional visitors would remark that the sound had improved markedly.

In the questionnaire, the large majority of participants reported some or a large improvement in the range and volume of their singing voice. Perhaps more surprising is the proportion of people (fifteen in total) who reported an improvement in the volume of their speaking voice. Four of the participants, indeed, reported a large improvement in the volume of their speaking voice. This question was included in the questionnaire because of a comment made in one of the focus groups. A participant observed that since she has lived alone, she had experienced a drop in the volume of her everyday speaking voice, and she hoped the workshops would allow for some improvement in this area.

All participants reported an increase in their confidence in singing during the workshops, and all but one reported an increase in their confidence around singing in the final concert. More than half of the participants reported that these had been large improvements. All but two participants agreed that they had experienced some sense of appreciation of their voice as a unique instrument (with three reporting a large increase in appreciation). Interestingly, in view of the organisational objectives of Musica Viva and Campbelltown Arts Centre, sixteen of the nineteen respondents agreed that there had been an increase in their appreciation of music in general, outside of the workshops, with half of these respondents reporting that this had been a significant effect.

Creativity and collaboration

By the end of the Sweet Tonic program, all but one of the nineteen workshop participants who responded to the questionnaire agreed that they felt more creative as a result of their participation in the program, with eight people strongly agreeing that this was the case.

Negus and Pickering point out that creative activity is about making collective meaning, and communicating our shared experience: 'creativity is a process which brings experience into meaning and significance, and helps it attain communicative value' (2004: vii). One aspect in particular of the Sweet Tonic program was very effective in manifesting collective meanings for the group. This was the songwriting component of the program, which resulted in 'Sweet Tonic,' a song the group wrote collaboratively and performed at the final concert.

Following a conceptual mapping exercise on the theme of 'Sweet Tonic' (see diagram below), individuals worked on verses for the song. Linda Marr took their samples away to collate and develop them as lyrics. The tune was then composed by the group in class, with Linda taking away melody fragments by recording them on her mobile phone. The song was then brought back to the group to be learned.
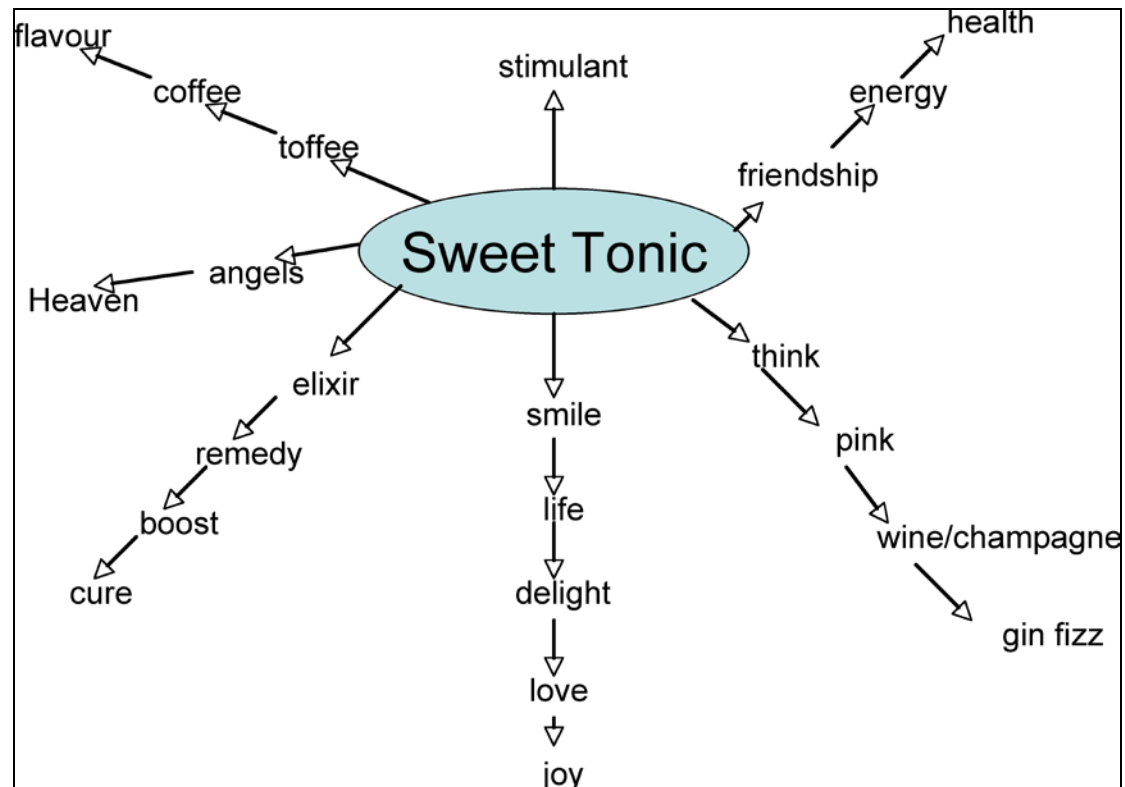
As the participants sang 'Sweet Tonic' in their workshops, the pride in the room was evident. The song is an explicit outcome of the program's extension and development of creative participation into creative collaboration.

