Using Popular Education in Development Work: Some Experiences from Aboriginal Australia

Deborah Durnan, Jack Beetson and Bob Boughton
(University of New England, Australia)

This paper discusses the use of popular education in development work with Aboriginal communities in Australia. The three authors have been developing a popular education approach since the 1990s, when we began working together in a national organization representing Aboriginal community-controlled adult colleges (FIAEP, 1997: Durnan & Boughton, 1999). The approach grows out of our experiences across a wide variety of education settings, formal and informal, accredited and non-accredited, for community controlled agencies and under contract to governments, and with Aboriginal communities in every state and territory in Australia. Recently, we extended our work to Timor-Leste, which deepened our understanding of the practice of popular education, especially its application in post-conflict societies (Boughton, 2010; Durnan & Beetson, 2011).

Deborah Durnan is a non-Aboriginal woman, a descendant of Irish and Scottish immigrants and refugees who settled in the lands of the Wiradjuri people in the Riverina region of the state of New South Wales, one of the eight states and territories established as British colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, which federated to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. Jack Beetson is a Ngemba man, whose traditional lands lie along the Barwon River, several hundred kilometres north west of Sydney, the NSW capital, in the remote western region. Bob Boughton’s family also originated in England and Ireland, arriving in Sydney, in the late nineteenth century. All three of us have university qualifications in adult education, and are part of a network of popular education practitioners in Australia which has existed informally since the 1970s, and more formally since the first popular education conference held in Sydney in 1995. Jack and Deborah work currently as independent adult education and development consultants, while Bob teaches adult and popular education at a regional university.

Our team approach draws on our different experiences and skills. Jack provides the essential ingredient of Aboriginal leadership, based on his deep understanding of the history and culture of his people, and several decades working as an advocate for Indigenous peoples rights nationally and internationally (e.g. Beetson, 1997).

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Deborah is a feminist and long-time peace activist, whose primary commitment is to developing transformative learning practices through which people can collectively learn their way out of intolerable circumstances. She has recently enhanced her approach to popular education by drawing on the literature of post-conflict peacebuilding (Lederach et al, 2007; Durnan, 2010). Bob is an academic, whose work focuses on the political economy of adult education and development and on the history and theory of popular education in the context of wider movements for social and political change (Boughton, 2005). We use an action-reflection model, with each other and with our students, to deepen our understanding of what we do and how and why it works, with a view always to becoming more effective as educators for social change. In terms of our different roles in the work described below, Jack leads the negotiations with community and government in setting up our program, and is the lead facilitator in the workshop setting. Deborah undertakes the detailed design and planning of a learning program, and co-facilitates with Jack in the delivery phase. Bob's primary role is to lead and document the critical reflection and systematization of the process.

The focus of this paper is on the pedagogy we use to assist communities which are in conflict, both internally and with non-Aboriginal authorities, to reach some basic agreements about how they will work together, and on what basis they are prepared to work with external authorities. Our aim is education for self-determination, a situation where people can freely choose their own development path, in accordance with their own aspirations and their own cultural values. This fundamental right of all peoples is enshrined in the United Nations Charter, and further elaborated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations, 2007). However, as adult educators have argued in international forums since Dar Es Salaam, a people's capacity to exercise their rights depends on critical literacy, which means an understanding of their own circumstances and how they can organize collectively in those circumstances to move beyond them (Nyere, 1976/2006). To the extent that opportunities to develop this critical literacy have been denied Aboriginal peoples in the past, there is a need for popular education. Popular education in this context means decolonizing education, since colonialism created the historical context, overriding peoples fundamental human rights, including their rights to live in peace, on their own lands, in accordance with their own cultures and traditions. Our basic assumption is that colonialism is the underlying or root cause of the experiences of disempowerment and internal divisiveness which must be overcome before people can fully exercise their rights.

This paper represents an attempt to systematize and theorise our practice, but, in order to make this concrete, we begin with two ‘case-studies’, generic examples based on experiences in several different communities. The first describes work which Deborah has done in very remote non-English speaking communities where people want to take greater control over their own local organizations. The second describes work the three of us have been doing recently with communities seeking to mitigate their internal differences and past conflicts, and adopt a more united approach to the non-Aboriginal agencies working in their community.

