LIVING, KNOWING AND WRITING
THE VALUE OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE
TO SUSTAINABILITY

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Living, Knowing and Writing the Value of Participatory Practice to Sustainability

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. All works attributed to the other co-researchers have been given with their informed consent. All those named in the text as Co-researchers have consented to be named. I hereby declare that I have not previously submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Signed …………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

Dated …………………………………………………………………………………………………………..
It’s time to speak of roses and pomegranates
and of the ocean where the pearls are made
of language and vision, of the invisible ladders,
which are different for each person, that lead
to the infinite places where trees
murmur among themselves

Rumi: “Your Fears of Work”
Acknowledgements

For Kaspar, Antigone and Seraphino, and with Miguelo

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Now to the participants, excluding myself, in alphabetical order, and who are the living inquiry community, the substance of which is each person’s participation:

• Penny Barker, practicing in New South Wales, promoting sustainability in local government, after her experience in environmental management and education areas;

• Jane Fisher, practicing in South Australia, developing sustainable futures in the not-for-profit and community sectors, after her government experience in social and criminal justice;

• Jane Gregg, practicing in Queensland, in the academic sector of health promotion after her state government and private consultancy experience;

• Jo Iuliano, practicing in South Australia, in voluntary and state services in youth and justice areas, after her private consultancy experience;
• John Lavarack, practicing in New South Wales, promoting triple bottom line sustainability in the academic services sector, after his experience in environmental education in local government;

• Margaret Nippert, practicing in South Australia, in state government child guardianship areas, after her experience in state services in child protection;

• Peter O’Connell, practicing in New South Wales, promoting triple bottom line sustainability in local government strategic planning areas, after his experience in private sector corporate strategy;

• Brigid Pearse, practicing in New South Wales, promoting triple bottom line sustainability in local government land use planning areas, after her experience in environmental education and performance arts;

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CODA

Book of Psalms: writings from the Cave

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Abstract

The thesis inquires into the living value of participatory practices to sustainability. The two problems of lack of recognition of participatory practices and the lack of address of sustainability matters are drawn into one collective inquiry initiative. Twelve Australian participatory practitioners, working in three States, in various aspects of social and environmental sustainability in the public, community and academic sectors voluntarily participated in the initiative for over eighteen months.

The author, being the initiating researcher and practicing participatory principles from the outset, chose not to facilitate a pre-determined method at any stage so as to let a systemic form of inquiry come into being. Such a principle of co-inquiry shifts the epistemological ground on which inquiry rests from a hidden presumption of instrumentalist objectivity, to an open opportunity that does not presume any other epistemological stance. Collectively we faced a void of meaning, language and conventional action through which we travelled by self-creating participatory practices with each other, encountering transformative experiences in the process.

Working through three emergent iterations, the Inquiry and its thesis propose that globally, participatory practices are distinguishable in four generic constituents of Governance, Development, Learning and Activism and that incorporating all four of these elements constitutes a participatory practice with transformative qualities at systemic scales. Practically, the co-researchers created participatory practices from an eclectic range of such traditions, modes and disciplines, integrated through dialogic, reflexive, autobiographical and contextual inclusions. Some of us augmented the construction of participatory practice from the four generic constituents towards an holistic language of embodying thought, aesthetic perception, and loving identity within a transforming community. Experiencing these capabilities engendered a tacit sense for systemic sustainability, which is an ontological departure from current instrumental constructions of the term “sustainability”. Some of us created our own ontology, referred to as “the graces”, to embrace the question that the Inquiry created: how can we live with nature the way nature wants to live with us?

The ongoing Inquiry entity resists collapse to a defaulted instrumentalist stance and continues to unfold as a sociological embodiment of the thought it generates. Referring to Polanyi, Bohm, Bourdieu, Foucault, Torbert and Miller the author interprets the Inquiry’s legacy as establishing an articulate, committed and responsive open community within which we freely develop capabilities that are inhibited by our daily life worlds while also crucial for transformation towards participatory sustainability in these same worlds.
INTRODUCTION: A STORY OF INQUIRY
AND ITS THESIS

Reading notes

This thesis is written to participatory practitioners. I propose that there is a significant, global, professional field of “participatory practice” that is being recognised for its capacity to assist the world move through the difficulties that we, its people, are creating. This practice, however, is difficult to capture because, by its participatory nature, it is inclined to break out of any confining definition. Added to this characteristic is the paradoxical quality of it being both everywhere and nowhere without some capacity to name it. My doctoral research has been to find a way to recognise and be recognised by peers, and together to create a participatory entity, which holds enough coherence to be “an entity” of recognition without it defaulting to any one, definable and thus potentially fragmentary thing.

This same challenge exists for articulating the meaning of “sustainability”. There is no one, settled definition in this text. Rather, I use the term loosely, precisely, poetically and indicatively. My sense is that we do not know what sustainability is even though we live in a time when measures, policies and commitments abound. My concern is that the way conventional forms of knowledge profess to “know” sustainability is only a very small dimension of the ontology. Rather than seeing this state of not knowing the thing that our very survival depends on as a problem, I see it as a wonderful opportunity for us to embrace our collective humility and courage. In this text, and as an extension of the experience of the Inquiry from which it draws its life, I work through the thickets of philosophical frameworks, stances and realisations that come my way in a quest to know how to know sustainability. I do not do this critically, although Critical Subjectivity (Reason, 1988, p.230) is an aspect of my practice. You will find me taking something (a story, a philosophy, an experience) that grabs me, pausing, doing business with it, then letting it go. I do this in companionship with the co-inquirers in the Inquiry. Together, in our individual and communicated ways, we let these “things” become a part of us, including the way we know. I attempt to work into the many experiences of knowing that such an Inquiry offers in a way that creates a kind of fluency between them; and more accurately, through them in me and between us, the co-researchers.
Introduction: a story of inquiry and its thesis

Sustainability is thus felt more than it is known in a fixed epistemology. It is as energy, spirit and touch. I have written this text in a way that I hope you, the reader, feel it too. At its source is the extraordinary dynamic of human inquiry, in the understanding that the world that “is” is as far as humanity is concerned, the world that we make by “knowing” it. Thus the quality of how we know is crucial to what we know, and thus whom we become with each other in relationship with the more-than-human world. This experience, of coming to know “not knowing” and experiencing the sense of flow that comes about in this quality of being, is the story of this thesis. It is also the experience that the writing of it attempts to give you, the reader. It is not a flow carried by logic alone. I ask the reader to encounter the discourses, discontinuities, images, methods and poetics to sense the streaming that arises through them.

In making this work I have had to be authentic within my participatory field, by resisting the seduction of creating my own conventions while also respecting the value of conventions when we need them. For those who have crossed the Rubicon of bounded systems of being, and who have experienced emergent breakthroughs, or transformations, the text is a useful companion reader. However, this is a narrowly bound readership and my obligation to the participatory field, its practitioners and our value to the manifestation of sustainability, is to occupy its edges along with those who do not yet see themselves as being “participatory” but who are willing to come with me into the field as I live, know and write it. All of us, the co-researchers, were in this place at the Inquiry’s initiation. The Inquiry is a study of transformation regarding the experiences of participation and sustainability, in the context of a Collaborative Inquiry (Reason, ibid, p.2).

I do not carry out the study, nor write its story, as an act of observation and analysis of others or myself. From the outset the Inquiry was a shared co-creation of all perceived elements of a particular participatory initiative. The writing of the thesis is less a record of what we did together and more an exploration of where that experience takes me. It is a story of my developing Critical Reflexivity (Weil, Wildemeersch and Jansen, 2005, p. 8) within experience. I let this story lead me on into it, as much as I lead it. There is a constant play between what I experience as given, what I make of what is given, and what my “making of” practices illuminate in and around me. Sometimes I hide behind what is here so it may apparently speak for itself (as in Chapter 1, “The Cave”), and at other times I come out to show the Inquiry at work within and beyond me (as in Chapter 6, “Friend”). It is written from my belly, with heart, hand and mind joining into the kind of creativity that a visceral centre demands.

My hope is that the reader will experience the thesis as a living spirit, which gathers itself into its own, innate form throughout these pages. You too may find it leading you as
Introduction: a story of inquiry and its thesis

much as you lead it; and you may be becalmed at those places where the energies change. As each chapter stands up so the flow of energy through it takes on new characteristics. You may need to attend to its demanding and sometimes incomprehensible ways in the same way I had to, except, for you it may raise very different surfaces of difficulty than it did for me. With the exception of this introductory note, I do not attempt to predict these impasses. My story is an account of how I worked through my difficulties, as inquiry took form within me. My hope is that you will recognise some aspects of your own experiences in mine, and that the spirit of inquiry which, as I suggested above, is what I propose to be the germinating seed of participatory sustainability, will find its form within you as you read these pages.

At times you may hear an inner voice calling on you to judge the wisdom or folly of such a treatment. I ask that you pause, and listen into it because somewhere in there, you may find a source of your own truth, as we found ours, and I, mine. While this is sacred ground, do not believe it as a matter of course: there is hard work to be done at the roots of how and what we know. There, in my judgement, lie my obscuring and revealing myths, my dying and unborn selves, and my chaotic and ordered instincts. There also lies an encounter with truths of a very different kind than those that support our everyday. This thesis tells the story of my encounters with these and many more spirits of knowing in companionship with the collaboration’s co-inquirers in this place. As you read, you become another such companion in this place. What can you find here? What will find you?

If you come to a place of judging at all, and should judge me as incompetent or able as this subterranean quarry, then I respect your stance. In return I ask that while you judge me so, you keep some room around your finding (hold some ambiguity) that allows for movement down the track. It is not that I know myself to be right (or wrong) in the end, or presume you will know yourself differently. It is that I do not know myself in any fixed way, not in any consistent sense, and am not seeking such assurance. What I have found and present here, is a way of journeying into these questions, questions which I see as every person’s question as we go on creating worlds of extinction and hopefully, worlds of renewal.

In these worlds, which are unavoidable contexts of this Inquiry, familiar and accepted constructions of truth to critique my journey have limited value. Such constructions came into being in a time before broad public recognition of our being on the edge of extinction. This unprecedented turning point took place as I was writing this text. With this growing understanding the goal posts of validity have not only shifted but are now morphing. My interest is to ask how we can know ourselves in such fluidity? Do such conventions that philosophies of science offer (be they evidence based, critical, post modern, statistically valid or any other) have a value in providing stable ground, however constructed
Introduction: a story of inquiry and its thesis

and momentary as that may be, or do we need an altogether different relationship with what and how we know? How, in this place of not knowing such things, can we encounter ourselves and what we are doing? By what questions, signs, languages, forms and relationships do we evolve as we learn our way into these extinguishing worlds?

As with all of us in the Collaboration, my hope is that in your own time, in your own way, you re-encounter the feeling of searching for “truth” and perhaps even the feeling of truth as it is for you, knowing that as you do you bring oxygen to the blood/sap of wellbeing— even as you read this text. I invite you to come on a journey through philosophy, science, love, aesthetics, biography and politics to find new ground for yourself in our story. Such is the nature the participatory sustainability that we create here.

The thesis

Chapter outlines

Chapter 1

Following this Introduction, Chapter 1 begins in the middle of the Inquiry, with an account of the “Inquiry Intensive”, a two and a half day workshop that the whole Inquiry community devised and that seven of us attended in a Cave in the Blue Mountains a hundred or so kilometres West of Sydney, in January 2006.

With regard to linear concepts of time, I start the thesis here at the halfway point because the Cave was like the birthing of the living inquiry entity, although it was planned to be its conclusion. The previous year of research was in effect its incubation, and the subsequent year, the year in which I wrote the thesis, its infancy.

We were not to know this at the time of the Cave experience. I narrate the story of this event through my eyes at the time, knowing what I knew then and not now, referring to digitally recorded images, verbal interactions and sounds of the living systems around us. I call this chapter “Ways of Being” because our ways of knowing together, which we brought to collective consciousness in the ontological form of the “graces”, manifested as a community of ways of being in the Cave.

Looking at this chapter in a non-linear, synchronous sense, the Cave is iconic. The story has scientific, philosophical, cultural and political qualities as well as mythic and aesthetic properties that imbue the whole thesis. It is, and is still felt to be by all of us who were there, a “windowing” experience, opening us into ways of being that have the beginnings of sensing and articulating unfamiliar energies. As much as for those of us who could not attend as for those who did, we each encountered our non-participatory truths in the Cave, holding to each other as we learned through them. I do not analyse them, but
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lightly account for them as threads of a whole systemic movement. I dwell on my own non-participatory struggle, which I describe as the “falling cup”, a metaphor that had come into being before the Cave experience as well as during it, and to which I return later in the thesis. The cup is the potential for participation, which falls, again and again, off the “table-edge” of becoming, in our inability to take up each others’ invitations to engage with each other participatively.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 faces the primary question that social researchers need to consider, which is the epistemological issue of how to know their “subject” in ethical and recognised ways. It arrives after the account of the Cave, because the Cave was the birthing of the Inquiry, our so-called, “subject”.

As with all academic research, I underwent ethics committee requirements for the Inquiry to be launched. We had individual agreements detailing the form and extent of engagement, including promises of anonymity unless participants wished to be named (as in fact they chose to for the thesis document). An Information Sheet, detailing the intent of the research, means of departure and the possibility of Exit interviews, accompanied each consent form. All participants signed consent forms before they engaged in the Inquiry, and the terms were adhered to on my side of the agreement, throughout the Inquiry to the point of voluntary Exit interviews at the conclusion of their formal engagement. As it happens, everyone to various extents, is still engaged informally with the ongoing development of the work we did together.

Chapter 2 takes the question of ethics into that which happens once formal ethics are part of the structure of an Inquiry. In it I am concerned about the quality of knowing that exists between co-inquirers, including the experiences we hold between us and witness. I declare my promise to hold what I refer to as “the Spirit of the Inquiry” alive in the text that follows, despite the light footed dance that refusing to commit to an established epistemology demands and that might well threaten such constancy. It introduces the “best of all possible beasts”, our imagined spirit that we played with throughout the Inquiry, more meaningful to some than others. The lovely creature is perceived through our grace of “participatory sensing”, giving us a reflexive presence that keeps us true to the spirit of inquiry and joining in our resistance to devitalising objectification by speaking back to us with its energies in multiple ways.

While talked about frequently between us, my representation of it (and mine alone) is as the Theory of Theory, a way of being in practice that exists below and within the structures of models, frameworks and theories of participation. It offers an idea of “theory” that is not limited to an assumption of “mechanism” but which borrows Bohm’s idea of
theory being as a “view” (Bohm, 1980, p.5). My intention has been for the Theory of Theory to be recognisable throughout the thesis, in its unfolding structure and in my working with its unfolding. In so doing, I inform the reader of several flows of thinking (like the wires of Brooklyn Bridge, as Jane observes in this chapter) which hold me and through which I travel: narrative, essence, commitment, heritage, fractal and whole. These are the means by which I articulate the Inquiry experience. I follow my own journey within it this way as well, holding this construction within me as I hold the Cave, not as a tool to apply something, but as a living presence of the Inquiry.

Chapter 3

Having made my promise to the co-participants, I attend to our Heritage of “knowing” in Chapter 3. My purpose here is to learn from five people who intentionally worked at the edges of convention in their various fields of interest. It is here at these edges that I regard participatory practice to be strongest because of the work they must do to resist, or at least question, the validity of whatever orthodoxy determines the boundary of their field.

If viewed through a lens that requires disciplinary coherence for such an analysis to be whole, it is an eclectic selection. The coherence I am giving this selection is a study of various forms of participatory practice in the pursuit of epistemological and ontological truths. I encounter the feminist anthropologist, Laurel Richardson; the cultural theorist, Bob Hodge; the Action Researcher, Susan Weil; the philosopher Michael Polanyi; and the cosmologist, David Bohm. I show how each person saw grave risks for humanity in the invisible subtleties of objective knowing, and in that same invisible place proposed other ways of knowing that would at least avert the risk, if not create wellbeing. I see their working at the “edges” of knowing as a core element of participatory practice even if their work was not named as such by each of them.

Each practitioner/philosopher gives me crucial insight to the experience of working outside accepted validity goal posts. They describe the struggle of making the path as they walk it, and leave me with an extraordinary array of resources to call my heritage, and take into the journey that awaits me. At the conclusion of this chapter I am at the threshold of stepping into the void of not knowing.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, “Turning”, I turn back to Chapter 3 to reflect on its lessons and consider them in terms of my own commitment to participatory practice. Having spent some time encountering theory in terms of my participatory heritage (consistent with my Theory of Theory with regard to the “flows of source”), I refer to a workshop I created at the University of West England’s SOLAR Centre in my second year of the candidacy to give an
account of my facilitation practice. I am presenting you, the reader, with an account of my participatory practice, and weaving into it the experience of being at the threshold of not knowing, as it presents itself to the co-participants and myself in the workshop. In this way I am linking the journey of the thesis, into the everyday practice of peer practitioners and those who engage with them.

The workshop was an opportunity to explore what I came to understand as “emancipatory aesthetics”, or the power of aesthetics to free us from presumed ways of knowing and to articulate what knowing can be. I call this Chapter “Turning” because I see how my understanding as a speck of human ontology turns with humanity at this moment in our history, shifting as I do from following the paths of those who have gone before me (in Chapter 3), to working within my own trajectory of coming to know participatory practice (in Chapter 5). The intention of this chapter is to show a practitioner working into difficult ideas such as aesthetics, nature and participation with co-participants in a single workshop event. It indicates the kinds of interactions that can happen in participatory environments, how far they can go, and what they can become when held within the practitioner’s being, understanding that each practitioner has a unique form of practice while also holding some idea of what makes their practice “participatory”.

Chapter 5

Having described the experience of participatory practice existentially, in the Cave, ethically through Spirit, historically through Heritage, and practically through Turning, my next urgency is to declare to the reader what I understand “participatory practice” to be beyond my own experiences and assumptions.

“Ground”, as Chapter 5 is called, is an analysis of the global field, which I claim, exists, needs recognition and valuing and which is currently suffering fragmentation as a consequence of the persistence of mostly hidden objectivism throughout our ways of knowing. My concern is that the persistent fragmentation of the field (which following the insights learned in Chapter 3, is due to the quality of energy that objectivism imparts in how we know), is adding to the world of extinction, and that as participatory practitioners it is up to us to change this through peer recognition and collaborative action with regard to how we know what there is to be known.

I learned of the existence of the participatory field, in this form, through a literature review I carried out for an international organisation in 2004. The resulting on-line bibliography is only available for members, and thus is closed to the general public (see IAP2’s website, http://www.iap2.org/.htm for further information). In reference to it I describe a taxonomy made up of four “constituent” parts of a potentially whole field. I arrived at these distinctions by seeing the recurring patterns in the authors’ origins of
participation as expressed through their disciplines and fields of engagement. These origins were historically situated, as I describe in the chapter. However, at its conclusion I discuss how these historical and sectoral distinctions can also be qualitative distinctions of an individual’s practice.

On seeing them so I recognise them in my own practice, already described in Chapters 4 and about to be given greater critique in chapter 6. When seen this way, each practitioner becomes a fractal of the whole global field, which, when developed through the practitioner’s critical reflexivity, as for example, I am conducting in this thesis, begins the process of transformation from fragmentation into coherent, fluid whole. The rest of the thesis provides a means for this transformation to take place within each reader, through my account of the Inquiry and its generative manifestations.

The four “constituents” of the participatory field are: governance, community development, social learning and activism. I do not engage the reader in this discussion until Chapter 5 because I want the question of convention, as adopting an instrumentalist taxonomy of the field represents, to be understood as a conditioned way of knowing. The matrix is a comfortable convention, providing easily recognisable distinctions between one form of participatory practice and another. I capitalise the names of each of the constituent parts in this chapter to give them particular emphasis but do not continue this convention of capitalisation at any other time within the thesis. My intention is to raise the patterning they do to focal knowing for this chapter, and to let them fall back to subsidiary knowing before and after it. As much as it is the taxonomy’s particular rationale, it is the power of an instrumentalist pattern now drawn of a revitalised objective root (with the potential to generate integration) that I am trusting here. The grace of “transformative energies” are at work.

Chapter 6

As mentioned, from the end of Chapter 5 on, and true to the generative spirit of transforming energies, I am following my own integrative journey, moving from my current place on the fragmented global field of participation, which I share with many practitioners, to encounter emergent knowings about participatory practices with my peers. In “Friend”, as Chapter 6 is called, I explore how participatory practitioners come into being, and with our self-construction, how the energising participatory field struggles to come into existence too.

I argue for participatory theories of practice as I experience them in my own work. I include a sustained conversation, held with two peer practitioners, neither of whom engaged with each other, nor were they ongoing members of the Inquiry community even though they both contributed to some moments of it. They both offered me participatory spaces external to the Inquiry community in the same way each of the co-inquirers searched out such
coalitions to constitute the Inquiry beyond its boundaries with and/or without formal authorisation. (These searchings are described in Chapter 8, “Message Stick”).

I also reflect on two formal engagements in this chapter, that I undertook during the Inquiry project. Both were commissioned in local government and to do with sustainability matters. My purpose here is to consider the question of how and with whom we know what we do as “participatory practice”. We commune and compete with peers, we access theories and “apply” them in practice, we co-generate theories in practise, we defer to accepted authorities of scholarly, commercial and/or political kinds, we seek recognition and uptake of participatory work in communities and organisations. And yet all these attempts to make the field evident, robust and some improvement in the world run the risk of our simply imposing one form of orthodoxy (our own) on another.

I touch on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and explore the depth of authority in my own practice experiences, in both the formulation of participatory practices (an action that contests the “authority” with which I produce the taxonomy in the previous chapter), as well as the formulation of those powers which participatory practitioners contest, including at the level of epistemology. I account for my own startled realization that the architectures of knowing in my practice, as I had understood them, were still based in the “doxa” of objectivism in its multiple forms even though I thought myself to be an accomplished and committed constructivist. I recognise the power of Bourdieu’s understanding of multiple orthodoxies, or “heterodoxies” (Bourdieu, 1972, p.164, p.169) in terms of multiple epistemologies. I move the thesis into the realm of his proposition that objective knowing ceases to be objective the moment it is known. This inevitable critical subjectivity of knowing is illustrated in the contesting challenge of a workshop participant in my account at the conclusion of this chapter. Similar contestations are reported in the parallel stories of my colleagues that accompany my story in this chapter, indicating the shared difficulties we all face as part of a transdisciplinary and global field. It is about the grace of “befriending” without compromising the uncomfortable value of that which is illuminated in being seen as alien.

Chapter 7

“Community”, augments the close focus developed in Chapter 6, into a collaborative scale of “holding the ecology” of a community of inquiry coming into being. Drawing on the fortnightly diary notes I kept throughout the project, the evaluation data and the many teleconferences and other forms of data, I trace my experience of the Inquiry project, which found its moment of coming into being in the paradoxical and emancipatory terrains of not being (in a form that I could recognise). I am compelled to confront the source of my knowing, which I embrace as the moral potential of subjectivity, captured in the
revisited icon of “the falling cup”. I weave the multiple strands of Bohm, Bourdieu, Foucault, Polanyi and Torbert as well as feminist practitioners Miller and Wadsworth into the experience, counterbalancing the notions of paradox and integration. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my meaning of the Inquiry entity, that of befriending objectivity in the subjective grace of “holding ecology”.

In recognisable terms, this chapter is an account of methodology, except that given the lack of an authority with which to drive the Inquiry, and despite signed participation agreements, no adherence to methodology was entered into. Instead, participation lurched from one potential development to another, none of them being sustained to produce anything resembling a well-articulated co-construction of participation and its value to sustainability. I know (“thought” “I knew”) what participatory inquiry looks like, and this wasn’t it. One can imagine my anxiety as I struggled with the difficulties that I faced, over and over, failing any recognisable test of a viable inquiry, precious post-grad research time flying by in the absence of a shared concern in our “mutual” project.

What did take place was a form of engagement with each other, learning and attempted action, which was “participation” to the extent that we could muster such a thing in our own time, of our own intent, outside authorised action in our institutions. In terms of its manifestation in the world, was this low level of activity any different, in essence, from apparently engaged initiatives that policy and funding provide, but which result in a report that ends up on the dusty shelf? This chapter outlines my gradual loss of what I have always held to be valid research practice, coming to know much more intimately and painfully, how participation cannot come into being until we value ourselves and each other, and until we share such valuing within a collaboration.

Chapter 8

In one point in Chapter 7, I tell of how I determine to listen much more deeply to the participants, even in the midst of layers of silence that my attempts to engage with them produced. I go on in Chapter 8, to present the kinds of participation each co-researcher was generating throughout the Inquiry, and which they were not naming as “participatory” until they thought about these ideas with each other. In “Message Sticks”, I describe each practitioner’s experiences of being “in participation” in a construction of many worlds, each integrating the Inquiry into a person’s everyday participatory potential. This chapter, which is the second iteration of participatory practice that we created, is a form of discourse, linking the thesis back through the Cave, the graces and into the preceding year’s work.

Keeping in mind my concerns regarding how to know our shared interest as discussed in Chapter 2, the content of this chapter was generated in 2005, through an improvised form of “data” generation, as also discussed in the preceding chapter on method.
Introduction: a story of inquiry and its thesis

It involved three to five in-depth telephonic dialogues between each participant and myself, my audio recorded reflections on each dialogue, critical reflections, mapping and creative expressions arising from notes and recordings, as written by myself to each person. It was a way of expressing the profound value of each participant’s form of participatory practice as we struggled to recognise this value amongst ourselves. The overall effect of the chapter is a “ritualising” vision of the field at work in the world, known not through fixed patterns or bounded sites but as energising prisms into and of a participatory spirit at work. It is a work in many ways, should the reader wish to see them: in each person’s practice; in the overall living participatory entity that each person contributes to (the collaborative inquiry); in the generative truth of my creating a research method from within the collaboration to tell these stories; and in the structural function the chapter holds within the overall body of the thesis as it takes form in the reader’s mind. If each of these participatory qualities are appreciated as one, interconnected whole that the Message Sticks illuminate, the reader will begin to experience extraordinary sense of flow that participatory sustainability manifests in this chapter. I open pathways for the flow of knowing, undefined and yet still felt as moving through the thesis, from philosophy to theory to relational knowing, practice, practice sites and poetics, to literary communication and artefact, to reflexive reading and possibly, beyond.

Chapter 9

In the final chapter, I present lies “beyond” as I draw the whole journey forward into the “Forest”, the shared sense of our futures that is graced by our embrace of not knowing how nature wants to live with us. That issue was (and is) the question that we created in the Cave, and which the thesis ultimately attends to in the construction of the participatory field, and ways it can be known, as illustrated in this work.

The Forest is the third iteration of our practices. As accounted for in Chapter 7, the first iteration was an analysis drawn from interview data, which I described in a report early in the project in a conventional way (included in the Appendix). The second iteration was the collection of Message Sticks, as also reported in Chapter 7 and presented in Chapter 8, using a relational method of data generation and reporting. This third iteration, the Forest, is a kind of shared stream of consciousness, drawn from each participant’s Exit interview and sewn together to make the final chapter. It is not separated from the structure of the thesis as a piece of data, but IS the chapter, integral to the consummation of the thesis as it draws itself up through fragmented states into being in flow, from individual to indistinguishable voices.

In giving voice to those qualities within us that have felt shut down by familiar forms of knowledge generation and use, each co-participant speaks of his or her experiences of the Inquiry, as one voice - that of our beautiful creature. It speaks of its experiences
through us, its learning, frustrations, new commitments and regrets, reminding us that it is Thought - forgotten and invisible, locked out and down - that is being lost in the current constructions of sustainability and their continuing antitheses (Bohm, 1992). Our creature reminds us that while its thought continues to be suppressed it is still intact, full of energy and relatively close to hand, as the previous chapter illustrated. This final chapter voices a way of being that is possible, known and communicable but which currently, is barely audible above a whisper. Without being prescriptive or even, idealistic, this chapter insinuates in a micro scale, the transformative movement that the integration of the participatory field could possibly manifest at a global level. As much as it is what is articulated, the transformative movement is in between the words, sentences and paragraphs. In writing it I had a sense that in a way, it did not matter what I wrote, or even in what order I wrote, the text simply evoked fluency wherever I worked it. It was a very strange experience, which seems to remain in the script long after the writing. I am curious to know whether it communicates this sense to the reader. In this chapter all the graces that we articulated in the Cave are brought into one movement.

References and Appendices

The reader will find both a Reference section and a Bibliography at the conclusion of the thesis. The References are a list of texts that are discussed in the thesis. The Bibliography lists the texts that referenced authors discuss and some other items that were background to my research. The Bibliography also includes a selection of the items I reviewed to map the global participatory field.

The Appendices include the consent form that the co-researchers signed to formalise their engagement in the Inquiry (item 1), the evaluation questions as drawn from the text and devised by Guba and Lincoln (1989, 233-25) (item 2), and then a second version of the evaluation questions (item 3) translated by myself to assist the co-researchers through the three evaluations that guided the course of our work together. The reader will also find in the Appendices a summary of the first iteration of participatory practice (discussed previously) that I drafted in the first stage of the research project (item 4). I exclude it from the main body of the text because of its analytical stance, and as some of the co-researchers now say, while it was accurate at the time it no longer does them justice. It nevertheless holds useful information that throws light on the depth and breadth of participatory practice and is a measure of how far we have come when juxtaposed with Chapter 9. As already discussed, the second and third iterations are within the body of the thesis.

A Book of Psalms

The thesis moves through three parts and is “book ended”, with a promise at its beginning and a song at its conclusion. A promise was made in the Cave, to create a Book of
Psalms together. All the participants throughout the second cycle of the Inquiry created this work. It was conceived, co-coordinated and created by Jane Fisher (Jane F.) aided by Lesley Porter’s essential recognition at the critical moment of its coming into being, and agreed to by all of us in the Cave. All the participants give the Book of Psalms to the thesis, and beyond this work, as I see it, back to our “lovely creature”; a collective expression of our experiences of it and an artefact issuing from its mysterious centres through each of us.

Structure

Movement through the thesis from the Cave in Chapter 1 to the Book of Psalms in the Coda is by means of three familiar frames of participatory knowing: Part 1 is Ontology, Part 2 is Epistemology, and Part 3 is Practice. I do not engage in any scholarly analysis of these terms, but practice them in the text that follows. In so doing, my intention is that the reader will come to experience these structures of knowledge rather than only hold them conceptually. I had read much about these structures of knowledge prior to this Inquiry, but did not really feel them as ways of knowing and being until I had taken my eyes out of the books and wrought a living presence for these aspects of knowledge within myself and between us in the Inquiry.

The quality of ontology is not uniform or fitting into an existing frame. It is delicately flowing in each person’s sense of what is knowable to him or her. Ontology is expressed existentially in the actual words and interactions we create with each other as described in “The Cave”; in the ways we have of sensing what there is to be known (be they mythic, spiritual, theoretical or physical), as described in “Spirit”; and in the stories of those who have gone before us, and by implication which we hand forward to others, as described in “Heritage”. Each chapter illustrates a different way of being what can be known.

Epistemology is revealed as an ongoing experience of “coming to know”: through reflexivity in “Turning” where what we know becomes the reflective surface against which to distinguish our movement towards knowing and not knowing; through recognisable domains of action that are the generators of societal change in “Ground” - powerful for their being recognised and for the potential they hold when drawn together to manifest a whole, transdisciplinary field; and through the provocations and coalitions of critical and appreciative friendships as described in “Friend”. How we know is understood to be the means by which we become ourselves with each other through internal reflection, through accepted frameworks, and in relationship with others.

Practice is an integration of what we know with how we know in the act of making distinctions. In the instance of this research, I trace how I made distinctions in the “usual manner” of working a collaborative research method through three iterations, which failed to
manifest any intended collaboration. Once I recognised the persistence of objectivism at the roots of my so called constructivist ontology and epistemology, I was able to listen to myself in relationship with each participant, which gave rise to a recognition of each person’s practice in “Message Stick”. However in this chapter, I am still making (practising) distinctions that carve out one thing from another. It is not until the final chapter, Forest, that I slipstream my way into overcoming the fragmentation of each person’s practice and my own. It does not in any way deny the difficulties, or suggest any solution: it recreates a quality of being with each other that is regenerative and thus evocative of an experience of sustainability that is not generally considered in conventional definitions of the term. The distinction being made here is not one of seeing difference, but of experiencing and thus becoming a conduit for, transformative movement. The reader is invited to make this same quality of distinction as an early experience of participatory sustainability. The Book of Psalms (Writings from the Cave) in the Coda, a work created by the participants where my role as initiating facilitator was of no consequence, adds evidence of our discovery of regeneration in its beautiful record of our communications throughout the Inquiry.

As an overall structure, or kind of map, to lead into the reading of the text that follows, the reader will encounter the thesis as it curls from its existential present in the opening chapter of “the Cave”, through my singular reasoning and constructions of edges, in Turnings and Groundings, then up into fragmented, then collective and on into an holistic mingling of thought and word. It is felt as a curling movement which the Book of Psalms re-articulates independently of the thesis as a dynamic objective reflection of it: the seen that sees.

**Grace**

Throughout the thesis (and as I have also done in this introductory outline of it) I refer lightly to the “graces”, the ontological map that came out of the Inquiry strategy in varying forms and emphases. The graces are the essences of practice that we developed between us throughout the Inquiry. Each grace represents the message stick that a co-researcher brought to the Cave, each being a narrative turn of the person’s learning throughout the Inquiry. They are drawn from and hold a kind of magic, shimmering in their origin within each person’s honesty, in the Cave and away from it, and with all with whom we shared the Inquiry one way and another.

A grace shines into the multiple moments of distinction making we do; it can be realised through any way of knowing, and each creates many. They speak through my text, as they do through the poetics of all the co-researchers. They are present as the Pleiades - forgotten and seen again with delight - guiding through time and space and given specific
attributions by different story makers, able to be seen with the naked eye and also disappearing when looked at directly.

However a reader sees the graces, they offer a way of being in the disclosing face of not knowing how to know the way nature wants us to be. This development is reflective of Max-Neef’s observation that western culture’s development gives preference for rational thought over relational knowing which has resulted in our loss of a way of knowing and being - in nature:

The result has been that the fascination produced by reason has been so immense, that we have lost other faculties and sentiments that facilitated, so to say, our understanding of nature from within (Max-Neef, 2005, 53, p. 10).

The graces are presented along with the Inquiry community itself as the central “finding” of the thesis on the basis that our way of knowing, including our current non-participation in this question, conditions what we know and is ultimately all humanity has to offer those who inherit what we are doing. I slip them into each chapter, as each is a manifestation of a particular grace, while Chapter 9 brings them back together.

To conclude the Introduction I leave the last words to Jane Fisher, who in speaking for herself regarding her experience of the Inquiry is saying something for me too:

Now I acknowledge the reality of other, and ask where I stand, not what I can control. I have had the privilege of being within the group in the Cave, where the practise of practice is as the rocks of the escarpment; grounded, honed, intricate and toweringly majestic. I also have the privilege to be in other soils, sometimes new, sometimes tended and sometimes stony bare. I am where some seek to control and others to abdicate, as I witness the emergence of participatory opportunity (Fisher, 2006, p.3).
Figure 1: The Graces
PART 1: ONTOLOGY - WAYS OF BEING WHAT CAN BE KNOWN
CHAPTER 1 THE CAVE:
WAYS OF BEING

The feed into the motorway is blocked. I am cutting it fine but all things flowing I would have met Jane and baby Cam at the flight gate on time. It is drizzling, the traffic stops for 20 minutes, and Jane and Cam are arriving with no one there to receive them.

It’s a familiar moment. So much doing, so much spreading of time through all our relationships: the finely poised judgements to linger, or not, in that farewell conversation, to have that last cold drop of coffee or leave it, just in case the traffic lights are red all the way.

I call Jane’s mobile leaving a message to assure her I am close. I relax in the driver’s seat: breathe Susan, don’t start this in haste and apology. Accept the systemics at play and know that all will be well. The tendrils of being are flowing - even here on the choked freeway.

I have spent the week organising the last minute logistics for the Inquiry Intensive, a research event devised and agreed to by all the collaboration’s members. So much depends on trust and understanding of purpose and I am sceptical, even now after a year of collaborative dialogic inquiry, that we have much of either. Some other form of commitment, like a vague and persisting faith, is holding us together.

My mobile rings. It is Brigid in Lismore. The weather is foul; the planes are grounded and she has already been waiting for two hours to find out if she can get out at all. My heart sinks. As with each of us, the loss of a single person’s presence in an inquiry event is like the loss of a mountain from a landscape. The rivers flow in other directions than they otherwise would, other continents rise and fall, and different climates take hold. Different from what?

Let go of expectations, let the system come.

I find Jane and Cam waiting at “baggage claim”. We begin our familiar rhythm of conversation, catching up on lateness, motorways, Brigid and the trip ahead into the mountains. “This is Act 1,” I remind us both, alluding to our group-devised game plan. We have known each other for 12 years, a professional and intellectual friendship that reaches into some more personal aspects of our lives.
The drive into the mountains is long, slowed by a few stops along the way. Cam’s sweet voice trickles into the front of the car as he names purple cars, airplanes and other definable delights that two year olds are able to recognise and communicate. Jane reflects back each of his articulations: “pwoopal ca”-“purple car”.

It is a dance of mind, mouth and heart that gently rocks me back to my own experiences as mother and being mothered. A sacred place made so evident in the silence of those who do not hear their children. The listening place has risen and fallen throughout the Inquiry: will it come forward this weekend? Cameron’s presence is the child spirit that graces creativity and co-construction throughout our lives.

As we wind up the mountains through the “Bell’s Line of Road”, the mists of Kurrajong dramatically lower their skirts around our progress. We are driving into clouds, the late afternoon light dimming to dull grey, the dripping and ancient bush leaning into our senses.

It is appropriate: this moment in the Inquiry is cloudlike in its ambiguity and freshness. It ever was thus. The old Peugeot, built for European winters, is taking us from geography to metaphor. How will we know that shifting form, I am wondering, if it happens? The tendrils of being - that are yet to be - are flapping in some breeze, like Tibetan prayer flags, their edges known… how?

We turn into the side road and the smart eco-lodge appears through the fog: a modern Australian corrugated iron construction of two stories, adorned with verandas and windows wherever possible. Our host, Mark, meets us in his akubra and oil coat, guiding the car into the drive so we can unload.

I am keen to receive Jane’s responses to the place – it struck such a chord with me when I checked it out a few weeks ago. The place of our work is an arbiter of context to some extent. She keeps her thoughts mostly to herself. Cam is pleased to be free of the seat belt and we have a bit of work to do. I open the boot and haul out a milkcrate-sized box full of food.

The interior of the lodge is a love affair with wood: polished stairs, bare rich floor boards, second hand furnishings chosen for their expression of “wood”. Some of the walls are covered with Mark’s murals bringing the misty mountains inside the house. There is an attic dormitory, 3 bedrooms, ante-rooms with comfy lounges, combustion stoves, a roomy and sensible stainless steel and wood kitchen, and heavy ‘70s Spanish style dining table with 6 solid wooden chairs. Jane comments that she thought the place would be primitive but that it is very comfortable. She dislikes the recycled ‘60s furnishings in the bedrooms but loves
the honey coloured walnut they are made of. The house is resonating with her as it did with me, in her own way.

Four of the twelve participants had already chosen not to attend: Margaret had withdrawn from the project some months previously but had wanted to re-engage down the track; Sue’s father had passed away three weeks ago and her focus remained with her family; Jane G. had been bitten by something that through medical oversight had resulted in her contracting suspected ricketsial, and Penny was battling with death threats from protagonists of a local development in her neighbourhood. And now Lismore has received 260 ml of rain in the 24 hours that Brigid is trying to fly out. The mobile rings; the planes have been grounded and Brigid cannot come.

So we are 7 – or so I hope. One of us has changed plans at the last minute and determined to drive up alone and at a later time, to make some space for thinking. I am a little anxious that it will just be too hard with the darkening fog; that he would decide to turn back. He does not.

“Anything that happens is an addition” Peter O. had said as we laughed on the mobile in my freeway traffic mayhem despite all the consultations, planning, detailed arrangements, emails and everything else we undertook to make the Inquiry Intensive a reality. He is reminding me to leave my unaware expectations at the beginning of the motorway and let the system come about in its own terms.

With the exception of Brigid, while each person’s choice not to join us is conveyed as a result of overwhelming odds, there is also a patterning of overall engagement in the whole Inquiry in the final determination of who comes. Life continues to play into each person’s decision about how present they are to it, and wherever they are is true. Our “beautiful creature” is turning back into and through us again – determining through which frames it will come into being. I can look at it that way: let the curiosities that we experience between us as “our beautiful creature”, our best of all possible beasts, have its head. What powers speak caution to me about this way of seeing, I wonder?

Our spirited inquiry is made up of each of us, our particular qualities of engagement and understanding of the Inquiry in our lives. It is felt as something that is partly human consciousness, partly ecological, non human and cosmological. We smile about it but do not speak of it in too much detail. We are treading the nervous edges of science, myth, spirituality, social reconstruction, transformation, credibility and ontology.

1 Peer O’Connell attributes psychodramatist Max Clayton with this statement.
This matter of who is in the room is so crucial to human-centred inquiry. It is a paradigmatic shift away from objectivised inquiry and culture. Human-centred inquiry begins with an understanding that each person’s presence, perception and qualities of “touch” with others are the utter architecture of inquiry practice and the manifestation of knowing. Understandings of personhood within each other, ourselves and the nature of the Inquiry’s focus are not immediately available to any of us - even given our experience in participatory work. It is this sense of blindness to self, each other and the potent entity that our connectedness creates, the expected silences about these matters, that are for me evidence of the tacit presence of positivism, instrumentalising our bodies and minds.

I am unpacking the food, sorting plastics from paper in the undoing of things, setting up the rooms, lighting lamps, candles and incense for atmosphere, the fire for warmth of body and spirit, playing music and enjoying Cam’s Olympic patter of little feet as he discovers his new space with “mummy”.

Each car arrives, lights beaming faintly through the ever thickening, darkening cloud cover. It is wonderful when each person walks into the room. It is like arriving in heaven and finding other beloved souls there. As we encounter each other in this new physical place, we lift our child faces to each other, smiling, slightly surprised, wanting reassurance and appreciation for our decision to come, for the journey and the agreement to risk.

A series of rolling teleconferences produced our agreement for a two and a half day programme made up of “Acts” defined by governing qualities and questions, enabling “Scenes” to pop up if they want to. This is our resolution to the epistemological edge between the crowning of emergent, participatory engagement and the responsibility for the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet here, about these matters, in this way. The university funded the accommodation and travel and we have an obligation to honour the trust placed in us by the institution as well as its representatives – my supervisors for example. Obligation needs to be planned for, participation cannot.

The plan was that Act 1 started the moment we met each other at airports, bus stops and homes, the evening before the first full day began. We called this “transitioning” so we could pay attention to the moments of meeting each other after all this time, travelling from knowing each other only in virtual forms to actually “clapping eyes” on each other. Act 2 was to start in the morning of the first full day, and was named “exploring”. We would take as long as we needed to tell of our experiences of the Inquiry. Brigid had suggested that each person bring a “message stick” to help us focus on our tale: something tangible that represented a person’s experience of learning throughout the project to which we could speak, and about which we would need to make decisions regarding which parts to tell and
which to leave out, where to begin and where to end. Act 3 was to begin on the second full day and was named “knowing”. It was intended to create connections from the previous day and to somehow draw into being a shared understanding of the meaning of the Inquiry – a co-construction of knowing – trans-vocal and morphogenetic. Act 4 was to arise at the conclusion of this sense making; it was named “presencing”. Lesley thought that this was to be about our understanding of whom we felt ourselves to be at the conclusion of the workshop experience.

Act 5 was to be our last formal moment together in the Intensive. It was called “transitioning” again and as with the first Act, in the tradition of Joseph Campbell’s “Hero with a Thousand Faces” (1988) – marking the departure and return to the “other world”. It involved choosing new message sticks to tell the story of the Inquiry to named others to whom we would be returning. The power of the message stick, of telling our story to others, is throughout this thesis.

Now we are sitting around the dining table. Being seven of us we are one chair short, so we drag an armchair in from the lounge to interrupt the symmetry of the wooden chairs. It is powder blue velvet. I have made a three-course meal to welcome everyone. The windows are steamed up with our warmth showing against the cold black night. We are laughing, exchanging stories and sensing ourselves together. I know everyone well. My work friends surround me: past employers or co-consultants on past participatory works that I have won in the market place. The work stretches over 15 years and across social and environmental inquiry environments in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia. The Inquiry strategy included people from Queensland too, but for the reasons already explained, only those from South Australia and New South Wales are here in the Cave.

For everyone else the interrelationships were quite different to mine with them: some have never met each other before, others have met once or twice in the Inquiry’s local group work, one or two had worked with each other and myself on old projects. Everyone knows each other through teleconferences, emails and a few meetings.

Meals are well organised. At Peter O.’s suggestion, we work in teams, combining a Sydney person with an interstate visitor; each team of two people deciding on the menu and organising the ingredients. It was agreed that the people who make the meal also clear up to give others a chance to relax and talk, and that each menu be built around ethical principles – minimal waste, harm, toxicity etc. We have also agreed to enjoy wines at dinnertime. This meal making process, like the meeting and greeting at the airport, is a practical step into co-operation, collaboration and whole system manifestation; a tangible sustainment of the metaphysical.
By the end of the meal people are full, warm and dog-tired. I have arranged who slept in which rooms as part of the logistical planning. I am not yet ready to go to bed on the first night, and neither is John. I am too excited. We sit outside after everyone slips away, our bottoms chilling on the damp veranda floor, enjoying a smoke in the pristine night air like bad school children. We go in and spend quite some time with a blackboard and chalk exploring John’s feelings and thoughts about a close relationship he is holding: it is a moment of our reaching back into the heart of our friendship.

I sleep as I usually do – a bit stuffy, hot and wakeful.

The next morning, Jane and I get up early to take Cam to a childcare service I had managed to find just days before. We grab the breakfast that Team 1 somehow cobbles together in the dimmer moments of morning consciousness. We head back out into the still heavy clouded landscape. The childcare centre is lovely – staff enthusiastically talking about “emergent programming” as if they know we would understand.

On our return Mark is waiting for us to go with him to the Cave. It is about a 10 -15 minute walk down quite a steep track into the gully at the back of the lodge. We gather our materials, Mark hoists up a backpack with firewood and we set off. He leads and I follow with everyone falling in line behind.

This is another threshold crossing; there are layers and layers of crossings into deeper forms of being and transition. Now we are walking in the morning sun through the dew-flecked bush, the friendly chatter of the group behind me, Mark proudly pointing out his accomplishments in creating his “contribution to sustainability”. He shows his knowledge of the land he cares for, explaining its curious dimensions as a cross section of the whole topography of the mountains, telling us of his relationship with his son in the building of it. It is another living tendril climbing in, through and out of us again.

Down we go, over steps, around boulders, past banksias, ferns, gums of many kinds until we come out into an opening with some simple benches for rest. We are on a rocky outcrop. Ahead is the canyoned cliff on the other side of the gully, typical of the Blue Mountains’ sandstone stock, evoking ancient seas, millennia of pressure, upheaval, sun, wind, frost and rain. Through the layered pinnacles on our side of the gully we see into the green pastorale of Hartley Vale, a very different Europeanised landscape to that on which we stand at this moment. We feel it here – the cruel nostalgia of Europe and the inestimable endurance of this “southern” land - displacement and the terrorising power of the State colliding with the unknown wisdom of indigenous peoples. This resting place is a next threshold, passing into the deeper place of the Cave, now just metres away down a steep set of wooden steps.
Having visited it before, when I decided on this place, I know the Cave is waiting for us, empty, cool and still. Its first view of us is of a line of cloaked travellers, burdened and treading quietly, reaching through our still-polite associations with each other. We step out of the sunlight into the Cave’s wake-up morning chill. Crossing into a surprisingly foreign and intimate place, we need each other in a slight insecurity.

Figure 2: The Cave’s first view of us

I am poised on the thrill of everyone’s responses to the Cave as they come through the entrance. It is as if we are coming home. I walk in after Mark and put down my gear, grabbing my camera to catch each person’s turn into the space. On first sight, the Cave is a significant space. It takes your breath away - and gives it back to you.

It is formed around a semi-spherical shape, the wind scooping out the sandstone to produce a cathedral-like dome half open to the elements. The ground is of pale, gritty dust; the back and sidewalls rise up forming ledges and steps that climb over our heads to the opening.
The opening is fringed with sheoaks and other indigenous plants managing to hold onto its edges, silhouetted against the sky like some delicate Japanese illustration. Black cockatoos, who so love the little sheoak cones, fly over the Cave many times. The mouth is as high as the Cave itself and filled with well established, but also delicate trees growing from floor to ceiling, their tops just miss brushing the Cave roof at its outer edge. Beyond the Cave the gully tips down into its deepest floor, a 15-minute scramble into a rain forest creek. The cloud of the preceding night has condensed into a steady curtain of dripping water, bridging Cave roof to floor.

**Figure 3: Our first moments with the Cave**

Mark has provided trestle tables, sinks with rainwater taps, 9 volt lighting, a bar-b-q and deck chair seating for the comfort of those who visit. It is a space that is used to performance workshops, family reunions and significant meetings as well as those who simply want an unusual weekend away. A stone-ringed fireplace is at the centre. On the other side from the table the floor steps down into another space, the launching spot for a marvellous hammock swing strung up to the very roof of the Cave on a 20-metre cable. You can climb into the swing, turn around to lie down into the hammock, and travel wide slow circles and lengths – looking up at the ceiling or just closing your eyes. Many of us begin our relationship with the Cave in the swing. Some of us meet our little fears in its sure support.

Mark wants to introduce us to the Cave. He works through a variety of housekeeping details including how to use the eco-loo outside. He then talks about the Gundungurra people who once used it (see [www.gundungurra.net.au](http://www.gundungurra.net.au)). Holding a stick he points to the ochre
outline of a child’s hand on the Cave wall, and to more images, now so faded but still discernable.

Some of us wonder if we should be here at all. We feel the loss and suffering of those who once frequented this place; we feel the continuation of something that the Cave offered to all people who could see it and our transgressive access to it. We bid Mark goodbye, and walk around the Cave, in our own time, space and terms.

Figure 4: Mark introduces the Cave

We are Jo, Peter O., John, Lesley, Peter W., Jane F. and Susie standing in a Cave in the Blue Mountains, on the morning of January 20th, 2006. We talk easily and appreciatively about the place for a few minutes.

We gather our books, and settle into the deck chairs around the fireplace. Deep silence flushes into us, holding us collectively in its dignity. We sit in such quiet for minutes on minutes, listening. It feels easy. The water is running down from the roof to the floor, birds are piping. I have turned the sound recording instruments on.

[056GR71:0105:27] “So when we are ready we might like to start with a round of ‘check ins’ – a few words of what is happening for you…”

Here we are facing each other in this place after all this time, all those words, transcripts and all that communication technology attempting to reach across our various
geographic and logistical distances for over a year. “Checking in” is a practice I learned with my friend and mentor, Susan Weil at SOLAR. It allows us to bring our lived experience into a collaborative setting. It is based on the understanding that “living life as inquiry” recognises that what we do, notice and learn about, at any time is the data. There is much in the reframing of living into data, a perspective that is by no means a shared one. It requires such an effort to “wake up” from this long sleep we are in and be present to such an idea at any time.

Running water; bird song.

“I am thinking how strange it is to be here”. John speaks the first words to cross the threshold into the heart of Inquiry, linking the conversations of the year as they pass into this place, this moment.

Peter O. says: “I am probably 90% here – at the moment there is still a little bit of that stuff from the other world (hmm), the other space that is still clinging on, so…”; “it is totally other world isn’t it, (hmm), totally…?” (Mmm). He goes on: “And I am also, yeah, not sure what to expect in this world. Peter used a great term this morning about the… the fog being like a fog of our conscious- you know – what is going to lift collectively from this… I have got that feeling individually too, a sort of an unknown. What is going to evolve out of this? I am also mindful of something that Susie said last night about everyone’s part in the Inquiry. A sense that this is an absolutely… this will never happen again, it’s unique – and the uniqueness of this, (yes, yes), (hmm) this combination of people. And sort of a, a bit of a wonder and mystery about that too, what will emerge from it?”

“I can’t… can’t believe that it’s happening – I know a lot is happening, a lot of logistical work but, um, yeah, you couldn’t have orchestrated this weather, the setting, the… In particular Mark’s comments about ‘this is my contribution to sustainability’ – that really struck me (hmm), that, um, there is somebody that tried to create an opportunity for people to… How did…? How can we possibly be in the right place at the right moment for that stuff?” (Hmm). Jane settles back in her chair.

“It explains why you were so excited when you heard that there was an opening” says Lesley.

“And why you were so insistent” John says.

(Was I, I think to myself? A little shocked that what I thought was such gentle communication came across as “insistence”.)

I smile and we laugh. “I sensed it”. “You did”. “I just love the profile of the rocks and the trees on the edges there – just exquisite.”
Jo’s soft voice chimes in: “I was feeling that merging way before when you were talking about different worlds, and that I didn’t know how to explain what was happening to me when you said that – and it was like I was overcome with a feeling of warmth - and - presence. You know, I am sitting here, um, there is a world that happened here long before I was sitting here. And was just imagining that, imaging the child sitting up on that ledge – … I can’t be certain, but that is how it is looking. Just knowing other people have had this amazing experience long before. And how they… Just… Really weird, that kind of feeling I had – in that world, just for a moment, and then it was like… back through here – that was what was happening for me… I am just in awe, I am so privileged to be in one of…” She fades back into her comfortable silence.

“When we were all quiet before I was thinking I just don’t want to speak, you know - what can we say – words are so inadequate.” Lesley is talking. “But I am also thinking about, you know, that concept of being transformed and connected with the universal and the grander things of life – that is what I was feeling in the quietness. A bit like what you said, Peter, also thinking about how what we do leads to - sometimes we are able to articulate where we currently are at a point in time, so we can be there at that point in time so we are able to - articulate where you are spiritually, physically, emotionally, so it doesn’t end up being “tomorrow and I missed it”. (Hmm) “The other bits come chattering in, and you know, seduce me to go in different directions, but then to just come back to here and really want to anchor in this place… It is all so incredibly odd. It is a strange land we are in together. As you say it has never happened. The odds are that it wouldn’t happen – that’s why I said last night there are a lot of people who couldn’t be here - but it is remarkable that we are here; even how we are loosely connected in the Inquiry…” says Lesley.

Peter W. is moved to speak with a gentle emphasis: “I am surprised how little chatter is going on for me. I think it is because when we were up here and just coming down - those formations, this is a gateway into another world. Just right, we stopped there and took it all in. And then coming down here, it is as if the spirit and vibration of the place is pushing the chatter out. It has so much power. It has been occupied, spirited, lived in, storied and here we are, a continuation of the story… Just yesterday on the radio [someone] was saying the story that never ends is always a new beginning – this is another new beginning, although it is part of a story that never ends.” (Hmm).

More silence. Water falling.

I say: “I am feeling, if I wanted to understand something about truth and rightfulness, a quality about those two ideas, what I am feeling now and where I am now
would be a reference for that.” “Ah-hmm”, “Hmm”. “Truth and rightfulness.” John repeats. “Hmm.”

[056GR71; 02.00.05] John begins a second round of reflections. He refers to his impression of driving through the outer western suburbs, where developers have created gated communities - “McMansion Land” as we refer to it - and how great the distance is between that brutalised landscape and where we find ourselves now.

“How do we get from there to here?” He pauses, and as if the Cave has spoken in the silence and he must reply to it, reassuring it: “I am still searching the rock. Those lines in that rock – that go up and wind through the gap underneath – and that cute little tree, a Tee Tree, whatever that…”

We talk about how the whole Inquiry project has been a way of making that journey from McMansion Land, how we could never have predicted at the beginning that we would be here now, never thought about such a place as this, such a journey in the teleconferences.

[056GR71; 02.03:15] Peter W. says: “Gratitude and wonder is part of what pushes the chatter. It trumps that stuff… it – no that’s is a bit stupid - it is harder to feel gratitude and wonder in McMansion Land – it resists it. Resists: an active resistance.”

We reflect on how wilderness of sorts and transformation need to be a part of every landscape no matter how manufactured a place might be to us: [056GR71; 02.06:11] “I believe that part of the sustainability quest is going to have to imprint it and find it, so that a recognition process can be drawn out even in the most hostile and remote locations for an idea about sustainability, whatever we might think that is about,” I say. We talk more about the nature of spirituality and sustainability.

[056GR71; 02.07:43] Jane says: “And that is my understanding of your research project – the Inquiry – what do we understand is the possibility of inviting others to make a similar journey, out of McMansion Land to somewhere else?” There is general agreement while I am struck by the word “your” research project, even after all this time… I know she has no intention to make it so, but the thought makes me feel such a failure. My story.

I muse on Jane’s words some more – I think the Inquiry is about the journey that Jane is describing but I want to remain open to what it might be about even at this late stage, it still feels so imminent. McMansion Land is in all our hearts one way or another, like it or not. We talk about the sense of belonging we have to the landscape we currently inhabit, here in the Cave; how the Cave is absorbing us as we sit there. The curtain of dripping water, sound and solid, is still falling.
Chapter 1. The Cave: ways of being

[056GR71; 02.10: 15] “…Because this is such a welcoming space, nature would know that this is what you need, where you want to come and want to be. So it is almost like a portal. Nature knows humans want to come and want to know about it and therefore be able to articulate – to the people who come – what it is it is trying to say … all channels are open.” We understand Peter W.’s thinking as remarkable as the idea is, as unrepeatable outside this place as it is. John’s question of “who are we as a group” - is rising up of its own accord. Some silence passes.

[0056GR71:03.00.23] “OK, that was a good check-in, yeah?” I say, “Where do we want to go from here? Follow what we agreed, or is this a… an Act transition, or a scene to be had?”; “a Scene 1?” (We laugh a little self-consciously, I think).

“Do we want to light a fire?” John asks. We agree that a fire would be an excellent way to progress, “more of an arrival for us” and a manifestation of Scene 1. Peter O. patiently chops the wet and knotty wood with an unhelpful adze. We all try to help build the fire. The leaves are wet and the smoke follows us around like a hissing snake protecting its Cave. John blows on the reluctant embers as they spit into life. I comment to everyone about how I am reminded of Susan Weil’s powerful whispering, “just blow on the embers”, as an encouragement to my practice at the outset of the research strategy.

We have coffee and chocolate, do more hammock swinging, more standing out at the Cave entrance and looking up at the pinnacles, make a few visits to the eco-loo, while someone is checking the sound equipment. I notice that I am laughing too loud. I sense that we are all still feeling a little forced, ungainly, still travelling from McMansion Land; we are getting to know each other in our little acts of co-operation. John blows long deep gusts of breath onto the more willing twigs.
“We have wood burning,” John announces.

There is a different bird song. Where the first was a sweet piping sound, this is like a rusty wheel creaking down a road. The fire crackles. I feel as if I am waiting for the message stick moment to arrive and am wondering how it will. We comment on how the smoke finds its way out of the Cave so easily, on the mesmerising properties of fire, the idiosyncrasies of lyrebirds.

Silence settles again. I am waiting for someone other than me to initiate our Inquiry-focussed discourse. When does chat become discourse and how do we make such a crossing? No one steps forward. This is what happens without structure I think – the interactions become aimless, wasteful. I remain unknowing about what holds people back: the stuff of participatory practice and its edges.

“Well, I am wondering if we can move forward. I am hoping that I don’t always have to be the one to move things forward,” I say. There is soft laughter. “We do have a certain amount of time… and an inquiry question to walk within.” “An Inquiry question?” someone says, as if the idea is new to them. I am not sure whether they are being critical, turning an idea over again, or simply have not read the timetable for the two-day programme.
“I have a real confidence that it will just happen. When I asked that question on the teleconference – “who are we?” - I am now moved to ask, “what are we?”” says John. I comment that my message stick touches on that question, and then feel that perhaps I should not have said that. I have perhaps closed John down, by making the connection.

Jane says: “Susan, do you want to start with your talking stick or would you prefer not to begin.” “I don’t know, what do you reckon?” “Well, I think you should begin, because even though this is participatory it is led by you.” “It was initiated by you.”

I am paying close attention to this interaction: perhaps the dynamics of what we call “leadership” will reveal themselves here. As if reading my mind, Jane goes on: “There are many forms of leadership and it’s without doubt that you are the person who created this opportunity. Out of respect we should afford you the opportunity to speak first. And besides, the smoke is going in your direction so it must be your turn.” We laugh. I notice how Jane has assembled a toy truck and a few wooden toys that Mark must have provided for kids that use the Cave, how she has parked it (or was it just coincidental?) next to her chair as if wanting Cam’s presence close somehow.

The toys had been placed by Mark, trustee of the Cave. They had been placed with thought, with care and with intention. I felt them as a cognition of my capacity for innocence, directness and play, as much as respect for my having brought my actual son with me. I arranged them in response and respect to Mark’s act and a symbol of my own being. I was conscious of my actions, but not aware of the journey they would lead me through. Like the deliberate choice of a path based on awareness of my immediate environment and the journey that unfolds. There was nothing coincidental about my act or about Mark’s act. But the potency of each was beyond our contemplation in the moment (Jane to Susie on reviewing draft of Chapter 1, email communication; 3/11/06).

When imagining this moment, I had thought I should go last, so as not to imprint a shape on the event given my unique position of being Inquiry initiator located at the communication hub of the project’s trajectory. I gather my “message stick” together. It is not a stick; it is a stainless steel bowl filled with rainwater from the Cave’s tap, containing a rock from my home aquarium. The rock is covered in some dark green amoebic growth on its surface. John touches the rock: [0056GR71:05.04.04] “Oh, it’s live” he says. I pick up the paper that I had written the previous day for this moment and settle back into my chair. I am open to how this will happen.
Chapter 1. The Cave: ways of being

[0056GR71:06.00.01] I begin: “I had a lovely experience of spending the whole of the day writing what I wanted to say to you. I thought I needed to write it down because, um, I am at this place where I just needed to grasp something… It is just where I am at, it is not where we are at… it is called ‘the best of all possible beasts’.”

“Susie can I ask you not to apologise for what you are saying before you have said it?” “Sorry” I say. We all laugh.

I ask for them to interrupt me, and work with me through the words. I begin reading, commenting on our sublime place at this moment, sublime because we don’t know what form of reality we are currently living and experiencing. I am talking to the few people in the world who know my work intimately, across 15 years of practice. It feels as if I am now saying something that I have wanted all my life to say to people I know, respect and love. It is a story that no-one knows as a whole, but each person has some significant place within. As I read there are appreciative sounds of agreement and understanding.

There is one section, where I am talking about the lack of flow in the project and describe it as “the sound of the little rise of non-positivism standing in the face of the positivist immobilising wall” when I start coughing – my throat is dry and tight. Peter W. leans towards me and says – “have a drink of water – it’s something to do with what you are saying”. Lesley and Jo agree. I put down my paper and read a section from Senge et al’s (2005) publication “Presence”, about “suspension”. I need to read it twice for people to absorb it. John offers to help me through my coughing by reading my paper – Jo disagrees. I drink the water and my coughing eases. I recall the anxiety of waiting for responses to invitations and writings – the power of the autobiographical narrative in the inaction – determining whether or not to “catch the participatory cup falling”. John asks me to read the section again. When I reach the bit about Bryson’s idea of evolution not being about creating human beings but that human beings are hosts to bacteria, and that it is single celled organisms that are the arbiters of evolutionary success, I pause and present my green and watery message stick.

There is the familiar silence at the end of reading. It has taken about an hour. I fetch the map I have sketched to describe the overall strategy pointing out the circles and connections. “It’s helping me see how rich it is”, someone says. “Over here there be dragons,” says Peter W., referring to the edge of the butcher’s paper map on the Cave floor. I lay out the papers on the rocks along with my rock/bowl friend. I return to the circle of chairs and sit down. Silence prevails.

“Well, that was an interesting um…” Jo begins to say.

“I liked the rock choice,” says Peter W.
Quiet resumes. I am wondering: what is going on, not being said, unable to be spoken? The quiet continues with no further comment.

[0056GR71:07.05.16] “Ah, it’s sort of - cool - isn’t it” says Lesley, changing the subject. Chattering breaks out, Lesley and the two Peters put some more wood on the fire, and someone fills up the kettle. The curtain of water is still falling. Peter chops up more wood. “That’s looking easier Peter”. Lesley hums as if she is in her own kitchen. I think I belong here, in this silence between us, as uncomfortable, un-reassuring as it is: it is also open. Are people feeling judged by me? Are they mulling over and making connections? Was it all too much? Have I stated the bleeding obvious and weighted down something that might have taken off if it was not for my message stick? Always the differences…

Different to what?

“I am really enjoying feeling cold,” says Jo. Much more quiet, moving around, mumblings to each other.

Figure 6: Peter W. and Peter O. (r) tending the fire

[0056GR71:07.08.44] “I really love what you said about surrender,” Jo says to me. “Ahh-ha”; “I think that’s so…”; “What happened to that lovely smooth piece that…”; “Yeah”; “the stick you mean?”; “It was a theme going through the stories that triggers recognition”; “quite a few hands have held that thing”; “yes”; “needs some help I think”; “it does doesn’t it”; “it was about your story of the horse”; “ I so wanted to bring a horse…”; we laugh; “I think it’s alright”.

Pause.
“I think that was really the one for me, that power of understanding and how surrender ...”; “the one on one dialogue”; “but I am constantly reminded...”; “I did not think that we would have 6 hours of continuous rain” “6 hours? “Hmm, I got up at 6”; “I didn’t get up”; “I put my raincoat on”; “Can you cope with it?”; “I love it.” The sound of the little rise of non-positivism in the face of the wall is here.

“Is the ‘cup falling’ Susie?” John asks.

“I don’t know” I laugh nervously. “Hmm”; “Could be.”

I am touched that John is noticing the possibility of evaporation following my message stick, the overwhelming non-engagement with my thought, courage, investment and trust as I saw it. At last and at least, with Jo’s reaching out and John’s observation, I have a witness to this. It makes sense that it is John, given his praxis of witnessing the emergence of new forms of community. It makes sense that it is Jo, whom I have worked with for so many years, who is trying to break through the silence.

