

Chapter 6

Examples of Critical Participatory Action Research

Example 1: The Recycling Project at Braxton High School, Canada

A critical participatory action research project about recycling was conducted in Braxton High School, a small school (550 students) in a large urban school district in Canada. It began with a core group of ten Grade 11 and 12 science students (six of whom were also on the Students' Council), three science teachers, the Principal, head custodian (janitor), and three district consultants (one of whom is Rhonda Nixon). The project began because staff learned of students' felt concern with their abilities to be agentive to solve problems in their own lives and the lives of others. When the science department volunteered to work with students to address their concern about apathy towards environmental stewardship in their community, this core group collectively spearheaded a recycling program.

Determining Issues of Importance to Students Through Focus Groups

The school Principal, Matthew, with Rhonda's support, initiated a student focus group. In focus groups, students worked in grade level groupings of three or four students to record individuals' responses to questions about what engages/disengages them in their learning, what helps/prevents them from being agents of change in their own and others' lives, and what creates/erodes an inclusive school culture. The results highlighted that students were interested in but unsure about how to address issues of importance in their lives. These issues included: maintaining school-life balance and managing pacing and expectations of their course loads; feeling incapable of joining competitive sports teams but wanting to improve their fitness level; wanting to use their talents to raise money and awareness about youth issues such as homelessness, pregnancy, alcoholism, drug addictions impacting their peers; feeling that environmental problems were significant and too little was being done about them in their own community.

Analysing and Interpreting Students' Felt Concerns

During a half-day professional development session with all teachers, Rhonda presented the student focus group results (that is, the student focus groups had been conducted 3 weeks earlier by two district staff, including Rhonda, and then they created a report in a highly visual form with many examples of students' comments). Teachers discussed recurring issues of importance (felt concerns) to students as starting points for critical participatory action research projects. Four critical participatory action research projects emerged: non-competitive physical activity program for all students were planned to address the needs of the non-competitive student body; Fashion Studies 30 students designed a fashion show to raise awareness about youth issues; a self-paced English 10-2 course was created (with the permission of the provincial education department) for students who needed more or less time and diverse supports to thrive as learners; a recycling program was initiated in the school to improve recycling habits of the community.

Focusing on Students' Concerns About the Environment

Forty-one percent of comments made by a representative sample of approximately 15% of Grade 10, 11 and 12 students highlighted students' interest in increasing their collective agency to address recycling as an important global issue. This is an excerpt from the focus group report:

*Students Seek to Change the Larger Community (Larger/Global Change) 27/66 = 41%.
Comments:*

Most of us contribute to a better community through charity at specific times of the year such as Christmas, and some of us volunteer in the school or local community by running ... [a local] children's program ... , but we do not really choose issues to address that we know have local and global impact. Unstable weather is caused by Greenhouse Gas emissions, I think, but what does that mean? How do I help? I have no idea.

By Grade 12, many of us who care about social justice are involved in [a social justice group that coordinates fund raising and volunteering activities], but that [group] is about raising money, collecting food and clothes for the disadvantaged, but what are we learning about how to stop poverty? And why is all of this happening outside of class? Isn't Social Studies about collectivism? I mean we studied it, but do we consider what it means to live it?

I am completely convinced that most of us don't know how to help our own environment and I mean that should be a top priority. There is indisputable evidence that changing recycling will change the likelihood of bad things like unpredictable weather disasters. How many more disasters do we need to hear about? And I'm on the Student Council and I organize many events, but do I organize events around worthy causes in terms of how we can address the cause and not just give others food and clothing after the fact? Not really, we don't.

Shaping Projects with Volunteer Teachers

The staff was not forced to design projects; instead, the Principal provided a budget of \$ 12,500 to be shared by one or more teachers who volunteered to engage in

further examination of issues raised by students with students. Four volunteer teachers took control of this budget and designated one half-day of substitute release time for each of them to work with students to draft critical participatory action research plans (that is, stating the problem of felt concern; listing strategies to address the felt concern; listing anticipated resources [money, time, student and staff materials] required; stating imagined outcomes/hopes). Some teachers drafted a plan and then shared it with students and others involved students from day one. After this drafting process happened, the principal reviewed the plans and looked for ways to support the groups with available funds that he learned about by calling district staff (for example, the district's Wellness Consultant was provided with money from the provincial education department to invest in projects that aimed to improve students' physical, social, emotional, mental and spiritual health).

Administering a Survey to Determine Whether Recycling Habits were Problematic

Grade 12 students who were on Student Council wondered whether parents, students and staff knew about what to recycle, where to recycle and how to recycle. These students, with the assistance of their teacher, Jane, who was also their Biology teacher, created a Google survey to assess these wonderings. They shared their draft survey with the Principal who asked the district researcher to suggest revisions. The students in the environmental core group decided to go class to class to show all students how to access the survey, and the students modelled how to support parents to complete it. Some of the items were: 1. Circle the item that has only recyclable items in the list; 2. Circle the item that states correctly how to dispose of batteries; 3. At times when you do not recycle an item that can be recycled, circle one or more choices. There were three short answer questions that provided respondents with an opportunity to share what they typically recycle, where they recycle items, and why they may sometimes or often not recycle items. Eighty-eight percent of parents and 100% of staff and students completed the survey.

The core group found that most parents and students were unaware of the location of the few recycling bins in the school, and most staff often threw away items that could be recycled because they had forgotten or did not have the time to find a recycling bin. Most respondents did not know what could be recycled and were therefore hesitant to use the recycling bins. As the students discussed these results with a teacher, Brad, who had been a biology teacher since the school had opened, they were surprised that he had anticipated these findings:

We've always had a problem in this school with poor recycling habits because as a science department, we didn't stress the need to get the bins from the get go. When you open a new school, there are so many needs and you let some things go. We knew that leaving only garbage cans and one big bin at the back of the school would do nothing to build a culture of stewardship. So, it is not a surprise that we have a community that is uncertain about what to recycle and where to put the items.

Purchasing and Publicizing Recycling Bins

Initially, the core group purchased recycling bins and planned how to raise awareness about how to use them. The students went class to class and created online messages to inform everyone about the bins. Then, students conducted interviews with a representative group to determine what was needed to grow and sustain positive changes in recycling habits. Students responded to a recurring suggestion by posting decreases in garbage production (monthly and then weekly) on the district web space; everyone in the school and district community could post comments, questions and recycling strategies when they reviewed what the students, staff and parents were doing to recycle in the community.

Monitoring Recycling Habits and Meeting to Discuss what to do Next

Most of the monitoring of recycling habits was in the form of casual one-on-one audio-recorded and video-recorded interviews. Students and one teacher in the group took on the role of stopping to ask students (randomly in the hallway) what they had recycled that day and if they had used the bins. They also tested students and staff who stood at the bins on which bin they should use and how they knew. Some of these comments were video-recorded and used in presentations to encourage and educate others to keep using the bins in the school. These documentation efforts usually happened at lunch twice a month and the core group met weekly to talk about strategies for continuing to raise awareness of what and how to recycle.

To illustrate how documentation happened, Darlene, a Grade 12 student who did many of the interviews, said, “I usually just jot down what they [the interviewees] say because sometimes our meetings happen within a couple of days of the interviews.” She explained that the core group used the notes from interviews to change their messaging about what to recycle and where. Darlene provided one story about a trend noticed by the core group—students “squished up plates used for poutine [a common French Canadian dish of French fries served with gravy and cheese]” and “shoved them into the recycle bin” even though “we had posted online and right above the bins not to recycle poutine plates.” Because students seemed to ignore this request, Darlene interviewed students just before they shoved the poutine dishes into the wrong bin and asked them why they did it. In this case, Darlene found that five students didn’t learn what to do with the poutine plates because they didn’t know the dish was ‘poutine’; the interviewees commented on the limited information about what to do with “fries plates.” Darlene laughed and said, “You see now that I just wanted to note that down and tell our group. There was no need to transcribe it.”

In addition to this informal and ongoing gathering of evidence, the core group also administered the same survey at a mid-point during their recycling program.

Pooling Ideas to Solve Problems

When problems arose, the group pooled their ideas and efforts to solve them. On one such occasion, a teacher joined their group and talked about his students noticing that the custodial staff often tossed all of the recycling into the gray bin (for garbage) instead of taking the time to separate the items. The students and teachers decided to ask the Principal for advice on what to do, and the Principal invited the head custodian (janitor) to the table. The head custodian said that he could show the night and replacement staff what to do with the different items using pictures in his communication book. With the help of some students, the custodian created a step-by-step visual sorting guide for what to put in the gray and blue bins.

Presenting Findings, and Re-Energizing the Group

One of the most exciting experiences for this core group was agreeing to present a report of the findings of their project, which had only just begun to show change in recycling habits, at a provincial conference. To prepare, they gathered several times over 2 months to decide what to present, how to present it, and who to involve in the presentation. This process required them to re-live their story and to uncover how their group's activities had been intense, productive and, at times, challenging. For example, one member noted that they had met weekly with students to keep track of their progress over 5 months, which was noted as a positive illustration of their commitment. They also uncovered additional evidence in the records from the focus group interviews with parents that further highlighted the need for their project (that is, many parents mentioned that their children seemed overly focused on their own needs and seemed to have little interest in important world issues such as the environment). After the students presented their findings at the conference and received extremely positive responses from their audience (other local high schools, district and ministry staff), the teachers were excited to present the findings to Braxton High School staff. The principal commented, "I think having to present has a re-energizing effect because you realize the importance of what you're doing instead of just getting caught up in the doing of it." Although presenting a report on the project at a mid-point was difficult because they didn't have a lot of evidence to share, this group acknowledged that it was important for them to reflect on how much they had learned about changing culture and about working together as staff, students, district staff and parents.