Case Study 1. Building peace through popular education for ‘good governance’

The context is a small isolated community, less than one thousand people, in the remote north west regions of the continent, founded one hundred years ago as a church mission and ration station for the nomadic desert people of the region (La Fontaine, 2006). The community includes several family groups from four different language groups, and is the focal point for government services including police, a health post and a centre to cater for the needs of a growing youth population who are mostly unskilled with little if any prospect for employment. Very few non-Aboriginal people live here, and almost all of them will move on within three years. Most adults are illiterate or semi-literate in English, which is their second, third or even fourth language. The community is racked by poverty and ill-health, and in crisis.

The program utilized the resources of the Commonwealth government to conduct two three-day workshops, attended by people from this community and others in the surrounding region. The aim was to deepen the understanding of the members of legally-incorporated Aboriginal organizations about democratic governance, so they could take greater control over their communities. There was a gap of several weeks between workshops, so participants could use what had been learned in the first workshop and reflect on that experience in the second. Between fifteen and twenty-five participants attended, young and old, mostly women. To deal with language issues, a local interpreter worked in the program, and governance terms were translated into the dominant local language prior to and/or during the workshop. The workshops were delivered in an agreed location in the community, one where the participants felt secure and could focus on the learning, away from the chaos of the daily rhythm of community life and from family obligations. The facilitators used a technique known as ‘Talking Paper’ (Wolfson, 2007), described

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further below, to help participants build their critical ‘governance literacy’.

The first task was to initiate the process of building trust, solidarity and confidence, through sharing family histories, fears and aspirations. To begin this, we discussed how to ‘work well together’ during the workshop. The participants chose the phrase ‘to act with a kind heart’, which they said would ‘make their spirit strong.’ Then it was time to listen to the participants stories of their context: about their place, their cultural identities, their histories and conflicts, their communities’ strengths, and their different visions and solutions for the problems they face. A process known as ‘Conflict Analysis’ (Fisher et al, 2000) was used to draw attention to and clarify a series of connections revealed through these personal stories:

- connections between those in the room;
- connections between the past and the current circumstances;
- connections between the role of community organisations and building a better future;
- connections between traditional authority and ways of knowing and doing, and ways of understanding and reading their contemporary world.

As this process unfolded, it revealed the extent to which people are living in situations deeply affected by violence. People from one community, for example, recalled that in the 1960s, some of their family members had been rounded up by police, placed in chains, and dragged on foot to the goal in the nearest town, several hundred kilometres away. Recounting this experience surfaced strong feelings of fear and distrust in authorities, as well as a sense of humiliation and loss of dignity. Another story in living memory was of the non-Aboriginal pastoralist and the miners who, in times past, regularly entered the catholic mission dormitory looking for young women. At times, this storytelling became difficult and painful, as participants spoke softly of things which they said had “broken their spirit”. Sometimes there was anger, sometimes fatigue. But people also said that they felt stronger from the sharing and building of affinity, united over a common purpose of regaining some of what had been taken or lost, where perhaps before this had not felt possible.

By the end of this sharing of stories, an agreement had been reached that the priorities for action by their local organizations were to look after the communities’ young people and rid their communities of violence. The materials generated from mapping these stories then provided the data upon which to build the rest of the program. The training team drew on the expertise and experiences within the group

to learn and make meaning of new words, concepts and practices which are a necessary part of the business of governance in a community organization which is incorporated under Australian legislation, such as a community council, local health service or adult education centre. Over the six workshop days, fifty governance terms grouped into ten sets of related concepts were introduced, including such initially-alien concepts as ‘sustainability’, ‘transparency’, ‘conflict of interest’, ‘risk management’, and ‘accountability’. Together, participants and facilitators work to deconstruct these words, by relating them to their own context, gradually demystifying what Aboriginal people call ‘secret’ English, the English which officials and advisers use as part of the ‘secret business’ of non-Aboriginal government regulation and funding practices. Gradually meaning is made through a discussion of associated traditional practices and current challenges to clarify these alien governance terms. The dialogue around each set of words is followed by a more in depth activity to apply them in practice through role play, art, small group discussion and story telling.

For example, one set of words consisted of “conflict, consensus, negotiation, mediation, dispute resolution”. Following dialogue about their meaning and use, the participants situated their community, Australia as a whole, and war-torn countries such as Afghanistan on a *continuum of conflict*. Then they described in words or pictures what peace would look like in their own community. This basic exercise focused participants on the relationships between peace and conflict. In the process, the participants decided that changing the conditions in communities meant creating a more safe and secure environment. They described a culture of law and order, in which residents could fall asleep at night without the worry of abuse, leave their kids without fear of harm, or make decisions as Board members of their organizations without the risk of violent retribution. We explored their emotional responses and associated behaviours when faced with conflict and violence. Then we identified as a group some of the tools and resources, including local “peacemakers”, and choices that could be made to prevent or manage conflict in an Aboriginal organisation. They drew on their own indigenous decision-making processes to think about ways that would work best in each specific community. We took the time to practice applying these processes to real life problems, followed by critical reflection about what we learned.

