

Theory, Identity, Language and Practice: The Value of Participatory Practices to Sustainability

J. Fisher¹, S. Goff¹, J. Lavarack², L. Porter³ & P. Whitecross⁴

¹Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney, AUS

²Sustainability Strategy, University of Sydney, AUS

³Murray Mallee Community Health Service, AUS

⁴Northern Sydney and Central Coast Area Health Service, AUS

Introduction

How do we know sustainability, and what is our relationship to such knowledge?

Between 2004 - 2006 twelve participatory practitioners in public, academic and community sectors in three Australian states collaboratively explored the value of participatory practices to sustainability.

The research was a doctoral candidature supported by the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney. The task of this Inquiry was to explore the nature of “participatory practices” being developed by each person within their range of disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches to aspects of “sustainability”. A central working assumption was that “participation” was more than “doing” in an observable and quantifiable sense; that “participation” and those practices that manifest it embrace being, knowing, doing and becoming.

Some of us work to a “triple bottom line” concept of sustainability addressing environmental and energy footprints; others work to social sustainability where the question of the environment remains relatively disassociated in public policy; some explore our experiences of sustainability and participation from personal, philosophical and cultural perspectives.

As a result of this still ongoing work, and through a powerful three-day interactive event in a cave in the Blue Mountains, we came to understand that when we approach the questions of sustainability without presuming an epistemological stance new ways of sensing, knowing and being in relationship to the sustainability quest arise, giving new forms to participation.

In this paper four of the practitioners reflect briefly on their various insights. Susan Goff describes how Torbert’s (Torbert, 2001; Torbert and Reason, 2001) proposition of Action Inquiry, while not used as a research mechanism, was a frequently discerned pattern in our work. John Lavarack reflects on the splitting and joining of self-identity between work, community and virtual environments. Peter Whitecross explores the liberating and disturbing influence of myth in re-minding us to be open to the multiple forms of knowing that take shape outside conventional holds. Lesley Porter considers the power of poetics to shift ways of knowing within a community health service’s team of therapeutic practitioners. Jane Fisher completes the text with critical reflection and editorial review.

We speak autonomously, partially and together, the hallmarks of inter-dependent freedoms that characterise the social-ecology of our collaboration.

Torbert's Action Inquiry in our hands: Ebbs, flows and flourishes

"We cannot know everything through rational intelligence and must accept incompleteness" (Marshall, 2004: 306).

Our Inquiry offers a small "step to the side" of conventional ideas about "change". This convention is governed by pre-determined "targets" undertaken through political and economic legitimacy and resourcing. It tends to use an instrumental form of knowing which is conducive to prediction and control, measure, and notions of "implementation".

Our concern with this convention of change is that it is adaptive to existing powers rather than transformative of and with them. With its origins in the Western enlightenment, luxuriating in colonial and class-based exploitation, our knowing, doing, being and becoming within the narrowing scope of this mono-epistemology can only prolong our un-sustainability possibly to the point of violent extinction:

"There can be no true solution until we turn away from the 'empty world' vision that underlies much of our political and economic thought, and commit ourselves to aspirations consistent with a world of finitude and limits... such a step is undeniably momentous..." (Bradford, 2000:9)

Our Inquiry considered how we could know differently as a matter of survival; how to experience the "undeniably momentous" steps of being, doing and becoming differently. We wanted to do this recognising the utility of instrumental approaches to, say, reducing ecological footprints and also recognising the dangers of instrumentalism as the only or "inappropriately appropriated" form of knowing. We wanted to emerge into and through an "epistemologically free zone"; to know whether such an experience informed our understandings of sustainability and participation; and whether "the Institution" could be persuaded.

While entertained by it, with the exception of my university, none of the participants' institutions could conceive of a formal association with the Inquiry any more than we were ready to conceive of one ourselves. Our Inquiry was about understanding this persistent disconnection, not from a strategic perspective, but from an epistemological one. We shared the problem with our institutions and took responsibility for it. We struggled with the same silences and inaction that our institutions have been struggling with - and we found new ground. The activism, community building, social learning and development of governing principles that we needed to do this work, with ourselves as much as any institution, located it in the field of "participatory practice".

