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## **A Pedagogical Model of Creative Enterprise: Building Communities with People, Pets and Art**

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### **Introduction**

In this paper we provide an overview of the premise and methodology of *The Pet Project* (TPP), a model of creative pedagogical enterprise that initiates and maintains publics across regional Tasmania (Figure 1). TPP was established in Hobart, Tasmania, in response to COVID-19 and the negative effects the pandemic has had on individual wellbeing, social and cultural cohesion, and community participation in the arts, and the economic blows experienced by the creative sector. The primary strategy for TPP is the development of a twofold model that advocates for creativity and culture as necessary social functions and that provides diverse participants access to mentoring, education, training, and resources.

The project has been designed to utilise an emotionally binding theme of animal-human relationships. This is combined with arts-based methods, intensive visual art workshops and semi-structured interviews. Our approach is aimed at promoting fundamental sustainability imperatives in different communities where at the centre of public engagement is the care and maintenance of relationships.

### **Basic project format**

We partner with councils and art/cultural, health or community organisations (Figure 1) in regional areas and offer a free intensive one-day workshop to any community member interested in painting a portrait of their much-loved pet and willing to share stories about their animal-human relationships. All materials, equipment and resources are supplied (including promotional material to supporting organisations) to remove financial barriers and to ensure there are no direct costs to partners or community participants.

Integral to the project is the paid employment, mentoring, and provision of necessary teaching resources for established and emerging artists to facilitate the workshops. There are two artists per workshop, and they are supported by the project team before (preparation), during (implementation) and after (feedback and ongoing support) the delivery of the workshop. The resources and training provided to the artists are also free, and they are encouraged to adapt these materials to suit their own local circumstances post-workshop. The aim of training community artists and providing a guide/template is to initiate self-sustaining entrepreneurial community-based activities.

