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Action research became a central focus of life not because I “learned” it in a traditional sense, but because it evolved from my attempts to come to grips with the complex problems inscribed in my academic and professional life. As a young schoolteacher my experiences teaching in an Aboriginal community in a remote desert area in West Australia alerted me, in a most dramatic fashion, to the fact that the world was not the tangible reality I had once assumed. In that context I not only learned that my way of seeing and living in the world was not the superior entity I had, until then, assumed. Not only was I taken by the starkly beautiful simplicity of the life that Aboriginal people lived at that time, but found the warmth of their interactions with myself and my new wife both engaging and heartening. The possibility that they represented a higher form of civilization, not circumscribed by technological criteria, still haunts me.

But it was in the classroom that I found my personal and professional life to be most challenged, as the routines and rituals that comprise standard teaching/learning practice in traditional schools proved woefully inadequate for the task of teaching children whose culture was so dramatically different from that inscribed in the school curriculum. That realization started me on an exploration that still fires my imagination today as I work in such widely divergent environments as city, suburban, rural and remote Australia, and the mid-West and Southwest of the United States of America. In all those contexts I still search for the ways and means to provide people with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to live harmonious and fruitful lives, whatever their cultural environment, whatever their lifestyle, and whatever life-world they carry in their hearts and minds.

This search commenced as an educational endeavour, in which I went through an extended period of formal education, ending with a Ph.D., in which I sought to understand how teachers and school systems could provide appropriate and successful educational experiences for Aboriginal children. Searching a diverse array of literature in sociology, anthropology and psychology I sought the Rosetta stone that would unlock the mysteries of educational process; that would provide me with the expertise that would enable me to teach people to devise educational programs and teaching strategies that would successfully provide for the needs of children from widely diverse cultural backgrounds.

By the early eighties I came to the realization that all my expertise, the now diverse array of quantitative and qualitative research tools I now had at my disposal, would fail to provide what I was seeking. As I continued to observe the highly inappropriate education provided for Aboriginal children in schools in my state, and the inability of even people I had trained intensively to come to grips with the fundamental issues involved, I became increasingly depressed. Taking leave from my university I spent almost two years engaged in adult education in remote Aboriginal communities. In one such community I found something of an answer to my quest: a school where the Aboriginal children of the community were excitedly and animatedly engaged in learning, where their continuous

chatter and interaction focused on the learning tasks in which they were engaged, and where “community teachers” provided a large part of the teaching, with the guidance of a young European-Australian woman teacher. With no special preparation she had, when asked, assisted people in the community to develop a school for their children, literally starting from the ground up, building a large classroom, formulating a curriculum, and moving through the formal steps of having their school accredited by the state educational authority. She and the people, with little or no “expert” assistance had devised a school and teaching/learning procedures that still stay in my mind nearly twenty years later.

The lesson was not lost on me, especially as at this time I started to become influenced by the writing of people like Paulo Freire, who advocated approaches to education dramatically different from those found, then and now, in most schools. At the same time I began to be influenced by an approach to work with people known in my state as “community development”, the notion that people themselves should use their own “expertise” as the basis for developing services, programs and resources in their own contexts. This approach to work in Aboriginal contexts was heavily underscored in the following years as I assisted Aboriginal people to develop a Centre for Aboriginal Studies at my university. The first two men with whom I worked had completed a Diploma in Community Development in a South Australian college, and used that as the basis of our work. At a time when Aboriginal people were increasingly demanding and being given opportunities to become self-managing, instead of being controlled by government and church agencies, we were involved a great deal of work to support Aboriginal people as they learned to administer, manage and operate their own communities, including its resources, programs and services. We provided a wide range of short training courses and programs, not only to Aboriginal people, but also to those non-Aboriginal people who must necessarily apply their expertise in Aboriginal contexts—teachers, nurses, telephone technicians, miners, police, and so on.

In all this work, the themes of community development predominated: Provide people with the support and resources to do things in ways that will fit their own cultural context and their own lifestyles. The people, we knew, not the experts, should be the ones to determine the nature and operation of the things that affected their lives.

The development of fully fledged university programs in management, community development and health emerged at this time. Aboriginal leaders within the Centre for Aboriginal Studies judged the need for long-term systematic development of capabilities would, in the long run, be more effective than the continued spasmodic offerings we, with our limited resources, could offer. Based on extensive consultation with Aboriginal people, building on the strengths of their own expertise, and implementing creative and active learning processes, these highly successful programs provided a model for many similar programs that followed them in other universities and colleges.

But the building blocks for all that we did remained the same, both the services we offered, and the educational programs we provided. The central core evolved from what I now refer to as “Aboriginal systems of knowledge.” Focusing

on an issue or problem, the developmental process we employed assisted Aboriginal people to define the issue in their own terms, to explore it in ways that made sense to their own life-worlds, and to construct solutions or develop outcomes that were meaningful in their own terms. This was not always an easy or straightforward process, and required sometimes painful learning processes as people struggled to deal with highly complex problems they experienced in their everyday lives. Not only did they have to accommodate the outcomes of highly oppressive and damaging history of colonization, but often to do so in contexts where the social, cultural and economic life of hunter-gatherer people appeared to be in direct conflict with the technologically oriented culture that revolved around a cash economy. How is it possible to operate a store based on an exchange of currency for goods, when the persons on either side of the counter have deeply held beliefs and attitudes about their kinship responsibilities to each other that is held together by an ethic of giving.