Getting Involved with Other Students and Teachers to Keep Momentum

A second district consultant connected the science teachers to The Centre for Global Education (TCGE). The Centre for Global Education is a non-profit organization

dedicated to building youth capacity internationally to learn about and collectively act on issues of global importance. To date, they have served over 10,000 students who form the largest youth network mobilized around global challenges. TCGE has a mission:

The mission of The Centre for Global Education (TCGE) is to educate 21st Century students for a 21st Century world by providing global learning opportunities, enhanced through technology, informed by sound research and innovative teaching. Through a series of strategic relationships, The Centre has uniquely placed itself as an international hub of technology innovation, higher learning and global education (<http://tcge.tiged.org/>).

At that time, the TCGE had arranged a videoconference with a climate change expert, so they offered 6 students from Braxton spaces in that conference to comment on the expert presentation, to ask questions of the presenter, and to offer strategies to advance what can be done about issues raised. Six Grade 12 students from Braxton High School met up virtually with students from surrounding districts who shared how they were improving recycling habits in their communities and later with the support of the Director of TCGE and the involvement of the Director of the *Cities as Green Leaders* program as well as their teachers, these six students co-wrote a paper with students who had taken part in this videoconference about their projects and presented it at the Canadian Scientific Congress, in another province. This is an excerpt from one of the school's web pages congratulating the students for their accomplishments:

For the past six weeks, seven students from Royal Garden High School have put in nearly 1500 hours preparing a paper on climate change that was just presented to the Canadian Scientific Congress, Canada's largest conference on climate change... This paper, "Cities as Green Leaders ([city name]): A White Paper by a City's Youth", will also be presented to the [city name] City Council in September.

The core group at Braxton High School continued their recycling program for the following school year. Their energy came from the students who took part in this TCGE networking opportunity to see, hear and co-write with other groups committed to changing their culture to be environmentally responsible. In one student's words, "We actually made a difference to our school community and to a larger effort to impact climate change in Canada." Participating in their own school group and expanding beyond it enabled Braxton's core group to remain committed to their recycling program as critical participatory action research for the long term.

Example 2: The Self-Directed Learning Project at Grace Elementary School, Canada

A critical participatory action research initiative about self-directed learning began at Grace Elementary School, a large school (500 students) in a high socioeconomic area of a large urban school district in Canada. Teachers and administrators were concerned about how to support students who had high levels of anxiety about academic performance and, in particular, the levels of performance needed

for admission to the academic junior high school in the area. The criteria for acceptance into this junior high program included students' Grade 6 grades as well as their marks on an entrance exam. Because approximately 30% of parents had physically moved houses to attend Grace Elementary in order to be eligible to register their children in the academically renowned junior and senior high programs in the area, Grace Elementary staff found that students as young as 7 and 8 years old openly voiced their anxiety about not getting into these schools. For most of these elementary school students, a preoccupation with academic success started at Grade Three. The School District concerned collected responses to an annual survey including questions about students' enjoyment of school and their feelings of success at school. Grace Elementary School Grade 4 to 6 students' responses to these questions indicated a sharp decline in their enjoyment of school and their feelings of success. These survey findings confirmed the concerns of staff.

Determining How to Begin

Given declining student satisfaction results and agreement amongst staff that students were expressing unusually high levels of anxiety about academic performance at unusually young ages, the school principal, Bonnie, the assistant principal, Lisa, and two Grade 3 teachers, Jessie and Anne, with the support of Rhonda Nixon (a member of staff in the district office), brainstormed how to address this anxiety issue by starting with Grade 3 students. Grade 3 was a logical starting point because it was the first year of standardised tests in English language arts and Mathematics. The results were publicized in the community papers and on local television stations, which seemed to influence both parents and students to refocus attention on grades as the main indicator of students' success in school.

During the first meeting, Lisa shared her professional reading about competency-based education that focused on moving instruction towards students' social and emotional development, and, most importantly, towards students taking ownership of their learning, which included strategies for managing their anxiety. Rhonda emphasized that changing the structure of the school schedule to provide students with interdisciplinary project-based learning would support a focus on learning, not on short assignments, tests, and, ultimately, marks. Jessie and Anne came from an Early Childhood background that fitted with this project-based understanding of teaching and learning, and Bonnie found a way to change Music and Physical Education blocks to open up every Thursday morning for Jessie and Anne to accomplish this restructuring of time. Because there was agreement about the need to change teaching and learning towards a more holistic view of success, Jessie and Anne were excited to work with their students to shape a Thursday morning self-directed learning time, that is, a time when students would work on science projects that centred on issues of importance to them and also met mandated programs of study outcomes. Students would set academic, social and emotional learning goals that they would track as part of this pilot project and teachers would become facilitators rather than directors of student learning.

Gathering Students' Feedback

When Jessie and Anne shared with their Grade 3 students that they wanted to support them to become “self-directed” learners who could balance their school, social and emotional needs, they asked students whether this was a good idea and two typical responses were as follows:

I know that I'm already worried about so many things, whether I can pass Math and L.A. [English Language Arts]. So as long as I can learn how to do well...
I just want to get Es [Excellent standing]. So as long as I can get Es, then I will do anything.

Although Jessie and Anne knew that students were overly focused on their marks, they had not expected that students began Grade 3 with an almost exclusive focus on them. Therefore, they focused their next class discussion on the picture book, ‘Imagine a Day’, which is about re-imagining where we are and who we want to become. The students drew pictures of their vision of themselves learning to be strong academically, socially and emotionally. They considered questions such as: ‘Where do I do my best work?’ ‘How well do I work with others?’ ‘How could I imagine myself using technologies to help me learn?’ Their pictures showed students’ reflections on such questions—where they would work best, with whom, and how to change their environment to be able to set and meet their learning goals.

Analysing Students' Feedback

Jessie and Anne met with Rhonda and a second consultant to review the drawings. Together they were surprised that students wanted to change their physical space. There was a large atrium in the school that was visible from all classrooms and the administrative office windows. Approximately 70% of students from both Grade 3 classes asked if they could create “comfortable work spaces in the atrium” to work alone and with others. They also asked if they could bring and use their own handheld technologies (iPads, iPhones, Smart phones, tablets) from home. After noting these two main aspects of students’ feedback, Jessie and Anne met with the two classes and asked them to explain why this was important. The students concurred that they felt cramped in their desks, that they were able to do more work when they could move around and choose where to work, which was not the norm in school, and they felt that the bright colours in the library (mainly primary colours) were overbearing and they asked if they could choose a more muted, calming colour.

Responding to Students' Feedback Involves Many People

Students chose to write a letter to the principal to ask if they could make some of the changes noted above. Several students researched which colours would promote the best learning conditions, and others researched what other schools do to create comfortable spaces. Finally, the teachers invited the Emerging Technology Consultant

into their classroom to talk about digital citizenship and the use of home devices at school. After conducting this research, the class wrote a letter to the principal asking to change the policy on the use of handheld devices at school, to allow them to paint the atrium space, and to be provided with some funds to create comfortable work spaces within the atrium and their classrooms. The principal met with the parent members of the School Advisory Council and talked with the staff about the proposed changes, and then gave the students \$ 10,000 to work with in order to refurbish learning spaces in the school. The only condition was that the students were expected to report back how the changes supported them to meet their academic, social and emotional learning goals.

Keeping Virtual Journals to Report Back to the Community

The students agreed to have a virtual story available on the school website for parents and students to read and comment on over the time that they made and reported on these changes. Rhonda suggested that they use thought and speech balloons in this story to show what they were doing (pictures), what they were saying (speech balloons), and what they were thinking (thought balloons) along their journey. Interestingly, parents often added Post-It notes to specific speech and thought balloons and asked questions or made comments. This interactive aspect resulted in the students also posting a blog to continue the conversation about what they were doing and learning.

Shaping Self-Directed Learning Time by Visiting Another School

As we gathered again as a teacher, administrator and consultant (Rhonda) team, we discussed what it meant to support students to be well-rounded and less anxious individuals. The conversation started with factors that seemed to be related to individuals' ways of talking and thinking about their learning. Anne and Jessie emphasized that school newsletters had been focused on celebrating the academic successes within their school, and they had decided that it would be necessary to shift this towards social and emotional as well as academic successes. They had visited a junior high school that had started self-directed learning. The junior high school students kept people informed about the progress of their project by distributing a student voice *newsletter*. Anne said:

I like how they have two students take this on weekly and gather other students' feedback about issues that need to be addressed better during self-directed learning time.

For example, the junior high students had created a one-page newsletter for teachers, parents and students that had four sections. The first section, called "Teaching Practices," reported students' feedback about what helped students to set and meet their learning goals. The second section, "Student Feedback," highlighted what students were doing well and what they needed to change to help each other with their individual and collective learning goals. The third section, "Staff Feedback," included common

facilitators of and barriers to quality self-directed learning from staff perspectives. The last section, “Barriers,” highlighted one area for improvement by everyone.