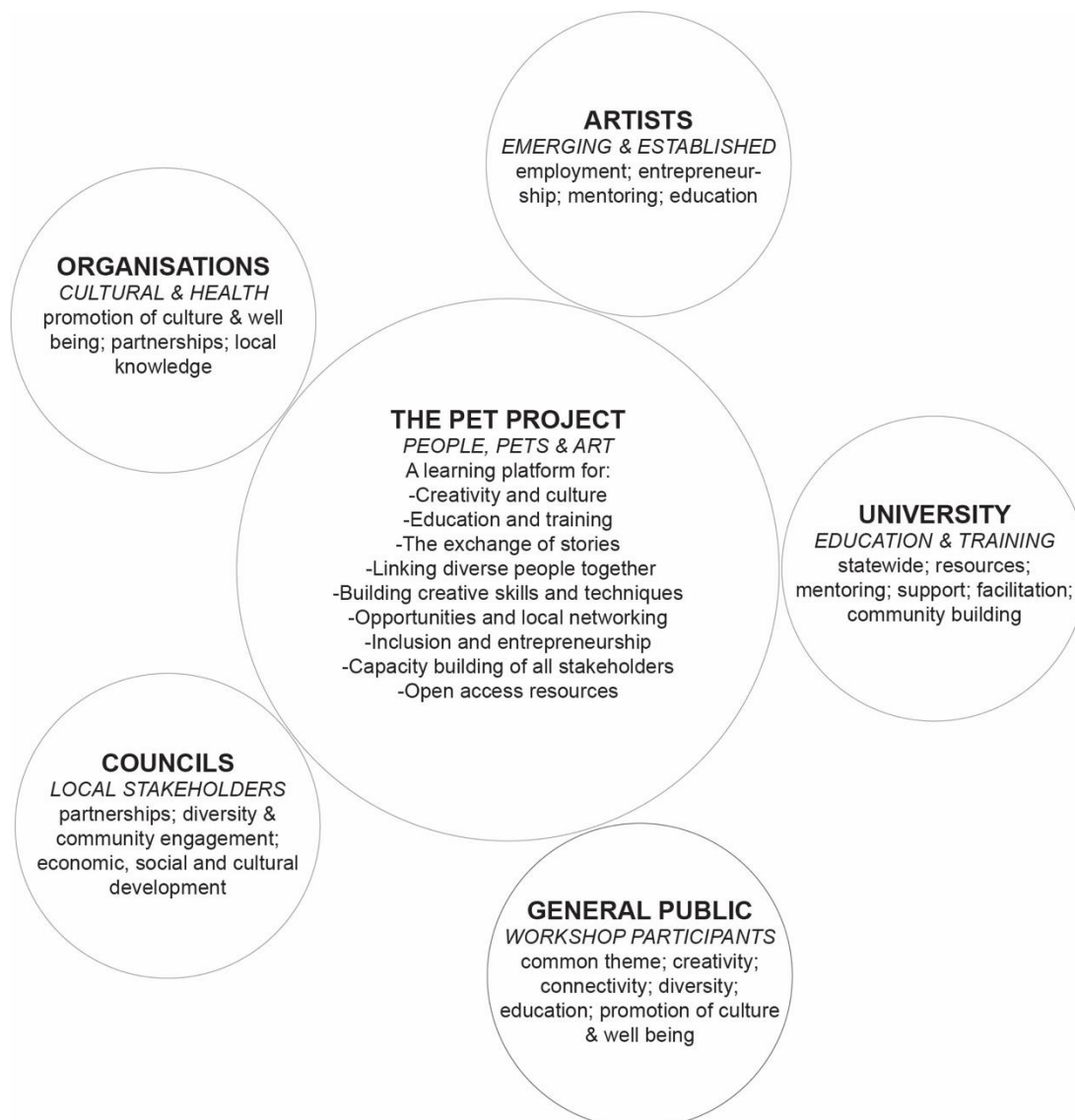


Figure 1: The Pet Project creative enterprise model

During the workshops members of the project team video interview participants about their relationship with their animals. A range of questions are asked as a way of encouraging them to share stories and anecdotes about their relationship with their pets. This also allows an opportunity to deeply reflect on their relationships, which in turn can influence the creative process. The participating artists are also interviewed about their experience of the workshop as well as delving into much broader questions such as the role of creativity, the value of community arts, creativity and its link to wellbeing and health, and other probes to gain insights about their individual practices.

Feedback and data about participants' experiences is then gathered and follow up sessions with artists and stakeholders are facilitated several months after the workshop. This serves to help understand how the experience has influenced their practice and how their feedback can inform and refine our pedagogical model.

Another part of the project is to deliver outcomes across diverse platforms. This has included digital publishing, open access archives, public events and screenings, exhibitions, and more traditional publications.<sup>1</sup>

### **Communities of Practice**

The value of TPP is that it is an educative experience in visual art and creative practice/enterprise that revolves around a transfer of knowledge. This "Community of Practice" can be broadly defined as groups of people who come together with a shared interest. Constructing "publics" can also be useful in framing how a public (like a Community of Practice) can be built via a common concern or issue. For TPP, this manifests by linking one community, such as those interested in arts workshops, with other communities that consist of creative practitioners, educators, researchers, cultural and community organisations, and other stakeholders using the universality of pets as the anchor (i.e. the shared interest).

However, it is not just a common concern that might bring "publics" together; it is also through others effectively communicating those issues or concerns (DiSalvo, 2009, p. 51). The broader question for TPP is how to repair social connections, address wellbeing factors and understand what this might look like as a creative pedagogical model that provides skills, opportunities, and meaningful outcomes for people.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.the-petproject.com](http://www.the-petproject.com) for more information.



Figure 2: Josh Foley. "... this opportunity was great in terms of giving me a bit more confidence ... workshops and ways that people can get together in groups and be creative are really important for individuals in regional, isolated communities". Josh Foley, participating artist, interview in Devonport TAS, March 2022. [www.joshfoley.com.au](http://www.joshfoley.com.au)  
Image: *Joni & Mitchell* by Josh Foley, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2022. Image credit: Andy Terhell.

One aspect is to invite personal storytelling from the participants during the workshop and to also ask them to reflect on their creative process. Strategies that promote the sharing of lived experience have been shown to improve emotional, mental health, and wellbeing outcomes (Harker Martin, 2020; Lusebrink, 2004) and result in better communication and connection within the community (Beauregard et al., 2020). Story-driven approaches provide the time and opportunity to reflect upon issues and experiences that hold personal meaning and relevance (Fraser & Al Aayah, 2011). By encouraging creativity in a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment, individual self-expression can also be explored as a means to reconcile complex internal individual issues—that is, the transformation of feelings and emotion into consciousness (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016). This approach also has parallels with a “social learning space”, a component within a Community of Practice. Social learning spaces focus on people and their participation by emphasising individual

identity and meaning as fundamental to the process of learning (Wegner-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2020).