Throughout this experience we kept seeing glimpses of Torbert's (and Reason's) Action Science as a pattern, rather than a methodology. His idea is that inquiry unfolds over three dimensions of personhood. His proposition is startling for its suggestion that we reverse the conventional sequence of "change" from one that is sourced in, and is often limited to a-critical, legitimate authority (law, regulation, policy and strategy for example), to one that is sourced in our selves and becomes a "mutually inter-penetrating first-, second- and third-person action inquiry in the

present” (Ibid: 251). For Torbert such inquiry practice begins with instilling appreciation in our illegitimate (free), subjective self, each other and our experiences of the present.

Our Inquiry provides a *complementarity* to those who hold that formal shifts towards sustainability need to occur at any cost, including that of our personal and societal freedom. Our experience is that the two ideas of freedom and sustainability are co-evolutionary of each other.

Through a glass brightly: Translating self between work and home

I have written emails from my workplace, an inner city university facility management office, to my home account as notes to self. These have served as the means of sending some piece of my work home: a problem to solve, a report to review, an opinion to consider. I have been struck, on reading them at home, by the difference between my work self and home self. In a strange moment of narcissism I treated the one at work as a friend generally addressing timidity and resolving issues from the peace of my home.

I am intrigued by this transition and have had conversations about it over the phone with participants in our research circle. The strangeness of the workplace is something that constantly confronts me as I live in the same neighbourhood and consider myself part of the communal reach of the University. On walking from home to work I come to the workplace door where I must swipe a card to get in. There is something that disturbs me in this, as much as I appreciate the security concerns that brought the door into being. The sense of transition in this manner is felt as unwarranted as an outsider and warranted as an insider.

I have worked in environments where strangers could, and sometimes did, come right up to my desk to pull up a chair and have a chat. One was a community education centre based in Sydney’s Inner West, in which I participated as a researcher, learner and, sometimes, mentor. There was a strong spirit of participatory practice in this environment and many remarkable and sustainable things followed, not least of which has been its continued existence beyond its original grant-funded status.

While the security of employees is something that I entirely applaud, I also believe that to address the apprehension that comes with measures such as security cards, we must find ways to a greater degree of participation in political, socio-cultural and aesthetic realms. These are the very generation of social capital - shared identities arising with shared actions. The optimal experience of moving in and out of this kind of work space can be characterised as ‘watery’ in the sense that while a sense of boundaries (ie. of the sensed difference between “being” and “not being”) may be essential to identity, the experience of transition between identities, as of diving into water, should be a pleasurable experience of new possibilities and not an abandonment of them.

I believe that workplaces need to become kinder environments and I believe that there may be a connection between the stifling of creativity in a workplace and the presence of security controls. Inequity, lack of transparency and exclusion may become the hallmarks of such an organisation. To make a general observation, I am

conscious of destructive relationships that form in organisations in which people conflate risk to their person with that to the corporation. The technical problem is revealed as a political one that is revealed as the minutiae of daily existence – things perceived or apprehended that act like fields of knowing, ways of being, plays in three acts with characters caught up in cycles of meaning and resisting.

Instrumental ways of knowing need to be subject to discipline within organisations to ensure that ethical being is accountable in deliberations. Qualitative approaches to evaluation exist in many frames but what distinguishes participatory practice is that it is infused with knowing, gracing and being in as many strands as possible, as fits. This can amount to simple but powerful moments of reassuring colleagues of something unspoken. Tacit.

“We serve tea at our desks with a tray and pot to which more distant colleagues may come and pause briefly over a cuppa while we get their news. We kick our shoes off and prop ourselves on top of desks to sit cross legged for animated conversations. We create moments of freedom in which to consider action and sense the next event” (Lavarack, J. Inquiry Evaluation 3, 2005).

