What is it to build a vital community? An account from the Melbourne Waldorf Teacher Training Seminar.

Over the past two and a half decades Waldorf Teacher Training, we have worked closely with a great number of students, and from this a clear sense of the individual's longing for community has become very apparent to us. The vital role of community building as a foundation for a healthy society is indeed a challenge for our times.

Here at the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner Teacher Training Seminar we are very fortunate to offer Waldorf Teacher Training at our beautiful dedicated purpose built campus, set on 20 hectares of natural bush. Our buildings and the space around us have provided a place where a nourishing sense of community is fostered. How and why does this happen?

Through formal and informal measures, the Seminar consciously commits to developing community, actively bringing this to life through the many and varied initiatives of staff and students (current and former).

A salient feature of our course is that it is delivered face to face, requiring daily attendance with no on-line component. This is not to cast aspersions on this mode of study, as it clearly has its place and we are often asked if there are any options for distance online learning. We have remained resolute in our focus on this direct approach because we truly want people seeking to develop themselves through anthroposophical study to do so through an authentic human exchange, that can only happen by being physically on site together, to participate in discussions, group collaboration, and artistic work. It is through this sustained 'working together' that meaningful connections are formed, many of which endure over time.

The warmth of a welcoming community is created from the outset, with an artistic greeting from our Tutors to new students, who are offered a performance of Eurythmy, a music recital, poetry and singing. Immediately a rich atmosphere is established which carries us forward for the rest of the course.

Similarly at the study period draws to a close, our graduating second year students hand over the 'flame of education' to first years in a very evocative ceremony which includes their gift of the Eurythmy "Hallelujah": in this ceremony the sense that the graduating students are leaving us, and the first years are continuing their journey but are linked through their shared experiences, is palpable and moving.

During the course we learn about Rudolf Steiner’s Three Fold Social Order, which stimulates students to think about how society is organised and our individual place in it. Working with this we then go out into the world and visit schools, organisations, businesses, medical centres, biodynamic farms, community and cultural organisations working with Anthroposophy. Students return inspired by coming into contact with people who are consciously working with this picture of society and community building.
We also consider festivals as a source of nourishment for building community in schools, and create our own to celebrate Harvest, Autumn or Easter, and also Mid-Winter which sees many graduates from years past returning to join in, nourishing themselves in this way.

Daily joyful singing before some classes, and also during Choir (as part of our Music unit) is also a powerful experience of community building. In our reviews with students upon completion, we hear again and again that the singing brought a strong sense of connection to others, and in many cases, was the first time they had ever made music in this way.

Most recently a cohort of past and current students have met out of their own initiative, to work for the past 18 months outside of work and course hours to develop and present a Mystery Play, titled “The Mystery of Eleusis,” under the directorship of one of our tutors. This production had an emphasis on choral speech rather than individual parts, which produced a cohesion of working not normally associated with drama. Many of our graduated students are now in full time employment as teachers in Waldorf Schools, or are completing their tertiary studies. Current students have an assessment workload as well as responsibilities in other areas of life, yet the desire and challenge to work through the intense process of forming this dramatic piece, as a community of Waldorf students, carried the project through to fruition.

Another community gathering with an artistic focus brought friends together to experiment with firing ceramics in a Tee Pee Kiln. Sculpture is taught throughout our course, however this activity was conducted out of hours and enabled anyone interested in furthering their experience to join in. It was an inspiring creative experience, while offering social opportunities at the same time (see separate article about this).

Of course the intense inner development that comes particularly in the first year of our program can also prove very challenging for our students. Meeting ideas around phases of life, karma, destiny and human development and our life purpose raises difficult questions that require in some cases sensitive pastoral care. This care is a very important aspect of our role as educators in this community, and is an outward manifestation of the individual’s sense that “I am seen here. I can seek and receive care from my peers and tutors in this community.”

Separate to the formal components of our course, a rich array of activity is unfolding around us: we share our campus with the Michael Group, who offer regular events such as anthroposophical study groups, hosting visiting speakers and festivals such as Whitsun, to which all friends in the community are invited. The biodynamic community gardens are yielding an annual summer harvest including beautiful honey from the hives; and the Gabriel Conversation Group for parents and little children meets weekly to
support one another through the journey of new parenthood.

From their own lived experience of being part of this community, we see students take this capacity to build community out into their relationships in the broader world, sharing this with their friends, work colleagues, and families.

In this way, our enunciation of the Social Ethic Verse with which we begin our day together, truly resonates for students:

"A healthy social life is found only, when in the mirror of each soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the whole community the virtue of each one is living."