

The Water Project

Case Study: Northern Lakes Center for the Arts

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PREFACE

Water is a critical life force for the small community of Amery, Wisconsin, located 75 miles northeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul. *The Water Project*, a project of the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts (NLCA), was a multidisciplinary exploration into the issue of water—its use and abuse. Between November 2000 and December 2001, people working in different art forms presented creative strategies for discussing perspectives on water: a reading and publication of new writings inspired by water; an adaptation of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* to present-day Amery; a chamber orchestra concert featuring water-related classical repertoire juxtaposed with newly commissioned work; the creation of Amery’s first three-dimensional piece of public art; and an exhibition of photography chronicling life along Amery’s Apple River.

This project illuminated the vital role that a local arts agency can play in catalyzing and linking public interest and discourse around a key civic issue in a small community. It examined the training and use of community members as facilitators for dialogue, particularly highlighting the vital role that young people can play; the potential to employ both classic and new work as a stimulus for dialogue; the tailoring of dialogue techniques to the art presented, as well as its anticipated participants; and the effectiveness of joining forces with other partners to build understanding and awareness around an issue. It underscored the difficult balancing act in arts-based civic dialogue that involves fostering authentic dialogue while retaining artistic quality and value so that each has validity and purpose. Throughout the evolution and implementation of this project, NLCA showed how flexibility, openness to opportunities, and a willingness to combine existing and potential resources lead to strengthened artistic activity, broadened public interest and involvement, and increased capacity within the community for meaningful dialogue.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

“Known as the ‘City of Lakes’, Amery, Wisconsin has several lakes within its immediate vicinity, several others nearby, and weaving through them all, the Apple River. Combined with lush woodlands and rolling hillsides, we are proud of the quality of life in our area. We also pride ourselves in being stewards of our natural surroundings: our air is clean and our water is pure. . . But is it? We know we can no longer provide our children with swimming lessons at the beach. Sometimes when we live so close to these kinds of wonderful resources, we begin to take them for granted.”

—brochure for *The Water Project*

Ranked as one of the nation's top small arts towns in *The 100 Best Small Arts Towns In America*, Amery, Wisconsin, population 2,800, offers a "small town atmosphere, while focusing on the things necessary for a quality lifestyle." Located about 75 miles northeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul, it is experiencing tremendous growth as the Twin Cities circle of expansion extends into the Amery area and surrounding Polk County.

Water is of essential importance in the Amery area, from recreational use and other quality of life concerns to the sustaining of life itself. The impending crisis relates to the general contamination of the water table and available drinking water. Preceding the initiation of *The Water Project* in April 2001, the city government had increased setback requirements for new housing development along the lakes and the river. It had embarked on a program of shoreline restoration to impede erosion on lakeshores and had adopted an ordinance banning high-phosphorus lawn fertilizer. In addition, the city had just finished a million dollar cleanup of its landfill, where toxic materials had entered the ground water, and was collaborating with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to clean up and reclaim four areas of the downtown. Looking ahead, the city had purchased two-thirds of the riverfront downtown, intending to change the historical perception of the Apple River as Amery's "back alley" and turn it into a family and recreational gathering point for the community. Controversy within the community had erupted around economic development, application of chemicals in farming, recreational use of the water, and preservation of the natural environment. There had been little formal discussion of the issue in the community outside of city council meetings. It was difficult for residents to understand the causes, effects, and possible solutions, or to "get their arms around" the multiple aspects of the issue. Because of this, the debate was expected to continue. As the mayor of Amery, Harvey Stower, stated, "Water is and will be the fountain of public dialogue and debate in Amery. It is an issue in which the arts can add clarity and positive direction to that dialogue."

Answering the mayor's call was the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts (NLCA). For over ten years, the NLCA has served as the cultural hub of Amery and surrounding Polk County. Established as a comprehensive cultural center designed to provide local residents with an opportunity to share and develop their creative talents and abilities, its programming has mushroomed over the years. Its multifaceted programming includes a chamber orchestra, community theater, community music school (affiliated with the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts), rotating exhibitions, specific groups devoted to photography, writing, and quilting, and presentation of outside artists and performing arts groups. It is home to the Robert Gard Gallery, containing various memorabilia relating to Gard's work as a community arts development pioneer in Wisconsin. It annually sponsors symposia on a wide range of subjects and their relationship to the arts including religion and racism. The center is located in a renovated old church, just a couple blocks from the Apple River and the center of Amery. The facility includes one main performance space with seating in the round for 75, a number of music studios and all-purpose rooms, and a magnificent pipe organ. NLCA was awarded the 1996 Wisconsin Governor's Award in Support of the Arts. Hallmarks of its programming are the ongoing integration of professional artists and amateurs, and of young people and adults in its activities.