Feedback on program organisation and delivery

The questionnaire responses indicated that all but one of the respondents (who remained neutral) enjoyed the sessions overall, with fifteen strongly agreeing with this statement. Other parts of the program had a more varied response from participants. Easily the most positive response in the program was to the percussion workshop, with fifteen respondents strongly agreeing that they enjoyed this session. The least positively supported part of the program was the songwriting component, with two respondents disliking this component and five remaining neutral. Only five participants strongly agreed that they enjoyed this part of the program.

It may have been that the songwriting component of the program received the least support because it was the component which most depended on the emergence of trust and self-confidence within the group dynamic. One of the participants said that the songwriting component had come too early in the program for her. She had hung back and not fully participated, but thought that if it had come later in the workshops she would have felt comfortable enough to get more involved in the process. Almost all of the participants had not done any songwriting before and so it was a totally new experience for them. Participants needed to be willing to offer creative input, and this could be a risky and demanding process. People needed to be brave to trust the group and to trust Linda to offer ideas and lines or

phrases, and this required careful scheduling consideration as to when it was best to introduce this part of the program.

The next series of questionnaire items attempted to assess the degree to which people found the different parts of the program more or less challenging. Participants, perhaps unsurprisingly, found it easier to learn melodies than harmonies. While only eleven agreed that it was easy to learn harmonies, seventeen found it easy to learn melodies, around the same proportion as found it easy to learn to sing in rounds. People vary in their ability to learn to sing in harmony as well, with some people preferring to stick to only sing melody. There is also variation in people's ability to be able to sing something different to the person who is standing next to them. The repertoire and schedule of such a program needs to be flexible enough to cater to differing abilities and developmental needs.

Because of the age group of participants, concentration, standing and hearing are potential obstacles to full participation and achievement of benefits. People found it easier to concentrate (sixteen agreeing) than to learn lyrics (twelve agreeing). Perhaps unsurprisingly, seven of the participants were either neutral or in disagreement that it was easy to stand for the time required, although six strongly agreed that this was easy. Most of the participants had little or no difficulty hearing the instructions, with only one participant finding it difficult and four neutral on this question.

Requirements for working with people of this age group include the need to be aware of participants' physical limitations, and so the presenters had to be careful to balance periods of standing with sitting. The stretching exercises catered for a range of abilities – some would be capable of only a small stretch while some would do more. Alternative versions of exercises were described to allow people to work within their capabilities.

The presenters observed that, compared to groups of mixed ages or children, participants in the older age group tend not to be as mentally flexible and able to improvise, and are not good at memorisation of lyrics and harmony parts. However they had all developed methods of compensating, for example by note-taking. It was apparent that some people would find change irritating. If a song had been learned with a particular pattern of repetition, then people would complain about changes, since this would mean rewriting their notations. In general, perhaps because of the discomfort associated with change and uncertainty, the group was very well-organised and keen to plan ahead.

