Growing Indigenous Arts Leadership

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ABSTRACT
The arts inspire and express the many cultures and societies of the world. They reflect the spectrum of the spirit, from the inspirational to the darkness of humanity. The arts and culture in Indigenous communities function on many levels – as tradition, as expression, as story - song, - dance, and as an economic activity. Through the arts, Indigenous communities link the past, present and future. The Indigenous arts and cultural sector is vibrant, complex and the site for much consideration of the leadership artists and arts managers play in Indigenous cultural and economic development.

This paper aims to explore what’s known of Indigenous leadership development in Australia through a scoping study of the literature available. This will then be compared with other Indigenous leadership development literature from around the world. I seek to clarify key themes and concepts for the development of Indigenous leaders like the acknowledgement of the diversity of Indigenous approaches and the importance of place and community in leadership work. I will place this body of knowledge into an arts and cultural context through a case study on the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural development.

The Wilin Centre is situated in the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts at the University of Melbourne. It is a unique Indigenous centre in that it is 95% philanthropically funded and based on a strategic purpose of cultural transformation. The paper will explore how the Wilin Centre supports the leadership development of individual Indigenous artists and their communities.
Growing Indigenous Arts Leadership

This paper expresses the journey of my mind and thoughts as I have come to understand 'leadership' from my own cultural perspective. I am an Aboriginal woman and I do not know my tribal origins – a long search of twenty years has left me displaced, longing for belonging. This cultural perspective shapes my leadership and the way I view leadership – the desire to create a new way to understand leadership is a drive for my research.

I situate myself in the Indigenous arts and cultural sector, specifically in an arts training environment supporting Indigenous artists. I am interested in how these Indigenous artists become arts leaders through their training experience and commitment to an Indigenous form of leadership – a generative leadership which calls us to give back to community, to organisations, people, and family who have supported our journey. Can a creative way of living life and approaching work be a springboard to a new type of leadership? Is this how to do leadership differently, by simply being different?

The Function of Art

The arts inspire and express the many cultures and societies of the world. The role of artistic, cultural and creative expression is fundamental to the interior and exterior life of humanity – it is the way we communicate and tell our stories, the way we express ourselves as individuals and a way to touch a sacred moment. The arts reflect the spectrum of the spirit, from the inspirational to the darkness of the soul.

The arts are about building knowledge of who we are. But what is the function of art? Is it to purely express, the domain of artists and creatives? Is it to act as a tool to liberate ordinary people? Is it to decorate our otherwise mundane lives? Is it a way to transmit and build knowledge? Is it and economic activity? Or, simply, to bring people closer to our story and family? This question – what is the function of art – has come through the ages and will be answered individually, with as many responses as there are people to respond.

Georges Braque said, “The function of art is to disturb. Science reassures.” E.M Foster said “To make us feel small in the right way is a function of art; men can only make us feel small in the wrong way.” Anais Nin said, “It is the function of art to renew our perception. What we are familiar with we cease to see.”

How you perceive the function of art will colour the way you see its purpose in your life. For me the role of art is core to my being. I enjoy engaging with artists and as an artist myself; I spend my time devoted to the development of creative outcomes. I am in a life long process of building knowledge about myself, my place, my family, my communities and the world. The arts function as a way to explore and expand my life journey.

The function of art is to free the spirit of man and to invigorate and enlarge his vision – Anonymous

Art functions in a similar way to leadership, by engaging an individual in the pursuit to express what is envisioned. Pushing artists and leaders to articulate their dreams, visions, ideas and thought process is one of the building blocks in leader/artist development. Articulation asks us to develop a rigor in our practice, which in turn requires a higher order of thinking - the pursuit of the ability to transform learning into context. A practice-based path is a way towards innovation, the development of new knowledge and excitingly unpredictable outcomes.
Introducing the Wilin Centre
This is the convergence that I am primarily focused on - the confluence of art, Indigenous knowledge and leadership; and furthermore, those who are leaders, artists and Indigenous – expressing their leadership in different and new ways. This is also the foundation that the Wilin Centre for indigenous Arts and Cultural Development was created upon.