Over the years, the NCLA had made forays into civic dialogue. When it first opened its doors, it produced a series, Critical Issues Forums, which attempted to bring people together to discuss important community concerns, such as sending troops to the Gulf War and local racial issues relating to Native American treaty rights. However, these forums never included the entire

community and did not become incorporated into the center's core programming. The Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) was seen as providing a new opportunity to use its resources as an arts organization to facilitate dialogue around an issue of critical community concern, reinvigorating the function of being a catalyst for civic dialogue.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

“We could hear the Apple River shouting at us before we saw it. During early spring the water races and churns because of the snow melt. The river's springtime tumbling and rushing noises were only made louder as volumes of water splashed against large boulders and rocks in the river under the bridge. These wonderful sounds made me feel both energized and content, all at the same time.”

—*Green-On-Green* by Shannon Willer Schacht

At the core of *The Water Project* was the concept that presentations of multiple artistic disciplines reaching different audiences would catalyze and enrich community dialogue around the issue of water, “opening new ways of thinking” and “a new way of dialoguing.” From the start, artistic goals were intertwined with civic goals and intent. It paired professional artists with community artists not only to strengthen and elevate the quality of art but also to explore the multiple perspectives of the issue through classic and new work. It intended to create artwork that would be an ongoing reminder of the issue for the community—and ultimately to challenge the community's notion of what is art, while increasing individual and collective understanding of water and its uses and abuses.

The Water Project was originally conceived to include four artistic components, presented over a four-month period, each followed by town hall type of dialogue. Three of the four would involve professional artists from outside of Amery working with community artists to create and present new work. The fourth, although it just involved local artists, would take a classic work and bring it into the present through a collective creative process. Specific planned activities and anticipated participants included:

- The Northern Lakes Writers' Guild, in consort with Wisconsin author Anthony Bukoski, would produce a series of stories, poems, and essays about water and people's relation to it, to be published in the Guild's publication, *Soundings*, and presented at a public reading in June 2001.
- In July 2001 Northern Lakes Chamber Orchestra would perform a concert featuring water music. Smetana's *The Moldau*, which depicts life along this eastern European river, would be paired with a newly commissioned work by Minnesota composer Layton James. James's piece would explore water from many perspectives.
- The Northern Lakes Theater Guild would revive an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's play, *An Enemy of the People*, centered on the water contamination concerns of present-day Amery and performed in August 2001.
- In collaboration with local artists, Wisconsin sculptor Frank Stone would create a three-dimensional public artwork in Amery. The work was scheduled for dedication at Amery's annual Fall Festival in September 2001, normally attracting 10,000 people.

The town hall meeting accompanying each of these artistic events was to be led by Amery's mayor. A lifelong social activist and politician, Mayor Harvey Stower was an advocate for increasing community dialogue around civic issues. In addition, he was a fervent community leader who not only supported the arts, but also knew them well. It was hoped that by connecting art with dialogue, understanding among residents about the critical role water plays in the community's quality of life would be increased, thereby clarifying specific local concerns. As one of the participating actors and facilitators, Mike Sullivan, explained, "Art is a way to talk about it [the issue] without telling people what to think."

Discovery and Evolution

"People don't change their minds with facts and figures; they change their minds by talking."

—Amery civic leader

In September 2000, project director LaMoine MacLaughlin and Mayor Stower attended the initial ADI gathering of project participants. This meeting was an eye-opening experience, introducing them not only to the diversity of projects funded but also to new concepts of dialogue and the possible forms that it might take within a community setting. This opened the door to a host of possibilities that would help strengthen the basic design of the project and bring greater meaning of the issue to the community's residents.

Prior to this meeting *The Water Project* dialogue component had been planned to follow a town meeting format. This orientation meeting, however, surfaced the idea of other formats that might be more effective, particularly dialogue in small groups. Recognizing that dialogue in small groups would necessitate additional facilitators, and not privy to an abundance of people trained in facilitation, it was determined that the most effective method for gaining this expertise, both for the project and over the long run, would be to train community members. They believed that in this project, as in all other NLCA programs, the facilitator pool should be multigenerational, and, ideally, would be divided into teams made up of one young person and one adult who would serve as dialogue leaders.

