



# CultureWork

A Periodic Broadside\*  
for Arts and Culture Workers

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Institute for Community Arts Studies  
Arts & Administration Program, University of Oregon



## What Is Community Cultural Development and How Do We Practice It?

Bill Flood

Artwork by Rusza Erceg.

Community involves, as Wendell Berry says, "a common dependence on a common life and a common ground." It is a physical place we share where people have values, beliefs, needs and interests that connect them. We also use the term to describe a group of people with a common affiliation, not necessarily linked by geography.

Community development is "the deliberate attempt by community people to work together to guide the future of their communities, and the development of a corresponding set of techniques for assisting community people in such a process." (Lee Cary, former head of the Community Development Masters Program at the University of Missouri).

Development implies moving forward.

Culture is where we feel most at home. It gives us identity and meaning. It takes many

forms, including: how we adapt our natural environment; the institutions we create to express our social and political beliefs; the performing arts, visual arts, literature, crafts and handwork; our history; and communication forms through which we express our beliefs. Culture is the societal glue that holds us together. It is what we are willing to go to war to defend -- our languages, our symbols and customs, our religions, our families.

Community cultural development is thus engaging people of a community in taking action to build on and improve their shared culture. If culture is what connects us, then community cultural development is the tool that tempers and strengthens the connection.

### **Why community cultural development?**

No community is static, and some degree of change is necessary for all communities to survive and thrive. Community development processes utilizing the power of culture tap into the heart of the community, and with that comes great passion and creativity, a capacity for love, appreciation of beauty, and ability to solve problems. The result is healthy, thriving communities.

### **Where can we practice community cultural development?**

Everywhere. It is not something relegated to those who can afford urban amenities; we are building and changing culture every day. People everywhere -- rural and urban -- are seeking a sense of their group, their place, and a connection to where they live.

### **How do we practice community cultural development?**

We work in different ways in each community. Listening is central to our work. We provide avenues, safe places, for people to tell their stories, to make connections with others, to come out of isolation, to celebrate their successes, to utilize their talents and learn new skills -- to be creative. We fight for justice and against all forces which limit people. Practicing community cultural development is as much about taking away obstacles to human expression as it is about creating new places or programs.

### **When do we practice community cultural development?**

Community cultural development embraces the ethic that it is good for people to participate in the cultural life of their communities. This ethic informs how we work at all times. Community planning processes (perhaps originally focused on land use, social services, transportation, housing or education) many times provide an opportunity to raise cultural concerns and strategies, and we seek to blend our ethic with these opportunities. We also look to help when a community is in crisis -- when we can use the power of culture to mobilize people, draw attention to issues, or engage in problem-solving or healing.

## **Who practices community cultural development?**

A person (volunteer or professional) who works to further and promote local culture. It is how you work that makes you a cultural worker. For example, a librarian becomes a cultural worker when he/she not only checks out books, but helps to engage people in understanding each other, their shared history, and other aspects of their community. Cultural workers, central to the life of a community, include librarians, teachers, historians, artists, workers in media, and community activists.

## **How about art?**

Art is a central form of cultural expression. There is no stronger force to draw attention to issues, bring people together, bring joy to people's lives, and build both physical and human community. Here are four Oregon examples.

Eva Castellanoz, a folk artist and curandera (healer in Mexican-American tradition) in Ontario, Oregon, works with youth, many of whom are affiliated with gangs, in teaching traditional Mexican-American folk arts. Eva spends many hours with these kids, not only teaching, but listening. Through this relationship and the stories and skills they offer one another, the kids are building self-esteem and gaining hope.

In Baker City, a group of concerned citizens decided to bring life back to the Powder River, a small river running adjacent to the downtown. Artists, historians, landscape designers, anthropologists, and many others were involved in developing a public art plan which reveals how public art can interpret the natural environment.

In Cave Junction, artists and others in the community organized the first Illinois River Festival on the weekend of Summer Solstice. The Festival was an opportunity to spotlight

the talents of local artists and craftspersons and to bring together the people in the Illinois Valley. Often folks here are separated by lifestyle or income. Festival organizers concluded that the Illinois River is the one common element in their place that they all share.

In schools all across Oregon artists are working in ways that connect youth with their cultures, with one another and with their communities. Artists are working directly with kids and also training teachers how to use the arts in teaching a variety of subject areas.

## **How do we know if we are practicing community cultural development?**

We can continually ask ourselves, "How does what I am now doing build community? Am I participating in and contributing to the the cultural life of my community? Am I listening to and making connections with other members of my community? Am I challenging forces which inhibit human expression?" If the answer is yes, we are most likely engaged in community cultural development, and we are using creativity, compassion, and problem-solving to help our communities.

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**Bill Flood** is the Community Development and Education Coordinator at the Oregon Arts Commission. Since 1984 he has been a consultant in the area of community cultural development. He lives in Portland and is a happy gardener, father, and accordion player.

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**CultureWork** is an electronic publication of the University of Oregon Institute for Community Arts Studies. Its mission is to provide timely workplace-oriented information on culture, the arts, education, and community.

**CultureWork** seeks submissions of concise (500-1500 words) critiques and advisories on community arts and the preparation of community arts workers. Graphics that express the spirit of community arts are welcome, to be published with attribution. Manuscripts should be sent in plain text format (i.e., NOT MS Word), via email, on Macintosh or Intel high-density 3.5 inch floppies or zip disks. Send submissions to Maria Finison at [mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu](mailto:mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu) or via snailmail: care of Arts & Administration Program, School of Architecture and Allied Arts, University of Oregon, Eugene Oregon 97403. If accepted for publication, authors may be asked to make revisions.

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Editor: Richard Bear. Marketing/publicity: Cara Baldrige.

Advisor: Dr. Douglas Blandy.

Comments to: [mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu](mailto:mfinison@darkwing.uoregon.edu)