The Wilin Centre (Wilin means fire in the Woi Wurrung language of Melbourne), established in 2002, is the indigenous student centre at the heart of the Victorian College of the Arts. The Wilin Centre is 95% philanthropically funded by an anonymous foundation and due to its small size (both physically and staff) primarily works in partnership to achieve our large reach. The Wilin Centre supports 24 Australian Indigenous students in all of the seven art disciplines at the VCA – Dance, Drama, Art, Production, Music, Community Cultural Development, Film and Television. We manage three major cross-sectoral partnership projects on behalf of the College, as well as pursuing our recruitment, talent identification, relationship building and community cultural development programs.

This paper aims to describe the importance of leadership in creative contexts, and the role and the place of the arts for Indigenous Australians; in order to then explore the literature surrounding Indigenous leadership development, the tensions I have encountered throughout my leadership development and in the work of creating a centre for community with the development of Indigenous Arts Leaders as one of the outcomes of our work.

Leading in creative contexts
“I think everyone can be creative, but you have to prepare for it with routine.”
Twyla Tharp

To understand the work of the trained artist, you will see a life dedicated to honing and exploring through their selected craft. And it is a craft, a multitude of skills sharpened through repetition, exploration and experience. This technical approach is blended with artists’ ability to surrender to a creative process – a space created in which ideas, movement, colour, and emotions grow and build upon each other. The artist understands that each time that movement is attempted or that text is performed; nothing will be exactly the same, yet the routine and dedication of the preparation creates a memory within.

Leading in creative contexts requires deep understanding and compassion towards the process of making art. In a world of ‘ends justify the means’ and stock exchange obsession; this type of leadership draws focus to your approach – how you do leadership? Similar to any business leadership role, arts leadership also requires a commitment to understanding the policy, theoretical, legal, historical and cultural frameworks of the industry you are working within, as well as excellent management skills. So what makes the specific skills of leading in creative contexts a candidate to influence or ‘lead’ the leadership field? And can you reconcile these multidisciplinary skills within one person?

I have been thinking that Creativity in leadership builds on three understandings, which shape this type of leadership – living with change, living with ambiguity and living with a commitment to articulating during the process of creating.

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Furthermore, I think that these abilities shape robust leadership within. The assumptions that I have made in highlighting these three underpinnings to a new type of leadership come from my experience as an artist and arts manager. I encourage students to reflect personally on their work and the way in which they work in order to cognitively understand their choices, ideas and how they enact their values. I embed this into the pedagogy of the subjects I teach by actively making time to reflect, by having one on one time with each student in active engagement where I want to understand their motivation and where they are going, as well as by assessing reflective journals, blogs and contextual work.

Being comfortable with change is a fundamental choice that managers and leaders need to make. In the creative context, change is the way forward, backward, up and down. Embracing the transformative power of change is the only choice you have as an artist, and it is a powerful way to build a dynamic organization and work. How do leaders enact the skill of working with change? Perhaps by remaining open to options, seeking to delay judgement, listening to intuition and noticing what you project into the environment. Change from within, precipitates change in the broader environment. Joseph Jaworski states, “To think that the world can ever change without changes in our mental model is folly.”

If you were to surrender to the winds of change completely as a leader, achieving vision would be of little consequence. How do you strike a balance between striving, future driven work and the importance if being present and understanding your leadership work day by day? The ability to live with ambiguity is becoming increasingly important in contemporary society. We are all in the situation of not knowing what tomorrow could bring and how it might affect our work and ourselves.

As a leader, can you deal with the multiple, conflicting and demanding contexts that govern your work? Vision work asks us as leaders to imagine and then discover how to achieve. This is a process of dealing with the uncertainty of the threats and opportunities in the environment and how you might come to understand and respond to them.

There is also another type of ambiguity creative leaders need to be open to is new ideas and thoughts, offers and options. This approach builds knowledge and allows thoughts and ideas to settle until they develop form. This is a creative approach, which is by definition unpredictable; it is also where innovation lies. Can you create space in the work environment to allow ideas to percolate? An example of this is my idea to create a talent identification program for the Wilin Centre – I understood that this was important, innovative and exciting but I have no set ideas how to do it, I have allowed this one to percolate through conversations and, eventually, three years later we have created a pilot to model this.

Whilst this creative process is happening creative leaders must be committed to finding a way to speak about this process. The importance of leaders articulating ideas and thoughts – even if they are not articulating the process – can mean they may be creating space for the process to occur, or defending ground, or establishing an organisational understanding that creates time and space for creativity to arise in its own time. This leadership is a leadership of contradictions and tensions, and is the way in which I, as a creative leader, lead my organisation and create space for myself. Continuing the example about the talent identification program, the conversations I had around this idea lead me towards the pilot program we are initiating this year. This visualisation of the idea with trusted and new colleagues

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encouraged me to develop the idea, to see what I already had to contribute to and commit to the idea.

