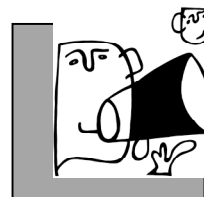


Airds community writing project: From leadership to Ratbags

By Sue Angle

The Centre for Popular Education
University of Technology, Sydney



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Airds women (Photo, Sue Angel)

The Airds writing group worked for more than 12 months, bringing together stories, interviews, essays and discussions into a collection, *RATBAGS ink*, which is in the process of being edited and printed.

The book represents the outcome of a creative writing project with the Macarthur leadership programme; it is also symbolic of a broader, less tangible process in which the people involved become exposed to, more connected with and certainly more critical of their community and the dominant structures within.

I could call our writing experience an odyssey for it certainly has been that for the participants, Anita, Jen, Sue, Ros Judy and myself (a participant and practitioner). We met each week from August 2002, losing one or two participants on the way, finding ourselves in all kinds of places retreats, conferences, restaurants, looking out over the mountains and looking under the tables. We also encountered emotional and intellectual places we had not expected to discover and told stories that brought up a lot of pain. We laughed, argued, fell out and made peace.

RATBAGS ink became almost secondary to the process of building friendships and broadening community involvement within Airds and with other communities in the Macarthur region.

We allowed what seemed to be deviations: conferences, retreats, lunches, discussions and writing sessions, to make connections, to take us on tangents and it was these meeting places and discussion groups that formed strong lasting connections.

Solidarity with people within and without the community was an almost unmediated outcome. There has definitely been a movement toward ongoing communication between members of Airds community and surrounding communities, particularly those encountering similar problems.

For the Airs group, *RATBAGS ink, the book* is the proverbial icing on the cake.

The place

The Macarthur/Campbelltown area where Airs is located is known for its housing commission estates. These estates were built in the sixties and seventies on Canadian and European models for welfare recipients. There have been a number of outstanding socio-economic problems not only the social isolation from the city and early lack of infrastructure, but the lack of employment opportunities and a diverse and frequently clashing population.

Over the past year the NSW state governments' decision to begin demolishing some of the estates and selling the land to private developers has been realised. Minto was the first estate in the group to be partially demolished and Macquarie Fields is next in line.

The government recently made it known that the Airs community will also be affected. The residents on all housing estates have been told this is 'for the best' but the reality of the situation is that they will be moved from the communities they have built up, their families and friends will be dispersed and their future housing is uncertain.

This has been the backdrop to the Airs writing project and is pivotal to the inception of the RATBAGS.

The people

The 'Airs leadership' (now a central component of RATBAGS Ink) is a group of women working voluntarily for various organizations in the Airs/Bradbury neighbourhood. They do everything from working for the neighbourhood centre, writing community newsletters and working voluntarily for organizations like Food bank, the after school care programme and YOTS (Youth Off The Streets).

The writing project, bringing community volunteers from different organizations, within the same community together, was initiated by Maggie Kyle then working for the Benevolent Society, and connected to Macquarie fields TAFE, and the University of Technology Centre for Popular Education, specifically Rick Flowers.

In the beginning the Airs women did not know each other and certainly they were not connected with each others' organizations. In fact, they tell me, that at first they were highly suspicious of one another and any outcome that may arise from these meetings.

My very first involvement was through a media workshop with Maggie Kyle in Minto. This involved members of the Airs group, Minto group, Macquarie Fields and young mothers group. All groups who were being supported by Maggie and the Benevolent society. I had already been involved with the Claymore community at this point in time.

We had a very successful one-day media workshop focusing on public housing and the imminent demise of Minto. What could the residents do to alert the media? What media

skills did the community need? A lot of discussion about public housing took place and early connections between groups were forged.

Airds writing and the birth of RATBAGS

Maggie and Rick invited me to assist the women from Airds edit a series of interviews with 'everyday community leaders.' This project was already underway when I joined the group. Its core idea was to change the notion of 'leadership' to one that is accessible and applicable to people who work so tirelessly for the community with very little kudos.

During discussions the women revealed that the creative component to this project was limited and interviewing community leaders, was not how the women really wanted to express their view of their community and the voluntary work they are engaged in.

The group was not very happy with the stiff, formal tone of the interview. They thought the pre-formulated questions were limited and precluded the subject from giving open, expressive responses. When the interviews were written up, the women were disparaging about their content and purpose.

The idea of 'everyday leaders' was not, at the beginning, how the group perceived themselves or how they wanted to explore notions of community work. Yet, by the end of the project, with their confidence high, the women readily accepted the mantle of community leaders.