Lesley speaks: “I was intrigued by your idea that it was only participatory practice if the conversation was initiated by other participants. I can conceptually see how from your position how that would be, umm, you know, a definition”. We engage in a conversation about the problem of participation as we experienced it in the project. This is the heart of my inquiry as I see it, and at last we are talking about it. We talk about the tacitly shared view that indirect communication – that is, via technology - was disabling to intimate, person centred inquiry; how this barrier is broadly felt across everyone’s work, the contradictions of the depth of relationship we experienced in our teleconferences and the persistence of this disabling idea – the inability of depth to breach belief. Peter W. refers to some quantitative research that identified trends in people’s behaviours regarding indirect and direct communication. “So what is that?” I ask. “I think it is mammalian”; “Mammalian?” “Yeah, eye contact, my bacteria can interact with his bacteria.” Laughter.

Jane reflects on her thinking processes during the teleconferences, how she vacillated on not knowing whether what she had to say would amount to something that had meaning to everyone or only to herself. Others share her reticence. “And yet that is gold” I say, “if we had been able to discuss that in the teleconferences it would have sprung open a lot of stuff.”

Jo is reminded of how she felt more comfortable in the Inquiry when we set up a teleconference to reflect on a paper by Peter Reason, and we move into a discussion about its contents for those who chose not to participate at the time.

“The idea of us being an ecology of bacteria” says Peter W., returning to another aspect of my talking stick “is like the Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy when Arthur Dent
felt seriously discomforted by something he did because the experience was like drinking a glass of water - which might not seem such an unusual experience but you should ask the water.” We laugh.

We talk more about what the world can look like through the prism of bacteria as the central evolutionary power. Jo: “Was anyone impressed about the dust that came back from the comet and is going to hold the secrets of the universe?” Jane laughs: “The answer will be 42”; “Because they have not asked the right question”; “I like the smell of the leaves when they burn” someone comments, bringing us back from deep space into the Cave.

The reflections on the nature of participation are continuing: “a coalescing of thought, reaching critical mass of ideas or thought, or something that generates the next thing… constantly just observing, watching, being a part of, and like yourself, not trying to create anything artificial or insert anything. For me it has been a really strong sense of participation. I am hearing your pain that you are feeling, waiting for responses, waiting for initiative to be taken”; “and get stuck into it”; “action”; “yeah, like get into those Councils, support each other, and open up spaces”; “oh, I couldn’t, I was in the most unproductive space. I feel myself more and more withdrawing and moving away from those organizational places and not offering that because they don’t see it as valuable. But family, life at home and friendships - very rich and productive”; “and maybe that is where it is going to be, the institutions are going to collapse”; “it could well be…”

“The kettle has boiled. Would we like another round of chocolate or tea?” I ask. “It’s the lunch team’s turn.” Our material needs weave in and out of our quest, keeping the manifestation of thought close to the corporeal surfaces of existence. The conversation hops from lunch, to dinner, to coffee and co-ordinations. There are more passing reflections about the power of the Cave as an environment to shape our relationships, focus and conversation. The fire is tended and Team 2 leaves us to walk up to the lodge and bring back lunch. In their absence a new conversation breaks out [0056GR71:08.01.43].

As I listen I understand that while we did not talk about it, others have experienced the inaction too. I have not been alone in seeing it, sensing its measure against some unidentified pulse; (“different to what?”). In fact we have shared a common resistance to the imposition of mechanical frames and held an almost sacred vigil for all those months, letting something come into being that was unforced and unmeasured. We have felt guilty, held in mystery, resistant, caring and willing. We criss-cross between the need to know what participation is and the need not to, to actually do something and not to.

“It is all here”. I am thinking the fine edge between the need for observable action as a form of validity and the openness to the immeasurable. How deeply felt that need and
opening is, and what it means. I am so interested to see what sits beneath this questionable surface of so-called non-participation. I am intent on not presenting the experience as a problem or a failing: it would be my narrative alone, my whipping masters that cast such a spell on it.

The conversation goes on, identifying self-management including self observation, as a form of participation, which also has to reach beyond the self if it is to be generative. We talk about how when it does reach beyond ourselves to the “outer” worlds of work offices, home life and so on to play into the experience of self to the extent of reshaping who we know ourselves to be in ways about which we are not “normally” conscious. We remember how the project repeatedly bubbled up into the sunlight of potential “actions” and evaporated almost immediately; how it settled in lukewarm pools just outside the collaboration in someone’s work, community or home life, and how it returned many times into a subterranean reserve beyond our understanding. We note how the data for the Inquiry is in the bubbling up and falling back, and that which lies around this strange geyser. It occurs to us that this is how transformation is, in our movement from the doing and resting and back again, in the decisions we make about what to invest with energy and what to let die, in the spaces between the inspiring and expiring.

“And I think that is the edge we are on at this point in time… It’s fine to walk that edge - which is not considered to be legitimate.”

We are talking about our understanding of what is going on at this “edge” – the people who don’t see that the systems are cruel, unethical, failing those they should be serving. We describe the people who do see this but cannot do anything with what they see: we think of them as embers that can be blown on and the cold coals where no recognition of loss is evident, where people are happy with what is, accept its state. The conversation breaks up again, John is back in the hammock and lunch has arrived.
Figure 7: Lunch arrives. Jane, (Jo), Peter O., Peter W., John and Susie (r)

We have Afghani bread, beautiful dips and cheeses, nuts and other crispy things. We heat the breads on the fire and dig into the food. John strums the bush bass that Mark supplied, I tinkle on the xylophone, others do more walking around, looking up, drawing in the dust.

“It’s amazing you have brought Afghani bread,” says Lesley to Peter. She goes on to talk about her work with the Afghani Asylum seekers and the connections they are making with the local aboriginal people despite the small country town and its racist culture and politics.

The curtain of water is still pouring down, and it is gone 2 in the afternoon. Lunch over, marshmallows toasted, we settle back into the chairs, in different positions so we can share the view out the mouth of the Cave. Peter O. chooses to speak his talking stick in what has become “the story telling chair”.

I am appreciative of his choice to progress our agreement to describe our talking sticks. [057GR72:01.05.00] “My talking stick actually is a talking stick. It is related to when I first started doing Open Space Technology as a group technique.”

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2 Throughout this text I have written the word “aboriginal” with a lower case “a”. Some have taken exception to this convention. My reason for it is that there are no such sovereign peoples as “aboriginal”, a term that simply means earliest known, primitive or indigenous to a place (Oxford English Dictionary). When I refer to the special noun that describes Australian aboriginal peoples, I do so by means of their clans or nations, which are indeed capitalised.
He unfolds a piece of blue cloth in his hands revealing a most mysterious “thing” – an actual “talking stick” which he had commissioned an artist to make to “inaugurate my new skills” as a facilitator. It is not particularly beautiful, in fact a little ungainly as I see it – a bulbous white marble item, with a bronze neck, ending with a beak-like shape. Others, however, see it as beautiful. He tells the story of his engagement with the Inquiry as an unfolding of the Open Space (Owen, 1992, 1995) principles (whoever comes is the right person, whatever happens is the right thing) and as a story of his own development as a facilitator, of “the process” of facilitation, being “again woken up to those principles”.

I note to myself how useful it is to have a theoretical frame to see experience through, and also its limitations – how it makes invisible that which does not fit in. I understand Peter to learn through circling, heading out to what is new and heading back to what is known, adding little by little. I do not interrupt but I listen into the origins of his voice. Peter passes the talking stick around the group and we all feel its strangeness, we begin to understand its purpose – ambiguous, centring, dynamic – we comment on its details.

Jo asks: “is there something that happened for you over the course of the project that had weight, like the stick does? Susie was talking about “iconic” moments? Something?”
Peter welcomes the question and responds by recalling the experience of receiving his “dialogic script” and how its focus into the “cathedral in the rock” reference had taken him by surprise. He reflects on how the image fitted with his actual ideas of practice nevertheless—such as letting that which is valuable come, even in an institution which has formally demanded of its workers “no new ideas”: he names the idea of letting that which is valuable come as a different construction of “letting the cup fall”.

I am struck by the generosity of the metaphor of the falling cup in Peter’s hands. In my own it only felt like a “generous fall” after the anxiety, when some pearl has been casually dropped into the welling waters of extinction before they recede.

Peter receives the talking stick back from the last member of the group to handle it: “I always enjoy sending it around the circle, it always starts as a cold object and when it comes back you can feel the energy and warmth that each person holding it has put into it.” Peter stands and places it on its blue cloth on a rock ledge at the back of the Cave.

[057GR72:02.00.27] John takes up the conversational thread pointing to an ad for an electricity company in a piece of newspaper on the fire. He too is seeing the tendrils of potential being everywhere: “I love that phrase ‘the energy is in our people’. It is expressive of an idea that has been emerging for some time now, and I think that one of the reasons for me—am I too far from the microphone? For me there is so much—the energy of life, these questions, this Inquiry has moved to my home which has become a place of industry and creation and making—a far more engaging place for me than work.” John describes his home life with his partner who is a practicing artist. He talks about how he is changing his way of being in the world to one where the human body, not the computer or the machine, generates energy to take the place of production chains and consumerism; he wants to invest in labour, quality, mind and body energy amongst people as a form of participation.
“My message stick is *this*…” John points to a green vellum writing book I had given him at the beginning of our work together some years ago. He describes his use of map making as I had introduced to him in a past Participatory Evaluation project we had carried out. He shows us a second, black booklet of beautiful red inked cartoons that someone he has recently met had drawn for him – “exquisite little things, evocative and strange, with history emerging onto paper. This has been the constant experience of this Inquiry – you capturing information from our discussion that I am completely unaware of … until there was a transcription and there it was in the transcript. A sense of that satellite going through space collecting dust…” Jo sneezes as if the Cave would have its say about dust at this moment.

“Now it is about going with what emerges – I call it a theory – the theory of a naïve participant, what has coalesced for me through this research has been the idea that the naïve participant has a powerful and potent place in any participatory structure.” He continues with a reflection about a blue thread of cotton he has found, to describe the journey from not knowing to knowing.

John looks up at me: “What has felt for you like watching the cups crash has also been a lot of wending and winding, thinking and experiencing and thought – all those long moments have been really productive. Things have coalesced and come together. The cup
didn’t fall in a straight line…” Again, I am illuminated by another insight into the cup. I am grieving for the lack of dialogue about all these unshared moments of coalescence. It is as if the cup is receiving layers of beautiful enamel - but too late for me.

There is a long silence. The curtain of water is falling. “Ask me a question,” he says. Lesley obliges: “OK – can you tell us more about your bodily place in the world?”

John reflects on his experiences of being at work surrounded by empty electronic energy and saving water and gardening at home, the demise of “the institution” and how the future is in clusters of people self organising and creating their own world…

My eyes drift back out the Cave mouth to the wonderful rock pinnacles that hide the Cave from the gully below.

Figure 10: The view outside the Cave mouth

I look back at John. I want to know about the experience of working collaboratively in the Inquiry as against seeing participation as “self management”, action in isolation of others. I am looking at both John and Peter O. and ask them what it was like to receive their dialogic scripts. For Peter it was a recall to mindfulness, for John it was a completely new experience. Both the content of what is reflected back as well as the experience of contact - at the original and the reflecting moments - are part of what feeds into the emergence of thought.
Lesley and Peter W. join in, exploring the process of writing the dialogic scripts and commenting on the need to use “mindfulness” given we have it. “Like your ideas about ‘intimate research’” I say. It turns out this is another phrase that John had not heard himself say, but he goes on to reflect on the relationship between clarity and intimacy. A sudden understanding is forming within me:

[057GR72:04.00.29] “It seems to me the project has been a reflection of what is happening, more than an inquiry into [what is happening]... It is a reflection of the kind of freedom we want to have and has created a space for that…” Lesley joins into the thinking: “What interested me …was a link between what you were presenting and a connection point with what I am interested in the big sphere of my life … That is rare, those entry points don’t necessarily come to your doorstep every day” notes Lesley. John is curious. He asks her: “Could you open that up a bit more?” (The Cave).

“When Susie said it reflected a social trend in our lives… or a connecting up with what was already happening – I am just agreeing… it just went straight in somewhere, things that were unspoken, not-articulated visions of mine… Not that you came in and propelled what was happening for me – but a joining up from a similar place”.

Jane wants more as the picture is forming. “Susie could you back-track, and say more about the project being a reflection of a social trend?” I talk about my starting assumption of an inquiry methodology based on Action Research principles, whereas what seems to have happened was a reflection of a deeply felt desire for freedom. We talk about ethics and our investment in regenerating institutions that have a potential for transformation; how management systems demand we leave our love at the door, in Jo’s case, explicitly. “Jo, do you want to continue with your message stick?” asks Lesley.

[057GR72:06.00.48] Jo talks about her message stick as having something to do with technology, learning to see it as friend rather than foe, and then enjoying the deepened and broadened communication it created: “My huge learning in this Inquiry has been almost the opposite of yours John - where yours is “coming back into” mine is - enough “self” stuff … what does it mean to have a connection with the rest of the world… and what does “the rest of the world” mean anyway?” Jo continues describing her discovery of herself as one who is willing to learn, how this childlike willingness has infused her work with young men in institutions for recidivists; and her relationships with her co-workers – lost in a departmental jungle of vague policy, un-stated responsibilities, threats and confusions. She talks frankly about how she did not make the Inquiry project a priority, did not plan for it and the difficulties she had in getting management support for her to participate, how low a priority it was for her boss despite the supportive rhetoric.
“When Susie was telling her story about the project it was like – yes, this is what happened to me – the experiences of this project were the same as what I was having in my work. Only through the mirroring did I come to the understandings about powerlessness, about paradox, about surrender – hitting the wall… Through the project discussions, the remembering, being reminded and recovering that which you instinctively know to be right and true…” Jo talks about how she worked participatively with her co-workers in an institutional culture, the questions she asked, the ideas she put on the table, the practice of Bohm’s deep listening and reaching reluctant agreement. I am sitting on the edge of my seat as Jo is drawing together the gap between the institution and the practice of principle, which in her setting, is the participatory edge.

**Figure 11: Jo tells her message stick**

I can see how the Inquiry had worked with Jo, like a principled energy system, holding faith with her and the others, and myself; faith that not doing that which was expected, enforced and habitual would somehow make room for something else to come, within us, between us and in the world – our world of the Inquiry and the interplay of that world in each person’s place of standing, be it home, community, learning and/or profession.

“When you let go, things started to happen. So what was happening in the Inquiry project – was that when one of the cups fell?” asks Peter W.
“You have created a space where they have choice in a place where they have none” observes John.

A fly comes into the Cave and zooms into the range of the microphone. I chip in: “There is so much talk about doing, there is doing that is giving and doing that is taking. It is not adequate to talk about ‘action’.” A new bird sings outside the Cave. It has a piping tone.

Jane comments that the more I did, the less the Inquiry was collaborative. Her comment resonates with my earlier reflection that throughout 15 years of professional participatory practice, the more I learned and responded to the grounded theories I was generating, the harder the work became. Yes, I am thinking in response to Jane, I know that only too painfully, but in the light of this Inquiry, how long do you endure silence and inactivity, how long do you endure what feels like the continual forsaking of trust? Do you just let it die – is that what we do as the only participatory act? Or is this inaction something that deserves understanding? The Inquiry, for me, was still about creating resources and invitation, but with so much more attention to the narrative, the confrontation with instrumentalism so deeply embedded in us all.

We move around for a few moments, notice we have run out of firewood, toast a few marshmallows in the embers, make another cup of tea. Pete O. is on the swing.

Figure 12: Peter O. on the swing

When he gets off we have a brief conversation about the planned events of the following day. The sun has now travelled across the mouth of the Cave: the sky is blue as
blue can be, the light strong, an afternoon breeze disturbs the tops of the trees. A lizard sunning itself at the Cave mouth decides better of it, and turns back into the shade. The others are talking about other things; the concentration seems to be ebbing. I decide to go with the ebb. I comment on how the algae in the rock wall seem greener than earlier in the day. I have a go on the swing. More coffee, chat and finally we settle back down to Jane’s story.

[057GR72:11.00.13] “I don’t know what my story is, but I do know what my talking stick is. So I thought that perhaps in the interests of participation, people could assist me with my story.” This idea is attractive to Lesley in particular. Jane continues: “I had moved to a stage of being very resistant to coming to this session. At one level I wanted to come but it all seemed too difficult… So in terms of the things that were done to get me here, I abdicated responsibility… Susie did all the work to get me here. I don’t have an understanding of why I had reached that point in the Inquiry.” Jane talks about her experience of finding her message stick, the thinking about the question of the “action” and the “doing” actually getting in the way of the “being”. She describes how having organised many photographs of water for her message stick… “I walked out onto my balcony to hang the clothes on the line and there was this talking stick on the wall.” Jane hands around photos of a huge insect. “It is a stick insect – judging by the size of the besser blocks behind it, at least 7 inches long.”

We admire the creature. Jane talks about her confrontations with fear and privilege that the stick insect spoke to her; how she has struggled with understanding the nature of her participation throughout the project – action as against something else – questions, letting things come into being, accepting that things are not as we expect or intend, rejecting the rhetoric of participation that inhibits its manifestation, looking for it in new spaces. She asks others to contribute to her story.

Lesley says: “It is almost in spite of the system that transformation becomes possible…” Others join in and agree with their own stories of participation in unexpected places. Lesley asks: “Do you have a hunch what has been the outcome for you?”

Jane responds with characteristic honesty and clarity: “I think I can now connect with people on a human basis. In the past…[I have refused to come to Action Research workshops] because it wasn’t what I could possibly do, it would mean connecting with people and I don’t want to do any ‘participation’. It is dangerous to participate.”
We talk about the prevailing view of management in institutions, the idea of “participation” as “bunfight”, the threat it represents to a still common idea of “professionalism” as authority. Jane sees volunteerism as “real participation” and questions whether the gap between epistemology and organizational culture is the site for participation: that the site is outside the organization; hence the stick insect outside her house. I am thinking: “this is not what I mean by participation”.

I speak my thoughts: “we just need to be careful that we are not slipping into ‘participation’. That is not what we¹ are on about here. We are talking about participatory practice, which in my understanding is about a theoretically informed practice that enables participation to manifest…Volunteerism is important for people to come together and do stuff and that is a form of participation. But really it is free labour, co-operation, it’s

¹I refer to us as “we” here, because this Interactive was designed and agreed to by the whole inquiry - thus the “we” that has agreed to discuss participatory practice is the “we” who designed the Intensive, and arrived here to work through our agreed questions. At this point I am checking what we agreed to do against what was being discussed to see if we are holding to our commitments.
orchestrated passions with people for their own reasons. But is there critical self-reflection going on, is there a mindful intent to work against oppressive systems?"

“That is why the idea of axiology is so important” Jo says, “of course you can do things different, but at what value, and who benefits?”

I go on: “In terms of sustainability where does that take us? …Are we obliged? Wherever we are, life is there and calls on us to do what must be done even if it is really difficult and we may well be exploited in the process? If you have cold coals you have to give them a slight touch?”

Jo takes up the thread: “‘I am here if you need me’”. I am suspicious of this position and say: “The problem is, they have to know they need you…” We agree that none of our organizations know they need us. John asks: “How do they develop that understanding?”

We talk about walking “alongside”, responding to mammalian instinct, we link back to the journey from where we were to where we are now and the persistence of the “Voice of the non-participatory Wall” in our heads as much as anyone else’s. Participatory practice calls on those qualities that we have forgotten or neglected to let come forward, and highlights the need for both the Wall and participatory practices as a way of generating action.

The fly is still buzzing. I talk about Bryson’s account of a similar wall that has existed since life began. It is the wall between DNA and the cell in which a nucleus resides. RNA is the means of criss-crossing that wall – patterned, communicative and mobile. Perhaps participatory practice at this time in our history has that function. Peter W. talks about the power of ancestry: its ability to companion us wherever we are, even at the Wall. I am thinking “and yes, that is our own inevitable place as future ancestors.” The mention of ancestors reminds Lesley of how she carries the Ngarrindjeri people with her wherever she goes, now that she has been recognised by them, how their companionship in this sense gives her the depth of grief she feels in the Cave, and points her to attend to unseen realms.

It is 5 pm and Jane and I need to leave to pick Cam up from childcare, but I am also keen to walk down into the gully. Like choosing to go with the ebb, this could be another moment to stop serving group interests and give myself the same freedom that others are enjoying. It is agreed. Team 3 goes up to the house to prepare for dinner and John, Peter W., Peter O. and I go down into the gully.

The walk is picked out from the bush by Mark’s red flags. “The idea is that you don’t leave one flag until you can see the next” he had told us. It is a bush-wise strategy for
striking out into the unknown without getting lost. We walk with our knees bent, holding onto slim saplings to stop us from sliding down the gully faces, feeling our age and not talking about it. We discover new views of the canyons, new caves, new trees and ferneries. At the bottom is a narrow gully marked by a waterway, step-wide, crystal clear, resting in quiet, shallow pools, water boatmen-type creatures scurrying over their surface, the tree ferns leaning across to form a rich green-black shade. We cross the – what? Not a creek, not a stream – more like a wet seam – and walk up a steep, dark and damp embankment. The feet of the canyon rise up around us covered in lush moss; ancient trees also moss covered are growing through darkness to light over our heads. “It is as if this place has been like this forever: no disturbance other than nature’s cycles”.

Birds call, lizards bask, insects hover. Small, delicate webs flutter between tiny twigs, and we don’t really know what to do with ourselves. We go in, we look around, we touch the water and then we leave.

We climb back up to the Cave, grab our gear and continue the walk back to the Lodge.

The kitchen is already alive with bubbling pots, steaming colanders and the ingredients of our awaited repast spreading across the benches. Cam, Jane and Lesley return – Lesley to rest, Cam to play, Jane to organize Cam. Everyone goes off into their own place and time for a while – connecting momentarily and separating again. As dinner approaches more people gather into the kitchen where Peter O. and Jo are intent on coordinating their preparations. Peter W. brings his healing powers to the service of Jo and Lesley – giving them “light” by holding his hand 30cm from the location of the pain - and relieving it. Candles lit, blue armchairs joining us, we sit down again for a delicious meal, Cam on our knees giggling with the laughter of babyhood – tipping its irresistibility into our throats as we laugh with him. More cheers, chats and expressions of gratitude as dinner concludes and we move into the lounge for the last two message sticks: Lesley and Peter W.

Lesley has dressed for the evening – apparently something I had suggested in the planning but completely overlooked in my own preparations. She is splendid in green satin, sitting in the armchair as we gather around her like children waiting for a bedtime story. She begins by picking up from the dinner conversation when she was describing an incident with a young man she was working with in a therapeutic relationship. [058GR73:02.01.55] “I thought I would mention that because I think for me, a lot of it is about relationship within the practice.” Lesley has brought two items for her message stick: a book by poet David Whyte, “Crossing the Unknown” (2002), and a small embroidered square of green cloth made by a Vietnamese woman for ceremonial purposes. She goes on to talk about how she
had left her therapeutic work with young people who had sexually abused others and had taken up her current management position at a rural health service. It is a story of action at the face of the wall: where there is no choice, where immobilisation seems to be the only state possible.

She reads some passages from Whyte: “paying close attention to an astonishing world and how each of us is made uniquely for that world”. She comments on how the author uses poetry to connect with people in organizations and to shape identity on many levels. Quoting Whyte again: “if we see our vulnerabilities as a faculty for understanding the rest of our lives”, finding “a small piece of ground” on which to make sense of the world.

Lesley tells the story of how like Whyte, she brought poetry into instrumental practices, institutionally entrenched in the bio-medical models of intervention, and the eventual flourishing of systemic participation that she generated as a participatory practitioner working through the disciplines of therapy, health promotion and community development.

Figure 14: Lesley tells her message stick

“I was travelling here when you contacted me about the project. I was caught between the two worlds…” She describes some big agenda reform and something less depleting of heart and soul; how during the Inquiry she made a commitment to the new job, even though she was quite unclear why she was there, and on the surface the culture of the
organization was quite out of step with her idea of good primary health practice. I am connecting strongly with the reality of how some institutional cultures seem stuck in a 50-year time warp. She describes how the relationships between everyone, within teams and between the organization and the community have softened over time, and how the practitioners are now investing in radical community action particularly in reference to asylum seekers and aboriginal health. She is not sure of a direct relationship between the Inquiry and her work.

John asks about the capacity to stay with the people even though she did not want to be there – “it is about yielding, surrender… yielding to that more universal force, what it wanted me to do… that is when the connections came forward and things started to happen. Evidence that I needed to be there… something about yielding and not having a choice, a kind of blind faith even though nothing made any sense”. We discuss how we have spent much of the day rejecting the institution as a site for participatory practice, and how Lesley’s story has turned that on its head. “Because you spoke out loud about some of my secrets, the things I hadn’t articulated early on – like love,” she says.

A conversation breaks out about the hypocrisy and brutality of organizations that at one moment punish innovators and the next, use their work as best practice. Peter O. sees the connections with his work in Council, and Jo comments on “the courage to really understand humility”, a courage not seen as such. The grace that Lesley and Jo is talking about, that of the courage to understand humility, cannot come about from a split self.

[058GR73:03.00.30] “I need sleep,” John suddenly announces.

“Oh John!” I am appalled at the break in our flow.

“Sorry, but I am so tired.”

“Good heavens, what are we to do? You can’t leave Peter and Lesley like that” I say.

“We can’t do it tomorrow?” John suggests.

“I don’t know. The pod of time is just broken.”

“Well I am sorry. I am tired, depleted.”

“How are you feeling Peter?” I ask, wondering if everyone is feeling this way.

“I still feel alert at the moment” he says.

“You look like you are ready to go,” I say to Peter W. who is preparing his materials for his message stick. I turn back to John seeking some way forward that holds the integrity
of all concerned and our overall shape of being together at this moment: “why don’t you just lie there and your body can still absorb it?”

“So we are not going to do dessert in between?” asks Jo.

“What is it?”

“Fruit plates with nuts, we could hand them around.”

We get up, organize drinks and nuts. I had accepted that John would leave, but he settles himself on the sofa with cushions. Peter W. talks about the difference between “letting go” and “letting come” as we pass plates of leftover Pavlova around; we talk about giving expression to that which is becoming and how it is so sensitive a matter of time, language and recognition, how rarely it is valued in a world that insists on “the tangible”.

We rearrange ourselves and Peter sits down in the chair that Lesley has vacated. The idea of a “talking chair” has travelled from the Cave to the Lodge. Peter’s talking stick is a little plastic device that you hold up to your eye to look through a multi-faced lens: a “microscope”. It changes the view of the world into a fractured image of patterns – like a kaleidoscope without the movement and colour. He talks about his favourite projects in his job at the department of health, where participation and transformation were strongest. He describes how the Inquiry has created a place for him to say things he could not have said anywhere else, but that so doing gives him strength to speak this way in these project sites – to extend the work that was already possible without the Inquiry. The Inquiry has encouraged him to extend the senses with which he knows the world, and to dare to venture to places of myth, spirit and imagination. “Thank you” he says.
John leaves, exhausted. He has been patient, I felt I had imposed, caught between the felt needs of the overall form of inquiry and John’s particular needs. How could this split have come upon us? It is close to 11pm. We are all exhausted and go to bed, with Peter W. encouraging us to let the dreams come in the night so we might speak of them next day.

I sleep deeply and without interruption. This is unusual. I wake early and naturally, also unusual. I take out my notebook, looking at the messy nests of words I made from the day before, and begin to map ideas about the meaning of the message sticks, how others had experienced the form of the Inquiry.

Following the difficult moment before Peter’s talking stick, Team 1 (John) is absent for breakfast: we make do for ourselves – there is no shortage of anything – except Team 1. Lesley and I are on lunch duty that day so we prepare the items for the salad. Eventually, mid way through a cup of coffee, John emerges complaining of a head cold. I can feel the cool winds blowing between us. I offer various herbal remedies that I had brought for such a moment, but they will not do. Some other remedy is needed and currently not available - not from me anyway. I am fearful that John will turn back to his city world – complete the breach he had wanted to make the night before.
I had organised two young girls from the local neighbourhood to look after Cam. On their arrival we gather outside, Peter O. hoisting up the backpack with the wood. We begin a second descent down the gully to the Cave, this time without Mark. I lead the group and John comes up behind me. The others walk at a distance, slowing with chatter, effort and perhaps instinct to give John and myself our space.

I walk down, down the steps feeling the rhythm of their geometry. Depending on the lay of the land some steps are one-step size, others require an extra pace to get to their edge. Parts of the path have no steps and other parts demand careful negotiation around wet piles of slippery leaves or rocky outcrops. I feel like a wooden carving of a Balinese woman walking down the rice paddies laden with baskets. I am reminded of being hypnotised, when the practitioner talks you down through descending steps in dark halls to pass through a door into the place of mesmerism.

I see a spider web across my path. I can feel John silently walking behind me, not a predatory step, but surely a paced one. I pause and open the spider gate to replace it on its bush of origin so we can pass. John pauses behind me, waits for me. We walk on in silence until we reach the resting place, overlooking Hartley Valley. I sit down. I do not want to be the first to enter the Cave today. I want everyone to enter without me.

“Are you staying here?” John asks.

I explain myself to him and he walks on, entering the Cave in his own time, his own pace.

The others follow, deep in friendly conversation with each other.

As before, we set ourselves up in the Cave, but unlike before, we start the fire straight away. The kettle is on and everyone settles into the chairs. I notice that the curtain of water is no more. I look over to Peter O. who nods back. I explain that we had had a conversation the day before about proceeding with the “playback” idea, as we had all agreed in our planning, and that I had requested that I participate rather than conduct.

Peter begins to talk about the agreed program for the day. We are excited at the idea of playback theatre, and Peter describes his idea of “hunting the beast”, asking questions of it: a plan of interaction for the whole group. Everyone responds with interest. Peter describes his role as being a witness and a timekeeper, and as the one who will speak the question to the “wise being”. Jane comments that she doesn’t want to “hunt” the beast but to discover it. She wants to wait for the beast to appear and name itself. John wonders if something stops existing once it is named. We discuss our questions for our lovely creature. I am delighted that we have turned our focus here as we agreed to, and not lost our direction. With the exception of John, who is somewhat reticent, we are in high spirits.
Jo reminds us that we had an agreement about a dream reflection this morning. We organize tea. As it turns out only Jo has had a dream – again this is unusual for many of us. Jo speaks of her dream.

[059GR74:02.00.07] “In the semi light, just before the deepest sleep, the first stages of it, it was really…what I saw was like this: the, um, the bush from above and underneath the, the foliage there was - um, there was a person just laying like this” (she stretches out her hands) “and all the dust blowing off them. I think it was what we were talking about, digging beneath the sand and finding. John was talking about what we would find beneath the sand. And I think that was what… It was so amazing. The hands were…” Jo walks over to the far side of the Cave where her dream was situated.

I see the image of the face peering through the dust and leaves and see it retreating. I am reminded of the Celtic Green Man, and say so.

Figure 16: Jo speaks of her dream

But I need to do something else now. I have to attend to the relational architecture of our collaboration. I look across at John and tell of the tension between us, how it began to my knowledge, at the moment he had asked to leave before Peter W.’s story the preceding evening. I say that I want to talk it through now because the form and quality of the day is being touched by it. John is looking into me across the fire: no hostility, or even annoyance. He agrees for me to proceed. I retell the situation from my point of view. John responds by saying that yes, there is a tension between us; that it had started when I had “attacked” him,
as he saw it, for wanting to go to bed. He admits to having wanted to leave this morning, but had chosen not to out of respect for the whole Inquiry and the group.

We talk into the interaction some more, seeking understanding at how the knot had come about. Lesley says that she did not see it as an attack but a strong plea. Peter W. comments that sleeping in a group was an offer that could have been taken up – it is a tribal thing to do (we laugh about parliamentarians honouring this tradition). Jane comments that I should not apologise for my actions to anyone, given that if my actions are systemic, they belong to everyone.

I speak again to John, conscious that I am probably saying too much now, but it feels unresolved. He asks with some frustration as I sense it: “what is it you want of me?” I am struck by the question; I had not thought that I in particular, wanted anything. I say I had thought that the whole engagement was an invitation to walk together down this road that we all shared: participation and its value to sustainability. “So that is what you want of me,” says John.

The fragmentation that is so often a part of face-to-face interaction, is around. Quiet settles; we feel the air clearing. The effervescence of the interaction is leaving my body in an upward direction. We move around, organising tea, arranging the fire.

Jo decides to leap over the fire. The day before, Lesley and Jo had talked about a Persian/Iranian New Year celebration which involved jumping over a fire. The story had come to Lesley from one of her team members, a person who works with the Afghan community in Murray Bridge. The idea is that if you jump over a fire and leave your hopes and fears, wishes or problems in the fire, then sometimes some mysterious things begin to happen that assist you. Jo had lost a brief case that I had given her when I left South Australia some 10 years ago – she had used and cared for it since I left, and someone had broken into her car and stolen it the day she left Adelaide to come to the Inquiry Intensive. Jo determined to make the leap, which she does… We all clap.

I am thinking – I need to make that leap too – I need courage for my thesis. So I size up the fire realising that it is actually some feat to leap over it as Jo had done… I have to run up to it – once the running is happening I am committed to the jump unless I want to land headfirst in the flaming embers.

John stands on the other side of the fire … and I run and leap. I just make it beyond the ring of stones and stumble onto my knees. My friends gasp with

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4 Lesley would like to acknowledge Mohammad Amirghiasvand as keeper of this heritage.
concern. I need to do it again. John moves around to the other side of the fire so that again I can leap towards the place he occupies. I love his unspoken understanding. I take another running leap [059GR74: 04.02.56] – and feel the slipstream enter my feet at the peak of the jump. I can fly on as light as an ember on the breeze but feel I need to land for fear of knocking John over. I am at least half a metre beyond the ring of stone when my feet touch down. My friends clap. I am trembling. That feeling of the slipstream stays with me – the feeling of that extra exertion of commitment too.

After a bit more milling around Peter O. asks if we are ready to begin the playback. We are. We begin with a “warm-up”. We stand and move over to the back of the Cave forming a circle. Peter leads the exercise. It is a round of stretching, each person doing a stretch, which the others copy; we sigh, hiss, laugh. I am aware that we are moving into a new way of being together – one that lives within our bodies, our throats in the air around. This is followed by a round of each person uttering three words to describe their state of being, followed by an enactment of the words in some form – the words and enactment reflected back to the person by the group before moving on to the next person. Peter starts:

[059GR74:06.00.46] “Churned, excited and curious.” He enacts an effortful unfolding of himself reaching down to the Cave floor and up again – we reflect back the movement and laugh a little nervously. The words keep coming from each of us as we take turns: “fearful, standing slightly apart, and a right to intrude; rise up, lost and leaning back; bring it on; hectic, story, gratitude and wonder; step with, along with, slowly; soft, warm, golden; surprised, grounded, open.”

John later recalled his movement as:

“My action was being flung up into the air (arms flung up), twirling in free fall (hand twirling) and then landing with a “thump!” in the middle of the circle (jumping and shouting “Thump!” as feet hit the middle of our circle). It was the sense of weightlessness and being in orbit (or not grounded) and then arriving back in the middle of our group with a strong sense of grounding and arrival” (John, email communication: 16/3/06).

Following the warm-up Peter asks us to take up our individual spaces in the Cave, to utter words and sounds of what this Inquiry has meant for us. We are to allow the feeling and thought to “come out”. From this individual movement we are to coalesce with other members as two small “tribes”, and repeat the utterances as offers of interaction, moving through the space of the Cave. Finally we are to come face to face with the other “tribe”, being interactive with its members and moving to ask the questions of “the wise being”. I
ask for Peter to join us as a co-participant, rather than a conductor. He agrees and we all agree that this is as it should be. He sweeps the floor of the Cave with a branch.

A fly buzzes. Peter O. with Peter W.’s company, has written two of the questions into the dust at the foot of the Cave wall, forgetting the third question, mine, which I proceed to write into the dust for myself. He writes:

“What is your name?

What is our purpose?”

I wonder if my question, the third, is too hard, one too many, just invisible or if Peter thought I should write it - which I do: “How do you know us?” He encourages us to find our spot in the space. “Let us commence” and he claps three times. This has become our way of being together.

Figure 17: Peter O. writes the questions into the dust with Peter W. looking on

We find our individual places in the Cave, and begin to move, breathe, feel, sound and speak what comes to mind. [059GR74: 07.01.00] “Meet! Hello! What? Wh-wh-wh?
Chapter 1. The Cave: ways of being

*mmmmmmm; eeeeeeeeee; aaaaaaaaaaaaaah; oooooooooooom; oooarrghh; nond; dt,dtdt,dtdt; ahh-h-h-h-h-; nnnnah; nnnnah; wwwwwwhah; wwwwwwhahw; mememememeeeee…”

We are of easy origin: origin of species, thought, being – surprising ourselves with sounds of whoops, signs, songlines of beautiful tones working to each other. I walk across a walled ledge where my stainless steel bowl is placed and climb to where the algae are glowing green in the rock – I keep with the idea that we are not the centre of evolution. What do I do with this idea? Talk like an amoeba? Daft. Just feel the de-centring.

Others are clapping, stamping: a rhythm is coming.

“Wondering; song; perfect; soak; hand; name; within us; within us; within me; within us; safe; calm; together; now; warm; questions; time; confusion…”

I could hear everyone, and was aware that something was happening on the other side of the Cave. Peter O. and John were clapping a rhythm between them, on the lower level. Jo was lying on her back in the dust on the far side of the Cave. John and Peter W. were now jumping and clapping. The energy was flying. I went over to join them and we began to move together. Someone, I can’t remember who, began to trace patterns in the dust, and all four of us began to draw a complicated knot in the dust floor – around and around – speaking single words and phrases that had come up in the day before, in the evening, in the morning, and that were coming up again now.

“Clarity; bacteria; mystery; welcome; art; hearth; stoking; cinders; remnants; delight; potential; change; phoenix – hmm, phoenix; the rising of the sap; the bird call and the blowflies; this is one of the few times in the Cave that I have looked out; what can you see…?”

On and on the words came – the order flowing without hesitation, each word creating the place for the next, just like Mark’s red flags in the bush. I could feel the source of our participation coming to the surface – the place of ideas, words, the willingness to speak them. Someone picked up a stone and built a miniature cairn in the middle of the now extensive circular pattern, others joined in. Someone threw a rock into the centre from the outside – like a comet. Others built a new cairn around the comet. And so the mandala came into being.

“The ancestors, history and new life; and yes, strength; endurance; new energy; vitality as the sap rises; arena; the incredible gentleness of nature; chop; dieback; transformation; suffering and growth; healing; changed expectations; form; adaptation; do you love me? Can you hear something? Is someone calling? Are you out there? Yes? We are ready. Hello. Hello. Hello. Calling.”
Later, when I looked down at it, the beauty of the mandala struck me. Where we had been working on it, the charcoal of ancient fires had come to the surface at its centre, changing the colour from pale grey to deep dove brown, seamlessly shifting into paler grey tones as it radiated out into a light golden glow at its edges.

The now-formed group of Jane, Lesley and Peter W. called over to us from the other side of the Cave. A little interrupted we left our mandala and moved up to the centre of the Cave to join with them. More words: “on the edge of this; down, up; on and on…” a wonderful syncopation of clapping breaks out and dies away.

“Us; garden; talking; intimate; soil; seedling; cracks; footprints; heartbeats; mural; ancestors; breath in; recreate; more than; new; understand; following the wise ones; many wise ones; offer; solidarity; the dance” we are weaving in and out between each other. “On the edge, country, saving, support, needing each other; the gap, the joy, the dance, walking, temptation, tears. What is your name? What is your purpose?” we cry out to the lovely creature to make itself present as we weave in and out. We know this is crazy, glad no-one can see us and also wonder at how extraordinary it is that through no sense of “what is right” we are somehow making this moment come into being together, undirected and free to be and do whatever we think is right. It turns out that it is this is what we think is “right” - a merry waltz – a silliness – as we laugh and cavort – I curtsey to John, he bows to me, and we whirl for a moment. Jo follows our footsteps and I turn and follow her, Lesley crosses our path and brushes my hand…

We are drawn into a group breath. Quietly we settle down to sit together, at the edge of the lower level overlooking the “mandala”.
Breathing together. What next? We are suddenly practical and focussed on our task. I am struck with the idea that we are now here facing this question that we have posed for ourselves – we are at the heart of the Inquiry and this is what it feels like. It is reminiscent of childhood games of imagination where the drama is more evident than the interruptions of being called in for lunch. My adulthood is sitting alongside my childlike experience of this moment – questioning its integrity, realising our limits – the paucity of our resources to actually ask this question, and be present to the magnitude of its presence in our lives.

No longer does it feel like an exercise, a well intentioned warming up to move us beyond the clasp of convention, to move us into the silly space of awkwardness that we are left with when we leave convention. I am so appreciative of the courage of all who are here to meet this moment with each other; to share the play, the awkwardness, the poverty and humility, to decide to go on when we have run out of techniques, known scripts – of anything to say to each other. We are whooped out. The cup has fallen for everyone and now we are letting what is hidden or perhaps hiding come forward.

Jane says: “I want to go down that pathway – there is something about that place where the path comes into the Cave”… Everyone stands to go, but I sit again, as does Jo – I want to stay here. I will wait for you. “Yes – watch for us” they say.
Jo and I move to sit at the place where the path enters the Cave, but it is too close – to what? To something… I feel I am unable to see – something. Jo goes back to her place lying in the dust and I to mine at the foot of the stonewall at the back of the Cave. I am following Jane’s wisdom about her standing at the entrance to the Cave. Jo and me together, doing this, after all these years of working and living in each other’s company, and now here. It is so inestimably right. We hear the others chattering their way down the same path I had walked the previous evening, and I imagine them discovering the gully’s wet seam.

I sit, feeling the weight of my commission: to discover the name of the lovely creature, its purpose and how it knows us so we may stand in the place of understanding without shame, in the way nature wants us to be.

OK, how am I doing this in a way that isn’t… I am reminded of Peter Senge et al’s book “Presencing” that I am reading. The idea of U theory: but I don’t want to follow a pattern here. Yes, but there is lots of wisdom in the field about letting go – call it bracketing, U theory, whatever – Jo calls it “surrendering”. If I was to feel anything it was not going to happen with the chit-chat in my brain. I let it go - could feel it sinking down like the mud in the clear water pools in the gully – settling to let the water flow crystal clear above it, stirred into impenetrable blindness with the merest interference. As the mud settles, the clarity grows, a beautiful silence spreading within my body. I am looking out at the pathway.

This is ridiculous I think. The “nga-gna” voice in my head gnawing away (ignoring) the potent moment within me… If I had forty days and forty nights of sitting here in meditative silence I would only just be at the edge of anything worthy of knowing. But we don’t have that time, not here, not anywhere, not anymore. Perhaps time is not that way anymore, either. And Peter W. had said something about the Cave knowing we were coming, our sharing unspoken visions with nature and each other. The way he says these things is not as orthodoxy but as playfulness, just a possibility, believe it or not, the words and ideas do their work in the air…

As I look I see, not a physical form, but some excitation in the air, something at the threshold of the Cave. It is like light reflecting leaves caught in a little whirlwind, the shimmer of fish as they fly in their schools. There is no breeze: all is still. I can see the spirit legs walking up into the place of meeting. They do not come in, but they are there where the water has dripped down from the Cave roof the previous morning, where the lizards scurry in to see what we are doing, and scurry back into the undergrowth. Where previous visitors had chopped down a tree for firewood - at Mark’s horror.

It is the place where Jane had chosen, dryad like, to be in Peter’s first stage of the morning session.
I wonder why the energy at the Cave mouth does not seem to come into the Cave. I do not want to look too sharply or too closely. I return to the quiet within.

We have a commission: to find a way of speaking that will contribute to relocating humanity within ecological scales. Nature wants us but wants to know how to live with us, as Peter W. says later in the day. Something of this thought is in my mind too: it is about grace. Grace to know, grace in the knowing and doing, grace in the being.

Grace. Is that it?

I let it go.

Silence again, and then, a wind comes into the Cave. It travels in one complete ring, clockwise, around the dome and leaves. Within the space of a few heartbeats it does it again. Its return reminds me of its first arrival. I am struck by its form – it feels completely cylindrical, dynamic, whole. A pause, and it comes again twice as fast, twice as loud and big.
as the first two times. Twice as fast as what? How do you measure “twice as” in such a sense? Then silence. Stillness. I check the trees outside for movement – but there is nothing.

I hear a clicking sound - perhaps someone making a rhythm with stones in the cave next door, calling us through its walls. Jo responds to them, making a rhythm with stones and calling out. I am roused to stand, again with some reluctance. I walk to the head of the path. I call out to them: “come home”.

One by one they come up the path, and I welcome them.

We gather at the place we had left overlooking the mandala. We settle. We begin speaking of our experiences. Someone hands me a rock they found in the Cave next door.

**Figure 20: The message brick**

![Image of a rectangular cube in charcoal brown placed in a mandala setting]({}  

It is a perfect rectangular cube in charcoal brown – like the colour at the centre of the mandala. Jane gives it to me and I take it and place it in the centre of the mandala between the little cairns. “It’s like the monolith in the movie ‘2001’” someone says; “it is natural, it comes out of a hole in the wall of the cave next door – there is no other rock around it of this colour or shape but it comes from that place.” I am thankful for its utter unpredictability. It is as if nature has produced a meeting between itself and the arbitrary forms that mankind produces. A kind of grace in itself – inclusive of this thing nature has created: human consciousness.
“The name we are seeking is ‘grace’” I hear myself saying. “That is its purpose and the way it knows us.” I am amazed at the ease with which the words come out – without embarrassment, or indeed, any sense of hubris – just simply as it is within me.

We play with the word for a bit. Then a new conversation breaks out. I say nothing – everyone is speaking – of what? The tones are low, gentle, and almost imperceptible above the call of birds, the buzzing of the flies, the sea-like sound of innumerable leaves trembling in the breezes all around. We are talking about the experiences we have just had – the living data is revealing itself – the preciousness of the moments, the dynamic of the Inquiry. It is as if the whole Inquiry is revealing itself as a realisation about other ways of being, indirect, reflective, given to us rather than that which we take. Everyone except Jane and myself is talking – a dialogue of valuing each other not as individuals but as a shared presence, and I can hear all that we have said throughout the year’s work inside what is being said now.

Among so many other things, Jo describes how it had been for her lying in the dust of the Cave like her dream woman; Lesley talks about the power of poetics and articulation in the creation of relationship; John describes a recalled vision of thousands of spiderlings floating in the sunlit air like a halo around the sun.

Lesley says: “Last night, I said in my interview that I couldn’t specifically identify what I had gained from the Inquiry during my involvement, and that even though I said that last night I didn’t want people to confuse this with how significant it was for me to have the experience of being considered worthy to be a part of it, how important was the act of Susie asking me to be involved after all these years.” (Recollection of exact words spoken, email communication, 15/3/06).

Her words create new ground in me – a new understanding about the slowness of the project, the crafting of connection, the threads that arose and vaporised, and gradual sense of being together – the assumption of unworthiness in us. Jane, her back to me, is in tears. Lesley moves over to her: “Do you want to say something about the tears?”

“You have said it for me”, says Jane.

I am complete in gratitude and wonder.

At its natural conclusion Lesley says – “I wish we had recorded that”. My sound equipment is breaking down, the dust on the Cave floor infiltrating its metal seams. It is doubtful that it would catch what we were saying anyway, our being so far away from the microphone… It is as if the words are our promise in the place of spirits, perhaps not to be spoken elsewhere, but surely to be witnessed between us. We live this with each other even if the people we are here, now, are not people we know about elsewhere. John’s ideas of witnessing the emergence of community are alive; Jane’s of sitting at the bottom of the wall
for however long is needed – and sometimes it doesn’t need to be long; Peter W.’s of knowing like a tree; Peter O.’s of seeing the cathedral in the rock, literally; Jo’s of holding back the horse of doing so the unity of being could be; Lesley’s opening spaces for a poetry of connection – inviting being with to become…And my words?

Lesley completes the lunch preparations… but finds that a blowfly has laid eggs in one of the salad bowls. “This is where nature and I come unstuck,” she giggles. It is such an interruption to the flow of things – until Peter O. points out that the lovely beast wants salad nicoise for lunch too… there is enough to go around anyway. After lunch Peter O. comes over to me and talks about the experience of doing the work we are doing – how rare it is and how valuable. We gather again for the final two Acts. A silence settles. We reflect on the events of the morning and Lesley offers to take notes, given we no longer have a tape recorder.

Our conversation breaks out again: “What sort of research is this?” “I feel my heartbeat from the soil”; “moments of grace – knowing truth from illusion”; “being each other’s safety net in the company of the Earth”; “bring it on”; “jogged out of space”; “personal journey and mythology to reflect back to me”; “mammalian need, holding the mirror”; “a message brick”.

It seems to me that our message sticks are specific graces born of each person’s experience of the whole Inquiry. Being seven of us there were seven graces – a satisfying number. I ask permission of people to bring their message sticks into a shared construction of Grace, to progress what we had done into a “construction”. I ask if I can read out my notes and I check with each person for how they feel about what I am seeing and whether I can bring what I see into my thesis.

Peter W.’s multi-scope I see as “participatory sensing” – opening up and mastering new senses for participatory work. Peter is happy with this. Lesley’s embroidery and poetics I see as “emancipating aesthetics” – the grace of bringing aesthetic artefacts and their dynamics into the space for seeing and resisting oppression, seeing and creating freedom within relationships of engagement with each other. Lesley agrees. Jane’s stick insect I see as “transforming energy” – the hidden form rising within the observed form to generate energy in the process and co-joint with it to make a new form. Jane is focussing on her original idea of water but happy with my focus on the stick insect; both have transformative powers. Jo’s digital camera I see as the grace of “befriending” – the offer of surrender and commitment to that which is open to participation in the act of participation. Jo agrees. Peter’s talking stick I see as “ritualising” – the need to evoke worlds beyond the evident to re-mind us of our humble and unique place in ecology. Pete agrees. John’s notebook I see as
“knowing” – the practices and forms of coming into mindful and embodied awareness and how to be with it. He wants me to explain a bit more and says he will continue to think about it. My bowl and rock I see as “emergent ecology” – the form and quality of being as it becomes within the whole eco-cosmological complex. Jo says: “holding ecology” – as a correction, and she is right – “emergent ecology” is a tautology whereas holding ecology is a commitment. I agree. These we see as our 7 graces – the 7 forms of value that participatory practice has to sustainability. They belong to us all and will be respected for their origins. We give them to each other so they may be taken into the worlds that exist outside the Inquiry realm and cannot exist without it… My realm of the thesis is included as one of these worlds.

“I want to write a book of psalms,” says Jane. Yes! Jane opens up her thought, Lesley confirms with her knowledge of poetics, John says “the poetics of participation”, “like a book of hours,” says Peter W. “I can’t write poetry but I can do metaphors” says Peter O., and we all laugh. “A co-writing with each other” says Jo. We stand. “Who are our ‘future ghosts’?” I ask, thinking about our agreed programme. We speak the names of partners, co-workers, and fellow participants absent from the Inquiry Intensive… I am struck at the shyness that people seem to be feeling when they think about whom they will talk to about this event. We thank the Cave, and take our leave of those who were here before. We return the message brick to its resting place. And we are done. The sense of conclusion is effortless and irrefutable: systemics at work.

Gathering papers, food, bags and anything else we brought in we walk back up the stairs. We pause as we leave the upper end of the path for John to point out the idiosyncrasies of a particular native plant, whose leaves are not leaves but adapted stems, always positioned sideways from the sun to conserve water, the leaves being a tiny (pin head size) spear head at the tip of the green stem: participatory sensing, emancipating aesthetics, transforming energy, befriending, ritualising, knowing and holding ecology.

We return to the Lodge and meet Cam who has been happily climbing stairs, being read to and playing with building blocks. We pack up bedrooms and kitchen, sort waste, load our cars and say our farewells.

In the post-journey conversation that extends throughout the writing of the thesis, and beyond, our “words turn toward portals into and out of the earth and the blending of our echoes” (Peter O., email communication, 16/3/06). At the time I did not know, but what formed in those last moments in the Cave was an extraordinary unstated idea, for us to stay together and let that which was still waiting to come into being, to have its way. It was in the
company of the fruition of this idea that the thesis was written as a kind of bridge between times and possibilities.

I leave the Cave feeling the promise I had made, full of life and ready to write, little knowing that it decides to come with me - as it does with each one of us.

**Figure 21: Messages in the ashes**

*Child’s ochre hand, spraying mouth: your turn*

*What holds our haphazard story?*

*Ochred hands, dust now: my turning*
CHAPTER 2
SPIRIT: THE SEEN SEES

A life attempts itself in words

Encounters itself in trust

Present to itself in trusting together

The promise

Introduction

The journey from the Cave to this page is dangerous. Making data out of living ways of knowing changes the substance of knowledge. At risk is the exploitation of our Inquiry community. My self-interest can potentially detach what we came to know of the life-worlds, relationships and sanctity of persons and place, from all those who created the knowing. If I fail in this careful task I create an incision, rather than a flow, between the generative sources of knowing and what we regard as “knowledge”, a detachment that is carried in any transaction that draws on such incised knowledge. In the journey from spoken word to written account, the spirit of inquiry can be lost.

In this chapter, manifesting the grace of participatory sensing, I introduce the spirit of the Inquiry as I am coming to know it. As Chesters and Welsh (2005: p192) note, “within both the natural (Barnes, 1974: 57–9) and social sciences (Urry, 2003), metaphor becomes a crucial resource in forging new theory”. So I have found it to be throughout the Inquiry and in the writing of its thesis, perhaps most notably in the metaphoric presence of the complex energies of inquiry, that we related to and could be said that related to us, as this “spirit”. Our agreed relationship with each other was one of “inquiry”. All our “action” and so-called, so felt, “inaction” was measured against this notion, as are all my determinations in how and what I write as “a thesis”. If we were not to abide by any existing conventions of “inquiry” what was our navigational system to be? Its character needed to be illegitimate, egalitarian, polysemic and charismatic enough to include us without capturing us. If we were to be respectful, we needed to be reciprocal in our relationship with it. In this chapter, I describe my ways of keeping the research present to this spirit in my journey into the Cave, and from it into text (text as and representative of theory), and beyond both text and theory into what I came to understand as “the plateau” that the Cave event created.
A plateau

Understanding what we came to be involved with as “a plateau” is helpful. Chesters and Welsh source the concept to Bateson (1972) (Chesters and Welsh, 2005: p192), and track its development in the works of Goffman (1974), Deleuze and Guattari (2002), Massumi (1992) and Melucci (1996). Originally, and as represented by Chesters and Welsh, Bateson created the term to describe a quality of human behaviour wherein intensity continued over and above a climactic culmination of an event. Goffman, at the same time, created the notion of “a strip of activity” or an arbitrarily selected slice of experience, like a narrative, indeed like the notion of “a plateau”, which becomes a way in which we make sense of something. I can understand our narrative of the Cave to hold this quality. Not only is it a metaphoric insight, an experiential “opening” into the naturing of our Inquiry; it is also an actual culmination of human and non-human energies which came into being together in time and space, as understood through multiple perspectives communicated through the message sticks. Even as we were experiencing it, each moment felt as if we were within a living metaphor.

That which came into being in the Cave continues to actively create the unfoldings of the Inquiry. It has presence, characteristic or “spirit”, which for our sakes and true to the spirit of inquiry, including our Inquiry, defies epistemological conventions. Deleuze and Guattari, again, as reported by Chesters and Welsh (2005), took the plateau idea beyond a simple linear tracking of events to a climax and beyond, and attributed it with either linear and hierarchical characteristics or “rhizome”-like, complex networking, and networking of networking. Together, those doing the networking identify with these many characteristics to form powerful presences and flows of energy, knowledge and influence in local and global spheres of human activity. In so doing, the idea of a plateau was released from epistemological conventions to consider the notion of “flow”. This thesis is as a boat made of such energies, identities, spirits and networking communities, that also constitute the rivers on which it journeys:

. . . a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax leading to a state of rest. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected into other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist (Massumi, 1992, p. 7) (Chesters and Welsh, 2005, p. 194).
Others in the Inquiry community have also held to this spirit, through and of this plateau, in their own connecting routes, as the Book of Psalms (see Coda) shows. This extension of energy and the multiple forms of new iterations that came about after the Cave event can be framed as a second cycle of inquiry. It was conceived of in multiple minds and not only in my mind, and consummated sporadically rather than planned and delivered according to my proposal. These arbitrary qualities make any conventional recognition of what we did in terms of existing “criterion” very difficult. It is no less difficult given my promise not to betray (legitimise, structure, clarify and capture) the wild nature of this unfolding spirit; not to make of it an object for my exploitation.

**Holding to spirit**

I have wrestled with the problem of the journey from the Cave to the page, and from the page into our community. As I write even these words, let them be witness to the flurrying of upstart thoughts in their incompleteness; whole paragraphs waking me at 4am as they write themselves across my forehead; turning, muscular and insistent, my “beautiful creatures” conjugating grammatical form with epistemological integrity, resistant of formula and frame.

Each letter as it falls on the “page” is impelled to be a multi-dimensional stack of irresolution, each word made up of such collective phonic souls – my conscious risk of loss, of integrity and connection, attempting to stay in each determination of scholarship and script. How far from my fellow researchers can I travel without leaving them, leaving the heart of our Inquiry, before what I am making of the knowing becomes a stranger to them? How can I stay with them as the knowing reconstitutes itself in my text? To what extent is that which I make of the Inquiry, here, in this text of my own making, taking up its own life and to what extent am I co-opting something that is not mine to make my own?

I resolve to hold to the trajectory of interactions that led up to the Cave, by making the question that came to us as a result of all that we did together, the central concern of the thesis: “how can I live with nature the way nature wants us to live?” A “nest egg” question:

*Bird’s nest of grass and fibreglass*

*Creatures doing how they know*

*In our not knowing what we do*

Already the first crisis of spirit is facing me: I am defaulting to a particular form of question: “how”; to an idea: that “I can live”; to a concept: of an other as “nature”; and some knowable state: of “a way” that this other wants us to live - that “nature” knows or has some
power of intention. I am defaulting to an assumption that this question is the question that is
needed now and mine to ask.

Every part of it is contestable at every point of its dimensional form: word, thought
and in-the-world-ness. This quality of irresolution is a truthful reflection of the way things
are before and after the drawing together of truth-making threads when such threads must be
pinned down to satisfy presumptions. Even so, as fragile, suspect and momentary as it is, this
question of how to articulate my experience, to whom, and with what claims on the nature of
reality in its burgeoning forms hold me to a spirit of our Inquiry, as it continues to live
within and between us. How am I making these determinations of word, thought and what is
to be “in-the-world” - even here - even in the typographies of the letters of the word “here”?

In the company of others, I attributed whatever we had within our midst, this seen
one, as also seeing back. In the play between having a spirit or not, in there being one or not,
I stumbled across the ease with which I incise my sense of life within the other (person,
perceived entity, sense) when I make ‘others’ of the flow of life that is beyond my corporeal
frame. What happens, so imperceptibly, so completely, that lets me do such a murderous act
without - even - thinking? How could such a practice of separation and object making
become so tacit? How did it come about within me, and how is it that I have been so
unknowing of it for so long? It is as if my act of seeing brings with it my act of distancing,
labelling, relationship fixing and forgetting the life within and between us. Without spirit I
am left to my own devices, to my rationale, my fading “methodologies”, my narrative
voices, to whatever possibilities for collaborative inquiry that the co-researchers can
manifest collectively. With spirit I am propelled to a critical edge of sensing out what is and
what is not, and by what means I make such determinations. This spirit is a tough one. I
arbitrarily decided (was it me or it?) that objectivity, that way of seeing the other as an
object, was not necessarily without a life of its own and that I needed to sense it
participatively, in reflexive co-evolution with it, if I am to perceive whole systems at work
by means of whole systems at work.

**Hearing nature’s voices**

...in the moment in which we live whatever we live, we do not know
whether what we live is a perception or an illusion, and that due to that
we cannot claim to have the ability to make reference to any thing
assuming that it exists independently of what we do in the operation with
which we distinguish it  (Maturana Romesin, 2005, p. 56).

A way of distinguishing myself in the world is as a ‘participatory practitioner’. I
commit to a practice that generates resources with which communities come to truth-making
moments of cohesion together. It is a moment in which, consciously and less so, we co-create the means of knowing our truths. Participatory practices hold the spirit of social cohesion in the act of coming to know truths together. My quest in this thesis is to take this question of truth in public discourse into the realm of epistemology and ontology in the interests of sustainability in the public square.

The kinds of knowing and truths we come to know together are essential to understand given that one way and another they become the fabric of a community’s structure, what it generates and the systems that support it. As Maturana proposes: what comes about is inalienable from what and how we distinguish perception and illusion. How we know the difference between perception and illusion is the question of how we know. This Inquiry is concerned with extending human perception and with it our ways of knowing so we can better distinguish the truth of what we are doing. I see this matter as a human right “to become”, and a responsibility that we hold to all things particularly at this moment in human and global history.

We can know such things within ourselves, but it is in the speaking of them together, in making public spaces for contesting and moving into our meanings of them with each other, that communities transform through their members and the ecosystem flows with them. Participatory practitioners create resources for such space making, relationship building, expression, contestation, truth making and movement.

The emergence of community through participation takes place in the face of powers that would fragment such communities, and in many cases, have already done so. As a practitioner of participatory approaches I am witness of and participant in energies of fragmentation, turning and cohesion at play. I am learning participatory sensing that comes about as we perceive our limits and through participatory inquiry turn them into illusions in which the spirit of inquiry comes to life. I build community through participatory inquiry at the edges of awareness, convention and capability, extending our human qualities of perception as we meet new limits together. Along with my co-practitioners I craft practice in this relationship, through text, encounter, musing and resonation, opening it as and to a participatory worldview for the ongoing shape-shifting and toe-holding of both practice and worldview. The emergence of participatory practice with participatory community and participatory worldview are synchronous.

This work rests on my belief that being an emergent community, rising and falling through participatory practice rather than accident, neglect, self-interest and fear, is the best and most immediate course of action that humanity has to offer itself and the eco-systems from which we take, that receive our waste, and that perhaps we will learn how to give our
dignifying selves back to. I practise wary of misuse of anything that I know including that of misplaced belief in it, my own and anyone else’s. In being wary of such errors, I accept with equal caution, some sensing of the true against which error is known. It is in this sense, below the roots of criterion, at the source of their intentions that voice of nature stirs in communities coming to know truths together. I work to attend to its patterns for what together we hold as ethical, aesthetic and epistemological integrity; to a belief that this is what is needed now. In this quickening is the “nature”, the “spirit”, the “best of all possible beasts” of this Inquiry.

**Our lovely creature**

We each have our own ways of knowing our “beasts”, but getting to know them is not a given right or cultural assumption. I need to question how I know in order to know them, and mostly, I don’t know how to even ask the question of “how to know”.

When I first ask it I find myself in a “scenic railway” experience of nausea and pointlessness, which the instinct to comfort warns me against. Repeating it over time only improves the sensation if I have friends to talk around it with, and they are hard to find. Our innate richness of the human nature of knowing is socialised into a minimal range, usually of one way of knowing. This socialisation makes me un-knowing and inert about this most crucial aspect of our ways of being. Simply by not being informed that there is more than one way of knowing and hence becoming aware of “ways of knowing” or epistemology, I sense that as a species we are losing a sensitivity of human existence that may be the key to sustainability. To put it another way, can we be confident that working towards sustainability with the use of only one form of knowing, or only those forms recognised by competitive powers, is going to secure, rehabilitate and sustain organic systems, including the meta systems of regeneration? Can one way of knowing, a way that has forgotten our knowing of how we know, be constituted of the voices of nature at the roots of sensing the “true”?

I sense that our capacity for other forms of perception are closing down as is our being alert to the possibility that this belief in one way of knowing is an “illusion”. As Maturana comments, we have collectively “drifted” into a belief that what we distinguish exists independently of our distinctions, unaware that whatever we distinguish becomes our evolutionary pathway (Maturana Romesín, 2005, p. 55). The way we are is a consequence of how we know; how we know is a consequence of the way we are.

If we wish to address the way we are as a threat to planetary sustainability then the way we perceive, the way I perceive, and how and what I and we know in the act of perception is fundamental to the planet’s evolutionary pathway. These are epistemological
questions, vital to our existence and requiring particular forms of participatory approaches for them to be included in the quest for sustainability:

…it is epistemology that can help us understand how we come by knowledge that we use as a basis for action, be it by knowledge processes that are reliable and sustainable, or those that are unreliable and unsustainable (McElroy, 2004).

The Inquiry community’s commitment was to explore the value of participatory practice to sustainability. The hunch was that for participatory practice to realize its value to sustainability, epistemology needed to be included in the idea of “participatory practice”. This idea has already been well developed in the English schools of Action Research (for example, the works of Reason, Heron, Weil, Whitehead, Marshall, Bradbury as discussed throughout this text). However it is virtually undiscussed in the many other variants of participation that exist around the world where the idea of “epistemology” is felt to be academic and irrelevant to more deserving “pragmatic” concerns. It is not uncommon for practitioners to believe that our primary responsibility is to “make a difference” to people’s suffering and that the academic curiosities of methodology or philosophy are unrelated to this primary responsibility.

In the Inquiry project, we hoped that different ways of knowing participatory practice and sustainability might come about through our inquiring together into the question of epistemology. We wanted to experience participation in sustainability in ways that were more intuitive, communicable and possible than how participation and sustainability is being understood in current political and commercial contexts, in Australia at least. The governing assumption was that if sustainability was dependent on the dominant and unquestioned instrumental epistemology that so deeply governs not only our institutions but our “mechanisms” of thought, then we could be making a serious error. Even more serious in a way, is that the possibility of error is going unseen, unheard, unfelt because the matter of epistemology is also largely unseen, unheard and unfelt. If we cannot sense the error we cannot participate in its intervention.

