The award-winning Head of the School of Education (ACT) Dr Carolyn Broadbent is quick to downplay her own influence, instead pointing to the contributions of others in creating “webs of connectedness” that create a framework through which to “respond to community needs”.

Her belief in the transformative power and communal nature of education prompted her to go beyond the formal scope of her lecturing with ACU National to set up the Adult, Recreation and Training Services (ARTS) Factory more than a decade ago.

Since then, the ARTS Factory has hosted more than a dozen major art exhibitions and carried out diverse community education projects, enriching the experiences of the University's education students and drawing in new collaborators along the way.

Dr Broadbent received a Carrick Institute award for Australian University Teaching for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning “for inspiring teacher education students to build sustainable communities of learning through the ARTS Factory initiative”.

In response to community needs, through music, dance, painting, pottery, Indigenous arts and more, and with the support of a range of government grants and community partners, Dr Broadbent and her colleagues and collaborators have reached out to rural schools, young people in detention, Indigenous families and elders, and people who are homeless or have not had the opportunity to continue their learning. This has, in turn, created a diverse range of opportunities for pre-service teacher education and other higher education students to work with and learn from others.

Dr Broadbent, who has spent 24 years at the Canberra Campus and its predecessor college, Signadou Dominican College of Education, believes “it is the strong sense of engagement with the community that characterises ACU National”.

“I enjoy the opportunity to be able to assist the learning process, and to see individuals reach their potential through learning,” she said. “Through acknowledging expertise, and finding out what people want to know, learning becomes authentic and real for those involved. It is about reciprocity.”

Dr Broadbent has evaluated the effectiveness of the various community-based programs and has presented the results widely, prompting similar initiatives.

“There are many fantastic moments, such as when you see people learning or achieving and acknowledging their own development, including pride in their sense of personal identity.

“it’s the breadth of understanding of what it means to be an educator that enhances your teaching, and leads to research, while at the same time making life more interesting and worthwhile.

“Education is the avenue to a better quality of life for all. I use the term ‘webs of connectedness’ to describe the way in which my work with the community has evolved over many years. Of importance is that these projects are only successful because of the enormous energy of so many people in the whole process. It is an exciting time. We all feel that.”

Dr Broadbent believes ongoing learning promotes personal growth and change, stimulating cognitive, emotional, creative and spiritual development, as well as the confidence and self-esteem to sustain individuals through difficult times.

In 1999, the ARTS Factory, in collaboration with staff at the Hindmarsh Education Centre, successfully obtained an Adult and Community Education (ACE) ACT Government grant to implement an art, design and technology project for residents at the Quamby Youth Detention Centre.

In 2003, the ARTS Factory coordinated an initial Families learning together community-based project in which Indigenous families were supported to assist their children’s literacy and numeracy learning.

The recent Connecting communities project, funded by the ACT Government, aimed to strengthen the sense of community and identity within the Indigenous community in Canberra. “It emerged from and drew on the expertise of respected members of the Indigenous community and incorporated The Three Cs adult education course (Culture, communication and connectedness) and the What’s up? Families learning together programs.

“Both programs successfully increased the level of participation of parents in their children’s education and supported interaction between members of the Indigenous community, teachers and school. This, in turn, has encouraged the children to engage more actively and confidently at school.

Among other responsibilities, Dr Broadbent serves on the ACT Advisory Group for Adult and Community Education Services, and collaborates with the St Vincent de Paul Society to coordinate the University's Clemente Australia program in Canberra.