



| CASE STUDY

CITYSTUDIO BENDIGO: INNOVATION IN CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

CITY OF GREATER BENDIGO &
LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

What happens when you give 16 students free rein to experiment with new forms of community

engagement in a city for five weeks? The CityStudio Pilot 2018 is an innovative collaboration between the City of Greater Bendigo and La Trobe University (LTU) to make the city more sustainable, liveable and joyful.

This partnership generates a unique approach to community engagement for urban and environmental planning because it focuses on inquiry and exploration, rather than solutions. It mobilises student energy to get priority projects off the ground. The CityStudio philosophy recognises that good projects stem from strong relationships. Emphasis is on genuine co-creation, with students and council staff working together to explore and frame a ‘problem’ to unlock opportunities for action. It starts with a series of listening exercises, site visits, observations and dialogues with Aboriginal elders, council staff and Councillors, other government agencies, private industry, journalists, artists, school children and other community

members. An intense collaborative process between students and teaching staff commences with a two-day retreat focused on place-making, location of self in an environment and the power of place and culture. From the outset, students are immersed in the place-based, personal and often impassioned engagement that will come to define their own projects. Students then develop and test their ideas through temporary experimental projects. During the process, students actively inspire future possibilities in the community and local government and gain employable skills in a unique study environment outside the classroom.

In July 2018, the student project focused on the Bendigo Creek – an area of significant environmental, cultural and social significance. The Bendigo Creek in total spans over 150

kilometres and its 30 kilometre section through the city's urban area. About 30% of the city's population live within 400 metres of the creek, and 16 schools are located along the waterway.

Students worked 9:00am-5:00pm, Monday to Friday over five weeks. They represented a variety of disciplines that make an important contribution to urban

and environmental planning: urban planning, health promotion, outdoor education, archaeology, IT, psychology, event management, visual arts and international development.

Students developed creative techniques to engage with the community, allowing experimentation outside conventional consultation practices and local government processes. As such, new ways were used to engage residents who might not respond to formal consultation. Examples of these during the CityStudio program included:

I. GIVE THE CREEK A VOICE

This project involved a student

group working with the aim of improving the language and identity of the Creek in the community. This involved students displaying images on banners of the Creek at a high profile urban intersection and undertaking a survey asking community members if they recognised how the Creek appeared downstream. 71 responses were recorded over 4 hours, with the majority

responding 'no' (59%). The project inspired a song from a 10-year-old that has now been performed by local acapella choirs and is in line to be sung in Dja Da Wurrung as part of the focus on natural resources.

A 'Love Bendigo Creek' Facebook page was also created to engage with the community and share stories and community aspirations around the Creek, attracting over 200 likes and 1,500 engagements. <https://www.facebook.com/LoveBendigoCreek/>

II. CREEKS CONNECTING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

This project focused on the vision of a 'Creek Week' program of events, with a particular emphasis on education. To prototype the concept, students ran a Creek Day event with a small group of primary school students at the Botanic Gardens to learn about the history of the Creek and its environmental features through games such as a treasure map and PH testing of the water. A Creekculem (curriculum) was developed by students and tested with a Huntly Primary school class, with teachers providing positive feedback on the initiative.

III. GREENING BENDIGO

This project centred on ways to experiment with revegetating the Creek in response to mining and other pollution effects such as strong odours. For their prototype, students used a guerrilla gardening approach to fill a bluestone heritage section of the Creek with native plants. The native plants were used to represent how a bio filtration process could be used to address pollution, along with being an experimental tool in reimagining the Creek in a more natural state. This project



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TRANSFORM

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generated significant media interest with the Bendigo Advertiser conducting a live stream of the project at dawn, generating over 4,000 views: <https://www.facebook.com/bendigoadvertiser/videos/10155393667532027/>

IV. BOARDWALK BLUES

Students created a public art representation of how the natural contours of the Creek would look underneath the Bendigo Bank boardwalk area. Students observed how people interacted with the artwork and generated conversations around the Creek. Students followed up with a survey of Bendigo Bank staff, eliciting a range of responses on ideas for the Creek.

Innovative Engagement

The above projects demonstrate how innovative engagement techniques can be used to build new relations between the Creek, council and communities, with the effects anticipated to reverberate into future. Since the completion of the CityStudio program, local councillors and representatives from key stakeholders such as the Dja Dja Wurrung have been in discussion with students around how their ideas can be implemented.

This is the first time that the CityStudio concept, which was pioneered in Vancouver in 2011, has ever been conducted outside of North America. The Council-LTU teaching team was mentored by CityStudio co-founder Duane Elverum, who visited Bendigo in April 2018 and conducted information sessions for community, council staff and university staff and students.

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