

## **Turning on a Sixpence: Creating a learning foundation for community engagement**

### **A story emerges**

I realised this morning that I am a gardener. After filling two decades of my adult working life with education, public relations, community organising and copywriting – generally focused on environmental sustainability – it's a surprising realisation on this blue-sky morning to see that in fact I have grown into a gardener. Not just any sort of gardener mind you, because while I enjoy tending my household's own backyard permaculture garden, I'm not actually much of a literal gardener.

I am a community gardener.

I realised this morning that I see communities as gardens...as living, evolving, self-organising organisms. Living entities that grow, seed, produce, entangle, disentangle, wither, collapse and regenerate in a continuing, ongoing way. I realised that communities, especially my own home community, don't depend on my professional expertise as an educator, trainer, communicator or organiser to make them work, though I can sometimes contribute to their humming, buzzing life if I listen carefully, look closely, learn deeply, care greatly and see myself as a part of this living system (not separate or superior to it). Sometimes I have opportunities to plant the seeds of new ideas in my community garden. Sometimes I can help build compost heaps from the old history and then nourish and fertilise the soil so new life and ways can emerge from a replenished base. Sometimes I can help water the garden so things might grow a little more quickly, and sometimes I even get to help with the harvest when we grow a bumper crop and celebrate with a feast of ideas come to fruition.

I realised this morning that I love being a community gardener because it's a 'job' that's about nurturing, supporting and collaborating not controlling, managing or bossing.

I am no longer a mechanic. I don't drive things anymore. I don't see the world or my community as a static, mechanical object that could or should be 'fixed' with the 'right tools'. I stopped living that life – personally and professionally – in early 2008 when I realised I no longer had the energy or desire to 'save the world', to educate, to inform, to transform. To impose from the outside, the knowledge that I thought would wake everyone up and turn things around. So I have quietly parked my car on the grassy verge beside the road, taken my foot off the pedal and my hands off the wheel, and begun breathing deeply – in and out. I have started to walk...slowly...and I have let lots of things go: 60-80 hour working weeks for a start. An infinity of worthy projects have been relinquished. Even the organisation I helped to create and grow through its infancy has been released into the hands of others.

This year I've been rebuilding my life from the soil up. Very quietly and gently with lots of time and space to sit, reflect, observe, listen, hear and see. I've let the old driver go and the new gardener grow. And so this little story about learning and community arises from the very heart of my own experience.

### **Bugged**

During this year of relative solitude and reflection I've been bugged by a sense of frustration about community and communication, particularly in the areas of community consultation, community education and community engagement. Four years ago in 2004, I completed a PhD thesis that was highly critical of community consultation because of its inability to meaningfully engage, innovate and enable participation and real change. In that research I discussed ideas about the potential of grassroots, community-driven, multi-party negotiation to create new ways of making social and

structural change from the ground up and from a base of learning in and from action (1). The centerpiece of this research was the story of the 1996 Cape York Peninsula Landuse Heads of Agreement, a remarkable agreement brokered between the graziers, greens and Aboriginal people of the Cape. The agreement addressed how diverse stakeholders (and previous enemies) could work together to protect and restore the quality of the region's natural environment, communities, cultures and economy.

In the time since finishing that research, my work as a consultant has paradoxically focused on community consultation, the very process I had so heavily critiqued; but somehow those dratted household bills needed to be paid. However, in my spare time (and in my own defense), I experimented with alternative methods of learning, teaching, communicating, conversing, collaborating and engaging, both in my home community of Beechmont in south east Queensland, and as part of a pilot project called the Gondwana Centre (later to become the Ethos Foundation: [www.ethosfoundation.org](http://www.ethosfoundation.org)).

Since early 2008 I have been a participant in Gold Coast City Council's Bold Future project – a well publicised, whole-of-city, 30-year visioning process – as a member of the Bold Future community advisory committee. While I'm not sure what Council thought I could bring to the table that would be of use to the project, what has emerged for me over the past 10 months is a niggling, annoying, persistent bug that refuses to be content with a community consultation approach that is based on the classic marketing and communications machine – one which pours glossy information into the 'empty vessel' of community and asks simplistic questions of generally busy, time-poor people.