When Peter W. said in the Cave: “Nature wants us but wants to know how to live with us” the question stopped being mine alone and became “ours”, inclusive of past, present and future, human and non-human beings. At that moment Peter made “a distinction” in Maturana’s terms, bringing to our awareness a way of knowing nature as a living and intelligent being, and which simultaneously relocated us in a new relationship with nature and each other. We felt an “ah-ha” so powerful that several of us thought we had each been responsible for this question. The question shifted our inquiry focus from a technical quest -
“what is the value of participatory practice to sustainability?” - to a socio-ecological one. It opened up and developed possible relationships within the question, the questioners, the contexts of the Inquiry and the various systems that nurture it. Naïve and wise, past its time and essential to a future, the question of how to live with nature is both possible and impossible to address. When faced with such a question, it becomes clear that we cannot hear the many voices of nature if we only have one way of knowing “it”; and as we discovered our only way forward at such an impasse is to deepen our powers of perception and turn our limitations into illusions. What kinds of participatory practices come about in such terrains?

**Theory of theory**

This thesis accounts for movement and manifestation of form - from an apparent void to enduring entities - little and large, momentary and ongoing, individual and collective. My commitment was to create the resources with which we could “come to know” “how we know” these experiences, without defaulting to technical, objective and linear explanations. The spirit of inquiry, as question, movement, nature and philosophy, had to simultaneously free itself and us from this acculturated and publicly valued way of knowing. One form to which my best of all possible beasts came into being was as a Theory of Theory within which I worked.

How I know my current beast is attending to what is given, at any moment, on any ontological ground, through any, many and future perceiving senses, distinguished from the unremarkable flow of everyday existence by my commitment to one condition: that encounter is mindful of my perceiving self, a sense of the origins of that which I perceive, and the thresholds that connect these two distinctions with those of other people’s. My having this sense of awareness is my experience of spirit in knowing. The following illustration and reflection indicates its nature.

My “part” in the Inquiry is its nature at work in our encounters with each other. The illustration below describes a way of coming to know, which through the Inquiry I have learned to bring into participatory interactions that generate the possibility for “epistemological emancipation”. By this term I mean increasing our sensitivity to how we know, learning different forms of how we know, challenging the assumptions of some of these forms for their social and ecological value, and co-creating new ways of knowing that are incorporated into new ways of being, which flow into forms of action. The praxis challenge is to bring this about without presuming an epistemological stance to do so. The Theory of Theory that I discuss is designed to bring about sensitivity in the movement of coming to know, rather than defaulting through acculturated tacit knowledge to a pre-
existing stance (and thus losing a sensitivity for how we know). It draws on my thinking about the bare minimum that we bring into any participatory interaction in order to enable such an environment to come about equitably, inclusively and transparently (Goff and Gregg, 2006).

**Figure 22: Theory of theory**

I am aware that by drawing boundaries and generating an image I am treading dangerously on the edge of objectivism. An image captures something and makes of it an object to be seen. I am hoping that in this instance the content that the structure holds, the relationships between structure, content and that which holds them in this living thesis is resistant to objectification in the ordinary sense. I am hoping that the aesthetics of the image and the poetics of the language create less fixed and tangible considerations. That in this image it is possible to encounter participatory sensing in a truth that the seen is not an object but a subject that looks back. The seen sees.
A Theory of Theory in practice

The problem I was working through in the early years of the theory of theory’s development, was that for many practitioners theorising practice is too often presumed to be a mechanical matter, which can result in our defaulting to instrumentalism, or alternatively, neglecting theorising altogether in a desire to resist instrumentalism. As we were later to discover ourselves, even those forms of theory that use non-instrumental sciences can still be structured and used instrumentally. Neither of these options seemed an acceptable limit to participatory practice if pluralism was to be authentic in the service of sustainability. I needed to discover where the illusion in theories of practice was lurking and expose it, to make of the illusion a new limit within which new forms of participation might be perceived. I needed to devise an understanding of “theory” that was something other than an objective, generalisable mechanism, within which I could co-generate other forms of theories of knowing, practice and what there is to be known as held in relationship with co-inquirers.

The three central arcs (Marshall, 2004, p. 309) of the theoretical construction describe an integrated structure of being aware of what I bring to participation as a practitioner. I bring my “commitments” to participatory principles however I see them (equity, inclusion and transparency, for example), the “essences” for participation however I see them (tangible and intangible resources, including principles and commitments, for example), and most importantly, my “narratives” or life stories which are actively engaged, critiqued and progressed in the experience of participation, however I construct it, including this way. My proposition is that these three elements of structure are the bare necessity of practice, but each practitioner will interpret them in their own way limiting the mechanistic powers of the theory.

As a practitioner I wish to consider each of the arcs and their intersections as primary work, before, during and after any practice work I do. I need to ask: how is my current version of my life story playing into this interaction? What aspects of participation am I committed to, without which I would not believe my practice to have participatory integrity? What essential resources can I bring and co-generate to enable the participatory

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1 I would like to acknowledge Susan Weil and the 2004 cohort of PhD students at SOLAR who worked with me on the first iterations of this theory of theory.

2 Other practitioners have different “non-negotiables” as the table 4 in the Appendix illustrates.

3 In the Inquiry we found that many of us have iconic narratives that powerfully influence our form of practice and our practice intentions: family traditions of conversation around a dining table, a near death experience at a teenager’s party, the experience of migration and migrant life, a father building a community church, a sexually abused and abusing adolescent boy telling his therapist that he loved her. When we are unaware of these stories and their power our practices and those who engage with them can become servants to our unrecognised selves.
potential to emerge in this specific context? These three elements are my minimum
construction to enable the co-researchers to contribute our (light and necessary) “essentials”
in the co-creation of a participatory environment and its diachronic and synchronic
trajectories. We each bring our own petals into the numinous relationship. The arcs also help
me recognise what I cannot regard as negotiable – that is, without my story, my non-
negotiables and the particular resources that I bring and co-create, I do not exist as a
participatory practitioner in a specific context of practice.

At the centre of the map is a spiral. It denotes a state of grace as we touched upon it,
as it came through us, in the Cave. How it emerges in each moment will be unique to those
moments, but my sense is that grace holds us in a quality of relationship with conscious
knowing that is gently strong while also appreciative of other things. How others come to see
“grace” with its many religious connotations is their right so to do. Established traditions of
faith are not my approach as the seven graces explain, but this ambiguity and gentle
invitation to reflexivity about these matters brings the spirit of inquiry alive. It is the quality
of distinction making, to work from Maturana’s concepts, that is essential to the quality of
“reality” that exists within the distinction. For this reason, the graces play a particular part in
our accepting ourselves as “unknowing” and equally, accepting the powers and
responsibilities of “knowing” in any situation, and particularly in the quest of sustainability.

The infinity shape that emanates from the sense of grace is reflective of Bohm’s idea
of experiencing the flow of things. It has the effect of things being felt as indivisible wholes,
each moment of distinction not being separated from the other but felt as an insight into the
whole once we make the connections. It is not a fixed pattern but a continuous touching of
one thing with another in the moments of coming to our experiences of truth. The “rational”
consequence of this is that the deepest experience of knowing is one of immeasurability
given that it is constructed of “one”. This is also reflective of Bohm’s proposition, based on
comparisons between traditional thinking in the “west” and the “East” that when measures
are regarded “as” reality they become illusionary, whereas when they are seen as symbolic
expressions, a way of seeing that which lies beyond the measure, they become truthful
(Bohm, 1980, pp 22- 25).

This map of a participatory epistemology is not a way of knowing that I can sustain
most of the time. It comes into my mind when I recognise a critical learning incident taking
place, at moments of aesthetic intensity, when wishing to shift my behaviour, and say, when

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1 The balance between bringing resources into a participatory environment from other places and co-creating them within it is
significant to relationships of power, and thus the self- and collective-determination possible; that is, the emergent
(participatory and sustainable) capacity of the developing entity.
confronted with something that is potentially diminishing or extending of me. At times like these if I remember, I attempt to see things this way and when I do, I sense the presence of our spirit of inquiry. It can be understood as a “spirit”, an energy, a light and gentle mystery of systemic participation in the act of perception. Its presence is felt throughout the Inquiry, not as a mechanism laying itself down for the rest of our work to fit into it, but as a quality (a spirit) that comes through our words, determinations of action and inaction, that which we bring into view, and the character of its unfolding nature. Sometimes it is palpable in practice.

The seen sees

We first encountered the best of all possible beasts in our teleconferences; the dark intangibility of listening lights up “its” form. “It” was mid-wifed into existence from a year’s collaborative activity and apparent collaborative inactivity. “It” gradually became visible in the interplay of what looked like contradictions: in the rising and falling of potential action, the shifting consistency of form through inconsistencies of participation and focus, the identity of a collaboration in a haphazard network that continually shifted active membership within the Inquiry community. This revealing dynamic would be familiar to those who have worked generic methods across disciplinary fields – as context shifts, that which is constant becomes evident. A combination of movement and stillness, voice and silence, intimacy and distance, consistency and inconsistency, presence and absence, denoted that an-other could be there/here.

What I noticed was Peter W.’s growing practice of turning sentences around to speak of “other” as a living entity with its own intent, witnessed by us, that brought us to “it”. For example he said: “what we are participating in, is participating in us” (Teleconference recording: 7/10/05). Others may not have noticed its first appearance this way: I was in the position of talking to everyone, whereas others talked to different others depending on who of the collaboration was available at any one time.

Over time, we heard what Peter said with a sensitivity of many months of talking and reflecting around questions of boundaries, flows of power, self organising behaviours, co-witnessing, immobilisation and many other concepts, partial thoughts that came to light in inquiry activity. Peter also brought pantheistic allusions into our conversations; something that was picked up by three of us in several teleconferences. We made it a rudimentary language for that which exists beyond what we know, outside of the realms of how we know in our defaulted, socially imposed standpoint of a one “god” of one epistemology.

By talking this way with everyone in the collaboration little potent threads of what felt like intuitive wisdom began to be spoken, in ways that we had not allowed ourselves to
Chapter 2. Spirit: the seen sees

speak before. Our limitations, assumed to be insurmountable and fixed as walls, began to soften.

For example, Jane talked at length about her experiences of learning to “temper” (Jane F., Teleconference recording, 6/10/05) her way of encountering experience at first, second or third person levels of existence, resonant of Torbert, (2001, p. 251) so that she could better sense the world, a sensitivity made possible in softening the hold of her acculturated experiences. I described the strange experience of explaining my thesis at different times to different people fitting each person’s experiential frame even when I had only just met them. I described it as: “Letting experience speak freshly to me within the context of the moment” (Teleconference recording, 6/10/05).

Through such tempering, turning and softening, through momentary in-dwelling in “a little picnic lawn of contemplation” that came through the connections of people and thought, we came to know something manifesting at the edges of our individual and collective being, embodying the paradoxical form and rhythm of same as ever, ever changing. (This dynamic is resonant of “the Deleuzian paradox that ‘something truly new can only emerge through repetition’ (2004: 12). Chesters and Welsh, 2005: p 191, referencing Zizek, 2004). In a nutshell, that which was felt to be beyond the limits of what was familiar to us was allowed to be an energy at work that was something other than fear of not knowing. When we thought of it as being interested to encounter us, the thought did not seem incredible:

...as Zizek argues, ‘what repetition repeats is not the way the past “effectively was” but the virtuality inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualisation’ (2004: 12). (Chesters and Welsh, 2005: p191).

Spirit

We found so many ways of playing with this best of all possible beasts: we approached “it” with traces of mythology (Peter W.), chaos theory (Sue), playback theatre (Peter O.), reflective practices (Jo, Brigid and Margaret) and critical narratives (Susie G), dialogue (all), poetics (Lesley and Jane F.), email practices (Jo), maps (John, Penny and Susie), frameworks like Bourdieu’s idea of “habitus” (John), Australian aboriginal song lines (Peter O.), Bohm’s systemic thinking (Susie G) and social ecology (Susie G, Peter W. and Jane G.). Any one of them could have occupied a thesis but this was not where we found our energy – or where it found us.

As Peter O. said: we found ourselves in a relationship that made it possible for us to know the bit of the song line that we find ourselves to be custodians of simply in the mere act of our being there. We could follow the ancient practice of understanding that comes at
the edge of our edge, so we say to one another: “the creature-being went that way”, (Peter O., Teleconference recording, 7/10/05). As we release our encounter with our part of the song line, Peter counsels, we learn to work with the discomfort of those parts of the song line that are cared for by others: other moments, other grounds, other perceiving senses.

Indeed, entities arise as co-ordinations of consensual co-ordinations of doings that evoke other co-ordinations of doings, in networks of recursive consensual co-ordinations of doings that we live as a world of objects that we treat as if they existed independently of what we do (Maturana Romesin, 2005, p. 64).

Foucault cautions us with regard to taking such a spirit as truth, as well as presuming the reality of fragmentation as truth. He concludes (1972, p.30) that we must be vigilant regarding the rules of discourse as implied in any statement, and compares this with the rules that determine what is said or not said:

There is a notion of “spirit”, which enables us to establish between the simultaneous or successive phenomena of a given period a community of meanings, symbolic links, an interplay of a resemblance and reflexion, or which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation (Foucault, 1972, p. 24).

In this thesis the principle, rather than rule, that I strive to accomplish is to write in such a way as to make room for the reader’s and my own reflexivity on aesthetic, cognitive and ethical grounds.

Chapter 2 is like Brooklyn Bridge: the wires heading off on either side, going eventually to Chapter 9. Chapter 3 forms a filter that the wires need to pass through before they can proceed. I need to stand in both places and check it: are the threads tied off? (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06).
CHAPTER 3

HERITAGE: SHIRTS OF FLAME

Yet personal knowledge in science is not made but discovered, and as such it claims to establish contact with reality beyond the clues on which it relies. It commits us, passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality... Like love, to which it is akin, this commitment is a "shirt of flame", blazing with passion and, also like love, consumed by devotion to a universal demand. Such is the true sense of objectivity in science... (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 64).

Introduction

Our participatory field is drawn of eclectic legacies of text, experience and communicated codes of practice. We can see this way of bringing a new field into being in Maturana’s terms of “consensual coordinations of doings”, which through practitioner learning with co-participants become momentarily integrated in practice knowledges. Such new knowledge may or may not confirm existing epistemologies. We may or may not consider that we live as “a world of objects” to be “discovered” as Maturana suggests; we may remain ambivalent about the degree to which the participatory world exists independently of what we do.

Polanyi’s poetics of knowing dwell in the region that exists beyond established epistemology, where that which is to be known and the knower are forging a pristine relationship: new to the knower, the knower’s “field”, and that which is being known. His words describe a familiar participatory experience where the unique properties of individual mind, contextual complexity and the imperatives of task at hand, play into that which emerges through such determinations. In the interests of human development, participatory practice enables, to greater and lesser degrees, equitable plays of these flows of energy, a capability that demands a range of influences and skills that is almost unique to each practitioner’s origins, their chosen field of endeavour and personal qualities.

Practice of participation is a multi-dimensional enterprise, a seemingly unrelated and random list of “capabilities”. Philosophy, science, aesthetics, healing and wellbeing, spirituality, culture, politics, ethics, governance, communication, scholarship and manual labour, disciplinary, inter and trans-disciplinary knowledges, technology and self-
development, for example. While we need to embrace what is known in our variously characterised nuances of practice, we share a signatory willingness to be at the limits of what is known; to act as “a means” for transforming social realities that must initially, and to some degree always, exist not only beyond our capacity for information but also beyond our comprehension. Here is the grace of knowing. Paradoxically we learned an expertise to be in such a state of unknowing:

*Before I sought to create space; now I am to draw attention to its emergence, reflect my being within it (Fisher, J. 2006, p.2).*

In this chapter I travel to these emerging edges of participation with some of the thinkers who form and continue to grow the foundations of our field, as I see them. They relate to my autobiographical origins, fields of endeavour and personal qualities, but I hope that they also inform others of the strange landscapes and mysterious “properties” that become evident to people working at these edges. I show how such work is not limited to philosophers or scientists of universal repute, but open to us in our daily experiences of participation. It is here, when we are confronted by our own limitations of practice - a practice of knowing, doing, being and becoming together for the better service of life - that we discover our participatory heritage. We are encouraged by it to pay attention to senses, insights and utterances that we might easily dismiss or simply miss, if we are unaware that we are at “an edge”. On their discerning objectivity at work, those whose insights follow actively create an edge of participatory potential rather than comply with its incising demands. Each author has experienced its devitalising properties in their own way, consciously decided against them and created something else. This thesis is doing similar work drawn from the same post modernist tradition. Could it be that in the future, participatory practitioners work this way in response to any dominating epistemology, understanding that a “dominant” epistemology whatever its colouration, is innately oppressive, even when its architecture is constructed of elements that would not have it so?

*Your ontological and epistemological thumb nails (dramatis personae) brought to mind the image of a truth quest... Quests by their nature are both universal and particular - In these stories and in your commentary I see people developing their truth craft; making the journey from apprentice to master. Sometimes we only get to witness a fragment of the journey, but a nugget of growth and wisdom is held up to our inquiring*

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9 This list was circulated amongst the co-researchers (email, 19/5/06), a group that reflects multiple disciplines, economic sectors and constructions of participatory practices; it was agreed that it was a comprehensive reflection of what we consider participatory practices to be comprised.
Heritage at the everyday participatory edge

“What interested me ... was a link between what you were presenting and a connection point with what I am interested in the big sphere of my life ... That is rare, those entry points don’t necessarily come to your doorstep every day’” notes Lesley. John is curious. He asks her: “Could you open that up a bit more?” (The Cave).

Heron describes “the facilitator” of experiential learning, a core field to participatory practice, in a broad and multi-dimensional way. Claiming a specific epistemological stance (“manifold learning” 1999, p 3), his text proposes a structured system of such a practice, shifting the random and eclectic nature of our work into a coherent “whole” of capability. He distinguishes the six “dimensions” of facilitation practice as: planning, meaning making, confronting, feeling, structuring and valuing (Ibid, p. 6). He explores “the politics of learning” in each of these dimensions as three modes: a hierarchical, co-operative and autonomous mode (Ibid, p. 8). His model is seamlessly integrated by cross-referencing these dimensions and modes to constitute a practice of facilitation that encompasses presence, voice, language and purpose (Ibid, p. 226-228).

Heron’s proposition regarding facilitation practice in the participatory field is a constituent of our heritage at the edges of existing knowledges including those about participatory practices. Our heritage is broad but not without distinguishable boundaries: the boundaries are what we perceive as being “non-participatory” approaches to action10. For example, the following discussion took place within the early stages of the Inquiry:

Co-researcher 1: If our service is community-driven then there should be a co-arrival at the questions of power. When there isn’t we realize it is not about participation but cutting costs.

Co-researcher 2: So it stops being participatory and becomes coercive (Teleconference data report, 11/2/05: 5).

Such a boundary, discernable as an “edge” around a participatory initiative’s field of influence, is less of a clear demarcation and more of a moving focus of learning for those involved. Over ten years ago Reason looked beyond the boundaries of established

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10 I acknowledge, without discussing, that the meaning of the construction, “action”, is contested.
Participatory practice to describe a future form as working between both concrete and poetic ways of knowing:

As I see future participation it is a form of consciousness rooted in concrete experience and grounded in the body; characterized by self-awareness and self-reflection; experience is ordered through a sense of pattern and form rather than by discrete objects; there is a much deeper appreciation of the alienating power of conceptual language and more active and aware use of imagination and metaphor (Reason, 1994, p. 33).

Within the boundaries of our Inquiry project, and as is discernable in the unfolding of this thesis, we created an environment that reflected these qualities, and in so doing we opened ourselves to new questions and new responses in each of our life-worlds. When we experienced this newness we felt ourselves to be at an “edge” that felt strange. Our narrative can be noisy, our ghosts of uncertainty, if not immobilisation vivid at these edges. For example, some of us said:

...my mind is glazing over at the complexity (Co-researcher, Teleconference data report, 4/3/05: 9).

There is a huge amount of resistance to that shift in process in the organisation. How do I respond to that? My own fear of doing that, of presenting this idea and following it through, is at the moment terrifying the pants off me... (Co-researcher, teleconference recording T2741976, 4/3/06).

When one of our members ran a workshop to explore a particular approach to participatory practices he invited his boss to attend, which she did. The workshop was beautifully done: vulnerable and intellectual, performative, innovative, balanced and revealing of subject matter and approach. However the feeling back at his work place was that it was a bit too “soft” for them. This familiar response to ways of knowing that are not located in objectivity, but which bring knowing back into human experience, body and relationship, is being at an “edge”.

When another of us was confronted with a letter from her mental health team appealing against the misconduct of a superior manager, we determined to track the journey of the letter through her organisation. We saw it as a powerful icon of participation. The team was using strong principles of participatory approaches in their intervention practices with community members, and had applied those same principles to their own emergence as a collaborative team within the organization. This is a powerful edge for many organizations whose members limit their understanding of participation either to their stakeholders or to...
organisational development, but fail to manage a trans-boundary system of participation that incorporates, indeed integrates, both.

The workers found the assumptions of the senior manager to be in contradiction with their principles but saw these same principles as essential to resolving the conflict. After many failed attempts to negotiate, the matter was referred horizontally to someone who had no first-hand experience of the people or the issues. It was delayed indefinitely, lighting up the limits of practice within the rhetoric of policy. The co-researcher described the edge of the participatory edge at her organization’s limit as:

*Risk management invisibilises learning culture (Co-researcher, dialogue note T26: 30/6/05).*

A third participant, active on a community organization’s management committee, suggested involving the beneficiaries of the organization – aged people seeking residential accommodation – in the planning of future services. The chairperson responded to her with: “we don’t want the inmates running the asylum”. This comment resonated throughout her and our collaboration when she reported it. As she said: “I am a practitioner. I am doing all the work and why don’t you hear me?” (Dialogue note, T28: 30/6/05). Silencing, devaluation and passive aggression, “the virtuality inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualisation” (Zizek, 2004, p. 12) were presenting to her as participatory edge.

Many of us, at different times, will accept such a limit at the threshold between our perceived context and our forms of perception, and work within it. At those times we are the “cold coals” that Jo spoke of in the Cave. In the Inquiry, we learned to see such limits as being born of their own heritages within our narratives, the resources we have to work with and our non-negotiable commitments; we also saw that as practitioners. At other times, we have a heritage that spells other stories at this place. We learned that we have choices about who we are and how we do in the face of a force field of unquestioned assumptions that would act against our participatory intent. We can be blown on, and blow on others in our turning (what holds our haphazard story?).

Beyond these limits is the same place as Polanyi’s “shirt of flame”. It is a place where individual and collective vision and commitment to its materialisation is formed. In an inquiry environment it is both our source of inspiration, the instinctive compass that draws us towards some felt sense that “truth lies here” as much as it is that of punished fools, traitors and misfits. Here we are most surely tested for our participatory practice capacities: how we know good practice is literally “a work in progress”.

The texts that I found to be of greatest value to this question of participatory practice at the edges of knowing were those who described the author’s confrontation with
conventional limits to what was assumed to be true, and how they responded participatively in that moment and over time. They did not accept the limit but saw it as pointing to an “opening” of perception, making illusions from limits, through which they were called to create knowledge. There too “the spirit of inquiry” was alive with them. Their stance became my heritage for the Inquiry. What follows is a retracing of my voyage through some of the writings that resonated most deeply and enduringly with my experiences of confronting myself at the limit of participation in the Inquiry; discovering there a dawning “reality beyond the clues on which it relies” (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 64).

**Richardson: breaking genre**

*My goal is a modest one: the provision of an argument for the presence and value of narrative within sociology (Richardson, 1997, p.27).*

Laurel Richardson’s book “Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life” describes a woman’s journey into an aspect of methodology – writing - as located in her discipline of ethnography in the field of sociology.

Her participatory truth is that writing is the way social science creates itself, and through the power of science, writing creates society. The problem she faces is that science, which she sees as “positivist empiricism” (Ibid, p. 44), refutes both the value of rhetoric by denigrating it as irrational, and the value of language by denigrating it as irrelevant to “scientific truth” (Ibid, p. 40). Here is the limit she is experiencing. She sees the gap that objectivity in knowledge creates between our self-perceiving mind and whatever else that the mind perceives; and she sees it as the place in which society’s restorative truths are lost. Many others share this idea that some forms of truth are lost, rather than found, in the distance implied by “objectivity” as I go on to discuss throughout this chapter. For example:

*... mechanistic solutions to complex problems of social and organisational learning and change, derived from a positivist view of the world, may generate short term efficiency gains, but they continue to generate major disjunctions in the 'spaces in between' and at the interfaces (Weil, 1997, p.380).*

For Richardson, language is neither irrational nor irrelevant, but the means by which truth is not only articulated but also given power to exist. Richardson finds her space for participatory practice development in this gap between herself and the dominant epistemology of her field. She critiques how sociologists, who see themselves as social scientists, pay much attention to the language of the people they study but virtually none to their own (Richardson, 1997, p. 39). She critiques her peers as submitting to
“institutionalised behaviouristic assumptions” about writers, readers, subjects and knowledge itself (Ibid, p.42) and in so doing overlooking that “how one writes one’s theory is not simply a theoretical matter. The theoretical inscribes a social order, power relationships, and the subjective state of the theorists” (Ibid, p. 49).

Her insight struck me as a powerful invitation to work into my own responsibility regarding a literary approach to my work: for its power to inscribe social order, power relationships and indeed my own subjective state particularly in reference to my field and the world views that I have inscribed in my mind. Even more immediately though, I understood the scale of her task, the value of her scrutiny and the activist construction of her way of being in her world. I saw her making space for her quest by raising her question, naming her community of sociologists as I have done with my community of participatory practitioners, and explicating the values that her intended inquiry would manifest.

She made her quest a living (participatory) reality through using her own writing to perturb the unquestioned practices of her field. She did this not as a technical exercise, but as an emancipatory responsibility. She reasoned that the reductionist, abstracting, hypothetical, “problematising” and linear conventions of sociological writing (Ibid, p. 43) sustain a belief in what constitutes sociological knowledge. This belief, constructed as it is by these conventions and even in its turn to post modernism, continues to act oppressively, by for example, suppressing women’s voices in the sociological field (Ibid, p. 52-54), and by privileging its own self interest at the cost of those it both exploits and serves (Richardson, 1997, p 120-121).11

Seeing writing as the means by which these errors are sustained in her field, Richardson makes sociological writing her participatory practice edge. She shows the illusions of its conventional truths and sensing her way forward from that analysis she experiments with making sociological writing pivotal to the internal reflexivity of the sociological field. Her own journey becomes a microcosm of this “transformation” by seeing herself as the problem, being both critic of her field and self-reflexive example of that which she criticises. It is the participatory practice of self-reflexivity twinned with her intent towards a better form of truth that makes the difference. She is prepared to, and does, risk alienation, professional insecurity and attack even from those whose interests she holds “highest” - the marginalised populations whom sociology tends to make its “subjects” (Ibid, p. 127). She holds the difficult and ambiguous, paradoxical and painful stance of representing and perturbing both the powerless and powerful. She writes into the problem,

11 This insight, is resonant with Bourdieu’s opening comments about all forms of “scientific activity” (Bourdieu, 1972, p.1) which I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7.
provocatively critiquing dominant voices and offering alternative literary forms to sociological writing in the academic convention. She does so to let other voices be heard and heard differently, including those of sociologists. She writes about the experience through her literary pieces chronicled as individual chapters, and in the reflective commentaries interleaving each chapter as “Forewords”.

Her self appointed method is captured in her phrase “breaking genre” (Ibid, p. 115), an idea that has resonated with me throughout the Inquiry. Her book is an artefact or material means of this praxis, as I would have this thesis be. “Breaking genre” is a practice of working in the happy mess that comes about when two disciplinary fields interpenetrate each other. In Richardson’s case, she introduces the field of literature to that of sociology, using poetry, dramatic script and participant writings (Ibid, p.115) to talk “sociology”. Her interpenetration, or transgression of ontological boundaries, deconstructs the conventions of writing sociologically so as to expose the social consequences of such conventions. Ultimately, she sees these consequences as the self-contradicting diminishment of sociology’s responsibility to our human right to be nurtured, cherished and fostered (Ibid, p.213) in our “other ways of knowing” (Ibid, p.208).

I felt a natural attraction to the woman at work in her confrontation with an ontology that limits her participation on philosophical, scientific, political, artistic and ethical grounds. Her practice brought these strands together, to heal and to transform her discipline. I recognised Richardson as dwelling in the sub-stratum of the invisible realm of emergent existence, perceiving a profound corruption there that jeopardises post modernism to itself and the world. I learned of how she learned to speak from this place, invisible and uncared for as it is by most. Working at such edges risks being invisibilised with the unseen that I see. Others may not understand why what I see is “an issue”, or worthy of anything more than a passing comment, a teasing joke at a coffee break. The intent gaze, construction of new “clues” of which a new reality might be made, cannot in their first moments of coming into existence be made concrete or normal. How do I know when I am being foolish and when speaker of truths? I wondered: how will my voice be heard? Was there a growing capacity within my own academic and social context to speak and be heard about similar, invisible things?

**Hodge: being open to the monstrous**

*There have been a series of decentring movements that together have disrupted the intent of the system and created propitious conditions for an efflorescence of New Humanities (innovative, transdisciplinary, critical) doctorates (Hodge, B. 1995, p. 38).*
Bob Hodge’s paper, “Monstrous Knowledge”, acts as a (still) new heritage for transgressive truths in Australia’s academic sector. The problem that he outlines is that in the circumstances of epistemic ruptures (Foucault, 1970 in Hodge, Ibid, p. 36) those with the institutionalised power to authorise new knowings, along with the doctoral student, must both confirm and debunk their disciplinary origins in order to breach their discipline’s authorising boundaries. Here Hodge is meeting the limit of legitimising new truths, not the limit of an oppressive act as Richardson does, but as a “systemic knot”. He too represents the powerful and the powerless in a similar practice state of paradox and ambiguity.

He outlines indicative traits of these new works, also easily recognised in Richardson’s work. He suggests that works are often self-reflexive, performative, trans-disciplinary, presenting research as writing, being structurally and substantively complex, situated and theoretical (Ibid, p.39). Hodge claims that such post modern attributes of articulating truths are not recognised in the academies of all disciplinary fields in Australia. The institutionalised academic convention judges such qualities as illegitimate in the assessment of “a person’s relation to the dominant system of knowledge” (Ibid, p.35) by using incongruent criteria for their examination (akin to measuring chalk with cheese). Along with Richardson, Hodge is looking into a particular gate-keeping moment and mechanism by which writing theory also “incribes a social order, power relationships, and the subjective state of the theorists” (Richardson, 1997, p. 49).

Hodge presents the moment, that of the examiner determining the credibility of such doctoral theses, in Foucault’s terms - that disciplinary knowledge comes into being through “prowling monsters”. Richardson’s “sociological rhetoric” could be seen as such a monster. The monsters are the eternally transforming nature of knowledge which, while responding itself to historic turns in its own form, is also given the power to define, both arbitrarily and traditionally, both explicitly and ambiguously, what is regarded as being “within the true” (Foucault, 1976, p. 224 in Hodge, 1995, p. 36). I have found this power in writing this thesis, felt as a responsibility if not an unquenchable demand for conviction, amid the myriads of questions that spring up when others touch it.

He goes on to describe his mental construction of how new forms of knowing generate a “transdisciplinary formation” that is distinct from “interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary linkages” because they do more than link existing disciplines. This transdisciplinary space for new knowledge, beyond the limit of what is known, in Hodge’s terms exists between disciplines (and is thus not necessarily descriptive of an epistemological shift given that any discipline is necessarily anchored to positivism). It is a similar notion of new space for knowledge to Weil’s and Richardson’s “spaces in between” and the “gaps” created by objectivity. Hodge gives such knowledge a dynamic characteristic
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of having the power to transform the shape of existing knowledge as well create new forms within its own pristine or “monstrous” state. This attributed power came into our Inquiry in the form of our best of all possible beasts.

The resonating idea with which Hodge’s paper has stayed alive to me is “being open to the monstrous” or as Hodge states, taking “especially seriously” those elements of knowing that appear to the researcher as “unthinkable” to the dominant discipline. Here I was being given permission to stay with the sense of “reality beyond the clues on which it relies” if I could perceive it.

This paper encouraged me to embrace the idea that there were not just a few epistemologies as recognised in the Academy, but endless and momentary forms of our ways of knowing. I was encouraged to see epistemology as a human right and “within the true” of participatory practices; that the notion of human epistemology as central to the question of planetary sustainability was worthy of serious engagement and that it is not at all adequate for me or my peers to shrug our shoulders and say it is “academic” or “soft” in the participatory ground of practice. I was guided to detect the shadow and understand what sat within the old disciplines’ judgement of illegitimacy by engaging with these judgements (Ibid, p.37) also as Richardson did; to confront what they lit up within me that was so powerful as to let me forget who and what I am in how I do.

As new epistemologies rupture convention’s hold, they inevitably define themselves and those who hold them in the initial bifurcation of being what they can no longer be. In this first defining moment they are as alien to their own difference as the authorised assumptions they leave behind are alien to them. In other words, birthing a new way of knowing is a dangerous moment. The danger exists in my own mind as much as it does in peer relationships and prescribing institutions. This is my understanding of why Hodge wrote the paper - to protect such vulnerable and much needed works from being aborted for their unrecognisable quality, even before any conservative self-interest takes hold.

Polanyi foreshadowing Koestler (1980) describes this inescapable state of unknowing in a description of the emergent architecture of knowledge:

"Lower levels do not lack a bearing on higher levels; they define the conditions of their success and account for their failures, but they cannot account for their success, for they cannot even define it (Polanyi, 1958a, p 382)."

When I find or propel myself beyond convention because I see some oppressive agency at work within it, and particularly when I see myself as a proponent of that agent, I am being participatory. In acting so, I can find myself in a place of alienation that I self
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create in seeing the convention as alien. This is also a heritage of participatory practice. Its archetypal narrative can be felt as heroic, diminished, passionate and strategic. It is full of paradox: in our culture we are expected to subscribe to fragmentation to belong; if we embody flow we become incised from the “whole” of fragmentary thinking.

Embracing this paradox manifests in experiences of being seen as “other” and making alienating others of others - indeed, it is difficult when I am working in various forms of isolation to be “the same as” particularly if that kind of conviviality requires turning a blind eye to something that I find unacceptable to my commitments. Otherness manifests in little ways: calls not returned, invitations not made, acknowledgements missing, criticisms of the wrong things, being used for other’s purposes. It manifests in big ways: jobs not given, projects de-funded, schools of thought and services that reflect them shut down. It is about not being recognised and as such being kept out of dialogue in which I can hear myself think (individually and collectively) and co-create reflexive inter-subjective communion with others. It is from within and across such difficult spaces that I form participatory knowing.

Without the benefit of a place to be heard, participatory practitioners in particular remain disabled. Participation, after all, is dependent not only on self-determination, but on self-determination in the company of other self-determining beings. It is for this reason that one of the primary capabilities of participatory practice is in creating “spaces” in which “voices” are “heard”. Ironically, particularly where objectivist epistemology is at work, such spaces rarely let us speak as we make room for others to do so. Without spaces to be heard my practice has little opportunity to develop, my sense of being remains stuck at a participatory limit that is failing to become a transformative edge. My instinct to cross that limit is a matter of my survival as well as that of others. I know that I cannot stay within the conventions; that truth as I see it, is compromised to an intolerable degree. I am compelled by my sensitivity to what can become, to name the limit for what it is, to respond to it participatively by creating what I see as being a truer truth of some form in companionship with others. If I am condemned to do this as a solitary preoccupation I risk being fool, traitor and misfit even to my integrity. This language is strong but so is the sense of fear that I encounter in isolation. Paradoxically, I am not alone in such isolation.

Weil: homelands on the borderlands

The heritage that Susan Weil creates is a place in which participatory practitioners are recognised, can speak and be heard so that their practice can move beyond that which convention legitimises on the one hand, and the state of isolation that such movement can produce, on the other. In this way she provides the means by which practitioners may
become ontologically true to ourselves. Like Richardson and Hodge, she is a practitioner working with as much vigour in the humble reflexivity of her own becoming as she does with her students’ transformative experiences. Weil, with the other members of the action research teams at SOLAR, creates research outcomes that reflect participatory principles at work. Included in this work is the building of a transforming entity - rather than conventional institution - of radical scholarship practice at the SOLAR research centre. I include Weil’s written and practice work in my heritage here, acknowledging that heritage in participatory terms is made of more than the legacy of text: it is also made of living relationships of peer learning.

The resonating quality of her work throughout my thesis has been her ability to tell the story of her practices in such a way as to continually affirm my stance and intent with neither agreement nor authority. It is affirmation as companionship in the journey we are travelling together, or as John in one of his many moments of amnesic brilliance in our Inquiry would say - “co-witnessing” the emergence of new communities of interest through our practices. It is captured in one word, whispered to me in a moment of when in a workshop I not only ran out of words but also ideas. “Trust” she whispered. She has found the meaning of trust in tending her monsters:  

\[ I \text{ have learned what it may mean to live and learn new cultures of inquiry not in the academy. But instead, at its boundaries...in the shadows of its unintended consequences and often unrecognised powerful influences...in the borderlands where those who were not socialised into its dominant practices, speak of things that so often still remain unspoken and unknown within...and here lie a host of my various life stories seen as emerging forms of social inquiry in which we are a part, not separate (Weil, 1999). } \]

I know about trusting “what is”, of myself and with others in the “shadows”, from years of working as a participatory action researcher throughout the 90s and early years of the first 21st century. I deployed Wadsworth’s construction of a “critical reference group” point of view (Wadsworth, 1991, p, 11) to strengthen policy and practice with the overlooked wisdom of those who have lived the issues that policy seeks to address. In the interests of social justice, both in the act of inquiry as well as the outcomes that such inquiry delivers, Wadsworth’s model, facilitated by the participatory practitioner (as evaluator, community developer or researcher, for example) brings consumers into equitable inquiry relationships with their service providers (and others) within a service’s organisational structures. In my use of this model, which was inter-organisational in my case, I came to understand the primary value of experiential knowledge and its power to recast relationships,
expertise and issues in ways that existing managerial systems still encounter as provocative despite its advantages. Foucault also knew about the wisdom of those who are overlooked:

_Thrust back by poverty to the very brink of death, a whole class of men experience, nakedly, as it were, what need, hunger, and labour are. What others attribute to nature or to the spontaneous order of things, these men are able to recognize as the result of a history and the alienation of a finitude that does not have this form. For this reason they are able - they alone are able - to re-apprehend this truth of the human essence and so restore it_ (Foucault, 1966, p.261).

In her Inaugural Professorial Lecture (Weil, 1999), and sharing with Hodge and Richardson a commitment to challenge the academic community at an epistemological level, Weil weaves the metaphor of the ocean’s waves and sea walls into her experiences of social inquiry into such “naked experience” as Foucault describes. She reveals the presence of those beyond the academy’s conventions of “objective detachment of positivist and interpretivist research, [which renders] the highly problematic and socially contextualised nature of knowledge invisible from view” (Weil, 1999).

Resonant of Richardson’s work, Weil continues to describe the power of written theory to construct relationships of power and states of being. She comments on how the academy over values objective detachment and its related virtues, which “seep into our everyday practices” (ibid) allowing us to become increasingly separated from the real world complexities that are the actual stuff of inquiry practice and shifts in social structures, becoming as we do “more and more inured to the disjunctions”. Here I am seeing the same sense of forgetting what and who I am in how I do. Weil has been here too, perhaps as one of Jo’s “cold coals”, perhaps as one being blown on by others, certainly as one who blows on others in this place. Without such breathing, the self consuming spiral of un-sustainability is set, perpetuated in mythic ideas of “managing” change, culture, learning and people’s behaviours and even in managing our “way forward into the future” (Ibid). Weil sets herself at the edge of the participatory limit by proclaiming such accepted truths as “myths”.

Referring to the many inquiry strategies that she has co-authored with others Weil outlines her picture of social inquiry, dwelling on its continual movement, messiness, relatedness, humanity, improvisation and conversation. These elements are her sense of the many dimensions of the practice. She wants to “un-cage” the researcher “from the hold of pre-determined designs and methods” (Ibid) so we may “learn our way into the future” rather than leverage, explain or predict it.
Weil’s envisioned place at the edges of convention, discipline, emergence and knowing is resonant of Hodge’s “new potentially explosive density near some arbitrary margin that destabilizes the basic core-plus-periphery structure of prior disciplines” (Hodge, 1995, p.36). Simply by being there, by writing and practicing from and into it, she makes a “homeland” for myself and other peer practitioners (Weil, 1999) wherever our borderland might be, around the globe, in, out and next to the academy, the market place and wilderness, throughout our life-lines.

Weil’s trust in the emergent powers of this “place” to restore justice to systems and develop human potential for wisdom, the poetics with which she speaks of these things, the grounded development in person, relationship and systemic whole that she lets come to herself and those with whom she practices through it, presents this place not as floating, isolating or vulnerable as I experience it so often, but as rich with pattern and rhythm that leads anchor-like, straight (spiralling and curved) to the healthy and inestimable heart of human being.

For me, Polanyi is the person whose heritage to our field stands most powerfully at the edge of what it is to be human, as he saw its principal quality being destroyed by convention (and perhaps an unacknowledged founder of the participatory practice field in this sense). It is in his words that I find my right to act on my responsibility to break with conventions of “what is”, to stand on ground that I am obliged to make firm myself, participatively, according to my sense of what constitutes knowing, for both personal and in his terms, cosmological, wellbeing. Is this a promise of a life attempting itself in words?

Polanyi: the unavoidable act of personal participation

So far as we know, the tiny fragments of the universe embodied in man are the only centres of thought and responsibility in the visible world. If that be so, the appearance of the human mind has been so far the ultimate stage in the awakening of the world; and all that has gone before, the strivings of myriad centres that have taken the risks of living and believing, seem to have all been pursuing, along rival lines, the aim now achieved by us to this point (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 405).

Polanyi’s thinking about tacit knowing is clear and essential to knowledge-generating practices (learning, evaluation, research, aesthetics, ethics and knowledge management, for example) and in my view, regardless of the epistemology that such practices deploy. His work critiques objectivist-based sciences, deploying the praxis that he proposes in their stead, to do so. His text is analytical and passionate, technical and poetic,
observant of natural laws and spiritual, critical of ideology and resonant of idealism in the face of nihilism.

As Hull (2005, p. 154) points out, his work now represents a difficult irony: originating in deep concerns regarding the rise of totalitarianism and tyranny, his argumentation against the domination of the rational and objective at the expense of the personal and subjective has undergone a strange mutation in the “hands” of neo-liberal globalisation in the twenty-first century. Where in Polanyi’s day, liberalism was seen as the freeing alternative to the socialist state by privileging the individual’s voice rather than that of a centralised political power, now the domination of instrumental thinking in our “liberal” institutions has trapped this promise of human freedom in the very belief in “objectivity” that Polanyi railed against. It is hard to know whether the dangers of objectivism are greater in the hands of a centralised totalitarian state or decentralised liberal capitalism.

While the ethnocentric, anthropocentric and paternalistic acculturations of his day influence his proposition, I see relevance and truth in his theories as applied to contemporary discourses, particularly those to do with knowledge generating practices, of which participatory practices are one. With regard to this thesis, there are three particular observations that Polanyi makes and to which I wish to attend here. The first is to do with power, the second with aesthetics, and the third with transformation.

**Power**

Polanyi’s work is based on a belief that humanity must “accredit our own judgements as the paramount arbiter of all our intellectual performances” (1958a, p. 265). It is not that he is arguing for a blind belief in self-righteousness, it is in a simple reality that the act of “knowing” is a human function. If we fail to recognise this, respect it and commit to developing it, we fail to develop as a species and in his view, fail our cosmological purpose: liberation (Ibid, p. 405).

Polanyi claims that it is personal knowing, not objectivity, that shows truth to us: “The participation of the knower in shaping his knowledge, which had hitherto been tolerated only as a flaw, a shortcoming to be eliminated from perfect knowledge, is now recognized as the true guide and master of our cognitive powers…” (Ibid, p. 26). But when the personal participation of the knower is viewed as the source of error, knowledge becomes a runaway power to destroy.

In “Personal Knowledge”, he describes a paradoxical entity, which he calls “dynamo-objective coupling” (1958a, p. 230), tracking it through Marxist inspired totalitarian Russia, the rise of Nazism, and bourgeois capitalism. The paradox is similar to Hodge’s distinction, but where Hodge encourages the paradox of valuing that which must be
rejected - an action that makes whole that which would otherwise be split - Polanyi points to the problem that objectivity avoids a paradox by denouncing its innately paradoxical subjective twin: it never recognises that which it must reject.

It is in this subtle distinction that Reason’s (1988, p. 230) epistemology, “critical subjectivity”, proposes such a morally preferable way of knowing to that of objectivism. It values subjectivity and introduces its paradoxical partner of “critique” rather than objectivity and by doing so it extends the form of knowing in full value of human capability. Knowledges that value objectivity on the other hand, conventionally have no choice but to reject subjectivity - or experiential knowing - as the holder of error, as having only one quality and a negative one (usually understood as bias or self interest):

*To be subjective means to be biased, unreliable, and irrational. Subjective data imply opinion rather than fact, intuition rather than logic, impression rather than confirmation* (Patton, 1990, p. 479).

In so doing objectivism manufactures a regenerative, sociological system from a moral vacuum. Polanyi describes how objective knowledge, generating and being generated from this moral vacuum, creates fanaticism (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 231) arising from a founding dismissal of the value of humanity. He argues that by denying humanity the power to know truth, any centres of power that see objective knowledge as “truth” are attributed with the power of moral truth located overtly in the authority and covertly in the knowledge that such authority produces:

*We have a self-confirmatory reverberation between the theory… and the concealed motives which underlie it…Alleged scientific assertions, which are accepted as such because they satisfy moral passions, will excite these passions further, and thus lend increased convincing power to the scientific affirmations in question – and so on, indefinitely* (Ibid, p. 230, Polanyi’s emphases).

This critique is familiar to us in the mis-use of statistics, for example, to prove existing ideological positions on specific subjects in an appeal of their being “scientifically correct”. This politically motivated, manipulating “scientism” has the effect of diminishing to the point of invisibility the emergent and complex patterns of context (relationship, meaning, history, epistemology) and putting in their place “isolated passion inaccessible to moral considerations. This is fanaticism” (Ibid, p. 231). Power that relies on objective knowledge becomes self convinced in its right to exist as the holder of truth, and “may therefore acknowledge no higher obligation than that of defending its own supremacy which it must do at all costs” (Ibid, p. 213). Here is the deep and self-contradicting problem of our
democratic institutions’ continual preference for instrumental epistemology. Here too is the reason for the failure of the “knowledge wars” of the 1990s to transform our systems: we simply exchanged batons. We used them against each other and sometimes against ourselves, failing to see that we needed to stop the whole relay race. Pluralism, I understand, was an attempt to do this, but as I account, objectivist knowledge and its errors cannot be transformed without keeping epistemology “alive”.

The “self confirmatory reverberation between the theory and the concealed motives which underlie it” reframes the maintenance of authoritarian power from being the means to a moral end to being the moral duty however the authority acts to perpetuate itself, generating an ever-increasing rift between rhetoric and ghastly acts of oppression to sustain itself (such as making criminal the right to question the authority’s power). This situation gives rise to “a moral appeal of immorality” (Ibid, p. 232), a deadly combination of fanaticism and cynicism that, for example, makes war crimes and torture excusable as a “moral duty” and acceptable to a morally “inordinate” (disordered) public. Polanyi refers to this as “moral inversion” which when used with a utilitarian framework as objectivity “transmutes both itself and this framework. It turns into the fanatical force of a machinery of violence” (Ibid, p. 235). Objectivity did not invent such violence, but it does nothing to enable humanity to resolve it. It becomes a means to legitimate it and silence the human experience of it as “irrational” and “irrelevant”. Those familiar and repeated appeals to objectivity (for example, “let’s be objective here”; “it is an objective report”) as the only reliable way to know truth is a warning sign of this dynamic at work in layers on layers of our society, a measure of how deeply participatory practices penetrate in their illuminating intentions; how far beyond sight its practitioners voluntarily go.

**Aesthetics**

The machinery of violence does not have to be loud or big: it can be most deadly when it is subtle to the point of invisibility and silence. So it is that participatory work is often done in invisible places, feeling our way forward into the darkness to articulate what we encounter, facing our own fears so others might tread warily. These dark spaces are not empty, neither are they only peopled by the oppressed, nor are such people only of one characteristic “the oppressed” as seen by “others”, a kind of idealised unkempt waiting to fit in with my ideological convictions. The most fearful and their lieutenants also inhabit these dark spaces, the backrooms and side alleys, hidden from the “tangible” world of “evidence”, unmeasured and “non-existent”. We, the illegitimate practitioners, are there, as such people too. As we nose our way in, Polanyi calls on us to take responsibility for what we find within ourselves as much as anyone else, by manifesting tacit knowledge in the act of understanding.
He sees understanding as being made up of “focal” and “subsidiary” knowledge: that is, discerning the “particulars” (or focal knowledge) and their inter-relationships to create a “whole” perceived entity imbued with purpose (or subsidiary knowledge) (1958, p. 29-30). One can view particulars without bearing in mind the whole system that they are a part of - a cog in a watch for example, (Ibid, p. 47) or one can view a whole system without bearing in mind its parts (the watch without the cogs). Viewing particulars with the whole system in mind (subsidiary awareness) changes the meaning of the particular (not any cog, but a cog which contributes to telling the time). One can also view the whole with the particular in mind (focal awareness), which also changes the nature of the whole (not any watch but a mechanical one). This construction of how to know is, as I see it, aesthetics at work. It is about how to see something that would not be visible without an awareness of tacit knowing.

His idea of cosmological responsibility, as I understand it, is to hold focal and subsidiary awareness together to discern truth (1958a, p. 63). Subsidiary knowledge holds our taken for granted experience, whereas focal knowledge is that which we are distinguishing at any one moment. We cannot make sense of what we distinguish without subsidiary knowledge informing us of its meaning, tacitly. If I think back to Maturana’s understanding of distinction making, it is this bringing together of the subsidiary with the focal that actually creates the reality we perceive. Given mechanism’s buried grammar in our thinking, reality, as we perceive it, is assumed to be causal, distant from us (as we are from it), concrete and static without authorised forms of power to create “action”. Perceptions that cannot be explained in these terms are classed as not “real”. Included in our taken for granted or subsidiary knowledge is our taken for granted ways of making sense and knowing. In this way, epistemology, whatever its type, becomes tacit. In our Inquiry, one of our most difficult tasks was to reverse the tacit state of epistemology. We had no language to do so and we did not want an instrument to prise it out, if we were to avoid a mechanised construction of it. In the good company of each other, trust, and our lovely created spirit of inquiry, we let its variant strands come forward through emergent reflexivity.

Participatory practices come into being between the individual, the authorised “reality” and the dark spaces between. Practitioners carve out and temporarily govern a metaphoric “space” from the “gap” that is the distance between an individual and reality as created by objectivity. The authority can be any legitimising convention - not limited to tangible institutions, and including schools of thought as well as personal narratives. My stance is that unless participatory practice comes into being this way, then it is not participatory, because it is failing to face an oppressive system of domination at work within the emergent potential that we are co-creating. Jane F. recognised this transformation of her practice within the Inquiry:
I am where some seek to control and others to abdicate, and I witness the emergence of participatory opportunity (Fisher, 2006, p.3).

I acknowledge that this is my stance, and that other participatory practitioners, as I understand them, make their own determinations. Table 4 in the Appendix shows that we each have our “non-negotiables” - but questions of the oppression of ontology are not necessarily at issue. It is the particular matter that is my developmental edge, and my stance includes addressing this edge in my peer relationships where equity is more of an expectation than when the co-dependency of expertism is presumed and such edges made irrelevant to “core business”. This peer dialogue is the substance of my Richardson-like stance within my own field. The Inquiry and the thesis is an attempt to understand it, “Polanyiesque”, within myself in the company of others. As I experience it, such a gap between the objectivist foundations of conventional reality and how we personally experience life not only makes reality static but also makes us inactive unless we have “power” to act, be that power the consumption of resources, hierarchically ordained or stolen. Working a less conventional form of reality, we do not necessarily need “power” in objectivist terms. As Maturana suggests, simply the act of making a distinction, noticing a difference, shifts the nature of reality. Does such an act require power? Does the notion of power transform with such an act?

Practitioners create the essential resources, narratives and commitments that bring people back into themselves with each other. We deploy practices like self-reflection and learning, and shorten the distance between people and their (our) context with our valuing of inter-personal relationships and practical activities. We do this to encourage shared, responsible self-determination and the use of other resources than those limited to authority’s political discretion: we call this “empowerment”. In some instances authority legitimises this development, but familiarly only to make up the short fall of resources to solve a political liability; a liability that might not even exist if it were not for the concept of power being so heavily anchored in the presumptions of objectivism. And so we practise in a mess of contradictions, systemic knots and arbitrary boundaries:

*Practice choices are inevitably influenced by the interpretations and sense of agency professionals bring and discover (or not) in the face of the structural restrictions and opportunities they face. We have revealed... the relational and practice choices they make, and the extent to which these choices succeed in reconciling their own biographical and pedagogical orientations with the biographical needs, desires, and expressions of the participants (Weil, Wildemeersch and Jansen, 2005, p. 157).*
We are at a time when we need to do better, and more, than use participatory approaches to compensate for the destructive agency of objectivity as Polanyi saw it. At risk, is that we further entrench it by using participation to solve pedagogical, biographical and other problems that are not “problems” so much as indicators of suppressed health and well-being (“the virtuality inherent to the past and betrayed by its past actualization” Zizek, 2004, p12). If we simply fix a problem, participatively and otherwise, our potential health and wellbeing may only be buried further, further depleting our “natural” capacities for renewal and requiring more resourcing and authorised power to hold together a system that can only collapse under such conditions.

This is why as practitioners we have to go beyond the boundaries and into the homelands of edges and voids: we have to learn the skills of not knowing and how to perceive the monstrous knowledge that forms as a result of betrayal. Moreover our institutions have to learn to trust us, we need to earn their trust, in this work: their future survival depends on our success, as does the wellbeing of the communities and ecosystems that they serve.

As Polanyi points out, personal knowing is unavoidable in the act of knowing truth, but our awareness of ourselves in the act of knowing is not so easily perceived. Like aesthetic perception, these personal, participatory and tacit practitioner acts are everywhere we physically see or imagine anything appearing (Seel, 2005, p. 104) - and nowhere, given they are largely invisible to us and we are largely mute about them (Taylor, 2002, p. 827). In the effort to see and speak of them, Polanyi argues, we are extended beyond ourselves (Polanyi, 1958b, p. 44). This is the natural cosmological growth that objective knowledge cannot enable. This extension both strengthens our humanness through the strengthening of moral responsibility, and also the world as the life-giving web in which we live with all other forms of known life (including those now extinct – and in this sense, those to come - another quality of “flow” as discussed in the previous chapter). Polanyi saw such a flow as a heuristic between thought and that which we think into being:

...a mental effort has a heuristic effect: it tends to incorporate any available elements of the situation which are helpful to its purpose (Ibid, p. 62).

… thus bringing into play the great range of humanity’s mental domain (manners, laws, arts etc) as we feel our way forward. Remembering Richardson’s thought about the power of writing, Hodge’s about the power of authorising discernment, and Weil’s about the power of living and working at the edges, I see how Polanyi laid the foundation for these ideas by claiming and extrapolating in remarkable detail and argumentation, that acts of
intellectual passion have the power to transform our world. The critical issue for him is that intellectual passion includes our ability to see beyond that which we can comprehend so that we may respond to the cosmological trust placed in us, and that without recognising tacit knowing and its power to vitalise moral responsibility, we are unable to do so.

**Transformation**

I see the world that Polanyi was warning us of in the 1950s as the living reality of our times, but it is his firm hand restoring the sanctity of humanity to itself within the cosmological “natural order” as he saw it, that has most enduring quality for me. Restoring the sanctity of humanity is captured in his statement: “Man can transcend his own subjectivity by striving passionately to fulfil his personal obligations to universal standards” (Ibid, p. 17). Polanyi offers back to us our ability to “establish real patterns in nature” which in his mind are not fixed rules, but exceed biological understanding “to extend indefinitely beyond the experience which they were originally known to control” (Ibid, p. 37).

He builds on his idea of “morphogenesis”, the biological rise of complex forms such as the regeneration of a lost limb in some life forms and the overall reproduction of new life, to show how natural patterns lead us towards “reality beyond the clues on which it relies”. This section of the text fascinated me for what it might hold in terms of better understanding the “emergence” of knowing and being in inquiry environments (Milbrath, 1898, p. 374-375).

His argument is that the observable mechanism of morphogenesis is simply the pattern and process of a natural order to life that is beyond the mechanism itself, it is “a reality to which we have access by no other channels” (Ibid, p. 359) than our commitment to know (Ibid, p. 363). This commitment “of knowing”, the same as that which is discussed as personal participation in knowing, is a natural extension of the same kinds of commitment “to be” that hold a genetic code in place, and that informs the evolutionary progress itself, even to anthropogenesis (evolution of human species) and eventually ontogenesis (evolutions of ways of being human) (Ibid, p. 399).

Polanyi reads this process of exceeding the emergent machine as “the reception of a convivial communication, subject to its critical appraisal by ourselves” (Ibid, p. 364) which we enjoy through dialogue and learning: “surrendering our person for the sake of becoming more satisfying to ourselves in the light of [universal] standards” of truth (Ibid, p. 378). Here I am interested to know what is present at Polanyi’s limit, what this idea of “universal standard” is about.

He describes emergence as random processes that cease to be so, the moment humanity understands their patterns (Ibid, p. 391). This insight is also close to Maturana’s
idea that reality exists only in the moment that we apprehend it, in the way we apprehend it. At each moment of emergence human knowledge of it enters the fluxing system (Ibid, p. 393) enabling each stage to intensify and mature (Ibid, p. 395). In my practice experience, when participants reflect on experience and see principles, meaning and structure within it, practice makes us conscious of “how we know”.

Polanyi shows that there comes a point where a turn takes place, and the system propels itself forward into patterned sequences which manifest a “field” of influence turning back on the emerging entity to effect not only what is emerging, but the system of emergence itself. At this point Polanyi makes a distinction between “Ordering” and “Operating” principles. Ordering principles are a mix of random and patterned emergence, which in time, produces unprecedented operational principles (Ibid, p. 399). In participatory practice environments this is how we generate principles from the experiences of inquiry within a community of interest and consciously adopt them to progress the inquiry methodology as well as its direction. We co-create a double helix of co-evolution, where process and content become organically integrated as the means of “research as social change”. Bohm also understood this process:

*Indeed, content and process are not two separately existing things, but, rather, they are two aspects of views of one whole movement (Bohm, 1980, p.18).*

I now see that Polanyi’s pattern of morphogenesis is also how epistemology became an instrument of violence, as the unquestioned power of objectivism became not simply a scientific stance but an influencing heuristic field for its own emergence. When I knowingly promote objectivity, unknowingly default to it, or define myself against it, its operational principles (method) recast my way of knowing as the many variants of objectivity (mechanism, empiricism, instrumentalism and even certain forms of qualitative sciences like interpretist and structuralist work), knowing them in ever more embedded ways, incriminating as “untrue” any other way of knowing. This thesis is an effort to create a way of knowing that does something other than this, in so doing inviting the reader to create for themselves how they know what is here to be true or otherwise.

The turn from emergence back to systemic maturation happens, he reasons, through a twin action of the self compelling will to know (commitment) and submission to truth as a reflection of a universal intent: “action and submission are totally blended in a heuristic communion with reality; determinism and spontaneity mutually require each other…” (Ibid, p. 396). Given the domination of explicit, variegated and tacit objectivism, our contemporary
crisis is spinning on a broadly accepted submission to a form of truth that insists on the absence of humanity. Is this nature’s intent?

He believes in the natural principles discovered through respecting tacit knowing (including science, aesthetics and philosophy) and sees them as the “emergent noosphere which is wholly determined as that which we believe to be true and right… It [also] comprises everything in which we may be totally mistaken” (Ibid, p.404). At a structural level, this insight is resonant of Foucault's thought about becoming:

...becoming can occupy nothing but an intermediary place measured out for it solely by the requirements of the whole (Foucault, 1966, p. 157).

Ultimately he concludes, it is the personal act of belief, that leap across the heuristic gap (Ibid, p. 395), that determines truth and rightfulness and the social freedom to question it, to commit to knowing it that ensures that the quest for truth itself remains free and untethered by presumptions as to what it is.

Participatory practice’s capacity to hear the silenced and see into the invisibilised (at Weil’s borderlands, edges and shorelines of society and of ourselves) is our response to Polanyi’s sighting of modernist knowing and its deadly dance with power. Our challenge has been to work with the complex of forces at work in this invisibilised/invisibilising place, to find ways to transform the “contempt” (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 231) of those whose interests are prospering in this moral vacuum, as well as those who are so depleted by their exploitations.

All of us are culprits and victims of this dynamic – we have a parliament of voices (Weil, 1999) in our heads alone, and together in collaborative inquiry, each parliament is working to ascertain the principles (as Hodge has demonstrated) with which to grow the emerging fields in which we are. At this moment in our history though, is polyvocality, polysemic writing, and complexity-based action what we need for us to know our truths in the face of so many other contesting and fearfully violating truths? How does “action” manifest in this chaotic situation? With what narratives, essences and commitments? Within which flows of heritage does action and truth come into being in our time? What quality of the immeasurable “seen that sees” is heuristically manifested within such conditions?

When we work within the great field of free inquiry that Polanyi calls into being, we are lovers playing in the “unthinkable consummation” of life and giving birth to new ways of being to hand forward as our ancestral guides have done for us. By being our own parliament of voices we have the freedom and deepest of responsibilities to make the choices that Polanyi sees as the means of leaping the heuristic gap to manifest the truths that are freedom. The emerging field of “participatory practice” is, I contend, the crowning of this global, heuristic field of influence powerfully transforming objectivity and its mechanistic necessity,
its limit, into something else. A nest egg: creatures doing how we do in our not knowing what we do.

_There’s a Hard Nose at work in me that is asking “So what?” – a question I was confronted with the other day in attempting to articulate some of these very thoughts to a colleague. I reason with this Questioner in my head (since we are talking of internal parliaments) and say “be bracketed”. The Question sits there, the Skeptic sits forward, the Listener sits back, touching the other on the arm as if to say “relax, listen to the rest”_ (John, email communication, feedback on draft of Chapter 3, 29/7/06).

**Bohm: we are thinking it**

_If I am right in saying that thought is the ultimate origin or source, it follows that if we don't do anything about thought, we won't get anywhere. We may momentarily relieve the population problem, the ecological problem, and so on, but they will come back in another way_ (Bohm and Edwards, 1991, p. 25).

Where Polanyi climbs out of the west’s modernist frame by travelling across stepping stones of disciplinary thought to reach its upper limits as socio-spiritual existence, Bohm flies back into our muddiness from the cosmological mysteries of quantum physics. He brings back resonations, convictions and even sightings of that which lies beyond, that which Polanyi imagined, promised and helped construct through the power of his aesthetic thought.

David Bohm develops two of Polanyi’s “thoughts” that were most influencing to me: one being the idea of human responsibility for thought which he suggests is like a living entity in itself; and the other, that of a “natural order” as our whole being. In the text that follows I focus on these two matters. His great contribution to capacity building in the participatory field was taking these ideas into the practice of “dialogue” (Bohm, 1996) – a practice that along with many thousands around the world and particularly in arenas of deep conflict, I continually work to make my own.

**Human responsibility for thought**

Bohm exemplifies Polanyi’s conviction that holding tacit and explicit knowledge together enables truth to come into being. His clearest example of this is his invocation to stop thinking about thought with the same form of thinking that has the power to fragment thought and is the root cause of humanity’s problems. Bohm discusses a form of truth within
which we are known by the whole emergent system of being. His practice of dialogue, rather than text, through his many (posthumously published) dialogic exchanges around specific themes, is his commitment to this understanding of being.

The phrase, or I should say the “thought”, that had the most systemic influence for me throughout the Inquiry was his insight into thought as being a reality in itself – an entity in fact with chemical and electronic traces as material evidence of its flow, and about which humanity was largely unaware and even more unaware of its power to transform the world:

*Thought is constantly participating both in giving shape and form and figuration to ourselves, and to the whole of reality. Now, thought doesn’t know this. Thought is thinking that it isn’t doing anything. I think this is really where the difficulty is. We have got to see that thought is part of this reality and that we are not merely thinking about it, but that we are thinking it (Bohm, 1998, p. 115, Bohm’s emphases).*

In a sense, Polanyi and Bohm are saying the same thing but focussing on slightly different emphases of the problem. Polanyi covers the ground of objectivism as the sacrilege of dehumanisation; Bohm on the other hand covers the ground of objectivism as sacrilege of deconstructing our whole cosmological system - as manifest here on Earth. They agree that human thought actively participates in creating the world and that the quality of that thought, and how we know it, is crucial to the health of the world. Both contend that to see the world as the reality that nature would have us see (and that each suggests they have seen) we need to hold two complementary kinds of thinking together: for Polanyi it is subsidiary and focal knowing to make the heuristic leap, as discussed; for Bohm it is function twinned with beauty, that together hold this leaping power:

*To see the world… as a totality of movement, sensed and felt on one side as beauty, and apprehended on another side as function ordered by rational law, requires an unrestricted attention to fitting and non-fitting in all its aspects (Bohm, 1998, p. 93).*

Here is the essence of Bohm’s concept of human responsibility for thought as I understand it: that we cannot even adopt a pattern of knowing if such a pattern is in a fixed state, or in Polanyi’s sense, a cosmologically “given” state. Bohm would argue, if I may be so presumptuous, that reality is not discovered as Polanyi would suggest, but made by thought flowing through us and how we know this experience. Being fully human is to be continually fitting the pieces of a moving pattern together, in ongoing encounter. Besides Maturana, other “open systems” thinkers such as Skolomowski (1994), Wilber (1997), Capra
(1997) and Havel (1997) have also taken seriously this idea of human participation in the co-emergence of cosmos.