We also engage local artists and, as previously noted, pay them a rate set out by national standards (National Association for the Visual Arts, n.d.). The aim here is to elevate artist profiles and leave the community members with new skills, networks, or opportunities that they can pursue once the project has been hosted in their specific region (Regional Arts Australia, 2019). What we provide is a mentoring program for the artists that aims to link different skill sets together and that further supports new networks and the development of professional and entrepreneurial skills. The artists have several touch points with the TPP team. Before the workshops, an online session is facilitated that brings the artists and project team together to meet each other, and to discuss the workshops and resources. During the community-based workshops, artists are encouraged to demonstrate their skill sets through actively painting and working one-on-one with participants. At the conclusion of the workshops, artists are video interviewed to capture their initial experience and to gain feedback. A follow-up online discussion several months after the workshop is also held to find out how the workshop and resources have influenced their practice (Figure 2).

It is not appropriate for us to maintain a community, but rather our goal is to facilitate, encourage, and support individuals to build and grow Communities of Practice in ways that are relevant to them and their contexts.

### **Wellbeing**

A key component of TPP is an emphasis on the repair of relationships between people and networks post-pandemic. Our method is to facilitate recovery by:

- a) celebrating community diversity—lived experience, knowledge, and stories.
- b) facilitating training—teaching, learning, and skill development.
- c) establishing creative opportunities—networking, entrepreneurship, and immediate and ongoing support for a range of stakeholders in ways that are meaningful, tangible, and positive.

This approach is in response to increasing evidence for the need to develop strategies that expand inclusivity and access to social opportunities, given that the

pandemic has had a dramatic negative impact on individual wellbeing<sup>2</sup> at a local level, particularly mental health (Australian Government Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019; Lester et al., 2021). This increasing negative trend extends nationally (Queensland Government, 2019; Australian Government Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022), and globally (Xiong et al., 2020; World Health Organization, 2022b).

### **Human-animal relationships**

To provide an opportunity that may facilitate positive social interaction and that can connect a broad range of people together, TPP uses animal companionship as a universally binding and emotional theme. Tasmania has one of the highest rates of pet ownership per capita in Australia (Animal Health Alliance, 2013; Animal Medicines Australia, 2016; Newsmaker, 2015), and it features heavily as part of daily life. Pet companionship has been proven to have many positive effects on mental and physical health and social benefits (Cleary et al., 2021; Damberg & Frömbling, 2021; Hussein et al., 2021; RSPCA, 2020). Relationships between humans and animals span millennia (Germonpré et al., 2009; Perri et al., 2021), so the development of a relationship with an animal is in part a function of being human (Figure 3).

### **Art**

The representation of animals in visual art practices, such as painting, also has a long and deep history and a connection to human endeavour. Visual art practices can have a role in establishing and communicating perceptions, realities, and how we understand the world. As such, art continues to play an important and popular role in social and cultural development. The Australia Council for the Arts has claimed that 98 per cent of the population are involved with the arts in some shape or form (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020b). Participation in the arts is high and clearly very popular, as is animal companionship. Combining two popular themes establishes a universal anchor for bringing disparate community members together to engage with creative pedagogies.

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<sup>2</sup> In the context of wellbeing, we also include the term mental health; wellbeing is defined by the World Health Organization as, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2022a).



Figure 3: Molly & Kathy. "... Molly is 19 ... I got Molly when I was going through a hard time in my life. Donkeys have very big ears and it turns out they are excellent listeners and will also pick up on your emotional state. Donkeys are marvellous creatures and very sensitive ... She's heard a lot of my secrets ... Last year I noticed a problem with her eye. The end result is that she had to have the eye removed. It was very traumatic". Kathy, participating community member interview in Hobart TAS, May 2021.

Image: *Molly* by Kathy, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2021. Image Credit: Andy Terhell.

### **Decimated creative sector**

Funding for the arts is low, although participation rates might be high. The statistic of engagement with art as noted above reflects those who engage with the arts and those who are employed in the sector (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020b). In Australia (and across the world) the pandemic has caused harmful social isolation and reduced community participation in the arts (Parliament of Australia, 2021a), which in turn has delivered economic blows to the creative sector, especially to those who rely on it for employment (Pacella et al., 2021; Pennington & Eltham, 2021).

There is now a long road to recovery (Watts, 2022). Tasmania has not been immune, experiencing economic downturn that has had socio-economic implications (Tasmanian Government, 2020b). Specifically, regional communities have been met with long-term uncertainty and increased mental health issues, and artists, especially those working in regional Tasmania, have faced compromised travel, exhibition, sales, and employment opportunities (Tasmanian Government, 2020a).