Although this newsletter concept originated in a junior high school, Jessie and Anne adopted the idea and had their Grade 3 students co-create their own newsletter. The result was a weekly newsletter that highlighted “Flowers” (what was helping students to set and reach their learning goals socially, emotionally and academically), and “Footsteps” (what were the next steps to follow to see what needed to change in classroom and home practices to support students to set and meet their learning goals).

Living Self-Directed Learning Time

Anne and Jessie provided time for students to work on science projects that were focused on issues of importance to students and that also connected to the curriculum. Some examples included what to do about pine beetle infestations, and what to do to save the ducks in local ponds that were contaminated with oil from local industries. Students helped to shape their academic goals by having conference time daily with their teachers, and they relied on an app called *Today’s Meet*, a virtual collaborative conversation board that was available through their handheld devices and the class SMART Board, to know where to find certain students who may not be working in the room, and to work out what to do about stumbling blocks as they faced them. For example, one student wasn’t sure of how to find information on oil spills, and several students typed their suggestions for search terms in answer to his class query. On a weekly basis, the students stopped not only to reflect on what had been posted on *Today’s Meet*, they also jointly added to their virtual story and the blog posts that went alongside it.

One unexpected result of maintaining the virtual classroom space was the very positive response of parents. For example:

Date: January 29, 2013

Goals: Today I will complete my search on oil spills in the _____ River and then record what happens to the water. I will do the lab on oil spills and hand it in.

Parents: How did that go, Joe? What did you find out?

Joe: I used too much oil so my experiment didn’t work, but I found out that [an oil company] has to clean up their refinery process to reduce the waste dumped into the ground that is seeping into the river.

According to Jessie and Anne, parents participated in real time during class quite often and they each noticed a significant reduction in emails from parents to them about their children’s learning.

Addressing Tensions Between Project-Based Learning and Test-Focused Understandings of Learning

Although there was a notable reduction in parents contacting the teacher about on-going learning, Jessie and Anne admitted that they were worried about whether or

not the students would perform well on multiple-choice tests, which were part of the entrance requirements for the junior high school and part of standardised tests for Grades 3 and 6. As a result, they felt it was necessary to talk openly with students about the need to be “test-wise” and to use their learning to perform well on exams. They spent one Thursday a month on more test-driven teaching and learning strategies. The students were very happy about this focus; one student who presented a report of the findings of the project at a provincial conference about self-directed learning stated:

I am loving it [self-directed learning time] because we get to research, use technology and learn about real things that are happening in the world. We are actually being scientists who try experiments to see what it means to have oil contaminate water. I also know that we can get into the school that we want because we take time to be good ‘test-takers’ and I feel so relaxed about it all now.

Given that the students were faced with tests as part of their schooling, the focus on tests was kept minimal but appropriate to ensure that they were familiar with necessary test-taking strategies.

Reflecting on the Value of Self-Directed Learning

Throughout the self-directed learning critical participatory action research project, students wrote their reflections on whether and how they were becoming more balanced in their learning goals, and whether and how they were meeting social, emotional and academic goals. In the survey at the start of the self-directed learning project, students overwhelmingly reported “being stressed” by meeting expectations of school assignments and tests, and by the end of the self-directed learning pilot (2 months later), 100% of students reported “being capable” of meeting expectations of school assignments and tests. When Jessie and Anne conducted interviews with students about their responses, many reported that the change was due to having a better feeling about themselves as learners and knowing that it is “okay to face challenges.” A number of students attributed their new attitude (being able to face challenges) to the weekly newsletter that listed barriers for their consideration, and the class meetings where they talked about how to improve collaboration.

Example 3: The Graphic Novel Project at Joseph Junior High School, Canada

Joseph Junior High School, which has approximately 300 Grade 7 to 9 students (ages 13–15 years old), is located in a lower middle class neighbourhood in a large urban school district in Canada. For about 2 years, students complained about their limited access to contemporary texts during independent reading time in English Language Arts in Grades 7, 8 and 9. They compared their choices to the neighbouring junior high school, which was relatively new and had a focus on promoting new

technologies and texts. The neighbouring school had huge sign in front of it that advertised *BYOD: Bring Your Own Devices* to school. Because the teachers had attended district professional development about engaging in critical participatory action research (that is, they learned that each participating school would receive \$ 12,500 to support students to be ‘agents of change’ in their community), they decided to take up this issue raised by students about limited access to contemporary texts and technologies.

Gathering Student Feedback

Teachers Sara and Diane met with Rhonda Nixon and a second district office consultant, Angelina, to discuss how to determine whether or not students genuinely wanted to have access to diverse multimodal texts or if they had a different idea about needed changes in their programming. Rhonda suggested creating a survey and conducting one-on-one interviews to find out what students’ thoughts were about the issue. They designed a survey that asked questions such as: *What do you like to read at home? What do you like to read at school? Do you have suggestions for how to improve what is available for reading choices at school? What kinds of technologies do you use at home? How do you use them? What could we do differently at school with technologies?* In addition to this survey, the teachers interviewed about 15% of the Grade 7 student body (focussing on students whose first language was not English who could not easily write responses to survey questions).

Analysing Students’ Feedback with Students

Sara, Diane, Angelina and Rhonda met to review the survey feedback and transcripts from the one-on-one interviews. The results showed that students read more highly visual texts at home to assist them with their homework; they also read graphic novels, comics and webcomics, Manga, comic novellas, comic nonfiction, and post modern texts (that had indeterminate or choice endings, highly interactive narrators, and invitations for the reader to take an active role in constructing meaning within the text) for pleasure; and they had some access to varied technologies and digital texts, but not as much as we had originally thought.

We reviewed the results with the students and asked them to offer input into what the findings meant for changing school programming. The Grade 7 students were the most concerned about the need to learn about how to read visuals and digital texts because they noticed that the neighbouring high school had gone completely digital. They noted, “It is now when we can get ready. If we wait until Grade 8 or 9, then we’ll be really behind and not know how to read in high school.” After much discussion, it became clear that many of the students’ comments also reflected what they were hearing at home from their parents.

Planning and Learning About Visual and Digital Texts with Students

Sara, Diane, Angelina and Rhonda scheduled regular planning and reflecting meetings over the following 6 months. Angelina and Rhonda brought research and professional literature to help with learning about how to read and compose highly visual texts. The four of us co-planned the two 45-minute weekly lessons and took on different roles: main teacher(s), helping teacher(s), documentarian(s). These roles were decided based on the experiences in the first few lessons. There was a need for at least one adult to make a video recording of lessons when students applied strategies and talked about what they were learning. It was at those moments when students and teachers also reflected on the value of having such texts and technologies in the classrooms.

Reflecting on the Value of Multimodal (Print, Visual, Digital) Explorations with Students

Throughout the six months of exploring lessons integrating new technologies (e-readers, apps, a digital database of over 60,000 texts) and over a hundred highly visual texts (graphic novels, comics, picture books), students who had not been excited about reading felt that this experience was changing not only their reading skills but their lives. One boy who was often not in other classes put it this way:

I used to drive with my dad to [another province] and I noticed things along the way, but now I notice everything—that the water is bluer, that the mountains have many pathways in them. When I asked my dad if the landscape had changed, he said, “No, it’s always been this way.” That’s the thing that graphic novels has done for me; it has made me notice the details, the little things that never meant anything to me before and now do. I can’t believe how I am different, even when I walk home. I want to walk with friends who notice things and that’s the biggest change, I think.

This kind of testimonial was not rare. The graphic novel project was initially about providing students with opportunities to access texts that they cared about and that were central in their non-school lives. It turned out that this study ended up providing students with greater access to ways of making meaning that influenced their identities as readers and as people (that is, how they related to their family members and friends).

Example 4: The Teacher Talk Project in an Australian University

In June, 2010, Rhonda Nixon (then a PhD candidate at the University of Alberta) interviewed Stephen Kemmis about his views on action research. In the course of the interview, as an example of critical participatory action research, Stephen described

the *Teacher Talk* project he had been involved with, with seven colleagues, over the preceding two and a half years (2008–2010). In the *Teacher Talk* project, participants critically explore problems and issues in their academic lives and work, and, in particular, how the changing conditions of work in the University (like the spread of new technologies, new forms of public administration, and new kinds of accountabilities) enable and constrain their academic practices (including teaching, research, academic administration, and engagement with disciplinary, professional and other communities). Ian Hardy (2010a, b)¹ and Stephen Kemmis (2012) have written about some of its findings.

At the time of writing (2013), the *Teacher Talk* project continues, now being conducted by seven academics at Charles Sturt University. The following is an excerpt the transcript of from Rhonda's interview with Stephen.

Stephen: One of the things that has grasped me most of all as I have been [thinking] about practice [in recent years] is this: "Stephen, you're doing it all the time, you are, yourself, constantly a practitioner," so, it's not a question of introspection, but the question I have to address is, "How can I study my educational practice?"

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: So, with a group of my colleagues here at work, at Charles Sturt University, School of Education, (Charles Sturt University, CSU, Wagga Wagga campus)...

Rhonda: Ya ...