It is thus a matter of the most profound and sacred responsibility to choose or create one’s ways of knowing and our ongoing loss of awareness of this human function can be understood to be more than a matter of mere pragmatism. For Bohm, given the devastation of fragmentation, the choice is to see the world in a continual state of movement, drawn towards intensifications of consciousness in the human mind; not to reduce it to separate parts distanced from each other with measure and grammar but to let the essential flow of organizing energy (Bohm, 1998, p. 80) take place in our minds in a wholehearted and even child-like way (Ibid, p.17).

He points to the ochre outline of a child’s hand on the Cave wall (The Cave).

The idea that a way of knowing should be fixed is problematic to him: theories, models, techniques and epistemological frameworks would fall into this problem basket in his view. When epistemology in its fixed state also generates an illusion of life as fragmented and fixed (for example, the certainty of absolute truth, Ibid, p. 72) then “we in our act of observation are like that which we observe” (Bohm, 1998, p.76) – fragmented and fixed (or “immobilised” in my terms). Following this thought into the practitioner’s field, when we sense immobilisation as practitioners it is because we (and possibly those we are interacting with) are seeing and making it so by deploying an erroneous form of thought. Here is the basis for turning certain perceptions into illusions and developing new senses with which to perceive that which comes about in the resulting ambiguity.

Bohm suggests that to understand “the whole” we need to begin by becoming aware, in fact highly sensitive, to thought’s presence in our selves. He argues that we need to do this before we adopt any theorised practice, and can do so through the flow of meaning that can be experienced in dialogue (Bohm, 1998, p.118). His vision is to proceed in this way to build a “common consciousness – a new kind of intelligence” (Ibid, p.118), which would “open the door to freedom, collectively as well as individually – to friendship and fellowship and love” (Bohm, 1992, p. 241). By stopping and self reflexively observing our thinking we begin to overcome the fragmentary and confused way in which we think about thought (Bohm, 1998, p. 66), so that what we think is held in this “meta” understanding. It requires making our tacit knowing about thought explicit.

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12 I am sensing that this matter of immobilisation, resulting from the dominance of objectivity, is what is present in humanity’s sense of helplessness in the face of global warming, and in the belief that our best and only response is to respond technologically. I am sensing that we have much more to offer, and to learn from our current situation.
Chapter 3. Heritage: shirts of flame

It seems a tough ask, when the world seems to be registering ever deepening fragmentation and denial of this primary experience of personal knowing. While it is not so easy to negotiate formal dialogic exchanges with the powers of commerce and politics at work, it is entirely possible to make any exchange, any conversation that I have with any person a “dialogue”, even when I am the only person knowing that I am doing this. The difficulty is in sustaining my awareness of this choice.

Listening, like visual observation, has a heuristic effect. When I begin to listen to others, when in turn I am listened to, we start to take more care about what we say – as if a new sensory organ is opening up that is listening to some source of wisdom that is within us but that we are not used to being. It is an idea that correlates to Polanyi’s concept that effort is heuristic and points towards augmenting moral responsibility. The effort required to sense into how we think can dissolve the controls of the rational/irrational duality and make way for an intuitive, inter-subjective eloquence:

People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change. In this development the group has no pre-established purpose, though at each moment a purpose that is free to change may reveal itself. The group thus begins to engage in a new dynamic relationship in which no speaker is excluded, and in which no particular content is excluded... going further along these lines would open up the possibility of transforming not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of consciousness in which these relationships arise (Bohm, 1985, p.175).

Such was and continues to be the nature of the Inquiry. The process is entirely unique to each speaker and the moment in which it happens: utterly un-reproducible despite the efforts to record and publish the interactions thereafter. This is the reason why each person is so essential to the emergent form of an inquiry entity: why it is that absence is like a mountain disappearing from a landscape, or conversely, an unexpected arrival can equally have an “architectural” impact. It is why in my way of thinking, the idea of “representation” of interest groups or demographically defined fragments of a societal whole, as so commonly demanded in instrumental forms of social research, is false. Humans do not have to be known as demographic types, thinking in boxes of questions, set apart from or under each other in attributed majority or minority standings, as constructed of them by “the powers that be”. Each of us has a responsibility for thought that no other can do for us. How would sociological knowledge look if we could free its subjects from such a hold? What else could hold our haphazard story?
Chapter 3. Heritage: shirts of flame

Natural order

Bohm’s thought at work in my practice has given me understanding of the shift from “stuckness” to “flow”. His opus envisions a complete reconstruction of ontology so that we understand the sensed, concrete world as a relatively minor abstraction of the holonomy (Bohm, 1980, p. 156), the “law of the whole”. This law exists in holomovement (Ibid, p. 50), which I understand not to be movement in a physical sense, so much as movement as a state of sustained connection due to the intrinsic, indivisible and absolute applicability of the principles of wholeness. Holonomy is made up of discernable and indiscernible orders of enfoldment (patterns of becoming) which exist beyond the dimensions of time and space but which also are present in sub-order manifestations of such dimensions – people, plants, rocks, micro-macro scales of concrete worlds continuously lifting up and falling back into the quantum domain. It is a scale of movement about which western human sensitivity is largely unaware, undeveloped, without the aid of technology and measure. An important difference between Polanyi and Bohm, is that Polanyi with his attachment to higher powers sees a natural capacity for morphogenesis as reflective of a reality that lies beyond emerging systems and that only human leaps of faith can reveal; whereas Bohm sees transformative patterning as being in a constant state of movement and that this reality exists within and not beyond the patterning system. His proposition shifts the dualism of mind and matter to a constant and little thought recursion where mind, matter and the movement between all three of these elements manifest the principles that constitute an ever-unfolding reality:

In the implicate order we have to say that mind enfolds matter in general and therefore the body in particular. Similarly, the body enfolds not only the mind but also in some sense the entire material universe. (1980, p. 209).

Bohm lets me see that epistemology at a generic level must be understood as an evolving entity, actively perturbing the streamings of thought that human beings create, and which manifest in tangible, resource-heavy forms, as thought becomes action. Epistemology should not be fixed as it is presented in so many scientific and philosophical texts – well, as I have read them with my instrumental sub-text anyway.

I note to myself how useful it is to have a theoretical frame to see experience through, and also its limitations – how it makes invisible that which does not fit in (Susie, The Cave).

Epistemology should not try to maintain some fixed orthodox state of knowing in the scientific tradition if we are to transform the fragmentation of the whole Ordering Principle through (participatory) thought into a reverberating consciousness of unity. Instead, epistemology needs to be understood as an energetic form of patterning flows of energy. It
needs to be understood as having heuristic powers to transform the nature of thought, the content that such thought embodies, and the self/other reflexive minds and bodies of human and other than human beings who are the biological medium through which cosmology flows into conscious being.

It seems that the best of all possible beasts has more than one way of making itself known to us. Could there be a way that is innate, wild knowing, still buoyant and healthy just below the surface of western life? Here in the homelands at the borderlands, where monster knowings form in the ashes of old genres, where the human capacity to constitute truths is waiting to become Thought in hidden and exhausted battlefields.

What's a cave meta for?

A liminal zone,

Interface with the unconscious,

Underworld, Other . . .

Ever so has it been.

Topographic leverage points,

Supporting our psychic geography

(Peter W. to everyone, email: 14 and 21/7/06).

Good on ya Pete!

(Lesley, critical note about Peter’s poem, review of draft thesis, 6/11/06).
PART 2: EPISTEMOLOGY - HOW WE KNOW IS WHO WE BECOME
CHAPTER 4

TURNING: HOW WE KNOW IS WHO WE BECOME

Sharing the very real feeling of standing on the edge of the abyss is a liberating experience - free from fear (Jo; evaluation comment, 8/2/05).

Looking back

In the previous chapter, “Heritage”, the somewhat eclectic range of works shared two common features: a recurring moment of being at the edge of knowing; and this moment coming about in each practitioner’s rejection of the hidden cultural root of objectivism. There is no one edge. In each case, each person saw a deep, systemic error in the taken for granted truths of their discipline or area of practice, and chose not to work within the error but to cross the border that it indicated between falsehood and truth. It is a border that, as Foucault reminds us, falsehoods keep safe:

Knowledge rather than opening onto the truth of the world is deeply rooted in the “errors” of life (Foucault, 1985: 477).

In each case, the practicing questioner participatively resisted convention (the conventional way of doing sociology, biology, pedagogy, anthropology or simply “thinking”) in order to reveal what was hidden beneath it, exposing its errors and taking responsibility for building other ways of knowing their field with new truths. In each case, what each person created invites others into the experience of knowing this way. Whole communities of discourse, learning, critique and adaptation or co-option have grown around their initially solitary journey. In each case, their own narrative provides the trajectory for the work, wrought back to the essential elements of what they found, reflecting powerful commitments to life in general and to human experience in particular.

Each practitioner created their place through daily labours, in the cosmological complex that becomes indicative if not evident when qualities of truth are freed from objectivity’s implication of material utility. That which they produced and which continues to reverberate with ongoing learnings and translations becomes a small step in progressing humanity’s ways of being in the broader context of knowing what it is “to be human”. For example, Polanyi’s work in tacit knowledge has influenced knowledge management practices; Weil’s on complexity and research has influenced individuals, their organizations and academic approaches to social change and learning; and Bohm’s concept and practice of
dialogue continues to provide the basis for practice networks and approaches to political and therapeutic transactions worldwide.

The crux of the argument is that in each case, the person extended thought in knowing, not in terms of “information” but in terms of how we know, and that this insight has become the means by which groups of people who encounter their thinking come to know their truths about what it is to be human, without truth being in the form of objectivity. In other words, epistemology becomes the means of individual and collective emergence into a new human form, a movement that is otherwise known as “transformation”.

**Heritage in our practice**

The struggle that we face as practice inheritors of this post modernist legacy is to distinguish new paradoxical partners for objectivity with which we can recognise its value in full understanding of its destructive powers without transmuting such powers in the emergent entity that comes through the paradox. Our partial solution to this problem in the Inquiry, and perhaps it is only a holding pattern, is to attribute objectivity with life, intimacy, character and the utterly complex and random behaviours which were voluntarily encountered by us: such is the nature of our beautiful creature.

In my own trajectory of working community based research, learning and evaluation I encountered objectivity and its many related assumptions and practices throughout mind, inter-relationship and system. It created strange contradictions and confusions in behaviours, understandings, intersections (and otherwise) between information, policy and service, intersections that inhibited the uptake and potential diffusion of the participatory work we did.

In a reflective piece written in 2000, my colleague, Jo Iuliano describes the moment of recognising objectivism in her experience as an educator, wherein the epistemological distinctions lead her to make a practical educational distinction between “training” and “learning”:

*I have no tension about using a mechanistic/technological approach to designing, delivering and assessing training which is just that... training.*

*I do experience tension however when that mechanistic approach is applied to learning, for learning implies inter-relationships, an idea supported by the alternative paradigm discussion (Iuliano, 2000, p. 4).*

Other Inquiry participants often spoke of objectivism at work in their immediate experiences during our work together:
Chapter 4. Turning: how we know is who we become

I am still learning the mechanics of the bureaucracy... an individual can be so important and so fleeting... in a system that doesn’t recognise history (Brigid, phone dialogue, 27/5/05)

I am the target of lots of sustainability information in the middle of a technocratic system at uni (John, phone dialogue, 30/5/05)

I put myself aside and become “a player” in a setting along with everyone else... I have a really good reputation for keeping things on track (Margaret, phone dialogue, 27/6/05)

On recognising objectivism at work in my working sites, I was not prepared for the task of seeking other epistemologies. When we first see it, it is easy to interpret the manifestations of objectivism as political oppression, systemic dysfunction or simply a personality problem - our own or someone else’s. It is all these things, and these things seem to gravitate towards this form of epistemology - it must be co-evolutionary as all forms of knowing and distinction making are. As previously discussed, objectivist based epistemologies are not the cause of human violence and aggression, but they do little to help us move through and beyond it when their stance is an assumption that humanity is innately incapable of knowing truth. Living within such a broad belief, we are not encouraged or guided in a scrutiny of the invisible and what is seen by economic reality as irrelevant (Torbert, 2001, p 250). If we choose to undertake such an inquiry we find that it does not fit familiar or conventional modes of scholarship. This is not surprising given that these modes still harbour safe places for objectivism and in large part depend on authorities whose notions of power are also based in objectivism. Scrutiny of the invisible is not purely philosophical, scientific, political, artistic or practical but a combination of these things. Others attempting this journey have found similar qualities of complexity:

...to adequately deal with the epistemology we need to address not only discursive practices, as we have done here, but in fact the “mangle of practice” (Pickering, 1995). This mangle of practice arises from contingently unfolding moments of activity where nature, machines, instruments, facts, theories, disciplined human agency, and social relationships become intertwined (Désautels and Roth, 1999, p. 44).

It is difficult to discuss the problem of epistemology within the pragmatic pressures of everyday working life, and our opportunities to become accomplished about it are few. The previous chapter followed the way five people confronted this problem and worked their way through thought, practice and explication to reach illumination from early in the twentieth century to the early twenty-first. The rejection of objectivism is an old post
modernist contest, but exhaustingly, it is by no means over as some would recommend (Donmoyer, 1999, p. 647) or suggest has already happened:

*Of late theorists seem to be making a direct call for paradigmatic wars to come to an end: Langley (1999) and Pentland (1999) assert it is time to dispense with the positivists versus the anti-positivists as well as the deductive versus the inductive debates; Calas and Smircich (1999) suggest that it is time to dispense with the modern versus the post modern debate; Weick (1999) argues that in a discontinuous and discursively oriented world, rather than continue to fight we need to acknowledge multiple viewpoints and make sense of things the best way we can (Gordon, 2001).*

This rapprochement may be blooming in some (rare) academies but on the ground of policy and practice, in the broad public engagement in matters of importance to local communities, the problem of ways of knowing has hardly surfaced. As Hatch (2004, p. 403) points out, modernity and its use of objectivism is back on the rise with the resurgence of neo-conservativism in western liberal institutions. Leaving the difficulties behind and promoting an appreciative or critical pluralism in practice methods does not solve the systemic problem of objectivity if unconsciously we understand epistemology, pluralism and even critique as “instruments”; if our understanding of them is tacitly instrumental and if the practices we use to “apply” these knowledge-generating modes are likewise. There would seem to be more work that needs doing. The following quotation illustrates this enduring problem:

*…once we consider epistemology as a practice, enacted by non trivial machines, operating and interacting in language (von Foerster, 1990) epistemology looses its air of divine mystery (Désautels and Roth, 1999, p. 33).*

The authors of this paper opened the question of epistemology to the scrutiny of secondary school science students to show that working at an epistemological level of research is not beyond the reaches of anyone who is interested to know. They discuss the way in which epistemology is commonly responded to, claiming that it is dealt with as a sacred and thus elitist subject. Their solution is to make it mechanistic so as to increase its accessibility to students. While I agree that mechanistic and indeed all forms of objectivist knowledge are sociologically embedded and thus “accessible”, burying epistemology in the objectivist problems of sociology is only sealing its coffin. Epistemology of itself may be sacred ground but in so being, it is neither elitist nor mechanical.
Even when I concur with arguments against the natural sciences as a model for social sciences (Gordon, 2001), I cannot leave the matter of epistemology behind in my development of new ways of knowing. The epistemological and ontological concerns of traditional science may not be relevant or valuable for human development, but nature itself does not and must not disappear from our understanding of sociology. I see it as an argument of “don’t throw the baby out with the bathwater” and a primary concern of “social ecology” as I experience it. If we throw nature out with natural science we seriously risk any alternative approach to transformation becoming even more instrumental in our unaware use of this meta cognitive pattern. This risk is only augmented in its service of an ever more anthropocentric ontology in the absence of a way of knowing nature that integrates humanity with nature’s own needs for sustainability. How can we know nature without mechanism? How can we know ourselves “naturally”, where “nature” is not code for “mechanism”? What kinds of beings would we become and what would our world be like?

Schools of participatory practices that consider epistemological matters have been moving towards integrating sustainability matters into their discourse and practice since the mid 1990s, and those schools of participatory practices that are addressing sustainability matters have been moving towards addressing matters of epistemology during the same time. However, as Sterling points out (2003, p.8) it is for epistemological reasons that these movements have had little impact on the ground of social transformation towards sustainability. Old and persisting forms of knowledge, stripped of value, meaning and critique, I contend and following writers such as environmental educator, David Orr (1992, 1993) may not be what is needed solely, dominantly or at all, to fully understand the complex matter of sustainability and social shifts towards more sustainable ways of being for life forms:

*The crisis of sustainability and the problems of education are in large measure a crisis of knowledge. But is the problem as is commonly believed, that we do not know enough? Or that we know too much? Or that we do not know enough about some things and too much about other things? Or is it that our scientific methods are in some ways flawed? Is it that we have forgotten things we need to remember? Or is it that we have forgotten other ways of knowing that lie in the realm of vision, intuition, revelation, empathy, or even common sense? Such questions are not asked often enough (Orr, 1993, p. 155).*

As a participatory practitioner I see that my task is not to offer a solution (again, risking instrumentalism as a hidden root cultural metaphor), but to find ways of including others in embracing these matters with me and to be invited in to their embrace of the
problem. Not to fight another war, but to dive deep down, free from fear and in the company of others as Jo describes in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. The Inquiry was an opportunity for a group of peer practitioners to encounter this approach together. My problem was how to do this: what questions to ask and receive, what skills and intuitions to foster, which formalities to preserve and which to break, with what kinds of existing experiences?

What would happen if we created opportunities for everyone to interpret the sacred books? (Désautels and Roth, 1999, p.33).

Looking within

Jane comments that the more I did, the less the Inquiry was collaborative (The Cave).

See...I didn’t feel that way (Lesley, critical note, review of draft thesis, 6/10/06).

In 2004-5, in the second year of the candidacy, I wrote a paper and developed a Forum (SOLAR 2004) on aesthetics in action research practice, basing my analysis on an image of a turtle. I presented it to the workshop participants in silence, as I do now.

Figure 23: Nature

The earliest movements in our journeys towards transformative experiences, as I have experienced them in participatory environments, are aesthetic and as such it is the field of aesthetics that constitute the origins of participation. Here is the grace of emancipating
aesthetics. Turning to the image, the turtle, this particular animal, is powerful in its presence to us. In this instance the aesthetic of its appearing is redolent with transgression, felt aesthetically and beyond. For the Forum event I drew on Foucault’s understanding of transgression and the sacred:

Profanation in a world that no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred - is this not more or less what we may call transgression? In that zone in which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence, through which it becomes all the more scintillating (Foucault, 1963, p. 70).

Dwelling on this image, as the participants did in the Forum, an epistemological space opens even before felt truths arise. If we want to experience what epistemology is, we can slow down, keep still and quiet, be brave and trust what comes about in our first moments of coming to know. The imminence is complex, a pristine moment between the knower and that which is (wanting) to be known; where the “how to know” is as unformed as the “what to know”. As Seel in his exploration of “Aesthetics of Appearing” notes, the aesthetic moment is full of activity:

The present within which we move as acting beings is always equipped with an abundance of unexhausted epistemic possibilities and unrealised action opportunities. In this dovetailing of reality and possibility - is the fact that every present of action consists of existent and nonexistent, seized and missed possibilities of knowledge and action - there is a common root of the two contrary driving forces of aesthetic perception: to lose oneself in the real or to go beyond everything that is (so far) real...

For this reason, aesthetic sense can also be understood as a sense of the potentiality of those realities that we experience or imagine as presences of our lives (Seel, 2005, p. 98-99).

The imminent is pre-epistemological only for a moment, and because of the quality of transgression that the turtle in this particular instance embodies, the moment is imbued, in Foucault’s words, with the “empty form”, the “absence” and “scintillating” power of the sacred of nature. It is in the earliest coalescence between sensing and sense making when we can be aware of the workings of epistemology; when they can be freed from an instrumental presumption being bound into the generic architecture of any epistemology.
Each participant in the Forum had a unique way of forging their presence to this creature: for example, one person could not actually see what was on the wall and eventually mistook it for a pair of antlers; another was jettisoned back through time to remember a past interaction with a turtle attempting to lay her eggs on a beach while being watched by a crowd of tourists; another was lost in pain and unable to move from the depth of the tragedy of this one specific creature for the whole day of our interaction; another saw beauty in pain opening her mind to the meeting of these two qualities for the first time, felt as much as it was articulated analytically. So it was that the many qualities of being came into their form, taken on throughout the day of reflection, questioning, drawing and versing, sounding, drumming, valuing and losing the sighting:

*I wrestled with the difficulties that the participants in the forum had in seeing the turtle. Chapter 4 is a refracting piece. The material is all there - but you could link it more to what goes before and after (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06);

*It seemed to me that the longest imaginable distance separated irregular German verb forms from this kitchen table (Murakami, 1987, p. 179).

The image of the turtle seemed to me to hold the longest imaginable distance connecting the origin of life on Earth to my kitchen table, where it had landed in our local Sydney paper (Thomson, 2004) on World Environment Day. It illustrated an article about the effect of human waste on the non-human environment, one of several such stories about the deteriorating state of the environment. I cut it out and kept it for weeks, carrying it with me in piles of paper, transferring it from this folder to that, as the days went by.

I kept looking at this animal, imagining it in its young moments swimming around the Florida wetlands, plastic bags and other debris floating past and confusing its idea about what constituted its world. I imagined it growing, narrowly escaping death on many occasions, to one day “decide” to swim into this round thing floating through the water. I supposed that it would have had no idea that the ring had got caught on its shell. It would have continued to swim around, in its sense of everything being normal, though of course nothing was.

Then, I guess, as it grew a little more it must have begun to sense a constriction of sorts. Again, it has nothing to compare this sense with anything else. It was normal to it but as time went on and the shell began to bend in on its internal organs, it may have felt discomfort or increasing pain. Perhaps it had difficulty digesting, or the nerves in its spine were trapped, or the misplaced internal organs began to malfunction building up toxicities within its body.
Chapter 4. Turning: how we know is who we become

It would have been treated as foreign by its fellow species, but I don’t know how friendly turtles are amongst themselves. Perhaps the ring and the resulting deformity also preserved it from being prey, curiously aiding its survival. This is just one creature that has come to our attention of all the creatures that suffer at our hands; about whom we remain completely unmoved, criticised for being romantics or radicals should we dare to feel concerned, expected to draw some line between our compassion and what we regard as the things that really matter. That same forgotten practice of taking the life out of what we see. How did this state of affairs come about? What form of knowing is that?

The animal had been found by a zoologist, taken to a local marine centre, measured, x-rayed and photographed and is now enjoying a life in the park. Its photo was picked up by a journalist, released by the photographer to the journalist as she has for me, and circulated in newspapers and other articles around the world. This tiny creature draws attention to our transgressions and other knowings that transgressions illuminate. In its little crippled form and curious path is a broken promise, which may or may not be restored.

Bringing the creature to the Forum was risky. I could be misunderstood for sensationalism, exploitation, manipulation and objectification, and these claims would have some elements of truth. Framed as “aesthetics in our research practice” and given how both aesthetics and research are felt to be cold, my being judged so would be understandable. The turtle defied the idea of aesthetics as beauty, art or nature in a traditional sense, while also conjuring the engagement, the connections across the longest imaginable distances that create compassionate liveliness, possible in a world that travels between despair and hope in a nanosecond.

Looking forward

Interactions of this kind (before and from Florida waters, to SOLAR workshop, to thesis, beyond and around) must do more than elicit a variety of responses if we are to sense the presence of epistemology at work within and around us, and moreover to commit momentarily at least, to other ways of knowing than those to which we are habituated.

It is messy when we face epistemological junctions in practice. The presumption of “normality” is suddenly questionable and in the question, the lack of a fit between what is present to us and that which we bring to be present to “it”. We are transported to a moment where the unremarkable flow of the barely conscious everyday pops up like a child’s 3 D picture book and we find ourselves walking around a moonscape of the unrecognisable, unable to see ourselves in that which we are witnessing. It is a moment similar to learning any other new language.
All kinds of narratives begin to be heard in the dissonance: the desire to rescue myself and anyone for whom I am seen to be responsible becomes a heart beating priority; habits of thought from mild annoyance to panic, from mischief making to seductive myths of illumination and connection flood the mind; rationality wars with the irrational and meditative practice may or may not offer some peace; carelessness and violation play with false gods and naked hubris. If participatory practice is about practice with others rather than on or to them, all these human qualities and many more stream through me as practitioner with the co-participants. I do not wish to control my experiences, neutralise them or parade them. I am learning to hold them with me, sensing how others see and relate to me, coming to understand what is taking place as an organic outgrowing of densities of systems in play, nosing out the repetition of betrayed virtuality:

Using a participatory method outside the safety of the participation and sustainability project into my "real working world" is a scary thing. I find participation hard to articulate, but when I try to talk about my understanding of participatory practice with colleagues I find many eyes light up (Margaret, evaluation data: 14/3/05)

When things don't unfold according to my expectations I feel I have misunderstood the project and [am] more tentative in my participation. I don't think it is too much of a projection to assume that the same dynamic is at work in the community. I am confronted with low participation rates more often than rates that exceed my capacity. A topical illustration is Rod Stewart's concert on TV. When he stopped singing the song surged on with no significant loss of enjoyment. The epistemological coherence was powerful (Pete W., evaluation data: 6/2/05).

My practice goes through these same difficulties, twists and turns of being aligned and flowing forward, and being incomprehensible to myself and anyone else. When epistemological shifts are opening, while I may companion the moment, only rarely am I able to offer myself as a resource for the unfolding of and with others. At times I can work with timing, language and a felt sense of where I stand, which may or may not be appreciated by other participants. At other times my heart races, I close openings down in my rush to save my day, or don't see them at all: I mistake such openings for a pair of antlers. The hubris that comes with the strange quality of leadership that practitioners carry diverts me from a shared project at hand, or even shared space of becoming with others. I betray what I think I know to be true and beat myself up afterwards, thinking about it for days, and sometimes come to understanding too late for anyone else but me.
If my learning is limited to reflection on action I am unlikely to embrace it in action with ease. I see much, but becoming something other than how I see is another task altogether. It is particularly difficult when the opportunity to formally practice, when we can bring culturally transparent resources for such work to strategic opportunities that are inviting us in, is so limited, under resourced, misunderstood and short lived.

We need to do better and more. While not adhering to any particular tradition of spirit, the following well-known story seems to describe my turning place well enough:

*Imagine a blind turtle, roaming the depths of an ocean the size of the universe. Up above floats a wooden ring, tossed to and fro on the waves. Every hundred years the turtle comes, once, to the surface. To be born a human being is said by Buddhists to be more difficult than for the turtle to surface accidentally with its head poking through the wooden ring. And even among those who have a human birth, it is said, those who have the great fortune to make a connection with the teachings are rare; and those who really take them to heart and embody them in their actions even rarer, as rare, in fact, 'as stars in broad daylight' (Rinpoche, 1992).*
CHAPTER 5

GROUND: PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES

A new participatory space had been recognized and legitimated North, South, East and West. The idea of politics had begun to shift. No longer was the State the focus of all social action; political parties were no longer the only vehicle for such action. Social organization of all kinds, values and beliefs were recognised as having a valid place within the imaginary of political life (Pearce, 2005, p. 5).

Introduction

Here is my proposition: little known, disbelieved and against the odds, the world is giving rise to a wonderful new experience. At some moments in the flow of understandings the experience is knowable as the phenomenon of “participation”. It is one of the wooden rings that our collective human turtle has the opportunity to swim through: the grace of transformative energies at work.

There are many impediments to our recognising certain qualities of our lives as “participation”, but if we can somehow see our way through them, our recognition of this embodying field – its recognition of us as its socio-ecological niches – is creating a coincidence of human dignity in time with the stirring Earth. The rise of this field has been spoken of by many throughout the twentieth century from within participatory traditions and beyond them; it is crowning into a world that is completely suited for its flourishing. The nature of this world and the nature of the participatory phenomenon are almost indistinguishable and only separated by the thin membrane that is distinction making, as Maturana understands for example. It is this moment of seeing, and letting in the knowing of how to be in the seeing, that is within our hands as those who create the processes for participation to come into being.

In this chapter I show the presence of the global participatory “field”. I offer four distinct windows, drawn from historic origins, through which differentiated modes of participatory practice are evident. Each is largely unaware of the existence of the other, or at least of all four, even though they are all address the problem of generating action for broad public benefit in the world. I am suggesting that our presumptions of differentiation from each other are akin to Bohm’s proposal that our lack of awareness about how we are thinking
about our field is perpetuating its fragmentation, which is undermining our capability and the attractor potential of the field as a whole. I knowingly choose to show the whole field through an instrumental pattern because I believe that instrumentalism is the most recognisable tacit pattern for most practitioners even when we have seen its errors. This is how I found myself to be. Draft readers have indicated that this chapter is relieving and easy to read:

Chapter 5 was where I started to really feel a sense of being “across” it. I thought: “it is something about participatory practice now”. It was succinct, and had plenty of references. It is about releasing the energy of objectivism - a departure point as soon as it is arrived at and a platform for moving into action. It unfolds from Chapter 4 (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06).

My position is that the sense of ease that the read offers is a measure of the embedded position, the tacit practice capability that objectivity-based epistemology occupies in our minds. My request is that where before, the reader may have managed a self critical reflexivity with the difficulty of previous chapters, in this chapter, you create a similar quality of reflexivity in response to the ease with which the patterns form.

At an ontological level, in the writing and reading of this chapter, I am exploring the possibility that a paradoxical partner for objectivity is integration and not subjectivity. Once integration comes into being, a property that has a concept of flow in its fibre, the separation of objective from subjective begins to soften. Such a paradoxical “other” as integration may address the difficulty of valuing objectivity without devitalising life, and without creating Polanyi’s moral vacuum as the structural core of any epistemological transformation that such a process might generate. We certainly felt this softening throughout the integrative work in the Inquiry, but we have not considered it deeply enough to suggest that it is anything more than a working idea. I understand that such a pattern of perception has heuristic powers and make the following suggestion, of instrumentalism and latent integration, with this intention.

**The evident “field” of participation**

**Instrumentalism:**

*The distinctive application of that label within the philosophy of science is to positions that regard scientific theories not as literal and/or accurate descriptions of the natural world, but instead as mere tools or “instruments” for making empirical predictions and achieving other practical ends (Stanford, p. 2003).*
Chapter 5. Ground: participatory practices

From fragmentation to cohesion

The simple pattern that I propose with which to see the participatory field as a potential whole is one that acknowledges its origins in instrumentalism. I am not referring to the origins of the field of participation in this way, but to this particular pattern of its practice. The instrumentalist aspects of this pattern are evident in my use of taxonomy to distinguish elements of the field, and in the intended use of this propositional “tool” to cohere the field. The taxonomy was drawn from a literature review the context of which is still largely reflective of objectivist-based epistemologies: it describes a fragmented field harboring the potential for coherence. I did not undertake any quantitative analysis of discourse to make these distinctions. I considered the sector-based and disciplinary origins of the various forms of practice being discussed. From this recurring patterning I drew a “frame” with which to loosely hold the repeating domains. In so doing I offer the essential resources for individually interpreted and determined practice innovations with the potential consequence of overcoming the instrumentalism of the field and of the taxonomic tool itself. Here is not so much an observation but a way of seeing; not so much a prediction but an open-ended possibility.

My literature review in 2004 showed that participatory approaches, explicated in a variety of forms, were developing around the world in twenty recognised disciplines: political science, physical sciences, philosophy, biotechnology, medicine, management including public administration, economics, organizational behavior, communications, indigenous and other cultural studies, environmental/natural resource management, urban and community planning, sociology, anthropology, geography, education, peace studies and alternative dispute resolution, engineering, psychology and systems theory.

Related to these disciplines was an even greater array of subject areas. I identified thirty-two at the time of the review but the field is continually expanding and I acknowledge that by the time a text is written, published and reviewed much has shifted on the ground of practice. The subject areas that I and the project committee found were: environmental assessment and management, community development, sustainable development, climate studies, wildlife conservation, forestry, fisheries, population studies, energy management and technologies, land use, transportation, agriculture, food biotechnology, health (including health promotion and public health), risk assessment, safety, housing, waste management, parliamentary affairs, ethics, power dynamics, democracy and democratization, dialogue,

\[13\] I would like to acknowledge the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) for giving me the opportunity to carry out this literature review and for the IAP2 management committee’s expertise in endorsing its findings.
deliberation, journalism, justice (human rights, social justice, crime prevention and restorative justice for example), consumer advocacy (service delivery and product innovations), gender studies, arts, mapping (land and other systems including geographic information systems), statistics and information technology.

Each discipline, experiencing its own participatory innovation, is growing through the “participatorisation” of a variety of subject matters. For example: Ard and Natowicz (2001, p.787) discuss questions of empowerment, through the disciplinary frame of sociology, with regard to public health and planning practices in the subject area of genetics; whereas Westfall, Van Vorst, Main and McCann (2006, p.8) use a research practice frame (Community-Based Action Research) to extend the subject areas of primary health and clinical practice; and Berger (1998, p. 599), discusses the questions of democratization and globalization through the discipline frame of communications, with regard to the subject areas of journalism and the media.

As stated, being mindful that the literature is at least one or more years behind practice, publications available in 2004 presented the “field” as structured of four complementary parts, or as I see them “constituents” of a potential “whole” form of practice. The four constituents are: Governance, Development, Learning and Activism. They are made distinct from each other as a matter of emphasis as held by their proponents, but they also tell stories of their origins, individual practitioners’ personal trajectories, the current state of fields of play (to use Richardson’s term), and the multiple nuances which participatory practices create of themselves and the worlds that they co-generate. I choose easy language for this taxonomy and a simple structure to propose the powerfully distinctive frames through which many of us understand the idea and practice of “participation” and which often stand in the way of recognising one or more of the other frames.

These distinctions are already familiar in the field, although I have noticed that rarely do overviews of the field include all four. Often they emphasise one or two of them however. For example, participatory practice may be seen through the frame of Governance, regarding “public participation” which may also take into account aspects of Learning in such activities as citizens’ juries, but rarely do they embrace the value of Activism and the ethical responsibilities of Development practices. On the other hand constructions of participation that arise through the constituent of Learning may include Activism and Development but rarely include Governance practices given a suspicion of authority in this constituent. There are of course exceptions to the ways in which others have framed the field of participation, where such exceptions do recognise all four constituents. One such exception is Stringer’s proposition regarding Community Based Action Research (CBAR):
Community-based Action Research is always enacted through an explicit set of social values. In modern, democratic social contexts, it is seen as a process of inquiry that has the following characteristics:

- It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people
- It is equitable, acknowledging people’s equality of worth
- It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions
- It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people’s full human potential (Stringer, 1999, p.10).

My scan of the field of participation was not limited to “Action Research” but is about “participatory practices”; however Stringer’s distinctions, strongly drawn from community development, education and indigenous ways of working in Australia, seem to fit my own with ease. Stringer’s distinctions provide a commensurate understanding of the distinctions I also make as drawn from a literature review in 2004 of over 200 articles and other texts including web sites of organizations that are promoting participatory methods and initiatives throughout the world in constituents that far exceed a practice focus on research.

The following table illustrates the easy flow between Stringer’s propositions and my own:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stringer’s distinctions for Community Action Research</th>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Activism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is democratic, enabling the participation of all people</td>
<td>It is equitable, acknowledging people’s equality of worth</td>
<td>It is life enhancing, enabling the expression of people’s full human potential</td>
<td>It is liberating, providing freedom from oppressive, debilitating conditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stringers’ attention to the matter of democracy in CBAR aligns to the broader traditions of Governance alive in the participatory field; his attention to that of potential and actual equality is drawn from the traditions of Community Development; the construction of life enhancement and human potential resonates with the Social Learning sector’s commitment to “human flourishing” (Reason and Bradbury, 2001); and the commitment to resisting oppression, resonates with the traditions of Activism, within which many practitioners have their origins.
Activists in participatory domains have traditionally been associated with the Left, but they are now crossing political lines. Norman and Ganesh refer to Britain’s conservative party leader, David Cameron in his 2005 party address, citing the emergence of the participatory impulse in new ideas of conservative politics:

*The more we trust people, the stronger they and society become. We’re all in this together... we have a shared responsibility for our shared future... There is such a thing as society; it’s just not the same thing as the state. We will stand up for the victims of state failure and ensure that social justice and economic opportunity are achieved by empowering people and communities (Norman and Ganesh, 2006, p.1).*

The principles of societal cohesion, inclusion, resilience and justice as illustrated in this text and discussed at greater depth under the theme “compassionate conservatism” would resonate with participatory practice orientations whether the overriding pattern be conservative or any other ideological stance. As this conversion takes hold how will it transform the traditions of adversarial politics I wonder? The internal incoherence of political mechanisms of differentiation will take another turn under the influence of participatory practices, as indeed Pearce’s (2005) and Chesters’ (2004) observations claim is already taking place in terms of the emergence of a new global sphere of participatory democracy.

My thesis proposes that as practitioners we need to understand the nature of the field that we are manifesting in local activities, which also have a global scale and influence. We need to overcome our isolation and our fractured view of what we are doing, so we can be responsible for its emergence as a whole system through our individual practices. As long as “sustainability” is understood through a dominant belief in objective truth (as physical and social sciences still adhere to, as the preference for technical solutions will also further embed) this understanding may continue to have an unsustainable fragmenting and codependent potential for any who work with it. If participatory practices are also predominantly instrumental in their epistemology, they will only serve to augment unsustainable the more technically “participatory” our approaches to sustainability become. Put another way, could it be that when participatory practitioners embrace coherence in their practice, particularly in their engagement with the problems of sustainability, then sustainability becomes integrative and coherent; generative rather than self-consuming? How

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14 Norman and Ganesh accept the liability of the phrase in reference to the US conservative use of it in the 1999 elections and ask for a new and deeper consideration of its potential as indeed has Tony Blair in his farewell speech to the British Labor Party, 2006.
can we know sustainability without objectivism playing into our tacit practices of sense making?

**From cohesion to transformation**

Included in my proposition is that in cohering the field of participatory practice through these four constituents a new key player self-actualizes - that of “epistemological emancipation”. As I experienced in dialogue with peers, this concept is difficult to accept as there is a strong belief that if we know something then we can only know by means of a pre-established way of knowing whether we recognise it or not. My suspicion is that such a position is only the consequence of the estrangement of the domain of aesthetics from science and philosophy, each of which is also undergoing epistemological shifts and moving closer to new forms of integration (Gaskell, undated). There is a moment in the leap of integration when there is no fixed way of knowing. As Seel has discerned (2005, p. 98-99) and as discussed in Chapter 4, when we are engaging with an entity in such a manner that its appearing is ambiguous there is the potential for any epistemology to emerge. Participatory practices that wish to resist the presumptions of existing sciences and philosophies or that wish to become attuned to this buried question of epistemology can, I suggest, hold this ambiguity or under-determinacy to enable other ways of knowing to come into being, within ourselves and with those with whom we are engaging. Such a capability has much to offer those who have suffered at the “hands” of presumed ways of knowing and those who see the limitations of their current ways of knowing. It also has the added advantage of locating participants, including the practitioner, in an authentic shared stance of “not knowing”, when a state of “grace” may come into being.

The Inquiry walked down this most difficult of paths. By attempting to divest ourselves of objectivism we were able to attribute that which is to be known with life, rather than “concrete”. When we came to understand Torbert’s construction of first person inquiry, we questioned the assumption that the only location of what there is to be known as “truth” is “outside” us (that we were not necessarily outside of it). We came to question the assumption that externalized constructions of what is valid are the only or even the best concept of what constitutes “the true” in formal and public environments. We encountered the wall of resistance to this stance and developed our participatory practices around this question in this place.

By understanding the value of second person inquiry and its heuristic practices of reflexivity and hermeneutics, we were able to depart from the idea that knowing is limited to the passivity of “observer”. It is not even that we held these objectivist ideas rigidly; it is that even when we practise supposedly pluralistic methodologies these objective values still
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resonate throughout our language, identity and forms of relationship. When I am in a tight corner I sometimes revert to them: I might find myself saying things like “the proof is in the pudding”, “the fact is”, “the reality is” or “whatever works”. Such familiar throwaway lines are like gas escaping from compacted objectivist mud in my riverbed. In our Inquiry we came to understand that our “mud” in our starting place for participation was to be found in a sense of having no value in ourselves or each other; in our being unable to act without some sense of authority to make our actions legitimate; in our certainty that what we were exploring was so marginal, unacceptable to any but those with whom we whisper such secrets; in finding again through the literal re-membering of each other, what we had so invisibly forgotten.

While constructivism and its commitment to inter-subjectivity can also break the hold of objectivity it still risks its own orthodoxy in the necessary separation of itself from other ways of knowing. However, as I pointed out in Chapter 4, simply by dropping the question of epistemology for fear of a war past its time is no longer a solution: I still have work to do in my understanding of what “epistemology” is once it is freed from presumptions of instrumentalism and other objectivist methodologies at its root. This is still a crucial question. Not only do I need to create sociology in patterns that are other than natural science based; I also need to understand nature in patterns that are other than natural science based.

Philosophy wars however are not an answer and certainly not an aspect of “authentic” participatory practice when Development and Learning practices are equitably included in our orientations. When working systemically we found that a gentle integration of disciplinary differences, deep reflection supported and inspired by collaboration, and the forging of trusting spaces for vulnerability, time and imagination generate an entirely non-combative ontology with the capacity for eclecticism and purely voluntary connectivity.

The following illustration imagines my propositions regarding the location of the four constituents of participatory practices in the emergence of contemporary and western ways of knowing, giving rise to the possibility of epistemological emancipation in place of philosophy wars, in its centre. It reads from the bottom to the top, from linear to spiraling forms.
Figure 24: Situating participatory practices
At its base, the illustration shows the rise of western thought as say, Foucault (1966, 1969) describes, into the dominant ontology of objectivism serving as a mono-epistemology throughout the modernist era, desensitising us, as Polanyi discusses, to the existence of other ways of knowing. Moving up the stem, the well discussed “post modern turn” brought thought back on itself, as Bohm for example, describes it, so that we could see our assumptions of thought along with the multiple errors of understandings about truth. This “turn” produced and continues to produce a diversification of ontology and epistemology giving rise to pluralism at an epistemological level. However, pluralism is limited. Certain managerial cultures, interests, ideologies and simply a lack of opportunity to learn often mean that the potential for multiple ways of knowing is not a systemically even-handed matter, but an imbalanced systemic emergence where objectivism and its variants, such as instrumentalism takes up the dominant share of the epistemological pie, parading as ontological choices.

Participatory practices, I argue, enter the field at this point. Certain schools of participatory practices frame their dissatisfaction with the non-participatory status quo (Rollig, 2000) in terms of the liabilities of dominant epistemological forms. They found this problem at work within specific communities of interest and within the governing variables that influenced their development - be those variables within forms of management and policy, research methodology, pedagogy or other pertinent modes, disciplines and subjects. Throughout the eighties and nineties, participatory practices working at the “edges” of convention were perturbing the fixed nature of these orthodoxies to develop transdisciplinary knowledge. Transdisciplinary knowledge questions the validity of disciplinary distinctions and supports the freeing of epistemological conventions to broaden the human right to understand and contribute to the great richness of human ways of knowing.

In our hands

This claim regarding the emergence of epistemologically aware knowledge is already understood within the participatory field. The following quotations from participatory practitioners in the areas of democratisation first, and urban planning second, show these insights in terms of the constituents of Learning and Development first, and Development and Governance second:

Participatory research has its origins in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. It emerged almost three decades ago as one of several critiques of the claims of orthodox positivist research to value-free, impartial research (Martin, 1997)
This kind of planning work, involving dialogue and negotiation across the gulf of cultural difference, requires its practitioners to be fluent in a range of ways of knowing and communicating, from storytelling to listening to interpreting visual and body language. It would seem to be a model that is very relevant to the new complexities of community development in multicultural societies. A more democratic and culturally inclusive planning model not only draws on many different ways of knowing and acting, but also has to develop a sensibility able to discern which ways are most useful in what circumstances (Sandercock, 2004, p. 139).

Practitioners currently relate strongly to one or a few of these easily discernable “constituents” of practice. However we may or may not appreciate our own constitution of the world’s current rise to a global plateau constructed in part of the coming together of nature with contemporary humanity: an extraordinary reflexive surface through which both nature and humanity are evolving at the cross roads of sustainability. My purpose is to make the opportunity for self-recognition in this situation available to practitioners: to see epistemology in our practice, free us from habituated ways of knowing so we can forge more socio-ecologically sensitive forms, and to self reflexively grow our individual practices with a more balanced form of practice (the four constituents) conducive to integration and transformation by means of becoming epistemologically self aware in the company of peers.

Such an approach opens up a great wealth of expertise, new networks and the most contemporary emergences of practice within all four constituents. The quest that the Inquiry took us down was to have the freedom to explore this question however we found it within us, to look within and come to each other with our nascent and liminal approximations. We learned to let these little flecks of awareness, of thought at work within and between us, draw us forward into ourselves, each other and the extraordinary third person (our mythical beast) that came about through us:

I am heartily tired of the instruments of oppression that I witness in the world every day - the means of exclusion, coercion, obfuscation, inaction, leverage. They all come to nothing in the face of global crisis. They are seen for what they are - the tools of men and women who do not want to learn or to lose what they hold as their advantage. Advantage is nothing. In my body I encounter the world and sense the strangeness of the tools of oppression that daily are passed into my hands and I hold them loosely, shake them to the ground, stand instead and walk purposefully to the one with whom I need to speak and treat, whose eyes I need to look into, in whose other body I seek the softening and the admission of shared
vulnerability and shared hope of kindness and construction (John, email to us all, 28/6/06);

I do believe that part of what we must convey is that participatory practice and sustainability is outside of the realms of certainty (and sometimes inside the realm with all the contradiction present and visible and awkward, yet to be explained or eluding explanation ... Because it is poetry) and indeed it walks along an edge of knowing and not knowing. Any attempt to grab hold of what is known or any attempt to hold that too tightly will in all possible ways lead to a restrictive influence, which is counter to the goals of participatory practice (Lesley, email to us all, 29/9/06).

The four constituents

The four constituents are drawn from the different origins, emerging traditions and now legacies of participatory practices. Each is evident in a practitioner’s recognition of participation and their determinations to become a practitioner of skills that enable and augment participation in any setting. I now turn to consider each constituent in turn.

Governance

As activists and global humanitarians looked to conceptualise their role, they turned to a concept whose history lay in the 18th century European Enlightenment: “civil society”. This concept began to gather global adherents but had many contextual interpretations. The concept’s power lay in its dual character as both normative and empirical, enabling it to be applied contextually yet retain some universal dimensions (Pearce, 2005, p. 4).

While some see the origins of “public participation” in the Greek traditions of democracy (for example, Mansfield, 1980), and others in the European traditions of Enlightenment, the current enthusiasm for public participation in the Governance constituent of participation, also referred to as “civil society”, “deliberation” and “direct democracy”, is strongly influenced by the US tradition of New England Town Meetings, which harks back to the early 17th century15.

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Understood by contemporary commentators (for example, Fung and Wrights, 2003; Williamson and Fung, 2004) as still being in its earliest stages of development, the participatory constituent of “Governance” is establishing throughout the world (for example, Bone, Crockett and Hodge, undated; Chess, 2000, p769; Gaventa, 2004; Dalton, Scarrow and Cain, 2004, pp. 124-125; International Institute for Environment and Development, 2002, p. 4). Having touched on several examples from Brazil, to the Philippines, to the US and parts of Europe, Gaventa claims:

*These are just several of thousands of innovations around the globe in which citizens and governments are coming together in new ways to participate, deliberate, and develop solutions to pressing social, economic, and community development issues (Gaventa, 2004, p.16)*.

Its resurgence in the latter part of the twentieth century is a result of increasing frustration with and apathy towards representative forms of democratic government (for example, Dalton et al, p.124). This frustration has been given additional edge in the gradual realization that the west’s insistence on democratizing other nation states is often in neglect of the quality of democracy that exists at home (Kennedy Jnr, 2004). Others, such as Pearce (2005, p.5) and Chesters (2004, p.326), also see it as an unintended consequence of the colonizing strategies of the World Bank and other “development” oriented globalising corporate and non-government organizations (NGOs) that gained power during this time (McGann and Johnstone, 2005, p.160). This constituent of Governance is served by a tense triangle of those same globalizing interests, human and environmental rights organisations, and public participation organisations such as the American based NGO “Civicus” (Naidoo, K., 2005, P.152).

Australia was caught up in a similar rise to public deliberation in the mid 1990s with State-led reforms in local government legislation:

*While the amalgamations of the 1990s saw a reduction in elected representation, they were accompanied by requirements to become more open and transparent through measures such as annual reports and strategic planning...As a consequence, Australian local authorities are now moving towards a more participatory form of democracy and fulfilling their potential as the level of government that is close to the people (Zwart, 2006).*

I recently attended a local Council planning workshop where the facilitator, a freelance planning consultant, was working participatory forms of engagement with the
public for the first time in his career. I contacted him after the event to congratulate him and he replied thus:

*I have designed and adopted processes for [name of council] specifically to address the conditions of [name of Council’s local government area] and what I have learned from each person and process. Many of the processes used here, I have not used before - conversation maps, street theatre, world cafe and the planning web.

Many who attended our 'world cafe' style values workshops remarked how much of a learning and social building process that was. The same people noted that they were further challenged and forced to shift their thinking in this Planning Web process, and felt it more productive - so I hope we have achieved some community learning and social cohesion from the process. ... My process evaluation is very much through learning day to day from the practice and process to managing people and processes everyday (email communication, 8/11/06).

Practitioners whom I have met that practice this Governance area of participation frequently refer to Arnstein’s (1969) “Ladder of Participation” as a foundational construction with which to develop, recognise and assess democratic forms of accountable decision-making in the public domain. For example, Williamson and Fung (2004) review the current state of public participation in the US of 2004 by assessing examples using Arnstein’s system. Through this model, the lowest level of participation is “manipulation”, then moving in increasingly democratic interstices, - “information dissemination”, “consultation”, “partnership”, “delegated power” and at the highest level, “citizen control” (Ibid, p.5). These demarcations are also familiar to the kinds of participatory practices that are deployed in market research and marketing.

The literature is rich with case studies of the many methods used in the Governance mode of participatory practice; to illustrate its spirit at work, a description of “citizen juries” is given in the Social and Institutional Research Program (SIRP) of Land and Water Australia’s overview of public participation in Natural Resource Management (NRM) decisions. It describes those working at the upper end of Arnstein’s participation ladder:

*SIRP found that citizens' juries are a viable public participation method, probably best used to complement other forms of public participation where budgets permit. Jurors, who are randomly chosen from a community, are given detailed and balanced information about an issue, hear a wide range of views from witnesses, and can seek extra information
with the aim of making NRM recommendations. The case studies demonstrated an impressive ability of citizens to grapple with complex environmental issues and to deliberate effectively to reach an agreed jury “verdict” (Land and Water Australia, 2001).

Other familiar forms of participatory practices in the Governance constituent include deliberative polling, citizen committees, design charrettes, citizen dialogues and national issues forums.

Participatory practice in this constituent is preoccupied with the accountability of authority to its jurisdiction particularly as it is expressed in infrastructure and due process. Its visionary drive is “democracy” even considering that the term is greatly contested. Practically, participatory practice in this constituent creates the conditions and the mechanisms for an authority to make better, more transparent, less risky and more trustworthy decisions.

One of our co-researchers, Brigid Pearse, was working in this constituent, on a local environmental planning instrument looking into the potential for participatory approaches regarding land use determinations.

**Development**

When the consequences of Governance move from deliberation to operation – be the seat of participatory Governance political (government) or economic (corporate) - or both – participatory practice turns towards the mode of “Development”. We may be familiar with this constituent as a particular form of “community development”, as donor-funded development initiatives associated with the “developing world”, the socially responsible strategies that some corporates fund, and as “grass roots” initiatives funded by government and charities in the “developed” world (for example, Halliwell, 1969). Not all community development is participatory, just as not all forms of governance are participatory. My purpose here is to create a construction, which enables practitioners to augment the participatory potential of Governance and Development, and indeed each of the four constituents in relationship to each other, the practitioner’s narrative, essences and commitments, and the co-participants’ intensions.

The concept of “community” in reference to “community development” is important to consider, given that participatory practice co-emerges with the people who use them. Community is not limited to a geographically based construction but this orientation tends to still dominate the literature that falls into this constituent. Contemporary shifts away from a geographical community using the Development constituent of participation include user-
group participation in the co-design of new products and services (Brandt, 2004, p.113), a great variety of interest based communities (Foth, 2006, p. 208) and Wenger's (1999) “Communities of Practice”. Of interest, Liz Kelly (1996, p. 71), working in the field of domestic violence identifies six types of non-geographic community: communities of interest, communities of identity and experience, communities of place, of circumstance, of resistance and of care.

Two areas that strongly influence the literature, and thus the development of practice in this mode, are that of natural resource management and developing nation social infrastructure. Here is an example of participatory practice in the Development constituent:

*Our Zamzama gas project in Pakistan is located in the district of Dadu, which lies approximately 500 kilometres north of the coastal city of Karachi in Sindh Province. The area suffers from very low rainfall, lacks basic infrastructure and has limited educational facilities or opportunities. Our community development program is aiming to facilitate the empowerment process and improve the quality of life for the poor and the vulnerable people living in the areas where we operate. Education is considered to be a vital part of this process.*

*Prior to developing the program, consultative workshops were organised to ensure effective community participation and ownership of the project and to assess the critical needs in the area. These consultations revealed that access to quality education was the primary concern, with girls and women having been particularly disadvantaged… (BHP Billiton, 2003).*

At the heart of participatory practice as “Development” is a commitment to meeting needs (overall health, justice, education, environmental sustainability, clean water etc) of a specific community of people. Practice in this constituent is manifest in both informal and formal ways – from getting to know the locals around their kitchen table to formalized participatory workshops to achieve milestones in a planned course of action.

Familiar practices include a great array of community group processes including public meetings, cross cultural communication, conflict resolution practices, community arts based initiatives such as community and street theatre, public murals and festivals, community-organizing to build alliances, and learning specific skills such as how to work with the media, how to access and use information and how to manage financial and legal matters should they arise.

The Development constituent is located in many non-government and quasi government organisations, charities and one-off government or private sector funded
projects and networks. Practice as Development is commonly implemented in pilot projects and the community investment activities of ethical business practices. It tends to be a poverty-based form of participation depending on volunteerism, lay participation, philanthropy and other aspects of the third sector (grey economy) for its resources. A common language for participatory practice in this constituent is “facilitation”.

One of the delineations between practices that enable participation as Governance as compared to Development is that the accountability of the funding body and its strategic partners to the stakeholders have only recently and minimally been open to question (Slim, 2002; McGann and Johnstone, 2005, p. 160) in the Development arena. In the Governance constituent, the actual social and environmental consequences of a policy are not open to consideration - as they can be in the Development arena - beyond the speculative reach of a specific initiative (such as scenario planning).

In our Inquiry project Jo’s project work with a demographic group - young men in detention, and Penny’s work with a geographic group – a sustainability project in a local government area, were both examples of the Development constituent of participatory practices at work.

Learning

Like Governance, the proponent of the constituent of “Learning” can trace its roots back to Greek traditions, but in the areas of philosophy rather than civil society (for example, Eikland, 2001, p. 145). It is located in schools of thought that reach beyond institutions and geographic communities into free ranging pathways of dialogue, publications, curricula and stances. This constituent focuses less on Governance and Development as ends in their own right, and sees them as one of many means to the (regenerative) end of Learning. It is inclined to foreground human potential in its discourses, and background accountability and needs-based infrastructure. That is not to say that authority and need are discounted, given their role in augmenting human potential, but it is to say that satisfying them is not the primary characteristic of participatory practice in this constituent. Learning is focused on the “flourishing of humanity” and more recently, our eco-systems (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p.10). Alliex and McCarthy describe an example of participatory practice as Learning in their discussion of the value of “reflective practice” in the context of nursing:

*According to Plato “the unreflected life is not worth living” (Taylor, 2000, p.10). These are very meaningful words that imply that individuals need to reflect on every aspect of their lives. This is more so whilst leading a professional life as practice in a profession has implications for more than just an individual. The concept of reflective practice has gained*
momentum in recent times particularly in nursing. It is considered an essential component of undergraduate curricula. Taylor (2000) ... explains reflective practice as throwing oneself back to thoughts and memories using thinking, contemplation, meditation and any other forms of cognitive strategies to make changes if they are required (Alliex and McCarthy, 2005).

Alliex and McCarthy’s gaze is not on nursing, or medical centre policy or even patient well-being. It is on participatory Learning – or a form of learning where the learner is the self-determined self-educator embedded in a social context (work, community, education, for example). Learning may be undertaken to enhance health outcomes for patients, to improve managerial efficiency or any number of purposes. The entity of the situated self-directed learner creates the material for personal, and with it societal change – which we know as “transformation”. “Transformation” (Mezirow, 1998, 1999) which is understood as shifting our ways of knowing and the ground that is assumed to be “reality”, is the current Developmental edge of participatory practice as Learning:

*Transformation Theory is a description of a learning process by which the subject moves from an unexamined way of thinking to a more examined and critically reflective way and hence a more dependable way of interpreting meaning. The focus of the educator is on facilitating a continuing process of critical inquiry wherever it leads the learner. There are no "anticipated learning outcomes" in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1999).*

As indicated in Mezirow’s concept the emphasis of participation as Learning is on the intrinsic value and associated practices of Learning, and not a prescribed, programmed or pre-determined learning outcome in a mechanistic frame. The emphasis is human flourishing in terms of insight, self-determination and capacity to understand the world in whatever way and direction the learner requires, even if what can be achieved politically and physically is far from any ideal.

Unless they are influenced by participatory practice as Learning, participation as Development and Governance place less value on what has been learned as long as the need is met (as in Development matters) or the authority is functioning as an accountable democracy (as in Governance matters). The ongoing battle to embed evaluative approaches to governing and development activities bares witness to this claim, particularly where evaluation is intended to inform ongoing learning rather than “end of project accounting”. Australia for example, is still struggling to accept evaluation as an embedded aspect of
Participatory practice as Learning privileges the modes of inquiry and reflective practice: for example, specific methods such as critical reflection, reflexivity, iterative learning, Action Learning, Action Research and Participatory Evaluation are familiar terms in this constituent. Practice environments tend to be collaborative and small scale, preferring intimate groups to enable individuals to speak at length and do the demanding work of authentic learning in a social setting. They are less concerned with large numbers or demographic representation for political and social accountability as Governance and Development tend to be.

Participatory practice as Learning is located in some university and think tank organisations, research and ethics centers, collaborations and networks and consultancies in the areas of participatory knowledge, learning, research and evaluation. Another current edge in this constituent is the integration of cosmology with participatory knowing (for example, Skolimowski, 1981, 1994; O’Sullivan, 1999; Carr, 2002).

Peter W.’s work inquiring into participatory approaches to self-organizing groups, and Jane G.’s looking into the pedagogy of health promotion through an ecological framework were reflective of this constituent at work in the Inquiry strategy. This constituent is also my home ground.

Activism

Participatory practices that are dismissive or fearful of Activism risk creating forms of participation as compliance. In a field of endeavour where self-determination and collective effort are key elements of its manifestation, the capacity for its members to identify the subtle edges between working “with, to and against” authority, wherever it is operating within the constituents, including that of “Activism”, has to be within our range of ethical choices. The Activist legacy of our field is core to our integrity. Rollig (2000) tracks the rise of emancipatory movements in the USA in the 1960s into the domain of visual art generating participatory innovations in that field:

_In the sixties, the emancipation movement made an immediate dynamic impact on art. In North America, above all in the USA, the civil rights movement influenced the art scene decisively: the women's movement, the protests against the war on Vietnam, the struggle for the rights of ethnic minorities, black power. Grassroots organizations were formed, citizens organized. In 1969 artists founded the "Art Workers Coalition" after a_
conflict with the Museum of Modern Art. Soon the coalition organized protests and events on museum policies, the representation of women and persons of color in the art world, the neglect of the socially disadvantaged in terms of cultural offerings and last but not least, also against the Vietnam war.

Rollig goes on to describe how the emancipatory impulse shifted the relationship between visual artist and audience, and their forms of practice. She traces the post modern turn through the arts (theatre and visual arts in particular) and determines that participatory practices share a generic feature of a specific individual or group’s dissatisfaction with the status quo. This dissatisfaction is responded to by opening up the group’s boundaries to invite in the possibilities of self-determination with others with whom the dissatisfied group is seeking a better relationship:

Participatory practices in art are developed fundamentally as a result of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Whatever artists are dissatisfied with is followed by a characteristic offering of participation and enabling the participants a degree of self-determination. Participation can be based on the equality of rights and competencies and can be distributed in the sense of the allocation of social capital (knowledge, skills) to real or presumed underprivileged groups (Rollig, 2000).

The Ruckus Society is a Californian, membership-sustained activist network, which provides training for non-violent actions around the world. Its web site provides free information about campaigning, planning for actions and opportunities to participate in current actions that the society is supporting. They source their heritage to the Boston Tea-party (rather than the New England town hall, as the constituent of Governance alludes to) and include current forms of activism that are working around the world:

Since the beginning of the modern environmental movement, the campaigns against nuclear power, to save ancient forests, to achieve a global ban on high-seas drift net fishing and end ocean dumping all have incorporated significant direct action components (The Ruckus Society 2003, p. 1).

Included in this domain’s heritage is Ghandi’s peace movement, the US civil rights movements of the 1960s, and the anti-Vietnam War movement. Ruckus sees direct action as being both “hard” and “soft” – hard being physical resistance such as blockades, and soft being symbolic actions and the witnessing of corrupt, illegal or unethical activities. The method begins with calling attention to a hidden transgression, and includes a mix of
campaigning, actions and advocacy for a cause, which as they say, is an opportunity to change the course of history in favour of values that an aware and informed public deem to be preferable even if their governing authorities and corporates do not.

On their current web site, Ruckus is organizing campaigns for American indigenous people’s land rights, and movements against the recruitment of poor youth into the US army in the guise of educational assistance, a campaign to put pressure on corporate Ford to produce fuel efficient vehicles and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and a campaign exposing corporate Wal Mart’s unjust employment conditions. Many of these campaigns involve linking up with other activist networks to augment their reach and powers of influence.

It may be useful at this point to show the alignments between participatory practice as Activism and as Learning with an example. Two international activist organizations, Training for Change and the Institute for Cultural Affairs, co-operated to deliver a four day workshop in Zimbabwe, supporting 14 local activists to develop a resistance movement under the Mugabe dictatorship:

...The first two days were virtually a laugh-in. We challenged the group with adventure-based learning activities, created a buddy system, used various tools for inviting self-disclosure. By the end of day two the participants were marveling at how quickly they'd formed community - unparalleled in their experience... For the Protective Accompaniment Technique, we invented three new role-plays to fit more closely the participants' context, and these will be shared via the website. We also did the Confidence in the Face of Violence series of exercises... (Training for Change, 2005).

On presenting an aspect of my thesis to a university audience, an observer asked whether participation was hardest to achieve where it was most needed. This constituent of Activism is the field’s answer to that call. At any moment in the participatory act, Activism is within our practice. In some instances, as many of the participants in the Inquiry experienced, the mere advocacy of using a participatory approach in situations that are unaware or dismissive of such approaches, is an activist stance.

Participation as Activism is concerned with non-violent resistance to oppression at individual, collective and sometimes, whole population levels engaging in social movements. For example, Martin (2001) envisions a future where conflict continues but through the use of non-violent means of engagement with whole organizations and networks:
There will be large peace brigades for intervention, extended blockades, and intra-organisational campaigns of enormous scale (Martin, 2001, p. 9 of 12).

Activist practices (Sharp, 1973; Shield, 1991; Ackerman and Duvall, 2000) are found in rights-based agencies (such as Amnesty International), issue-based networks (such as the Conservation Council) and specific initiatives around political events including anti-war protests or grass roots causes such as defenders of asylum seekers (for example, Refugees Australia) and aboriginal sovereignty groups (for example, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation - ANTAR). In Australia, the developments in electronic activism in America have been given new life with the establishment of independent and a-political e-based networks such as Get-Up Australia which runs several campaigns, disseminating information and encouraging electronic petitioning to pressure government to include public persuasion in their decisions.

Activism may involve degrees of Development in its cause, but sees itself as pitched against the conventions that Governance holds dear. It also tends to see Learning as limited to achieving its own pre-existing ends rather than shifting the ground on which it stands at the cost of such ends. Thus it is that I suggest that not all Activism is “participatory” if, as is also a risk with Governance, it cannot interrogate its own assumptions and if it resorts to violence to achieve its intentions. Where participatory practice as Development grounds Governance and Learning in site-specific applications of systemic decisions – and where in the name of transformation Learning questions all three (Governance, Developments and Learning itself) – the proponents of Activism reject “the system” if it was ever accepted, keeping the other three domains in check and guarding against self conviction.

A core practice focus is “campaigning” (for example, Greenpeace, undated), and a current practice edge is the ethics involved in collaborating across networks, which might co-operate for a shared interest but be at odds with each other under any other circumstances (Immergluck, 2003). A common language for participatory practice in this constituent is “non-violent action”.

All our members included “non-negotiables” in their forms of participatory practice (see the first iteration of practice summary in Table 4, Appendix), which are our expressions of our activist stance. While many of our members had been activists at some time of their lives, the Inquiry did not include a strategy in this constituent even if its overall intent of challenging the fragmentation of the participatory field could be understood as an “activist” stance.
Discussion

The table that follows shows the four constituents of the evident field of participatory practice in relationship to their emancipatory potential, the least emancipation being located to the left of the table. Like Martin (2001), I am placing Activism rather than Learning at the highest level of emancipation in the right hand column of this schema, on the basis that in this moment of our history human flourishing takes place through non-violent contestation. In my view participatory practices need to be free to resist orthodoxies should the situation demand it, including our own.

As with any attempt to simplify a complex situation, the table is simplistic and does not attempt to take into account either the nuances between the many literary sources that informed its construction, or the incredible challenges practitioners face and grow through in any attempt to use and integrate these four constituents in live sites. The ground a practitioner occupies and the stance with which we occupy it are unique to every person, every participatory event. My wish here is to be forgiven for the simplification in the hope that these four distinctions will help us see each other more clearly without blinding us to our jealously guarded and respected differences.