Prior to the project's public kick-off, Dr. Patricia Romney, of Romney and Associates in Amherst, Massachusetts, was engaged to conduct a two-day training session for 24 young people and adults, ages 13 to over 70, in February 2001. The aim of the training was to provide contextual understanding of *The Water Project* and the issue, to discuss best practices in dialogue facilitation, and to present and rehearse specific dialogue techniques, so that they could be immediately applied to the project. Particularly effective in the training was Romney's constant modeling of skillful facilitation and of an art-specific orientation as focal points for practicing dialogue techniques. Her underscoring of the idea that one of the most important factors of dialogue facilitation is to "maintain a spirit of wonder" was a lesson that influenced dialogue facilitation throughout the project. She suggests:

Encourage a spirit of wonder and through inquiry encourage reflective responses on the art that is at hand and its meaning in the lives of those participating in the dialogue. Wonder also suggests awe. For dialogue facilitators, this aspect of wonder suggests an awe-filled respectful appreciation for the people who are sharing their intimate thoughts, feelings, and experiences with you. When we bring people together to work on the arts and civic dialogue, we want them to wonder together about what they have seen and heard. This involves questioning their own responses and those of others. It involves respectfully interrogating the work of art. It involves the community-building effort of talking and thinking together from a both/and standpoint, as opposed to an either/or standpoint.

—*Thoughts on Dialogue Facilitation* by Pat Romney

The structure of the training offered the young people in the project an opportunity to take early and continued leadership in the dialogue and other components. After spending an afternoon learning about the principles of dialogue facilitation and trying out techniques, they designed and lead a joint adult-youth session on dialogue facilitation, which helped to establish them as equal partners with the adults. In addition, Dr. Romney credits “a lot of home cooking” as helping “to make the project personal, so that participants relaxed and got to know each other.” An unforeseen consequence of these factors was the development of leadership and ownership for *The Water Project* beyond that of LaMoine and the mayor, significantly broadening NLCA’s capacity to implement the project, as well as the community’s commitment to the project and to the issue itself. As Romney observed of the group: “It was clear everyone was interested in preserving the community and having clean water. . . . They didn’t wait for the trained facilitator or for the big draw events. They used the techniques right away to get people talking, and that built momentum over the course of the project.”

From the very first test of the facilitation training in late March 2001 with Anthony Bukoski’s reading, through the project’s conclusion in December 2001 with the fountain dedication, the facilitators continually tested, questioned, and reframed their approaches. Occurring prior to The Water Project’s official kick-off, Bukoski’s reading of his work provided a facilitation “dress rehearsal.” The facilitators learned basic lessons about their roles and about structuring dialogue that they carried throughout the entire project. These lessons can be summed up simply: dialogue facilitation is not a “one size fits all” activity. Additionally, the facilitators recognized the need to know more about how to frame questions, how to bring closure, and other techniques that might be used to encourage and support the process. This resulted in a follow-up training with Dr. Romney in early summer that helped them fine-tune their dialogue facilitation efforts for the remainder of the project.

While Dr. Romney’s sessions gave Amery’s facilitators a basic foundation in dialogue, what most influenced this component of the project were the lessons they learned through doing. LaMoine MacLaughlin summarized key lessons:

Dialogue is not discussion. Very early on we had to arrive at a common concept or perception about the nature of dialogue. We had differing definitions among artists and facilitators, among audience and facilitators. We learned that dialogue is much more than people with different opinions coming together to exchange those opinions, with the more outgoing, more articulate, and more verbal providing more input. Dialogue became for us a very well thought out, organized, and structured involvement of individuals with one another—an involvement that sought and received input from everyone.

Dialogue works better as it is empirically learned by the community. It was our experience that our dialogue improved as we better learned to dialogue, and that this came not only from better facilitation of dialogue, but also from the audience better learning how to participate in dialogue activities. . . . A question arose from our audience questionnaires: Can an audience dialogue without even knowing it is doing so? Our audience questionnaires gave us some information that some audience members indicated that they had not participated in dialogue when we knew for a fact that they had. Yet apparently, according to their perceptions, they had not.

Dialogue causes rethinking of project outcomes and goals. Initially we were hoping to identify specific policy issues that we might influence, but with the concept of stakeholders, this too became simplistic and secondary. Consciousness raising—increasing awareness and sensitivity—as well as long-term results became much more important, but also more difficult to measure.