**The role of the arts for Indigenous Australians**
The arts and culture in Indigenous communities function on many levels – as tradition, as expression, as story - song, - dance; as a way to transmit and build knowledge’s and in contemporary society as an economic activity. Through the arts, Indigenous communities link the past, present as well as the future. An Indigenous way of knowing is encapsulated through the way time is viewed – past, present, future all happening at once, a depth to understanding place and time. This depth of seeing and knowing expands the reflective practitioners’ approach to work by asking where are you now, how is this placed, what and how is it connected and whom do I need to work with. The breadth of the arts within an Indigenous Australian context, is complex in nature, role and expression.

Indigenous arts have developed over the past 60,000 plus years as the way in which we record, transmit and build upon our way of seeing our world. Our worldview is constructed by painting, carving, etching, dance, song cycle, ceremony and story. Today the arts are segmented by disciplines, like the way the schools at the Victorian College of the Arts are established – dance, drama, art, production, music, film and television. Yet, even today, Indigenous artists skills and experience span the spectrum of the arts. Surprisingly many are visual artists, performers, writers, film makers, dancers - Clinton Nain, Arthur Pambegan Jnr, Sally Morgan, Bronwyn Bancroft, Richard Frankland, Lou Bennett, Ray Kelly, Rhoda Roberts and the list goes on!

These artists are sometimes responsible for the transmission of the cultural and historical stories that frame their lives. What position does this place Indigenous artists in, seeing this is a weighty task to take upon? The work of some Indigenous artists embraces the paradox of the indigenous arts industry, that being, the work is both cultural object and economic commodity. This is especially exemplified by the work of Arthur Pambegan Jnr, a senior elder of the Winehanem clan of the Wik Mungkan language group, from Aurukun. Arthur is a master sculptor and his work embodies the importance of a family member – the carving is a family member – and therefore must be placed within the context of ‘economic’ art object through ceremony – it must be sung into the gallery ‘space’.

The leadership Indigenous artists demonstrate is a cultural transformation point of bringing Australian and international audiences into the circle of that family, historical or cultural story through an arm length artistic and economic exchange. This further illustrates the complexity of the Indigenous arts. How do Indigenous artists lead the arts sector and exemplify ‘leadership’ for us to take note from? Is there an understanding of ‘Indigenous leadership’ and how we might develop Indigenous leadership, which can begin to show us a new approach?

**Australian Indigenous leadership development programs**
There are three significant Indigenous leadership development programs in Australia that I have chosen to highlight – the Australian Indigenous Leadership Program, FaHCSIA Indigenous Leadership Program and the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute. Each program targets both established leaders and emerging leaders for their programs, and encourages personal development as a part of the learning journey.

*Australian Indigenous Leadership Program*
The program was established in 1999 after momentum was harnessed from Indigenous organisations keen to address the complexities that Indigenous leaders and emerging Indigenous leaders were facing. These organisations included the Kimberley Aboriginal Tourist Association, the Australian Rural Leadership Program and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS). The organisations commissioned a research project Concept Study Into An Australian Indigenous Leadership Development Program by Ms Marg Cranney and Ms Dale Edwards. This report detailed the sort of outcomes, parameters and issues that an Australian Indigenous Leadership development program should address and became the foundation for the current course’s Certificate II and IV in Indigenous Leadership.3

The courses combine competency based learning units from different Industry training packages including Business Services Training, Community Services Training and the Sports Industry Training; with a focus on cultural and historical understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and philosophy. The combination of articulated learning modules focus the participant on skills development like working in organisations, advocacy, media management, work and stress management as well as working in community settings. Whereas, the cultural aspects of the course aim to contextualise these competencies into an Australian Indigenous community setting.4

An aside at this point about Indigenous education. I think we devalue the complexity of this contextualization work, the burden of preparation to ground the teaching and learning environment so that we do not alienate students, families and communities is inherently larger than the task we are generally employed to do. I was once a Coordinator and teacher within the TAFE sector, specifically in an Indigenous Performing Arts course. Having come from a primarily subject driven, project driven arts training the competency based learning model of TAFE frustrated me. With the latitude to do what I saw needed to be done, that fabulous long rope we as Indigenous educators are sometimes allowed (yet that rope does not necessarily include support or a real understanding of the challenges) I started the curriculum afresh, designing projects and productions, bringing in local Indigenous artists to drive the curriculum. This experiential learning approach to ticking the boxes of the competencies the students had enrolled to learn, was the only way I could see to make this course not only relevant but attractive to Indigenous students.