### **Creativity in uncertain times**

Aside from economic concerns, there is a genuine need for creative experiences to be facilitated. Creative platforms and outlets aid in coping with uncertain times, a point acknowledged by the Federal Government (Parliament of Australia, 2021b). During the pandemic, although people were unable to engage with art-based platforms/mediums face-to-face, arts participation increased, primarily as a means of staying connected and as a mechanism to support overall individual wellbeing (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020a). This appears to be a global trend, rolled out in key initiatives and projects in New Zealand, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Bennet et al., 2022). Although participation is high, paradoxically arts funding typically has not fared well in government budgets (Benton, 2020; Reid, 2020). More recently too, disruptions from COVID-19 resulted in the tertiary sector disestablishing some offerings within art school contexts (Rubenis & Nicol, 2021).

### **Artist engagement**

TPP addresses this demand for public engagement with art practices, but also a need to provide direct employment for artists across regional Tasmania. Our project delivery model is structured in a way where University of Tasmania educators/researchers from the School of Creative Arts and Media (who work across art, design, and media disciplines) facilitate workshops that are delivered state-wide through paid partnerships with an established artist and an emerging artist in their respective communities. The established artist undertakes a stronger leadership role in recognition of their experience or standing within the community, and the emerging artist is afforded the opportunity to build skills as the mentee. Both established and emerging artists are mentored by the research team. This includes workshop preparation and delivery, strategies for engaging and building a positive learning experience for community participants, as well as being provided with ongoing support (Figure 4).



### Barriers to tertiary sector

TPP has also been developed as a way of bridging the gap between communities and the tertiary sector by providing educational opportunities that deploy arts-based methods in regional/remote areas to those who have little or no connection with the university sector. There are barriers that prevent engagement with the University of Tasmania.



Figure 4: *Scuppers* by Zoe Grey. "I've learnt heaps ... This is so different to what I usually do; so that's been challenging and interesting, and a great way to shake up my usual practice. The strength [of The Pet Project] is engaging the emerging and established artist ... It is also really well facilitated, and all the materials have been provided, and the concise step-by-step process is a great strength". Zoe Grey, participating artist, interview in Smithton TAS, September 2022. [www.zoe-grey.com](http://www.zoe-grey.com)  
Image: *Scuppers* by Zoe Grey, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2022. Image Credit: Meg Keating.

Tasmania has the lowest rates of literacy and numeracy in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008; Denny et al., 2021; Tasmanian Government, Department of Education, 2019; Warner, 2021), as well as the lowest median income (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). In 2022, student enrolment statistics for those attending the University of Tasmania reported that 70 per cent were “first in family” to go to university, and 5 per cent were from remote areas (University of Tasmania, 2022). There is also data showing that approximately 30 per cent of Tasmanian secondary school leavers take up study at university one year out from school and this engagement reduces as years progress (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Therefore, there is a significant gap that can be bridged by training organisations to facilitate broader community engagement, and to communicate and demonstrate the value of life-long learning.

### **Assessment**

To assess our approach, we have adopted the positive psychology framework (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which comprises five basic components: a) Positive Emotion, b) Engagement, c) Relationships, d) Meaning, and e) Accomplishment. The data collected from a formal feedback participant survey indicates that all five basic components are achieved through the workshops.

- Positive Emotion: 95 per cent of participants stated they enjoyed the workshop; 96 per cent would do it again; 88 per cent strongly agreed that they felt inspired throughout the day; 81 per cent of participants had never done a similar workshop.
- Engagement: 89 per cent rated the outcomes of the workshop as excellent, as did 87 per cent in relation to the hands-on activities; 96 per cent declared they would do it again, even if offered in a different medium.
- Relationships: 96 per cent of participants agreed that the workshops helped them feel more connected to their community.
- Meaning: 94 per cent felt comfortable during the semi-structured interview. The interview is geared toward allowing participants a chance to reflect on their relationships with their pet. This can add layers of meaning that further influence the creative process.
- Accomplishment: 88 per cent of participants have noted that the best outcome from the workshop was a finished painting.

These statistics indicate that there are positive benefits from art and creativity pedagogies that have been designed alongside the core elements of wellbeing (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Alex & Renate. "... since I participated in Hobart, I have gone on to draw and paint every day. The Pet Project supported my recovery from trauma, reconnected me to community during the Pandemic and to my inner creativity. I will be forever grateful for the love of creating artwork that your team inspired". Renate, participating community member, email correspondence, August 2022.