Successful dialogue depends upon successful facilitation. It was our experience that the dialogue facilitators were crucial for setting the tone and for providing the leadership. . . . Dr. Patricia Romney's dialogue facilitation training in February 2001 provided the perfect groundwork, both in theory as well as in her role-modeling, for our local people to continue beyond her training sessions. One of the best results of the project was having young people trained and working with adults as facilitators. I think it was important for our facilitators to be trained in a range of dialogue techniques: buzz grouping, the wagon wheel, the web, take a stand, common ground, etc. But we have continued wrestling with dialogue questions which arose: How do you actively draw out input from those very thoughtful people who only participate by listening—always? How do you evaluate dialogue effectiveness? If the audience thinks that it was great, does that make dialogue great? For our future, do certain dialogue methods work better with certain issues? Should certain facilitators specialize in certain dialogue activities?

Artistic Twists, New Opportunities

The addition of a new concept of dialogue and the formal training of teen and adult community members to be facilitators were not the only components incorporated into the project that provided additional catalysts and opportunities for exploring the issue of water in Amery. In response to a dialogue training exercise based on his photography, Jerry Boucher, a local professional photographer, suggested that the overall project intent might be strengthened with the addition of photography. Coincidentally, at the same time, discussions with the Polk County Water Resources Agent, Brook Waalen, had uncovered the existence of historical photographs that documented the development of the County's lakes and rivers. The idea emerged that a comparative exhibit of contemporary views of the Apple River and historical views might inspire thinking and dialogue about the water issue. The NLCA's Photo Club embraced the challenge of documenting diverse views of the Apple River, including its use, abuse, and beauty, from its source to where it flowed into the St. Croix River. In addition to an exhibit mounted at the Center, the Photo Club planned to develop a touring exhibit that might be taken to the schools to open dialogue among the area's youth about the issue. This last component was seen as one that might further attention on the issue of water after the ADI project's official conclusion.

The project composer, Layton James, who in addition to being a musician was an avid fisherman, introduced NLCA to two environmental videos on water issues. The first, a 1937 WPA-

produced black-and-white film, *The River*, chronicled the Mississippi River with the advent of harnessing electrical power produced by water. The second, *A Storm on the Horizon*, was produced by a local branch of Trout Unlimited and was aired on television as a news segment. It described the erosion of a nearby Wisconsin trout stream due to growth. Although *The River* was produced almost 75 years prior to this project, it echoed the similar warnings about the dangers of erosion, although couched in a different context. These two contrasting treatments became the foundation for building the community's understanding of the issue. They were immediately incorporated into the project and first used as part of the facilitator training to insure a common ground of knowledge among all the facilitators.

Several other unpredicted occurrences lead to additional changes in the project design that created new dialogue possibilities. First, an official kick-off to the project was added to build community awareness about the project and water issues and to initiate dialogue. Planning its kick-off for Earth Day 2001, NLCA piggybacked on this recognized environmental awareness day to focus community attention not only on the water issue but also on its project. Second, an unforeseen community scheduling conflict with the July concert of the Chamber Orchestra opened the door to experimenting with the use of multiple arts disciplines as a stimulus for dialogue as it was rescheduled for the same weekend as the opening of the photography exhibit.

The uniqueness of NLCA's efforts to bridge the arts with dialogue around a significant public issue attracted the interest of Wisconsin Public Radio. The initiative of this small community became the subject of a radio documentary on the Water Project, which was aired in August and early September 2001 on *Spectrum West*, a weekly program highlighting the arts in west central Wisconsin.

Help from Unexpected Places

Ironically, in the spring of 2001, nature helped build interest and credibility for *The Water Project*. There was an unusually high flood level among local rivers, including the Apple River. The river flooded so high that one of the local dams was nearly washed out and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had to allow more water through the dam to ease water pressure. The impact of this was the visible alteration of a beautiful and rather large lake and shoreline to a much narrower channel with a very muddy shoreline. Residents were anxious, not only about losing their lake, but also about decreasing property values.