FaHCSIA Indigenous Leadership Development Programs
The Australian government coordinates Indigenous programs through its Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, including the governments’ commitment to Indigenous Leadership Development. Specifically, FaHCSIA established the Indigenous Women’s Development Program in 2004 because it, “…recognised that Indigenous women often carry significant responsibility for the well-being of their communities but are severely

underrepresented in formal positions of influence.” The success of this program was then converted into three streams — men’s, women’s and youth leadership development programs.

The program logic centers on four key factors: firstly, the selection of participants who answer a leadership readiness assessment form (are you ready/are you willing/are you able?); secondly the development of management, advocacy and community focused skill development in a learning environment that encourages participants to locate the development of skills and theories within their experience; thirdly, the participants are supported by a Delivery Support Program and a range of ‘coaches’; and finally the program contextualises this learning, by providing one on one work with students to place the learning within the policy context of the Australian government Indigenous affairs programs, budget, and directives they work with and within.

*Indigenous Education Leadership Institute*

The Indigenous Education Leadership Institute is a partnership between Education Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology, that seeks to deliver leadership development programs to principals and teachers along with further corporate goals regarding research into this area, partnership development and community development. Due to the institute’s focus on education, it differs from the previous two programs in that it highlights school environmental and Indigenous educational challenges as problems that will be addressed by developing leadership capacity in teachers and principals.

The program overview for 2008 includes a residential program, data gathering and planning at a school level, follow up workshop, school based project and action research and finally the publication of writing by the participant on the research and learning they have developed over the program. The leadership development program actively pursues a research driven agenda towards knowledge development in the area of Indigenous leadership and creates further rich investigation for the field.

*International Indigenous leadership development programs*

In the international arena, North America leads the field in Indigenous leadership research and development. I have found that Pennsylvania State University’s American Indian Leadership program, the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management and Policy and the Banff Aboriginal Leadership and Management program to be exemplars. These three courses serve to build capacity of Indigenous North American peoples to dream about the best way to shape their nations through self-determination and within negotiation with government.

*Pennsylvania State University*


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American Indian Leadership Program has been working with American Indian and Native Alaskan leaders since 1970\(^9\). The program is located with the College of Education and frames leadership development through an education speciality, specifically in relation to the Indian Education Act (1972) amendment in 1974, which granted special funds to develop graduate programs to develop Indian teachers\(^10\).

This program exclusively focuses on Indigenous education and excludes other Indigenous peoples of the United States of American, namely, Native Hawaiian peoples. Does this result in the program being seen not only successful but exclusive? Warner and Grint (2006) name the elite alumni of this program as the “Penn State Mafia”.\(^{11}\) Such an approach in Australia would be seen disapprovingly I believe, because it would fail to embrace the diversity of cultures within Indigenous Australia. Exclusivity would raise problems within the Australian context, unless it was specifically localized within one area for one tribal group, otherwise this type of approach in Australia would raise eyebrows.

Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management and Policy
The Morris K Udall Foundation in partnership with the University of Arizona established the Native Nations Institute in 2001 to resource Indigenous nations in their efforts to achieve self-determination and governance.\(^12\) The Institute works in partnership with the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development to deliver an executive education program in leadership. This program specifically addresses economic, governance and leadership issues through attention to ‘nation-building’ for Indigenous Native Americans.

The well-regarded Manley A. Begay – both Co-director of the Harvard Project and Director of the Institute the Native Nations Institute – has developed an executive education program that is built upon twenty years of research into what works economically for Native American communities. Begay’s personal contribution to this wealth of research and experiential learning that frames these two significant organisations, is felt beyond the organisations themselves and into the many communities and individuals who have had contact/participation in these executive programs. In contrast to Penn State, the Institute also encourages Indigenous people internationally to enrol in the courses on offer, broadening the potential for an understanding of the many faces of Indigenous leadership.