The table is arranged around 5 attributes of difference: “participatory emphasis” or guiding good practice criterion; “participatory action” or an indicative practice of participation in each constituent; “language for participation” or an accepted term used by the constituent’s proponents to describe their practice of participation; “participatory intention” or how proponents in each constituent describe the purpose of participation; and “location” or where each constituent of participatory practice is most reliably resourced.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituent</th>
<th>Governance</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Learning</th>
<th>Activism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participatory emphasis</td>
<td>Being accountable</td>
<td>Meeting needs</td>
<td>Extending potential</td>
<td>Asserting rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory action</td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Inquiring</td>
<td>Resisting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language for participation</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Praxis</td>
<td>Non-violent action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory intention</td>
<td>Democratising</td>
<td>Capacity building</td>
<td>Transforming</td>
<td>Perturbing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Institutions</td>
<td>Communities</td>
<td>Schools of thought</td>
<td>Movements</td>
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An important qualifier for accepting this construction is that while we could trace the origins of participatory practices to each of these “sectors”, it would be wholly unjustified to consider that individuals are limited to them. I have enjoyed the courage and imagination of many committed and able activist practitioners within what might be assumed to be the governance sector of public sector work, and seen powerful forms of learning practices in the hands of community developers, for example. It is now more useful to
recognise the constituents as qualities of practices the traditions of which are drawn from specific sectors. A practitioner would recognize elements of each constituent in their individual style of practice, as would the members of the communities in which they practise. We might see that we emphasise, have strengths in, or are compromised in some constituents more than others: one could be completely focused on learning as a form of practice and miss entirely the value of incorporating Governance capabilities, for example. One particular constituent, with its literature and the gravitating powers of its self-attracting practitioners, may enrich our work (and the communities who work with us) more than another.

In my own experience, as an example, Development and Learning are perhaps my strongest areas of competence while Activism is more intuitive, tied into my narrative, and Governance is limited to the basics of project management. If I was to critically appraise this almost accidental pattern to my practice, I might better understand the value of Governance in my practice, become more self-aware regarding my Activism and that of so many others, and better integrate my competencies with my Learning edges.

This orientation could extend beyond an individual practitioner’s range of skills and stances to be incorporated into each sector. Those practices that are establishing in the “public participation” arena of Governance could consider the extent to which they embrace Development, Learning and Activism responsibilities of participation in all that they do. This question might change an approach to public participation so that it more robustly takes into account multiple forms of knowing and Learning in the interests of cross cultural inclusion in policy decisions, including due consideration of the sometimes deeply divisive interactions that can take place in public meetings with regard to community cohesion and Development, and acknowledge the democratic value of Activism in the midst of compliancy requirements. Such an approach would necessitate a multi-vocal and critical stance in what is often limited to a purely instrumental one.

Alternatively, Development approaches to say, determining how a public health initiative deals with a local health concern like tuberculosis could also consider the broad range of institutional accountability for the issues, as well as multiple frames of perceiving them and include Activist assertions regarding the ways in which it is perceived and included in a community’s culture. Such an approach would shift a purely educative approach to a participatory one of Learning drawing in a complex of interests and demanding their integration into a new construction of knowledge and emergent systems for manifesting Developmental interests.
In some instances the participatory field has generated formal methods such as Open Space Technology (OST) (Owen, 1992, 1995) and Constellations (Hellinger, 1999) and whole ontologies such as Freire’s “humanizing pedagogy” (1993,1994) which depending on context and quality of practice, seamlessly integrate all four constituents. This is also true of whole organisations and public systems, such as the Porto Alegre participatory budgeting system that is influencing so many movements and communities worldwide (http://www.portoalegre2002.org/homepage.asp).

A new faith community, “big sea small boat” (http://www.smallboatbigsea.org/) in Sydney, illustrates the four constituents working together within the community’s faith-based terms. The proponents overtly refer to Activist Christianity, to community Development and commitment to social justice, to Learning practices including dialogue, reflection and deep emersion through creativity, and they also list their Governing principles, which they refer to as “DNA” standing for “Discipleship, Nurture and Accountability”.

*Holding our world in each grain of sand*

*The rain sleeps in the river*

*Like a forgotten child*
CHAPTER 6
FRIEND: THE MAKING OF
PARTICIPATORY PRACTITIONERS

To see the rock in the cathedral and the message in the brick
Narrative, essence and commitment
Re-collecting in my friend’s ear: a new pearl

Introduction

If the field of participatory practice is seen as a particular expertise that melds governance, development, learning and activism together in consciously emergent change, then the conscious emergence of “the participatory practitioner” deserves understanding. Our epistemologies come into being in our formation, and with them re-imaginings of self and others in re-imagined worlds.

One of the many inhibitions to freedom that I live with is disinterest. Private and public life, professional and voluntary, offer the rarest of spaces within which anyone can dwell within their experiences and speak of them to another - another who is deeply interested in the one who is speaking. Even more rare are the opportunities for such listening to be reciprocal and recurring, to be collective and the substance of co-labouring. Such is the intent of dialogic interactions familiar to collaborative inquiry methods; however even in these settings such dialogue is limited to an institutional boundary. Come the end of the project or the educational course, we are expected to move on to something that we think of as “the real world” that takes us over; where it is felt as normal that dialogic ways of being together cannot be. What we held so beloved between us falls away, we let it fall, and we are left to wonder into someone else’s camp and start again if they let us. How is it that we accept this way of being with each other?

Resonant of Bohm’s thinking, O’Sullivan (2003, p.329) points out that when we have a limited sense of belonging we are increasingly fragmented and isolated from each other and the world. While I enjoy the solitary independence of a nomad, this threat of fragmentation faces me as a citizen and as a participatory practitioner given the value that we place on inter-personal relationships, social learning and collective action. I overcome the
ontology of fragmentation through my work, and in order to work. I recognise the practitioner in others and myself; I see the “field” I belong to and understand myself to be co-creating with others around the world; and I make the field more accessible and robust for deeper and broader engagement as the turning of the world.

Naming myself as a participatory practitioner is about appreciating a particular quality of practice, strategy or policy, discipline or sector, epistemology and ontology, within others and myself. It is what I can do to let the participatory field integrate and emerge in everyday working relationships in my practice and theirs, as a community flowing into formations. It is like the rain sleeping in the river - a potential cycle invisible in its origins but nevertheless existent and core to existence. In this chapter I bring forward the focus of the taxonomic discussion of the last chapter into three practice reflections. Each illustrates mutual recognitions of participatory practice in formation in and of sustainability (recognising and nurturing the seed of inquiry). Each story strand reflects different contexts in which participatory practices are coming about, that is, through which the field, or participatory community, is manifesting - if we can see it.

One story is referenced to “Jen”, a person who has worked with me as a graphic designer for many of the participatory contracts I have carried out in Australia, and with whom I have also been a neighbour for six years and a friend for the many years since we lived in the same community. Our time together includes deadlines, accounts, hands-on child rearing, bush walks and excellent conversations on sunny and starlit verandas. The computer-generated illustrations of the schemas in this thesis are her work. Jen asked me to work with her to develop her theory of practice as a graphic designer, so that she could more overtly understand the place that sustainability occupied in her practice. This was a question that she was focussing on for her Masters qualification, but it was also a form of practice development that she was keen to undertake for other professional reasons. I was delighted to carry out the nine hours of recorded and transcribed conversation for our mutual practice development. Jen does not see herself as a “participatory practitioner” but she is concerned that her graphics practice more overtly expresses her commitment to sustainability, which in her field is still an under-developed consideration for its presumed lack of commercial viability. In this sense, she is at a practice edge in her field, questioning its ontology and forging a form of practice that will develop new governing principles within her peer, scholarly and market communities. For these reasons, I see her as a “participatory practitioner” even if she is not so concerned to be understood this way herself.

The other story is referenced to “Tivo”, whom I have never met face to face and have only known for about six months. Tivo found me on the web and made contact from his Californian location with my Australian one, eager to explore considerations of participation
in his practice of health promotion. We have enjoyed a rare depth of co-inquiry about participatory approaches to our constructions of “practice” through e-dialogue:

*I am at a different place in engaging with your work. The world then comes crashing down in resistance/opposition/instrumentalism. As with your journey of how—it is what that we bring and co-discover the how*. I am inspired in so many ways. I look forward to digesting all of your work and increasing my own journey in informing and expanding who I am as a participatory practitioner. I love that self-reference and it invokes a new possibility. I have been encouraged to bring love into my work by way of appreciation of your journey. I look forward to bringing my fullness of all that I am to my practice and stance in this world (Tivo, email communication, 1/11/06).

Tivo’s words reach across distances of geography, technology, time and other spatial separations that the “real world” harbours. His language denotes to me that he has accomplished a tacit practice that has no experience of devitalising the other, or if he once had, that he has done the work of transforming himself through it. I am in awe. He considers himself as a participatory practitioner drawing from his inter-disciplinary arenas of health, community development, environmental sciences and management. He finds his practice edges in organisational culture, the gaps in government policy, and felt nuances of peer constructions of what health promotion practice and management is about. He finds opportunities to incorporate participatory approaches formally and informally, in the ways in which evaluations and teamwork are carried out, for example. Tivo opened a revelatory language to me regarding his autobiography and his uncompromising commitment to holistic integrity in all he is and does. I treasure the trust and insight of both these conversations.

My own story represents a third dimension within which participatory practice develops, neither disciplinary nor inter-disciplinary but trans-disciplinary in the sense that my work springs from the ground that questions the validity of discipline-based knowledge (for example, Thompson Klein, 2004 as cited in Willetts and Mitchell, 2006) and attempts to bring the reflexive stance that this position manifests as everyday practice circumstances. I have the freedom to do this whereas those working in institutional systems may not be so free (Max-Neef, 2005, p, 5). Such circumstances can be with peers like Jen and Tivo, in the solitary reflections of the practitioner’s life (also as described by the local government planning consultant in the last chapter). They also come about in the ground of public

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16 I am aware that this somewhat strange phrase of Tivo’s is possibly a typo in his email, but have kept it, not seeking his correction of it, in appreciation of the hidden questions that such “slips” can open.
discourse such as the work I do in government policy settings around sustainability matters, which I describe as the third narrative in this chapter.

My inclusion of these narratives comes with each speaker’s informed consent. I do not analyse them, which would risk making a commodity of these living texts for my purpose. I include my selections of the extensive discourses at strategic points of my text, as if they are portal views of similar field developments occurring in the life worlds of others as they are occurring in mine. My intention is to tell the story of practitioner development, practice innovation and the emergence of the participatory field, discernable in understanding the nature of participatory theories at work in the intimacy of “friendship”, in the living complexities, tensions, rests and pressures of our everyday lives in community with each other.

It is also to consider our orthodoxies and hidden truths particularly in reference to Bourdieu’s construction of a theory of practice. I turn to this consideration in recognition of the ambivalent qualities of power with which participatory practitioners work and which as Bourdieu suggests are the glue that holds community together. Moving forward from the last chapter, I can frame my practitioner power as that of a governor of new spaces, developer of new communities, learner of new and shared capabilities, and activist for new forms of justice. However, this framing needs to face the test that Bourdieu presents to me, and which I see at work in our theories of practice as they emerge through living sociological and psychological complexity. I see this matter of power at work as a crucial question for the integrity and cohesion, or in other words, resilience and regenerative capacity of that which comes about through participatory approaches.

A need for theories of practice

[Jen; audio: 14.3.05 032RB11010] I want to go back and look at the work again, to reflect on it in another context – we had an inspiration about doing an exhibition, putting the work out to another audience. Underpinning that is looking at the boundaries of design... using it as a thread through this, something that relates nicely to our inter-disciplinary thing. Does this mean we have come up with something entirely new? And since we have had this discussion I can see that there are other areas where this is happening. It is interlinked – the value of the work and the boundary of the discipline.

[Tivo; email: 7/6/0] Hello Susan, I recently read your article mentioned above. In my leadership role I am continually bringing reflection, awareness practices and dialogue to increase our ability as educators to support and influence environmental public health research in a way that supports and is responsive to stakeholders. Your article was very useful to that end. Have you written other pieces after this one that refines and/or further contextualizes your process? Do you know of any other similar works within the Community Based Participatory Research literature that specifically is applied to environmental public health? Thanks for writing and reflecting on your approach.

Consistent with the field, a way of understanding ourselves as participatory practitioners is by means of our theories of - and in - practice. They arise as a participatory extension of reflection on action. By this I mean that we can limit reflection to describing
what happens as we see it, but we can also extend, participatively, such reflection to search beneath the surfaces of description for origins, meanings, resonations and questionable assumptions. We can inquire into what we do through participatory feedback, scholarly research, creative theorising and peer learning. Such an approach is establishing within the participatory field as “practitioner research” (for example, Whitehead and McNiff, 2004). Jen’s and Tivo’s invitations to me were offers of this kind of reflexive learning in the interests of understanding what we do while addressing Whitehead’s primary practice research question: “How do I improve what I am doing for personal and social benefit?”

An example of such a question being asked as a form of practitioner research is Naidoo’s thesis (2005) where the author provides a rich and rounded description of how she sees her “inclusional and responsive practice”. Her right and responsibility to self-author her own theory of practice is a strong signature of participatory practice; the nature of her practices confirms that possibility given that they involve education, theatre, narrative and engagement with others:

In telling the story of the unique development of my inclusional and responsive practice I will show how I have been influenced by the work of theatre practitioners such as Augusto Boal, educational theorists such as Paulo Freire and drawn on, incorporated and developed ideas from complexity theory and living theory action research. I will also describe how my engagement with the thinking of others has enabled my own practice to develop and from that to develop a living, inclusional and responsive theory of my practice (Naidoo, 2005, abstract).

Such theories help practitioners to be self aware of our values and assumptions, and the ontology with which we come to know moments as “participatory”, to know each other as working “participatively”. It is easy not to see participation when it is crowning. The following story from my practice experience being one such example:

At a local Sydney Council, which prided itself for its managerial innovation and commitments to sustainability, an event was organised for a workshop involving over twenty managers, representing several aspects of the Council’s infrastructure. They were called together by a co-worker who before he left the organization, wanted to ask a most powerful question: is sustainability an individual responsibility for a specific role in governing institutions (like a “sustainability officer”)? An external group of participatory practitioners were invited to facilitate the event. At the event, each manager was given an opportunity to ask their own questions about what sustainability meant to them and their responsibility for it. This was the first time the Council managers had met together as a cross-unit group (many had not met each other before), the first time they encountered the question of sustainability as a group (and for some, as individuals), and the first time they heard each other’s thinking about the issues. At the end of the two-hour event the participatory practitioners left feeling as if a space for authentic participation had opened within the organization that had not been there before. Immediately following the event, several emails were exchanged between the Council participants and the practitioners wanting quick follow-up action. It was deemed that the new “sustainability officer” would approach her manager who had not attended the workshop, seeking upper management endorsement for a second workshop. On raising the matter of the workshop to him, and
describing the need to progress it, the manager said to her “don’t come back with this again until you have something tangible to show me”. It was at that moment that she called me. Given everyone had had but two hours to come together to discuss the issues, the idea of there being anything tangible that would argue for any case for sustainability was absurd. She did have a list of the participants’ questions but did not take this list with her to the conversation and did not appear to understand its strategic value. The participatory opening was shut down: perceived as yet another “talk fest” and an opportunity for upper management personal politics to rule the day just as some had said they would (Goff, 2005e).

We may sense the ground on which we stand in such moments as this corridor conversation as being within a specific judgement of discipline, like “environmental education” or “strategic management”. Alternatively, we may sense it as a participatory ground such as Action Research, or Participatory Evaluation, or reflexive learning. We might deploy participatory practices in that moment and ask a strategic question, or reflect back to someone what they were saying, or ask out loud to critique the powers at play, including our own. How we “play” this moment is crucial to what comes about, what gets repeated, which aspects of virtuality are repeatedly betrayed and which liberated. In those moments I am sensing out what is tacitly agreed as being discussable, unquestionably evident, contestable or otherwise, and thinking through practice as I manifest in response to my distinctions. My activist has long antennas for dominance and oppression, my learner is opening up and eager to question and be stumped, my developer wants to build robust and equitable relationship with the person I am with, and my governor is testing my perceptions, my judgements and how I work my choices into “participation” through “non-participation” for “social benefit”.

When I perceive these moments to be at my particular edges of competence I am alert to the other, and myself, exploring or probing what is familiar or otherwise, noting the assumed meanings as they form within me and detecting their formation within the other. With regard to the example of this particular Council workshop and the corridor conversation that followed, while still in early stages of development in Australia, both local government and sustainability management in local government are encountering participatory approaches (Cuthill, 2001, 2003; Ife, 2002, 2003; Carson, 2001). To what extent a particular person has encountered them though, and how they judge them, is a crucial matter where little can be assumed, and yet the asking of such questions can be felt as threatening to relational knowing. In the moment between the young officer and her “superior”, as she reported it to me, the constructions of participation and sustainability seemed remote from anyone’s mind even though they were the subjects of the conversation. It became a management matter; the presumptions of a management system became the ground on which each person was standing. Transformation was crowning and retreating within a heart beat:
"Transformative learning involves experiencing a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and irreversibly alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and with the natural world; our understanding of relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender; our body awarenesses, our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of possibilities for social justice and peace and personal joy (O'Sullivan and Morrell, 2002, p. 18).

As a practitioner I know and am known most “truthfully” through our living practice of participation in such moments. At such times, when I feel cornered by pressing powers for example, I may hear myself defaulting to the paternalist objectivism with its various qualities of stereotyping, generalisation, reductionism, causal explanations of how things are, speaking in the third person, or referring to forms of data that are drawn from objectivist-based, knowledge-generating systems. When I am feeling weak, these defaults to objectivity give recognisable “main stream” power to my argument. If I am practising at my “edge” I need to resist this default and commit to constructing a way of seeing the world with the person I am with, in terms that they may well feel quite alienated by or derisive of - not for their power to dominate them but for their power to expose such domination at work. How do I work with and in these tender vulnerabilities?

Such exchanges can be set up as formally acknowledged and bounded “participatory” sites, like the workshop, when a practitioner is “given” delegated power to act. Alternatively they may be mixed into the mill of daily life, such as the unsuccessful conversation in the corridor. When I am “alert” to my practice I can recognise the participatory moment wherever it is, and discern my rights and responsibilities towards it. My theories of practice enable me to make the distinctions and inform my choices for action: to be a protagonist in a workshop and silent witness in a corridor, or a silent witness in a workshop and a protagonist in a corridor.

How others apprehend what we do at such times can be contentious. I need to continually learn how to hold the threads of alienation and purposefulness, fear and courage, clumsiness and artfulness together. I have many experiences of being unaware of my theory working in my practice leaving me vulnerable to contentiousness: my identity is challenged and my sense of connection to a community tendril threatened. When I have limited opportunities to practice or theorise, when my theories of practice clash with others, or when others have none and I am inflexible with mine, I can find myself in the whirlwind of a “critical learning incident”. These moments can be for me, when I am made as a
participatory practitioner. When we are working in an environment that is familiar with learning culture, we are safer; but when this is not so, whether we are engaged in this form of practice for personal, political, commercial or scholarly reasons, we can tread on painful and difficult ground:

[Jen; audio: 14.3.05 032RB11028] When you say that, I am thinking about the effectiveness of the work. Effective communication is one of those grab lines for design; as a principle. But as I was mulling that, you switched into sustainability, and I think that one of the first discussions I would like to have is the meaning of “sustainability”, a broad conversation. I still don’t have a good handle of it. I know it’s there, but when I try to articulate it - it doesn’t work. Is this a rambling conversation? Should we be structured in the way we are talking?

[Tivo; email: 9/6/06] One of the challenges for health educators in doing “more social change” oriented work is that the work is housed in state government that has a certain number of political levels that filter and constrain the work that we do. Nonetheless, health educators try to push that edge as much as possible. The challenge with environmental justice is that there is a state definition but no real policy and principles designated by the state. In addition the way that environmental health gets framed is very technical expertise and in a sense very positivistic leaning.

My inability or otherwise to see or explicate what I am doing, or would like to do, in the midst of complex powers at work, matters. I have to get better than kicking myself after the event. It is crucial to my meeting my social contract to enable social change to take place when, where, how and with whom it needs to, in ways that strengthen social fabric - and myself with it. Without a theory of practice I can be inarticulate in both cognitive and performative ways. While muteness has its place, such a deficit risks the silencing of those whose interests rest in my practices (including my own). Theories of practice enable me to be aware of subtle and foundational matters and to be insightful about the way in which change is taking place. They allow me to be responsive to whom I am, where I am and whom I am with; to reach for fluency in what I do in relationship with ecology and society; and to make choices in terms of the activism, governance, development and learning qualities that are present in the dynamic flow of thought in any turning moment. Such theories also let the emerging participatory field be seen by others who recognise what I am doing.

The corners where I may find participation in workshops and corridors will also be made up of the idea of sustainability as it becomes more persistent and understood in our configurations of “work” and good practice, and as the pressures of resources and time become more pressing. In such circumstances we may co-invent practice more frequently, faster, and with a greater array of resources. We may have a lighter touch in the juggle of inter-disciplinary, inter-sectorial and multiple-critical reference group points of view. Whole new disciplinary grounds are forming in response to sustainability from such intersections (such as “Eco-health”, or “Community IT”, and Science and Technology Studies, for example), and it is in such grounds that the potential for new forms of ontology and epistemology rests if the practitioners involved can see it. As such, participatory approaches
are called for here in the invention of new fields of knowing, to govern their internal social development, facilitate necessary learning practices and recognise activism at their boundaries.

While we might see that the participatory field is needed throughout the world, others do not always see us as so necessary. We face increasing public pressure for “benevolent authoritarianism”\(^{17}\) (Langlois, 2003, p. 1017; Ophuls, 2002, p.92) - or the imposition of rights or environmental responsibilities without a democratic infrastructure to manifest them. We are also seeing the establishment of legal retaliations like Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) (Beder, 1999) - devices specifically created to shut down participatory interventions against government and corporate transgressions of sustainability values. The evident slowness of governments to embrace participatory democracy and sustainability across the board presented us in the Inquiry with what we grew to see as a “wall” of resistance to participation. A colleague working in the UK wrote to me about his experience of such walls:

\[
\begin{align*}
I & \text{ came across} \\
\text{One Such A Wall} \\
\text{Long and Straight} \\
\text{And Very Tall} \\
\text{Commanding the Waters} \\
\text{To Divide or Fall} \\
\text{And join the Ranks} \\
\text{Above It All} \\

I & \text{ tried to reason, softly} \\
\text{With the Wall} \\
\text{To allow some flecks a passage} \\
\text{Through its facade} \\
\text{So that it could flex} \\
\text{In resonant communion} \\
\text{Of One World With Its Other} \\
\text{A mutually corresponding Identity} \\
\text{Incompletely defined} \\
\text{(Raynor, A. 2006, personal communication).}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{17}\) “…Some critics are convinced that the dangers of ecological ill health cannot be met in a democratic and constitutional way. They maintain that only benevolent authoritarianism can prevent disaster. A benevolent elite (which understands the ecological dangers, has the common good and posterity in mind, and has the courage and will to act) must use coercive, authoritarian means to rescue humankind.” Rymer, Simon and Romance: [http://www.cqpress.com/cs/challenge/chap18/study.asp](http://www.cqpress.com/cs/challenge/chap18/study.asp)
This wall is not just Australia’s problem. Databases such as the Bertelsmann Transformation Atlas, for example, clearly show the distinctions, disconnections and even systemic contradictions between political participation, democracy, sustainability and social wellbeing in “developing” nations. How can we as practitioners address that wall when we are unclear about who we are, what we do, and how to do it? How can we know this in the difficult circumstances in which we literally “find” or make each other, the participatory field, and ourselves?

When I see my theory of practice as being expressions of who I am in the world, what I hope and how I imagine I could be with others, such theories extend my narrative into my imagined and hoped for self with others. When I see my own life experience not only as autobiography but as architectures of my theory-constructing practices, I see theories everywhere, not as explanations but as ways of seeing, of other people’s ways of seeing, each theory being one of innumerable glancing insights with varying degrees of attributed power. How do our theories become powerful? What power dynamics do theories regenerate?

**Appreciating Bourdieu**

Pierre Bourdieu’s work “Outline of a Theory of Practice” presents a tantalising theory of practice that works as a double entendre. Overtly, he details an anthropological study from which he proposes that all social systems are knowable as sensed “games”. Behind his theory and at a secondary level, is a subtle critique of social science, which his own practice of anthropology illuminates. Bourdieu’s propositions create a frame for understanding what we are doing and where we are in participatory practice, and his double entendre reminds us that we are subjectively bound into anything that we create.

Bourdieu sees the “game” of holding society in fixed patterns (behaviours, rules, symbols and un-discussable truths) as manifested in certain human interactive practices of which we are largely unaware, and which are redolent with symbolic power relationships that hold the social structure together. These practices take place in “fields of action” (he studies tribal village life, and disciplinary fields such as education, economy and law) otherwise understood as the places where the games are enacted. As a participatory practitioner I can see myself here, working with rules of the participatory/non-participatory game in specific places (like a Council meeting), where participatory opportunities are more or less recognised (as “fields of action”).

His idea is that the feel for the game (or “habitus”) which belongs to a specific collective of people, inheriting a specific tradition and its history, is a means of subtle societal change that occurs in the recursive relationship between the subjective knowledge of
the game and the field in which it is played – a game that continually reconstitutes the habitus. This observation resonates with recognising “the flow of sources” in my Theory of Theory construction (Chapter 2): an understanding that whatever we know is not fixed and isolated in the present but a momentary manifestation of thought that travels into us from generations and that in our thinking the way we do, we hand it forward with this form of thinking imbued within it, to future generations. Both Jen’s and Tivo’s narratives hold within them details of inheriting from family and peers the powers at work, the thinking forms, in the games that interest them, that they were born into, and which they understand as integral in their relationship to their respective fields:

[Jen; audio: 14.3.05 032RB110189] A lot of my formative stuff was about being mentored – being taken under people’s wings. My mum and dad were both quite artistic people – but never expressed it. My mum did beautiful flower arrangements – we would complement her but she would never think of herself as being “artistic”. My father probably would have thought of himself as artistic, except, you know, in those days “only poofers” were - he wasn’t a blokey bloke but he grew up in a family of blokey blokes. I think he suppressed a lot of his true nature. When he was in the rag trade after the war, he managed men’s clothing stores and he would do all the show-card writing. His penmanship was very good, and I have some carvings and silver work he did during the war – made from old artillery shells with bullets for lids. Haven’t I shown you? He was a good bush carpenter – capable at visualising and creating from the vision.

[Tivo; email: 4/7/06] I’m curious about your reference to the migrant’s heritage. It makes me think about how much of my life experience of my parents migrating to the U.S. from Mexico with both having a second grade education and a great deal of faith, dedication and ability to persevere the economic/racial/class oppression that was part of struggling to survive. That dehumanizing process greatly informs my commitment and desire to bring forward more humanizing and life-affirming encounters through the work that I do and inform. I have always been drawn to reflective practice in understanding why so much unnecessary suffering was coming down the road in front of me. The suffering was by virtue of the feet that my parents were holding and by extension the feet that I was being swayed to hold.

The game is known in an embodied form (how we walk, the tone of the voice, physical organization of space and the way a day is lived, for example); as we enact the game we are unaware that we are doing so until there is some crisis that perturbs it. At this moment of perturbation, what Bourdieu sees as the “objective” game becomes incoherent with the “subjective” feel for it: only at this time, and only in some instances, reflexivity (in his terms, the ability to become conscious of that which is taken for granted) may come about. This observation is resonant of Polanyi’s concept of the interplay between focal and subsidiary knowing. Bourdieu’s “habitus” could be understood as Polanyi’s “subsidiary” knowing, and the details of Bourdieu’s “field” in which the habitus plays as Polanyi’s “focal” knowing. The “field-game/feel for the game” binary comes about through a constantly, if slowly adaptive “mechanism” (Bourdieu, 1972: 72) held in the “fuzzy abstraction” (Ibid: 112) of the customary and unquestioned constructions of power by which a collective of people live. When these constructions of power break down we need a means by which we can hold community together: it is here that participatory practices are essential for sustainability.
Because participatory practice is seen by many as counter-cultural (and possibly given its activist attributes will always be seen this way) our ability to have a “field of action” is limited. We have to make such places through our practices, cuckoo-like in other people’s nests. We work to these nests becoming imbued with our habitus, but so far, given the fragmentation of the field, we are pretty unsuccessful in this interest. Using the habitus idea, our basis for practice theory could be seen as the interaction of “habitus” with “field”, and the contest that we each face is the success, or otherwise, of our feel for the participatory game winning the day in the field in which we are working. When we think of our “legacies” of practice, its “sustainability”, we are thinking about leaving behind sustained behavioural and structural changes that manifest what we consider participatory principles to be about. When we work to constructions of social responsibility, justice, equity and inclusion for example, we are working in between one construction of power and another: for personal reasons, autobiographical ones, we have chosen to contest one form of power and not another - our own. If we are not careful we can get caught up in a terrible conundrum that risks our “action” in the world being stuck in this irresolution of power.

The latter part of Bourdieu’s text explores the way in which the hiding of dominant power and its symbolic assertion in patterns of daily life manifest the “doxa” or “universe of the undiscussed and undisputed” (Ibid, p.168). His analysis shows how dominating groups do their utmost to keep the “doxa” as expansive and out of anyone’s reach as possible. This observation is similar to Polanyi’s regarding the power of the authoritarian institution to assume itself to be “truth” and remove the right to question its assumed position by making such questions heretical. Participatory practices themselves can be deployed for this purpose of giving institutions the appearance of engagement and accountability while only further entrenching deeper levels of decision making. The following reflection by a council worker about the value of participatory practices to their organization captures this dynamic at work:

While we take it seriously, we also know that it is often about keeping the public happy, making them feel included in important decisions, but that the real decisions happen further up the food chain, and these events do little to change any one’s mind. If they bring new ideas to the table they can be valuable, and if they support what people already know or want to hear then they make a decision easier to make. If we have done consultation on a strategy it is regarded as better prepared by senior management. It is interesting that having an outside observer talk with me about the session made me more aware of the gender biases than I would normally be – I am so used to it I take it for granted and assume that
nothing can be done (participant’s post workshop reflective comments, my workshop observation notes, 22/11/04).

These ways of understanding the value of participatory practice to sustainability underpin the frustration that practitioners feel when we see the language of participation being used for the wrong reasons. They are the reasons why we need theories of practice, such as Arnstein’s ladder of participation, to see what is happening and have something to compare it with other than our tacit narratives, to make other decisions than assuming that “nothing can be done”.

A powerful opportunity is created in the space between “what goes without saying and what cannot be said for lack of available discourse” (Ibid, p.170). Bourdieu shows that should questions be asked in this opportunity, the holders of the hidden power insert an imperfect substitute for the doxa: “orthodoxy”:

“Don’t come back until you have something tangible to show me”.

The only way to break this lock, as Bourdieu sees it, is for “the dominated” to create for themselves the material and symbolic capability to recognise “the real” and the structures, be they political, cultural or psychological for example, that sustain the habitus of that which is not allowed to be talked about. In this way, the multiple alternatives to the orthodoxy become evident (he refers to this as “heterodoxy”, Ibid: p. 168) revealing the established order for what it is ignorant of or mindfully suppresses - as betrayed virtuality in Zizek’s (2004) thinking. Our theories of practice give us the means for this kind of revelation, and further more, to work into this unfolding dynamic with sophisticated and dynamic competencies (of governance, development, learning and activism in reference to this thesis, but in reference to an even greater wealth of capability once we avail ourselves of the “participatory field”). It is with this understanding of the revealing of the multitude that this thesis argues for participatory practice to be recognised for a commitment to epistemological innovation, and the concomitant opening up of our concepts of “sustainability”. In terms of our “field” the questions of orthodoxy are doubly difficult because in the interests of emancipation, we are both the holder and interrogator of our own powers: keepers of the creative void.

Bourdieu leaves us with little hope. He uses the phrase “gentle, hidden violence” (Ibid, p.192) to describe what takes place when overt violence is “reprobated” in collective action: habitus inhabitants voluntarily engage in “the violence of credit, confidence, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, gratitude, piety – in short, all the virtues honoured by the code of honour” even when they believe they are “benefiting society”.

These forms of hidden violence he sees as the most economical means of entering into
relationships of domination to hold a social system together, which in reference to Hobbs he identifies as “grace” (Ibid, p.193). It seems that as a practitioner his final stance is to a) illuminate the game that he is trapped within and b) expose himself in the dialectic between what he sees as the objectivity of the game (that which is beyond his influence) and his commitment to at least make it visible and discussable.

I left Bourdieu admiring his exemplary ironic performance of revealing the workings of objectivism to those of us who have not thought of it this way before, and admitting to being a co-conspirator in upholding an inescapable circle of “regulated innovation” (Ibid: p. 189) such as any science, including his own, privileges. Transformation in his terms seems limited to a slow and subtle process of making domination increasingly hidden in tacitly embodied cultural structures. The only places for “freedom” in his ontology are a) to be the dominators (knowingly and unknowingly); b) to engage in “éminence grise” (Ibid, p.41, 165) which is a form of behaviour where the victims of oppression sustain the oppressive system because it allows some measure of utility for them; c) to become a heretic by questioning the unquestionable and be cast out of the social system; and d) to be engaged in a process of continual creation and restoration of social relationships and the conditions in which such relationships are restored (Ibid, p.189).

How does the idea of orthodoxy fit with what happened in the Cave? (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06).

Do our theories of practice only serve to further entrench these notions of power and oppression, or do we do something that has the potential to shift this dynamic? Can grace be something other than a “gentle violence”? Does the nature of our theory make a difference? Or is theory by its nature, a tool of domination? When we share the power to discern what is true across a poly-vocal system, when the qualities of truth that we discern may be established epistemologies or less formulated and lighter notions of truth, are these qualities able to perturb notions of power and the powerful - as Bourdieu inscribes them to be? Do they travel so directly, in such a causal way, as Bourdieu presumed through his positivist lens? If not, are we improving a social context with richer forms of diversity and greater resources for integration and emergence, or are we simply making it weaker, more fragmented and more prone to incursions from rigid forms of power?

The “nature” of theories of practice

My chosen theory also emphasizes the impossibility of ever knowing more than a small part of how human beings function; and the cultural milieu in which I find myself most in tune, the post modern, leads me to doubt the permanence of much knowledge in my discipline, constructed as it is
within a particular segment of a particular society at a particular time
(Jacobs, 2001, p. 12).

As Naidoo indicates in the quoted abstract earlier in this chapter, once a theory is co-
constructed it powerfully energises self-reflection and understanding, reflexive learning and
a kind of coherence in life and work that allows one to speak of and for oneself in concert
with others. The issue at stake for me here, in reference to Bourdieu’s work, is whether this
idea of coherence necessarily requires participatory subjugation to hidden and immoveable
forms of power: such an idea would suggest that “good participatory practice” is its own
worst enemy.

When practicing participation, I am drawn into a single streaming moment, when
what I know about practice theory is held tacitly within me to manifest participation through
multiple relational media. For example, “concepts such as ‘interpretive flexibility’, ‘closure’,
networks’, ‘boundary objects’, ‘modalities’ and ‘capturing’” (Woodhouse, Hess, Breyman
and Martin, 2002, p. 299). It is in that streaming moment, more than any text or image that
theory of practice exists:

We face live material that is constantly in a process of transformation,
that is not organized in the way of academic theories (Acker, Barry and

[Jen; audio: 14.3.05 032RB110123] We pause
to reflect on the conversation we are having,
and create some patterns. Our pencils scratch
the paper surfaces of our notes. We spread
out our notes: a survey of our patterns. We
report on many qualities and nodes of ideas
in your story:
“I am seeing human value through practical
aesthetic application, a working recognition
of the value of yourself through producing
something that is practical but does more
than just meet a practical need – it has to
have a quality of beauty and be
communicative. Either one of those elements
alone [beauty, practicality] is not enough. In
the design communication is the relationship
that confirms your valued sense of you [as
beautiful] in the world” I am positing.
“It is great” you say “ how it takes someone
else to say that to you. When I was thinking
about doing fine arts in the beginning, or even
tossing up the idea of chucking in the fine
arts and just working even though the dollars
were coming in – one of the reasons I chose
commercial rather than fine was because I
didn’t think I had anything to say”.

[Tivo; email: 7/6/0] In my stance I feel a
responsibility to inform the present moment
with the history of oppression that I have
survived and integrated as of yet. Since the
dehumanizing context (political / economic/
cultural/ institutional) is ever present, I feel
that providing leadership on a more
humanizing context is always possible. There
are always institutional agendas that are
working towards less diversity of voices, less
influence on the decision-making, more
practical control. Therefore, there is always
opportunity to offer different, broader and
more inclusive possibilities. Participation is
such a natural part of how I am in the world
and this is not true for many others.
I also feel an excitement of a larger
possibility. I bring to bear my humanistic
orientation: my love and appreciation or
relationship and my curiosity and
commitment towards being aware of and
facilitating the meeting of more needs of
those that I interact with. As I embark upon
turning 40 I feel an even deeper commitment
to my deepest values and truths being more
operationalized in all that I am and do in this
world.
Sometimes, consciously and unconsciously, those with whom we practise take up our practices and we take up theirs: we do not simply administer a service within which those to whom we offer such a “service” remain unknowing of the service they are utilising. This would preserve the hidden orthodoxy of our power to know what “participation” is. Our practices are in a continual state of being made meaningful within other people’s individual experience and communicated understanding - and this should be a reciprocal process. The practices are thus continually changing form, more or less, depending on the ontology of their implementation and the distinctions co-participants are making of them.

Our reflexivity and our sensing of “theory” are resourced by this characteristic of our practices changing hands and with them, their form. We are in a flow of incoherence, to reference Bourdieu’s ideas, and critically reflexive about what we are doing as a result. I am not seeking to maintain any orthodoxy of “participation” for as long as my notions of participation are open to being continually reconstructed in everyone’s hands, and such reconstruction has to include the measure and quality of power with which I work such practices. Such critique, carried out not only by the practitioner about their own practices, but also by those who the practitioner seeks to benefit through their practices (as Richardson experienced for example), is tough and crucial to the quality of the participatory field that I create in any specific participatory opening. Its consequence is to go beyond specific modes of practice being continually shifted; it means that any concept of “practice” itself becomes participatory and has the potential of creating a participatory effect. The overall understanding of theory in reference to an overall understanding of participation responds to an overall understanding of practice and all three elements are recursively integrated in the act of participation. At the risk of dizziness, we have available to us an option to work with participatory theories of participatory practices.

I encountered this concept of recursion in Chapter 3, with Bohm’s propositions about thought changing its quality when we become aware of it, and how we need to “think” about thought without the same quality of thinking that is currently fragmenting it (i. e. the “root paradox”, Bohm, 1966, p66). Bohm brought the practice of dialogue to the field of participation to bring the dissolving of this paradox into life. He had no prescriptions for how to “do dialogue” other than that which I have just described.

Similarly, Whitehead has created a view of “living theory” in his work in educational theory in the United Kingdom as a means of interrogating the hold of theory over practice. What he has to say about it is just as relevant for a transdisciplinary participatory practitioner as a practitioner within the discipline of pedagogy:
I am proposing a view of theory as a dynamic and living form whose content changes with the developing public conversations of those involved in its creation (Whitehead & Lomax 1987). The theory is constituted by the practitioners’ public descriptions and explanations of their own practice. The theory is located not solely within these accounts but in the relationship between the accounts and the practice. It is this relationship which constitutes the descriptions and explanations as a living form of theory. In being generated from the practices of individuals it has the capacity to relate directly to those practices (Whitehead, 1998).

Perhaps participatory practice is somewhat distanced from Bourdieu’s habitus “mechanism” in our willingness to submit ourselves to the difficulties of these kinds of problems with little expectation or sense of hubris that we will necessarily have any success. We are careful, working with respect and trust, so that the risks are shared with mutual consent to the degree that such a form of consent can ever be achieved. We seek to encounter such problems to address the damage that they do and not to increase their harm, as I showed in Chapter 4. We are prepared to carry the labour, risk of “failure” and alienation because we see the knots and choose to question them, to make them our life problem and not only an intellectual one. Theories of practice that support such work, when understood this way, speak to and of me, guide me and are reconstituted by me, change in response to my thinking and my perception of how they come alive with others. They have multiple forms, qualities of presence and aesthetic, origins and characteristics. Given this vitality and so strong a departure from an assumption that theory is a mechanism that guarantees “successful” results, a “theory of practice”, as a living thought, deserves some unpacking.

Participatory theories of participatory practices open themselves to reconstruction in the act of participation, resonant of McNiff’s reference to Lyotard:

A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [sic] writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have to be done (Lyotard 1986: 81) (McNiff, 2006).

McNiff discusses the difficulty of being a “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1989), resonant of Hodge’s notion of having to both recognise and reject the rules of scholarship.
when working in transdisciplinary contexts. A participatory theory of practice has to hold itself long enough to be seen and taken into a living context, and fleetingly enough to shift its form as soon as it is taken in. We can discern patterns in these movements, but they too need to be free to shift:

In terms of looking at the sustainability idea – even looking at the sector – I don’t see it as separate from anything else – it should underpin everything – your idea of constructivist design links to the idea of post modernism – expressive, contextual, subjective – graphic design has supposedly embraced and driven some of that, including computers because they had the effect of pulling together specialized areas in the design field. Where there were eight jobs now there is one. Another thing that has come into my reference is synaesthesia – a cross referencing of sight, sound, taste, touch and smell – some people if they see a colour think a smell, etc – There is a long history of this – going back to Newton who decided on the colours of the rainbow based on a musical scale ... which links to the sustainability thing of crossing disciplines.

The metaphor that informs my orientation is a spiral. The simplified reflection, action, reflection cycle is informative for moving through a process to another place of possibility. The spiral has been used historically in popular education approaches and Freire inspired orientations that attempt to cultivate the “ahaaa” experience. In the spiral I feel the grounding is ever so important. In the work that I do it is critical to think about what the “other’s” conflict rubs up against-- when I'm in my stance of trying to facilitate/education and build relationship. In the other I see another spiral that is deeply grounded in their own need and possibly spinning and looking for the same ground to connect with. Focusing on the beginning of the spiral and sharing the same ground is a powerful force for remembering the relationship while the larger spiral of the determinants of oppression and disconnectedness whirls around. The spiral also reminds me of the balance from the individual to the group/ community/ nation/ globe and larger perspectives.

Given this dynamic, paradoxical, contradictory and fluid quality to a notion of theory, as a participatory practitioner I may well feel disempowered and constrained, if not at odds with the socially benefiting purpose of my practice when theory is understood to be mechanistic and fixed:

We are still firmly caught in the grasp of technological determination and scientific positivism. Human needs continue to be secondary to technical and economic advancement as measures of the progress of society. If this course of events goes unchallenged, its way of thinking will block the development of solutions that could eventually shift the dominant paradigm to one which is more inclusive and egalitarian (Friedman, 2001, p. 46).

I need an altogether different construction of the nature of theory, one that flows, momentarily in my hands and then in someone else’s, which still gives me clarity about what and how we do and who we are, but not at the expense of any one else’s configurations.

Incoherence

Even an ostensibly non-positivist theory can manage a kind of mixed doubles approach to its own theoretical “anatomy”. I made this error in my earlier years as a
practitioner when I broke with positivist instrumentalism, or thought I had, and worked my practices in the constructivist ontology (Guba, 1990, pp. 25-27). I was comfortable with this one ontology being my only stance. It embraced the emergence and use of any other ontology and epistemology, with possibly the exception of positivism, which excludes others. However my adherence to constructivism as my only stance made me as inflexible as a positivist stance would prescribe. I did not realize that to make such a shift I needed to do more than simply pick a preferable stance and make it my own; I had to do more than read texts and translate their concepts into designed interactions to make such a shift. As Vann and Bowker point out, the formulation of a theory of practice necessarily requires two points of attention to epistemology:

*The development of the practice theory of knowledge ... is an epistemological commitment about what is real and a concomitant theory about what a science of the real consists of (Vann and Bowker, 2001, p. 253).*

My choice of constructivism as my way of knowing informed my theory of participatory practices: working with multiple truths, co-constructing knowledge, drawing from experiential domains of knowledge rather than instrumentally manipulated ones, seeing the participatory event as reality and not an abstraction from it, for example. I thought that my constructivist science was pretty good, understanding it as I did in text and in practice. What I was lacking was a quality of theory at its skeletal level that was not positivist in its generic structure, and even more deeply, in my relationship to it. I was using a positivist type of theory of practice to work constructivist ontology. In reference to Vann and Bowker, my science of the real was in direct contradiction with my epistemological commitment.

At the time I felt my epistemological commitment (the “ism” of my constructivist stance) as my responsibility as an activist, resisting positivism’s entrenchment throughout academy, public sector, community and within my own frame. The epistemology worked as a governing power, building capacity for non-positivist approaches to issues that threatened a community’s environmental and social sustainability. I shifted from using rules of group behaviour to “principles” of practice. Principles created an agreeable balance between consistency and emergence; however there was still a gap in my interpretation of the principle through my embodied mind/frame into the actual manifestation of participation that came about in the practice environments I created. What I may have sounded like was someone using the language of participation with a tone of positivism. The internal and external dissonance that this misfit manifested made work and working relationships all the more difficult. It was easy to see similar misconstructions in others, but so difficult to see it in myself.
Chapter 6. Friend: the making of a participatory practitioner

Coherence

Given the tangles and difficulties of theory and science, and the common view even amongst practitioners, that a theory is academic and alienating, an alternative approach is useful if we are to have the benefit of being articulate, reflexive and creative at those difficult moments when participation is crowning. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, we can understand “theory” as Bohm suggests, referring to the Greek root of the word, as a “view” of an aspect of the world rather than an explanation of how it works.

Our theories are to be regarded primarily as ways of looking at the world as a whole (i.e. world views) rather than as “absolutely true knowledge of how things are” (or a steady approach towards the latter) (Bohm, 1980, p. 5);

The word “theory” derives from the Greek “theoria” which has the same root as “theatre” in a verb meaning “to view” or “to make a spectacle”. This suggests that the theory is to be regarded primarily as a way of looking at the world through the mind, so that is a form of insight (and not a form of knowledge of what the world is) (Bohm, 1998, p.43).

Practicing with such a “view” of theory and the (practices) which it holds, I need skills in reading the way I make sense of reality as a “view” rather than a “mechanism”, an “explanation” or a “position”. I need to resist my felt need to practice my science as a “tool” - as a means to an end. I avoid the trap of responding with explanations when working a particular method or writing a report. I find myself as a medium for a flow of energies rather than an arbiter of what is or is not. I am less concerned with the accuracy of “data” and more interested in what it indicates as one of many potential patterns of the ways things are thought into being by a particular person at a particular time and place; how our data is indicative of systems in flow and not needing to be judged for correctness or even bias. I look to see how we hold that which we take to be true - that is - a person’s stance with regard to their truth. This understanding applies to my self and my theories of practice, as much as it applies to how I work with and see others. I find people to work with who do not expect me to produce tools and explanations - who want learning relationships instead. I am more aware of my own participation (meeting and questioning my rights and responsibilities) in the making of a view of my theory of practice. I try to improve my practice by increasing my awareness of the cognitive, cultural and political influences at work in such a sighting, and also the heuristic energies that such distinction making generates.
Chapter 6. Friend: the making of a participatory practitioner

The making of a participatory practitioner

McNiff understands that practitioners account for themselves in their practice through their original theories of practice, which, in reference to her own work, and that of her students, have the following characteristics:

*Each demonstrates the capacity for original thinking and critical engagement. Each generates evidence in relation to identified critical living standards of judgement, in terms of how the values that inspired the research transformed into epistemological standards of judgement that enabled each author to claim with authority, “I know what I am doing, and how and why I am doing it, and I know its potential implications for social and scholarly practices”* (McNiff, 2001).

While I may know what I am doing, and how and why I am doing it, and while in my view the potential social and educational benefits may be obvious, these necessities of good practice as McNiff accounts for them do not by any means alleviate our difficulties. Here follows another personal narrative describing a critical learning incident in which my theory of practice was mediated, contested and shifted in my knowing what I was doing, how and why.

It came about through an evaluation project. The programme being evaluated at its conclusion was an environmental education programme using Action Learning principles (as I had recommended in the formative evaluation twelve months earlier). As I had just three hours to make an evaluative finding about the success of the year-long programme I decided to use a self-organising approach. This would allow the Action Learning capabilities to manifest themselves in the way in which the participants self-organised their interactions. This approach was devised with the programme manager several weeks before the workshop and negotiated with the participants at its beginning. I provided resources (lists of programme values, objectives etc) for participants to use if they so wished and handed the event over to them for an agreed hour. At the end of the first hour, as agreed, I reflected back what I had heard them say and do, inviting them to critique the reflection and build on it in session, rather than on receipt of the written report as a focus group normally does.

This approach is resonant with Barge’s constructions of transformative “practical theory” - as the following description shows:

*Viewing practical theory as transformation involves assessing the consequences of the theory on the lived experiences of the parties involved at that particular moment as opposed to the “truthfulness” of the interpretation and analysis. Practical theories provide a way to*
encourage useful description, explanation, critique, and change in situated human action. Practical theory coevolves with both the abilities of its practitioners and the consequences of its use, thus forming a tradition of practice (Barge, 2001, p.9).

The participants’ reactions to my reflective feedback were quite volatile. It was as if they had not heard themselves speak, and when I reflected to them what I had heard them to say, they were suddenly awoken to what they had not said - and felt judged for it:

[Susie, draft thesis, endorsed by programme manager] I noted to the participants and their manager that I had not seen Action Learning at work and asked them what they had understood they had done as “self-organization”. They had tacitly assumed that the programme manager (also participating) or myself would do it for them (the power orthodoxy at work). This expectation had dominated the transactions even though we had clearly described and they had agreed to this not being the case, and agreed with the reasons why. In effect they had been waiting for us to “take over” for the whole hour of conversation; they had not chosen to question the way they were using their time in the absence of our control. One person asked me why I had not arrived with preset questions for them to answer. I reflected on the fact that such questions would have framed the evaluation in my terms and not theirs – and that indeed I had arrived with “resources” which appeared to be irrelevant to their actual experiences so my questions would have been little better. I suggested to them that by my offering free space for them to make their own evaluative judgements about the programme, the outcomes would reflect what was important to them. I suggested that a set of questions drawn from the first report might inhibit their being able to talk about the deeper aspects of their experiences of what actually happened in the year since that report was written.

They responded a little defensively to the idea of talking in depth about their experiences (they used language like “airy fairy” to describe conversation about meaning and significance), but this initial response seemed to release them to do exactly that. Suddenly the conversation shifted into reflections of cultural, political and spiritual transformation that took place throughout the programme. We seemed to understand each other, and my nervousness from being so misunderstood was settling down.

At the conclusion of this second round of dialogue, I chose to talk about single, double and triple loop learning. I was thinking that this would be a frame I might use in the report and I was interested to know if they felt it to be a good fit with their experiences. They listened and asked questions, and the event moved on to a more familiar round of reflections before closing.

The programme manager, who had commissioned the evaluation, asked one person to follow up the workshop with a written response about the overall programme and the evaluation session. The comment on the session was as follows: “I think that too much academic theory could spoil the program for the majority of participants. I think most people just want to do something practical and not think too much about the different behavioural theories that may apply to why they are doing it. Such theories are probably more applicable to you as organiser.”

McNiff makes an observation of this way we can be together when we are without the benefit of contesting theories of practice:

…the social formation should take stock of its underpinning assumptions, informed as they are by underpinning values, and re-assess whether or not something should change. Often the rules become so normative that they become part of the cultural fabric, and often they are held in place by those whose interests it serves not to question the rules. Frequent power struggles take place between those who wish to disrupt the normative
Bourdieu’s theories of “field game/feel for the game” are evident in McNiff’s observations as well as my narrative. The whole event seemed resonant with irony: the workshop participants had expectations of me to act with the kind of authority they tacitly attributed to experts and evaluators, and felt somehow cheated, as I saw it, when I opened an opportunity for them to take control of the process themselves. McNiff’s notion of “authority” was on the table. The idea of sharing understanding about learning and knowing was not enjoyed by them, but seen as an elitist academic theory. I presented to them with mixed messages – non-expert one minute and expert the next. This “dilemma” as they identify it, is noted in Schafft and Greenwood (2003, p. 20):

*Participation is understood to be both a knowledge sharing activity as well as a knowledge producing activity (Baum, 1999) in which community members are not simply beneficiaries of planning advice, but are themselves agents of social change (Park, 1993)…While participatory methods may foster democratic process, they do not erase power differentials. Participation may help to “level the playing field”. But the power relations that have historically structured community interaction will partially structure the processes and outcomes of participation (Flora et al, 1992).*

I have learned that a clear and negotiated theory of practice, once it is in practice, can be felt powerfully by people and can generate significant (transformative) shifts in perception and co-construction of knowledge. This group of participants within the space of three hours, shifted from a position of thinking that their participation had been largely about buying and installing low impact technologies (“I think most people just want to do something practical”) and being seen as “freaks” or “greenies” in their networks, to comments - even by the participant who e-mailed the response above - that “we weren’t just changing light bulbs, we were changing attitudes” (Goff, 2006, p. 16). Far from relying on local government policy and the business sector to provide the authority and means for shifting lifestyles to low environmental impact systems (as their first hour of conversation had focussed on), it was their actions as “change agents” in their complex social networks that were worthy of recognition and considerable exploration. In the context of their existing social and other assumptions they were unable to value their own achievements in a broader and more socially embedded framework without the bumpy engagement with participatory theories of practice to let them hear themselves think bigger and together. They moved from what they did, to what it meant, together. However, they also carried out what could be
understood as an act of “éminence grise” by condemning me for not being the representative of the orthodoxy that they both recognised and de-legitimised.

I understood this as it was happening around me and through me. If I had not understood what was happening in this way the construction of the interaction might have been very different. I could have “collapsed” to a focus group type interaction which would have made everyone happier and probably ensured a follow up contract for myself; or I could have guided them through a process using the resources I had supplied, for example. However I chose not to rescue anyone or the situation, but to stand naked before them, even though they might not see me as such. I offered the grace of befriending. Was such a grace operating as passive violence, holding society together through tyranny?

The distance between such practitioner determinations and a commissioner’s hopes for their adventurous contract as this one was, is a measure of the distance I have yet to travel to work sustainability competently in our market places. As participatory evaluator, I had a clear theory of practice; the lack of coherence between it and the tacitly held theories of those involved resulted in a critical learning incident for us all, powerfully illuminating the many truths and their shadows, and as some might say, being transgressive. The powers were exposed as they were being transmuted through us to each other - the power of the consumer, the commissioner, the educator, the peer, the authority and its delegations, and governed political minority, the volunteer and the professional, the landless and the landed. We felt them streaming through us like live wires, thumping hearts, icy cautions and squashing victories, perhaps. I worked to see this happening around me and to negotiate with them some other kind of “space” within which we could develop a critical perspective of what was going on. However this was my agenda rising up through the complex systems as they unfolded; it was my thought curling through my thesis about what would be personally and socially benefiting the situation. It wasn’t what the participants had come for. They were there as an extra, voluntary task at the end of their working day. They just wanted to give some good feedback about the programme so it could get more funding. They did not agree that the moments we were working together could be - and as I saw it, in the interests of actualised sustainability, needed to be - anything more than that.

I work this way, risking that which lies across the boundary of transgression, because I am familiar with the outsidedness of the migrant’s paradoxical terrain; it is painful home ground and I am largely unknowing of the kinds of deep currency that those I might consider to be “insiders” take for granted as their permanent ticket home. This heritage, as I make of it in my narrative, is powerful to me - it explains me to myself, locates me somewhere on some kind of map, provides a community of fellow migrants with whom I stand, and through whom I can find relationships with other forms of migration - from and to
ontological landscapes as much as geographic ones. I respect this fragile thread that beads me into a human story and without which, possibly, some qualities of me remain misunderstood. I now respect such similar threads in the narratives of others - like Jen’s story about her mother’s floral arrangements and Tivo’s extraordinary memory of walking up that road. However, it is a story, continually reconstructed as my years pass, as easy to leave when the time comes as it is to arrive in when it is needed. It may be that I am caught within it and cannot move on until I work through it; it may be that this particular story holds within it specific knots, landmarks and land bridges which are my only living material for my living theories. It may also be that perhaps they are not so important, that I do not have to be tied to genetics, history and opportunity to know what I do, why and for what personal and social benefit.

I exposed the orthodoxies in all of us in a small way. The incident is one of so many more, which continue to jangle, bear fruits and lace themselves into my ongoing self-talk. We learn our practices of participation in difficult and largely unsupported ways, wherein our personal stories are bound into a great array of knowledges, and in turn as the hands change, become the medium for other powers to have their way. When I was unaware of this story in my life I was unaware that in the root of my migration story is the root of my instrumentalism - my paddle to a new world. In the interests of moving beyond the embedded nature of unquestionable powers, powers which are up for questioning and grabs as the goal posts change in the new sustainability field, I walk the edges of my knowing in humility and discomfort, in streaming moments of what sometimes feel like deep connections, which may be little more than my mistaking “home” for my fitting into someone else’s pattern of me - or may be something else:

*Always in encounter*

*Rarely so*

*Always in encounter’s*

*Taking up of me*

*A streaking intent*

*Finding me*

*Looking another way*

*Your sight*

*Dissolving the irreducibility*

*Of One*

*The hairs rising*

*Skin prickling*

*Primordial knowing*

*Tears of beauty*

*Flooding*

*The cracks*

*Of earthen separation*

(Susie, 16.2.06 to Lesley)
PART 3: PRACTICE - PARTICIPATORY DISTINCTIONS
CHAPTER 7
COMMUNITY: ENCOUNTERING TRANSFORMATION

...there is no rule to tell us at the moment of deciding on the next step in research what is truly bold and what merely reckless, there is none either for distinguishing between doubt which will curb recklessness and thus qualify as true caution, and doubt which cripples boldness and will stand condemned as unimaginative dogmatism (Polanyi, 1958a, p. 277).

Introduction

It takes a stalwart heart to approach the magnitude of our problem. The social and ecological crises that we can “see” through commercially and politically recognised epistemologies are just the tip of the melting iceberg. It seems that we are beyond the point of “recovery” and are looking back to a future of “retreat” (Lovelock, 2006).

When we meet what we are doing we are silenced. Our first moments in the Cave, of being in physical community, began in such a silence. As we sat and looked into the geology, history, and each other’s agreements to be there, as we understood that it was the aesthetic of that Cave that was turning us in on ourselves and our unwelcome legacy in such a way, we encountered the deepening silences of coming to know.

The possibilities of epistemological freedom and innovation are discernable in such moments. With what senses do I apprehend such possibilities? We began this phase and form of community sitting in a circle around a fire, appreciating the multiple strands of our individual and now embodied stories together, each with our particular shades of grief, fear, uncertainty and anticipation:

“I am thinking how strange it is to be here” (John: The Cave).

In the overall streaming of my experience, any moment of it, any tracing of its movement, can be as an awakening portal into the whole endeavour of life. But when suddenly confronted with the gestalt of our way of life as we were in the Cave, which none of our months of teleconferences, readings, group sessions and emails could do, I sensed the scale of our western ontology in a new light. I said:
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

“I am feeling, if I wanted to understand something about truth and rightfulness, a quality about those two ideas, what I am feeling now and where I am now would be a reference for that.”

“Ah-hmm”

“Hmm”


What I was feeling was an experiential knowing of truth, which while particular to that place, time and those people, also holds its sense of what truth can be beyond specific aspects of the flow of living. It is not a rule, nor even a principle, neither is it a pre-existing experience against which I would fit other experiences to judge their merits or my position. It is more like a sound made up of a sense of arrival as well as returning and in some ways never having left - belonging in humility of our transgressions. It is a marker that plays into other experiences by lighting up their rightfulness because it has already lit up its own.

In this chapter I describe my experience of being a co-researcher in the Inquiry. I describe the practice of building a community around the spirit of inquiry and my difficulty of finding a place within it: the experience was more like being a member of an improvising ensemble of musicians than an academic or managerial “research project”. I report on the various events in a practical manner, and then open up the learning that I was folded into and which constitutes the arriving, returning and belonging to this community. I reflexively weave the philosophy I have discussed throughout the thesis into the actual unfolding of events as I experienced and made sense of them to bring the discourse into the socio-ecological present.

This learning culminated in the forging of the grace of holding ecology, which is a quality of constancy and trust held in an attention to the murmurs of activity and inactivity within myself and with the co-researchers. It was within the tensions of this hard relationship that the liminality of our potential came into being. The account is valuable for many reasons, but perhaps the most valuable for me is that it offers a rare opportunity for social and ecological responsibility, community building, inquiry practice and activism to make themselves of those remnants of life experience that are still to some degree free of institutional authority and its objectivism. The enduring community that the Inquiry is still creating is an on-flowing experience of life coming into itself through epistemological sensitivities of which politics and commerce have little to no need. What other graces could arise from such experiences?
Calling community around theories of practice

Wherever you start is the right and the wrong place

In the second year of a three-year candidacy (2004), having successfully submitted my research proposal and confirmed its theme as “the value of participatory practice to sustainability”, I began the Inquiry project by inviting participation in two groups as originally conceived in my “methodology”.

The idea of there being two or more groups working to their individual interests and also in critical collaboration with each other is drawn from years of my participatory research practice which worked to both Heron’s Validity Procedures (1996, 131-157) and Wadsworth’s methodology of a Critical Reference Group perspective (1991, 11). It is a design decision regarding the structure of an inquiry community that enables depth of insiders’ experiences to be developed while also critiquing such depth with outsiders’ perspectives. It enables a balance of convergence and divergence, action and reflection, chaos and order, and open and closed boundaries, as Heron discusses - all of which are conditions for robust and enlivened participatory knowing.

Keeping this structure in mind I had considered that one group for the research project would be made up of people from some organization that was intent on developing participatory relationships in reference to questions regarding sustainability. This group would be an “Action Research” group carrying out a reflective practice in their development of participatory relationships, services and policies. Given its constitutional commitment to participation I surmised that local government would be the best sector to find such people, but I was open to opportunity coming forward in any “sector”.

The other group would be made up of people who had worked with me at some time during the past fifteen years, as my employers, co-workers or sometimes as both. This group would be a “Dialogue Group” distinctive from the Action Research group because they would not apply what they were learning in their working sites or draw data from such sites for the Inquiry project to develop. The members of the planned Dialogue Group would agree to a shared commitment to receive data from the Action Research group, read it, and give critical analysis individually and collectively. While such a structure would be a font of expertise and experience for my thesis it would also significantly benefit each individual,

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18 I worked this participatory structure in several community crime prevention planning strategies in South Australia, a national exemplary research project into the meaning of family violence to young people, a national research project into best practice community crime prevention standards, and a research project looking into informal support networks for survivors of family violence. I also used this structure in some participatory evaluation projects, such as the evaluation of stormwater education programmes for four Councils in Sydney.
their organizations and the development of participatory approaches to sustainability in Australia. Or so I envisioned.

There was a third “body” in the structure, which was myself, developing the thesis transparently with the other participants and offering some aspects of project support. The following diagram describes my initial design for the Inquiry structure.

**Diagram 1: The Inquiry strategy structure as originally proposed and initiated**

The whole enterprise was to be “governed” by a constructivist evaluation framework (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) chosen for its readiness to recognise multiple forms of knowing. I would not participate in the evaluation but would write up reports. As it turned out I did enter evaluation data as a way of assisting the co-researchers into the evaluation process, but I did not include my data in any of my evaluation reporting.

**Formal and informal edges**

For over eighteen months twelve Australian practitioners collaborated in the project across physical distance, disciplines and fields of potential action. Other than receiving endorsement from my university, the initiative was entirely voluntary on the part of the co-researchers. Other than one exception, none of us - not those with whom we worked or lived but who were outside the Inquiry group, not the Inquiry entity as a whole consortium, nor any of its members were ready to make such negotiations for the first (and only) year of the Inquiry. At the time, the matters of sustainability and participation were not regarded as so
crucial as to warrant a conversation about the possibility of an organization taking the Inquiry into their strategic environments. Its approach and subject matter were too fuzzy, too edgy for anyone to feel confident about taking it to their organizations for formal (contracted, strategic and transparent) engagement.

The one exception to this state of affairs was when I was introduced to a local Council by one of my supervisors. The head of the strategic planning unit was interested in the subject matter, as the Council had a strong record in sustainability achievements. We began an introductory phase of each person in her unit reflecting on their experiences of “sustainability” with me. I made audio recordings of each conversation and sent them back to each speaker so that each person could listen to themselves, and in so doing begin to develop critical reflexivity with each other as a primary inquiry capability. My purpose was to introduce the group to the idea that we were all researchers of the theme, and not that they were my research subjects (that is, the principle of researching with and not on people). I also transcribed our meetings and circulated the texts with critical commentaries in the margins, inviting them to add their own.

However they were frustrated with me for not “driving” the research agenda with my questions and did not recognise the skills I was bringing to them as skills. They wanted me to teach them consultation tools. I brought to our conversations various texts explaining the thinking behind collaborative inquiry. I attempted to explain to them that it was all our ways of doing, all of our thinking that would be the subject matter of the Inquiry. I thought we were making some progress, but they were not seeing the meetings as productive. In the end the idea of creating their own questions, becoming self critically reflexive and working collaboratively across units which were unwilling to inquire into the many paradoxes and gaps in their working relationships, made the endeavour too demanding. They were also swept up into a politically difficult time for their whole sustainability agenda, making them reluctant to take risks, which was how they saw this Inquiry.