The flooding spurred further development of alliances with other organizations in the region invested in environmental and water-related issues. Brook Waalen, the county's water resources agent, had been in discussion with the Center about the possibility of using it for a series of meetings related to concerns about the Apple River. Not only had the Center been seen as a neutral setting for such a gathering but also the initial *Water Project* activities had brought increased visibility to the issue. He hoped that from these gatherings an organizational structure might arise to oversee issues relating to the river and to provide a sounding board for public concerns. Through sponsorship of these meetings, the Center assisted in the development of the Apple River Association, but also attracted people unfamiliar with the Center to its facility. Approaching the Center to produce an environmental play was the Balsam Branch Partnership, an organization similar to the one formed for the Apple River, but concerned with the entire local watershed. After viewing the reaction to the production of *An Enemy of the People*, Jane Johnson, president of the Partnership recognized: "It used to be that I could think of art as a refuge from the imperfections of the world; I can't say that now . . . art can plant a seed which [we]can then carry forth." Although the production of the environmental

play did not happen during the initial project, the discussion about it set up the promise of future activity.

On with the Show

“If we can draw people in, we will inspire them and help them change their ways.”
—Bridget Traxlor,
facilitator and high school senior

The Water Project was launched in Amery on Earth Day 2001. This kick-off event, attracting almost 50 local residents, was billed as a “community discussion about the issue of water and its importance to life in our community, from recreational use, to business to economic development needs, to life-sustaining necessity.” It featured the WPA film, *The River*, and the Trout Unlimited news segment as the focus for dialogue. The first real venture into community dialogue around the issue, this event proved critical in introducing the issue to the community and facilitating its understanding of how the community’s patterns of water use “hit home.” Along this line, one of the most poignant moments to come out of the dialogue was a story from a young person who lived along the Apple River. She told of observing her elderly neighbors regularly emptying their kitty litter box into the river just upstream from her house. Ultimately during the course of the project, the elderly couple stopped their kitty litter disposal practice. This early story became a mantra for the project that was told over and over again as one small, but significant example of how consciousness-raising can lead to change when there is increased understanding about the implications of individual actions on a community.

The first arts event of the project was the Writers Forum in June 2001, where the members of the Writers Guild, working under the guidance of Anthony Bukoski, read their writings about water. These poems and stories considered water in a positive light as an image conveying a personal reason for living in the Amery area and as a source of creative inspiration. Interspersed between readings, teams of facilitators invited the audience to discuss the work. Questions progressed from consideration of the author’s use of water within his/her work to how the writing precipitated thinking about water in a new or different way, employing the dialogue technique of buzz groupings—pairing individuals to share responses to a specific question. This method was used because it was quick, easy to explain, and worked logistically. After the readings were concluded, the wagon wheel dialogue technique encouraged audience members to consider: “Which writing stuck in your mind and what about the issue of water do you carry away with you tonight?” The wagon wheel placed participants in two concentric circles facing each other. Pairs of individuals facing each other were able to share responses to a question. The circles were rotated so different pairs of individuals could engage in dialogue on the same or different questions. One writer commented: “The formal dialogue structure was a great stepping-off point for informal discussion during the reception. Conversation was about the issue of water and people were more willing to talk to the artist.”

Presented in early August 2001, NLCA/Theater Guild’s adaptation of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* blurred the lines between art and dialogue, and fiction and reality. Ibsen’s play, dealing with water contamination concerns and public discourse related to it, was adapted to present-day Amery and the issues facing its shoreline development efforts. Although critical parts of the original play were used intact, the actors invented most of the text to bring it into the present. In the town meeting at the climax of the play in the fourth act, the protagonist defends his stand against growth in light of public safety. In this production the town meeting became one that

included both the performers and audience, all engaging in dialogue around the issue of water. Incorporating the dialogue into the play raised many questions for the actors: How do you balance the art and the dialogue? How can both the art and the dialogue be developed and experienced as a whole, without either being subservient to the others? LaMoine MacLaughlin described that at certain points in the rehearsal they had to discuss and decide: Is it dialogue now? Are we returning to theater now? In the end they decided that both were one and that the most effective way of striking a balance was to use the common ground dialogue technique. The actor/facilitator engaged the audience by asking each audience member to show his or her agreement with a statement by standing up. Questions ranged from asking how many people lived by water to how many swam at Amery Beach to how many had thrown a pop or beer can in the river. A surprising moment occurred at one performance when the audience was asked whether they would be willing to have their taxes increased to clean up the water; all but three of the sixty-plus in attendance stood up.