Stephen: ... a group of about eight of us have been talking about our academic work about once a month for coming up to two years

Rhonda: Hmm

Stephen: And we always attempt a conversation where we meet here at my house on a Wednesday night from about 7.30 pm to 9.00 pm or 9.30 pm, something like that, and we talk about our work and, in particular, we talk about things that are causing us to have to change the way we work. For example, the university introduced a platform for online learning called Interact, which is based on Sakai [an open source software platform for university teaching and learning]

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: and we were all told by the University that we have to use it: we have to have forums talking with our students, distance students and on-campus students, via this platform, and we have to, you know, prepare digital materials that are going to be available to them through this mechanism and so on.

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: So: [the *Teacher Talk* group addresses questions like] "How does this change our work?" and "How does this change our relationships with our students?" So we talk about a topic like that for an hour and a half or so—and make an audio record of the whole meeting—and later on we read the transcript and we come back to the next meeting and somebody in the group will have been nominated to be the coordinator of the session, and suggest three or four topics that we should now discuss (based on our previous discussion) and that we should think our way into. And we often change to a new topic.

¹ A former member of the group now at the University of Queensland.

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: So we will talk about performance management, for example, and how performance management is changing life and work at the university, or how our students, because they pay fees, are changed or have a changed relationship with us from a time 10 or 20 years ago when students didn't pay fees or only trivial fees, but now they pay more substantial fees...

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: and this changes the relationships between us and our students when we're grading their work, for example, and their expectations about their grades have also changed. So: our aim is to talk about these changed circumstances and see how, for example, there are educational systems that we live and work in, and changed conditions for our work, and also saying how we should, whether and how, we should change our work in the light of it. For example, we might say about the Interact platform, or about whatever, that it's a bloody nuisance.

Rhonda: [laughs]

Stephen: But maybe it's also harmful, you know. The University tells us we have to do it; well, maybe we should just get on with it and say, "Fine", but to what extent does it change the nature of our real educational work? If Interact causes us to have a highly mediated relationship with students, of a kind that means that we no longer care about them or connect with them or can engage them seriously in grappling with ideas, then maybe we should refuse it.

Rhonda: Yes.

Stephen: But if it's all right, if it's just another way of connecting with them, then we should embrace it—but we should continue asking questions about our work, including, centrally, "To what extent is our work educational?" We should think about how we understand ourselves as university educators, how we understand ourselves as university researchers, and so on. And so we want, as academics, to have teaching and research and community service things to do (the things that define our work as academic work), and still to be able to ask "Is Interact interfering with that?"

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: So maybe the answer is that it's changed our work a little bit, so we constantly are trying to explore the nature of our educational practices and how they connect up to the affordances and constraints of the actual institutions we work in, the actual lives we lead, to see whether we can really act as we intend to. So, to me, having a 'critical' grasp is to say that we want to be acting in the real history in which find ourselves, for the good for humankind and for the good for our students, for example: for those we are researching with. But, if I can just say one other thing that is kind of important to me about this project...

Rhonda: Okay.

Stephen: ... Anyway, it's really important to me because, on the one side, we're thinking about practice as *spectators of other people's practice*, and some of our research group are working on a fabulous project at the moment going to classrooms of teachers in several schools and talking to teachers about their work and about their practice, and it's just a wonderful privilege and we're having a wonderful time. And we've just been, earlier this week, we spent 2 days talking about

transcripts of lessons and interviews from these schools, and talking about practice theory, and bouncing backwards and forwards our theoretical ideas about practice², just wonderful, wonderful stuff, but that's a *spectator view of practice*. And on the other side, we have *the participant view of practice* that is really the most important Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: because each of us is a practitioner of our own lives, of course, and it's not just a question of having privileged access to our own practice—privileged access to our own thoughts and so on—but it's a question of deeply understanding the relationship between ourselves and the world around us. So there are some things that can only be done by practitioner inquiry of this kind, and especially collaborative inquiry of this kind. All but one of us are working in the same School of Education, some of us teach together, and some of us have overlapping research and administrative responsibilities. We work together on projects, research projects together and things like that, so this *Teacher Talk* project is the opportunity to live the practice of practitioner inquiry for ourselves. It's also quite important to us that it's kind of low tech.

Rhonda: Yes.

Stephen: We could be doing a lot of taping of our teaching and so on, but I think we're really wanting to understand how we are connected with the world in the way that Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as "effective historical consciousness." How do we develop effective historical consciousness of ourselves as in a tradition and part of a tradition (like the tradition of university work)? And of course, we know we must be misled and self-deceived and self-interested and so on about some of the ways we see the world, but, you know, the *Teacher Talk* time is a kind of privileged, enchanted time where it's possible for us to see how we are within it, but it's also a time to affirm... It's immensely affirming despite change and difficult circumstances in the contemporary university, which most people these days have in most universities in Australia anyway. Despite these difficult times, we nevertheless feel a sense that our work has a real value and purpose.

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: And this is very much affirmed by our critical conversations about what we do and how it affects us. It's like one of the best times. A new member joined the group, a year ago, and she went home to her husband after her first evening meeting and she burst into tears.

Rhonda: Ohh... Ya

Stephen: She said to her husband "I didn't think anybody actually talked about their work that way anymore." She's in another School in the University but she works with us on research projects. She couldn't believe that people could schedule this special time just to talk educational philosophy, as it were, about their own work. I mean, she hadn't experienced it for years... I don't mean that the value of our *Teacher Talk* project is principally therapeutic. Hopefully its value is that we are

² The findings of the research Stephen is referring to—the analyses of transcripts of interviews and classroom lessons—can be found in Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer and Bristol (2014).

more knowing about what we're doing and the consequences of what we do, and hopefully we're doing things better. Anyway, it's for that, as it were, 'methodological reason' that it's important for us to think about our own practice and to develop some sense of what this version of collaborative inquiry might look like.

Rhonda: As you're inquiring into your own practices, what is it that you've found to be most productive methodologically? When you're trying to analyse your talk and actually think deeply about your moral commitments about what you do... because that is the sense that I got from "personal praxis" versus "practice"—you can correct me if I'm wrong—but it's about a deep moral commitment to what you're doing as well as locating yourself in the tradition of what you're doing, but methodologically and theoretically, how are you looking at that data so that you see what you may not have seen before through maybe other discourse analysis processes?

Stephen: I think the reflection on what we've said and the reflection on the transcripts is nowhere as deep as you think...

Rhonda: ...hmm...Oh.

Stephen: ...as your question implies. We're not doing discourse analysis or conversation analysis.

Rhonda: Okay.

Stephen: We're simply reading the transcripts and we're asking: "What are some interesting ideas or interesting quotes? Where does something get summarized in a concise way? Where does an idea or an issue get crystallized?" And so, we do try to read the transcripts, as it were, critically, and, of course, we are immensely embarrassed when we see them [the transcripts] for the usual reasons when people read their own transcripts: "Who would have said such a thing as that?" "Who would have gone on about that for so long?"

Rhonda: [laughs]

Stephen: [laughs] So we're more concerned with *insights* as it were, but I think after that, we're much more... For example, when Ian [Hardy] was convening the group, he would pick out a few lines of transcript, or a few topics and say, "Let's talk about these three things over the next hour and a half", and then we would happily go off chasing those rabbits. The most important thing was what happened in the conversation arising from that. "Here are three interesting things that we said last time. Now, what comes up as we roll this around in our heads? How can we think about that? Where does it take us?" And of course, when you've got eight people thinking about a topic, you've quite a lot of thinking power

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: going on and seeing issues from different perspectives, seeing them from different angles, and somebody will remember to ask a question like, "What are we doing for students?" and so on. Now, this is to say that it's really very ordinary processes that are in play here. I'm becoming, as is my friend Wilfred Carr (2006), very suspicious about 'methodology' because I am beginning to think that 'methodology' is a way of trying to do the right thing in a *technical sense*, to follow a set of rules, but the set of rules is always disconnected from the historical reality, the physical reality, the social reality in which one finds oneself. So the question is, from the point of view of *practical reason*, from Aristotle is, "How do I do the right

thing here?” “What’s the right thing to do?” And of course I am often going to get it wrong, you know, I don’t know enough, I don’t see enough. I’m as impatient as the next person... And so there are many things that you know are uncertain but that’s what practical reasoning is. It is trying to the best you can in the circumstances and trying to do what it is right to do. So practical reason, practical philosophy, isn’t like a methodology that you implement. It’s just thinking about what to do, you know.

Rhonda: Yeah.

Stephen: And, of course, the lovely part about it is *thinking with other people*, which is a wonderful privilege and joy to have in a lifetime... to be thinking hard about, you know, our work place or whatever it is. So: ‘methodology’: I want to undermine the methodological view of research and action research.

Rhonda: I have a question that might sound dumb, but is the *Teacher Talk* project an example of critical action research?

Stephen: I think so. I did a [research] project on the practice of ... Education for Sustainability, and I did ten case studies of sites doing Education for Sustainability with a [co-]researcher, Rebecca Mutton, and in that context I began thinking that almost none of the people involved in those Education for Sustainability activities think that they are doing action research or describe themselves as doing action research

Rhonda: Yes.

Stephen: but I would describe all of them as doing critical participatory action research. Now: they’re working with other people; they’re trying to live rightly in the world; and they’re trying to think about how the world really operates, and how nature really operates and how we’re part of it, and about our place in the cosmos and so on.