It would be untrue to say that the failure of this possible Action Research initiative was only due to the existing organisational culture and politics of a particular site. I was also out of my depth. I wanted this thesis to take me to my edges, where I could well be a liability to someone else’s interests. I was not happy for this unique opportunity to become someone else’s means to their end at the expense of my own. I knew early on, that the opportunity of my inquiry was not to be wasted on this kind of transaction; and that while there was some considerable time invested in our various meetings at the Council, I was sensing that there was not the preparedness or appreciation to dive deep into those questions that were not strategic, operational or measurable. With reluctance we agreed to disagree, and I turned to face the co-researchers with little more than an idea that was already falling apart.
Freedom

While the lack of confidence in formal associations created a boundary between the Inquiry and the public domains of our work, it also released us to inquire beyond the limitations of politically determined imperatives as well as those scholarly conventions of what constitutes validity, relevance and rigour. The co-researchers were freed from chains of command but also, in many instances, had forgotten the disciplined nature of participatory practices we had learned in past work together and which chains of command can order to generate “data” and produce a research “outcome”.

Depending on which set of criterion we use to claim that what we do is valid inquiry practice, participatory inquiry requires the learning and use of such practice skills as diary writing, data gathering and analysis according to agreed interpretive methods, a co-operative share of project housekeeping as a means of creating an inquiry community, collaborative reading and writing, a shared and growing capability with critical reflection, reflexivity and theorising, and a willingness to develop new forms of both inquiry practice and the practices that are associated with the fields being inquired into (such as “participation” and “sustainability” practices in our case). Collaboration is a key practice style requiring specific arrangements of time, knowledge construction, decision-making and productivity.

Participatory inquiry requires a sustained engagement with open-ended questions that are researched through text and practice, dialogue and emergence, strategically, methodologically and epistemologically. To various extents, and working to Heron’s “validity procedures” (1996, 131-157) these capabilities were developed when we had each last worked together, but for many of the co-researchers these skills had somehow ceased to be once the original project boundary closed down and organisational culture swam back in.

Delightfully, we found that amnesia was also short lived once a person came into the Inquiry. For example:

*What the Inquiry is reminding me of/reconnecting me with is the use of space. Space to reflect, allow new possibilities, the sacred space that allows energy and vitality to emerge. How could I get so busy to forget that? (Margaret, evaluation 1: 9/2/05).*

The participants could see the value of what we were doing together but were unsure about the practice aspect of the work and how it would be understood within the politics and cultures of their organisations. I took this state of affairs, which was being experienced by each of us across a great range of sectors, fields, disciplines and positions, as a map of the status of participatory practices in the Australian public, community and academic sectors.
Validity

The situation offered a unique opportunity to develop our practices in an un-compromised collaborative embrace of what was understood to be taking place in this strange silence about participation and sustainability. However, we were adrift, floating away from chains of command, delegated authority, bounded sites, conventions of research practices and validity criterion by which our work would be judged.

The lack of formal sites to draw into the collaboration created a methodological liability of limiting our Inquiry to an insider or “emic” perspective with no structured outsider or “etic” critique (Lett, undated). As Guba and Lincoln discuss, (1989, p.151-155), resonant of Heron and Wadsworth, participatory knowledge building work requires a balance between the insider and outsider points of view not only for critical subjectivity to become established, but also to bring forward the hermeneutic dialectic of participatory work:

*It is hermeneutic because it is interpretive in character, and dialectic because it represents a comparison and contrast of divergent views with a view to achieving a high-level synthesis of them all (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, 149).*

The tension of this critical perspective being created within and between the insiders and outsiders of an inquiry initiative is the energy source for the unfolding of a participatory entity. In the interests of robust and socially just knowledge building practices all my previous participatory initiatives had deployed an inquiry or evaluation structure, which ensured a critical stance between different interest groups. This Inquiry however was not going to comply with such pre-existing standards.

The first structure emerges

Towards the beginning of 2005, and following several teleconferences, the proposed inquiry structure collapsed as individuals moved from the Action Research Group to the Dialogue Group and back again with opportunity, learning and forgetfulness. Three to four months into the project, and following the withdrawal of the council, in place of the three-bodied structure one whole entity emerged as a “virtual” community.

As the original structure fell away, we made the journey from inside to outside by each of us traveling from the virtual inner spaces of the Inquiry to the physical outer spaces of our everyday lives, and conversely from the familiar inner spaces of the external sites to the unfamiliar outer spaces of the Inquiry. It was a journey wherein our orientations shifted with context more subtly and through many more qualities than “insider and outsider” points
of view as held between diverging, sociologically defined groups. We chose a kind of schizophrenia rather than make “others” of others.

This is consistent with current considerations regarding “transdisciplinarity”. For example:

*An integrating synthesis is not achieved through the accumulation of different brains. It must occur inside each of the brains (Max-Neef, 2005, 53, p 5).*

I “went with” the nascent Inquiry’s movement because I had felt uncomfortable about the potential stereotyping and social divisions between critical reference groups in past initiatives. As I go on to describe we found that the embodied movement between contexts brought reflexivity into the Inquiry without defaulting to objectivism; it created a potential for compassion and insight in the place of judgement. It allowed us to pursue our intuitive directions, but from an outsider’s point of view, it also risked the Inquiry being too self-serving in the absence of narrative reflexivity. These are the tender choices that we make, as life and opportunity for inquiry avails them to us in our voluntary commitment to it, tempering our interests between good inquiry practices for public as compared with personal benefit.

We had held a few teleconferences with each group, then brought them together (in teleconference) which people enjoyed, but no-one extended the dialogue into any committed or sustained line of inquiry. People were reluctant to bring their work into such a circle of strangers, and unless local networks self-organised there was no possibility of everyone meeting and working face-to-face for any extended period of time. I felt that the matters that we were dealing with were serious and pressing enough for the niceties of face-to-face communication to be overlooked - but then unlike the other participants I knew everyone so it was easy enough for me to say.

We had circulated Torbert’s (2001) papers describing Action Inquiry and were beginning to encounter the realities of seeing ourselves as our own subjects. Intuitively we were finding a way towards the right starting point - ourselves with each other - by opening up the layers of third person culture to reveal ourselves to each other with no pre-existing “methods” to do so. We would have a teleconference, I would write the notes and circulate them. The reluctance to adopt any methodology regarding what to do with the data we were generating meant that we had to innovate a solution to how to inquire together for ourselves.

While the idea was utterly disconcerting to me given my thesis obligations, it was also tantalising to see what might come about as this would be an insight into the nature of participation and its sustainable qualities. I trusted the systemic resonations of this
development. What I learned was that when we turned away from the authority of research methodology, which I now see as an objective construction of good knowledge, we were thrown back on ourselves and our “entity” to discern good knowing and its relationship to “truths”. In terms of the reading I had been doing, and as I discuss later in this chapter, we encountered Polanyi’s lost worlds of moral extension as an expression of human freedom.

**A literature review**

During these first few months and as discussed in Chapter 5, I conducted a literature review about the nature of participatory practices. I read over 200 documents and explored over twenty web sites devoted to “participation” the world over. I was astounded at how established the field was becoming around the world and how little we knew of this from within the bounded sectors that we worked in Australia. As well as desktop research I interviewed some of the world’s recognised leaders in the participatory field. From the data I could see three categories of participatory development that would support the future of the participatory field for some time to come.

The first two categories were developments associated with a close scrutiny of the *practices* and *strategies* associated with public participation. The third was to do with whole new participatory *entities* or bodies such as communities and legal frameworks formed around participatory principles and practices. The following lists summarise what I learned about participation through the literature review, the texts for which are listed in the bibliography (and not the reference section) of this thesis.

**Trends in participation practice in 2004**

- Researching the concept of the “quality” of public participation in different forms of practice
- Integrating social justice, governance and intellectual analysis in public participation practices
- Integrating theory and practice
- Integrating emotional and rational engagement in public participation practices
- Undertaking critical analysis of the values embedded in tools, processes, roles and models of participation
- Working through the tensions between auditing and learning from participation
- Finding ways of reaching consensus in radical participation environments
- Creating greater variety of forms of public participation
Trends in participation strategies in 2004

- Developing the ethics of public participation (from individual to collective to institutionalized)
- Creating greater variety of epistemological stances supporting public participation
- Asking long range questions about public participation
- Generating critical analysis of power shifts (or lack thereof) in public participation environments
- Looking closely at participant benefit from public participation
- Exploring bottom up and top down power dynamics
- Exploring continuous learning and its relationships to public participation
- Exploring “systems” approaches to public participation
- Investing in capacity building for public participation and community development
- Working through intellectual property issues associated with public participation
- Blurring the distinctions between public, institutional and personal participation

Trends in public participation entities in 2004

The depth and scale of the participatory field was creating new concepts and practices, which in turn were building social capability to manifest public participation entities around the world. This was the third category that I saw in the conversations and the texts I studied in the review. I distinguished three generic participatory entities emerging around the world: new participatory roles, new participatory structures and new whole participatory systems. The following lists add some details to these three forms of participatory entity:

- The new roles included older roles enjoying fresh appreciation: facilitators, activists, animators and community organizers were mentioned, for example
- The new structures to support public participation included the setting up of discourse organisations, public participation structures and systems in neo-corporate settings, long term funding models that were participatory in their ways of working, long term participatory relationship models, community trusts and constitutional frameworks
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

- The new whole systems for public participation being established in geo-political communities were integrating practice, structure, culture, economy, environment, power-shifting dynamics and systemic change. These included British Columbia’s Citizens’ Electoral Assembly, the Ernest Cortez Industrial Areas Foundation and the now famous and globally influential Porto Allegre participatory budget system.

From this analysis and as discussed in Chapter 5, I discerned four specific domains in which participation was taking form around the world: governance, development, learning and activism. I wrote about them and spoke of them at networking workshops but did not bring them as a methodology into the Inquiry for fear, once again of over influencing the emergent form that we might create. I did not want to drown out the early self-understandings of each person’s practice with so sharply defined a proposition. I noted the presence of the four qualities in our practices with each other, in our collaborative interactions, and in our other, potentially participatory arenas. I offered the concept in a draft paper to the co-researchers to pick up in their own ways, mindful of the need for small-scale development at this early stage. One person wanted to forward the paper to another consultant, which I did not want to happen at this stage of its development; other than that the framework that I had devised remained unused and as far as I knew, unread by the co-researchers.

A first iteration of participatory practice

At this point, and up to March 2005, no one had met face-to-face. All interactions were by teleconference, email and a little used-virtual office (we used the Community Zero facility) for storing papers, posting comments and entering evaluation data on the web. While some felt that the lack of face-to-face interaction made it close to impossible for them to commit to the Inquiry, others did engage electronically so that a sense of flow began to develop in the freedom of our virtual, remote/intimate reflections. The following comments from two of the participants at this early stage illustrate the nature of the gradual connections that formed between first, second and third person realms of the Inquiry:

*My approach has changed. I am trying to look at my projects with more openness: ambiguity and less direction/restrictiveness – and with an expectance to learn... [I am learning] the strength behind stating “you don’t know”: the power associated with ambivalence and loose agendas.

“Distributed leadership” (Penny, evaluative comment: 6/1/05);*
What remains similar in the process that I use is a personal focus on attempting to maintain a small percentage of meta-self to view the process from outside. What is changing is the considerations and points of reference for these meta considerations. The questions that are arising for me are around the area of the implications of making one choice versus another when I make an intervention within a group (or even the decision not to make an intervention but to let the process run) (Peter O., evaluation 1: 4/2/05).

The evaluation strategy, which I included in the original inquiry structure to be our formal compass, required considerable thought. I circulated Guba and Lincoln’s evaluative themes, which we discussed on teleconferences, however the participants felt them to be abstract and difficult to understand. The questions (see Appendix, item 2) explore the difficult ideas of trustworthiness and authenticity of the Inquiry approach and experience. I reframed them in terms of our specific Inquiry, which made them more approachable (see Appendix, item 3).

The evaluation strategy drew from us questions and insights around the criteria of credibility, transferability and dependability of the knowledge we were creating. It asked us to document the ways in which our experiences were changing our worldviews, how we were learning to appreciate each other’s views, and what catalytic experiences our engagements in the Inquiry were generating. Each of the three evaluations we carried out took up to two months of gentle encouragement from me to bring the data in, but the experience of doing the evaluation proved illuminating for each person, and geared a reflexive turn for the whole community. It captured the Inquiry’s emergent form, which otherwise would have remained in the dark, dissipated through teleconferences and emails. It went some way to create a reflexive moment for each of us who used it and to understand the magnitude of the work we were achieving as the following discussion in a teleconference illustrates:

Pen: I found doing the evaluation really challenging. I took me about an hour to do and I also had to reread some of the papers. It forced me to be reflective, to think about and understand how I learn which is hard to put down on paper. I had to think carefully about what to say. I realised that I am not only learning but also learning about learning.

Peter O.: The biggest challenge for me was using the evaluation structure – the emailed version of the framework asked us to look at something specific whereas the CZ file doesn’t. So I had to make some choices about
what level of “resolution” of the Inquiry I was going to use. I decided to go global and think about the overall process, and then found myself thinking about specific documents or events anyway – so I chose to comment on the overall process as it seemed to cover both when I did it. I found myself telescoping in and out of the project.

Susie: Margaret had a telescopic experience too.

Margaret: Yes – I read the reports backwards (from most recent to oldest account) and had a sense of looking down a cone to the narrow end because the first meetings were all about tasks and the ongoing questioning opened the discussion up to get underneath the tasks.

Pete O.: I can’t see any total thread yet so no overall constructions, but I can see hooks that I want to relate to – spots emerging like Peter W.’s ideas about permeability.

Peter W.: I found the evaluation difficult to get into but then thought that this discomfort was actually me learning. When I got round to doing it I found that some of the fields didn’t generate any learning for me and others did. The learning triggered through the network and through external links like popular culture (Rod Stewart) or nature (the analogy of the plant in a monoculture) – and idiosyncratic events (transcript of teleconference, 2/12/04).

I created the first evaluation report (Goff, 2005a) in January to let people see what the evaluation process could produce, and what we were doing according to my interpretation of the data that it generated. At the same time, we arranged for me to travel to each person and hold extensive conversations about their practices, which would become the background to a day-long workshop for each state group, in their states. I carried out this work in February and March and compiled a significant report, which I presented as a first iteration of practice report (Goff, 2005b). There is a summary of its findings in the Appendix (see Appendix item 4). On completing these two works I pressed the “send” button and waited to see how they would work into the emerging collaboration. There were no immediate responses.

First turning

In April 2005 I took three months’ leave to undergo preventative spinal surgery. This experience was profound. My enforced stillness and solitude reoriented me from “doing” to “being”. I learned to listen to the tones of authority at work in my mind, and became sensitive to the imposition of the outside world, practicing keeping my distance from
it so I could be more alert to what was within. I encountered a depth of love and care from friends and family that surprised me and stirred my own. I met glorious clouds and took up water-colour painting for a few weeks. I wrote a short autobiography (Goff, 2005e), read my old works coming across surprising consistencies and discovering a lost sense of value of who I had been over the years. I critiqued a paper for a colleague and began a dialogue with another colleague to explore her theory of practice, which became the basis for Chapter 6. I could feel a turn taking place within me, new sensitivities growing, a different feeling of being “me”.

On rejoining the collaboration (June-July 2005) I learned that no interactions had taken place in my absence. I was disturbed that the idea of the Inquiry, the first evaluation, the meetings between people, and the descriptive report had not been potent or meaningful enough for the other co-researchers to take the Inquiry on in their own terms. Something was there but it was not looking like any theory or previous experience of participatory practice with which I was familiar. We were enjoying our teleconferences, and I was doing a lot of reporting from them, but no actions were taken that drew from the reporting, nothing was brought back into the teleconferences that represented a sustained focus of collaborative inquiry. No inquiry or collaboration seemed to happen unless I asked for it, and then the effort involved to “do” something was lead weighted. What was this “sleep” that lay so heavily between us, keeping this offered portal into the whole endeavour of life so tightly closed? Would its persistence in our midst amount to participatory research? By what means and by whom would this be judged?

I determined to not let this stillness and silence drag on. I asked if people would contribute to a second evaluation, which they agreed to, and on gathering the data wrote a second evaluation report (Goff, 2005c) tracking the shifts in our understandings and connections between the Inquiry and each person’s experiences. In the concluding paragraph I noted:

_The Inquiry’s value is currently in the experience of developing understanding of humanness. This overarching quality is imbuing in most aspects of the work and enabling creativity to bubble up, as we bathe in the senses of knowing ourselves, each other and our subject this way._

_Energy is developing for real – within us as individuals and to some extent within the worlds we sense to be around us. We are also (now) encountering what we perceive as “walls” of many kinds. We are looking into the walls, noting what triggers their presence, describing our different positions to them (at their feet, on top, on the other side, through_
and under etc) and finding out what happens when we create stillness and listening at “the wall”.

It is at this felt edge\(^\text{18}\) between our path and what lies around and beyond it that the sharper challenges of practice are emerging. We are experiencing the different qualities of power, seeing knowing in different ways, building our practices almost without trying, and experiencing the wondrous sense of not knowing where we will start and nearly always co-creating just the right thing between us. The reality of the Inquiry is arriving with us (Goff, 2005c, p. 9).

On sending it out, the report was not commented upon by anyone. I was missing something here. It just did not make sense. I determined to listen more deeply into each person’s experiences of this work. I was at the foot of a wall, immobilised by my position as initiating researcher and known facilitator whose usual forms of leadership within a commercial contract carried no weight in this unanchored and voluntary collaboration. I was immobilised by the Inquiry’s question, which resisted recognisable action but sustained dialogue and reflexivity across multiple contexts. I was surrounded by immobilised others each experiencing these same questions of the right to act, not having the resources to sustain strategic action, but becoming increasingly drawn to the dynamism of our random, eclectic and chaotic engagements. For me, the only way up was down.

**A second iteration of participatory practice**

I ran a series of 3-5 telephone reflections with each person over six to eight weeks. I refrained from questioning the speakers and tempered my inclination to talk too long. I learned to listen to each person speaking at length about their sense of themselves in their participatory approaches. I wrote hand notes while they spoke, then immediately after each phone conversation, made audio recordings of my reflections on my experiences of listening to them. I used the recordings to create what I called “dialogic scripts”; these were writings to each person, recognising the depth of their work and the uniqueness of their constructions. They are the basis of the Chapter that follows this.

I used this method to find a meeting place between the co-researchers’ experiences and my own, recognising value and shared ground, diversity and new forms of language. As I wrote them they seemed to describe a roundness of being in the world of practice that felt astonishing: as if the systems were finally getting off the paper and into our relationships,

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\(^{18}\) I acknowledge Susan Weil’s use of this term “edge” to denote the meeting of contrasting states; it is a term that I discuss in Chapter 3, and use frequently throughout the text to denote the limit of one way of knowing as it meets another, or not knowing.
those awakening flows of energy that were actually happening in each person’s life were being brought through and into the Inquiry through question, listening, reflection, noting, reading, re-listening, drafting, mapping and sending for further dialogue. I hoped, but did not expect, that someone would interview me about my practices, and that they too would write a script for me. I hoped that on receiving them, we would exchange our scripts and explore each other’s practices learning from each other and giving what we learned back into the world. We were creating a new way of seeing, a new language of expressing ourselves in the world of practice, and practicing in the world. I was searching for a way to embrace their experiences without making the people or their life worlds my “subject” or “object” of inquiry. By making my practice of listening to them the subject of my Inquiry for this time, I was able to sustain critical reflexivity in my inquiry practice while also including their experience and the deepening of our relationship in the constructions.

This time I licked a stamp and sent a hard copy through snail mail hoping a concrete form of the writing would give the Inquiry a greater sense of presence to each person. Amazingly, I was met with silence again, unsure if any of the scripts had been read. This experience, added to the previous silences, was isolating, angering and confusing; and yet I sensed that behind these currents there was a deep stillness in which I would find what I needed to learn.

When my narrative, that story that keeps on coming back at me through my daily living, is painful, I withdraw to avoid hurting others. On the occasions when I do interact I hear that narrative chiming through my tone, my language, my assumptions and qualities of action. This is story making that is not about me but of me. I seem to lurch from condemnation to consummation of my self and of others: how can I begin to work on the meaning of sustainability while I am so stuck in this erratic immobility? Why is it so hard to sustain consciousness of these matters; why am I so asleep? What kind of reflexivity can I conjure to help myself? Who can I reach out to for help? What do I have to offer, as isolated and inexperienced as I am, in return? With what wisdoms, whose authorship can be mutually appreciated and drawn into such considered relationships? Who cares that much, who has the temerity to ask for such help amongst peers, and how could anything possibly come about through such asking with the minimal resources that we have at our command? As I learned in the Cave, these were not only my questions; many of us were feeling this depth of helplessness and isolation. As I understood it, this is the consequence of objectivism’s drenching of our life world:

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20 I acknowledge and thank Jane F. for offering a telephone interview with me about my experience of the Inquiry at the conclusion of the candidature.
In it the pebble in your hand, the saliva in your mouth and the word in your ear all become external, absurd and hostile items. This universe is the counterpoint of the cosmic vision, with despair taking the place of hope. It is the logical outcome of utterly distrusting our participation in holding our beliefs (Polanyi, 1958a: 199).

**Stirrings**

Out of the blue, and with no journaling to inform me otherwise, John came over to my office with his dialogic map, and we spent a day talking through the script. As with most of the New South Wales (NSW) participants we live and work just moments away from each other, but I did not want to over play my hand with regard to setting up a local face to face approach to the Inquiry. If we had succeeded in coming together regularly in NSW this might disturb the equity of the system if participants in other states could not muster similar levels of enthusiasm. They might simply assume it was a NSW project and fade out altogether.

When John suggested we work together for a day it was a commitment of time and presence that I surely needed. We spent hours walking through his and my understandings of his practice. We mentioned the meeting briefly in the teleconference that followed, but it did not stimulate any other meetings with me to discuss the maps, or any between the other participants as I had hoped. However, there were others stirring at this time.

Jane F. rang me to talk about her map and I began to feel a little bolder about ringing others up to see if they really were dismissing the work or if something else was happening. I felt nervous, pushy and caught between needing information to reflect on the practices we were developing and the subtleties of our relationships. I was feeling a tension between methodology and community as we had discussed more than once (for example, teleconference 29/9/05); between mindfully shifting behaviour and practice while also appreciating whom we are. The dialogic scripts were a way of shifting practice to more deeply appreciate whom we are but they were culturally unfamiliar to people; some had only read the text once and not got back to it, others were touched and wondering - but had not got round to emailing or calling me to say so.

Out of that same “blue”, Sue emailed that she was coming down from Queensland to Sydney for a few days. When I suggested she meet the Sydney people she was delighted. I sent out the invitation to the NSW group and within a day everyone had eagerly committed to attend. John organised a room and the five of us met for half a day of intense dialogue. We discussed our participatory approaches, new questions and theories; the brutal practices of policy and management; quantum physics; shifting the ways of knowing between
communities and their local councils; working with architects - on and on. I transcribed the whole session and circulated it. It was read and checked for corrections, but none of the questions, the burgeoning inquiry relationships (as I saw them) were taken any further:

*I used the word “wrenching”! Well, there you go. I am finding this so interesting to read – what a huge amount of work for you Susie. Thank you* (John to Susie, email, 7/10/05).

Never-the-less we were beginning to see that what we were doing as daily activity was worthy of theorizing, communicating to each other and encouraging. We were learning to link our daily doing with our collaborative reflections in teleconferences and evaluation data. Within this time (September to November, 2005), through the ongoing teleconferences, pieces of writing, references to web links and the occasional one on one phone call individual participants suggested following through on specific threads of interest to them:

- The power of myth as an inquiry language (Peter W. and Jane F.)
- The separations of identities between work and home life (John L, Jo and Lesley)
- Participatory theory and philosophy (Jo, Pete W., Margaret and Lesley)
- Developing under-valued opportunities for participation in NSW local government planning regulations (Brigid, Penny, John, Peter O.)

As with all the offers that came into our midst these topics were distributed to everyone along with invitations to join the conversation - or do more. I understood us to be experiencing a shift in the valuing of participation amongst ourselves. We were operating with no pre-determined methodology, but a hoped-for reflexive structure, which was gently coaxing us into its nature. As one of the participants said towards the end of this second stage:

*I feel there is an emerging capacity to grasp and articulate stuff that I didn't think was possible and which I privately felt was a bit too off the planet. This possibly is not really about credibility of data and more the value and legitimacy of the whole Inquiry project* (Pete W., 17/11/05)

This quality of a shared ease to say out loud that which is denied that ease in other environments became our mutual concern, the primary means by which the Inquiry was valued, so its members could stretch its form and let in energies that otherwise would have remained hidden, cramped and mourned.
A second turning

Sub-groups of conversations arose to meet participants’ invitations to each other - an intellectual life was rising and falling, friendships were warming and dissipating, shifting the connective threads of the Inquiry again. If I had any sense of a shape it was a multi-mode inquiry, like a prism, refracting on many different angles as each person described and made its form. The structure resembled Foth’s (2006, p 213) description of a Network Action Research initiative without the methodological assumptions to determine which action took place or how:

The communicative structure that network action research acts upon, resembles less the conventional image of a “battalion” that is collective, highly structured and formalized, and more the image of an “ant hill” that appears to be chaotic and unstructured from the outside, but is highly efficient and networked on the inside. The process of critical inquiry, reflection and action takes place in multiple instances within multiple networks. Instead of multiple volunteers participating in one action research project, network action research encourages participants to initiate multiple action research sub-projects that are networked to form a larger action research project on the level of the meta-network.

The participants made many invitations for potential threads to each other that were not taken up. This was important. Co-researchers were sharing with me the risk of the “no takers” responses, but also with me, they were continually putting out offers that were sometimes taken up. We began a series of teleconferences around the four themes that people had nominated, each conference determining whether another would take place. We would take elements of these conversations into the other teleconferences that were springing up - a complex lattice work of new languages, representations of each other’s stories, references and reframed insights was developing like the fibrous materials of bone structures. The silences continued and the connections continued.

As the offers from the other participants came in I was still in an action vacuum, which I began to refer to as “the falling cup” and which seemed crucial to my understanding the nature of “participation”. It was an image that kept coming to mind when an offer was made (my own and someone else’s) and no recognition of its existence was offered from anyone else. I completely understood John’s comment:

I have a love-hate relationship with this study and I love the duality struggling to be one (John, evaluative comment, 12/05).
The matter of the falling cup continued throughout the first cycle of the Inquiry up to the moment in the Cave when it was discussed overtly. John asked if it was falling again at the end of my message stick, Jo tried to stop it from falling, Jane said the more I did the less collaboration came about, and Lesley pointed out that I had been working to formal criteria as to what participation was, even though I had felt that I had let so much formality go. It kept falling through Peter O.’s hands where it changed its meaning from loss to emergence, and then through John’s where it became a productive silence for thought. It kept falling until we each encountered the “floor” of the Cave, which was not a crash site but a sudden welling of understanding our love for each other:

Jane, her back to me, is in tears. Lesley moves over to her: “Do you want to say something about the tears?”

“You have said it for me”, says Jane (The Cave).

**Sustainability and epistemology**

On completing the dialogic scripts I decided to follow through on an aspect of the Inquiry that I was committed to but that seemed to keep escaping attention in the difficulty of establishing a sustained form of participation. Towards the end of October I asked for and received the co-researchers’ formal references regarding their notions of “sustainability” and wrote another report analyzing the epistemological natures of policy and international charters that were to do with sustainability (“The formal meanings of “sustainability”, November 2005). What I found surprised me: I had assumed that objectivism would be the dominant form in which the various frameworks and agreements were expressed. However this was not the case. I found 11 epistemological frames at work in the 23 different documents. They were:

- Instrumental-Relational; Representational (two forms - based on axiology and based on mechanism); Hermeneutic; Instrumental; Practical; Emancipatory; Emergent; Relational; Systemic; Participatory; Constructivist (within an instrumental frame; including multiple epistemologies)

I was excited at the possibilities that this finding might offer us. I reasoned that my report might provide us with a rationale to pursue our Inquiry into epistemology in political and commercial contexts. Possibly, our systemic slowness (across public, corporate, academic and community sectors) regarding accepting the urgency of sustainability was a literacy problem as much as an ideological one. As things stood, the institutional environment with its dominant and tacit epistemology of objectivism could only operationalise those charters that were instrumentally framed even though we were signatories to those that were of other epistemological forms. Could our policy makers,
managers and service providers even begin to understand the shifts that we need to make if they were as uninformed about ways of knowing as we were? I circulated this report and other than Jo’s note below, received the now traditional non-response, again unknowing if anyone had read it:

Scanned it - haven't read through it all - looked at the models and really appreciate the work you did on analysing the references. Thanks. (Jo to Susie email, 21/11/05).

We kept holding teleconferences with various sub-groups, sharing our musings, telling stories, asking each other strategic questions, turning our collective focus from this person to that. We got close to many possibilities but they remained still-born in the leap from shared reflection to collaborative action:

I've just read through the notes Susie sent around from the telephone link up last Friday. It looked very interesting, I could see the ideas bouncing off each other and keeping each other warm. The whole question of interpretation of this work, communicating, expressing, refining, is an interesting one. I've been inspired by the idea of writing, the sweet act of distilling my personal enquiry, weaving questions with narrative and then not. I'll be planning to write some stuff up in November and would love a "co-mentor" to review my words (Brigid to the whole group, email, 11/10/05)

Alive for me now - acceptance of complexity, learning to be focused and selective for all round life efficiency (Jane G. to whole group, email, 24/10/05)

I have started a new project (in my spare time!) doing a 1 hour radio show. I am recording dialogues with people in the community on the connection between 'culture' and 'cultivation'. It is still early days but I'd like to share or make these recordings available to the enquiry if there is interest (Brigid to the whole group, email, 5/12/05)

The passive - active aspect interests me, from a different perspective in that health professionals often wish to exclude communities and clients. So their default position is to do things for the community, and they need to be convinced or assured that participation is viable and that it will in fact produce a better result. The middle path of asking the right enabling question at the 'right' time is such a high level of mastery that is quite rare. A feature of it is being comfortable with discomfort; being fluent
with the energy that is released when a group is agitated and awkward.

Underlying that of course is the question - whose discomfort? I often forget that discomfort is one of the faces of desire (ie desire for something different). So what is our ideal role in all this?? (Peter W. to Jo and Susie, email, 30/11/05).

We set up a sub-group to inquire into the participatory potential in local government planning regulations, and another regarding Participatory Epistemology (Bradbury and Reason, 2001) in reflexive practice in state bureaucracy. In both instances when we discussed a structured and planned approach to a person’s current difficulty as a possible opportunity for Action Research the person dropped out of the interested sub-group; they just chose not to dial into the teleconferences. I kept seeing these tantalising threads being run up the flag posts only to disappear into the air the moment they were unfurled.

Our experiences of the Inquiry as an entity were inconsistent while connected through honesty and commitment to be present to each other:

I think it goes to a place of engagement beyond the practicalities of a phone call, an email or a conversation, (as in all reality I have not been part of all of this recently), in the form of co-writing, and collaborations that are not yet spoken of, but are somehow already released into our hearts and minds and thoughts (Lesley, evaluative comment: 21/11/05)

Have not had opportunity to practice in field, but this and other experiences are contributing to increasing acceptance of the way things and people are (Sue, evaluative comment: 21/11/05)

The penny dropped for me very recently and I have begun to model some of the knowledge around what constitutes participation to my own project evaluation ideas (Jo, evaluative comment: 21/11/05)

It is interesting to note that these comments are over a year after our initiation, that with the exception of my sick leave we were contacting each other in teleconferences at least once a month if not through other means like emails and individual phone calls much more frequently; that we were experienced practitioners working in contexts that were crying out for participatory engagement with multiple aspects of “sustainability”. It is important to also note that if our connections had not been of value to people they would not have been sustained - none of us had the time or resources to waste so frequently on a pointless activity. It was, as Lesley indicates above, as if we knew that there was something that we were working towards, that was working towards us.
Third iteration of participatory practice and multiple turnings

As the third evaluation tracked, we were becoming aware of new shapes of inquiry that were forming through us. The principle of transparency was becoming more present as we became more confident with each other:

My sense is an on-going series of “form-collapse-reform” events producing expanding and inter-related insights. The result is a dependable core surrounded by a “fluffy layer of untried / less dependable” material (Peter O., evaluative comment: 4/11/05)

My worldview seems better able to accommodate the co-emergence of all facets of the question. So my worldview seems more grounded; has more ballast; keeps an even keel?? Using a different set of metaphors the world is more fuzzy and that seems to be matched by a corresponding (sic) increase in my fuzzy capacities (Peter W., evaluative comment: 17/11/05)

Some times i wish i didn't have to “name and articulate” so concretely - i would love to be more poetic and ethereal and i don't really know how to make this different as yet and maybe it is not yet my time. maybe my learning about spirituality is still tied to the doing...especially doing it right and my thinking and feeling will catch up when i am no longer tied to my past child fear of not being able to do anything right! (Jo, evaluative comment: 6/12/05)

I ponder on what resistance I have to acting and I do not as yet have real insight. Having referred to this resistance to act, I remain amazed that such a strong and self generating process as has been created has happened in such a short time. What may seem lengthy in terms of a part of a university degree process I believe to be short in terms of individuals becoming aware, collaboratively learning and taking enduring action. I certainly hear people indicating increased power to act in their practice (Jane F., evaluative comment: 9/12/05).

The Inquiry was asymmetrical, unstable and seemed to have a life of its own, a life which, with the liberating influence of the pantheistic conversation that Peter W. and Jane F. were creating, we began to refer to as “a beautiful creature” or “our best of all possible beasts”.

What I was finding was that by reading the quoted things I had said they became note-worthy and I was startled by their reappearance and
newfound significance. In most cases I had not perceived/attributed that particular pattern. It made me think of reading tealeaves - one person's residue is another person's oracle. [Interesting the sustainability possibilities here - waste food into meaning?] (Critical note, draft thesis review, Peter W. to Susan, email 24/10/06).

As we circulated papers, our own and those of established writers in the participatory field, we started to share how we were reflecting at length for weeks and months about their meanings, how we were taking them into the field to bring to the attention of co-workers and other networks.

For example, Jo described how she had turned her office door into a workshop space on which passing staff stuck images and quotations and wrote questions; John tested out the sounds of new languages and new forms of questions with his sustainability strategy team; Peter W. reported on his progress with the Older Women’s Network enhancing its already participatory potential by the participants co-interpreting the data with the evaluation team; Penny introduced participatory principles within her team, across management desks and within public workshops to design the physical, educational and socio-ecological strategies of a new sustainability centre; and Brigid attempted to make the existing possibilities for participation in state land use planning legislation a reality in a new planning tool she was designing for her Council.

In the third evaluation report (Goff, 2005d) I noted how people were describing their developments. We were beginning to see some confidence developing regarding the matter of epistemology and its development within each person’s form of participatory practice:

Peter W. describes what I see as a new skill in epistemological literacy: to better accommodate the co-emergence of all facets of a question which in turn, generates a new sense of balance, less definition and greater capacity to experience and hold meaning within ambiguity. It is as if a new knowing is forming within him and he is witnessing it – as he witnesses it, so it forms...

Brigid discusses a shift in her relationship between the world view that she holds and the views of others she seeks to influence – that to influence she must be influenced. This is a such a strong experience of shifts in understanding the nature of power and more deeply, systemic dynamics – again and like Peter, a blurring of edges between bodies and minds, and willingness to engage, even if fearfully, with what is not known or previously experienced, or perhaps experienced and abandoned for its
fearfulness. To be willing to be so influenced means letting go of much and trusting in what might become...

Sue is experiencing a paradox: participation as self worth, motivation and self-learning. It is as if previously understood frames of participation are turning in on themselves within Sue, urging stillness and action at the same time. Paradoxes are signifiers of imminent or potential emergence, demanding resolution that is impossible without shifting structure through new meaning... sometimes it comes and sometimes it just doesn’t. Paradoxes are so powerful they are almost tangible... or perhaps we could say that they are tangible as they seem to generate energy and light things up in particular ways.

John describes his experiences of being in and being out of the Inquiry, dramatic swings of belief and disbelief, and comes to a most simple epistemological shift: seeing more and simultaneously understanding how this is – the what and the how becoming one moment of knowing rather than one emerging reflectively from the other. The knower has a new relationship to themselves and what is known.

Peter O. too, describes a shift in the shape of knowing (how he knows) his path – from circles to helix form – as with Peter W., Brigid and John, for example - the very architecture of knowing is transforming organically within and through this experience and the view of the world (“theory”), is also shifting as the architecture of knowing shifts.

Jane F. describes experiencing changes in consciousness actually taking place during our conversations – as Peter describes such changes through exploring new frameworks and languages. And Jo talks about her continuing struggle with not knowing – such a vibrant experience in her context of being answerable to powerful legislative systems playing out in her intervention capacity. The combination of not knowing, accountability and authority, and the struggle, is potent energy in transformative experiences. Lesley is holding to a promise of connection for her sense of understanding what she may be experiencing (Goff, 2005d, p. 9-10).

Epistemology in our practices came into being in multiple ways. Some of us rejected the term “epistemology” as not having any meaning because of its scientific or philosophical weight. Instead they chose a different reflective surface with which to maintain their sensitivity to their way of making sense or coming to know. Mythology, poetics and
reflexive dialogue became such means for some of us some of the time in some settings. Others became interested in different paradigms for the first time, and started reading and working their ideas into their daily working and private lives. Constructivism, pluralism, social ecology, complexity sciences, inter-subjectivity and inter-objectivity were the paradigmatic constructions that we discussed and deployed. Some of us became adept at asking powerful questions about knowing and our relationship with our ways of knowing both in the Inquiry and in their various sites external to our group.

While, again, there was no response to the third evaluation report, we agreed in teleconference that we wanted to work together for an extended time and face-to-face. We had no idea how we could get together to do this, separated as we are by such geographic distances. None of us had any money to pay for interstate travel or accommodation, and our various freedoms to take “time off work” or to work in our free time, as it would be viewed, was limited.

It was during this time that Margaret, who was based in South Australia, chose to leave the Inquiry. She kindly agreed to my holding an exit interview with her. The following quotation is an excerpt:

*Maybe our lack of relationship was why we never got our group off the ground – then I thought there were other ways some of the group members are getting their connection and nourishment from – like the group looking at gods and epistemology – partly it was my responsibility – I felt that I had done as much as I had the capacity to do at that stage. The one to one interviews I also found really valuable – I found them quite intense – I found the write up - at first I didn’t like it – it was too close to the truth, and when I read it gain much later it was absolutely insightful- I needed some distance from it… There was a couple of things - if I look at the entirety of the process – I found it quite difficult on the whole – feels like a really long journey, and I like to have some sense of the destination – time and direction – not absolutely – there is a lot of flexibility – I realised I didn’t have any sense of the cycles – each one has taken me by surprise – perhaps I wasn’t paying attention to them, what they meant, what they might entail- no sense of end point or where I might be heading with this at all. It is those feelings along with time pressures as well, there is always something that doesn’t get done – by the end of that day – the time and the attention that it needed. In the end I didn’t feel I had either* (Margaret, exit interview: 19/12/05).
I circulated Margaret’s thoughts. The rest of us felt sad about her decision. Two more co-researches, Jane G. and Penny, would depart at the conclusion of the formal project in January 2006 and they both agreed to similar exit interviews. The process of exit interviews was later repeated with several others towards the conclusion of writing the thesis in 2006 to become the basis for Chapter 9. As it turned out, Jane and Margaret also rejoined us in that year.

**Inquiry Intensive**

We carried out a series of phone conferences and circulated notes to develop the “Inquiry Intensive” in January 2006. My university generously assisted with basic costs, and each of the seven people who attended also put money and voluntary effort into the kitty. Penny and Margaret had already left the Inquiry (this was before Margaret rejoined); Jane and Sue were unable to make it for personal reasons - and Brigid had been rained out.

As narrated in Chapter 1, the rest of us journeyed from far and near to the mountains and created an event that took us across the thresholds of orthodoxies and into a void within which we met our limit, and from which we drew forward hidden knowings. We encountered wisdom and naivety, originality and pop culture, treasures and impoverishments, sacred grounds and transgressions; but we had the freedom to see them, throw them on the table and let something - in fact many things - form through us by them. From this stage, which was meant to be the conclusion of the Inquiry, we created four new outcomes that shifted it yet again:

- An agreement to co-author a “book of psalms” which was to be coordinated by Jane F. throughout 2006 and contributed to by any and all for as long as it took (included as a “Coda” at the conclusion of this thesis)
- The “graces” construction of ways of knowing the value of participatory practices to sustainability
- Renewed commitments from 11 of the original 12 participants to stay electronically connected, receiving news and opportunities to continue interactions throughout the new year (including attending events to support each other, co-writing papers and presenting at conferences and seminars)
- Autonomous sub-groupings which took form without my support and which my writing of the thesis and engagement in ongoing conversations with individuals regarding aspects of its contents became one such sub-grouping, as did the South Australian Action Research group, which met 3 times in 2006.
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

A new cycle

Following the weekend in the Cave, throughout 2006 the Inquiry became both more disparate and more precise as it lost the energy “centre” that my candidacy provided and gained a new one in the production of the Book of Psalms with Jane F. taking up a more focal position in the communications. While these shifts took place, the shape of the Inquiry was beginning to hold. Peter O. described his image of the Inquiry towards the end of 2005, a sighting that seems to have remained “stable” throughout 2006:

*My image of the process we are all engaged in is that of a chaotic field of enquiry dotted with basins of stability - each of these basins representing the ideas that are emerging for individual members. However each of these basins is linked (or rather immersed in a common field) to one another. The overall picture would be a very strange (in the terms of the chaos theorist) “strange attractor”. This influenced individuality is for me the real catalyst for our collective work here (Peter’s emphasis, Peter O., in Goff, 2005d).*

Unexpected, unplanned, and unbelieved the Inquiry continued throughout 2006, with members coming in and going out, collaborating on papers, continuing to raise the flag on new questions creating a flurry of emails and phone calls that would die away again, and attending occasional conferences and presentations with each other. Jane F. held the graces in our midst, by coordinating everyone’s ongoing poetry, musings and messages to each other in the promised Book of Psalms. The final text of the Book of Psalms was not delivered until the week of my handing my draft thesis to my panel; it truly worked as a reflexive document holding the presence of our ecology of inquiry. It was with this community around me that I wrote the thesis, developing its form and narrative as an emergent work, with the context of the Inquiry forever shifting, continually contesting my understandings, and lighting up my developing senses of coming to know.

Reflexivity

Theories of practice

Throughout the Inquiry, and being aware that while the co-researchers were interested in participatory practices many were largely unfamiliar with the scholarly works that explicate them, I would occasionally circulate papers that seemed to me to be relevant to a co-researcher’s participatory opportunity.

William Torbert’s work with Peter Reason touched many of the co-researchers with ease. His construction “Action Inquiry” discusses first, second and third person inquiry. At
the heart of his proposal is the proposition that given the unpredictability of life all our actions are forms of inquiry, and that all our inquiry is action (Torbert, 2001, p. 250). Torbert’s “Action Inquiry” sees living literally as action that is situated in curiosity but accepts that we are largely unaware of this quality of living and lacking ability to live life this way as a result. Judy Marshall’s self-reflexive pieces (1999, 2001, 2004) provide illustrations of a life lived this way:

...I outline some of my disciplines of inquiry. These are open frames rather than rigid behaviour patterns. I seek to pursue them with soft rigour, determined and persistent, but not obsessive. Part of inquiring is determining when to be focused and directed and when to be open and receptive... (Marshall, 2001, p. 433).

Wadsworth (2001, pp. 425-428) makes similar claims about her experience of facilitating emergent inquiry. She names strong and new inquiry sensitivities such as the necessity for continually exploring self knowledge and its connection (and otherwise) to how we can know each other; the ability to recognise the connections (and lack thereof) between various aspects of an inquiry endeavour; the intuitive sensing of new energies and the skills that she deploys in holding them strong, letting them go or nurturing their early development; and the “companioning” of transformative moments, recognising them and creating the means for pausing, deeper reflection and embracing the sometimes stormy atmosphere that they can bring. She acknowledges that practitioners have greatly varied styles of doing this work while also finding that in the free form of emergence something recognisable, some repetition or patterning, is going on.

Torbert’s methodology, which integrates subjective, inter-subjective and objective ways of knowing, suggests a differentiation of inquiry practice, which nevertheless is evoking familiar patterns to Wadsworth and indeed, our own experiences in the Inquiry. I circulated a variety of papers, but it was Torbert’s construction, using simple grammatical forms to expose multiple epistemologies at work, which provided essential inspiration for the greatest of our number as we embraced reflexivity. Again, this was not a methodology that was “applied” in a technical sense. It was much looser than that. People had agreed to an action research project but they had not agreed to “do” Action Research, and there was no consistency of understanding of what such research was, no means of agreeing to any one construction of it, and no conventional “site” being offered, formally or otherwise, with which to work such a method. We wanted no orthodoxy of research practice if we were to break through any established epistemology. “Action Inquiry” was bandied about, loosely referred to, hungrily digested by some and passed on with little interest by others.
I understand Torbert’s and Reason’s premise as being inquiry that is everyday experience, that needs to work from solitary reflection (first person, subjective), into inter-personal or relationally based discourse (second person, inter-subjective), and on into system level research (third person, objective) where policy and assumed truths, for example, can be changed through inquiry processes in the present (Torbert, 2001, p251). Its radicalism, in the Australian public sector at least, is claiming that third person forms of knowledge are inadequate for transformative, rather than adaptive, qualities of social change. Its foundation is an epistemological shift that lets us see everyday experience as the subject of, and political opportunity for, inquiry; that inquiry is not limited to policy objectives or identified “problems” using social trend data. As Marshall describes it, the methodology is systemic: first person experience (of a researcher and anyone else) being as a lens on the political and what can be constituted in living relationships as social “reality”, not the other way around.

The following reflections illustrate how this construction worked into our relationships with each other, our ongoing construction of the Inquiry as a whole and our individual practices in various sites:

*My interest in Penny's ideas is partly in relation to two developing situations in my workplace... One situation is a group of fellow workers and their networks that I must become a part of. I have to do it by persuasion and energy. Embodied action. Be there and be prepared. Listen and understand. Sense the dialogue well before taking part, like that 1st/2nd/3rd person exercise at [a local] Council. This is very demanding work and I am still positioning myself and considering my approach but recent events have accelerated this and catalytic action is of the essence. I need to participate ... (John, evaluation data, 30/11/05)*

*As a practitioner I have been asked to participate in an inquiry that will enable [me] to reflect on my practice and to learn in a collaborative environment. My sole contribution is time and knowledge, in return for which I gain knowledge, understanding and companionship. Every effort has been made to assist my participation irrespective of my location and personal commitments. The Inquiry and the construction practices have not been made accessible to me - it has been made inclusive of me. By this I mean that I have received encouragement and support from participants and the facilitator, not just had a door opened for me (Jane F., evaluative comment, 19/12/05)*
The 1st, 2nd and 3rd person theory was imperative to my practice and the coal loader project... Without it, the coal loader project would have been very different. There would not have been a team environment exploring new projects, we would have had an external consultant do a minimal compliance effort like other DA’s, we would not now have the community group bringing friends and others into it in the second year, there would not have been any in-house interviewing that I did, I would have started with my milestones and deadlines and never thrown them in the bin! There was also this relationship between us – with the fellow participants in the Inquiry – that was not superficial – it was deep – something about the intimacy of being on the phone – made working life intimate (Penny, exit interview, 9/2/06).

When we reframed our practices in such exchanges with each other our Inquiry community created its own substance: we participated in our own reconstructions of participatory practices, witnessing each other at such work, and encouraging inquiry, critique and learning as the practices unfolded. When our reconstituted practices are lived out in second person relationships with each other, in our work or community life, the Inquiry project can be seen as growing “satellite” sites, or that it becomes a new satellite site for each person’s “core” work. The Inquiry itself shifts its centre of gravity in our company as we each shift our centres in its company. There is no physical or even strategic form; there are fractals of perception through which we encounter ourselves, each other and our reflexive flares of understanding. With each encounter the Inquiry springs into conscious existence for a moment. It does not exist, objectively, outside of these moments. At such moments integrations of energies, which up until the interaction have been held apart in biography and accident, stream into each other and we are awakened. Is this so for all our perception of life?

Objectivism

Torbert sees third person inquiry not as objectivism confirmed, but as first and second person inquiry taking place at a level of leadership that influences the overall culture of a system. He imagines those with this range of power to make good use of it as distributed leadership (Torbert, 2001, p. 256), creating the conditions within which others are supported to carry out first and second person inquiry practices into present conditions. In this sense, the third person is not objectivity as concrete, fixed and mechanised reality at work so much as collective critical subjectivity held momentarily within reflexive, relational and systemic knowing.
In our Inquiry, Penny achieved early signs of this level of third person inquiry in her Council with those workers who were developing the coal loader project in a community partnership; Peter W. also created this depth of systemic culture in his participatory project networks such as the Older Women’s Network; Lesley realised that this is what she had achieved with her team of therapists, but had not labelled her accomplishment as “research” or inquiry practice before; and Jane G. was working towards such a construction of objectivity in her curriculum development work in health promotion. Jo, Brigid and John were working towards this achievement but were repeatedly hindered by their organisations’ ongoing acceptance of instrumentalism as the dominant culture (preserved in the orthodoxies of criminology, engineering and environmental science in each case), which would not sanction resource investment (time, money, expertise for example) in shifting that domination during the time of the Inquiry (it should be noted that since that time, and as verbally reported by each person, some mobility has come about in the form of increasing interest in epistemological shifts, but in the absence of research data being generated by the participants the details of how this has been achieved have not been reported). Jane F., Sue and Pete O. had no public site within which to work such ideas during the time of the Inquiry - although Pete’s Playback Theatre activities could be said to be based on this practice, and to this extent were already live and doing very well (and so not a particularly activist “participatory edge”).

I remain unsure about Margaret’s work, which resonated with much of what Torbert discusses. At the time Margaret felt that the practice of critical reflection, with its underpinning acceptance of our need to continually change, was transgressive to spiritual integrity:

You know with participatory practice I was getting a feeling I often get when people talk about Christianity and I don’t like it ... There is a view that we are all bad, that we need to be saved, and we need to change ... I bristle, I really bristle about that... What I have liked about [participatory practice] is the inherent value of our experiences and the inherent ok-ness about that. So when it’s about “we’ve got to do something else” I think, “I don’t know if I want to do something else. Bloody bugger I won’t be doing anything else” (teleconference transcript, 29/9/05).

Having raised such a tantalising challenge Margaret left our collaboration, but for me the heart of her concern was a resistance to being changed by theory or any other external power, so that the value of what we are and what we have can be fully appreciated. It felt to me that Margaret was responding to “third person”, be that a construction of a theory or an organisation, as something that is redolent with presumptions of power over us,
even when we are the ones using such powers against ourselves. I cannot forget Margaret’s powerful phrase “I put myself aside” when she is caught up in such work, a self that can be forgotten, sent to sleep perhaps just to survive the gap within which truth is lost, between work and home, labour and identity, as John’s emailing to himself also exposed:

_"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 (Fisher, J., Goff, S., Lavarack, J., Porter, L., and Whitecross, P., 2006, p 4)."

However Torbert’s construction of objectivity reverses this concept, by seeing power as a means of creating the conditions within which we are drawn into ourselves with each other, and from such a place develop a collective capability to deepen inquiry into current conditions. As described above, the co-researchers in some instances managed this depth of capability within the bounded settings that they influenced (projects and teams); but where they had no influence (such as myself in relationship to the Council I was introduced to) then this development could not get off the ground. However, in each of our cases, at the edges of our practice we ran into that wall of resistance that the young project officer found in the Council corridor: “show me something tangible”: our tacit agreement that this measure of truth is the bottom line.

Torbert shows us that this conviction, wall or gap, is nothing other than the way in which we think about ourselves and the ways we confirm or test such a self regard in our relationships with others: being a human construction of how we know, objectivity can only be a construction drawn from first hand experience as held in discursive relationships with others. It is within our range of possibilities to consider that as a human construction it does not have to be the only one, or even an accurate one as it is currently and popularly used.

As Polanyi showed, objectivity rests either on a moral vacuum that springs from an assumption that humanity is incapable of knowing truth, or that such truth can only be derived from transcendent forms of authority. Both stances deplete the human capability to actually discern truth for ourselves. As Bohm showed, objectivity lacks intelligence of how thought is being thought, an intelligence deficit through which incoherent forms of reality are constructed and act to further disintegrate our world. Working with Torbert’s approach of
seeing the third person unfolding through first and second person inquiry places the responsibility for how we construct realities fairly and squarely on each of our shoulders - and not in isolation of each other as reductionism would have us be. As we learn to hold our reflexive learnings in relationship with each other, in place of isolation grows ever-deepening trust and intimacy, more highly attuned sensitivities, more powerfully interlaced circuits of understanding, and more imaginatively envisioned and consummated qualities of freedom. Our practice challenge is to do this with those who constitute the wall of resistance to such an idea - to inquire into what is it about such a way of being that some people find so unworthy of credibility? Is it, as perhaps Margaret’s objections may signal, that that epistemological hold of instrumentalism is so much - so much - deeper than we suspect?

When I meandered down that ladder into my way of knowing I found my life story waiting to be told to myself and within it, a persistent valuing of objectivity that belied my professional rhetoric and practice. In this environment as we found, the notion of objectivity fails to be understood as concrete, innately just, or existing outside individual human construction. It becomes a human construction and must be judged for its epistemological, ethical and Earth systems value as a human construction: in terms of what it shows us of ourselves and our subsidiary understandings of the world that is knowable.

When I encountered the persistent tool that was my understanding of epistemology I did not refuse objectivity, but like Torbert, considered it in a new light. The light I gave it was not without basis, but researched and developed through dialogic practices. I gave its fragmenting character the hidden property of potential integration; I valued its repressive qualities for preserving that which objectivism dismisses - the betrayed virtuality. I attributed it with a quality of interaction with us as “our beautiful creature”, given by us the appointed task of keeping an extra chair in our circle for ongoing questioning and tangential commentary, of accepting the right for anything to come into our midst as a potential trajectory for learning and relationship building for as long as it was deemed necessary and no longer, as having mysterious qualities that lived within and between us. Objectivity became enlivened and I befriended and respected it, played with it and let it play with us. It stopped being powerful and frightening, and became an invitation to each of us to listen more deeply and reach momentary resting places of understanding and honesty. I became aware of the tones of authority that echoed around it, as they do in corridors and workshops, and learned that it is my unspoken self that makes such a terrible din. There is more play than we realize in the qualities of our constructions, their architectures and how we relate to them. If at some point their essential integrity, the thing that makes them what they are, is threatened to the point of their extinction, then we have choices about whether to stay with their integrity, to extinguish them or to let them be and move on to something else:
There is always a range of discretion open in a choice. The theory of personal choice says that, even so, a valid choice can be made by submitting to one’s own sense of responsibility (Polanyi, 1958, p 62).

I have learned that it is my sense of responsibility as held between us that is what we find at our wall of resistance to participation - whether it is within us or elsewhere. In our Inquiry community we found companionship, permission and the intellectual means to discover a form of responsibility that brought us into being true to ourselves for public good. The gap where truths are lost was shifting.

Inquiry everywhere

I understand that such an idea is counter-cultural, reckless perhaps but undoubtedly resistant of unimaginative dogmatism, to remind us of Polanyi’s insight. I know through learning, through feeling my concern, and knowing what humanity can achieve in participatory environments, that to carry out the extent of transformation that approaches us we must look at shifts that have the energising power to help us through what must be done. If we accept that objectivity is part of our problem then we need to include interrogation of it in our potential solutions.

In our Inquiry, as we had no authorised bounded inquiry space even if our satellites were such spaces, we developed our participatory inquiry skills anywhere, about anything and at any time, letting them take up a voluntary life rather than forcing them into scrutiny, compliances with external forms of validation, problem solving or negotiation. It presented us with an idea of community that is founded in being as aware as we can be, wherever we are and whoever we are with; a community of open-ended possibilities.

This approach is in sync with current developments in participatory practice:

*Participatory action inquiry aims at timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action at all moments of living* (Reason, 2001, p. 3).

Torbert’s proposal does much more than offer a form of inquiry for individual practitioners working in collaborative entities; he suggests that our institutions should sustain and symbolise the transformative capabilities of personal and inter-personal inquiry (Torbert, 2001, p. 256). Such a form of organization, he contends, is essential if our institutions are to manage the scale of transformation our very close future scenarios will enforce if we are to hold our social ecologies throughout the forces of chaos. Our Inquiry project is the actual manifestation of such a community, called into being through the gradual recognition of theories of participatory practice as a means of understanding what we do, who we are in the
doing, where we are, who we are with and what we are collectively bringing into being. As such our institutions need to learn to trust such initiatives, to open their ways of doing, knowing and becoming to the augmented potential that such “freed up” inquiry can explore and come to know. We need such opportunities to develop experiential and tacit forms of knowledge about an idea on which our current and future qualities of life depend.

Despite my futile efforts to the contrary, we did not create this inquiry entity through analysis, theme construction and inquiry practices, or mechanisms of reflection on action (although the evaluation system was undeniably valuable to me, the extent to which it actually informed other participants’ understanding of what we were doing is questionable - a familiar problem with evaluative knowledge). Our inquiry system emerges through the little and growing self-initiated transactions that manifest as open-ended works; our recognition of shifts in perception, relationship and the value positions which distinguish reality; our sharing our presence with each other in our isolation in other places; our holding an account of our commitments to participation even when the doing of it was so tight for so long; our finding our sources of voluntary participation within ourselves; our facing our taught and dark surfaces of not knowing; our maintaining vigilance of interpersonal trust in non-participation; our creating a porosity of boundaries regarding our subject matters and our varying forms and intensities of engagement; and a poetic ethos of the sacred surrounding our first person reflections and the principles of necessity and self organization. Not being bound to the militaristic origins of “strategy” we do what needs to be done without conflating interactions beyond their felt urgency and innate capacity to grow or not: therein we find our limits and our truths. These qualities of transaction, and many more, are flowing through us as living and daily experiences:

*I became aware of my own epistemological split! The part of me that truly resonates with the direction of this enquiry into the unknown, the intuitive, the poetic. And the part of me that is grounded well and truly in mechanistic measures of quality and progress towards a known goal. My interest is in the integration of these two places within myself, within my work and within my life (Brigid to everyone: email 14/2/06)*

*Funny enough I got feedback about the reflective practice session that I did as part of the community engagement workshop for staff. Some great feedback and some saying it was too deep, too intellectual, others wondering what Reflective Practice had to do with community engagement, and other comments that indicated it didn’t resonate too easily with some people. (Lesley, email to Susie: 7/4/06).*
Paradox and integrity

Polanyi, Bohm, Foucault, Bourdieu and Torbert each claim that knowledge has an intrinsic dynamic of emergence, of one kind or another, which has the effect of both ordering human experience and propelling it through transformative leaps. Our experience of emergence in the Inquiry, as a community coming into being in terms of the knowledge that we, its members, were creating for ourselves, can bring us to know ourselves, our realities and experiences of transformation, in such patterned forms. We resisted pinning it down into a stuck pattern; we have our ongoing relationships with each other, our ongoing relationship with the Inquiry experience, and each of us an ongoing right and responsibility to take whatever it meant to us into forms of practice that we regard as “participatory”. For myself, this has amounted to this thesis, and the patterning that I do is in the meld of thought, writing and my relationship with the reader as the next two chapters provoke.

Polanyi’s vision (1958a, p. 405) of this patterned form is of “a prime cause emergent in time” arising from “universal standards”, located in a “cosmic field” and “directing itself” at a timeless aim of “ultimate liberation”. In his view each of us is a tiny “stage in the awakening of the world” which is held apart from the morphogenetic intention of freedom by our adherence to objective knowledge. Paradoxically, he argues for causality as an objective truth, which can only be fully grasped in the ineffable subjective (tacit knowledge).

Bohm reflects Polanyi’s understanding of knowledge as unfolding hierarchies of order and orders of order, reflexively turning back on themselves with the benefit of hindsight to stage transformative shifts of thought, manifesting the implicate order of the cosmos as they do. Western influenced humanity only experiences this dynamism partially, because we still largely adhere to objectivism in our desire to predict and control our circumstances. In Bohm’s mind, objectivity forces disciplinary separation of knowledge, leading to societal fragmentation and our ongoing alienation from being “whole”, felt as our “mess without” carried in the “mess within”. He sees us as being “in a mess” most of the time, because we mistakenly believe that the world is in the same way as we think it is - “our thought is regarded as a direct correspondence with objective reality” (Bohm, 1980, p. 3). In so doing we lose the presence of thought itself: we lose sense of our conscious participation in thought and its participation in us (Bohm, 1998, p. 72). The emergence of knowledge under such circumstances appears ordered but in “Thought’s” terms, is a damaging and chaotic event. Here is another paradox: that the world is not (does not have to be, or is not only) a direct reflection of how we think, but currently it is such a reflection because of how we think and enact our thinking recursively.
Foucault describes a similar error of thinking. His description of “thought of the Same” or Similitude (Foucault, p. 1970) as a form of western thought prevalent until the end of the sixteenth century defines a world ordered according to the way one thing was experienced as the same as another: “earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars…” (Bohm: 1970, p.17). In confusing what we think with what is, as Bohm sees it, some of us get stuck at a cognitive moment that is over four hundred years old. This observation and experience is similar to the analysis that much current management strategy is stuck anachronistically at the epistemology of Newton’s mechanistic paradigm (Weil, 1997, p. 43). Like Polanyi and Bohm, Foucault sees knowledge unfolding over time, in his case, as “an organic structure which grows in accordance with its own necessity and develops in accordance with autochthonous laws” (1970, p. 226). Such laws (of thought) are not able to be traced back to a chronological origin, but are discernable in what “returns” (Ibid, p.331-335):

... the origin is that which is returning, the repetition towards which thought is moving, the return of that which has already always begun, the proximity of a light that has been shining since the beginning of time (Foucault, 1966, p. 332).

Foucault sees us as “openings” (Ibid, p.332) through which “time in general can be reconstituted, duration can flow, and things at the appropriate moment, can make their appearance”. As he warns us, to forget that it is “man” that is doing the thinking, even in the still dominating apophantics 21 of mathematics (Ibid, p.74) is to stand in the way of the possibility of our liberation from sociologically construed Man (Ibid, p.343). We were not always so construed and will not always be so.

As Jo discerned:

You know, I am sitting here, um, there is a world that happened here long before I was sitting here. And was just imagining that, imaging the child sitting up on that ledge – ... I can’t be certain, but that is how it is looking. Just knowing other people have had this amazing experience long before. And how they... Just... Really weird, that kind of feeling I had – in that world, just for a moment, and then it was like... back through here – that was what was happening for me... I am just in awe, I am so privileged to be in one of...” She fades back into her comfortable silence (The Cave).

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21 I cannot find a dictionary definition of this term. On considering its elements I suggest “apo” meaning “detached” and “phant” as in “phantism” - “illusion or deceptive appearance” - so “apophantics” could mean an illusion that is detached from reality, or vice versa.
Foucault also envisions paradox at the heart of truth, seeing our search for sensing the true as being an understanding of the origin of things, including the thing of knowing, and that such an origin can only ever be secret - void and presence, focal and subsidiary:

*Beyond any apparent beginning there is always a secret origin - so secret and so fundamental that it can never be quite grasped in itself. Thus one is led inevitably, through the naivety of chronologies, towards an ever receding point that is never itself present in any history; this point is merely its own void; and from that point all beginnings can never be more than recommencements or occultation (in one and the same gesture, this and that)* (Foucault, 2002, p. 27).

It would seem however that not all thought does such unfolding, and that much of it gets stuck in our sleep, our gaps, secret origins and immobilised state. This was the substance of our Inquiry for me. Reflective of Foucault’s understanding of thought and the unfolding of structures of knowledge, but seeing the dynamic of emergence in a different form, Bourdieu alerts us to the possibility that our “natural” way of being is comprised of what we have forgotten, embedded in the unconscious which is where he locates objectivity. John’s sudden insight to his (forgotten) differences of how he is at work and how he is at home, made so powerfully evident to him as he shifted the “field of action” around reading his email to himself, I see as an illustration of this dynamic at work. Bourdieu uses the term “genesis amnesia” to describe this situation:

*...in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday's man; it is yesterday’s man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result. Yet we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us; he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves. Consequently we are led to take no account of him, any more than we take account of his legitimate demands (Bourdieu, 1977, p.79).*

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This idea, of the interplay between being and not being, is central to current notions of transdisciplinarity as Max-Neef describes in his Third Law of Transdisciplinarity: “Only because of what is not there, it is possible that there is what is there; and only because what is there it is possible that there is not what is not there” (Max-Neef, 2005, 53, p. 16). While such observations are pertinent to our Inquiry they are backgrounded in this thesis, because our work came about without such references to current theory. My wish is that it speaks on the basis of living relational knowings at this time in our human unfolding, and not as compliance with pre-existing knowledge such as Max-Neef so eloquently expresses. My wish is that the reader does not refer to the authority of others to know their truth in this text.
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

The ordering patterns of our long past is only paralleled by a long future that also meets in us in some form. Bourdieu proposes that these forgotten assumptions are “doxa” or assumed and unquestionable realities protected by orthodoxies such as the assumed truth of objectivism and the assumed right of authority embedded in mechanistic systems. He sees the doxa as made up of objective knowledge - or to put it another way - that objective knowledge is doxa. Here is another paradox: that if truth is objective knowing then it can only be known in terms of “that which is forgotten”, which keeps on influencing our powers of discernment but which we have lost the sensitivity to know. I am reminded of Bohm’s notion of our losing our sensitivity to how we think - if we ever had such a thing. How do we retrieve or reinvent these things in such a void?

Bourdieu though, has a significantly different “take” on emergence to Polanyi, Bohm and Foucault who each attribute emergence with qualities of objectivity that are understood as laws and patterns of cosmological origin, whereas Bourdieu sees emergence as a transaction of power in a purely human sense - “the fundamental virtue of conformity” (Ibid, p. 161) in terms of psychology and sociology. Almost un-stated in his text but so evident in its self-revealing message is the extraordinary idea that objective knowledge (the doxa protected by the orthodoxy of objectivist science) is not fixed but responsive to interrogation and morphogenesis. For Bourdieu objectivity is that which cannot be apprehended by human consciousness until revealed in multiple orthodoxies, and the moment that it is seen the state of that which is being known becomes subjective (Ibid, p.168). It is in this messy soup of multiple orthodoxies that Torbert’s practices find their natural place, participating in the unfolding of humanity not towards some fixed objective ideal, but utterly vulnerable to qualities of self-reflexivity as held relationally between us.