Post-performance dialogue helped move the conversation from personal perceptions to connecting to issues happening within the community. Using buzz groupings, a technique used at almost every dialogue because of its ease of use and comfort level for most participants, questions concerning the play's connection to real life and how the residents of the area might react to the play's scenario formed the core of the dialogue. One of the actor/facilitators observed how blurred the line between the two had become for one audience member when he asked: "Is this for real or is this a play?"

In early October 2001, the back-to-back photo exhibit and music concert provided an opportunity to try an interdisciplinary approach. Like the play, the exhibit, consisting of thirty photos by local professional and amateur photographers, was intended to present diverse views of the Apple River, including the effects of pollution, use of the river for recreation and industry, and the river's natural beauty. Questions that arose during the selection process here, as well as during the play development and public art creation, forced NLCA artists to grapple with another central concern: How do you keep the art from becoming propaganda? Where is the line dividing political art from something that is not art at all? How do you avoid irrelevance on the one hand and political contrivance on the other? The answer was perhaps best articulated by LaMoine MacLaughlin: "We are always exposed when art becomes a tool, a means for something else and not an end in and of itself."

Creating an authentic dialogue experience at an art opening presented a new set of challenges. Recognizing that most of the participants of the dialogue would be standing and might have had different amounts of interaction with the work prior to the dialogue, the dialogue format incorporated all of these factors. Using the Take a Stand technique, a series of statements were read and participants were asked to move to parts of the room designated as strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. Statements included: *The photos represent perceptions of the river that I have never considered. Tubers are careless about waste when they tube down the river. I am concerned about the health of the water in our area. It is the job of elected officials to take care of water problems.* Group dialogue ensued around the reasons for individual choices. This group dialogue transitioned into a series of questions that were more personal reactions to the art and the content of the photos. Bridget Traxlor, one of the young facilitators, observed that "personalization brings out a deeper level of conversation." Using the dialogue to clarify personal opinion, individuals were asked to personalize responses by standing next to the photo that best demonstrated where they might most like or least like to live. Participants were encouraged to question the photographers about the circumstances and contexts surrounding particular photographs. This probing brought out fruitful conversation about the issue, in

particular, acknowledgement of fellow residents' blind-eye to the implications of their abusive actions.

The photo exhibit proved to be especially successful in terms of both dialogue and exploration of the issue. Written evaluation surveys showed that the photo exhibit drew the largest number of people. It was seen as the most factual and informative event, based on both the artwork and the dialogue. In addition, it was the one event at which participants experienced the greatest amount of participation in the dialogue.

Of all *The Water Project* events, the music performance was least successful in raising consciousness about the issue, but was among the most successful artistically. The program juxtaposed Layton James's new work, *Water Music*, with Smetana's *Die Moldau*. Both pieces described life along the water, including: Smetana's "Forest Hunt," "Peasant Wedding," and "The Moldau in its Greatest Breadth," and James's "Lament for the Big One that Got Away" and "Fireworks Over the Lake." The performance of the Smetana work was mentioned most often as the artistic highlight of the project. Despite the use of buzz grouping questions that attempted to move the audience from responding to the music to making the connection between the music and the issue, the dialogue focused primarily on the music. Evaluation surveys suggested this might have been due to the fact that the dialogue was seen as enhancing appreciation of the music, not the issue.

The most "risky" artistic endeavor in *The Water Project* was the creation and installation of the fountain, dedicated in December 2001. Risk was compounded by the community's lack of experience with three-dimensional public art. Everything about the project had to be invented anew, from determining methods of gathering input, to introducing it to the community, to maintaining it after it was installed. From the onset, the intention had been to encourage broad public dialogue during the creation process. Input was solicited from everyone: the elderly, students, city council members, and local business representatives—anyone who expressed an interest. However, reflecting on this experience, LaMoine MacLaughlin was not sure whether the artistic product resulting from the dialogue truly encouraged reflection and dialogue on the issue. "We may have had too much public involvement. When you seek involvement and get it, then there is a strong urge to use as much of it as you can. The result can be disarming. Our public art was not at all what was originally expected, although I am not altogether sure what original expectations were. Frank Stone, the artist, has said correctly that the Northern Lakes public art, *Bobber and Battery*, evokes two responses from the public: It raises two questions—Is this art? and What is art?—and it makes them smile. Perhaps this is the ultimate we can ask of public art." *Bobber and Battery* does incorporate a multidimensional perspective that permeates *The Water Project*. Very simply rendered, a red-and-white-painted bobber was placed in the river representing the recreational use of water, while the battery placed on shore shoots water into the river. This constant stream of water represents the major contaminant of water, mercury.