Rhonda: Oh...yes.

Stephen: And so they’re very much thinking about correcting the way they live and helping students or adults or children (whichever they’re working with because we studied projects working with both) and it seems to me, they’re really genuinely critical

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: ... in the sense that they’re trying to reframe their understandings in very, very deep ways about their relationship with the world around them. One of the things that was incredibly striking to me was that, even among very secular groups, they developed, um, and I understand it completely, a kind of secular spirituality that gave them a very much heightened sense of their place in the universe

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: which is something, of course, that all of us might experience and feel that most of the time that we don’t stop and think deeply enough to come into that zone or whatever.

Rhonda: Umhm

Stephen: So: is *Teacher Talk* critical? Well, I think that it is critical in the same way, because it’s trying to understand how we relate to the world and to history. This is different from what I used to think. Once upon a time I imagined that our task as

critical action researchers was, sort of, to climb over the barricades and destroy the military industrial complex or something...

Rhonda: [laughs]

Stephen: [smiles] I'm now thinking it's much more humble, and much more inviting, and much more straightforward. I think critical participatory action research is about just trying to do what's reasonable and to think what's reasonable, and to behave more reasonably in the world. And that's something that many people are happy to do. So I think that there are limits to what we will do, but there are also limits on what we'll allow to be removed from us; that is, you can tell us that we have to go through performance management, or use the Interact site, and all sorts of other stuff, but you cannot tell us to stop doing our jobs as academics.

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: We're going to work with our students as educators; we're going to work as researchers contributing to our fields; and we'll continue to do our jobs.....

Rhonda: So, when you get together in these *Teacher Talk* sessions and you gain critical insights, have you been able to change or act on any of them so that you bring about some change in your institution?

Stephen: I've thought about that quite a lot because I don't think that we always come away with a very big change, but *we do something differently* in respect to a particular thing. I think mostly *we change the way we regard things*.

Rhonda: Okay.

Stephen: So, for example, we used to think of Interact as an imposition and, although it was meant for distance education students, it felt like an added mediation to our relationship with on-campus students, and it seemed kind of false in the on-campus situation. To be required to have an online forum in every subject that we have seemed to us not necessarily to be a good idea because, for example, if you require all students to participate in a blog or a forum like that, they just write their required three sentences, but were they good sentences?

Rhonda: Ya.

Stephen: Were they part of a real conversation with others on the forum or were they just a kind of dump that has to be done and then they move on? It looks like it's meant to be an educational engagement, but it's actually a nuisance for everybody concerned, so that changes the way that we regard Interact. We regard it as a potentially helpful tool, certainly well intentioned by the University and all that kind of thing with all of its technical problems (it's not as user-friendly as it could be *et cetera*), but we're not going to regard it either as our saviour or as a disaster. We're just going to treat it as part of the furniture, and continue to think about how it warrants what is important to do in our real job of education. We're going to think that using Interact is not the opposite of education, and that it could be part of our work of education. And we will continue to think that the most important thing is how we get into the heads of our students [in relation to our teaching], and how we do our research together [in relation to our research]. So: the critical insights don't necessarily change us by making us do away with Interact (for example) or take a direct action of that kind. Sometimes our critical insights lead us to change the

way we think about things, and regard things. At the same time, we can and do take action on issues like that. One of the members of our *Teacher Talk* group is my wife Ros Brennan-Kemmis, who is also my Head of School [my boss]. She is a member of the executive group of the University's Heads of School Forum—a meeting of all of the Heads of School across the University. And she's compiling a Big List of all of the impositions that the University has made in recent years because there have been dozens of these new things that we are required to do. Each one of them seems small enough, but when you put them all down on the Big List, you discover that you've taken many, many hours of academics' time that would otherwise have been devoted to teaching and research. In themselves, the things on the list are not necessarily bad things but they've reshaped our work in ways that are cumulatively dangerous. And so Ros made a complaint through that Forum about this. Our friend the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic ... we have great respect and admiration for him, but he sends out memos to people in the University telling them about new rulings on procedures within the University—"You will do this" and "You will do that"—and I want to say to him, "Nobody knows more than we do that you intend this well,

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: but every time I receive an email from you that has a memo attached, I know that the memo contains an instruction to me—an order—and that every time you send one of those, you remind me that I am to do what I'm told. You are not engaging me a conversation; you're giving me an instruction." But he'll say, "I am. These are rulings, these are things that are decided that everybody needs to know." But I think that the way you tell people these things is very, very important because in those memos you are not addressing them now as professional persons. You are addressing them as employees and when they turn their attention back to their work after they have been addressed in that way, they don't feel like the same person, the same agentic person, as they did before they read that.

Rhonda: [laughs] And did it do anything?

Stephen: Oh no, no, no. I haven't had that conversation.

Rhonda: [laughs] Oh, well, you should.

Stephen: Yeah, I will do. I will do, but I will also have a conversation with him about the Big List because he's very, very sensitive about questions of academic work. He keeps trying to change the circumstances for all of us to improve our capacity to do academic work...

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: but sometimes it gets worse after he's done that....

Stephen: ... And what we want to talk about [in the *Teacher Talk* project] is how *schooling* [at every level from early childhood care and education to universities and higher education] has proliferated to occupy the space that was once occupied by *education*

Rhonda: Ya.

Stephen: so most people can't any longer tell the difference [between *education* and *schooling*] and it comes as a shock to some, even teachers and Education graduates that you can say, "Could it be the case that this schooling is not educational? Could

it even be anti-educational?” And then they start to think, “Ah, it could be. One could imagine a meaning of education that would make it possible to think that.” But I want to emphasize that thinking about and grappling with the contradiction between education and schooling should be the life’s work of everyone who works in the field of Education

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: and everyone who becomes a teacher. For every teacher, that contradiction should become the necessary, irreducible contest

Rhonda: Ummhmm

Stephen: that should be the motor for their career.

Rhonda: Ya

Stephen: It is the contradiction between education and schooling that I hope guides us in our *Teacher Talk* conversations. It forces us to ask, about everything we do, “Are we acting educationally or are we just doing schooling [at a university level]?”

Example 5: The Yirrkala Ganma Education Project: Critical Participatory Action Research in an Indigenous Community

The Yolngu³ Indigenous community of Yirrkala and its homelands, in North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia (see map, Fig. 6.2) has existed in that location for tens of thousands of years. Since white colonisation of the area, and over many generations, the community has led in establishing working relationships with non-Indigenous Australia. As well engaging in vigorous and successful land rights and cultural activism, the community has taken a strong educative role in its work with non-Indigenous Australians, especially producing educational materials for schools and national television audiences (for example, Dunlop 1979, 1981; Morphy 1984). The community also worked closely with universities and other educators to establish and maintain an exemplary bilingual education program in the community and homeland schools. Especially in education, much of this work has expressed some key features of critical participatory action research. It is important to recognise that the work of the community stands on its own terms, the terms of the Yolngu people of Yirrkala. The Yirrkala Ganma education project we describe here was not constructed within a non-Indigenous framework like the Western notion of critical social science (although Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart, and other non-Indigenous researchers and teachers, discussed these ideas with some members of the Yirrkala community). Nevertheless, we use the perspective of critical social science to make links between a community initiative in Yirrkala and the view of critical participatory action research elaborated in this book. We use

³ Name used by the Indigenous people of North Eastern Arnhem Land to describe themselves as a people.

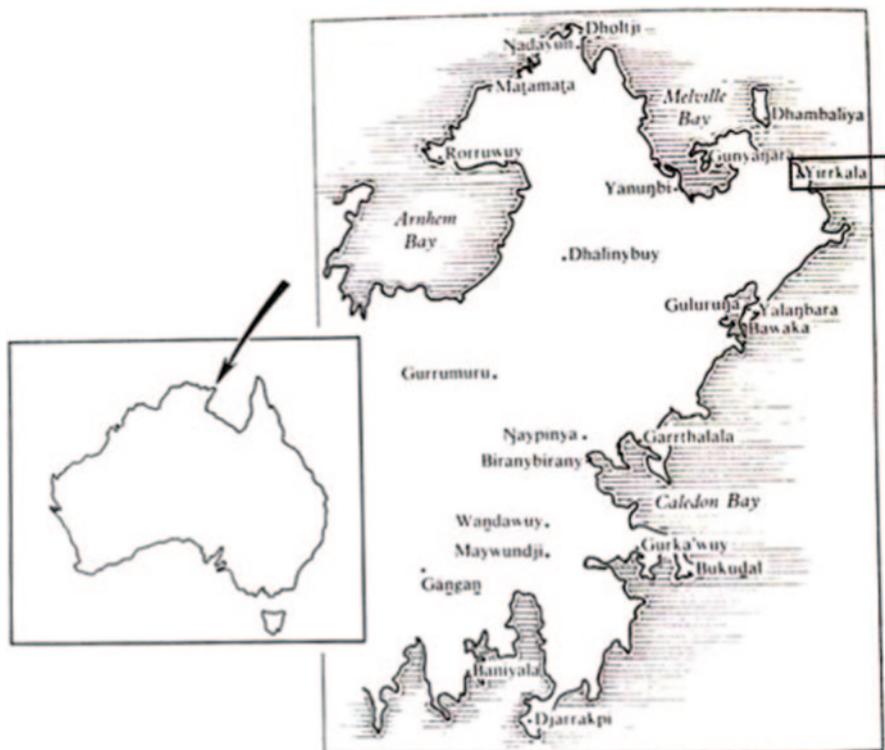


Fig. 6.1 North East Arnhem Land, showing the Yolngu community of Yirrkala. (After Watson and Chambers 1989, p. 6)

the concept of the ‘public sphere’ to suggest that the work of the Yirrkala Ganma education project shows how critical participatory action research takes shape in real social situations where people share a legitimate felt concern. The project took place at a particular period of time when there was Australia-wide concern about the continuing colonising effects of Western-style education in Australian Indigenous communities (Fig. 6.1).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Yolngu people wanted to change their schools, to make them hospitable to the language and culture of Yolngu children. Dr⁴ M. Yunupingu (Yunupingu 1991), then Deputy Principal at the school, and later lead