Our objective was to demonstrate that the business of governance includes, as a fundamental, the responsibility of the Boards of local community-controlled organizations to use those organization ’s institutional power to lead the community

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from a place of violence to a place of peace. Internally, violent conflict can arise, for example, between families and language groups or tribes; between strong men or bosses; grog and drug runners and abusers; and between men and women. Almost always, these internal conflicts have long histories, going back to the earlier periods of colonization e.g. when people were forced onto each other's lands, and when traditional authority and means of dispute resolution were undermined or directly repressed. External conflicts arise constantly in current times over non-Aboriginal access to community lands and resources, and over Aboriginal peoples' access to important resources in mainstream society, such as education and health services. Aboriginal community organisations are required to respond to a myriad of government and non-government development agencies on a weekly basis as well as other interested parties such as store-keepers, academics, tourist operators, art dealers, religious groups and mineral exploration companies, all of whom are pursuing their own interests inside their own ideologies. Almost invariably, these external actors exploit and exacerbate the internal divisions. Without strong local Aboriginal governance and authority, these internally- and externally-generated divisions cannot be resolved, and the conflict and violence spirals out of control.

Case Study 2. Devising Principles & Protocols of Engagement

Our second case study draws on work in rural and remote communities in eastern Australia, which have a longer history of colonization than the ones described above, and are located in regions where there has been much closer 'settlement' by non-Aboriginal people. In most of these places, Aboriginal people live as a minority in their own country, and many are not on their own 'original' country, having been subject over many generations to forced re-settlement policies. In these more 'settled' areas, there has also been a much more intensive attempt at cultural assimilation by colonial education authorities, including the deliberate suppression of local languages and customs (Fletcher, 1989). The language of communication which people use in daily life is 'Aboriginal English', a dialect of Standard Australian English (Eades, 1994).

The last two decades have seen an exponential growth in the number of government departments and programs seeking to engage with these communities, in pursuit of national policy objectives designed to 'Close the Gap' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on a range of social indicators, including health, housing and education. These policies are a response to the work of the Aboriginal rights movement, which has been demanding urgent action on these

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fronts since the 1930s at least, and won significant reforms from the 1960s onwards, one of which was that Aboriginal people needed to be involved in planning and delivery of services to their communities (Goodall, 1976). However, in the absence of a treaty or constitutional provision whereby local Aboriginal authority could be formally recognized as having equal status with institutions of the settler governments, the practice of 'consultation' as often as not has led to increased divisions within communities, as different government officials pick and choose between the leaders, families and organizations with which they will consult. The increased funding available for government services, especially as neo-liberal policy models call for 'contracting out' of these services, also multiplies the number of non-government actors including private businesses, church organizations and non-Aboriginal NGOs, all wanting to be involved. This is producing an increasingly complex reality of governance regulation and service provision, one with which the vast majority of Aboriginal adults are ill-equipped to deal, due largely to previous decades of educational neglect. Hence the need for a 'critical literacy' which can 'read' this new world in ways which show a path through the maze, toward improved community well-being and greater control and autonomy.

Our approach in these communities again utilises action reflection and conflict mapping in association with 'Talking Paper', to help people 'read' this world, and come to some agreement about how they can deal in a united way with the multitude of non-Aboriginal actors who are there, in theory, to assist their development. One useful tool has proved to be devising a set of Principles and Protocols of Engagement, to which agencies are asked to sign up, if they are to work with the community. It is not unusual to hear people say, when they see what they have collectively produced, that this is the first 'training' they have had in which they were actually listened to, and were not simply talked at. People also express pride in the fact that the words which are written down are 'their words', and in the fact that they have found ways to work together despite historic differences and conflicts in the community. In other words, people see that 'taking control' is a possibility, given the tools to do so: 'We've got rights, and this is a tool for taking control' was how one participant put it.