I must rush to say clearly that this is not an attack on the very skillful and capable Gold Coast City Council marketing and communication team, nor indeed on Council itself. This is a much broader bugbear about the traditional marketing and public relations approach that underpins most community consultation in Australia. It is an approach which, for some years appears to have been reaching its limits of effectiveness with evident levels of fatigue, disengagement and even mistrust setting in throughout communities whenever they're consulted by government or big business, the two most common proponents of community consultation.

During 2008, the Bold Future advisory committee has reviewed substantial amounts of community feedback from public forums and questionnaires and has itself waded through many expert presentations and papers in order to help draft the Bold Future vision, themes, principles and targets. As I write, it is almost time for Council to go back to the community with these ideas and the committee feels a little stuck...at an instinctive, gut level we committee members all seem to recognise that the glossy marketing brochures and website aren't in and of themselves, going to tell an engaging, compelling and open-ended story that will catalyse the good people of the Gold Coast to help create their own bold future.

It seems the whole committee has been bitten by that pesky bug but as a group, we don't quite know what to do about it. I say, let's garden...let's look around at the world in a different way – through a learning lens – and here's why.

### **Interesting times**

There is a lot going on in the world these days. Global economic meltdown (to use the media's own language) reflected in extraordinary financial market freefalling around the world and on-the-run federal government cash management. Global warming and climate destabilisation made visible in phenomenon such as glacial meltdowns at the Poles and chronic water scarcity throughout much of Australia. Rollercoaster petroleum prices and talk of oil shocks and peaks that has affected food prices in affluent nations and food availability in the most vulnerable countries of the world.

Those on the margins, the ones dubbed the 'loony left' and 'tree huggers' by media stereotyping, have been banging on about such global possibilities for a while now. But in the past few years, highly credible political scientists like Professor Thomas Homer-Dixon (2), renowned climate and natural resource scientists like Dr Graeme Pearman and Dr John Williams, and even corporate leaders like Ian Dunlop (3) have joined the chorus, expressing dismay not only at the speed of these seismic ecological, economic and social shifts but also with their convergence. Our governments, businesses, communities and households are not just faced with one big issue at a time, but with a cocktail that mixes everything together in a bitter and highly synergised pill.

What are we to do when we bring these interesting times into perspective at a regional, city, community and local level? Albert Einstein was onto things all those years ago when he said that the level of thinking which created significant problems was not the level of thinking required to solve them (4). He was referring to the fact that our world is a very complex place made up of many interlocking, connected systems. He was suggesting that if we want to do more than continually create more problems out of one-track, linear, mechanistic thinking and 'solutions', then we need to bring many minds, many ideas, much creativity and great depth together in the way we think about and act in the world.

When I think about the complex and interconnected challenges that are facing humanity, I usually run in fright to my backyard garden and get my hands into that volcanic Beechmont soil. I look at the profusion of seedlings, flowers, fruiting and seeding vegies – greens, beets, herbs, beans, potatoes and so on, and I hear an amazing hum and buzz of pollinating bees and insects. I see an extraordinary layering of relationships, connections, knowing, functioning, producing, composting, exchange, reciprocity, synergy and growth going on without a single leader, book, brochure or word spoken. Complexity and knowledge and activity and solutions are all around in my backyard garden. Knowledge and innovation and creativity are distributed everywhere – throughout nature and throughout human communities.

If we imagine for just a moment that our communities are gardens – living social systems and we are gardeners, then perhaps we will discover that we already have the means to think about and engage more meaningfully with our interesting times, if we simply change our perspective.