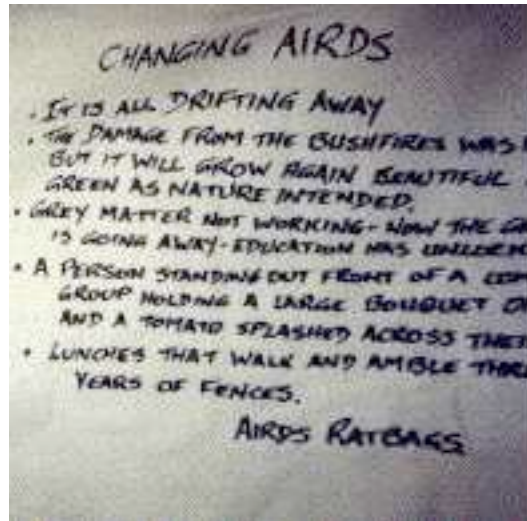
The beginnings

Each week, starting in August, we met at the Airds neighbourhood centre. We ate sandwiches from Claymore community and sometimes even a hot lunch and talked and talked and talked. As the group became more familiar with one another more creative options could be explored. We made an outline for the weeks ahead. We came up with the idea of a book that included more than just interviews; it came to include photographic essays, discussions, individual stories and group poems.

The strategy was 'no strategy': Rather a slow process of getting to know one another; expressing views, testing creative mediums for what worked and didn't within the group dynamic. The emphasis, in these meetings was on self-expression, discussion of communities and their views, aims and ideas. Gradually, notions of form, what shape the work might take, evolved.

At one of our early meetings we decided to have an open mic forum each time we met for lunch to discuss different issues. The group determined this technique as it was one which allowed the conversation to remain informal and lively in contrast to the 'interviews' where the posing of deliberate formal questions seemed to inhibit the interviewees or those involved in discussion leading to pat, formulaic responses. The idea then, was to let the conversation meander.

Personally, I am very taken with the notion of the ‘heuristic’¹ an investigation whereby one subject or idea leads to the next. This is a concept I explored in post-graduate cultural studies and was something I encouraged. This group dialogue led to a natural investigation whereby one idea or thought opened to the next.



Airds women group writing (photo, Sue Angel)

I was also careful not to place my own value judgements or interpretations about ‘relevance’ or appropriateness of subject. I let discussions and conversations become as inclusive and broad as possible. While this was a great technique to allow for the unfolding of ideas it did eventually lead to some contestation about my role. One member of the group challenged my ‘non teaching’ method. Another questioned my lack of authoritarian position within the group.

Talking about it

The women spoke about the issues of concern to their lives, within their community, and these became the subject of further group discussions. The subjects the women suggested included *Housing/ Community workers/ Families/ Relationships/Being a single mum/ Poverty, Friendship/ Taking power in your community.*

The group really liked the idea of the open mic over lunch. It was a chance for the women to get to know each other discussing and identifying common problems. Prejudices and fears seemed to dissolve. These sessions were recorded (appearing in the collected works) and assume an importance for being a conduit, for a level of discourse, which was honest, forthright, very funny and laid the groundwork for a growing sense of ease and familiarity within the group.

¹ heuristic 1. ‘serving to find out, furthering investigation. 2. a teaching method encouraging the student to discover for himself or herself’; *Macquarie Dictionary*

From the start we decided that everyone would be involved in the conceptualisation and creation of all the work for the book. Everyone had control over the shape, look and content. Everyone had the right to exclude information when and if they wished. We talked about opening up the group discussions to other communities such as Minto to understand and gauge their views on the current situation with NSW government housing and the imminent demise of their estate. This was Maggie Kyle's idea and everyone was fine with this.

I discovered early on in our involvement as a group that outside 'workers', such as social workers, government bureaucrats and non-government representatives, were viewed with suspicion, scepticism and sometimes antagonism. Initially, I met such a reaction. Who was I and what did I know about working class communities? Also, one early discussion became quite heated when the group began discussing community 'workers' and their role. To the extent that this project, amongst many, was challenged on the grounds of its validity to their lives and their future within the community. What do outsiders know?

'He's never lived on a housing estate, he wouldn't know how you're treated and what you have to go through.'

Once I established my credentials (my grandparents and parents were brought up on housing commission estates and I am a single mother), I was accepted as 'one of them'. Coming from a similar working class background gave me privileged access to the group. I was not out to 'rip-off' their ideas and I wasn't carving out a career for myself from their misfortune, which is a common assumption regarding social workers and university students/academics.

There was a lot of talk about outsiders not knowing really what they went through. We broadened this out to housing and the discussion then centred on housing and discrimination; how views could be changed and how the women could change people's attitudes toward housing residents. Was it possible? Should the volunteer workers form their own coalition to inform workers of their needs; create a united front?

It was interesting to see the dramatic shift in their perception of community workers and academics following the Airs group visit to the Centre for Popular Education's "Education and Social Action" conference in December 2002 and a number of meetings and retreats with the Sydney Leadership Group in 2003. In a non-formal environment these workers became, 'people, too.'

On one of my first meeting with the Airs group we went to a photographic exhibition of community art at a Library in Liverpool. The photographs consisted of large portraits that the community members had added to, painted on, textualised with their writings and self descriptions. All of the group were struck by this exhibition and I later talked to them about using photographs in their work. This was something they really wanted to do. This was the first of many different ideas that percolated through the work and added to the project. Interestingly all the creative ideas were triggered by discussions, meetings and

events. One seemed to go in hand with the other: the notion of the ‘heuristic’, the creative investigation was in action.