For a program of this type, presenters believe that a larger group works well. Many participants were initially apprehensive, and in a larger group individuals don't stand out to the same extent and don't feel embarrassed about singing in front of others as much as they would in a smaller group. People are able to blend in at the start, and can ease into standing out more as they develop confidence. In a larger group there is also more scope for complex musical arrangements, with less reliance on having to make sure there is a sufficient balance of strong singers in each of the part groups.

Two participants' stories[6]

Sharon's story

Sharon says that her involvement in Sweet Tonic 'was a very emotional and incredible experience for me'. Initially intimidated and apprehensive, she found the group very supportive, and felt that everyone was non-judgmental, particularly the workshop leaders who were supportive and extremely encouraging. No matter what was contributed it was not dismissed as trivial.

Sharon says that she has been 'surrounded by negativity for a long time'. She paints, and considers herself an emerging artist, but her siblings have said 'you only dabble'. She has taken the negativity very personally in the past:

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[6] Sharon's and Beth's stories are based on telephone interviews with them after the Sweet Tonic program had concluded.

> 'I've allowed people to put me down but I don't allow that any more, and that's something that I've got from Sweet Tonic. Before I would carry the self-doubt around and it would discourage me from doing things'

She went through a marriage breakdown three years ago that was very difficult emotionally, and feels that for a while she 'lost everything'. She feels that the grieving period was very intense for two years or more, and that the Sweet Tonic program put her 'in the right place at the right time'. Sharon says that the impact on her self-confidence has been 'amazing'. She feels emotionally and psychically as if she is 'standing in the light' and can 'look back through a dark door to the turmoil beyond'. She feels she is able now to rationalize and think more clearly about her experiences.

Sharon was the participant who didn't participate fully in the song-writing process because she felt it was 'too early for her'. Next time, she says, she 'wouldn't hesitate'. Sharon says the program was 'liberating' for her, and that she is enjoying life more and getting involved in more activities. Physically,

> 'it's made me more aware of my breathing and of how my body clock is ticking. I can now recognise the signs of stress and use some of the techniques we learned, and that helps to release the stress. My blood pressure is great now, but before, even with medication there was no way to keep it under control. My heart specialist said I had to do something. Now it's down to normal.'

She sings around the house now, and if she feels herself getting stressed, she says, 'I sing!'. People have told her she's looking the best she has in years. 'My daughter said "Mum, what have you done to your skin, you're looking so well!"' Her 7-year-old grandson said 'Grandma, I'm so proud of you'.

Beth's story

> 'I had no social contact before, basically I never got out of the house. Week to week the workshops were something to get up for, they really made a difference in my life. I live alone, since my daughter left home, and I had no contact with anyone other than family.'

Beth started from a low base in confidence, barely making eye contact or engaging in social interaction with the others. Her voice was very soft in the initial workshops and she was reticent to participate in call and response exercises where individual voices could be heard. Later on in the program she became much more confident and volunteered input, and by the end was smiling often and making much more animated conversation with others, who were clearly enjoying her company.

Although the ending of the workshops have left a gap in the week, she is now motivated to take up other activities: 'I've made a list! I'm a lot more motivated now, to get out and do other things.' She describes the list as a 'list of things to do before I die'. It has more singing on it, but also doing family history research and home decoration.

Like Sharon, Beth was married, but 'it wasn't a good marriage'. She says she has had some 'left-over baggage for some years' as a result. Although she was aware of concerts and other activities at the Arts Centre, she hadn't been there before enrolling in the Sweet Tonic workshops. She 'loves music' – 'but not heavy rock', and she says she doesn't listen to the radio. She buys 'classic' CDs, with music ranging from the 1920s to the 1950s. She jokes that she is 'stuck in time', and says that she sings along with the CDs to 'annoy the neighbours'.

Re-evaluating qualitative evidence

The success of the research project in demonstrating the value of the program may be demonstrated by the observation that in 2009, the Sweet Tonic program will be extended, through being launched in Queensland and Western Australia.