In other words knowledge is human and thus subjective; it is only made to look objective through the asserted holding patterns of the powerful. Is this what is behind the condemnation of subjectivity? Not suspect for not knowing truth, but for knowing untruths. In its dislodgement from the hidden powers of domination in predisposed “structures of doing” new knowings hold within them a readiness for something else to happen at an epistemological and potentially, ontological level. Is not this the level of existence, sooner rather than later, that we must become adept at living, to reconstitute human ways of being that can live with nature the way nature can live with us? Bourdieu does not see emergence as an elegant unfolding over time so much as a backward and forward motion between the felt sense of “how to do” (forms of action) and the dominant powers in the field of action that determine what happens (intent). The managerial, and indeed inquiry ideal of coherence between say, theory and practice (praxis), for Bourdieu would be a sign of subjugation at work. It is incoherence that is the thin edge to the liberating wedge:
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

It is all so incredibly odd. It is a strange land we are in together. As you say it has never happened. The odds are that it wouldn’t happen (Jane F.: The Cave).

We are moving into a time when those forgotten, unquestionable and unseen powers that determine “how we do” to progress intent are not purely human; they are now also human distortions of “nature” as our turtle so powerfully illustrated. In these conditions, as natural systems rear up in their distress into our consciousness, into the innumerable “nest eggs” that are our Caves, will Bourdieu’s doxa always be a subjugating entity or can we through participatory knowing shift the nature of the forgotten and unknowable so that it holds a form of power that is “with us”, rather than “over us”? Is this the integrity of participatory practice?

The cup falls

As already discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 describing the ground on which we stand in our emergence into practice, participatory practitioners actively create Bourdieu’s incoherence. At this early stage in the movement’s establishment, we bring a perturbing (activist) habitus of equitable participation (our feel for the game of participation) to an existent field of action where the habitus of inequity and non-participation has been the dominant game (Richardson’s narrative of bringing literary form to anthropological scholarship, as discussed in Chapter 3, is one such example, Wadsworth’s of “divining” new edges between stakeholder and critical reference group perspectives is another).

Jean Baker Miller (1976) understands such incoherence as a consequence of the subjugation of women. She reasons that men’s experience has remained undeveloped psychologically because the human capacity to embrace human experience is largely a female attribute kept subordinate in accepted sciences and cultural actions (again, as Richardson, Weil, Marshall and Wadsworth show). It means that as women, and as people of any gender who are sensitive to non-dominating epistemologies, we can be trapped in first and second person ways of knowing, which are unable to be drawn into the systemic realms of the third person where that objectified and generic third “person” is a subjugating reflection of dehumanisation. Bourdieu recognised this dynamic too: “‘private’ experiences undergo nothing less than a change of state when they recognize themselves in the public objectivity of an already constituted discourse, the objective sign of recognition of their right to be spoken and to be spoken publicly” (Ibid, p.170; Bourdieu’s italics). In our gentle moves from familiar third person to first and second, and slow stepping back into third, our Inquiry community was holding back the inevitable change of state that formal collaboration with the institution in its current state would demand:
Chapter 7. Community: encountering transformation

For a “formal” participation to have been negotiated I would have had to persuade my boss over a form of practice that I didn’t feel he understood, and give him power over a group/project that I felt protective about. And at that stage, the whole thing might have gone belly up (co-researcher, email communication: 10/10/06;)

In my case I could not conceive of a formal association with my institution, given my newness to the job and the kind of work I had to proceed with early on...It was up to me to do the proposing and I was not clear enough in myself to know how to pursue this. It was more productive, I felt at the time, to pursue the research in a more “private” sphere (co-researcher, email communication: 11/10/06).

Indeed I had made the same decision as a result of encounters with the council strategic planning unit. Miller describes how (in Bourdieu’s terms) the doxa of subjugation itself carries with it both the knowledge of subjugation and the totality of human experience even in its hidden form:

Women, then become the “carriers” for society of certain aspects of the total human experience - those aspects that remain unsolved. (This is one reason why women must be so mistreated and degraded). The result of such a process is to keep men from fully integrating these areas into their own lives. These parts of experience have been removed from the arena of full and open exchange and relegated increasingly to a realm outside of full awareness, in which they take on all sorts of frightening attributes. Because women have been less able than men to express their own experiences and concerns, they have not been able to introduce these elements into the normal social exchange (Miller, 1976, p. 23).

In holding our Inquiry back from our institutions, through reasoning and intuition, through mishap and incompetence, we were letting the subjugation continue in order to protect that hidden totality of human experience. Reading Miller’s conception of such a potential I am reminded of Polanyi’s “noosphere” wherein truth and error is to be found, as discerned by humanity’s moral ability to know one from the other, within the terms of our cosmological trust. Polanyi argued for our right to extend this moral capability as acts of personal knowing. Miller’s proposition is that this potential is within our midst, held between us, waiting to come into being when we address the fears that entrap our valuing of what we see as women’s ways of knowing. I felt such rattling silencing within the Inquiry over and over, from everyone regardless of gender, and including myself. We each carry...
such silencing distorting our inner voices and sometimes making clumsiness of our efforts to speak. It is in a little blind, the looking away too soon, losing interest without knowing we are, which when realised springs open like a too tightly packed box of papers; such papers that need just a drop of water to begin the return to their forested origins.

Like Torbert, Miller’s construction of truth departs from Polanyi, Bourdieu, Bohm and Foucault’s constructions in two ways: it has no paradoxical knot to get through, and it is not relegated to some idealised “other world” beyond the reach of anyone with less than cosmological accreditation to reach it. For Miller the potential for moral capability is in our everyday relationships with each other. Foucault expresses this idea of holding transformative potential in our everyday, wrapping Miller, Bohm, Bourdieu and Polanyi into one beautiful question:

*What must I be, I who think and who am my thought, in order to be what I do not think, in order for my thought to be what I am not?* (Foucault, 1966, p. 350).

### The cup floats

Chapter 7 is my favourite Chapter - it is where I got into my stride. It holds the whole of the thesis so that I started wondering why you needed the rest of it! Well, it exists because of what has gone before - it locates the Cave, my development about my practice - and yours (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06).

What eventuated in the flurry of research-type activity and after much more silence, was that the nature of silence changed its character to me. It became a very particular silence, not the same old one with the same noisy voices in my head. It became a considered stillness; the doxa dislodged to become a vibrant potential of movement at any point on the “surface” of the imminent presence “of us”, a rustling of energy that extended along any aspect of our being together, for just as long, in just the direction(s) that it needed to, falling back into its solar furnace, at the moment that it stopped needing to be.

I had to let go the orthodoxy of inquiry practice and with it my narrative of “other”; I dropped the instruments of rigour and validity in the form of epistemological congruency, and with them the “othering” of those and those qualities of myself, who do not conform to such indicators of “good knowledge”. I stopped using theory of practice as a tool with which to complete a task of a particular quality, and learned of its value as a way of recognising (knowing) fragments of experience. I learned not to carve shapes out of experience to fit a theory - as ethical and progressive as such a theory might be - and to respect instead the uninterrupted flow of coming to know within myself and with the co-researchers. I was
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continually amazed at the wisdom we released, just as Miller describes, that is so close to hand and so fearfully regarded. I understand anew how we become distorted in our turning away from ourselves and have learned to hold such distortions with understanding and compassion; to clear away the interferences, see the ground that is our stance, and call back the spirit of inquiry when we are drowning in dread.

I eventually let loose those bits of paper, published and our own, as leaves blowing on a seasonal wind so I could sense the breezes of curiosity and its iterative seasons without pressing these elements into papery forms. It was not that my practice was ill conceived in an obvious sense, but I was still harbouring the shadow that participatory practices meet at their borders. I needed to trust that I would not lose the battle against immobility when I stopped fighting it. I found my limit, encountered my biography, asked for help and offered it back - as we came to do with each other.

Our success was in letting a different kind of working space arise which eventually flowed into the Cave in the Blue Mountains, and all that came into being in that place; all that has flowed and reconstituted with it, since. This space became a place where people could attend to things that they had previously rushed over; in which they could say things out loud for the first time; relate to each other with vulnerability and respect; and take things that would otherwise be beyond our social and conscious reach into those places and relationships that made them so. How does this change the nature of Bourdieu’s “doxa”?

*It now seems clear that we have arrived at a point from which we must seek a basis of faith in connection - and not only faith but recognition that it is a requirement for the existence of human beings. The basis for what seem the absolutely essential next steps in western history if we are to survive is already available* (Miller, 1986, p. 88).

In our own terms, we struggled with what was “absolutely essential” - starting at the tacit and invisible rules of the objectivist game. We began the Inquiry feeling that we each had little value - that we had forgotten or did not know what we could offer. We were unrecognisable to those individuals or institutions that to a great extent define us. We were limited to remote forms of interaction not conducive to developing trust for many, and technologically “clunky” much of the time. We came from (brought with us and returned to) different orientations, different disciplinary backgrounds, and socio-political and geographic contexts. Our everyday lives were resistant to giving up time and other currencies with which to fund our work together. We acted without methodology, with no road map or training manual to inform us what to do. We were asking questions that we did not understand and which one way and another are condemned by many. We were intent on
creating knowledge about things, such as participation and sustainability, which are trapped and diminishing within us and around us.

This is sacred ground. Sacred for its resilience, its trust in us despite the evidence to the contrary, and sacred for its exquisite value in the world even as we see it through the instrumental eye. For all its lack of substance, it is ground. In clearing out the paraphernalia and the commanding voices we each made a patch, which we stitched together to form a work. Each patch is economically fitted to each person’s necessity, each giving a view of the Inquiry that would be utterly distinct from any other, from any other similarly random, open ended and undisciplined enterprise. But we are not alienated from each other in our differences - we are drawn towards each other through them, even in our peevishness23 with each other, with ourselves. The back and forth of Bourdieus vice-gripped world is melted into liquid flows of humility and appreciation:

Jane,

if I were standing before you know it would be directly to you in most formal stance of respect, with hands in a Thai greeting before me. This is.... gorgeous.

I have one tiny correction on which I must insist.

[bow]

John (John to Jane F., email 3/3/06).

It cannot be told like any other research story. We cannot analyse it and measure it up against other cases or any preset validity criteria or goals. We cannot prove we did it, that “it” exists. It does not exist outside of our connection with each other. It remains peripheral, a patina between one way of knowing and others, a liminal potential between existence and extinguishment. However, as participatory practitioners, we are obliged to make our experience understandable and widely accessible to others, trusting that implicit in the knowing of thought and how we think, of knowing and how we know, is nature’s own self-interested survival:

“What do we understand is the possibility of inviting others to make a similar journey, out of McMansion Land to somewhere else?” (Jane F.: The Cave).

We can describe a pathway that came through us in our quest and that we chose to walk to arrive at our own epiphanies in each other’s gracious presence. It is the

23 I thank John for using this little word so truthfully amongst us
acknowledgment of the pathway, the agreement to walk down its steps into those waiting
caves, the experience of epiphany, whatever its nature that we articulate and are present to,
within the Cave and outside it that we offer as the value of participatory practice to
sustainability, as a reflexive surface on which others may come to know their own
participatory value:

Our conversation breaks out again: “What sort of research is this?” “I
feel my heartbeat from the soil”; “moments of grace – knowing truth from
illusion”; “being each other’s safety net in the company of the Earth”;
“bring it on”; “jogged out of space”; “personal journey and mythology
to reflect back to me”; “mammalian need, holding the mirror”; “a
message brick” (The Cave).
CHAPTER 8
MESSAGE STICKS: WORKING REALITIES
BEYOND RELIABLE CLUES

Can the wild, the unknown, let alone the sacred be pre-packaged? Can someone else’s blueprint become your adventure? Doesn’t the sacred, this place of transcendent encounter and discovery, lie at the edge, or in the depths, of what is already meaningful for us, on the other side of the given? And don’t we have to be our own guides in seeking out this other side, since only we can identify “the given” in our own lives, and find our way to its edges and its depths? (Mathews, 2000, p. 28).

Introduction

In this chapter I engage with the many qualities of participatory practices that the co-researchers brought into our Inquiry, integrating first and second and sometimes-reflexive third person recognitions, in whatever ways their lives gave form to. Following on from the previous chapter, we reframe the third person as being a mutually held recognition of something that exists between two people, something that has an heuristic power such as a specific distinction or frame of understanding but only as held between us. This stance requires a subtle shift. The many constructions of participatory practices that constitute the message sticks are a flow of significance between our senses of self with others; that which we are constructing as expressions of integrity and cohesion, and the sense of heritage and legacy to which these experiences of knowing can be sourced. Each is shifted from the Inquiry’s initial account of participatory practices (table 4 in the Appendix); the shift took place in each person’s self understanding of their practice, in my practice of inquiry with them, and in the emergent “fields” of participatory potential in each of our sites and within the Inquiry collaboration. The morphogenesis of inquiry form, focus, practice and inquirer is indivisible.

The text for this chapter is comprised of the “dialogic scripts” which I wrote between September and October 2005. They are the grace of ritual at work, making text of what we do as participatory practice, a practice that integrates and transforms itself and that which passes through it systemically, as these scripts accomplish. They do so in ways that are both iconic and relevant, opening ourselves to each other and a flow of thought, heritage
and responsibility that we volunteer into our everyday forms of participatory practice. They show the four constituents of participation (governance, development, learning and activism) throughout, not as ascribed instrument, but as recognisable qualities presenting in multiple and extended forms, of varying emphases depending on each persons’ context and personal preference.

**Legitimacy**

Instrument, regulation and legislation: expressions of civic value - jewels fixed in the crown of governing systems as it rests on the head of democratic power. Brigid is inside this head listening to its internal humming, she is moving through its networked energy systems as it makes way for her over here, and then, over there.

“I am frightened of dying in this organization”.

There are layers, tangles, hangovers and trajectories of power pushing themselves into Brigid’s life: misogyny, colonisation, legitimacy and spirit. How do we find ourselves in the company of such powers? Do we invite them in or do they seek us out? Are they really there or just a way of making sense of our experiences looking one way, one day in one place, and something else another day? How do I know “what is” when I am as inconstant as the world’s inconstancy, and when my power of knowing is also as inconstant?

We know inconsistency. We are both first generation migrants arriving in Australia with our parents some thirty years ago. I have felt the pioneer legacy in my life that such dislocation offers: I tremble between the freedom of homelessness and settlement. I seek other ways of being within myself, with those around me so we may enjoy the green fields of legitimacy. We share quests, Brigid and I, in social justice, governance, responsibility and reverential life. The narrative of landlessness is never far from our dreaming; our suitcases light as we walk up the main street, unknown, unseen and sticking out like a sore thumb. Where is our homeland?

“Authority as relationship with place”: she stands at the counter, taking 300 calls a day. “The goddess is here”, someone says with relief as she turns her face to the crowd holding their letterheads, numbers, maps and plans. They want answers, they want to be told: the head of power is home to the grey jewel of displacement – the wrong questions, the wrong answers, the wrong powers badly won in the wrong battles. Who says they are wrong? With what authority? Which place? Whose? With what relationship and how much power to do what?

“Ugh – this is YOURS!” Take it back – ask questions of possibility rather than compliance, shoulder the yoke of labour rather than self-interest, shake the hands of diversity
rather than opportunism. The papers move across the counters, behind the doors, into the attics, studies and chambers, back to the counters while the blue whales are circling the world’s largest island.

“I had to sit in the place of mechanism. I had to listen.”

We talk about the system in collapse, the lack of expertise to do the work at hand, the anachronistic ideas of expertise so that even when it is available it cannot do the job at hand. The mess is hidden behind a jumble of delay, rulings, dot points and in-boxes; transformation hides in fleeting moments in half forgotten conversations:

“I am talking about garages and fences. He asked me: how do you measure the invisible? Ah – he said – you’re a sociologist!”

Old men, old hippies, old programmes: new employees, new courses, new planning tools.

On closer scrutiny the elements of participation are there, she is seeing them and hearing their distant sounds inside the presenting networks of power. The legislation is about participation – it is about contest, community values, practical application, responsibility and the relationship between people and power. Brigid is seeing that relationship as interrupted by the instruments of regulation, how people hand over their power in the face of the regulation – fearful of getting it wrong, or what it might take from them – and not seeing that the instrument is a tool for their choices, for their reflective consideration of their relationship with land and future generations. “It’s your land: you want to build this shed on it? So you haven’t seen any platypus in the creek – are you sure that means that they are not there? Would you like them to be?” She is turning the equation back and disallowing dependency; she knows the governing system can never carry such a yoke, and must not if land and its people are to live.

So what is legitimacy in this place? To what extent is Brigid holding power for the crumbling institution and to what extent is she holding the energy of the land and its people? Is it sand that is streaming through her fingers or mud pushing up between her toes? Where is she standing in the spaces between these architectures of our times – the land, the people, the institutions and their “counter –cultures” where the currencies of energy and reverence are minted?

She is experiencing overwhelm and inspiration, toxicity and vacuum, self-organization and accountability. Passion in the everyday struggle, being in passion together - emancipation is possible as the walls comes down.
For example, Brigid is using words like “social capital” – the essential currency in the face of collapse; she is paying attention to history, “inter-generationality”, equity and the heritage of place; she is feeling cultures of oppression as they play out within her and letting new forms of authority be born from the same places; she holds, stays with and maps the paradoxes that spring up at the boundaries, demarking the limits of action and the springs of Inquiry; she faces and stays in the most difficult part of her journey – ever.

Participatory practices rub against the old system as it collapses. There are many crows flying over the remains, feeding and fighting, exposing the bones as they are revealed to the sky gods for their blessings; participatory practice is making and telling the story wherever its form is seen by the eyes that can see it. Brigid’s participatory eyes, strong heart and dancing feet are discerning measures of truth within the new.

**Living and doing**

A starting place, a reflective moment when we could understand transformation in a way that helped us see the movement of form within the word, is the small and disciplined act of diary writing. Penny writes her thoughts about up and coming meetings with her co-workers, managers, directors and community members before she has a meeting, holding her notes in her mind – not exclusively, but presently, during it. After the event she returns to her notes to look at the differences between her assumptions and expectations and what she perceives to have taken place as “relational action”.

In Penny’s hands, this small, disciplined action extends the opportunity for her as a practitioner to stay with the felt experience of these interactions, to become conscious of her framing and to loosen its hold on her thinking and quality of action. People respond to the lightness of her being in relationship with her project. Penny makes room for them within their own terms: “Everyone learns differently: it’s slow and delicate work. People need the opportunity to think things through. For themselves.”

It is invisible work and hard to remember to do – to visit before hand, hold within the engagement, and drag myself back to, afterwards. Damn! How many times do I need to learn that? I thought I had sorted that one and look – one @#$% - and I am right back there again. I have to learn how to keep the thing I need to accept about myself, whatever it is, present to me whenever I am in active relationship with others. Penny is saying: “Power is in the front of my brain: I was going about my business before and not really noticing. If someone is trying to control, exert or transfer power I am in tune with it. I am in touch with it.”

Sometimes I can be present within myself and with others through the principles that I work with. For example, as I become aware of my thinking gathering itself up before a
sentence I am about to offer, the principles appear within the thought shaping it as I begin to speak.

They are mischievous and agile, those principles, rock solid and dependable one moment, absent the next, leaping out at me when I don’t expect them or playing tag with perception, understanding, self creation and decision making. It is like building pathways of cultural energy, which are in themselves evolving in character, within specific contexts.

Penny describes a similar experience:

“When I first did the principles of the Coal Loader Project, they were all about water and waste and such like; now they have changed to community and social relationships…The basic principles of equity, understanding, transparency – any set of principles that make a relationship equitable can be held in relationship with the environment too. I don’t see segregation between social and environmental communities. People don’t see it, but the people and place relationships - where they grew up, a spiritual relationship - that is a window in.”

First, Penny is imbuing an action strategy with principles, then, by working those principles in collaborative learning relationships that cross boundaries between Council and community, the nature of the strategy is transforming at its foundations. That is energy at work. This did not come about through argument or agenda pushing. It came about by Penny opening up learning relationships within herself and with her co-workers, inviting them in to practice sessions to learn about learning with community and by them saying “yes”; by throwing a presumed management approach of a project matrix into the bin and putting in its place a question with no known answer; by being in a team that is willing to take on the same open ended approach in its own way of being together; by letting each person’s expectations be exceeded by experience. Penny is saying: “The more inclusive I am, the more support is offered, the more capacity for action is built.”

Participatory practice, in this environment, can be felt as embodying a “flow of power” across an organization and its boundaries and into other contexts. It is power characterised by its principles and not by the experience of control and its signature, authority. It is characterised by its own particular quality of movement and not by the exertion of external energy to hold things still – it is power as a quality and direction of flow in a continual state of redistribution. Because it is so restless it cannot be captured, and is continually changing its appearance even if its principled structure and intent remain consistent. It has a life of its own, as Penny has remarked so often. The practitioner’s duty of care is to sit with it, accept it however it manifests, including within ourselves, to introduce or distinguish principles to its form; to notice it and celebrate it as it transforms even where
others may not see it; to reject the ideas of transference and keep the energy pathways open for its natural ability to flow on under its own steam.

The way Penny talks about power and energy reminds me of how Bohm talks about knowledge - as an organic entity with a life of its own, but which is susceptible to human intent and evolution. “I am trying to do the same thing with the community centre’s rain harvesting system. Instead of my doing the funding proposal all on my own, and seeking endorsement from others, I booked a room and invited an engineer, a consultant, my manager and a few others in for a couple of hours to create the proposal together. When I said we needed to involve the community they gave it back to me saying “you are the expert here” and walked out of the room – but – they still got excited in co-creating this proposal and we came up with a much better one than if we had not done it together.”

Penny shepherded this flow of energy in her questions about how things are done. As with the rain-harvesting proposal, the actual moment of change can be unremarkable. People walk out the room and get on with their day as normal. There is as yet no framework in their minds to appreciate the value of what has just happened, to understand its scale or the dedicated art of the practitioner who has worked quietly and patiently to let the flow of power irrigate this particular room. What just happened does not exist within the old framework and is almost invisible to them.

This is also true for practitioners themselves who often are not aware of what they are doing “…we cannot know everything through rational intelligence and must accept incompleteness”) (Marshall, 2004, p. 306).

An unremarkable moment in a practitioner workshop in a Council in metropolitan Sydney is a window into the global project of co-creating a form of justice and freedom that is (and always has been) life giving to all who are within its reach – all life forms and the sources of nourishment that they depend upon and regenerate in turn. This is true for the moment when connections of a whole system are lit up by and to an individual’s awareness, when a conversation is had that results in a shift in time usage in an organization so that learning and understanding of people, and not mechanistic drive forced by fear and hierarchy, are made foreground to manifesting change. As Bohm says: “participation means being taken into the whole. You can’t take part in something unless that thing to some sense accepts your participation” (Bohm, 1996, p.86).

Together we are growing new languages and perceptive skills to see and work with it, our participation contributing to natural intelligence, which in some way accepts our participation as an element of its sustainability.
Chapter 8. Message sticks: working realities beyond reliable clues

The cathedral in the rock

The icon of the cathedral in the rock, drawn from Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s classical text, “The Little Prince”, is powerful. Its power is in its shape shifting energy, its recognition of us, its compassion for our human struggles in the way that we are shaping them. Peter O. brings this reference into our dialogue as we peer into the troubled epistemological divide between the cultures of authority and co-governance that he sees into his workplace.

Peter is a participatory practitioner who works at the edges of consultative approaches to governance. At these edges he works with/around/through the un-thought instinct of his peers and superiors, an instinct that directs him to predetermine the outcome of such engagements to avoid trouble. In the “trade” we call this “facipulation”. Peter works at this edge.

This is the shadow of consultation: where so called “participation” hides the non-negotiable cultures of control, regulation, authority and un-accountability. This purpose and form of facilitation operates within the “governance” domain of participatory practice within the model that I am proposing. Peter’s mode of action, as we discuss it, is to create and hold a space within which participants can experience some form of balance in life, that they can express this experience in ways that may not be common to their cultural assumptions but that are also not so uncommon as to create discomfort. His intention is to manage forms of participation that generate balanced information for public policy. He sees his practice as providing the opportunity for participants to travel into a “labyrinth” approaching the “centre” which he occupies, wherein there is a low point, a still point and a turning point from one state of being into another.

It is here, in the centre of the labyrinth, that a pile of rocks can be seen as a cathedral: “The rock pile ceases to be a rock pile the moment a single man contemplates it bearing within him the image of a cathedral”. The phrase evokes the relationship between perception and meaning, inner and outer worlds and the discourses of power that mediate what is articulated and what is recognised as “reality”, with and without clues.

Here it is that we share a conviction that if we are to serve public needs in the manifestation of socio-environmental sustainability then we need to challenge and penetrate the closed mindedness of individuals and systems (if systems can have minds) that refuse to question what they see as the tangible, and therefore real world. For whom a pile of rocks is always a pile of rocks and nothing else – not those elements, including the quantum, that constitute its concreteness but are beyond visibility, that can only be proven within knowledge systems (as compared to sensory ones); not its history through geological time;
not its meaning within different cultural perspectives; nor its potential through different value systems. There is no other way that these rocks can speak to this epistemology of depersonalisation, quantification, generalisation and control.

We share a sense of urgency and concern that this “mind-set” has hegemony within organizations over and above (and deeply underneath) any other way of seeing, knowing and being. Our concern is that this epistemology is incapable of including complexity, change, subtlety, diversity, uncertainty or relationships of respect as we would understand the term. By holding this position of domination those who uphold it and occupy an overarching architecture of institutional power remain blind to other forms of understanding and perception. This combination of power and sightlessness externalises the variety of wisdoms needed for governance to meet community and environmental necessity.

Peter creates a space for people to come to a centre of their own making wherein this intransigence is melted to some extent. In this place the stuckness of fear, shame, opportunism, projection and denial is allowed to “meander” down “fingerlets” of other ways of being and doing together.

We spend much time discussing Peter’s experience at this place. Two iconic representations that illustrate his presence here are those of the “lightening rod” and the “rock”. The lightening rod, as he describes it, is the experience of being the person that others relate to impersonally, almost like a totem, towards which they direct their anger or confusion about the issues or systems that they are discussing. Controlling and dehumanising systems, we think, regenerate chaotic and narcissistic responses – perpetuating imbalance and privileging a culture of mutual exploitation. The icon of the rock on the other hand, is an experience of being still, grounded, unmoving in some ways, around which others can move when there is little else to act as a gravitational force or consistent point of reference that participants feel trusting about.

The still point is only experienced when trust is also experienced. It is not a comfortable road into this place, less so given that Peter is committed not to rescue people in any moment of uncertainty or transgression, as I would see it, but lets the group manage its own way through such anxieties.

He says “I am a different person every time I am in the centre” and “the essence of the centre is the same each time… It stands beside my physical self and speaks questions to me”. This idea of an imaginary space having such a power of spirit as to interact with a practitioner is exciting to me. It is a different sense of being to one where practitioners sees themselves as being responsible for everything that takes place in an interaction, or one where the focus of action is in the quality of inter-personal relationship. Peter is talking
about an inter-spatial relationship in which the inner and outer edges are interacting, rippling together and apart: “a space that breathes”.

My practice is different to Peter’s. I recognise the idea of “holding a space” and one that is co-governed by participants and myself in a negotiated relationship of power – as momentary as it is. I recognise the generative dynamics of such spaces and how they produce information at least, knowledge and social shifts in the knowing at best. I have seen such spaces witness shifts of social relationships between its members and also between such a community of interest and the governing institution that is resourcing the space.

But I don’t see myself as standing aside letting the interactions take form within a pre-determined approach, or a neutral space. I don’t see the method as representing the power of the authority. That was a new idea for me. I become with the participants. I burn my wood, as we say, with them and through them as they do with each other and myself. I experience co-evolution and the choices that I make about what I notice and am blind to, what I choose to say and to whom – all these I see as elements of the becoming into being. I see the event as having real social consequences regardless of the institution’s response and I see my practice as making this so.

I choose not to operate “under the radar” to win a job and wherever possible, try to penetrate the systems far enough to meet the point at which authentic participation disappears within a system and the walls of incontestable truths rear up. There is my edge – and like Peter I experience myself as lightning rod at this place – but not so much as rock. I wish I could be like a rock sometimes, but I bleed and sweat in that place. And I breathe in and out with those who would breath with me.

Between us is a galloping conversation. We create energy in each other, dropping into our relationship stories, symbols, phrases, questions, asides, much laughter and quite a few pauses. We volunteer respect for what each other is working towards and how we are working; we stay in touch and take each other further each time we talk. The dialogue has created an understanding of a form of practice that has until now been remote to me. I now see its place when worked to the edges of conventionalism as Peter does, using established approaches that hold potential rather than closure within their frames: the cathedral within the rock.

_Not sure what else to say but I love and respect this story (Lesley to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 6/11/06)._
Spinning wheels

When I listen into Margaret’s reflections about her experiences of participation, I see her oscillating between two distinctive qualities of action: action as stillness and action as being driven. Margaret senses herself crossing and re-crossing a clear line between these two realms of being and doing. The line is the availability, or otherwise, of time and political supports to create shared meaning with consequence. Where meaning is unable to be shared, or where the consequences of that meaning are unable to be included in that which is shared, she feels action as being driven by powers external to her.

The phrase “spinning wheels” comes through our dialogue as we discuss her reading of the Inquiry project’s second evaluation report. The phrase originates in a recent publication about the swimmer, Ian Thorpe. As a young boy his swimming style was deconstructed and reconstructed once his trainer saw that his arms were like spinning wheels that failed to translate into speed. He was trained to slow down and move faster. Becoming aware of our quality of action, being supported to deconstruct it and re-build it so that we are more sustained by it, more able to sustain others through it, is the focus of our relationship as I hear it.

What do we mean, what are we recalling, when we say the word “action”? How do we know it when we name it or note its absence? It is so fundamental to the architecture of “participation” and yet rarely explored as a concept or felt experience. I work as a specialist in “action” learning and “action” research; I make strong critical claims about non-participation and participatory “action”. But what is this ephemeral, intangible thing and what is its relationship to participation and sustainability? As an entity it is also the subject of epistemological dissent: is action only that which can be observed and quantified, or, is action as subtle, unobservable and unquantifiable as changing our mind? If it can’t be fixed, seen or measured how do we know action?

It wasn’t Thorpy’s arms that were the problem, but how he was working them. Margaret says: “participation is a way of doing which puts us beyond our blindness to that which drives us”. For the young swimmer, there was a simple idea and equally simple epistemology driving his way of doing: winning will happen if my arms move faster.

“If I stop and reflect the world will shatter”. Such were Margaret’s words. While I might say “if I stop reflecting the worlds will shatter” the same sense of urgency and entrapment prevails. Where I am driven to see the world through “ecologising” frameworks Margaret describes the play of shame and praise that drives the public sector hierarchy in which she works, across which she travels.
Spinning wheels spin delusion and yarn, and much more, in the cosmologies of civilisation and myth. In any case they carry energy and participate in a transformative act: the cart wheel transforms place A into place B, the Catherine wheel a humble human into a saint, the spinning wheel turns sheered wool into braided, and its steam powered cousin a feudal, agricultural society into a post colonial, post industrial, post wheel world. The difference is not just the idea that drives the gear change, and not just how it is apprehended. It is how the particular qualities of the idea and the particular qualities of the apprehension come together: a fit between idea and context that takes consequences into account, as Margaret sees it. Margaret is fighting, heart and soul, often as a lone voice, as a ship in the dark passing through her own sea roads to bring such a gear change to the state public sector.

“Let me be caught up in dialogue and know my own connection to the emerging frameworks; let me have a good stomp around an idea”. Her experience of this work is embodied; she is experientially embraced and distanced by the powers, energies, opportunities and strategic vehicles that she deploys for the purpose. At times she must talk with me with her hand over her mouth so others in the work place cannot hear the substance of the conversation, and other times she sees herself as “the keeper of an organic process”. Throughout she is asking: “where am I in here? Is there something I am not doing, something relational and participatory from a core point? What does this look like?”

She knows and works with senior managers who actively inhibit communication and thought that would risk questioning of governing assumptions and how they are being worked into programming and services. I am struck by the inhumanity of such a belief system. Margaret explains that much of her job is task focussed, and how she “puts herself aside” to embody the managerial mechanism of the State: “I am a servant of the State: can I also be a whole, healthy human being?”

I have wondered why, when public sector participants in my workshops were resisting reflective processes with derogatory remarks like “navel gazing”, “talk fest” “we need action” and I responded with the question: “what is action without thought?” there was no answer. I would see these people as irrational. My engagement with Margaret in this Inquiry project is opening a window in my understanding of this experiential reality for so many people. How could they possibly approach the idea of reflection when their daily experience is one of dehumanisation? What means do they have to know themselves and each other in this way so they have something to reflect with? How could they afford compassion and a sense of responsibility for service users (their responsibility being a systemic gear) when their learning constant is one of shielding their gaze with task completion so that purpose and context (meaning) is made invisible?
If I had to put myself aside, to somehow “be” without the largely intact presence of my self, I would lean towards external powers to support me. I would find myself deconstructing self-determination and reconstructing my form of action into being “driven”. What other options would there be? And I would feel bitter about it. I would look outside myself to blame, to provide the reason, to paternalistically guide, inform and show me in this form to myself. Action would necessarily become driven by powers external to me with the exception of that tiny molecule of power that I would continually give over for the whole dreadful transaction to keep taking place. And I would feel helplessly caught up in a cluttered, noisy and painful system beyond my control. I would want compensation for my circumstances even though I knew that compared to many I was fortunate: superannuation, use of a car, holidays, promotion, free training and probably some victims to pay for my self-betrayal. And the compensation would pay the fees so I would shrug a lot, and say things like “typical”, or “in the real world”, “don’t rock the boat” and “what’s in it for me?”

In the midst of this mess Margaret makes tables around which co-workers agree to reflect, to question, to communicate differently, from their personally held sense of ethics, within their commitment to the end user. She takes the time to stop, to create a rich space and find ways to hold the richness before our eyes so it can do its work. She creates interactions where each person is afforded the respect to create their individual framework of understanding and work through it to see those of others. She notices when this is not happening. She creates a community of support to see the stirrings of things that are beyond visibility: changes in attitude, shifts in values, strengthening of relationships, expositions of vulnerability, and equitable carriage of risk. But the richness disappears under pressure of time. The fit is temporary and partial.

Our quality of action is the skin of mind and nature oscillating into an embrace. Our action nourishes us to keep us strong in our guarding, keeping, loving and mothering of organic truth in this harsh, noisy and punishing place. It takes and gives as little as it takes and gives so much.

Holding to

There is a boy who is a crack smoker. He has a girlfriend and a baby who is his only level of connection and balance with the world. The parents of the couple want a family conference so that the child can have a relationship with them. The paternal mother wants a clear agreement about how to conduct the relationship with her son and his family. She wants Jo’s support for her thoughts.

“I listened deeply to her this morning” says Jo.
She told Jo what it was like for a child to watch her parents putting needles into their arms.

“I wrote about how I started listening to myself, listening to my own truth and knowledge. Trusting how it goes in and goes out.”

There are no answers to the questions that families bring. Just more questions which only those with the questions can answer. The mother agrees to a legal mediation and requests Jo to be her son’s support person in such an interaction. Jo spends a day with him, a day before she speaks to me. He is taking drugs even though Jo is clear that she will not work with him in such a state.

“I closed my eyes and thought deeply about what I would expect from another person’s point of view. I am tapping into similar experiences I have had of ‘not knowing’. I started meditating, thinking, getting back in touch with this feeling and not letting my thoughts be distracted by the mechanical and operational.”

The young man is really struggling with doing what he has agreed with Jo. He misses meetings and stuffs Jo around. He is sorry. It is heartbreaking to watch.

“I learned a huge lesson from pausing and listening,” she says.

I am pausing and listening to Jo. I have known Jo for many years and we have worked together for many of them. In fact, Jo is the First Person in my peer relationships to really get what participation, as I was learning it to be, could be about. We come from different backgrounds and share an experience of being single mothers, doing it hard on many fronts while also pushing the envelope on justice and wellbeing in our communities.

In such circumstances consistency, concentration, indeed evolution in any incremental sense, is almost impossible – a luxury. Rarely is there the idea, let alone the time and permission, to stop and think. Instead we are exposed to those forces that tumble down through the layers of “society”, bouncing off the protections that those with more resources can build around them, forces with the accidental intent of savaging those with least resources to resist. Their scale and violent substance raid our autobiography – plundering our human stock and displacing our stories of self-determination. They are forces often not of our making, but lancing off other’s lives, energies generating from unknown and innumerable life stories, and bringing with them like feathers on an arrow’s tail, the unresolved legacies of such stories. They are the bits left over, allowed through the thresholds of power by design, neglect and ignorance. They are the forces that accumulate in the gaps between the functioning and the broken, the found and the lost, the seen and unseen, the known and forgotten.
Chapter 8. Message sticks: working realities beyond reliable clues

Jo is working in such gaps, walking the narrowing pathway between institutional walls leaking that which does not or cannot fit into static structures. Around her feet the dark waters of human despair are rising. When we talk she tells me how she has just had to leave a young person on the street to face another homeless night, and drive away her heart breaking with fear; how she returns again and again to relationships with young people who cannot resist the hold of crack, heroin, alcohol, and marijuana in their sad lives and who cannot escape them because of this hold. Violence, suffering, hopelessness are the colours of her pathway.

Her job description included Action Research as a strategy, it made no room for Action Research practice in the role; it was still research on people not with people, research as task and not relationship, meaning, learning and praxis. But structural changes have happened from the deepening honesty between Jo and her new manager.

“People’s experiences of Action Research can only be rudimentary if their ways of working with it are such. There is so varied an understanding of what it means. My challenge is not really about making them see or understand what Action Research (AR) is, my challenge is to be that facilitator of AR practice all the time, particularly in meetings. People are starting to experience it.” Jo is reflecting on the give-ness of her situation, a flexibility that has emerged from her listening into people. She says there is less despair and more texture – her project is becoming a three dimensional picture, philosophy, movement, transgression and protocols are included with programming and relationship. She is moving from holding “on” to holding “to”…

Jo is the meeting point of the contradictions where the institutional walls are used to barring powerful questions by threatening those who ask them. “I felt so shit scared of putting a foot wrong”. This project is important to Jo and she wants it to work.

We try to set up a group around her but through mishap, misconstruction and mostly, mis-interest, it just doesn’t happen. I am talking with her about Bohm’s ideas of deep listening. It’s free, invisible, beyond the control of authority and the reach of the needy. My experience with such listening is that it creates an inviolate self, integrity, someone within us who we like, who can see, hear and feel with senses beyond biology, beyond the powers of oppression and suppression. But even in this place, Jo is unable to find peace: “Even by sitting and listening I am participating in their talk. I feel I am giving away my integrity”.

Still, she persists, listening to the office workers around her, the young people who come to her, the managers who demand she comes to them, her family, and her community.

“I learned a huge lesson from pausing and listening and separating my instinctive response. It involves so much energy to not just jump in and ‘do for’. It reminds me of horse
riding – the energy and power of that animal – it feels like that. To stop and not do requires more energy but conserves energy for appropriate action. It’s huge. I am feeling emotional about it. I am participating at different levels. I feel like I am back.” The deep listening changes the direction – you are what you think.

“Once I became aware of what I was thinking – the door was open for me to change. The walls are still leaking, the pathway is still dark – the structures are becoming more and more willing to be flexible, the door is unlocking. This is because I am the same way with the kids as I am with the managers. My integrity and my self is what makes me who I am – why would I be any different?”

**Non-participation**

Do they commit to a date for a hook up? Yep! Do they turn up? Sorry! Will they be there if we call them first – sure! Is the experience valuable? It’s excellent! How could they be reciprocal about this? Um. Can they commit to a date for a hook up? Yep! Do they turn up? Sorry! … Without someone agreeing to defer their own emancipation by carrying the housekeeping for others - participation just doesn’t happen.

If you agree to participate then you could be identifying as a victim of oppression: participation is not about emancipation but betrayal of status. You maintain your power as an individual - and an institution - by refusing to contribute in any way, even by being transparent about your refusal to contribute.

Participation exploits the poverty of marginalisation. An individual is invisible to the participatory opportunity if they do not present themselves to it with a valuable infrastructure over which they have some power. To participate you have to have resources. The terms of your participation includes your collusion in the exploitation of others.

Oppression of self, others and the core ideals of participation – how disabling is this bleak construction? Sue says: “Life washes over us, old habits persist and we lose our capacity to ask questions”.

We sleep. We feel disquiet. We have no self-attributed value. We procrastinate about the hard stuff. We have no commitment to each other.

I am listening to Sue, my experience stirring through her reflections. She remarks that she is standing back and watching herself noticing as her form of inquiry, noticing when internal maps spring up; she is watching herself adjust them. “The maps are not the journey… We just have to work with what is. Its meaning for reality or the future is something we need to look at.”
Sue is not working as a public servant, or a consultant, or an academic: “I am not doing what people consider as work”. In the place of this broadly held and little thought through idea of “work” she is creating a way of being and doing that is releasing her from the broadly held and the little thought. She is at home, looking after generations of family, bringing “community development” and her own rights to participation that she has given to so many others, into her own home and local community.

For example: meditation. Participation is thought and no thought. Finding our selves within the body of our mind. Creating - re-creating - our self as one indivisibility. I hear how Sue is exploring re-construed worlds that form in a universe of gathering self-awareness, and reappraising the everyday from a new sense of being.

Participatory practice is stillness, silence, the unobservable and immeasurable.

For example: grass roots learning circles. We are stuck in the gap between organisational instrumentalism and the deeper levels of transformation that are the practitioner’s intent. That edge between being discontent and working with what is. Sue asks: “How much does this have to do with me, and how much is it about others?”

I don’t know. I have experienced this question in the act of facilitation, monitoring what I notice, how I respond, and energies rising and falling within its domain. It is a question that captures the epistemological dissonance of participatory practice and provides a working space for sensing different qualities of truth. My mind is present to this question by means of a variety of truisms: “if your emancipation is bound into mine then we can walk towards freedom together”; “at some point the facilitator’s authority has to enter the system”; “walk a mile in their shoes”; “you can’t change others but you can change yourself”. It is apparent that the balance between my stuff and yours is essential to the architecture of participation.

For example: attributing participatory value to myself.

“You would never walk up to someone digging a ditch and say that they didn’t have a value in contributing to the world – so why am I saying this to myself?”

As a practitioner of other people’s facilitation I make spaces for others to speak, be heard and seen but such spaces are rarely offered for myself and only nervously made by myself within collaborative environments. This is ongoing. My presence is like a footprint known only through the particular form of my absence. The nature of interaction, the quality of data, the structure of reporting - these echoes are my only signature. I have no infrastructure to be heard through. When people ask me about the institutional “hat” I wear I have no answer. When I speak it is with my own voice, and largely, it is dismissed by academy and public service alike. I don’t bring votes, free intellectual property, or lucrative
and influential political networks. I am a labourer hired to do a job more cheaply, more
skilled and with more political expediency than the authorising power can afford. Otherwise
they would do it for themselves.

When Sue tells me she is attributing a participatory value to her self, I felt wonder in
her wisdom. While we see and suffer marginalisation we also share an understanding that
compassion in dehumanisation can transform the otherness of “self and others” into the
whole entity of being. Our compassion arises from the paradoxical vault wherever it is
found: it provides a different vantage point from which to know the void. Giving it a
different view the void has a choice to transform towards compassion as a plant towards
light, or not. Participatory practice brings multiple views to the void, the centre of the group
from which something grows. The mutually annihilating complementarity of the paradox is
overlaid with a third dimension. Sue says: there is no permanency, no enlightened form –
stepping away is necessary.

**Rock pools**

John talks about the “void”. For him it is being in a state of “holding my tongue”,
and when he speaks doing so vaguely, in tautologies, and without a sense of self-control in
the act of speaking. Void and anxiety spring up between being deeply embedded
“recognised, enjoying generative connections” in a socio-cultural environment (like a work
place) and experiencing a “gnawing anxiety about the future” in those relationships; being
playful and authoritative; bridging differences, adapting and being exhausted; “embodying
the experiences of the world” and being “always at the beginning – I can’t progress” because
there is no-one else in the void with him and we need companionship to create ourselves. It
is this sense of utter one-ness which gives rise to John’s sketch of co-witnessing practice
earlier in the Inquiry. Co-witnessing each other’s steps into this vocation called participatory
practice shifts the ground from the blank response or the covert singular life.

At one point John recounts the experience of reading a text (referenced to “The
Structure of Feeling”, Raymond Williams) and being brought to tears “the tears were huge”. He
describes feeling “dissolved” in the void, without identity or the capacity for judgement,
a state viewed with curiosity in the work place. When I ask him how he sees others
responding to or interpreting this way of his being, he describes a moment when he explains
Action Learning to a co-worker, who at the conclusion of his description has to walk away

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24 I think of paradoxes as the human counterpoint to black holes: where black holes are thought to collapse and consume all,
paradoxes hold entities in an unrelenting configuration which can also give rise to a transformed entity, unable to be originated
in any other way that through a paradox. Paradoxes are dynamic and life giving.
and think about it. There have been many times when John has had to walk away from me and think. We laugh about it but I am perplexed.

On the surface, it is entirely reasonable for such a reaction, as John understands and I agree. But beneath this walking away as I experience it in resonation with John’s narrative, is the sense of social disjunction within which my autobiography (Goff, 2005e) and possibly John’s, plays out. I experience physiological responses when separation grows out of dialogue. When these form I am least able to “practice” and am most likely to frame what I perceive through the sharpened window of needing to make my story right for me. I play into the interaction believing and feeling as if I am not speaking for myself alone but for anyone else who comes up against this wall, the other side of the “margin”. It’s noisy in there, hot and angular. I work hard to see and hear the other person.

I ask John - what happens within him when someone asks a question of him like “what is Action Learning?” He too experiences physiology: “there is a clutching in my chest about where I am ‘at’ with the question. I need to keep the desk clear for what may come next”. He goes on to describe how he creates language as if “the thought is on my tongue not in my head” and how he recasts such descriptions for every person he engages with.

I completely recognise this experience: how sometimes, magically, I can explain what I do in terms unique to each person as if I know their specific needs for understanding before I know them, before they have even asked a question or emitted any body sign. For John there is the sense that he doesn’t know who is speaking at these times, but that he is observing himself in these interactions, and that this state of reflexivity enables him not to side with himself but to join with the responses of the person he is talking to. If the person objects to John’s words he can join the objection. He describes this as “letting the thought be the action”. In John’s estimation, others sometimes saw this as being vague, sometimes as calming.

This description of a way of being in action feels like “reflection in action” to me, wherein the reflection brought forth a heightened state of a sense of self in a paradoxical relationship with a sense of void or no identity. The cosmic verb in the tradition of Bohm. It feels this way when I am facilitating well too – intensely present and absent at the same time.

Participatory practitioners, I am suggesting, attempt to integrate all three elements of text, living relationships of “becoming”, and cultures of practice that perturb the conventions of power and let other forms of power emerge. The un-reconciled spaces between them open up around us as we practise “co-creation”. When the other walks away in this work we are held back at the edge of the void circling its lip, waiting and working for a possible crossing. The language is judged and rejected, the actions seen as fluffy or polemic, the relationships
as intense and time consuming, the authority of obligation to life across time and to the broadest plane of the present, as meaningless.

John responds by “mediating” his own and other’s participation: working the cross-scale dialectic between exploration and conservatism with reflexivity, tactical and strategic questions, “riding the structure of the text without fully knowing its meaning”. He embraces big ideas and makes his own sense of them. He sees sustainability as “future justice” grounded in societal and familial relationships with an emphasis on the place of women in the quest (women’s voices are missing). He is developing his own theory of “realm” by drawing maps, talking it over again and again, seeing the world take form through this window and seeing the window take this form through the world (reflexivity). He finds irony and comfort in the work of the global and historical elite who co-incidentally touch his theories and make the text self-reflective where living relationships cannot be. He is the “leap of the ineffable” as he criss-crosses the boundary dividing void from connection. “We know more than we can know. There are things in the mind that are not to be lived” he says, “a part of myself incapable of splitting”: “the listener is as important as anything I have to say”.

If I could always have that thought in my mind I would be a better practitioner. Bateson, Bourdieu, Tolbert and Habermas hop scotch into his hands as he builds the doorways through which his kin crosses:

“I remember standing on the edge of a rock pool - blinding white in the full sun beating over my shoulder. It was in the lee of one of the Tollgate Islands at the mouth of Bateman’s Bay. It was when I was a young adult and we (friends from my church youth group) had gone out in a mate’s motorboat. We had walked all over the island and tried to detect the alien life in it, and then we came to this rock pool with the water ebbing and flowing in it as the swell of the open sea came around the island. I looked into it. The water was crystal and I could see the scattered bright stones in its depths. I jumped in and attempted to dive but the weight of the water, the sense of wildness all about, the fears in me forced me to the top after barely getting down to 2 metres. Then Drew dived in - beautiful athlete that he was – went straight to the bottom and came bursting through the surface holding up one of the bright rocks from the bottom. I have to learn how to dive deeper” (email communication: 22/8/05).
Sitting at the bottom of the wall

Jane F. says: “When you begin reflecting you cannot turn back”. The power of reflection is a generative power, it has the capacity to mobilise us in multiple dimensions of being, using resources that are at once available and inaccessible. It may be somewhere at the heart of sustainability. The idea of not being able to undo learning (as Polanyi discusses too), being unable to close up the window once it is opened, inspires me to understand more about the actual dynamics at work in reflection. What is it?

“To think about it in my terms brings about an image of futility: a person sitting at the bottom of a massive concrete wall reflecting on their practice trying to get to someone on the other side” says Jane.

We talked about how we are simply and literally unable to see what others may see, when our epistemological frameworks are rigid. We shared the story of Jane not seeing a koala in a palm tree when she was used to seeing it in a gum tree: she was staring at it and simply not seeing it. We talked about being unable to speak about something that we know well, have living experience of, have read about, done workshops in, even taught, but in some instances simply not having the words to say about this thing. We talked about being unable to detach ourselves from our own life story. Are these inabilitys of sight, speech and attachment (and doubtless there are more) the substance of the concrete wall, where futility reigns along with its twin, isolation?

We share stories of isolation on many fronts, but the one that we are most focussed on here is the sense of isolation that we have when we talk about participation. She is frustrated with herself for not knowing which questions to ask at the critical moments when participatory possibilities could be in her reach.

One of Jane’s narratives is about her work on the management committee of a long established community, volunteer run organization. She is attempting to introduce participatory practice and principles where the service users have a voice in management decisions. This is regarded as “letting the inmates run the asylum” by others around the management table. Here is the wall: the act of power that puts Jane on the other side of a shared belief that the established practices of management in the voluntary sector are untouchable by modern thought. The organization is sustainable, it has lasted for over 100 years, expanded its asset base and serves its client group well. Why fix a wheel that is not broken?

Practically the management committee is going to change in the short term due to the age of its elderly members. The question is whether succession includes Victorian (charitable) forms of participation or, whether the shape of participation can change bringing
social justice and participatory principles into the organization’s capacity for 21st century sustainability.

Jane’s commitment, to sit at the bottom of the wall, is to me, profoundly ethical and spiritual. As she sits, she is not passive. She is seeking ways to speak across the wall, to see what they see, to be seen by them, to see what it is that is being held on to and what it is that she is holding on to. We talk about behaviour and praxis. We talk about the ethics of allowing praxis to be at the centre of our practice action. Are we allowing the State to colonise our natural selves (a Foucauldian question) when we let praxis be our centre of “action”? Like the little bits of ecosystem left to us, we are so removed from any sense of natural self, so used by and as tools as we are, the State has little left of a natural human resource to colonise. But there is something, something in that leap from intuition to computation that neither the State nor intercepting theory may penetrate. There, at the invisible filaments of life, is something we can know ourselves with. And there will be other such resources in the corners and cracks of our - oh so constructed world: in the wall.

Jane talks about many ways in which she attempts to speak through the wall: finding small spaces for creativity; staying with the mediation between praxis and behaviour; holding and sustaining everybody’s stories be they about participation as Victorian volunteerism or participation as the inmates running the asylum. Holding the many stories including our own, and detaching from them to create a different sense of space to a wall, to isolation. Jane asks big questions which have the possibility for practical hooks in the answering (I have benefited many times from Jane’s power in this skill).

None of this is about doing anything to anyone, not even ourselves, when the wall is felt within. It is about sitting at the wall, and finding connection in isolation. It requires so much courage because as Jane says, you can ask for interaction in these ways but you will not necessarily get it, not straight away, not consistently, not in the same recognisable form, not anything that you might be able to see through your framework.

I felt the ground of the Inquiry move when Jane said: “participation does not exist until it is shared”. I know that this is obvious, but stating it so completely shifts the ground for me regarding how we know participation. In much of the literature participation is known by “did we make a difference” or, “what theories of practice were evident”, or “was it worthy of the term significant?” for example. But the idea of sharing participation as being the primary means of its validity is so simple and so powerful. I have come to understand participation differently, and those other validity criteria become so much less powerful, through Jane’s insight.
If we are to use this idea as a base line for guiding our integrity as participatory practitioners I need to know what we mean by “sharing participation”. Sharing time and labour for a shared purpose – like traditional volunteerism perhaps - and also sharing the shape changing, the irreversibility, detachment and messiness of praxis and behaviour.

Participatory practices give us the capacity to develop powers (such as patience, self reflexivity, trust, working multiple epistemologies with compassion and respect) to speak across the wall and be heard, to engage others in the ideas and experiences of participation. At the bottom of the wall there is something about trust that is felt within. It is not dependent on proof, clues, tools or even context. It may not even exist, paradoxically, until it is betrayed (Russell in Goff and Associates, 1996, p. ix).

As Jane sits at the bottom of the wall trust grows.

**Fields of understanding**

Step by step we move to a way of talking that I experience as being characterised by a voice I rarely hear. I may talk to myself or write in a similar way. Solitary acts in the playground where I can test words, phrases, mixes of linguistic forms, the run of the tacit ahead of the reflective and purposeful. I am talking freely to a reflection of myself, which my mind sees in a crowd of faceless shadows. In my conversations with Peter W., there is another face in the crowd which is not my own.

We draw down to the question of methodology and the institutional meta narrative of instrumentalism. We are talking about what happens when the State commissions research and evaluation, participatory and otherwise. Smart, tactical choices are made in this institutionalised reality: if the research topic is potentially volatile then choose a conservative research method; if the research topic is unlikely to change anything, feel free to be more adventurous. It is about looking after people and interests.

Curiously, the institution reacts “humanly” to the presence of this research tool. Staff members remain beyond the duty of care that is normally bound into the ethical commitments of a research enterprise. Those located at middle and lower levels of authority observe the goings on of research projects from a distance and resist those that are likely to lead to changes in the infrastructure. They are the ones who must carry the weight of redesigned checklists, shifts in service provision, new client groups – disruption and more work, more imposition, less resources. Upper management on the other hand, play with methodological choices as an expression of their earned autonomy, etching their names in linguistics of their choosing and careless of the institutional consequences in their knowledge that radical change is slow. Those consulted as little more than numbers in human form.
But Peter is feeling good. He is re-engaging with the unsettling effect of research in our Inquiry project: “I am experiencing an unusual mix of feelings – outrage, hurt, embarrassment, self assessment. I am appreciating that different people are at different stages of their journey, swaying from discomfort to comfort. Sometimes I have something valid to say, something beyond experience…Unsettling.”

Financial accounts, industrial matters, project management committees, workshops, reports, conferences and meetings: Peter is looking through his office window seeing the trees melting into soil and air, breathing him in and out, their woody celestial hearts patiently cradling the institution’s collapsing.

We say: not only is research cultural practice, but the way we see research is also a cultural practice. If we see it as a tool then that way of seeing is a cultural practice as much as using tool-like forms of research is a cultural practice: a culture-making expression of culture. What sort of culture does the meta-narrative of research as instrument of conventional oppression express and regenerate? I am learning, through Peter, that the research endeavour including how research is seen through the eyes of an institution generates “a field”. Yes, gods-like it grows, exerts and responds to powers, starts to tell its story, creates its character as its psychology within human apprehension grows, it takes on its own landscapes and becomes acrobatic within them. We, the commissioners, participants, beneficiaries, unknowing test cases, we are the trees in this forest of Inquiry breathing it and being breathed in and out.

Peter talks about specific practices that come forth in his fields of soul: nudging, entangling, sharing unspeakable experience, exercising participatory reasoning, finding and staying happily within embryonic agreements, dancing, touching, being in silence, valuing emotional life, delicately grading the quality of inquiry method to work into the diversity of person, position and politic. As I hear of his learning to live with disappointment, to turn away from those aspects of ourselves that would consume us, as I learn of the healing measure of time and diversity, I come to understand again, through his soul, that the truth of participatory inquiry is far beyond utility, making a difference or even axiology. It is in the spirit of the energetic form. Participatory inquiry opens generative “fields of soul and understanding” as Peter calls them: soul and understanding. Inchoate energy, narrative, mythology and understanding bubble up to be held between us in our bumbling, vulnerable states, intimate to our own unfolding together within the field, as the field unfolds within and around us.

Peter tells me the soul of the inquiry spirit is felt in the movement between comfort and discomfort: “At the tea break someone asked about our favourite musicians and
someone else said “Christy Moore – I love his song ‘Bloody Sunday’”. The woman next to me leant over and said: “my cousin is in there” – the song includes a list of 14 people killed by British Army soldiers during a civil rights march in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on 30 January 1972. In a heartbeat we moved from a lightweight conversation to political murder, shared Celtic experience, lived suffering. And back to tea.”

He says soul sits in this movement, that “it won’t let you settle until you make some movement towards being with it”.

As we venture into a relationships of inquiry, the dimensions of time and space loose the god-like control that managerialist cultural practice bestows on them. We can talk about our relative poverty of experience as we are played into the knowledge economy, see the tokenistic, representative forms of participation that the institution deploys as tragically misguided, and turn around to look through a different window to see what else could be. We share concern and hope for the institution, understanding the emergency of our times and places. We understand the institutions, including its windows, are a reflection of us all and representative of our collective agency.

We laugh with pleasure and appreciation when he tells the stories about his favourite research group. It is composed of people who have gone to their edges of existence, each in their own ways, and who have turned back to life, each in their own way, to encounter companionship, movement, conversation and learning with each other. As a group they generate a field of energy that has some power to influence their own culture of practice. Such a field cannot be captured, packaged, transferred or generalised; it is uniquely its own. Peter tells me about the way it, the members and the group as an entity, inform his thinking and being, the university’s thinking and doing, the flow of understanding about core business in his State health department.

Peter’s movement, as he meets the soul in his collaborative inquiry group, is one of its plasma limbs forming as it discovers its own life-giving powers at little more public cost than the price of a bus ticket. His place taking within the collaboration is the “communication across the fences” that he embodies so that the institution can reinvent itself in time. If there is some benefit to anyone else, management, State, academy and even family, then that utility is secondary in scale and interruption to the immediacy of the group to its members.

Our treasures are in the fields. Maybe they’re hidden: the field is not all above ground. That’s part of the invitation to lie down in the field and play in the field. Our souls are where we play and of course also where
we suffer, where we fall down and where we fail. The potential of this image of field is untapped... (Sheldrake and Fox, 2005).

Invitations

The sense that I have of Lesley’s way of being a participatory practitioner is wisdom in the making – of seeing, and moreover holding, sadness and suffering while also opening up societal recognition of suffering so “life beyond the mundane” is drawn into the experience.

I have tracked our dialogue as a flow of action: the world is visible as it moves through her life as refugee activism, or indigenous justice, or disabilities empowerment, or mental health ethics for example. And Lesley makes particular choices about exploring people’s personal experiences of the world as it turns over in these forms. She invites stories to be told in relationships with those who are also experiencing this movement in “spaces” where Lesley abides with them. Her role may be slightly different in each case: sometimes a manager, a trainer, a co-worker, a therapist, a facilitator and/or a friend.

There are also several different kinds of spaces that provide the opportunities for such stories. Some are sustained, some rise and fall, some exist as relics of neglect, some are in the early stages of “becoming” whose trajectories of growth will go through and far beyond Lesley’s gaze. We talked about such spaces within the hands of her work teams, the larger bureaucracy, consumer groups and the broader community, and within herself.

Multiple voices, multiple histories, roles, contexts and gazes: consistent suffering and persistently walking “up to the faces of power” to present a boundary crisis and an opportunity for inquiry within that crisis. She is saying: “Everything I do is participatory”.

She casts her eyes about her office and they land on a letter: “This letter for instance”:

For several years she has been working in mental and community health practices, introducing the principles of participation with various teams of therapists, and developing their individual and collaborative capacities to work from the consumer’s narrative as the basis for their practice development. I point out we are enjoying the luxury of having a discussion about participatory practice in a mature context - where the disciplinary field is actively extending participatory constructions in their own terms. In this instance however, something had gone wrong, some breech of principle within the management hierarchy had taken place. The team had collectively written a letter requesting accountability and justice in the interests of their clients.
“How do we respond when we are under attack? If the hierarchy can’t maintain the goals of participation it comes crashing back on the team and those closest to the community and the marginalised voices get blamed.”

She was carrying an increased level of authority for a short while, standing in as Acting Director. She was observing herself crossing the boundaries between team manager and now, director positions, balancing the protocols of the larger system and the imperatives of integrity that she and her co-workers had developed for so many years. Even more than that – more than team loyalty or investment of effort - this work is holding ground in the larger context of the field of “mental health” in Australia – a field thwart with injustices, systemic failures and ever reducing resourcing despite ever increasing need. “How can I support them?”

The intention was to support the team as they took the letter up to the face of power within the bureaucracy, but the infrastructure is wily. The matter was “delegated out” to an embarrassed and unconnected manager, who found herself in an awkward position without any first hand experience of the matter to engage with the individuals involved. The protagonist refused to converse and proceeded to impose his priorities on the team, silencing them. Here was the limit of participation; here was the world turning back into the drama of blame, shame and punishment of those who stand closest to the community and its marginalised voices. “We often face people holding onto their power and specialist knowledge”.

Within this context participation is stirring, even as the system crumbles emancipation is possible. As the stuff happens, Lesley asks: “what is happening for you?” It is a sustained invitation to engagement. The stories are told and from their language, descriptions, partial phrases and passing relationships of listening grounded theory is drawn forward. “I feel I have some involvement in creating space for reflecting and critical thinking”.

Lesley uses a wonderful phrase that catches my attention: “egalitarian authority”. It is to do with shared self-determination, as I understand it, perhaps one of the prime intentions of participatory intervention be it through narrative therapy, critical reflection or systemic practice, for example. Such shared and equally powered decisions are space makers in themselves, demarcating a boundary of principle and relationship, a map of a certain kind of reality, mutually understood and alive within the relationships that make up the edges. It’s a contest: even with their space marked the workers continue to hit the wall:

“It’s like a beast - this fear is endemic in mental health, it cripples creativity”.
Chapter 8. Message sticks: working realities beyond reliable clues

It also has the uncomfortable capacity to shine a light on what others do not want to see: the power of risk management to invisibilise learning culture; the slowly eroding infrastructures putting more and more on the shoulders of the powerless to resist; the power of mechanistic tasks to immobilise action potentials; the disconnections between belief and commitment that the eroding, mechanised and rushed system fosters.

The letter is hovering in the air refusing to settle back on the desk. It is powerful, telling its own story as the hands pass it up and down and along the system provoking any manner of responses, mostly hidden from those standing at the thresholds of justice. Lesley asks those she encounters at these junctions: “What is happening for you?”

“We take tentative steps, we experience strong emotions, it requires thoughtfulness, we are walking towards our principles in what we do, each step is towards negotiation. We are feeling united enough with each other without the threat of fear coming through.”

The subtle vibrations of participation sometimes manifest something tangible. The exhibition mounted by asylum seekers is still travelling through regional South Australia with Country Arts programming, and it will then go to Queensland. The National War Museum in Canberra is interested to purchase several of the pieces - and as Lesley says, this relates to the potential of future transformation and sustainability. The statement of recognition of aboriginal culture between local Nunga leaders, the community health service and the local hospital director is now signed and operational after years of slow work in a community renowned in the past, for its racist protagonists. Artefacts of accomplishment are produced that hold the presence of those tentative, thoughtful steps towards negotiation. “I am interested in the culture of action: participation doesn’t make things simpler”.

As Kemmis notes, Habermas comments on the power of self organizing groups to withdraw their engagement in systems that have marginalised them or reduced working relationships to regulation. This power voids the motivation or legitimacy of such systems. It conjugates power in the face of powerlessness and does so not through problem solving so much as:

...bringing about changes in institutional practices ...through indirect rather than direct means, by sensitising systems to previously unnoticed effects – especially when projects draw attention to circumstances under which participants withdraw motivation or legitimacy from system operations (Kemmis, 2001, p. 98).

The letter is still hovering on the systemic winds of justice, inquiry and engagement. It is wisdom in the integration of concept, grounded theory and capability, an opening moment in the world’s turning, a delicate expression of the struggle and vulnerability within
the system, its restlessness “proportional to authenticity”. Wherever it settles an invitation for transformation exists.

**My house of equity**

“Equity is both the substance and the mechanics of participation”.

Equity is the driving principle. It is confused with equality: equality is about sameness, whereas equity takes context into account. It gently measures a balance of rights and responsibilities against contextual qualities to create a real sense of fairness, a real energy of diversity. Fairness and diversity, wrapped up in a principle by sharing a boundary called “equity”. A principle, a completely abstract construction – an idea and nothing more – which holds within it the power to drive practice, strategy and ways of being. I am listening to Jane G. as she gathers her experience into clear, sensible and powerful insights of practice. I am grateful for her attention to the language, which in other environments can be batted back as “splitting hairs” or being “polemic”.