Image: *Alex* by Renate, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2021.  
Image Credit: Andy Terhell.

Fundamental to the project is that we give the participants the opportunity to try something new. Our straightforward approach demystifies the processes of art making and we make sure that everyone leaves with a finished painting. Confidence is built through staged and simple techniques that support the participants to make

early and significant progress in their creative works, as well as equipping them with skills and resources to continue beyond the workshop.

## Reflection

To create an engagement strategy that facilitates forms of post-pandemic recovery, this project combines a popular and universal theme of animal companionship with art as a way of reaching diverse community participants. Our intention has been to provide an opportunity to reflect on what animal companionship means individually and collectively as a way of engaging on an emotional level, and through these stories establish a platform to celebrate a range of perspectives. Centering artistic endeavours within the context of pet companionship (past or present) has the capacity to transcend demographic or geographic boundaries. Art and the very act of being creative holds no boundaries and does not yield right or wrong answers as anyone and everyone has the capacity to express, think, and learn through creative work. More broadly, this in turn can then provide a level playing field for long-term engagement and for building communities through partnerships and relationships (Regional Arts Australia, 2019).



Figure 6: Cheryl Rose. “I am a very proud Aboriginal woman, descendant from Mannalargenna ... art is healing, and so is our land ... [our mob] do better being together—doing art, yarnning, and telling our stories through art ...” Cheryl Rose, participating artist, interview in Ulverstone TAS, March 2022. [www.instagram.com/cherylrose.arts/](https://www.instagram.com/cherylrose.arts/). Image: *Bozo* by Cheryl Rose, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2022. Image Credit: Andy Terhell.

At this stage, TPP is a small-scale project.<sup>3</sup> Although there is a focus on our locality of Tasmania, the project is applicable and potentially scalable more broadly. However, for regional collaborations to build successful relationships they need to be nurtured over several years, and that long-term engagement is key to the success of community building (Regional Arts Australia, 2019). Working with artists who belong to these communities, the project team has been able to tailor individual workshops and sessions to suit community needs. Understanding these needs has also required additional preparation and resources, which has resulted in the project starting small to achieve the outcomes. It is obvious that communities, Communities of Practice, and skills take time to build. The longer-term aim of this project is to create a networked community across Tasmania that centres our educational institute and school as the core facilitator. This will require sustained work, but in part it is evidenced by the key stakeholders and supporters who recognise the project's value through their support,<sup>4</sup> as well as the documentation from participating emerging and established artists in the regional areas (Figure 2, Figure 4, Figure 6 and Figure 7).

Combining popular and universal themes, such as human-animal relationships, with art can bind people together in emotional ways. The relationships forged with other beings—be it human and/or animal—can then form inclusive and resilient communities. We have learnt that to move toward increased sustainable futures requires promoting creativity and culture as sustaining strategies that care for relationships within communities to foster resilience, inclusivity, equity, and a sense of being.

### **Acknowledgment of country**

We have conducted the project and written this article across *lutruwita* (Tasmania) Aboriginal land, sea, and waterways. We would like to acknowledge with deep respect the traditional owners of this land, the *palawa* people. The sovereignty of the First Nations peoples over the land, sea, and waterways on which we have conducted this project was never ceded.

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<sup>3</sup> To date there have been over 130 individual registrations across the state from community members.

<sup>4</sup> Excluding artists, we currently have 21 supporting organisations across Tasmania (cultural, art, health, and councils).

## Acknowledgments

This project was made possible by the Australian Government's Regional Arts Fund, which supports the arts in regional and remote Australia.



Figure 7: Lee-Anne Walters. "I felt uncomfortable initially about the prospect of being an emerging artist because I didn't feel that I was there in my art journey. But after speaking to you [the project team] and then reading the materials and meetings, I felt really confident and comfortable and that I wasn't here on false pretences. You've really made me feel like this is something I should be doing and something to pursue. The [workshop] is great and has been really well run. I don't feel rushed in the way its progressed. The support on ideas along the way is great ..." Lee-Anne Walters, participating artist, interview in Smithton TAS, September 2022.

Image: Coco by Lee-Anne Walters, acrylic paint on canvas, painted as part of The Pet Project, 2022. Image Credit: Andy Terhell.

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