OUTCOMES AND SUCCESS FACTORS

"This project was a bold thing to do. It's hard to put tangible things in abstract thoughts. It opened people up to a new way of thinking."

—Amery civic leader

For the Northern Lakes Center for the Arts, The Water Project proved to be a significant catalyst for community-wide exploration of water use, which established a process of linking the arts with civic dialogue in a way that will endure beyond this project. Key to the project was the organization's willingness to remain open and flexible to every opportunity that might advance community awareness and dialogue around water issues. This allowed the project, its participants, and the community to embrace and respond to individual concerns and gather a dynamic energy that only comes from sharing common priorities among partnering entities. As the area's local arts agency and the primary coordinator of arts activity in the region, it used its existing strengths as an established community gathering place with a multidisciplinary focus and intergenerational approach to expand its position within the community, while building greater long-term internal capacity. The artistic diversity of the project did attract different, as well as overlapping, audiences, reaching almost 65% of the community and involving nearly a hundred artists. Being a relatively small organization in a rural community worked in its favor as NLCA could move quickly, do "a great deal with a little budget," and experiment with a multitude of entry avenues, both artistic and civic, to reach its residents, invite them into the dialogue, and bring needed attention to the issue.

The intergenerational involvement of young people and adults as key players and partners in every aspect of this project was critical to building the leadership, energy, and momentum necessary to implement the project successfully. Working side by side with adults in all aspects of the project—as artists, facilitators, and leaders—the young people played a critical role in framing the dialogue, contributing their aesthetic values, and cultivating an environment that respected and welcomed learning. One of these young people was Laura Johnson, a senior in high school at the time of the project, who participated not only as an actor and facilitator but also as a spokesperson at two national ADI gatherings and as the primary analyst of the written evaluation data. The mutual regard garnered between young people and adults acknowledged the importance of every person's responsibility to be a contributing member of the community. Liz Stower, another young facilitator, explained the importance of young people's active involvement: "students can care . . . getting involved in projects like this is a way to show people that we do care." The conscious incorporation of different generations' perspectives bolstered the importance of including diverse viewpoints within the project.

The use of outside resources, both artistic and dialogue resources, substantially strengthened the quality of the art and dialogue, elevating the effectiveness of the entire project. Contributing artists Anthony Bukoski, Layton James, and Frank Stone provided not only their creative talents and guidance to the community's artists but also their willingness to work with the NLCA in evolving its concept of the relationship of art and dialogue in exploring civic issues. Dr. Patricia Romney, in providing the tools of dialogue to a broad cross-section of young people and adults, created a local capacity to expand as well as to deepen the potential for meaningful dialogue that would not have been possible otherwise. Unexpectedly her dialogue training led to a group of invested community members, who not only contributed to a heightened level of dialogue, but also broadened the base of leadership for the project.

The artists from the community involved in this project appreciated and benefited artistically from the challenges posed. In the focus group evaluation sessions, artists from all disciplines commented on the positive impact of the artistic rigor and stretch required by this project and the satisfaction gained in being able to rise to that level. The musicians were proud to have the opportunity to premiere a piece of music, while being challenged technically by a piece from the classical repertoire. The addition of non-string musicians to the chamber orchestra was a first, bringing another new artistic dimension to their work. Both the writers and the photographers commented on positive implications of having a specific theme dictate their creative process.

Although they would not always want to work that way, they valued the creative dilemmas it presented and questions that encouraged them to look at their work in a different way. For artists in each discipline, the project triggered an expanded concept of the purpose of art. They recognized that the conscious infusion of dialogue during the creative process, as well as after a performance, had strengthened their artistry and furthered their creative growth.

Dialogue formats reflected the overall project's purpose to build awareness and understanding about the issue, as well as about art. Although the community facilitators learned early in the project that different art forms and presentations demanded different types of techniques to engender meaningful dialogue, each dialogue reflected similar intentions. One approach aimed to balance the audience's attention and understanding of the art experienced, their reaction to the art, and the art's connection to water issues. For example, at the dialogue that accompanied the dedication of the public artwork, a series of questions was posed: "Is this art? What would you title this piece? What was your first impression of the piece? Does this reflect Amery's water priorities?" In many situations this conversation was amplified with an opportunity for the audience to have direct dialogue with the artists. The concluding exercise used at the play, the music performance, and the public art dedication—the web of commitment dialogue technique—encouraged participants to express publicly what they gained from the experience and to consider their personal and civic responsibilities around water issues.