Mythology: A deeper code of discourse

What attracts me to mythology as a system is its power to dissolve and resist instrumental epistemological conventions and structures. Participation is by its nature emergent, full of surprises and unbidden memories. Systems that place a high value on certainty, predictability and security are inimical to the messiness of participation. Myth on the other hand can provide a narrative/quest framework for us to recognise and give voice and shape to an emergent pattern of being, knowing, doing and becoming. Myth can come in the form of a full blown classical narrative eg Orpheus and Eurydice or a line from a pop song eg ‘stairway to heaven’ or ‘stand by me’. Insofar as it gives voice, shape and beauty to a relationship it helps propel that experience in a meaningful direction, helping us to remain engaged and committed.

In parallel to this Inquiry, I had the privilege of working with a group of older women who wanted to evaluate their ‘program’ of wellness activities in a participatory way; largely because the essence of their wellness activities is participation. While creating an innovative social care modality they were simultaneously recreating (and re-storying) the myth of activist crone. Pre-sensing this enabled us to move with the grain of the relationships rather than against them. We were enabled and empowered to take imaginative leaps that would not have been available to us if a more pedestrian and programmatic evaluative pathway had been taken. A consequence of these choices is that the report struggles to be ‘useful’ as a piece of advocacy writing while charming all who read it.

Metaphor, myth and ritual can infiltrate and illuminate discourses through time, virtual space and real life space. This happened both in the cave and with the older women. As a deep code of discourse, epistemology is a simultaneously limiting and enabling framework; framing possible questions/solutions and creating tools; providing a bridge in the journey. Epistemology is a self-fulfilling prophecy - in both senses of the term; that is - a prophecy that fulfils itself (comes true) and a

prophecy that fulfils (and becomes) your self. Recognising this, I feel more at home with such a storied system of sense making than with a more abstract system. Myth is full of choices and bifurcations, and while always recognisable it is never predetermined; no two tellings being the same.

Nature has traditionally spoken to us in mythic forms – perhaps Aesop was the world's first biosemiotician? It is basic and obvious that the first step in this journey is the acknowledgement that such a conversation with Nature is possible, without condescension or arrogance. Humility, love and wonder seem to be keystones to the foundation of this more integrated way of being with Nature. For it's fortieth anniversary the magazine "Resurgence" asked many luminaries of the environment movement to reflect on the past forty years. Jonathon Porritt (2006) made the point that while the movement could hardly be faulted on its record of rational evidence based science and rhetoric, it had not engaged in any meaningful way with people's personal narratives and identities. Myth is one promising tool for reaching out to engage with the stories that are important to people everywhere.

Poetics and power: The lyrics of dissonance in transformative experiences

"Life is a creative, intimate and unpredictable conversation if it is nothing else, spoken or unspoken, and our life and our work are both the result of the particular way we hold that passionate conversation" (Whyte, 2001:6).

Whyte suggests that life and work are more closely related than most of us realise (Whyte: 2001). He believes that work is a pilgrimage where people shape and develop identity, and life's purpose. With this assertion he states that there is a grander scheme in operation during everyone's working lives, and contends that this grander scheme requires closer attention and connection. Furthermore he states that work involves a 'conversation with grander, more eternal, more essential parts of ourselves' (Ibid:8). With the sensibility of a poet Whyte believes that working relationships are closely connected to the metaphysical and poetic realm of life. I am strongly drawn to these ideas, in my role as a manager of a rural primary health care team. In recent years I have experimented with opportunities that allow for the inclusion of the poetic realm in team work, while also daring to question some of the limitations of normative professional boundaries in our work with community.

In early 2003 my team and I became involved in managing and providing a community based therapeutic program for a group of asylum seekers from Afghanistan living in rural Murray Bridge, South Australia. The program focused on keeping the men well, alive and socially connected. These men had fled their country fearing for their lives following a long history and experience of persecution and marginalisation in Afghanistan. All of the men had been detained for several months on arrival into Australia and they were all separated from their families and loved ones. In early 2003 a member of this community, a highly respected man Dr Wahede took his own life. This tragic loss shocked the Murray Bridge community. We reached out to these men by inviting them to attend the community health service every Friday night to have a shared meal and swim in our hydrotherapy pool. On the first night

over 50 men arrived accompanied by local community people who had supported them by offering English classes every week on a Saturday, in a voluntary capacity.