Paul Hawken (5), ecologically sustainable business commentator and author discusses the notion of distributed and localised knowledge and leadership in his latest book "Blessed Unrest" when he says "Since one person's knowledge can only represent a fragment of the totality of what is known, wisdom can be achieved when people combine what they have learned...viable social institutions had to evolve (we might now say 'coevolve') to confront the problems at hand rather than reflect theories at mind" (2007, p21).

Organisational learning researcher and author, Peter Senge (6) suggests we need to take off our mechanic/driver/controller glasses which assume the world is linear, simple, controllable, 'fixable' and that the answers lie in the hands of just a few strong leaders. Senge suggests that organisations and communities are like gardens – complex, self-organising, organic and evolving organisms which contain many leaders, much knowledge, multiple connections and relationships, and many layers of innovation and creativity. He suggests that our most important task is to become gardeners who can find and support and nurture these leaders, knowledge, connections, relationships, innovation and creativity.

If we become gardeners I think we will also naturally evolve into learners and begin to regard our communities, organisations, businesses and households as sites of learning, vitality and innovation. We will no longer see them as 'empty vessels' that need 'the right' information poured into them, or as machines that need fixing. We have an opportunity to change our lens on the world from one of mechanical control to one of learning in and from complexity. As the Bold Future advisory committee brings its attention to how the draft vision, themes, principles and targets might be communicated to

the people of Gold Coast City, I think a good place to start with such a shift in perspective is in the field of community engagement.

### **Reaching the limits of marketing and communications**

I would like to suggest that the methodologies of public relations, marketing and media communications have been the assumed and unquestioned foundation for community consultation and community engagement for a long time. According to Australian environmental researcher Sharon Beder (7) “modern public relations dates back to at least the 1930s, when Edward Bernays ‘convinced corporate America that changing the public’s opinion – using PR techniques – about troublesome social movements and labour unions, was far more effective than hiring goons to club people’. Bernays had worked for the wartime propaganda commission in the US, and wrote up his ideas in articles with titles like Manipulating Public Opinion and The Engineering of Consent, which described the ‘application of scientific principles and tried practices in the task of getting people to support ideas and programs’ ” (p107).

Even within the environment and sustainability movements which I’ve been part of since 1989, public relations, marketing and media communications have been a central base upon which the movement has built much of its public education and campaigning. It is a paradigm that assumes ‘they’ (the public, the politicians, the business leaders etc) do not know or understand the big issues...and if we can just feed them the right information or knowledge in an appealing and persuasive way then they will hear, understand and change...it’s the old ‘empty vessel’ model of education and public communication again.

I would like to suggest these models are now singularly ineffective because:

- ‘they’ are not empty vessels - people are complex and evolving beings who embody a great deal of knowledge and are constantly engaged in learning processes in conscious, unconscious, formal and informal ways within their lives;
- ‘they’ are people who have diverse values, beliefs and roles and come from a rich diversity of backgrounds and cultures which greatly colour the way they see and engage with the world;
- the big issues and the limits to growth which human civilisation is now facing are complex and interconnected and cannot be addressed in linear, simplistic, single message ways;
- many people are now skeptical about and literate in the ways of marketing and public communications and simply do not trust or indeed, engage with these processes and messages any more;
- most people are extremely busy in their lives of work, family, community, education and recreation and don’t have or make the time to engage with marketing and PR (which they’re already mistrustful of);
- most people have little trust in government, big business, lobby groups and activists – or their marketing messages – because they sense there are hidden agendas and a lack of independence and credibility;
- people have access to an increasing diversity of information, well beyond traditional mainstream mediums, and increasing numbers of them seek out alternative sources of information as their needs arise.

## **The need for new stories**

In these interesting times we are all in need of new stories that help us more clearly see our challenges and opportunities in ways that lead to joined-up thinking and action. We need stories that are inspiring, energising, optimistic, compelling and authentic. We need stories that not only help us to reflect and learn but inspire us to create together in a process of innovation, engagement, experimentation and growth. Paul Hawken (8) says that humankind can create new narratives and that "...a society capable of naming itself lives within its stories, inhabiting and furnishing them. We ride stories like rafts, or lay them out on the table like maps...because stories are greater than we are, their capacious narratives give us wiggle room to dream...our families and communities connect us to the old and new stories, and guide us to lean into the light" (2007, p25, 26).