It may well be that the evidence that swayed the funding bodies was the calculation and tabulation of quantitative results from the questionnaires, and the subjective reporting of the participants that the program had benefits for them. I would like to suggest, however, that the

most powerful evidence of the impact a program like Sweet Tonic can have, on some participants at least, is contained in the personal narratives of participants like Sharon and Beth.[7]

Yet such evidence is often dismissed as 'anecdotal' (see Oakley 2006: 13, for example). Indeed, during one Sweet Tonic steering committee meeting, while I was explaining the process of developing the questionnaire on the basis of focus group and observational material, one of the community stakeholders asked me if it was 'OK to use that kind of anecdotal material'. As a qualitative researcher, the idea that qualitative data is anecdotal is a suggestion has become somewhat familiar. On a number of occasions arts administrators and cultural workers have said something along the lines of: 'we have anecdotal evidence that this works, but we need *hard data* to *prove* that it does'.

The dictionary definition of 'anecdote' is that it is 'a short amusing or interesting story about a real incident or person'. The derogatory association is more explicit in the alternative definition: 'an account regarded as unreliable or hearsay'. Adjectivally, 'anecdotal' means 'not necessarily true or reliable, because based on personal accounts rather than facts or research'.[8]

So an anecdote is told because it is amusing or interesting, and cannot be assumed to be a reliable account of events. Contrast this with Mulligan et al's study, cited earlier, in which the researchers concluded that arts projects can 'enable individuals and groups of people to develop *narratives of action* in response to social change' (2008: 50, emphasis added). To use of the term 'anecdotal' to describe the narratives of personal transformation of Sweet Tonic participants like Sharon and Beth therefore to trivialize the them as narratives, and to refuse to recognise them as potentially 'the tip of an iceberg, indicating the existence of a much larger truth' (Lally 2008: 162).

'Qualitative', on the other hand, is defined as 'relating to, measuring, or measured by the quality of something rather than its quantity.'[9] Qualitative research comes from 'a perspective that takes the multiplicity of modern life seriously enough to do away with appeals to a unitary truth as the arbiter of quality' (Baym 2008: 178). As Smith and Deemer put it, the question of qualitative evidence then comes down to one of being able to 'make and defend judgements when there can be no appeal to foundations or to something outside of the social processes of knowledge construction' (2000: 438). The focus shifts from 'whether we have really found the true state of things to whether we have built interpretations of affairs that meet our audience's standards for what they will accept as a basis for action' (Baym 2008: 179).

This leads us back, then, to the issue raised earlier in the paper, that the instrumentalist transformation in arts and cultural policy, the turn to a limited form of evidence-based decision-making, is one of a crisis of authority and legitimacy, and a failure to recognise the complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship between qualitative and quantitative evidence.

It is necessary to 'understand the *limits* of evidence in an area as complex as this …' (Oakley 2006: 9), and in particular, it may be that 'social and economic policy is simply too complex to be subjected to processes designed for the laboratory' (2006: 1). Mulligan et al point out that 'the conceptual problem is that some researchers have been looking for linear relationships of

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[7] The report to MVA and CAC prepared as the final outcome of the research contained seven such personal narratives.

[8] 'anecdotal adjective' The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. 30 November 2008 http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e2549

[9] 'qualitative adjective' The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. 30 November 2008 http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t140.e63114

causality when the relationships between inputs (arts and cultural projects) and (social) outcomes is much more indirect and diffuse than that' (2008: 52). They go on to say that we need to 'broaden our understanding of what counts as "evidence" because it comes in a wide variety of forms' (Mulligan et al 2008: 52).

We need, I propose, to rehabilitate qualitative research from accusations that its materials are anecdotal. In doing so, it is interesting to observe that politicians themselves understand the value of an iconic narrative of personal transformation to mobilize the commitment of communities through its symbolic potency.   In his speech after winning the 2008 US Presidential election on 4 November, for example, Barack Obama included one person's biographical narrative of transformation to stand in for the experiences of many:

> This election had many firsts and many stories that will be told for generations. But one that's on my mind tonight's about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta. She's a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their voice heard in this election except for one thing: Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. She was born just a generation past slavery; a time when there were no cars on the road or planes in the sky; when someone like her couldn't vote for two reasons -- because she was a woman and because of the color of her skin. And tonight, I think about all that she's seen throughout her century in America -- the heartache and the hope; the struggle and the progress; the times we were told that we can't, and the people who pressed on with that American creed: Yes we can. … And this year, in this election, she touched her finger to a screen, and cast her vote, because after 106 years in America, through the best of times and the darkest of hours, she knows how America can change.
>
> Yes we can. (Anonymous 2008)

Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd used a similar rhetorical device in making the first national government apology to the Stolen Generations in February 2008.[10]

Conclusion

Would it be reasonable to suggest that President-elect Obama and Prime Minister Rudd were telling these stories as anecdotes, or that they would have been done better to make their case using a statistical mode of presentation?