Banff Aboriginal Leadership and Management Program
The Banff Centre is a globally recognised centre for the training and professional development of creative practitioners and artists. Uniquely, at the heart of this cultural centre sits a leadership development program, and at the heart of this program sits the Aboriginal Leadership and Management program directed by Dr Brian Calliou. The programs within this department are built upon the Sacred Circle of Life, which dually embraces nation revitalisation and capacity building. Centered


on personal development, the program model honours knowledge and skills development along with a commitment to nation building.\(^\text{13}\)

The key course offered at Banff is the Certificate in Aboriginal Leadership, Governance, and Management Excellence. This qualification creates the opportunity for students to study the short courses (the Department has been running for 34 years) like Indigenous Women’s Leadership or Negotiation Skills training and scaffolds them with attention to governance and leadership.\(^\text{14}\)

**Themes for the development of Indigenous leaders**

From the research into the six leadership development courses outlined I have identified three themes in working with Indigenous leaders:

1. Commitment to ‘grounding’ the leader in community
2. Commitment to understanding community based role in the context of contemporary management and leadership
3. Challenge to create a decolonised leadership

The first two themes lead Indigenous leaders towards growing a unique leadership – that of innovation through translating the learning into the leader’s experience of work within a community context. Indigenous leaders must ground themselves within their organization and community, and realise these new skills and ideas within the community development context of Indigenous communities, as well as through grasping contemporary management and leadership theory/practice. The role of the leadership development course is to grant individuals a reflection space to spend time with other people who do work similar to themselves, who experience the same challenges and together refresh their perspective, their practice and process.

How do you create a decolonised leadership approach? Hooks (1992), Smith (1999), Ranzijn, McConnachie, Nolan, Day & Serverino (2006), Maryboy, Begay & Nichol (2006) and Nakata (2007) are a few scholars exploring how we might work in this way. There needs to be a commitment to deconstructing the stories and revealing what’s underlying in our organisations and work. It’s a mentorship with elders and an understanding of our impact as well as knowledge of whom we are excluding. These are the tensions for Indigenous leaders as we walk day by day, constructing a less colonial, more community-based, collaborative and generative leadership.

The dynamics of power in Indigenous communities are deeply embedded – from traditional to historical roles, through colonisation, assimilation, separation towards a reconciliation of our contemporary existence as intercultural. The power of the individual is challenged daily by the surfacing of trans-generational trauma\(^\text{15}\) from within and without. Hooks (1992) speaks of the research agenda for indigenous people as movement through four tides – survival, recovery, development and self determination.\(^\text{16}\) Indigenous leadership is framed within the politics of self determination, so what happens when leaders find themselves drifting in and out of

\(^\text{13}\) Aboriginal Leadership, Banff Centre

\(^\text{14}\) Aboriginal Leadership, Banff Centre


these tides, responding to pressures of poverty, abuse, violence, racism colour the ebb and flow of this area of leadership.

The pressure from expectations and assumptions experienced by Indigenous leaders is built up inside. Ottomann (2005) speaks of this leadership being ‘taxing’ and that the satisfaction is internalised rather than material. A major challenge for Indigenous leaders is to work out the best way to let that pressure out. An interesting example for me is the role of being ‘boss’ – the one that pays people, that manages people, the one who decides. At a recent festival I witnessed a high profile artist acting up towards me and the staff of the Wilin Centre, watching for us, making sure we were watching them, repeatedly asking what we thought, calling me and staff of the Wilin Centre boss. For me, seeing this pandering not only saddened me, it made me want to call the artist on this behaviour but in action I ignored it. Why? I didn’t want to shame the artist, and I didn’t want to play the game. I find my personal reflective practice crucial in unpacking the heaviness associated with being ‘the boss’.

Some old thinking that I have begun to interact with is the return to traditional Indigenous models of leadership where there is not one leader, but a leadership group. I have been speaking to elders and Indigenous artists about traditional leadership roles in community, in a way to understand what is innately different about Indigenous leadership. The conversations all echo each other – there are at least three major roles in traditional leadership. This is supported by Native American research as well. Warner and Grint in American Indian Ways of Leading and Knowing outline the Tahdooahnippah/Warner Model that features four leadership roles – the elder, the author, the role model and the social scientist – as well as the one who speaks for us at all times.