Let's remember that stories are created collaboratively between the writer and the reader and that stories can be told in many ways and through many vehicles: music, images, text, art, dance, online, in videos, through living examples, in forums, celebrations, meetings, around kitchen tables, in workplaces, in classrooms, playgrounds, in the bush, on the beach and in the old-fashioned book just to name a few.

The Bold Future project has an interesting story to open up to the people, organisations, businesses and communities of the Gold Coast but the way it takes and tells this story will determine whether a creative partnership between Council and community is generated to turn words into wise, shared, ongoing and meaningful action. And make no mistake; wise, shared, ongoing and meaningful action is what people want as interesting global times enter our homes and workplaces.

Good stories are best told, developed and grown within a learning framework. Just ask Dr Ron Tooth, Principal of Pullenvale Environmental Education Centre and creator of the Storythread methodology (9). Grounded in sound pedagogy (learning principles and methods), stories applicable to people, households, organisations, neighbourhoods and communities can be written, told and grown that not only bring into focus a sustainable future but inspire meaningful action to make real that vision.

### **Good learning and teaching (pedagogy) includes these important principles:**

- It begins where learners are at so the story is relevant to them and their world
- It engages the head, heart and hands – intellect, knowledge, information, research; it has emotional relevance and engagement; is hands-on and purposeful; it leads to action, change and evolution
- It involves great stories – creating them; telling them; enabling reflection, creativity, innovation; and growing them
- It has clear aims and outcomes but is also adaptive and evolves as learners and teachers evolve
- It includes planning, researching, doing, reflecting, critiquing, monitoring and adapting (the action learning cycle)
- It is cyclical, ongoing and long term
- It involves a fluidity of roles between learners and teachers and supports co-learning
- It is inspiring and energising
- It is inclusive – it is accessible and relevant to whoever wants to play.

Good learning foundations, processes and stories can bring people together in ways that are unifying but not stifling. They don't demand agreement of opinion (surely an impossible task), but they do help to create alignment around an evolving, co-created vision or intention. They also allow the creation of a diversity of activities and pathways towards that aligned vision.

Good stories when created and developed collectively, also have the potential to "solve for pattern" (10), Wendell Berry's marvellous term that refers to solutions which address multiple, connected, systemic problems (without creating further problems), instead of just dealing linearly with one symptom at a time. Berry, a farmer, poet and systems thinker suggests for example, that sustainable food and farming has the potential to address many serious issues simultaneously including: soil and water health, carbon storage and greenhouse gas reduction, worker health and safety, productivity and yield, water conservation, biodiversity, food nutrition and local economic prosperity. For Berry, sustainable agriculture is more than a linear 'fix', it is an evolving, systems-based approach to some of the biggest issues of our time. It also requires more than top-down leadership to implement. It is a place-based, localised, creative and evolving framework, philosophy and act of creativity arising from the grassroots.

### **The role of the community gardener**

One of my favourite words in the English language is 'desireline'. I understand it comes from the landscaping fraternity and describes the informal pathways pedestrians make when they step off concrete footpaths and walk across lawns and grass. They are the routes that people take or make based on their needs and desires to get somewhere via a shorter or perhaps more scenic path and they tend to become visible over time as more feet walk them across the ground.

If we continue with our 'community as a garden' setting, I believe there also exist webs of invisible desirelines within our communities that connect ideas, knowledge, needs, aspirations and leadership with people, projects, organisations and businesses. If our communities are already living systems and sites of learning and innovation, then one of the most important jobs of local government in particular, is to become a community gardener; to find those community desirelines and support their ongoing development, because these represent what our communities value at their core. I also believe it is important and possible for community desirelines to grow and function alongside the more formal structures of governance though if we are to be community gardeners, we must be careful not to put up 'keep off the lawn' signs or concrete over desirelines with so many layers of bureaucracy and structure that they become too rigid and uncomfortable to be useful to community any more.