⁴ This man has been our colleague and friend for many years, but since his recent death, out of respect and at the specific request of his relatives, we do not use his first name. This is an established practice regarding the names and images of deceased Indigenous persons in Australia. We use the formal title ‘Doctor’ also out of respect: in 1998, our friend was awarded an honorary doctorate by Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane “in recognition of his significant contribution to the education of Aboriginal children, and to greater understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.” He was named 1992 Australian of the Year for his role in “building bridges of understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.”

singer of the pop group *Yothu Yindi* (and 1992 Australian of the Year), wrote about the problem this way:

Yolngu children have difficulties in learning areas of Balanda [white people's] knowledge. This is not because Yolngu cannot think, it is because the curriculum in the schools is not relevant for Yolngu children, and often these curriculum documents are developed by Balanda who are ethnocentric in their values. The way that Balanda people have institutionalised their way of living is through maintaining the social reproduction process where children are sent to school and they are taught to do things in a particular way. Often the things that they learn favour [the interests of] the rich and powerful, because when they leave school [and go to work] the control of the workforce is in the hands of the middle class and the upper class.

An appropriate curriculum for Yolngu is one that is located in the Aboriginal world which can enable the children to cross over into the Balanda world. [It allows] for identification of bits of Balanda knowledge that are consistent with the Yolngu way of learning. (p. 102).

The Yolngu teachers at Yirrkala Community School, together with other teachers, and with the help of their community, began a journey that looked very much like a journey of critical participatory action research. All working together, they changed the white man's world of schooling. Of course there were sometimes conflicts, and many disagreements, but they worked through them in the Yolngu way, towards consensus. They had help, but no money to conduct their research.

Their research was not research about schools and schooling in general. Their critical participatory action research was about how schooling was done in their schools. As Dr Yunupingu put it:

So here is a fundamental difference compared with traditional research about Yolngu education: we start with Yolngu knowledge and work out what comes from Yolngu minds as of central importance, not the other way round [starting from Western ideas about research and schooling] (pp. 102–3).

Throughout their growing engagement with this crisis of legitimation in the school—the sense that Yolngu children could not thrive in the school because of the colonising effect of Balanda education—the Yolngu teachers were guided by their own collaborative research into their problems and their practices. They gathered stories from the old people. They gathered information from meetings and their classrooms and reflected on how the school worked and did not work for them. They made changes, for example, using Yolngu matha (language) and Yolngu classification systems and English more explicitly in maths classes, and they watched what happened. They thought carefully about the consequences of the changes they made, and then they made still further changes on the basis of the evidence they had gathered.

Through their shared journey of critical participatory action research, the school and the community discovered how to limit the culturally-corrosive effects of the white man's way of schooling, and they learnt to respect both Yolngu ways and the white man's ways. At first, the teachers called the new form of schooling 'both ways education', then with teachers from other communities, 'Aboriginal pedagogy'. Later, at Yirrkala and nearby Yolngu communities, drawing on a sacred story from their own tradition, they called it 'Ganma education'.

Speaking about his hopes for the Ganma ('both ways') research the community conducted in order to develop the ideas and practices of Ganma education, Dr Yunupingu (1991) wrote:

I am hoping the Ganma research will become critical educational research, that it will empower Yolngu, that it will emphasise emancipatory aspects and that it will take a side—just as the Balanda research has always taken a side but never revealed this, always claiming to be neutral and objective. My aim in Ganma is to help, to change, to shift the balance of power.

Ganma research is also critical in the processes we use. Our critical community of action researchers working together, reflecting, sharing and thinking, includes important Yolngu elders, the Yolngu action group [teachers in the school], Balanda teachers and a Balanda researcher to help with the process. Of course she is involved too: she cares about our problems, she has a stake in finding solutions—this too is different from the traditional role of a researcher (p. 103).

It is, I must stress, important to locate Ganma in our broader development plans ... in the overall context of Aboriginalisation and control into which Ganma must fit (p. 104).

Together, the teachers and the community found new ways to think about schools and schooling—new ways to think about the work of teaching and learning, and about their community and its future. Their collaborative, critical participatory action research changed not only the school, but also the people themselves.

The Concept of Ganma

One of the most significant elements of the commencement of the Ganma Education Project was the moment when a senior elder described its foundations in Yolngu culture. It was at a meeting of the Yolngu teachers' action group, led by Dr Yunupingu (then Principal of the school). Yunupingu had asked an 'old man' with special responsibilities as a traditional ceremony organiser for the community to listen to the teachers' formulation of the problem about the need to teach Yolngu knowledge and culture alongside Balanda knowledge and culture. After listening patiently to the teachers for perhaps an hour, the old man addressed the action group. He drew on 'inside' (sacred) knowledge to lay out, for the first time, in terms of Yolngu cosmology and culture, a powerful way of understanding the relationship between Yolngu education and people and Balanda education and people. This was the moment at which the concept of Ganma—and the word itself—was brought out from 'inside' knowledge into 'outside' knowledge, that allowed it to be used by uninitiated people (like Indigenous teachers from other clans and places, and the non-Indigenous teachers and researchers working with the school), not just initiated people.

The old man described Ganma—it is a special place on part of Caledon Bay where two rivers run into a lagoon that empties into the sea. One of the rivers runs through *Yirritja* land, the other through *Dhuwa* land. All things in the Yolngu world belong to one or the other of these two moieties, *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa*: people, clans, animals, plants, and places on the land and in the sea. People from the several

Yirritja clans can only marry spouses from one of the *Dhuwa* clans; people from the several *Dhuwa* clans can marry only *Yirritja* spouses. In patrilineal Yolngu society, children of *Yirritja* fathers will attend ceremonies (and hear ‘outside’ versions of *Dhuwa* stories) with their *Dhuwa* mothers until first initiation around the age of 12 or 14, when boys will be taken by their fathers’ brothers, and girls by their mothers’ sisters, for their first formal initiation. From that moment, they will now attend ceremonies and have the opportunity to learn sacred *Yirritja* knowledge as *Yirritja* young people, at the beginning of a series of initiations that will lead them to the deepest *Yirritja* sacred knowledge. Speaking figuratively, the Yolngu thus say, in this *Yirritja* case, that the child’s foot is *Dhuwa* and his head is *Yirritja*. For the children of *Dhuwa* fathers and *Yirritja* mothers, things are the opposite way around: they attend ceremonies (and hear ‘outside’ versions of *Yirritja* stories) with their *Yirritja* mothers until first initiation, then become initiated *Dhuwa* young people. In Yolngu cosmology, the relationship between the moieties is an immensely powerfully dynamic: it is an embodied relationship from which all Yolngu come, a social layer over and above sexual reproduction that reproduces the moieties themselves in the form of the web of kinship relations around every child who is born into the community, as well as the matrix of relationships between the clans and their lands and their ancestors.

In the lagoon on Caledon Bay, *Yirritja* water and *Dhuwa* water from the two rivers mix, and this mixing fresh river water also meets the salt water from the sea. This is Ganma. It is a very vital, dynamic place: its dynamism is evident in the brackishness of the water (neither fresh nor salt), and in the foam bobbing on the surface, intermingled with pieces of bark from *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa* trees and plants carried to the lagoon from the rivers. The Yolngu do not regard this commingling as making a solution of *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa*, something that is weakened from the strong *Yirritja* and the strong *Dhuwa* water from the two rivers. On the contrary, they regard the commingling of the waters as like an emulsion, where both *Yirritja* and *Dhuwa* are intensely present. Ganma is a place where *Yirritja*-ness and *Dhuwa*-ness are at their most intense, since each is most itself when it is in the presence of the other. *This* is the Yolngu conceptual framework that re-framed the way the Yolngu teachers thought about the school and its curriculum.

The old man at the Yolngu teachers’ meeting told them a sacred story about that place. He also asked them to imagine, just for the sake of argument, that the fresh water was Yolngu knowledge, culture, people and communities, and the salt water was Balanda knowledge, culture, people and communities (in fact, all places in the sea near Caledon Bay are either *Yirritja* or *Dhuwa*). He invited them to think of the relationship between Yolngu and Balanda in education in terms of the Ganma metaphor: to think of the Yirrkala Community School, and the Yirrkala community, as a place of commingling like Ganma, where Yolngu and Balanda can each be at their most intense, and each have its greatest fullness and integrity as itself, because it is in the presence of the other (Fig. 6.2).