The style of leadership I have found resonant when thinking and speaking about Indigenous leadership as a generative approach to leadership. Within Indigenous communities and individuals rests this responsibility to ‘give back’ to community. The way in which an individual does this is highly personal and yet it is a public, or at least, semi-public act of service to community. This commitment to community, this generative consciousness is one of the most significant and core differences Indigenous leadership brings to the leadership arena. And it is also a burden for Indigenous leaders, as we struggle with the tension to privilege our own needs with the needs of the greater family/community.

Returning to the Wilin Centre
The Wilin Centre was established in a rare moment. In 2002 the Victorian College of the Arts was approached by an anonymous foundation with an interest to build upon the fledgling Indigenous development program established in 1997. The foundation asked the College to construct a strategic vision, with no limits on timeframes or budgets. The result was a seven-year strategic plan and a contractual relationship with the foundation of $3.6 million. The Wilin Centre has achieved success in a relatively short space of time, and is now poised to envision a new strategy for a renewed contract with the Foundation within the next twelve to eighteen months.

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On most barometers the Wilin Centre has been very successful – retention rate, application rate, scholarship program - however, my experience as Head of the Wilin Centre highlights many of the ongoing challenges working in Indigenous leadership development. There are tensions about working in a university environment that is trying to ‘do well’ yet in action the work and commitment to Indigenous students, community and knowledge falls squarely in the lap of the Indigenous centre/Director of the Indigenous centre. There are tensions with being a manager of an Indigenous centre with Indigenous staff. I find myself acting as a protective layer between the university bureaucracy and the centre in a bid to protect the staff from the structural racism of the university system. The downside of being in a role like mine is the challenge to create a nurturing space for students, staff and community and to protect it from the bureaucracy and mainstream – not to isolate, but in fact that is exactly what happens, no matter how open and welcoming you are, or how much free food and festivities you put on.

Another tension for Indigenous education and support within universities is the rate and nature of change. I have found rigidity within the bureaucracy at times of change that is frustrating and alienating to all staff, however as an Indigenous leader within this environment I cease to be able to understand how to move or work within this environment. The ease with which I can turn my back on that and concentrate on the internal work of the Wilin Centre is perhaps evidence of a choice to isolate, which compounds problematic relationships with management, the mainstream and the bureaucracy. So what’s working and how do you keep light, engaged and not distressed in these hostile places?

What I think the Wilin Centre is doing is leadership development and effectively growing Indigenous arts leaders. I say this plainly because the results speak for themselves, our graduates and students emerge into the arts sector armed with networks, opportunities and confidence that has seen a shift in the sector. They are intercultural leaders:

- Mark ‘The Black’ Olive: Graduate of Bachelor of Film and Television; now one of the faces of Tourism Australia and owner of Outback Café business – Pay TV show, catering business, foundation for young Indigenous Australians, tourism and business work
- Jacob Boheme: Graduate of Post Graduate Diploma and Masters of Puppetry; choreographer, writer and director of Idja, opening and closing ceremonies of The Dreaming Festival, presented solo show at the ASSTTEJ World Congress of Children’s Theatre
- Andrea James: Graduate of Bachelor of Dramatic Arts; writer/director Yanagai! Yanagai! Which toured the UK, former Artist Director of the Melbourne Workers Theatre, and now Community Arts worker for the Koorie Heritage Trust
- Gayle Maddigan: Graduate of Masters of Fine Art; exhibiting artist including solo exhibition Burial Grounds at Tandanya 2002 and winner of the Telstra Indigenous Art Award (Drawing) 2005

Our success is seen in the success of our graduates and their generative leadership return to the Wilin Centre. Our success is seen in or connections with communities

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and organizations and our dedication to the development of a thriving Indigenous arts sector.

The impacts the Wilin Centre is having across the country, is through our commitment to Indigenous arts and sector development through the establishment of the Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Arts Management and our partnerships with organisations like Berry Street Victoria, Ausdance Victoria, the South Project, Melbourne International Arts Festival, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Foundation House for Survivors of Torture and Trauma.

The connectedness that the Wilin Centre has built over the past five years in Victoria and further into a national scope, has invited others into our place to work together. The Centre is small in size and staff, situated in a weatherboard demountable built in 1924 and a staff of 5 our Centre is home to many and open to all. The consistency the Wilin Centre has shown to artists and community in our approach and the standard of the talent of the artists engaged is the key to the strong foundation of trust and connectedness that we have built upon which we grow some of Australia’s most exciting Indigenous artists.

