Tarot as Reflective Practice in Arts Based Community Development

A proposed creative group program for women in regional Western Australia

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About this paper

This paper explores how Tarot imagery might be used alongside writing, artmaking and conversation to support social connection among women in regional Western Australia. It outlines a proposed six week pilot program and considers its theoretical basis, facilitation, ethical responsibilities and evaluation.

Adapted from coursework completed for the Master of International and Community Development at Deakin University, this edition has been edited for a general readership. The program described has not been evaluated in this paper. Anticipated benefits are possibilities to investigate, rather than established outcomes. Tarot is used here as a source of symbolic images for participant interpretation; the proposal makes no claim about predictive or supernatural abilities.

The references provide the academic and practice context for the proposal. Evidence about participatory arts and community connection should be distinguished from the smaller body of research specifically concerning Tarot. This paper does not establish that Tarot offers benefits beyond other visual prompts or group activities.

Introduction

Tarot has evolved from a fifteenth-century card game and later esoteric divinatory practice toward increasingly symbolic, therapeutic, and psychologically reflective forms of engagement within contemporary culture (Sosteric, 2014; Enoiu, 2025). While recent scholarship has explored Tarot through psychological, narrative, and reflective frameworks, its application within arts-based community development remains relatively underexamined. This paper argues that Tarot's symbolic imagery and participatory interpretive processes may provide a valuable framework for creative dialogue, engagement, and social connection within community settings.

Community development approaches increasingly recognise creativity, and relational connection as important components of wellbeing and belonging (Ife, 2016; Ledwith & Springett 2009). In regional communities, however, opportunities for meaningful social engagement may be shaped by distance, limited services, changing life circumstances and social isolation. Although community activities can provide social interaction, they do not always create opportunities for deeper conversation, particularly for adults navigating significant life transitions or experiences of social isolation (Ife 2016; Kenny & Connors 2017).

This paper proposes an arts-based group program for adult women in regional Western Australia that uses Tarot imagery as a catalyst for conversation and creative expression (Sosteric, 2014). Within this project,

Tarot is approached not as a predictive or supernatural tool but as a symbolic medium that may support reflection and dialogue within group settings.

The paper outlines the project context and rationale before examining the theoretical frameworks informing the design of the pilot program. It then discusses the proposed facilitation process, implementation strategies, ethical considerations, and evaluation methods. Future iterations of the project may emerge through participant feedback, community interest and locally identified needs.

Community context and rationale

Social isolation in regional communities extends beyond physical separation or limited social contact. It also reflects a lack of opportunities for emotional expression and genuine connection (Kenny & Connors 2017; Wilson 2015). Although community events may bring people together, they do not always create conditions for deep interaction. A retired woman, for example, may regularly attend local gatherings yet still feel unseen or disconnected from those around her. Likewise, a full-time carer may participate socially while having little space to speak honestly about the emotional complexity of her experiences.

Regional communities within Western Australia often experience challenges relating to distance, service accessibility, transport and opportunities for sustained social participation. Census data from the Shire of Denmark identifies an ageing population demographic and a significant proportion of single-person households, factors often associated with increased risks of social isolation and reduced community connection (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). The Shire of Denmark Sustainability Strategy (2021–2031) also highlights the importance of social wellbeing, inclusion, community participation and accessible community spaces in supporting long-term community resilience. Within this context, small-scale arts-based initiatives may provide accessible opportunities for relational connection, creative participation and shared reflection within local community life.

The proposed initiative would use Tarot imagery as a starting point for conversation and creative activity. Symbolic prompts offer an indirect way to approach experiences through metaphor and storytelling. Participants might explore transition, identity, relationships, uncertainty or change. A storm depicted on a card, for example, could remind one participant of caring for an elderly parent and another of moving to a new place. The meaning would come from each participant's interpretation.

Regular participation in facilitated group dialogue can strengthen trust, confidence, and social connection (Kenny and Connors, 2017). Knowledge and understanding are developed collaboratively through dialogue and shared exploration rather than delivered through expert instruction (Freire, 1970; Ife, 2016). Within regional communities, creative participation can contribute to stronger social networks and informal support through shared experiences and ongoing interpersonal engagement.

In addition to development theory, informal community consultation also shaped the project (Kumar, 2002). Through individual conversations and Tarot-based discussions with local women, participants often described isolation, emotional exhaustion, changing identity and limited opportunities for meaningful conversation. Many expressed interest in creative, symbolic group approaches that felt less formal or clinical than traditional programs.

How the program might help

The proposed theory of change is that shared engagement with images, writing and artmaking may make reflective conversation easier to begin. Repeated sessions could allow familiarity and trust to develop, supporting confidence in self-expression and a stronger sense of connection. Whether these changes occur, and which parts of the program contribute, would be questions for evaluation (Ife, 2016; Ledwith & Springett, 2009).