A way to put the old man’s message is this: to learn Balanda knowledge and culture, and to find ways to *be* in Balanda communities, Yolngu students must

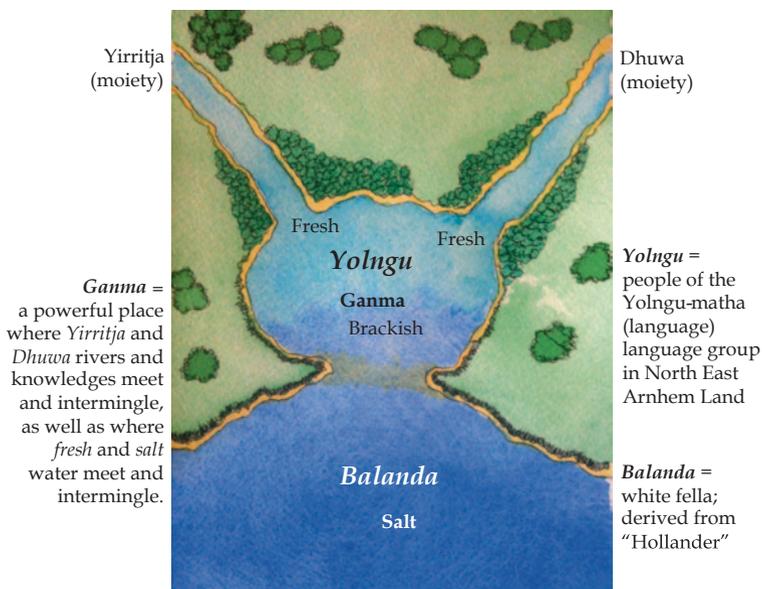


Fig. 6.2 Artist's impression of Ganma. (Painting by Stephen Kemmis)

understand themselves first and foremost as Yolngu, as inheritors of and contributors to Yolngu knowledge and culture and identities and communities; only then can they take what will strengthen and help them from Balanda knowledge, culture and communities. Another part of his message is also that Balanda can only best be themselves when they fully recognise and respect Yolngu knowledge, culture, people and communities.

In this moment of revelation, the old man produced the new notion of 'Ganma education'. He encouraged the teachers to use the term rather than the Balanda notion of 'both ways' education. With this single gesture, he repatriated the notion of 'education' to *within* Yolngu knowledge, conceptual frameworks and control. Unlike the notion of 'both ways' education, which is something *alongside* and *outside* Yolngu knowledge and control, Ganma education has its roots in Yolngu knowledge and culture. The Balanda notion of 'both ways' education has no real content: unlike the substantial Ganma concept which describes the nature of the relationship between Yolngu and Balanda knowledge and cultures, people and communities, 'both ways' education is an imprecise, abstract and empty way to describe the relationship between these two ways of knowing and being in the world.

Ganma Education And The Practice Of Critical Participatory Action Research

Can we see how the Yirrkala Ganma education project is also an example of critical participatory action research? To address this question let us use what we know about the work of the community from our own engagement with it. In *Chap. 2: A new view of participation: Participation in public spheres*, and following Habermas (1996), we outlined ten features of public spheres. As you will see in what follows, those features can be observed in the Yirrkala Ganma education project (and our involvement in it).

1. Public spheres are constituted as actual networks of communication among actual participants.

The Yirrkala Ganma education project involved a particular group of people in and around the schools and community at that time. It was a somewhat fluid group that was focused on the Yolngu teachers at the school together with community elders and other community members—parents and others—and students at the schools. It also involved non-Indigenous teachers (including Leon White, who co-authored an article about the project with two of the Yolngu teachers: Marika, Ngurruwutthun and White 1992) and some non-Indigenous co-researchers who acted as critical friends to the project. These included several Deakin University professors, among whom were Stephen Kemmis and Robin McTaggart. The network of actual communications among these people constituted the project as a public sphere.

2. Public spheres are self-constituted.

Public spheres are formed by people who get together voluntarily. They are also relatively autonomous; that is, they are outside formal systems like the administrative systems of the state. They are also outside the formal systems of influence that mediate between civil society and the state.

People who wanted to work together on changing Yirrkala Community School and the Homelands Centres schools in the region around Yirrkala formed the Yirrkala Ganma education project. They participated voluntarily. They were relatively autonomous in the sense that their activities were based in the schools but were not “owned” by the schools, and their activities were based in the community but were not “owned” by any community organization. The project was held together by a common commitment to communication and exploration of the possibilities for changing the schools to enact the Ganma vision of Yolngu schooling for Yolngu students and communities. The participants did not get together in order to have a project; they got together to address their deep shared concern that ‘Balanda education’ was not working for Yolngu students.

3. Public spheres frequently come into existence in response to legitimation deficits.

The Yirrkala Ganma education project came into existence because of prolonged and profound dissatisfaction with the nature and consequences of Balanda schooling for Yolngu students, including the sense that the existing ways of doing schooling were culturally corrosive for Yolngu students and communities. As indicated

earlier, Yolngu teachers and community members wanted to find alternative ways of doing ‘schooling’ that would be more inclusive, engaging, and enabling for Yolngu students, and that would help to develop the school and the community under Yolngu control.

4. Public spheres are constituted for communicative action and for public discourse.

The Ganma education project was created with the principal aim of creating a shared communicative space in which people could think, talk, and act together openly and with a commitment to making a difference in the way in which schooling was enacted in their community. Communications in the project were mostly face-to-face, but there was also much written communication as people worked on various ideas and subprojects within the overall framework of the project. They spent many hours in reaching intersubjective agreement on the ideas that framed their thinking about education. They spent many hours reaching mutual understanding about conceptual frameworks through which different aspects of their current situation could be understood and about how the Ganma conceptual framework could guide their thinking as they developed new forms of schooling. And they spent many hours determining ways in which to move forward based on unforced consensus about how to proceed. Although it might appear that they had an instrumental approach and a clear goal in mind—the development of an improved form of schooling—it should be emphasized that their task was not instrumental. It was not instrumental because they had no clear idea at the beginning about what form this new kind of schooling would take; both their goal and the means to achieve it needed to be critically developed through their own communicative action and public discourse.

5. Public spheres aim to be inclusive.

To the extent that communication among participants is exclusive, there is a doubt about whether a communicative space is in fact a “public” sphere.

The Yirrkala Ganma education project aimed to include as many as possible of the people who were (and are) involved in and affected by schooling in the community. It reached out from the school to involve the Yolngu community and the elders. It also included non-Indigenous teachers (and student teachers) as well as Indigenous teachers (and student teachers, and it involved students and their families as well as teachers in the school (sometimes using slightly different terminology—for example, because of avoidance kinship relations between some of the clans, some could not use the term ‘Ganma’, so the term ‘Garma’ was introduced to embrace all clans; Ngurruwutthun 1991). The public sphere formed by the Ganma project was not exclusive in the sense that its assertion of Yolngu control excluded Balanda (non-Indigenous) people; still, it invited Balanda teachers, advisers, and others to join the common commitment of Yolngu people in their search for improved forms of education and schooling that would meet the needs and aspirations of Yolngu people and their communities more genuinely.

The extension of the public sphere in this way created opportunities for Balanda participants to learn from their Indigenous colleagues and to communicate some of these understandings to others (as we are doing here). It also created the opportunity for Indigenous teachers to undertake formal studies, and to elaborate and examine

their ideas with Indigenous educators from other communities. The completion of these studies also enabled them to take on higher levels of responsibility in their school systems. The connection of the Yirrkala community to Deakin University created the opportunity and need to renegotiate the teacher education curriculum to take account of the teachers' aspirations to re-invent the schools in which they worked, stimulated by the emerging theory and practice of Ganma education and Aboriginal pedagogies.

6. As part of their inclusive character, public spheres tend to involve communication in ordinary language.

In the Yirrkala Ganma education project, not only was much of the communication about the project in ordinary language, but it was also conducted in the language of the community, that is, *Yolngu-matha*. This was not only a deliberate shift from the language in which Balanda schooling was usually discussed in the community (English and specialist educational discourse), but also a shift to engage and use the profound conceptual frameworks of the community and Yolngu culture. On the other hand, the customary traditional modes of address in the Yolngu culture require respect for elders, and strictly regulate the use of specialist Yolngu discourses and the language used to discuss 'inside' (secret/sacred, for the initiated) matters versus 'outside' (secular, for the uninitiated) matters, so many discussions of the Ganma conceptual framework required participants to respect these distinctions and the levels of initiation of speakers and hearers. Who can speak to whom and in what manner is also strictly regulated by kinship relationships (including complete avoidance relationships for specific classes of cousins and in-laws) that exist between people and between clans. Despite these strictures, however, Yolngu people are highly skilled at participating in community discussions in (sometimes indirect or mediated) ways that foster the *collective* rather than *individual* giving and receiving of ideas and advice, with the effect all voices do get heard, and all points of view are taken into account (though resolutions of issues are not always to everyone's satisfaction, of course).

7. Public spheres presuppose communicative freedom.

In public spheres, participants are free to occupy (or not occupy) the particular discursive roles of speaker, listener, and observer, and they are free to withdraw from the communicative space of the discussion. Participation and nonparticipation are voluntary.