One of the questions I have, as Head of the Wilin Centre is how can we create a ‘place’ where Indigenous artists can feel at home in a foreign environment (university), and grow their own voice, confidence, vision and leadership? Much like Dudgeon & Fielder’s “emergent third space”\(^{21}\), philanthropic funding, external partnerships and community/artistic engagement approach has created a protective place for the leadership to develop. Artists are encouraged to develop their own voice during their study, and the rigor of the training in the art disciplines demands commitment. The Wilin Centre creates a reciprocity relationship with students which results in a two-way exchange, basically what we do is build relationships that move Indigenous students away from a place of receipt into a powerful role of contribution.

**Returning to the themes of Indigenous leadership development**

So how does the Wilin Centre, as an example of an Indigenous arts leadership incubator address the key points of Indigenous leadership development?

1. Commitment to ‘grounding’ the leader in community
2. Commitment to understanding community based role in the context of contemporary management and leadership
3. Challenge to create a decolonised leadership

The Wilin Centre has created a community on campus for the students, staff, key cultural advisors and VCA staff and students to belong to. This family is exemplified by the relaxed and open nature of the Centre and the practice of the students and staff in their support of each other. This community grounds the Indigenous artists as they study at the Victorian College of the Arts. This open environment is perfect for the informal conversations and opportunities that arise for artists to engage with projects, to speak about their practice, to meet other artists who are practicing in the sector like our annual artist in residence. These informal opportunities act as provocations to our students to engage beyond their course with a broader cultural dialogue. And all of these actions continue to remind us to ‘decolonise’ ourselves, to act genuinely and to express our own voice.

The Wilin Centre supports Indigenous artists through engaging and supporting their dreams in applying to an elite training institution like the Victorian College of the Arts;

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supporting, profiling and promoting them whilst they are studying at the VCA and employing them, promoting and profiling their achievements beyond the VCA, into their chosen career and the arts and cultural sector. Our alumni are the face of the small and dynamic Indigenous arts sector. Artists like Trevor Nicholls (The first Indigenous artist to exhibit at the Viennce Biennale), Mark Coles Smith (Film maker and Musician), Maroochy Barmbah (Opera Singer, Actor and Cultural Worker), Kylie Belling (Director, Actor and Writer), and Liz Cavanagh (Jazz singer, founder of *The Liz Cavanagh Quintet*, member of the Black Armband).

**Conclusion**

When we act in the leadership development area, contributing to the growth of leaders, do we consider whether ‘leadership’ is sustainable? Indigenous arts leaders have many responsibilities weighing on their work – community expectations and needs, public perceptions, and ultimately they have a voice that can transmit cultural stories and knowledge in innovative ways. For me, leadership in the area of the Indigenous arts is demanding, confronting as well as fantastic and satisfying. I find in myself that I want to protect younger artists from the burden of responsibility of being a ‘leader’ or a ‘role model’, yet I know and they know that this is their road to walk. So from within myself I need to understand why this work attracts and repels me, why I don’t privilege my own needs and burn out on a regular basis. If this is the nature of Indigenous arts leadership, do I want to be in it? How do we create sustainable leadership in this complex environment?
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Appendix One

Achievements of the Wilin Centre 2003 – 2007
From: Strategic Review of the Wilin Centre 2007 by Helen Kemp

• A significantly higher retention rate for indigenous students compared with most other tertiary institutions (84% compared with 42%)
• Increasing numbers of indigenous students successfully applying to enter VCA – from 10 in 2003 to 24 in 2008
• Establishment of Wilin Words – the Centre’s quarterly newsletter
• Establishment and ongoing development of Wilin Week, a week-long celebration of indigenous talent
• Establishment and development of the Artists in Residence Program
• Initiation of the Graduate Certificate in Indigenous Arts Management
• Establishment of the Wominjeka program for orientating indigenous students
• The provision of relocation grants to 100% of students requiring relocation
• The effective use of VCA indigenous alumni to showcase indigenous talent, and provide role models for current students
• Capacity to give financial assistance to those students/applicants requiring support
• Employment of indigenous academics within the VCA
• Increase in the availability of indigenous reference materials in the VCA library/resource centre
• Building of Indigenous scholarships in the VCA from no scholarships in 2003 to a portfolio of 11 scholarships in 2008