Ideas informing the proposal

Arts-based community development views cultural participation as more than recreation or self-expression. It is a collective process for understanding experience, exploring identity, and strengthening social connections. Participatory theorists prioritise dialogue, shared knowledge, and local engagement over economic outcomes or service provision (Ife, 2016; Ledwith & Springett, 2009). Creative community practices help people connect with others.

Freire's (1970) dialogic participation and the community development approaches of Kenny and Connors (2017) view participation as relational and collaborative rather than expert led. Freire (1970) emphasises examining power and the ways dominant knowledge systems shape participation. Kenny and Connors (2017) focus on community arts processes that foster connection and shared expression. Participation in arts-based approaches may still favour those comfortable with creative expression or reflective discussion, while the imagery itself may hold culturally specific meanings that differ across participants and communities. This project therefore approaches symbolic practice as a collaborative process shaped by the different ways participants interpret meaning through their own lived experiences and relationships with the world around them. The facilitation process aims to create a respectful group environment in which understanding develops gradually through ongoing interaction and collective participation rather than through fixed interpretation or expert authority.

Wilson (2015) argues that community development is inseparable from questions of identity, culture, and the politics of participation. Community practices are shaped by dominant assumptions about which forms of knowledge, expression and participation are considered legitimate within institutional and social contexts. Cultural practices that fall outside mainstream frameworks may therefore be overlooked, marginalised, or dismissed despite their potential value in fostering connection and community engagement. Arts-based and symbolic approaches are not peripheral to community development but may provide culturally meaningful ways for individuals and groups to explore identity, experience and belonging through shared creative processes.

Tarot has also been discussed through sociological and reflective frameworks (Sosteric, 2014; Dore, 2021). These perspectives offer ways to think about symbolic interpretation, but do not establish the effectiveness of this proposed group program. Its contribution to social connection would need to be examined through participant experience and evaluation.

Jungian interpretations provide one possible lens for thinking about recurring themes in Tarot imagery (Nichols, 1984). They would not be treated as universal explanations of experience. Participants would be free to interpret an image differently, reject an interpretation or choose another creative prompt.

Arts-based community development is concerned not only with individual wellbeing, but also with the social and relational conditions that enable communities to participate, adapt and respond collectively to

change. While reflective practices may appear personal on the surface, interpersonal connection and shared dialogue can contribute more broadly to social cohesion, trust, and community capacity (Fancourt, 2026). Informal spaces where people gather regularly, exchange stories and recognise shared experiences can strengthen forms of social capital often overlooked within formal service-based responses to isolation (Ife, 2016; Ledwith & Springett, 2009). Over time, these networks may support greater confidence, participation and ongoing community engagement.

Within this project, participation is understood as both a personal and collective process. Understanding develops through symbolic interpretation, creative exploration and conversation. Small moments matter: a participant hearing aspects of her own experience reflected in someone else's interpretation; familiarity forming across repeated sessions; growing confidence to contribute within group discussion. These interactions may contribute to broader forms of belonging and connection within community life. In regional contexts especially, relational wellbeing becomes closely connected to collective resilience and community participation.

As a researcher and facilitator, my expertise lies in education and wellbeing in regional contexts. Although symbolic practice hasn't been part of my formal work, my interest in narrative and human experience informs this project. I view Tarot not as a predictive tool but as a prompt for reflection and connection in community settings. Continual self-awareness and critical self-reflection, and participant-led interpretation will be central to the facilitation process.

The proposed pilot program

Program description

Project Goal

To support wellbeing and social connection among adult women in regional WA through arts-based participatory practice.

Objectives

Create opportunities for creative expression.

Strengthen social connection through facilitated discussion.

Provide a welcoming and accessible creative group experience.

Support shared interpretation and meaning making through Tarot imagery.

The pilot program would involve approximately 8-12 adult women from the Denmark and Albany regions and would run across six weekly sessions of approximately two hours each.

The program is intentionally designed to remain low-cost, accessible and community based. No prior experience with Tarot or artmaking would be required. The program would also be clearly framed as an arts-based group rather than therapy, counselling or spiritual instruction.

Each session would follow a consistent structure designed to create a respectful and supportive group environment.

Opening check-in and welcome.

Selection of a Tarot card as a visual prompt.

Individual response through journalling, drawing or collage.

Small group or whole group discussion and interpretation of the symbols and images.

Closing discussion and preparation for following week.