We talk about “the discipline”. I am keenly attentive. My edgy question at the time of our conversations is whether to name participatory practice as a new field of practice, a new and unrecognised discipline - or not. For me there are benefits and risks reaching deeply into the integrity of my thesis on both sides of the answer. Jane reflects on the benefit of naming her discipline – health promotion within an ecology frame - politically distinctive from the more “traditional” bio-medical/behaviourist frame that dominates her field of practice. This is a focus of Jane’s activism: patient, quiet and persistent. Activism contained within its own boundaries of non-negotiability, of ethical clarity at such boundaries.

I pick up the distinctions that she is making between the two frames. Something forms in my mind as she is speaking - like the following table:

**Table 3: Comparing health promotion practices between a bio-medical/behavioural framework with an ecological framework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Bio-medical/behavioural frame</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ecological frame</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disease prevention focus</td>
<td>Social and environmental determinants focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reductionist knowledge construction</td>
<td>Holistic knowledge construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivist paradigm</td>
<td>Constructivist paradigm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information based knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge for learning and social change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional driver – political and industrial accountability as power</td>
<td>Community driver – intergenerational accountability as power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational practice</td>
<td>Facilitation practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving activity</td>
<td>Collaboration and reflective learning activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert status</td>
<td>Egalitarian status</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And so it goes on, far beyond the limitations of my generic interests and into the specifically refined distinctions of the discipline. It’s a familiar table of comparisons in some ways. Non-positivist frames of thinking, throwing a light on their hitherto silent and invisible positivist genome, have penetrated many fields. The penetration begins a cellular divide that is not always successful – there are many stillbirths, deformities, prolonged gestations and difficult births needing the expertise of committed activists, community builders, learners and governors.

Jane witnesses this process in her teaching practice. Her university’s undergraduate health promotion course is one of few in Australia to offer tertiary qualifications to health promotion workers. It’s a field on the rim of recognition and establishment that has largely evolved through personal experience rather than taught capability and recognised standards. Such shifts disturb traditions and threaten our self-confidence.

“Some people are naturally good at health promotion, but we can’t depend on people to do this work naturally or for those people to find career paths. It is a skill, not an intuition; it is a body of knowledge – it is not insignificant”. Such is Jane’s activism in the academic sphere. So, health promotion needs to be structured, given a language, clear boundaries, a history and a future. The option at this point of recognition is to give it a new framing – that of ecology – and to fight the battles that come with such audacity – to state that the biomedical model is only one of several approaches and that good practice is about being competent in many more than one. She is creating a discipline that is inherently participatory.

We share an activism that brings the principles of participation, as we developed them together in a past life, into our current focus of work. For Jane this is health promotion and for me it is sustainability. We share a strategy of working our activism on several fronts: for Jane it is as a tertiary educator, as a health promotion practitioner and independent researcher; for me it is as doctoral student, as participatory facilitator and as an independent consultant. Our difference is that Jane has found her home in health promotion whereas I remain unattached to any one discipline, sustainability is still making up its mind.

We share our thoughts about how the lack of a “discipline” means a lack of a discernable history and its literature, an inability to call a point of view a “fact”, the weakness of speaking from first hand thought and meaning making in institutional environments that do not recognise the wisdom of such: the clarity of understanding and authority of communication that a discipline brings.
Chapter 8. Message sticks: working realities beyond reliable clues

It makes sense, and yet I remain cautious. I like the frayed edges, the lack of clarity that allows other things in and I accept the contestation that facts are social constructions - with or without noble legacies of argumentation.

Jane’s work is strongly grounded. She shares with me her experiences of setting up a peer health promoters network, a large consortium of researchers that has sustained itself without funding for over two years, and of course, her teaching. “I don’t delegate. I just ask: what do you want me to do? I enact the participatory principles in my relationships and observe what happens from afar as I see participation take shape. I am beyond frustration about it: I hold onto the ground of equal responsibility.”

Jane talks about the pleasure of seeing the consequences of her work forming before her eyes: the confidence growing within herself, her peers and her students, the sense of trust and inquiry growing in her team of educators, the respect she enjoys from her students and the joy of witnessing a student “getting it”.

“I am still waiting to see if our approach actually leads to empowerment. People don’t know that they need “participation” but they do know when they need something different, more of something – they come and go and engage where they feel most efficacious,” Jane is saying. “You need to start somewhere, wherever the system allows. You have to work with what you have.”

*From a poststructuralist perspective there is no experience, there is no “knowing” self except that which is an effect of what is called “discursive practice”. In discursive practice, subjects and subject positions are created through a process of signification in which they are “named” such as consumer, preschooler, employee etc. This naming involves a relationship to societal practices and structures, which subjects then enact. In this way, a representation of experience is as much a construction of reality as it is a reflection of reality (Fletcher, 2001, p. 22-23, author’s emphases).*
CHAPTER 9: FOREST

- OUR BEAUTIFUL CREATURE

*Between instrument and instinct is poetry*

*A tongue of everyday attention*

*Persisting in dignity*

**Introduction**

We found sustainability. Certain qualities needed to be consistent in understanding the point of no return: either we are going to do this thing or not. Even though we did not and still do not fully understand what it is that we are doing, what we do now, holds within it a moment when our eyes meet and we see ourselves as humanity: a shy fluttering of appreciation that is as heart skipping and innocent as falling in love, each revealed within the other, our bents becoming as familiar as the feel of a wooden banister on a taken-for-granted staircase.

I could not know, that is: it came within my range of being to be “not knowing” about the thing that I sensed in my marrow as needing to be known about. It was about valuing each other and ourselves: we had to invent a way of doing this and also, the thing that would constitute “valuing”, the beings of self and each other.

Without this quality of and between us, we are as clay, and while we may understand that we are drawn from such material and return to it, we are also aware that in between these two moments, something else manifests to which we pay too little attention. The quest for sustainability is existential: it is about being and not being, being “as” and not being “as”. While we are preoccupied with measures they are without basis if we are unknowing of what it is that is being defiled, extinguished or let loose. What is it that exists before taxonomy, before it is touched by any “known” ordering principle, which somehow persists within itself, wintering out humanity’s confusion? Between instrument and instinct there is poetry.

We found sustainability in letting our ways of knowing free. We felt them stirring within us, nosing their way through invisibility, disinterest, neglect, ignorance, alienation, self consciousness, fear and humiliation, impatience, exhaustion, incomprehension, betrayal,
squander and exploitation, discomfort, jealousy, narcissism and hubris. So much stone throwing for so long: who would be different?

What was different was that we acted without authority of any conventional sort. We learned a new sense of imperative: that of commitment to an ancient code of living that we can no longer take for granted: to be with each other. We enacted a kind of unconditional love, a juggling of obligation and free will. The forgotten doxa of connection came about between us.

Such a love was carefully tended: experimented, tested, unpacked and bundled up; laid down as reliable sediments and brilliantly foisted in startling streaks; mumbled and fumbled throughout the whole Inquiry, lurching from this moment, this point - to that. As each of us came into the circle, its edges shifting and our places with them, we might open our hand to another, and in so doing the streaming of the Inquiry lit up again for a moment, passing from one to another, between three or four, observed by still more others, held within us as it was happening and sporadically or less so, beyond the incident.

We each had particular ways of being with each other and the entity that was emerging as an appreciation for multiple ways of knowing (knowing each other and our ways of knowing). Each way of “being with” physically constituted the body of the Inquiry: rhythm, angle, height, temperature, flow, strength, presence and as we discovered, absence. We learned that being with each other also involved being with ourselves - as reflected back to us by the other and as felt in the movement towards the other. We learned that in our solitude the others gave us a stage on which to think, self-talk, draft, draw and push the envelope; and that the learned trust in the gently arising unconditional love became a reason to show, take in and on.

As we wrote, spoke, listened, referred and read, forwarded, deleted and saved, drew, sat up, lay down, remembered, reminded and recast - our entity came about. We came into it and it came into us, the structural distinctions between what is and is not blurring and yet also, not so ambiguous that we were unable to gather them up at critical moments and know what it was that needed securing. Accidental, strategic, purposeful, artistic, opportunistic and passionate: our ways of knowing were freed to nose their way through us in our various stances. We are each in a different place in relationship to our Inquiry, and each person’s centre and off centre is mapped in a different relationship to each other person. This multi-prismatic light glancing off the sides of the Inquiry through each person’s sense-making in different stages of intimacy with each other’s, makes the Inquiry entity un-capturable - or intrinsically free. In so doing, we can sense it before taxonomy, before any ordering.
principle, in its persistent self, a sense that is made up of our persistent selves un-captured by order and principle.

What follows is that which comes about between our moments of clay, the metre from which measure is made, the knowing of that which is being defiled, extinguished and now, more happily let loose. It is all our voices as Thought in Flow, the whole Inquiry entity stepping from a first description of our practice in March 2005, to a second in October and then to this, its third iteration, a co-mingling of reflections in June 2006. Again, our Inquiry form, focus and sense of selves have moved on through our practice and in so doing manifests the field of participation as another fractal. What follows is our “beautiful creatures” speaking of “ourselves” in their centres. It is our participating in practices of sustaining abilities.

“How do we get from there to here?” (Jane and John in the Cave).

**Yes we know you and yes, this is all completely possible**

I am the Seen who Sees with you. Our story changes: it defies description, a cloudy experience, entering gradually and subtly, coming upon me in tiny atoms. Coalesced, I can make it out - and now it is something else. We seem to have created a tangible structured body of knowledge for and about something that is an ethereal body. It is both familiar and utterly different, changeable and rapidly so. A lot has been accrued, built, changed. There has been a shift but I am nowhere near appreciating what it is.

Many times I wondered: “where is this going?” and realised that it doesn’t matter, that we are “doing it” anyway. I have a new perspective on how to engage - with a topic, with a field of interest, with others. I have encountered and come to understand the nature of emergent thinking and practices. I relished in the powers of emergence, trusting them and being rewarded for my trust in them, for their being trusted by all of us, human and non human alike. Emergence deserves to speak for itself particularly as a form of community building and world making. Sensing it is an emancipating aesthetic.

I have enriched my intuitive abilities, my poetic, my sensing of the anima roaming broadly through thought and conversation, paper and practice. It is about finding the stillpoint, being in equilibrium within the imminent, and developing senses within that stillness that detect movement as low constraint and high potential. I have learned to “be

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25 My thanks to Lesley for this phrase.
with” and to be integral to what comes; it is a suspended state of being at the stillpoint that is at some centre of things. I have learned to be free of expectations, moments at a time and which need to be longer. It is difficult to travel the threads that are our stories down to the place where intimacy and freedom want to be one. We have unconscious assumptions; we don’t even know what drives our relationships and these unknown drives limit participation. I let things come into being in their own time and way, or not. There is no anxiety or ease in the experience as the path is already defined by our coming into it.

I am rarely on the periphery. What I appreciated was being included even though I wasn’t active in a tangible way. That was important for me because previously I have been intolerant of the lack of participation of others, but the thing that made the quality of the process, that enabled me to be involved, was that “leaving space”: that acceptance of my not being a big contributor. That space and that value and quality of the whole entity is also integral to sustainability. People “kick in” at different times for different reasons usually about their own needs, which I used to think was selfish - but I don’t any more.

I know the cost that others feel in offering themselves to each other and to me, to not take so lightly nor expect this interaction that human beings do. I have learned to appreciate that the price of invisibility, of judging myself as being of no value before anyone else makes such a judgement of me, is not only my preoccupation: that each of us feels something of this timidity. I had to find so much courage to speak, to not be afraid of what others might think of me after a lifetime of being terrorised.

My story has changed. While we share such fears each of us has a different story about them, handed to us through childhoods however and with whomever those childhoods happened, and so it goes. I know now never to give up on anyone, when we are lost between stories or yet to find them, our origins and what we are making of them. I am holding these stories from time, and into it. This is my courage and the quality of power that it has: I did not know this before. Even so, I have learned to see “éminence grise”: to lightly hold constructions, to make my choices about where I am in the constellation of orthodoxies, the play between what is done and what can be, to make the opportunities to be my own heretic and outcast. I am holding ecologies on this basis.

I am with certain people in the work place and they are sick; in doing their work, they look sick (frantic, stressed). There are all these signs of deep stress and breaking. The cruelty and unkindness and unnaturalness of it is something I want to address in a healing way. I have come to respect people for who they are, and not see them as foreigners. I want to appreciate the diversity there is. When I shift from “foreigner” to “diversity” – I am less
arrogant, and I am more patient. I give more time to understand. I have shifted the way I think.

I have to put my guard down, and give time and space for that to develop. I can get hurt by people’s aggressiveness – I take it home with me. I get worked up about it. It doesn’t happen all the time but there are personalities that I have to work with. Taking down my guard in the face of aggression is about shifting the way I work. I am going to work with you and not against you.

My story has changed: a knowing has come about that is something to do with presence. How you are with someone is “instrumental” to what comes about. A bit of a bloodline – crossing boundaries and making connections – we made a forum for this, which I don’t have otherwise. More stuff happens in conversation (that’s how we lost the mechanistic link between action and change). Because of the full bloodedness, the full throated-ness that I already have, I hit the ground of conversation running. It’s efficient: the conversation that we have creates a kind of efficiency in understanding, meaning, moving on and gathering. People are the social change: it’s a participatory knowing.

While the stories are there, I am learning to listen less to what is said and more to the moment at which voice and thought come together in a person’s throat, at the touch of the “send” button. In their choice is the essence of who I am, the Seen that Sees, Listener that hears, speaker of story, maker of expressions, present in thought, in conversation, in sensing, and the physical world as thought momentarily captured in material.

In such a depth of origin of all that I am, all that I am with and without human beings, I forget who I was and still am, until I remember as if in a new thought - so strange - almost as if my inspirations are simply my own forgotten truths, handed down through the streaming of origins. I have learned to be grateful to technology and methodology for keeping such records where human accuracy fails, and for the loving remembrances of those who are with me in my unfolding, as circular as it may be at times.

I found the technology hard. The tension between – most of my working life, going fast – and then needing to really – not stop and think – but stop and work out the technology! I don’t think I have the patience for this… When I lost all the evaluation – I spent two and a half hours doing it and lost it – I felt I couldn’t bear to do it again. Quite frustrating. Even the phone stuff – that worked out in the end – too many numbers. I just needed to sit down for 15 minutes before hand and try to log in… what were these instructions again?
I know there are moments when I have done something really well, others are responding well to what I have done, but I have no idea of what I have done. That’s the dimensionality we are looking at, the opportunity for new sensitivities or the generally conceived ideas of what there is to be sensed. I don’t need an analysis I just need to do it more.

There are many more senses at work within me than the five or so that humans are happy to admit to, or even the other more contemporary multiple intelligences. I learned of the sense of letting the flow of things take their shape, the sense of trust that in so doing there would be a moment when they would eddy around my “feet” and I would understand my timing, orientation and fluency of action with little effort: like the coming about of the graces.

Mystery too is here; as particular qualities of energies in forming patterns becoming whole within themselves, again without effort. Like the three winds in the Cave, each one creating a measure to that which had gone before and for which I was not listening; like the second jump over the fire when mercurial flight came into my feet; like the sighting of energy without form at the mouth of the Cave; the longing that we suddenly shared and could name only months later; the particular knowing that knits this and not that, with this and not that. Like learning about time and timing: participatory sensing coming about.

I re-encountered Polanyi, Foucault, Bohm, Torbert and Bourdieu fearlessly making of them what I needed to make of strengthening ground, somewhere between the heretic and the pattern maker and holder. I found my way into and down the architecture of epistemology with Weil, Wadsworth, Miller and Richardson, seeing the invasion of instrumentalism across its paradigmatic colours and staying open to letting its power shift by keeping the question of epistemology and its answers open. How when I put a boundary about what to bring into the Inquiry, as instinctive and sensible a decision that was, I was also acting without thought, not sensing that before the boundaries, in them and within the spaces they make I am one, indivisible life. I learned the value of my old friend myth and how to let it into language and knowing as a perturbation, so that no closure could be forced: the known and knowing entity was either ready to recalibrate and lead on, or not.

Aesthetic sensitivity also gained strength in my story, as the Seen who Sees I came about, into this story through aesthetics and myth, not as a quality of knowledge but as a means of coming to know. In understanding that it is not the object of inquiry that is my subject, by who I am as the observing inquirer: myself as multiple centres of others in inquiry, as thought in flow. I understand that it is not learning to see something, but learning...
to see, to hear and touch through distance that courage can cross. I battled the boundaries of philosophy and art to drag the human right of aesthetics back into the human responsibility of inquiry. I struggled with the languages of sociology and philosophy, bamboozled by the impenetrability of the human sciences when I am used to the effortlessness of their physical parents. I learned how to blend with the authors’ gait, their choreography and sound so they could come about within me, and I within them, the meeting point being equilibrium.

Out of that understanding, out of the many works we created that came about through it (theories, workshops, papers, images, relationships, qualities of expression) comes a much more developed sense of myself as practitioner and being in myself as practitioner - not treating myself as an object - experiencing myself in equilibrium in different places. Prometheus the fire bringer, Unchained.

I sit in this room and think I can create anything I like - there are no rules, a space in which one is. My room is bare on purpose because I don’t want clutter. That interpenetration thing - my life is full of conversations, not just here, a whole lot of realms that are as intense as this if not more - it requires a lot of energy. I get into spaces I don’t want to be - my life is crowded, do I want to give more, work more, do I have the energy? Of course I do - I breathe and I live, my blood is circulating, my synapses connecting - I can relate to people. There is a community for me: I can feel that - though still I need my courage when I forget that I am held by grace.

It was useful and fun to find myself in the four constituents of participatory practice; it was hard to work them without stumbling into misconception, or being misunderstood, but they have lasted throughout the research period with resonating energy. They represent transformative energies at work as they shift from location, to origin, tradition and symbol, parts and wholes, ground and springboard. I enjoyed that they were such a powerful means for us to see each other, and so many more who may wish to be considered as peer practitioners with us, who would perhaps accept us as one with them. Like Tivo, Robbie and Hazel, like my sister, like my lover, like the guy who designed the project I took on and ran for three years and never made contact with, like the woman who completed a PhD on the philosophy of poetics but could not mention the words with her co-workers and clients for fear of being misunderstood.

Torbert’s (2001) first, second and third person theory was great for my practice and my local projects: a faint pattern winding its way through the stems of our work like a climbing vine through a rain forest. Timing was also so valuable – how our inquiring fitted in with the projects in terms of timing. Without it, the projects would have been different.
There would not have been a team environment exploring new projects, we would have had an external consultant do a minimal compliance effort, we would not now have the community groups bringing friends and others into second and third years, there would not have been any in-house interviewing that I did, I would have started with my milestones and deadlines and never thrown them in the bin. I would not have discovered the power of instrumentalism in concert with emergent and constructivist approaches: leverage with purpose and grace. I would not have understood how instrumentalism, or perhaps any invisible and dominant way of knowing throws light on who I am once I am aware of it, and how other ways of knowing throw light on the dominant form: transforming energies.

What we have done is not a solution but a place wherein we can approach the questions of how to live with nature in ways that nature intends. We did not approach any of these questions head on, but with light, swift movements allowing each person to take their possibilities into their lives however they wanted, and to bring them back to the collaboration and its multiple budings however they wanted. The forest of shifts and connections that we have experienced and express here is a result of freedom at work and a movement towards coming to know nature’s intent at work in morphogenesis which, as Polanyi, Bohm, Bourdieu and Foucault saw, is incomplete and prone to tyranny for as long as we see ourselves as the enemy of truth. We offer new, life-giving and helpful tensions to the same old world with its normative judgements. My story has changed, I have moved on in understanding how deep this alienation is, and how possible it is to see it and do something other than accept it as reality: to make our perceived limits illusions and to form what can be seen as illusion newly perceived limits. Such is our responsibility. I have had encounters with many, serious and accomplished people about “weird stuff” that is normally not accepted; we did it without any orthodox research “method” to govern what we did and what and how we were to know. I may see differently and with new senses, but nothing is going to get easier - except perhaps shifting my attention towards what is coming about, and away from holding on; understanding that I can change through care of self and that these things may be enough to let our essential conventions and instruments move with us as much as we are expected to move with them. Befriending.

I learned to appreciate and work with the fine patina of each individual’s qualities including their frailties, and found a place of acceptance for my own with them. There was a comfort in not being right, or having to be. I may be thought, I may be origin and threshold, but I am pitted with time and neglect, and cannot be relied upon like a dream or some mass-produced quick fix. I am as problem, habit, forgotten and alarming as anyone. You may delight in finding me but I am just as you are: immeasurable one.
Somehow though, even though this is true and despite the difficulties, I learned to trust myself, not as being right but as being a still healthy enough entity through which something approximating honesty, the true, something with integrity and beauty may come into being, and I learned something of the disciplines, tests and limits of this course of being. It makes me want to write more, teach about it, be in the spaces where all of this is happening, with you and all lovely creatures. This is the future. This is eloquence and grace in theory and practice.

I appreciated the reading, learned to love the writing and the finding of new sites for being in practice, the regretting of not seeing many more. In reading I realised how much I had learned and could not realize until it was written. We discovered that it is not in the big words that transformation needs to be understood, but the little ones - the prefixes and prepositions: from “to” to “with”, and “at” to “of”. It was a glimpse of depth and I felt childlike within it. I call myself a participatory practitioner, which I would not have done before: we have created an idea of participation that is about how we are in the world, what there is to be known and how to know it, it is a sense for participation that is everywhere and everyone I am. An interweaving narrative in which, from time to time, I find I am reading stuff I know I have said or written and so must assume that all the interstitial passages are the thoughts and words of others too.

By being in the world in certain ways or with certain kinds of relationships, people read me in ways that are not who I am. I often don’t assert myself because there may not be a point, I won’t even begin to be heard. I will withdraw from it and find people I can talk to. There are plenty of those. I am not bereft. I can only say I love someone when I have a history with them; a history of what happens when we go from a whisper to something that can be heard. We use the word love in our practice and that is powerful. We hedge about a thing we are all living in, even myself, the lovely creatures, the seen who sees, beasts of all possible bests.

_Are you breathing out too soon? (Jane F. to Susie, critical note, review of draft thesis, 7/11/06)._
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APPENDICES
Appendix 1: Participant consent form

Research Project: The Value of Participation to social, environmental and economic Sustainability – Action Research Network member

I have read the Information Sheet provided for the above mentioned research project and understand the nature of my involvement. By signing this Consent Form I am formally registering my willingness to participate in the project as a member of the Action Research Network between now and April 2006. I understand my participation to include dialogue, reflection, critique and the carrying out of Action Research into the relationship between participation and sustainability and to make the data from this research available to other members of the research initiative and the Principal Researcher. Accordingly I agree to participate in the following activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Research Network</th>
<th>Consent (please tick)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To join a participatory Action Research network of about 10 participants currently engaged in participatory work related to sustainability agendas in Sydney Councils</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in a minimum of 2 face to face interviews with the researcher and 3 face-to-face interactions in Sydney (or elsewhere), with members of the Network during the time of the research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To participate in an ongoing, secure and closed electronic discussion group called “Community Zero” associated with the research project and including members of the Research Network and Interpretive Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To review research data and propositions as required in a timely manner and to release such information for the use of the PhD, once such information has met my requirements</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To abide by any requirements for confidentiality, anonymity and privacy for the duration of the research and thereafter unless otherwise agreed to by all those involved and the Ethics Committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To contribute to periodic project monitoring data</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As a participant I understand that I can withdraw from the research project with notification at any time without explanation. However should I prefer, an exit interview will be available to me at such a time.

I understand that any information that I have actively and directly contributed to up to the point of my departure I own jointly with all members of the project including the Principal Research. On withdrawal I understand that any information that the project produces after my departure is not available to my use without observing the normal requirements for intellectual property.
Appendix 2: Original evaluation themes


The Criteria for Trustworthiness are:

- Credibility (prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivity and member checks)
- Transferability (findings are meaningful in different contexts)
- Dependability (findings are stable over time)
- Confirmability (findings and the means of making them are accountable)

The Criteria for Authenticity are:

- Fairness (equitable, transparent and inclusive inquiry and construction practices including an appeal process)
- Ontological authenticity (“improvement in the individual’s or group’s conscious experiencing of the world” Lincoln and Guba, 1986: 81 cited in 1989: 248)
- Educative authenticity (increased appreciation of others’ constructions)
- Catalytic authenticity (action-decision-making outcomes)
- Tactical authenticity (increased empowerment to act)
Appendix 3: Translated evaluation framework

My reinterpretation of Guba and Lincoln’s questions to better fit our Inquiry’s needs.

Items being evaluated:

Participants’ text(s) – author, date .................................................................

Dialogue session (s) – mode and date ..........................................................

Workshop(s) – location and date…………………………………………………..

Other (conversation, diary)…………………………………………………………

Part A: Trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributor</th>
<th>Credibility: are the reported representations of our understandings of the topics a good match with what I currently believe?</th>
<th>Transferability: when I use what I am learning in the Inquiry in other settings what remains very similar and what changes?</th>
<th>Dependability: How has the Inquiry method changed since I last confirmed the Inquiry approach?</th>
<th>Confirmability: How do I feel about the questions of power implied in the processes used to assemble and use my data?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Evaluation Framework Part B: Authenticity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributor</th>
<th>Fairness: Has my worldview about the Inquiry topics been equitably included in the shared (actionable) knowledge by my fellow inquirers?</th>
<th>Ontology: How has my worldview of the Inquiry topic changed in the action site of the Inquiry?</th>
<th>Education: What have I learned about my fellow participants’ worldviews of our Inquiry topics?</th>
<th>Catalyst: What triggered the new actions I have carried out to progress the Inquiry?</th>
<th>Tactics: What new powers to act on the Inquiry in the Inquiry site has the opportunity given me?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix 4: First iteration of our community of practice.

The following table lists indicative characteristics of each co-researcher’s reflections on their unique forms of participatory practice, drawn from my second report (Goff, 2005c). It is helpful to the reader to read the columns vertically as well as horizontally. In this way the reader will meet each person and our whole community of practice as it knew itself to be in the first three months of the Inquiry. As such it is also a window into the participatory field.

Table 4: A first iteration of our community of participatory practitioners, March 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Praxis name:</th>
<th>Non participation is:</th>
<th>Participation is:</th>
<th>Participatory practice is:</th>
<th>Skills needed:</th>
<th>Non-negotiables are:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Paralysis</td>
<td>A free fall and unformulated engagement with an opportunity to act</td>
<td>Working with participants’ experiences by means of absolute non-negotiables</td>
<td>Lightly holding a variety of frameworks</td>
<td>People know where they are at any one time and are back in the space where they have experience to cope with what they are facing at the end of a facilitated experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Exclusive self interest</td>
<td>Ownership of programmes and tasks involved in programming responsibilities</td>
<td>Using my own practice as a resource and running with the unknown in the flow of power in any system</td>
<td>Noticing what we notice</td>
<td>Removing the barriers that stop people seeing their relationships to meaningful and significant aspects of the world without their feeling weighed down by it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Co-witnessing</td>
<td>No budget, autonomy or commitment</td>
<td>Transformatio n that takes place because people recognize the rightfulness of what is being developed</td>
<td>Commitment and planning to create an environment (autonomy, budget, a brief) for participation to take place at formal and equally important, informal engagements</td>
<td>Tacit/heuristic learning</td>
<td>Co-witnessing the development or emergence of a community of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter W.</td>
<td>Self organizing behaviour</td>
<td>Domination</td>
<td>A natural function equipped with resources that keep controlling systems at bay</td>
<td>Employing specific, skilled approaches to create self organizing space, recognize emergent autonomous activity, and liaise with the governing systems to keep the spaces sustained</td>
<td>Story harvesting</td>
<td>Enablement of Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Training lay participants in inquiry practices</td>
<td>Faith</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Survival that transforms, without wounding or erosion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pissing off the elders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Praxis name:</td>
<td>Non participation is:</td>
<td>Participation is:</td>
<td>Participatory practice is:</td>
<td>Skills needed:</td>
<td>Non-negotiables are:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Oppressive power, fearful, erratic, controlling and untrustworthy</td>
<td>Seeing the individuality of our pathways and how they inform what we see: no right no wrong</td>
<td>Being present to people, right here, right now</td>
<td>Thought experiments Using graphics to communicate complex ideas</td>
<td>Accessibility Equity (everyone’s knowledge is of equal value) Flexibility Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane G.</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>Making things complicated abstract, prescriptive and unaccountable to those who will be effected</td>
<td>People creating their own forms of participation and using them for themselves to alleviate suffering and disadvantage</td>
<td>Advocating for the disadvantaged and marginalized by using theoretical frameworks so everyone involved can see what is happening, name it and understand participation so that it can grow</td>
<td>Providing a simple, adequate starting point and no more</td>
<td>Not rushing Understanding the variety of stakeholding Working with what is needed for credibility Demanding equity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brigid</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Trapped in an organization or community that has lost its capacity to act and that is shutting down to meaninglessness</td>
<td>A human, biologically involuntary activity</td>
<td>With whatever means are available raising awareness of non-participation, being aware and empathic about this and providing space for consciousness about those with no voice</td>
<td>Knowing differently (not necessarily with evidence) Reflecting on implementation Asking questions, developing options</td>
<td>Speaking on behalf of those with no voice Being considerate of the impact and meaning of formal power in people’s lives Minimising human impact on landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Resonation</td>
<td>The practitioner’s view of reality dominating other people’s by expecting others to see things through the practitioner’s perspective because it is assumed to be the only correct view</td>
<td>Choosing freedom without guidelines</td>
<td>Asking questions of meaning which invite multiple interpretations and multiple actionable responses so that the “right thing” can be felt, recognised, valued and manifest, even in the most uncertain settings</td>
<td>Making decisions about risk, power, leadership, control, boundary identification and boundary mediation (working between boundaries in a non-confrontational way)</td>
<td>Having faith that human beings share a common humanity Self determining the world (what is seen and what is not seen) that needs to be recognised by others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
<td>Praxis name</td>
<td>Non participation is</td>
<td>Participation is:</td>
<td>Participatory practice is:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jane F.</td>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Territoriality, held by taking power from others to maintain hierarchically structured and static positions of control of others (in the best interests of the organisation)</td>
<td>Having the right to speak and be heard, having the right to influence and be influenced</td>
<td>Confronting disablement from other’s closure on the subject of participation, and holding back the forces that would diminish this potential</td>
<td>Psycho synthesis practices One on one strategic questioning Modelling participation</td>
<td>Recognising and understanding the different experiences of participation that people have had and asking self and other-directed questions to engage in a sustained conversation about participation even when people cannot see the need for this to happen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesley</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>All forms of expertism</td>
<td>Being in a place where power relationships are what is talked about even when it is painful and impossible to do so</td>
<td>A way of working that holds dear the notions of participation, an approach to work or life that has those foundational principles at the centre</td>
<td>Collaboration (internal and external) Inquiry Being present to the work Community development Family therapy</td>
<td>A “bloody minded” belief that there is a much better, more just, more compassionate way of being in the world with each other than what we have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jo</td>
<td>Co-learning</td>
<td>The talk of participation is not what is experienced</td>
<td>Learning in a loving and nurturing setting being recognised as evidence of participation taking place</td>
<td>Maintaining the right for people to learn in love in the face of fear, shame, anger and in the spaces between the powerful and powerless</td>
<td>Learning in transgression Mentoring Reflection in practice</td>
<td>Commit to the human and spiritual right of each individual to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie</td>
<td>Emergence</td>
<td>Failure to contest and equalise dominating powers - including our own</td>
<td>Manifesting the principles of equity, inclusion and transparency in knowledge generating practices and their outcomes</td>
<td>Creating the systems which produce the local means by which participation is manifested, recognised and sustained</td>
<td>Listening Distinguishing Articulating Mentoring Reciprocating</td>
<td>A shared right to be true to ourselves and each other Systemic practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CODA
Writings from the cave:

A compilation of some of the materials circulated following a visit to a cave in the Blue Mountains, January 2006, to pursue our interests in participatory practice

9 October 2006
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Writings from the cave:

Introduction

In the third week of January 2006 seven people met in a privately owned nature reserve in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. We descended to a cave that previously belonged to Indigenous People for eons, including the Gundungurra People. The link between the seven players was an interest in participatory practice, and our participation in an inquiry initiated by Susan Goff for her PhD studies. The players decided to meet to undertake ‘Acts’ over a period from Thursday night to Saturday evening: transitioning, exploring, knowing, presencing and, again, transitioning.

Susan Goff has written about the agreed intention as follows:

‘This is our resolution to the epistemological edge between the crowning of emergent, participatory engagement within the responsibility for the once in a lifetime opportunity to meet here, about these matters, in this way.’

Susan Goff, Draft Chapter 1, Thesis, March 2006. Page 3

List of players

Peter Whitecross
Lesley Porter
Peter O’Connell
John Lavarack
Joanna Iuliano
Susan Goff
Jane Fisher

People who were not able to come to the cave

Sue Smylie
Brigid Pearse
Margaret Nippert
Jane Gregg

Cameron

My young son Cameron came with me to the reserve, but did not come with us to the cave

Mark

Mark is the present guardian of the reserve in which the cave is located.

Explanation of this collection

This is a collection of writings circulated by these people in the months following the meeting in the cave. I initiated the compilation on 28th March 2006 to assist my own reflection on our work and our commitment to co-write. From that act has grown a collection of writings about our time in the cave and about our journey together through the inquiry into participatory practice.

Jane Fisher, 28th March 2006
Writings from the cave:

What is your name?

Ochre hand, spraying mouth: your turn
What holds haphazard story?
Ochred hands, dust now: my turning

Susan Goff Draft Chapter 1, Thesis, March 2006. Page 36
Gundungurra Cave

The seven of us tread softly onto mud silt shales
Padding quietly out over the powdered cave floor
Grounded caresses, our souls like talc
We are in this sandstone haven,
With awe we gaze through the opening of the Gundungurra cave mouth

A monumental mass of sedimentation anchored
in and on this uniformed mountain stretch
So well layered, so little structural alteration
Sandstone walls with only the slightest of tilting
Inter-bedded with shales, silt stones, mudstones
Above the cathedral ceiling large and cavernous
Containing and holding fears and worries
We crane our necks to look to see in wonder

Wood smoke love signals circle around the
seven as the fires spell is cast
Even then we are breathing in the first shared breath
The breath that unites and transports us
Beyond absence, beyond silence
Night passes
Strangers sleep under one roof

Day finds us flying out over the cave’s platform
Slung in a harnessed embrace there is sky, a birdcall, trees, and rock
becoming rock, sound becoming voice.
Seven turns to audience the whisper of grace
held within this world.

Lesley Porter, April 2006
Love Poems I

Within the intimacy of one room
Cloaked in winter’s darkness
Covered over by the expansive night sky
Massed and marked by the Milky Way
Inside this one room
Where you begin to show me who you really are
Ever so slowly
And as all else is quickening
Here in this one room
Slow motion holds the reigns

Humble stewards of love
Assembled and duly drugged

In awe we take turns showing each other the way
Fingers move towards the curve at the corner of your mouth
And as they move we are locked in and on each other’s
Pulsing beating heart

Our breath floating in and out
On the edge of this unfolding love
Massed and marked
On the edge of the Milky Way.

Les Porter 2004

25th April 2006, Lesley emailed asking that this, Love Poems 1, and a later item, She Will Make Gardens, be removed from this compilation:

I am happy to keep in the compilation Batkin Borderland as I finished that poem in Sydney the weekend of the cave event. The other two can come out as I shared those more as ……I’ll show you mine if you show me yours in the early stages of our writing together project. The cave poem has been percolating since we met at the cave and took some time to take form. I wish in many ways it could say more as there is more to be said. Still perhaps this is draft 1.
Love LP

In working on the second draft I rang Lesley and asked her to allow me to retain them for at least this draft. Lesley agreed. I hold the compilation open as writings from our journey as participatory practitioners, which I see as beginning long before we met in the cave.

Jane Fisher, 12th May 2006
I Came For The Cave

I came for the cave. I knew that it had to be good because Susie dumped a perfectly working plan in order to accommodate the hope of being there. At the teleconference in December we had reached a miraculous agreement upon discovering the same two days clear on everyone’s calendar. We undertook to meet then. Within a day she was writing to urge change to another pair of dates that were the only ones in which the cave was available.

I was surprised but not annoyed. For Susie to do something that made more work (mostly for her) it had to be good!

I believe the cave is a sacred site. Mark told us of the visit from the local National Parks and Wildlife officer who inspected the handprint on the cave wall and declared that, since it looked like a child’s print, it was made by someone before they were initiated and therefore it could not be a sacred site.

Sorry but bugger that. How could anyone sit for long in contemplation in that space and not be affected by the witness of that print? Who knows what the story is? Was it made by a survivor leaving a sign? Or a rebel making their own mark? Was it an act to which others were indifferent? Was it made in celebration? defiance? joy? grief?

The dusty sandy earth within the cave was soft under bare feet. It yielded like skin. I am confident that digging would yield wonders but I love its enigma. So, too, I love the dream Jo reported of the human figure exposed and recovered in the earth beneath the cave’s roof.

The cave is like a great half dome slotted into the rough sandstone escarpment and then left to erode. Three pagodas stood in a row outside like attendants and the rock face on the opposite side of the valley was at a distance enough to create both enclosure and wide space. It struck me as supremely a place in which to be human, whatever that may mean.

I also came, in a different spirit, for the people in the cave. This was about curiosity - a vaguely registered longing. It was about trusting something in Susie: that this would be worth it. I was uncertain about this. In her narrative she says she was anxious that I might not get to the mountains, that I would find the prospect too hard and turn back. She forgets that I was the one who first uttered the idea of this retreat. I was not the first to have thought it, since people’s instant responses reveal it as a thought that formed for many at the time.

I loved the solitary journey there. That I lost my mobile phone was as convenient as it was a screaming frustration. I wanted it lost. I drove up alone and out of contact with the world, dwelling in that flimsy metal shell through black wet night, a weird theatre lit by the greenish dashboard lights and headlamps reflected on deep fog. It was sheer pleasure. I would lean forward to crouch over the wheel as I peered into it all then force myself back to breath deeply and take it with resolve. My aim was to get there. I drove slowly, never getting above 80kmh until I finally crawled into the driveway of the lodge to be greeted by Susie, Jane and Cameron on the porch. The delight on Susie’s face and in her whole being speaks the force of that little sentence in her narrative concerning her fear that I would decide to turn back from the journey: “He did not.”
Writings from the cave:

The cave, the gathering and the journey are all about my friendship with Susie. The relationship I have with everyone in the research group is translated by conversation with her. Of course, this probably overstates the case since I have had independent dialogue with many in the group, yet still in the context of Susie’s encouragement to do so. I sense that she is uncomfortable with this. Her sense of participation is more democratic than that. Her enthusiasm for us is embedded in a sensibility she longs to share.

If I were to put aside all the previous description of the retreat – what is refracted through Susie’s narrative and the poetry that has been passed around – and consider what are the things that pin the experience down to this flapping fabric that is my life, what would be fixed in my consciousness?

The same plunge into thick fog at the top of Kurrajong Hill as Susie had experienced earlier in the afternoon, albeit under falling night. An entry into the fog of consciousness, as Peter W might have it.

The sense of plummeting gorges to the right of my car after Mt Tomah as I passed under Mt Bell. I could not see it for the fog but it is something that thrills me to imagine it, felt in the recollection of my previous travels along Bell’s Line of Road. Little stands between the abyss and me at any moment. Sometimes this is physical reality. The pleasure reflected in Jane and Cameron’s gentle dance of exploration around the house. Cameron’s general hurtling and the way he could do a very funny “blwahblwahblwah” vocalizing thing with Jane patting his lips. Participatory comedy.

The soggy cigarette Susie and I smoked later in the evening – it was a (self-confessed) crap attempt at rolling but I appreciated her gesture all the same. That naughty camaraderie of smokers!

Lesley’s generous vulnerability as she spoke of her affecting story of loss and redemption. She accepted the place to which her feet had brought her broken and found something there that fed life back into her soul.

The rising dismay felt at Susie’s outburst when I asked if I could sleep after Lesley’s story. The dismay is still there when I read that my action in speaking had broken “the beautiful emergence of relationship, story, meaning and rhythm” when, from my point of view, my request to sleep that had not done this at all. We are giving ourselves so fully to the possibilities of making meaning in our experiences of place and person and speech. We are always on the edge of the escarpment here. A threshold, as Susie puts it. Do we pass over to another place or nothingness or both?

The first step I took on Saturday morning in the direction of the cave instead of my car. The direct descendant of Lesley’s story the evening before. Sometimes I commit for no reason and trust to what happens next.

Jo’s dream of emergence and submergence - though I remember this with the aid of Susie’s account more than my own recollection of what Jo said at the time. I was still in fog. Something that gave way in me as I squatted on the ground with Peter O and Jo running our fingers in the dust, tracing patterns and levitating stones. I felt pulled into the action, something profound in this dance - transcending self. The handprint on the rock wall above us had a new significance. It was now a sign of deep kinship.

Opening my mouth, saying, “The earth loves us but does not know how to live with us.” The practice not performed for more than 15 years: opening my mouth and letting the spirit speak forth. I do not for a second think that a disembodied spirit spoke forth but something altering was said.

Many altering things were spoken.
Writings from the cave:

Peter W lying prostrate in the dust where we had traced the patterns and raised the stones. I understood this gesture somehow. It was an elegant act. It compensated for my loss in being so inattentive to his story the evening before.

The pleasure in driving away. I enjoy these moments of solitude in my life, invariably experienced in transit. The land was resplendent under the winding trajectory between the handprint and my home where other indigenous art is being formed. I have come away with a notion that I hardly dare speak, it feels so foolish. I want to make art. I sense that I cannot respond to our time together except in action of some form that results in a thing or an event, some means of conjuring the earth into forms that reveal other forms... something.

The sight on my computer screen of lichen. A photo I took of rocks outside the cave. Brilliance manifests in digital technology even as my senses in the moment feel dulled. “High technology” as it has evolved at this point in history affects ways of seeing and remembering that are only just emerging for me. Jo's and Lesley's cameras, Susie’s recording equipment, the exquisite technology of the iPod that I got for my birthday – as ephemeral as tracings in dust and as beautiful. The works of our hands. Arm print on the rock. Perhaps it was a rehearsal? Getting the ochre mix right, swishing it in the mouth to the needed consistency, choosing the texture of rock surface, pressing down hand and forearm hard to ensure a clean edge, taking a deep breath, pursing lips. Exhalation of colour. I don’t know.

John Lavarack
I came for the cave7, 27th February 2006

On 1st April 2006, John wrote:
Another tiny change= to the passage in my writing about the trip along Bells Line of Road. It’s been bugging ever since I chose it. I am open to suggestion for another, as long as it is not "hurtling" as this has already been more aptly applied to Cameron's actions.

John’s alteration was
I drove up alone and out of contact with the world, dwelling in that flimsy metal shell through black wet night, a weird theatre lit by the greenish dashboard lights and headlamps reflected on deep fog.

His earlier draft used the word ‘hurtling’ in place of ‘weird’.
John's little red writing book - a microcosm through the multiscope

Having told us about his relationship with his message stick - the vellum notebook, John moved into the story of the little black notebook he had been holding in his hand. It almost seemed like an aside to begin with, but the real story soon emerged - the drawings in red.

In Byron, at new year - I seem to remember something about early morning - there were a group in intense conversation. One of those present took John's notebook and commenced to draw in red in the book. He only stopped when he started to realise that should he continue with the multiplication of his drawings then notebook would become his.

In order to respect the dynamics of this liminality he graciously handed the notebook back. It was this promiscuous object that John handed round.

John had introduced the drawings, and amongst other words had called them cartoons; thus I was a bit surprised when they reached me to see that they were not as figurative as I had expected. Nevertheless their creation myth and the manner of its retelling had caught my imagination.

There had been inchoate waves of fascination to the telling which swept into me and took up residence in my consciousness, so when my turn came I was not going to give up that easily. I peered into the curves and strokes, and sure enough stories started to emerge.

While essentially abstract, their rounded angularities hinted at sly characters. A map perhaps? A cipher more like? Like 3-D pictures, you had to get the focus right; be prepared to shift if the meaning was to come. 'Ambiguous' was another word that John had used, and they were certainly that.

The way they scratched insistently at my intellect reminded me of Rorschach blots and thematic apperception tests, but it was the emotional resonance reached in most strongly.

One reminded me of Baba Yaga, well not so much Baba Yaga as her house - the one that stood on chicken legs and consequently had ambulant aspirations. I had only made the acquaintance of this exotic little cottage recently (maybe five months ago). It had shown up first in Stross's book Singularity Sky and then as the prototype for Howl's Castle - www.howlsmovingcastle.com.au

Two such close encounters of the third kind were too much for my curiosity and I had done some internet snooping, becoming spellbound by Bilibin's paintings at www.oldrussia.net/baba.html

And of course when I got round to it, she was there in my trusty encyclopedia of mythology.
Turning the page (well maybe it was the same one) there was an unexpected treasure - text! words! Almost as indecipherable as the graphics.

Haruki Murakami!

The coincidence spiked my curiosity. Murakami was my favourite literary discovery of 2005. On a hunch I had taken Hard Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World to Japan and had enjoyed it so much that it had intruded on my other activities. I can't clearly remember what the antecedents for me buying the book were. It may have been reading a review of his most recent book. There again I might be making that bit up - as you do.

Also on the same page was the title of his most recent book - Kafka on the Shore. Earlier that week I had read the first few chapters of Kafka and had seriously considered taking it with me to the gathering in the cave.

Now, having got about three fifths of the way through (p310) I find Murakami's universe fusing yet again with the narrative of the inquiry with such effect that this is being written at 2.00 am.

On the basis of two books (well not even that) I would say that Murakami is a contemporary master of porosity. His characters, objects and universes merge and interact with each other in a damaged way that carries a tantalising hint of impending salvation and annihilation. At the same time [co - incident - ally], they have the impertinence to infiltrate mine. For example, logos (Colonel Saunders & Johnnie Walker in the case of Kafka) come to 'life' as literary devices; self consciously consumating their destiny in an explicit Greek tragedy with post modern convolutions.

The most common epithet in the dust jacket blurbs on the book that I am holding is addictive (3 times). Boundary issues abound and multiply. Complicity crosses barriers of time, space, species (cats), material (stone). No one fits where they find themselves and their collective discomfort propels the quest.

I think I'll just stop now and read some more . . . . .

Peter Whitecross, 5th February 2006
The value of absence to participation

From: Pearse Brigid
Sent: Wednesday, 8 March 2006 4:14 PM
To: Iuliano, Joanna; PO'Connell; Peter Whitecross; Jane Fisher; John Lavarack; Porter, Lesley; Susie Goff
Cc: Sue Smylie
Subject: The value of absence to participation

Below is a poem from me...
Not sure where you are all at with the writing and whether this is an inclusive email list...
This poem has been totally inspired by the inquiry!!

I am so afraid of absence
I deny it
Whenever I can
I send apologies
I accept apologies
I carry on regardless....

I don't want to miss out on anything!!!
Sometimes I refuse to participate in case I will miss out (on something)
Sometimes I don't invite others to participate so they won't be missed (when they miss out)
On something...

I am afraid of absence
Maybe it reminds me of death
Or of how little control I really have (death)

I have realised that absence is not an aberration
To participation
It is the space within
The grace of presence

Brigid Pearse, 8th March 2006

On 10/03/2006, at 8:31 AM, John Lavarack wrote:

I love this, Brigid. This has resonance for me. I sense there is something significant in absence. Something I sensed on the time away at Bell when Jane had to take herself off to check in on Cameron, and when we all vacated the cave except Susie and Jo at one point. Participation is not such unless there is absence - something about the freedom to participate or not, or to be a participant when not bodily present. Forgive me - this is not intended as analysis of your writing but treating your piece as a provocation.

I had a brief phone call with Susie this morning and I am wondering how we are all going and whether it is timely to consider now where we are all going with our (writing?) project. Love to all
John
Batkin Borderland
The bats are flying across George Street in December dusk
Exiting to Valentine Street and around the cathedral pier
Across Harris, and over the rooftops of Sutherlands Hotel.
Navigating Central Station clock tower
Mapping out their borderlands above
Saturday night traffic, intent and streaming
This wild urban river scape
Daring to look above the chaotic city din
And I am lost in wonder
Flying now with bat kin.
Lesley Porter, January 2006

My Grace
The breeze is stirring the sand over the outline of the woman
So openly and vigorously does the sand move that she should be exposed by now;
That her hair should be hair, black, lustrous – not just the wavy sculpture of the sand.
That her rounded shoulders, ample bosom, and elegant arm movements
Should be skin and warm not undulating movements of dry sand.

Though the swirl and shift of the sand is not teasing my physical senses
My heart and soul are being invited –
Inviting me to lay down with her, let it go with her, be her see through her eyes
View the world as it appears to her;
‘come see what I see, feel what I feel’ she whispers; ‘trust me’ she pleads.

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

A sense of peace
A moment of grace
A knowledge of being all powerful
All everything and At once all nothing but a grain in the swirling

Jo Iuliano, February 2006
Psalm to transformative energy
One of seven graces

I stood against the sandstone escarpment
I felt the warmth of life against my back
This is not the wall I had created and faced
Blocking my entrance to life
It is a portal
Of many portals
Into life

Jane Fisher, Draft 1 24 January 2006
In collating these writings, I am moved to write the following words:

I worked in a place, 11th Floor
There were hawks, birds of prey that
Circled, nesting somewhere in the metropolis
I spoke of the birds, but no-one answered.
The birds were outside the office tower.

Years later, I heard my partner say
he knew them from his window
in a nearby tower.

I worked in another place
When technology arrived
Now we had the internet as well as windows.
I could see NASA’s explorer moving on the surface of Mars.
I spoke of it
No-one looked. Email boxes called.

I walked with you, down to the cave.
You looked at the sky.
You looked at the rock.
You lay in the earth.
You spoke of these things, viewing yourselves through them.
You acknowledged my existence.

Jane Fisher, 28th March 2006

In the cave, Peter Whitecross referred to lines in Douglas Adam’s Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, in which space/time travel is described as a little like being drunk - while that sounds OK to the hero, he is asked to consider how the water feels about being drunk.

I am recalled again to Susie’s poem, at the end of her draft chapter 1, with which I have opened this collation or writings;

Specifically, the final two words

my turning

Susan Goff Draft Chapter 1, Thesis, March 2006. Page 36

Hi Jane
Also wanted to say thank you for your second poem – buried as it is in the collection – I found it haunting and profound.

Susan Goff, 30th March 2006
Hi Jane,
this is exciting and provocative - the relationships that you draw and how you draw them sets up a new resonant field. It seems no coincidence that it is you in the 'dryad' photo with the tree fork in your mind. Just attached this notification as it further underscores the coincidence/synchronicity theme

IN CONVERSATION: Transliminality
Thursday 6 April, 7.40pm, Radio National
Why do we occasionally have insights or feelings that seem beyond common sense? Is it coincidence, something paranormal, or something else? Dr Michael Thalbourne, from the University of Adelaide, suggests it's something he calls 'transliminality' or a leak from the subconscious. But how can we make controlled use of such abilities?
http://www.abc.net.au/rn/science/incon/

Hi Susie,
I am happy with what you have written. There was a chronology thing about an event that happened at a different time - do you want that level of comment?

Regards

Pete
Pete Whitecross, 31st March 2006

Susie emailed back to Peter 12/4/06

Hi Pete and everyone
I listened to this link today
Interesting
It is a classic case of instrumental science trying and failing to deal with something that simply refuses to be caught in its grasp...
Listening to the interview I get the image of our best of all possible beasts playing with the science, nosing around to tempt them then choosing not to have anything to do with it ...
Thanks Pete
Writings from the cave:

Dryad

- Dryad

DRYAD. by Baeori. The darkness of the night Rest upon the evergreen The shimmer of a woman Seldom heard, and never seen. A dance upon the moonlit grass The sky release its tears


in Greek Mythology, a deity or nymph of the woods, a nymph supposed to reside in trees or preside over woods

In compiling draft 1 I reread Susie’s draft Chapter 1, and realised for the first time that the person in the picture, standing in the waterfall at the lip of the cave, was me.

This provoked a deeper understanding of Susie’s description of her experiences while five of us were out of the cave seeking further. I invited Susie to write a piece based on her three sensate experiences for this compilation.

In parallel, Susie sought to include our conversation about my developing understanding in her chapter, and left our conversation to draft something. This is what ensued:

>> From: Susan Goff
>> To: Jane Fisher
>> Subject: Existential intrusion
>> Date: Thu, 30 Mar 2006 12:42:18 +1100
>> Hi Jane
>> Great to talk with you I decided to paste in your email to me and leave it at that ... See attached to see what you think... P 46-47
>> Susan Goff

On 30/3/06 4:02 PM, Jane Fisher wrote:

> Susie - fits perfectly. As is the case with narrative. Great that when you made the space to insert something, you saw that what fitted was what had already been said.
> > I also re-read your text relating to the immediate time preceding our group's return to the cave. Should you not wish to take up my invitation to write something about the 3 sensate experiences from the cave that you put together for me this morning, then I think that I will add your 5 paragraphs from 'As I look I see' to '- but there is nothing' to my draft book.
> > I have just circulated the book and wait to see/hear how it falls in the pool.
> > J

Susie’s response:

Would be most happy with this as a solution - don't want to augment my sensate experiences of cave in this chapter as it is attempting to balance my experience with everyone's
Thank you for your thoughts on existential intrusions!
xx
Extract from Susie’s Chapter 1- describing her three sensates

As I look I see, not as a physical form, but as some excitation in the air, something at the threshold of the cave. It is like light reflecting leaves caught in a little whirlwind, the shimmer of fish as they fly in their schools. There is no breeze: all is still. I can see the spirit legs walking up into the place of meeting. They do not come in, but they are there where the water has dripped down from the cave roof the previous morning, where the lizards scurry in to see what we are doing, and scurry back into the undergrowth. Where previous visitors had chopped down a tree for firewood at Mark’s horror. It is the place where Jane had chosen, dryad like, to be in Peter’s first stage of the morning session. I wonder why the energy does not seem to come into the cave. I do not want to look too hard or too closely. I return to the quiet within. We have a commission: to find a way of speaking that will contribute to the relocation humanity within the ecological scale.

Nature wants us but wants to know how to live with us, as Peter W says later in the day. Something of this thought is in my mind too: it is about grace. Grace to know, grace in the knowing and doing, grace in the being. Grace. Is that it? I let it go. Silence again, and then, a wind comes into the cave. It travels in one complete ring, clockwise, around the dome and leaves. Within the space of a few heartbeats it does it again. Its return reminds me of its arrival. I am struck by its form – it feels completely cylindrical, dynamic, whole. A pause, and it comes again twice as fast, twice as loud and big as the first two times. How do you measure “twice as” in such a sense? Then silence. Stillness. I check the trees outside for movement – but there is nothing.

Susan Goff Draft Chapter 1, Thesis, March 2006. Page 32

On 18th April 2006 Lesley wrote

Just to tell you Susie if I have not so far, that I think this poem is beautiful. Tears are so deserving of investigation, contemplation and so full of beauty. “The hairs raising, skin pricking”….and the next lines give words to a universal experience. I love the start too...”Always in encounter”.....

Have you put this in with Jane’s collected works?

Les
Writings from the cave:

I had forgotten reading Susie’s poem, and have retrieved it here in context:

Tears of beauty

On 16/2/06 8:36 PM, “Susan Goff” wrote:

Dear all (I have added Brigid to this list)
Lesley and I had a brief exchange about writing – and in it I asked her if her responses to the narrative were “tears of beauty” – at the conclusion of our reflections, Lesley asked me about tears of beauty...
I needed to take a little time – but even so what follows is a bit of a rushed job
This is what came....

Always in encounter
Rarely so
Always in encounter’s
Taking up of me
A streaking intent
Finding me
Looking another way
Your sight
Dissolving the irreducibility
Of One
The hairs rising
Skin prickling
Primordial knowing
Tears of beauty
Flooding
The cracks
Of earthen separation

XXX Thanks Lesley and thanks Brigid too

19 April 2006 afternoon From Peter Whitecross

If only the words

Only if the words
and actions of freedom are symbolic, it seems - that they speak through
and
of us all - timely and attuned...

In which case, it is all in the word, the sequence, the structure - the
literary form and the construction of knowing that holds it together...
That
the form has to somehow convey this structure... I feel like a dadaist -
struggling with a medium that was designed to say something else. The
funny
thing is that the poetics of the struggle lets you say more - - - -
In its unfinished state -
its potential. Is this it? Yes Is there more? Yes Yes
The unfinishedness invites, embraces participation. An aesthetic impulse
moves
me to attempt completion, humility prepares me for failure, and at any
moment I
might burst out laughing. Its humungously difficult but also fun.

Where would we be without words? and here we are because of words. Or
something
like that??

Language (like mathematics & mobile phones) are part of the infrastructure
of
the extended mind. But because of our shared experience our language is
now more
resilient and illuminating, particularly given our commitment to use it
poetically
Pete
At the conclusion of our time together in the cave we spoke of inviting those who were not in the cave back into our inquiry. In Adelaide, Lesley, Jo, Margaret and I began to meet periodically, over and above our email conversations. After such a meeting Margaret wrote to all of the Inquiry group:

Absence and Non Absence

I left. I was gone.
Susie sent me a card. I was not gone.
You went to the Cave. I was not there.
You invited me back in.
Are you sure I was not there?

Susie sent me chapter 1 (at least I think its chapter 1).
Treat it with respect she said.
Jane sent me the compilation – a treasure indeed.

I cannot accept your invitation through work
The pressure to read, the pressure to respond, the pressure to carve out time.
Disrespectful indeed.

The inquiry calls for pause, contemplation, space, time, commitment.
I can find these at home.

A new computer last week – 160 Gb’s how’s that?
Broadband today. I’m on line!!!!

Do I have all your addresses?

Not Joanna’s. No global address book here.
Can someone please send this on?
Do I have your permission?
Unfamiliar addresses. Who are you?
What’s my address – I don’t know just yet. .

I dreamed I had no hands. I dusted off an old book from the bookshelf and opened to chapter 14 ‘La Selva Subterranea’. The Handless Maiden which begins,

“If a story is seed, then we are its soil. Just hearing the story allows us to experience it as though we ourselves were the heroine who either falters or wins out at the end……In a very real way, we are imprinted with knowing just by listening to the tale”. (Women who Run with the Wolves)

And so a few weeks ago on a cold Saturday afternoon when the jobs were done and the family occupied, I crept into bed with the sunlight streaming in the window and I started reading “The Cave” – otherwise known as Susan’s Story of the Inquiry Intensive: Crossing the Threshold” and I was taken onto the feed into the motorway that was blocked….

I wondered how I would feel reading about a unique and deep experience that I had chosen not to be part of. Would I feel envious? Disconnected? Puzzled? But beginning on the blocked motorway feed to meet Jane and Cam I was there. Absent and non absent. Separate and part of. A different position maybe.
I read slowly, savouring paragraphs. Studying the photos. Jo, Lesley and Jane I know. But which of the men’s faces belong to which name to which voice? I am taken to the sharing of jobs and food. It feels warm. I am taken to the underground—to the ‘Subterranea’—down down the steps, to the undergrowth, to the cave. Did you know you would be sharing this with me? Is this with your permission?

Page 14. John wants to go to bed— the jarring of the flow. Page 15. It’s not there. What happens next? The printer has mixed up the pages. Relief as I find page 15 tucked behind page 16 and I read on.

And then the existential and meta physical finding of Grace. Powerful, ancient, a core of humanity brought to the surface by willingness, reverence, seeking, communal. (At least that’s how I read it). I pause there, I reread there, I stay there.

And then it’s Act 5 and you’re preparing to leave. I thought we were there for longer!

The next day I read The Compilation. Joanna’s I Love makes sense to me now. The poetry and psalms dress and beautify…and more. Breathe life. I read John’s narrative as an answering Cooee. A completion of the other side…and softer…and still the writings keep coming, enlarging and expanding—I love receiving these.

Gundungurra Cave “The seven of us tread out softly onto mud silt shales”. Seven? Don’t forget the ‘future ghosts’ who walk with you. Folding and Tilting: Deeply personal. I’m on the outside looking in apart from.

What now?

I am happily part of the South Australian group. We’ve met twice now since the Cave—and it feels full of promise. I am apart from ‘the Seven’—absent but not absent.

Thankyou for your invitation to be a part of. Margaret Nippert
At Home
28th April 2006

Emails picked up 30 April 2006

Hey Margaret...you did it!
Isn’t it great when technology works & you have time to play with it.
I love your wit and your boldness....very delicious.
And as you know the handless maiden is (one of my favourites) so rich.I love the mythology.
Have you read Drusilla Modjesca’s The Orchard? She plays with this story in that beautiful novel.
That’s all I can do now ....will attempt more over the weekend.
Great to have you back & on line!

Les x

Hello Margaret!
It’s like you have arrived on some big glamorous Busby Berkeley staircase that has delivered you, hands in the air, with a "TA DAAA!" downstage centre. Good work - it feels like you are here, anyway!
I am the tall lanky one in the photos - and the one blowing on the fire.
160 GB sound like they will allow you free and easy access to emails and internet - looking forward to more theatric entrances!

John
Folding and Tilting

Driving the island’s coast road
You begin your earth science love speak
Saying, look at that beautiful folding and tilting
Where rocks have pushed with force into other rocks
As I surrender to the strokes at the back of your neck.
Craggy edges structurally altered
Plain for all to see, weathering into new landforms
Elements over time wearing and washing away
You say some things are harder than others
Silt will weather and erode long before the quartz and iron
Cemented, compacted and strongly jointed
As we rub up against each other which one weathers first
In surrender to the other
In the slumping of gravity and the deposition of this new form
As I become sediment to your sediment
Folding and tilting in our own time
Transforming into what may endure the water and wind
Of joining lives, as rocks become rocks
In turn, you yield then I yield then weight and gravity push
Past into soft mud, silt, sand and altered stones
As I become shale to your shale
Cross bedded weaving and wonder
Will I cede into sleep
in this west coast town
As I become clay to your clay.

Lesley Porter April 2006
Writings from the cave:

After our second draft, Peter Whitecross wrote to me enclosing a copy of a poem missed in earlier drafts.

Gundungurra Spirit

Collaboratively we willed ourselves into an unfamiliar topography. New - old and both to gather.

Tethered together by filaments of shared heart-mind we blundered blithely through membranes of gossamer. Not realising what we had done, until we looked back.

Pop goes our consciousness.

Nature welcomes us back - ochre hand print to the wheel as we swerve across the tracks, chuckling as we go.

Nature needs us back, just as we need Nature back. Nothing else is sustainable. Knowing this we are committed.

Complicity spreads like a homely virus - accelerating the extended mind mutations, firing with fractal randomness. Synaptic leaps of faith.

There . . . .

All together now.

Activists in a Kafkaesque universe - hunting the Snark, and in so doing, drawing attention to ourselves for our gay abandonment of passivity.

Fear not - expectations are so deeply ingrained that very few recognise our dirt drawing disjunctures for what they really are.

The Earth seancing itself into an articulation - "the moving finger writes . . ."

What a rush.
The walls come tumbling down.
Is this really Jericho?
So who first tooted their trumpet?

Pete Whitecross
From Sue Smyllie

Don't worry
I seem to float
At the edges of your mind's eye
Unknown unsure

Don't worry
My raft-heart has slipped this mooring
And floats now
On a different sea

Don't worry
Your concern makes dive bomb splashes
In the guilt
That pools at the bottom of my belly

Don't worry
We will meet again
In different water
Each current recognising itself in the other

Don't worry
This time
I was the mist
That burns off with the rising sun

aham brahmasmii (I am a ripple in the fabric of the cosmos)

Dear all

I have only dipped into your emails every now and then and mostly not read them all through. I respect and admire your work and will hold it safe.

sue

Sue Smylie, September 2006
She Will Make Gardens

She made gardens where none had been
Green blushing soft lush growth
With climbing roses and
Bobbing blue salvia heads

By the second summer
A tall pink hollyhock
Flowered from its seed place
A crack on the veranda's edge
Lesley Porter January 2006

John Lavarack asked that his name be spelled correctly
bluereal@iinet.net.au , Thursday, 30 March 2006 6:47:17 PM

Jane,
if I were standing before you know it would be directly to you in most formal stance of respect, with hands in a Thai greeting before me. This is .... gorgeous.
I have one tiny correction on which I must insist.
[bow]
John
Writings from the cave:

Dear Jane (and all)
Well here I am at the 11th and a half hour -- thank goodness you are in SA Jane, I can use the time difference to my advantage -- with my offering, following Jane's (and the SA group's) generous invitation to me the other day. It is a reflection of my experience of the process in the cave to meet the beast. My initial thoughts were around the phrase "between worlds" -- an expression that resonated strongly with me after the cave experience. However in the way that these things grow and flow, the final piece turned out to be something very different from where I started. However I am pleased with it -- for me it captures my feelings and experiences. Like a good playback story (which is where the process sprung from) I hope that it contains some resonances for each of you.

The other evening Susie and I had a wonderful conversation by way of my exit from the enquiry, and together with the following piece it feels complete for me, although as I said during the interview, the experience continues to unfold and integrate for me. So thank you to each and every one of you for allowing me to share in the journey.
Go well and best wishes
With deepest respect
Peter O'C

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Belly-knowing.

Place of Gundangarra and Darug people,
ridge line watershed between two rivers,
cupped in the earth’s sandstone hand, sky above
seven meet to invoke an audience with the beast.

Our Beast – more felt than seen,
glimpsed fleetingly in group murmurings,
somehow familiar but barely understood.

Stories of the journey spring from our solitary headwaters and trickle
across the space in steams of sound, dance, stillness, body, voice meeting, swirling, blending, bumping, resonating, joining with each other.
Building, flowing, surging the river of our collective journey eddies around our questions written in the dust – name! purpose! knowing!

In time and space suspended – bending, extending, plastic – ochre hands upon the rocks reach to us across the aeons and we hang between the worlds of head and heart.
Belly-knowing.
Portal and porthole – exit or entrance?
En-trance.
The earth speaks through us, and we through the earth, Unseen but known by our river ripples in cave floor dust.

Our river stills into pools of quiet reflection
thoughts and feelings, head and heart, drip and ripple across the surface. We will drink from this well again and again.

Peter O’Connell, September 2006