The problems requiring resolution were embedded in the very fabric of people's social and cultural lives, and still today require careful negotiation of cultural ethics, protocols and practices, even in suburban environments where families have a lifestyle that appears to be little different from the social mainstream. Despite enormous problems, solutions have been emerging continuously, and in many contexts Aboriginal people have been able to accomplish dramatic advances in their lives that have, to some extent enabled them to overcome the history of oppression that characterized much of the first two centuries of European occupation of what they still consider to be their land.

As a non-Aboriginal person involved in this process I needed to learn ways to participate in this process productively. My experience had shown me that my own professional expertise, by itself, was inadequate to provide the knowledge needed to assist Aboriginal people to come to grips with the broad range of problems and issues with which they grappled. My prescriptions for action often proved inadequate, inappropriate or, in some cases, absolutely counterproductive. After many years of university study I could not honestly say that I knew answers to some of the vexing questions related even to my field of professional expertise—education.

An epiphanic moment in a remote Aboriginal community enabled me to see a way forward; to provide the key, I now feel, to an approach to work that now permeates not only my work with Aboriginal people, but my whole approach to professional and academic life. In it lies the grounding for my continuing quest to clarify and communicate the action research processes that now constitute much of my working life.

Engaged in an electoral education program at a time when the Australian government was trying to ensure that Aboriginal people took advantage of their right to vote, I explained to the community chairman the purpose of my visit and the information sessions I could provide for interested people, including the showing of relevant documentary style films.

"That would be good," he responded to my offer. "We need to learn more about these things."

Having negotiated the time and place to show films that evening, I suggested that I walk around the community to inform people about the event, and waited for his affirmative response. The chairman looked thoughtful and didn't answer immediately. I couldn't tell why he didn't respond to a suggestion that seemed very straight forward to me. A community worker standing close by quietly asked,

"How can people get to know that the films will be shown, Tom?"

Tom, the chairman, looked thoughtfully around, then responded, "I'll go and tell them!"

In retrospect I can now see the wisdom of his choice. Not only would Aboriginal people at that time have been perturbed by the sight of a "white" official walking through their community (the times were not too distant when Aboriginal children had been removed from their communities for their own "welfare"), but would have been highly suspicious of the message I presented. I suspect very few people would have taken up the invitation to participate in the event, I contrast to the majority of the community that actually turned up that night.

The message was not lost on me, and I carry it with me constantly as I move through many different social environments across regions, states, nations and continents. The basis of my work is that I principally need to approach each situation as a "learner"; to listen carefully and respectfully to people, to allow them to describe the situation in their own terms, and to provide opportunities for them to formulate action in their own terms, and, as much as possible, to do it themselves with the resources they have at their disposal. This approach has transformed my work, and continues to enable me to provide productive input to people's community and professional lives in a wide range of differing contexts. My major contribution is to provide the listening ear that enables them, as they talk through the situation or issues that bring us together, to clarify their thinking and extend their understanding. Further, to provide my specialist input, where it is appropriate, in ways that builds on and strengthens the enhanced understanding that emerges from this process.

My current approach to professional and academic work, including my enactment of action research, is characterized by orientations to research, teaching and professional practice that are somewhat at odds with traditional procedures embedded in many bureaucratic, organizational and institutional settings. I often work in contexts where centralized and highly prescribed practices seem to dictate the necessity for organizational superiors and institutionalized rules to define precisely the nature of my activities. As a teacher, for instance, I am expected to define the curriculum—what people will learn, as well as the learning strategies—how they will learn, and the means of assessment—how they will demonstrate learning. As a researcher it is often expected that I will investigate an issue and provide recommended solutions to the problem investigated on the basis of my analysis of data that I have collected.

Enacting participatory approaches requires me to take quite a different stance to my work. I now realize the necessity to thoughtfully engage in practices that involve changes in relationship, positioning, authority and knowledge

production practices. As a teacher, researcher or professional practitioner I am a changed person. No longer dictating to people the ways and means by which they will act or behave, I work to enable them to define the situation in terms that make sense to them, to build understandings based on their own history of experience, and to formulate actions that will work for them. In all this I try to create conditions that enable them to work in safety, maintaining their human dignity and acknowledging their competence to deal effectively with their own situation.

People's response to this approach has not only been heartening at a personal level, but I have great joy in seeing the wide range of successful programs, services and personal achievements that people have been able to accomplish. The constant feedback that I receive from those with whom I work directly continues to encourage me to embrace this approach to my work, and to support those who would do likewise. Recently I received the following note from a woman whose teaching and professional expertise is human sexuality following her participation in my research methods class:

"[When] I experienced you teaching style I found my life's work!! ... I know that my teaching style has changed drastically this semester! As a result I've had an amazingly meaningful experience with my students that fulfilled us all!!! Thank you!!!!"

Another person from a similar class wrote in her journal:

"It is a long time since I have had a paradigmatic shift life this in such a profound way. ... It is like shedding a skin of some sort, to emerge anew with more honest eyes. I have come to final conclusion that I am being "Stringerized"—meant in a humorous, caring gentle way."

These types of affirmation reaffirm my commitment to my work, and enable me to maintain the major principles that I seek to characterize my work—a truly democratic intent, that is equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing to all involved. Not only do I have the joy of enabling people to accomplish significant achievements in their own lives, but to see the outcomes reflected in the quality of the services and programs they provide. Action research, to me, continues to sustain a joyfully meaningful and productive approach to my professional and academic life. At another level, it also provides the impetus for me to continue to explore the academic and intellectual roots of this tradition, enabling me seek affirmation for my work in the postmodern, feminist and critical theories that a, for me, the most significant discourse of the academic world I inhabit.