The active involvement of the mayor throughout the entire project added to the credibility of the effort, as well as brought greater attention to the issue. A passionate supporter of the arts, Mayor Stower played a significant role at every artistic event by providing a context for water issues in Amery, as well as a connection to the art. His persistent belief in the importance of this effort for Amery and the inspiration it could provide to other small communities permeated his involvement.

The civic impact of this project was evident through the alliances made with new community partners that had aligned interests in the water issue. With nature providing increased visibility for water issues in the spring of 2001, the County Water Resources Department and Balsam Branch Partnership sought NLCA's assistance in furthering their action-oriented agendas. Partnership with these entities served to expand the dialogue around this issue, and elevate NLCA's position as a key community player. NLCA is credited with being the catalyst for the establishment of an Apple River Association because of its willingness to serve as a central venue for dialogue among residents and the county water resources department. As one civic leader observed, "Out of these meetings came a group of really concerned individuals who don't necessarily agree, but who have pulled together to address this issue."

The project successfully integrated the use of formative evaluation methods in fine-tuning its dialogue techniques and gauging community involvement and understanding of the issue. Early in project implementation, LaMoine MacLaughlin worked with Rebecca Schaffer, one of the ADI evaluation specialists, to create an audience/participant survey and focus group protocols appropriate for the Water Project and this community. The surveys were religiously distributed at arts events, providing valuable information on the effectiveness of both the art form and dialogue techniques to draw meaning to the larger issue. Focus-group meetings of significant project stakeholders—the writers, musicians, actors, facilitators, and community and public officials—provided a qualitative barometer of artistic, civic, and dialogue impact. In both cases, results verified that this project had advanced awareness and understanding of the water issue, as well as had contributed to a heightened level of artistic expression and accomplishment.

As Northern Lakes Center for the Arts moves ahead into future programming, it has already begun to incorporate what it learned from this project into program design of other projects. In

2002 it hosted Racism in Rural Wisconsin, employing many of the techniques learned and applied in its Animating Democracy project. It also expressed the hope that the Critical Issues Forum that had been so much a part of its initial programming could be reinstated in future years, reinvented based on the Water Project experience.

The Water Project in Amery was distinct among ADI-supported projects with its small community orientation, focus on multiple artistic disciplines, combination of classic and contemporary art, and partnership of young people and adults in a common cause. As a local arts agency and center for the arts in this region, this project allowed it to demonstrate how the arts can be a critical resource in contributing to the promotion of new ways of thinking and greater understanding of critical community issues.

The NLCA involvement in the Animating Democracy Initiative influenced and changed our organization and has also influenced and changed our community. It led us to new partners in the community and it opened our eyes to dialogue and its exciting potential. It showed our community how the arts can draw people together around an issue and lead to better interpersonal involvement, communication, and exchange resulting in deeper understanding of both the issue and of one another.

—LaMoine MacLaughlin

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A 25-year veteran in arts management, **Cheryl Yuen** shares her diverse experience in planning, organizational assessment and development, and meeting facilitation with nonprofit and governmental arts agencies and foundations across the country. An independent cultural development and arts management consultant for 15 years, projects have included long range planning with The Renaissance Society, The Guild Complex, Folklore Village, and The Three Arts Club; community cultural planning in Oklahoma City and Champaign-Urbana (IL); assessment studies for the Chicago Cultural Facilities Fund and the Ohio Arts Council; diagnostic assessments of small and mid-sized Houston arts organizations for the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County; and meeting facilitation for Columbia College, Chicago Public Art Group and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education. For over five years she has managed the cultural giving program at the Sara Lee Foundation. She directed local arts agency, arts education and presenting programs at the Illinois Arts Council for five years and has served as a program director with two local arts agencies. In addition, she has been a NEA field evaluator, planning consultant, facilitator, researcher and panelist. She is author of *Community Vision: A Policy Guide to Local Arts Agency Development* and co-author of *Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force in Civic Dialogue*. She has served on the Illinois Arts Alliance/ Foundation board for over 12 years, currently chairing the Arts Leadership for the 21st Century initiative, and formerly on the board of the National Assembly of Local Arts Agencies (now Americans for the Arts).

Cheryl Yuen and Animating Democracy would like to thank LaMoine MacLaughlin for his contributions to this case study.