We explored group poetry writing after a session with Annie Bolitho and Mary Hutchison at the “Education and Social Action” conference, which exposed and opened them up to group writing.

It’s important to add that there was a level of informality between the auspicing and organizations (the Benevolent society, the University of Technology and the Macquarie Fields TAFE,) which allowed this writing project to evolve without too much external interference. Consequently a certain degree of self-determination evolved. We took our time. There was no pressing deadline or urgency for outcome. Everyone was already under a degree of pressure in their everyday lives with volunteer work, TAFE and large families.

Over a four-week period, early in the weekly meetings we employed a graphics designer to teach the group how to use a graphics manipulation piece of software. The group all use basic technology in their work. A new media skill seemed to be an excellent idea something they could take with them. The four week process where each member worked one on one with the designer while the rest of the group enjoyed lunch and discussed community issues really allowed everyone to get to know each other and enjoy each others’ company. We all had a great laugh at some of the photographic outcomes.

For me, as a worker in this project the meeting with Annie and Mary, through the Centre for Popular Education and specifically the conference, allowed me access to new techniques for group writing and self-expression. Thanks to them for the alphabet technique used in the following group poem:

A is for Airds
Airds is the ass-end of Sydney where we all live
B is for the bullshit the workers give
C is the collector who collects our debts
D is the dreams we’re struggling to get
E is the eruption that goes off in our heads and for the enthusiasm
which can leave us dead.
F is for fun when friends get together
G is for god who may have left us forever
H is for houses that are falling down
I for the inadequacy of people in this town.
And J is the joke called department of housing

K for kids
L, lunatics, losers and lovers
M is for all us BRILLIANT mothers
N is for nuisance
O for neighbours opposite

And P is for police who are often incompetent.

*Q for quarrels which there is plenty of
R is the rights of a diversified mob
S is for sex that usually runs rampant
T is for our teenagers who are often pregnant.
U is for understanding
V for vicious
W for the wankers who are very malicious*

*X for xenophobia that is not welcome here
Y is for youngsters who we hold dear
Z is the Airds we liken to a zoo
It's a place we love and hate and yet thoughts fly to*

@airds group/arids ratbags ink. jan. 2003

RATBAGS Ink.

As the group became more solid and more confident, able to express their views on community issues, they organised a meeting with other community volunteers from throughout the region to be held at the Catholic Club. The idea was to bring together residents from the housing estates to discuss common issues of concern, particularly similar problems with the department of housing with paid community workers and with other organizations. This was a very important meeting and really set the stage for other meetings which occurred this year and lead to the formation of RATBAGS Ink.

The Catholic Club conference was completely organised and run by the Airds group with invaluable assistance from the Benevolent society's Maggie Kyle (discussions and outcomes feature in the book, '*RATBAGS ink.*').

As a group we all ventured into the centre of Sydney for the Centre for Popular Education's "Education and Social Action" conference. It was the chance to see how a university and workers operate. For almost everyone in the group it was their first visit to a university, a place frequently seen as removed from their life experience and possibly a hostile and inaccessible environment.

The group was very confident at this point and very keen to see the Centre and watch the workers from their own institutionalised base. This was part of the demystification process. Seeing it was just an ordinary building containing ordinary people.

The women were thrilled when their small collaboration, another Airds poem, was strung up in the Atrium of the university's campus. There was a certain victory for them in being in this institution and having power within it. The conference was also a good excuse to eat out in Chinatown.



Banner with group writing at the Centre for Popular Education 2002 'Education and Social Action' conference (Phot, Sue Angel).

A retreat took place in January 2003, which was organised by Maggie Kyle with assistance from a community art worker, Paddy Lane, myself and of course all the participants. The idea was to bring together all the groups Maggie had been working with from Minto, Airds, Claymore and Macquarie Fields (where I was also engaged in a community art project). We had an amazing three days of intense social interaction, group poems and artwork, but the real discussions occurred in the privacy of the women's space where the disparate groups became interconnected over ideas and common problems. By the last day of the retreat a collective forum had opened up and the larger group adopted the moniker, '**RATBAGS**' this was exciting for everyone present and involved. It was clearly a real 'grassroots' collective with no pushing or prodding from outside organizations or workers.

Since these particular events the RATBAGS collective has met a number of times and dates and events have been organised. Members of the Airds group have participated and presented at the SWARTA (South Western Area Regional Tenancy Association) a Department of Housing Conference. The group, also, recently presented a workshop to students from the University of Western Sydney on 'Building communities'.

The confidence of the group knows no bounds. They have gone through a process of expansion into their own ideas and personal frames of reference. But they are by no means inured to friction in everyday group dynamics. Teething problems with the larger group and internal group dynamics come and go. The final editing of the book is at hand and everyone is experiencing large and frequent demands on their time. But we've been in this together for the best part of the year and we are all committed to the project and to the future of a larger group.