In the Yirrkala Ganma education project, participants were free to occupy the different roles of speaker, listener, and observer or to withdraw from discussions. In any particular discussion, some may have occupied one or another of these roles to a greater extent, but over the life of the project, people generally occupied the range of these roles at one time or another. As indicated earlier, some people continued to occupy privileged positions as speakers (for example, on matters of 'inside' knowledge), but they also occupied roles as listeners in many other situations, responding with their specialist knowledge whenever and wherever it was appropriate to do so. In general, however, the prolonged discussions and debates about giving form to the idea of Ganma education in a Ganma curriculum (that included both Yolngu and Balanda elements) was conducted in ways that enabled participants to gather a

shared sense of what it was and could be and how it might be realized in practice. The discussions were consistently open and critical in the sense that all participants wanted to reach shared understandings and agreements about the limitations of Balanda education for Yolngu children and communities, and about the possibilities for realizing a different and more empowering form of education for Yolngu children and their community.

8. The communicative networks of public spheres generate communicative power.

The communicative networks of public spheres generate communicative power in the sense that the positions and viewpoints developed through discussion in a public sphere command the respect of participants not by virtue of obligation, or by power over people present, but rather by the power of mutual understanding and consensus.

Over the life of the Yirrkala Ganma education project, and in the continuing work arising from it, participants developed the strongest sense that the new way of thinking about education and schooling that they were developing was timely, appropriate, true to their circumstances, and generative for Yolngu children and their community. They were clearly conscious that their shared viewpoint, as well as their conceptual framework, contrasted markedly with taken-for-granted assumptions and presuppositions about schooling in Australia, including many taken-for-granted Balanda ideas about school education and teacher education for Indigenous students. The communicative power developed through the project sustained participants in their commitment to these new ways of schooling despite the occasional resistances they experienced when the Northern Territory education authorities found that community proposals were counter to, or exceptions to, usual ways of operating in the system.

It is a tribute to many non-Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, including Northern Territory Education Secretary Geoff Spring, who worked with Yirrkala Community Schools and the associated Homelands Centre Schools, that they generally took a constructive and supportive view of the community's proposals even when what was proposed fell outside established practice. The obvious and deep commitment of the Yolngu teachers and community to the tasks of the project, the support of non-Indigenous staff at the school, the commitment to the project of credible external co-researchers, and the long-term nature of the project encouraged many non-Indigenous people to give the project "the benefit of the doubt" as an educational project that had the possibility to succeed in Indigenous education where many previous proposals and plans developed by non-Indigenous people had failed.

9. Public spheres do not affect social systems (like government and administration) directly; their impact on systems is indirect.

In public spheres, participants aim to change the climate of debate, the ways in which things are thought about and how situations are understood.

As already indicated, the Yirrkala Ganma project operated in the schools but was not an 'official' or funded project of the schools or the Northern Territory Department of Education. Likewise, it operated in the community but was not an 'official' or funded project of any community organization. The schools and the Northern Territory education system, as well as various community organizations

(including universities), knew of the existence of the project and were generally supportive. The work of the project was not a development project undertaken by any of these organizations, nor did the project “speak” directly to these organizations from *within* the functions and operations of the systems as systems. On the contrary, the project aimed to change the way in which these systems and organizations thought about and organized education in the community. In particular, it aimed to change the conceptual frameworks and discourses in which Yolngu education was understood, to change the activities that constituted it, and to change the relationships between different groups of people involved in the process (especially the place in those relationships occupied by Yolngu students, their families and their community). In a sense, the transformations produced by the project were initially ‘tolerated’ by these systems and organizations as exceptions to accepted procedures and practices. Over time, through the indirect influence of showing that alternative ways of doing things could work, the systems began to accept the alternative practices—even though the alternative practices were at odds with practice elsewhere in the Northern Territory. The project changed the climate of discussion and the nature of the discourse about what constitutes good education for Yolngu children and communities. Because similar experiments were going on elsewhere around Australia (for example, with the involvement of researchers and teacher educators from Deakin University and the University of Melbourne, and from Batchelor College, then a Northern Territory teacher education institution preparing Indigenous teachers), there was a sense within education systems that the new experiment should be permitted to proceed in the hope (increasingly fulfilled) that the new ways of working might prove to be more effective in Indigenous schools in Indigenous communities where education had frequently produced less satisfactory outcomes than in non-Indigenous schools and for non-Indigenous students and communities. In a variety of small but significant ways, education systems began to accept the discourses of ‘both ways’ education (realized differently in different places) and to encourage different practices of ‘both ways’ education in Indigenous communities and schools with large enrolments of Indigenous students.

10. Public spheres frequently arise in practice through, or in relation to, the communication networks associated with social movements.

Public spheres form where voluntary groupings of participants arise in response to a shared sense that a social problem has arisen and needs to be addressed—a shared sense of a legitimization deficit.

As some of the statements of Yunupingu (1991) quoted earlier suggest, the Yirrkala Ganma education project was an expression of several important contemporary Indigenous social movements in Australia, particularly the land rights movement, the movement for Aboriginal self-determination and control, and (for Australians generally) the movement for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Arguably, some of the ideas developed in the Ganma education project had a far wider currency than might have been expected, as they were promulgated through the songs and music of Yunupingu’s pop group, *Yothu Yindi*, which resolutely and consistently advocated mutual recognition and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and educated and encouraged

non-Indigenous Australians to understand and respect Indigenous people, knowledge, communities, and cultures. The Ganma education project was a manifestation of these Indigenous rights movements at the local level and in the particular setting of schools, and was also a powerful intellectual contribution to shaping the wider movements. On the one hand, the project named and explained ways in which schooling was culturally corrosive for Indigenous peoples; on the other hand, it showed that it was possible to create, and to give rational justifications for, alternative, culturally supportive ways of doing schooling and education for Indigenous people and in Indigenous communities.

Conclusion

It is clear from this analysis that the Yirrkala Ganma education project did much more than illustrate a commitment to the idea of public spheres. The Yirrkala community, like any other community, cannot be a perfect expression of these ideas, even if it wanted to be. Many features of Indigenous life and culture militate against that, including many different cultural checks and balances between clans and moieties and kinship groups and traditional kinship relationships, and between those initiated into different levels of Yolngu knowledge in the different clans and moieties. By contrast with this highly differentiated Yolngu social reality, the idea of a uniform and inclusive public sphere seems especially ‘ideal’ or ‘theoretical’—assuming, for example, that each individual person can participate in exactly the same way in relation to every other person in the public sphere. The social reality of Yolngu kinship and clan relationships is more complex, sophisticated and supple, with each person understood not only as an individual personality but also having obligations and rights on a matrix of kinship and clan relations that constantly and concretely signal the connectedness and locatedness of every person in the highly differentiated social whole.

Despite this elaborate differentiation, Yolngu traditional processes can and do proceed in a manner very much like communicative action and public discourse in public spheres, and especially in the face of particular kinds of critical circumstances. Communications echo through the matrix of social relations with different speakers in different locations advocating views and perspectives that are expected to come together in a consensus decision that takes all voices into account and advances the good for the community as a whole. One example is the conduct of negotiations between clans that occurs when preparations are made for a funeral ceremony during which a deceased person’s soul must be ‘sung’ back to its ancestral home, passing through the territory of other related clans who must sing their sacred songs to guide the soul on its journey (which sometimes involves the negotiation of resolutions to outstanding disputes between clans or clan members so the funeral can proceed). Another example is the form of discussions when Yolngu community members and elders consider major new proposals, which can only be accepted by consensus, so discussion follows formal patterns in which junior people often speak

first and elders speak last in a series of attempts that finally bring all the considerations that have been aired together in a consensus decision. The commencement of the Ganma education project was such a moment, when the old man pronounced a consensus about how the Yolngu teachers should re-construe the educational problems they had been struggling with. And the project continued in accordance with Yolngu customary practices and traditions about reaching consensus on matters that affect everyone, despite the conflicts that arise from time to time. While its principal significance lies in the education it produced for Yolngu children, young people and adults in the Yirrkala community at that time, the Ganma education project also profoundly affected the non-Indigenous teachers and researchers who were touched by it. It gave these non-Indigenous people a new understanding about how Balanda education colonised the minds of Yolngu children, and how it could work otherwise, to respect and build on Yolngu knowledge and culture. As with Dr Yunupingu's songs and music, the project also spread the notion of 'Ganma' into the non-Indigenous community⁵, showing a new way for non-Indigenous people to *live* mutual recognition and respect for Yolngu knowledge, culture, people and communities.

A transcript of the short tribute to Dr Yunupingu by his wife, Yalmay Yunupingu (Yunupingu 2013), given at his Northern Territory State Funeral on June 30, 2013, describes Dr Yunupingu's work, refers to his development of the concept of Ganma, his ideas about the strength and vitality of Yolngu knowledge and culture, his aspirations for intercultural exchange, and his work for both ways education.

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⁵ The community movement that led to the formation of the Ganma education project produced other significant developments for the Yolngu people of North East Arnhem Land. The related word 'Garma' became internationally prominent as the name of the Garma Festival, the festival of Traditional Culture held each year at Gulkula in North East Arnhem Land. Dr Yunupingu's Yothu Yindi Foundation initiated the Garma Festival.

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