The men's stories were rich in pathos, poetry, sorrow and confusion. For several years we supported the men in this way, and we still hold our Friday night groups today. We also involved the men in art therapy workshops which culminated in the highly successful "Pictures in My Heart" exhibition which continues to tour regional South Australia with Country Arts SA. Nearly all of the men now have permanent protection visas, and many of them have managed to bring their families safely to Australia. I am telling this story here to say that this work was characterised by multiple difficulties and although it was based on participatory practice, we all needed to draw on that which was yet to be spoken, in terms of the stories that were hidden, the stories that were consumed by political agendas, the stories designed to reinvent and reshape realities and truths, and the stories of how we were all impacted by this experience in ways that can only be described as connected to the universal themes which web and weave poetry into our lives and our work.

As a therapist, a team manager, a researcher and participatory practitioner Whyte inspires me to consider the intersection between poetry's sacred and universal narratives and participatory practice. If we consider participatory practice in relationship to universal themes of: belonging, compassion, ethics in practice, overcoming isolation, engagement with despair and hope, negotiating loneliness and connectedness, responding to subjugation and injustice, a possible bridge forms metaphorically and literally to themes and possibilities for sustainability. From this position, standing on this bridge I am able to connect with the poetics and aesthetics' of the participatory endeavour. In this connection I am interested in poetics and aesthetics as a relational resource for sustaining and enriching my participatory practice.

Whyte makes reference to delving into the unknown 'to bring out words' that makes sense and gives meaning to day-to-day existence (Whyte, 2001). Bird considers 'talk that sings' in her linguistic and relational approach to making meaning within the therapeutic relationship (Bird, 2004). In poetry, therapy and participatory practice there is an intentional exploration with what is yet to be said and yet to be known. I believe that participatory practice and poetics attempt to connect people and communities, including practitioners with thoughts and feelings of hope, nurture and the possibility of a desired or longed for future, while also navigating the depths and experiences of despair, loss and disconnection. In my world participatory practice is interested in exposing the intersection between poetry and therapy, the poetry and song of the therapeutic relationship, and to make more visible that, which is considered sacred and poetic.

Conclusion

In writing this text we are encouraged by the other co-researchers to resist the felt convention to order our reflections with common themes, findings, principles, models or any homogenisation that would make digestion familiar. And yet our disparate experiences hold within them some sense of a shared context even if perceived differently, and constructed of different elements through each person's form of participation.

Torbert's construction hovers behind our words, a gentle permeating architecture of being in solitude, together and of the world. It holds the gravity of the first person in reflexive appreciation that relational practices generate, allowing the personal, solitary and inward knowings to cautiously reach towards someone else's fragile and uncertain hold on "what is". As we found our "sites" for question, reflection and renewed intentions, we found new caves in the depths of our writings, the silences and appreciations of our conversations.

It is not that we changed any aspect of infrastructure as a recognisable third person inquiry would expect; but the infrastructures changed around us as we brought new and different qualities of valuing first and second person inquiries together and into them. We did not change our behaviours in a mechanical sense, but we did change the context of behaviours in a meaningful sense. We learned to let connections come to us, rise within us and not be stitched together; in so doing energy formed through us and was not taken from us.

We grew to appreciate, as this paper follows, ways of being with theory that were not about compliance or elitism, but about pattern and recognition. We learned about identity by ripening our sense of person and appreciating the depth of being in others. We let rise within each of us not only new words, but new forms of communication, an extra pause in a conversation, a question where previously we might close a thought down. We let myth and poetry stir, reframed emails as artefacts of cultural practices, and gathered and worked images of many kinds. We found within us unexplored sensitivities that opened whole worlds of freedom, hurts, confusions and leaps of understanding hitherto hidden from our life worlds.