Holden has linked the crisis of legitimacy in arts and cultural policy mentioned earlier to the reluctance of public sector managers to recognise the essentially political nature of their decisions:

> The priorities of public good and value creation can change over time, and funders will have to address competing claims. This is a recognition of what currently happens in practice: the art of resolving conflicting claims, an of allocating scarce resources lies at the heart of public service professionalism. But it is an art that successive generations of public sector managers have sought to camouflage because it is essentially political. (2004: 44)

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[10] His speech included the story of one member of the Stolen Generations (Aboriginal people who were taken from their families as children in government-authorised programs aimed to 'assimilate' them into white society):

> Some have asked, "Why apologise?" Let me begin to answer by telling the parliament just a little of one person's story … Nanna Nungala Fejo, as she prefers to be called, was born in the late 1920s. She remembers her earliest childhood days living with her family and her community in a bush camp just outside Tennant Creek. She remembers the love and the warmth and the kinship of those days long ago, including traditional dancing around the camp fire at night. … I asked Nanna Fejo what she would have me say today about her story. She thought for a few minutes then said that what I should say today was that all mothers are important. … (Commonwealth of Australia 2008: 167-168).

He goes on to suggest that

> Public administrators should recognise that they use their expertise. Rather than adopting a stance of professional neutrality, people running publicly funded cultural organizations, funders themselves, and civil servants who oversee the whole system, should explicitly articulate the values that they in fact promote. (2004: 43)

There is still a problem, however, in that there is a sense that research and advocacy should never be allowed to contaminate each other. For Oakley,

> the advocacy problem, a widespread critique that research in this area is rarely impartial and is too often confused with advocacy … is perhaps the mirror image of concerns about instrumentalism and points again to the need for more, independent and rigorous research in these sectors, not for abandoning ship. (2006: 9).

I would like to suggest here that scholarly rigour and partiality – the recognition that we are all speaking from a particular nexus of socio-political conditions (including in this case that of the research commissioned by the program hosts) – and are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The difficulty may be that it is indeed true that 'neither funders nor funded seem able to talk about what they really do' (Holden 2004: 14). We need to develop new language to talk about evidence that doesn't limit it to quantitative or statistical forms. In particular, we urgently need to move away from the negativity of the language used around qualitative arguments to support the value of cultural activity. Holden points out that both the arts and the defence forces are paid for by taxpayers, 'but only the arts are described as a subsidised sector'. Relating directly to the concern with how we describe qualitative data, he goes on to observe that 'business schools use case studies, but culture puts together *anecdotal evidence*' (Holden 2004: 26, emphasis in original).

Oakley has pointed out the irony in the fact that 'such a notion – that *government* is in some way linked to *politics* and therefore a matter of competing ideas and values – needs stating at all, suggests that we had perhaps reached the high-water mark of commitment to evidence-based policy-making' (2006: 3). In what may be a piece of qualitative evidence that this is the case, Australian Innovation Minister Kim Carr, in an address to the National Press Club in September 2008, acknowledged that the humanities, arts and social sciences are critical to giving us new ways of understanding ourselves and our world. In what may be an encouraging sign from a new government that things may be changing, he went on to say:

> I believe the creative arts – and the humanities and the social sciences – make a terrible mistake when they claim support on the basis of their commercial value. Whatever they may be worth in the marketplace, it is their intrinsic value we should treasure them for. We should support these disciplines because they give us pleasure, knowledge, meaning, and inspiration. No other pay-off is required. (Carr 2008: p.11)

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