The program would use a variety of Tarot decks to ensure participants encounter a wide range of artistic styles, cultural symbolism and interpretive perspectives, recognising that imagery may resonate differently depending on personal experience and identity. The use of multiple decks also supports participant choice and encourages more participant-led interpretation, rather than suggesting that any single symbolic system or interpretation is the correct or dominant one. Participants who prefer not to use Tarot imagery would be offered other visual prompts or a writing activity. Participation in any discussion or creative task would remain optional.

The facilitator's role would be to guide discussion and interpretation, support respectful participation and maintain ethical boundaries rather than provide expert analysis of meaning. Facilitators would require skills in group facilitation, creating a respectful and supportive group environment, trauma awareness and referral processes should participants require additional support . The project design reflects the author's professional training and experience in facilitated educational and wellbeing settings, particularly in relation to group participation and conversation.

Facilitation Process

The program would be facilitated by one lead facilitator with experience in community development, arts-based facilitation and trauma-aware practice. Where possible, a second support facilitator or volunteer would assist with group support, materials and participant wellbeing.

Facilitation would guide discussion through open-ended prompts and respectful group conversation while maintaining clear ethical boundaries.

Ethical responsibilities and participation

Participation would be voluntary. Consent to attend the group would be separate from consent for evaluation or use of anonymous feedback. Confidentiality would be discussed explicitly, including the limits of what a facilitator can guarantee in a small community. Any future evaluation intended as formal research would need the relevant ethical review before data collection.

Self-selection may affect participation, as those interested in symbolic practices may engage more, limiting wider community access. Symbolic imagery varies culturally, so facilitators must be culturally responsive and avoid presenting Tarot imagery as universal.

Facilitators establish agreements on respectful participation, confidentiality, and voluntary sharing to manage emotional responses. Trauma-aware practices, grounding activities, and referral pathways to support services are crucial. The project supports connection and meaning making but is not therapy.

Potential community resistance to Tarot-based approaches also requires careful consideration (Halafoff, Singleton & Fitzpatrick, 2023). Although the program positions Tarot as a symbolic and arts-based reflective tool rather than a supernatural or predictive practice, some individuals or community groups may associate

Tarot with religious, spiritual, or occult beliefs that conflict with their personal values or cultural traditions. Misunderstandings about the purpose of the program could affect participant recruitment, community trust, or willingness of organisations to support the initiative. To mitigate these risks, all promotional materials and participant information would clearly describe the program as an arts-based community development initiative focused on creativity, storytelling, reflection, and social connection rather than fortune-telling or spiritual instruction. Facilitators would remain sensitive to diverse cultural and religious perspectives and would avoid presenting symbolic interpretations as universal truths.

Inviting participants

Participants would be recruited through local libraries, community centres, women's groups, arts organisations, wellbeing networks, community noticeboard, local newspaper, local radio and word of mouth.

Efforts would be made to reduce barriers relating to cost and accessibility.

Evaluating the pilot

The project would use the Better Evaluation Rainbow Framework (2022) to support a participatory mixed-method evaluation examining whether the program increases social connection, creative participation, confidence in self-expression and feelings of belonging.

Evaluation would occur across three stages: baseline assessment, ongoing monitoring, and post-program evaluation.

Before the program begins, participants would complete a short confidential survey exploring social connection, wellbeing, confidence in discussion and creative participation, previous involvement in community activities and participant goals for the program. Participants would also provide a brief written reflection about their motivation for participation.

Throughout the six-week program, monitoring would include attendance records, facilitator observations, participant engagement, optional written reflections, and informal feedback conversations. Observations would focus on interaction, discussion participation, confidence in creative activities, relationship-building and group cohesion.

At the conclusion of the program, participants would complete a follow-up survey using repeated baseline questions to identify perceived changes over time. Optional interviews or focus groups would further explore experiences of symbolic imagery, creative participation, wellbeing, belonging and suggestions for improvement (Kumar, 2002).

Indicators of success may include:

regular attendance and engagement

increased confidence in discussion and creative expression

stronger feelings of social connection and belonging

evidence of relationship-building between participants

willingness to participate in future community activities.

Qualitative data from interviews, reflections, and facilitator observations would be analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns relating to connection, participation and wellbeing.

Several limitations may affect findings. Participants may already have an interest in reflective or symbolic practices, influencing engagement and outcomes. The small scale and short duration of the pilot also limit long-term measurement and broader generalisation. The project is therefore positioned as a modest participatory initiative designed to support interpersonal connection and creative engagement rather than as a comprehensive response to structural inequality.

Conclusion

This proposal explores Tarot imagery as a starting point for shared reflection, storytelling and creative participation. Its potential contribution lies in the conversations and relationships that might develop as participants interpret images through their own experiences. The program would need to be trialled and evaluated before conclusions could be drawn about its effects on connection, belonging or wellbeing.

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