We learned to walk into such waters and take their dampening disturbances into other locations, not as formal contracted works gearing shifts from one way of doing to another, but as shifts in qualities of our presence with others, as subtle lightening bolts of understanding:

"Before I sought to create space; now I am to draw attention to its emergence, reflect my being within it" (Fisher, J. 2006)

These were invisible journeys actually undertaken, travelling through the spaces in between (Weil, 1997: 380) theory, identity, language and practice, opening ourselves up to "what and how" we know, the "monstrous knowledges" (Foucault, 1976, 224 in Hodge, 1995: 36) of emergent knowings. They are those forms of knowing that as Hodge sees, must paradoxically recognise and reject convention if they are to spring into being. In these ontological spaces are homeless knowings and home making beings, built on the principle of:

"Normal and other ascribed by society. Many caves; much participatory work. The antithesis of control; people being what people are, not what I [we] want them to be. Not like us. The zenith of respect in humanity" (Fisher, J. 2006).

It is into these spaces that we invite you to participate in the quest that is sustainability.

*“The shift from the idea to the being is not even
I am suddenly the shifting sand the undulating body of grace;
I see a perfect portion of the white soft cloud moving slowly across the clear blue;
The sky framed perfectly by the overhang of an enormous cave-like a mouth;
Shouting out the joy, the pain, the love and the blessing of the creative spirit.
I am the sand, I am the woman, I am the earth, and I am myself at grace”*
(Iuliano, J. 2006)

Jane’ commentary: Reflecting on finalising this paper for printing

When this paper began I chose not to participate in its collaborative authorship. I watched its development and agreed with the authors that, following its peer review, we each use the paper as a reflective tool in co-writing in participatory practice. In time, I took my role in progressing the paper towards submission for printing. To do so is my practice. How then to be with the two issues that emerged for the authors from the reviews of our paper? How many times have I been here before? Experiencing the reality of collaborative action that emerges from rigorous and reflected-on participatory practice, and facing the dismissal of the emergent knowledge by those reading but not having experienced the action. Like Peter I have experienced that the...

“...consequence of these choices is that the report struggles to be “useful” as a piece of advocacy writing while charming all who read it” (Whitcross, P., this paper).

Again: language as a barrier, not as an enabler. Again: I see the fear of dismissal of our knowledge rising in the eyes of my fellow practitioners.

“Can ‘the Institution’ be persuaded?” (Goff, S., this paper).

I observe myself, and others, dismissing what we dislike, that which does not fit with the knowledge we have created in our Inquiry. I observe us reaching for the standard tools – translation, explanation. I find myself exploring different ways of laying out the paper, to accommodate the non-linear knowings into some acceptable form. If only a poster, a multi-dimensional e-tool. I get an email from a friend asking me how I work on such papers as these - am I ‘very organised’ and work from beginning to end, or ... And so I ask myself, where is my practice now? In facilitating the final draft of a co-written work about our experience of participatory practice, am I practising what I have learnt?

I cease reflecting alone. I email the authors:

“Hooray! The reviewer finds participatory practice and how it is spoken of difficult to come to terms with. Also the reviewer has noticed paradox. We have done well” (email communication: 3/10/06).

I re-read the paper and listen anew to my colleagues’ words:

- "... simple but powerful moments of reassuring colleagues of something unspoken" (Lavarack, J., this paper);
- "The point of resistance – our sharp edges and our porous skin" (Goff, S., this paper);
- "... a possible bridge forms metaphorically and literally to themes and possibilities for sustainability" (Porter, L., this paper)."

A reviewer challenged the notion of an 'epistemologically free zone'. We pondered on this, collectively and individually, and accept that, rather than standing outside what we know, we observe that there are many ways in which people know, many of which are unnamed by science and philosophy. Peter has proposed that we sought to emerge through an 'epistemologically fresh zone'.

Another reviewer suggested that we shift the first paragraph of the conclusion into the introduction to help readers, who have not experienced what the authors have in the Inquiry, to engage with the paper. We decided to leave the paper to unfold to you. However, now you can choose to read it with the first paragraph of the conclusion as the opening paragraph of the paper, and to reflect on how you have come to know.

"Into these spaces we invite you ..." (Goff, S., this paper).

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