During the 1990s, economic development researcher and practitioner Ernesto Sirolli (11) developed a framework that aligns well with our metaphor of the community as a garden. Called 'enterprise facilitation', Sirolli's framework focuses on the development of local economies and small to medium enterprises that are fuelled by peoples' own passions and aspirations. Economic development officers are reinvented as enterprise facilitators – community-based networkers whose job involves doing nothing until people come to them with their business aspirations. Then their role is to listen deeply to understand those aspirations and find the connections, information, expertise and leadership within the community to enable those aspirations to evolve into thriving, meaningful business enterprises.

In suggesting a learning lens for community engagement it's useful to turn Sirolli's enterprise facilitators into learning facilitators: people who are great listeners, observers and connectors. People who have the ability to go into communities to find the local leaders, innovators, desirelines and needs and can help connect them up. Facilitators who have the skills to help people and organisations reflect upon and tell their stories, then amplify those stories across communities so others can be inspired and activated and the learnings made contagious. And they also have the capacity to connect the grassroots with more formal governance structures so that real partnerships are born between government and community.

## Supporting new growth

In proposing a new framework for community engagement based on a learning foundation, particularly within programs like Bold Future which are about future visions and emergent activity, it is important to clarify that I'm not suggesting we throw the marketing baby out with the bathwater. As mentioned earlier in this paper, marketing, public relations and media communications have been around for a long time and they do have useful and at times, important roles to play particularly in raising broad levels of awareness. They have provided the base for most of the community consultation and engagement undertaken in Australia in past decades and as such, currently represent the public communication status quo.

Yet something important needs to change if the Bold Future vision and supporting themes and projects are to become meaningful for the Gold Coast's people and communities. Our communities need and deserve more than a one-size-fits-all, top down vision. Our communities are already well-stocked with effective local leaders, teachers and visionaries. They are already home to many effective, inspiring, locally-relevant innovations too, from outstanding neighbourhood building and family support programs that are pulling down fences and raising roller doors in the northern suburbs (12), to internationally-recognised ecologically sustainable businesses in Nerang (13) and Currumbin (14). These programs, businesses and people arise from the ground up to meet the needs and aspirations of local areas in meaningful, authentic and appropriate ways.

If the Bold Future program is to look to its next stage of life with a community engagement learning lens, it can do so in a low risk, cost effective way simply by collaborating and partnering with the innovators already living a bold future vision. We can learn from them and help make their stories accessible and contagious. We can map them and celebrate them and enable their work to grow and connect. In doing that we help the Bold Future vision grow and expand in ways that work, and work from the inside out rather than being imposed from above. Even Council itself is filled with Bold Future aligned people and projects which showcase the bold future that is already here and itching to grow.

Of course, there is room for new start-up signature projects too, that can be tested initially at small, localised scales and grown or adapted as we learn from them.

In his book "Blessed Unrest", Paul Hawken discusses the potential for regional transformation in ecological sustainability in a story about the US-based Garfield Foundation's work with 30 non government organisations (NGOs) in a collaborative renewable energy project. The Garfield Foundation, alongside 12, then 30 regional NGOs visioned, planned, created and is now implementing a regional project that is developing a Midwest clean energy economy that will "increase jobs, investment and prosperity while addressing climate change, culminating in an 80% reduction of greenhouse gasses by 2030" (p 163). The project is an inspiring example of enabling and supporting social connectivity between the innovators and leaders within government, NGOs and community so that structural change can occur via collaboration and learning.

In the end, I don't believe that community engagement built upon a lens of learning is a radical shift at all. Like the propensity of life to turn on a sixpence and our inbuilt human capacity for relationship, it can happen in an instant if we shift our perspective to the local level, to the learning level, to the recognition that our communities are living systems – gardens if you will.

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