‘Practice Story Exchanges’ and their Creative Invitation to Informal Learning

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of how members of a collaborative group interested in promoting convivial civilisation in human society took up exchanging practice stories – stories of doing something or seeing something done as examples of convivial backyard civilisation – in order tacitly to create an informal learning environment where practices of such a convivial backyard civilisation could seem normal, desirable and do-able. Practice story exchanges were an attempt to ‘tell the truth but tell it slant’ as Emily Dickenson put it, to work tentatively and collaboratively avoiding too much direct confrontation and rigid debate. This paper talks of the work of creating conviviality to redress an over emphasis on productivity in society; of the nature and importance of informal learning and its links with story exchanges and how this is pursued in the work of the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC).

Keywords: Artistry in Story Telling, Backyard Civilisation, Convivial Civilisation, Informal Learning, Storytelling Exchange

INTRODUCTION

In my early work as community worker and religious minister in the Outback, I became aware of the importance of ‘yarning’ as an indirect way in which people shared experiences, ideas and judgments which were often founded on unspoken values and assumptions about life. I was unaware that this yarning in pubs and around campfires and kitchen tables was such a strong source of informal learning. People with mastery of song and story in Australia – entertainers like

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant---
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind---
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

DOI: 10.4018/ijavet.2013070106
Slim Dusty, Ted Egan and Archie Roach and other less uplifting come to mind - had huge influence on Outback people of all races and attitudes. I think at this period rural and outback women yawned less publically and commercially but no less enthusiastically. I realised that this practice needed closer examination: What was good enough for these convivial types might be good enough for us as well.

I have been with a group who have been interested to generate informal learning about a more convivial and human civilisation to balance the stories particularly from the media about consuming, about being beautiful, about winning, about being rich and about being famous. We wanted to share stories of creative insight into a more humane and creative way of living in the world avoiding too early engagement in debate by inviting not statements of fact which require evidence but stories of life which require experience and artistry.

We come together once a month at the local community centre as the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC). Our project is to share stories of convivial civilisation practice in our local experience around different elements in human society such as: ideas, communication, economics, politics, technology, health and the environment and art. Sharing ‘practice stories’ often seems to create interest and sometimes imitation and thus to evoke informal, existential learning and thus to evoke informal, existential learning and enthusiasm around ways of making real elements of convivial backyard civilisation. I thought it would be good to find out more about the creative links between the imagination and informal learning and storytelling at the ACCBC.

This paper has three parts. The first looks at the learning challenges of creating a convivial civilisation in Australia. The second looks at the nature of human knowing and learning with particular interest in the imagination, and how different kind of knowing and learning can be evoked and shaped for human enrichment. The final part looks at practice story exchanges and their enrichment particularly though the metaphorical imagination, as a way of evoking informal learning about a just and convivial society particularly in community settings. The example is the ‘Practice Story’ Exchange meetings of the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC).

**BALANCING CONVIVIAL AND COMPETITIVE CIVILIZATIONS**

The educational challenge for the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation is to explore and reflect on conditions of conviviality in human society. Conviviality is about courteous, equitable, creative and compassionate living. Convivial living evokes pictures of people sharing a meal together. It is used here as a working image of mankind as a human family: at home somewhere in the world and its various eco-systems, inter-related, respectful and inclusive. It traces an oblique and possibly more humanistic line from Illich’s Tools for Conviviality (1973)

The convivial table is a working metaphor alongside images of contemporary competitive value: the champion winning in competition leaving the defeated unseen behind; the armed soldier giving security against attack from enemies; the scientist who discovers a new drug or physical correlation; the inventor who develops new technology; the entrepreneur who founds and builds up enterprises and becomes enriched as the enterprise and its stakeholders prosper often in competition with others who are toppled. These tend to give weight to heroic human individual and competitive achievement and not so much to collaborative and non-competitive human service.

The convivial table is offered as an idealised image to redress the balance of too much competition and too much individualism both of which are needed in modern society but not to the detriment of other values and needs. In his recent book, The Righteous Mind Jonathan Haidt (2012) wrote:

*We may spend most of our waking hours advancing our own interests, but we all have the*
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