As facilitators, we are constantly struck by the way this process releases and reveals the range of talent that exists in a community, once people feel safe to bring their own experiences into the discussion. For example, someone who is illiterate will contribute with his or her traditional law and stories perspective; another will provide a strong and articulate focus on the need to protect women and

children; another will demonstrate acute perception of the way governments do business. Someone will turn out to be passionate about youth needs, another about improving relations with police and another about using media to get the message out. Moreover, although there are many conflicts in these communities, the process allows people to move through that conflict and not get caught in it, because there is no one organization being discussed, and this is a neutral space, away from the day-to-day business of managing and sharing resources. At times, when tensions rise, the group will work together to find a solution, by maintaining their focus on the purpose of the workshop, the shared outcome that would benefit all equally. This is often very difficult for people to do, involving what Jack calls ‘having the hard conversations’.

In the workshops where this technique has been used, participants said in the evaluation that the process had been a transformative experience. Prior to the workshop, they were individually angry and frustrated about what was happening. The situation was terrible, causing serious pain, and it had to stop. Through these workshops, people said they had learned that they were not on their own, that feelings they thought they were having alone were shared by others in the community. As a result they had produced something which gave them a great sense of achievement. The workshops generate a lot of enthusiasm and positive energy for taking the process forward, and confidence that they can regain some control over the development process. People re-discover that it is possible to unite despite their differences, and realize that they no longer have to carry the hurt and abuse they have been suffering as individuals, but can work together to pursue their aspirations.

At one level, this may seem a very basic kind of community development practice, which it is. At the same time, the fact remains that few Aboriginal communities in recent times have experienced even such a basic form of development support. On the contrary, in the last three decades, the majority of external interventions appear to be ones which have left communities feeling less empowered, and more divided. This is ironic, since, on external measures such as government policy settings and expenditure levels, it would appear that things have been improving. This suggests that government agencies, and most non-government agencies also, are still operating within a colonialist and welfarist paradigm, in which the communities are seen as disadvantaged people who are the ‘beneficiaries’ of the state’s benevolence, rather than as active agents in a process of decolonization which requires major changes to the state and society which created that

disadvantage in the first place. In the words of Paulo Freire :

These men (sic) …. are not marginal to the structure, but oppressed men within it. Alienated men, they cannot overcome their dependency by 'incorporation' into the very structure responsible for their dependency.

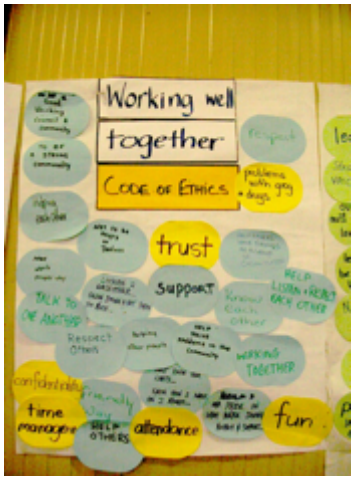
(Freire, 1972, p. 27-8).

Talking Paper

The techniques of facilitation which we use in this work do not differ greatly from methods described in any popular education handbook, e.g. *Training for Transformation*(Hope and Timmel, 1999). The conflict analysis tools we use have also been well described in other places (e.g. Lederach et al, 2007). In this paper, therefore, we focus our discussion of technique on 'Talking Paper', which has been popularized in Australia by Julia Wolfson who learned it in South Africa in the 1990s as a method for working with groups in conflict (Wolfson and Fowles, 2008). 'Talking Paper' involves workshop participants recording their words, feelings and ideas on relatively small sheets of different coloured and shaped paper, which are then displayed by being stuck on larger flip chart sheets with 're- stickable ' glue. Participants and facilitators can then move the individual words and phrases around, and group them in different ways, to build more complex concepts. As discussed further below, this is akin to Freire's generative words in his literacy classes, which could be broken down into syllables to form different words (Schugurensky, 2011, pp. 59-65). 'Talking Paper', however, works not with syllables, but with simple words and phrases, which can be 'constructed and 'reconstructed' to produce new concepts and understandings.

The great strength of this technique is that it places the words of the participants at the centre of the learning process from the start. For example, as described in the first case study, our workshops begin with an activity called Working Well Together, designed to establish workshop protocols. The lead facilitator asks the participants to write down on their small pieces of coloured paper their ideas for rules for workshop conduct. People invariably write words like RESPECT, LISTEN, COME ON TIME, etc. For participants and groups where literacy is very low, the facilitator or another participant can sit with and write for them. But the essential thing is to use peoples own words. At the end of this process, the different suggestions are

collected and displayed, then reviewed for consensus with the group as a whole. Once agreement is reached, this becomes the guide for conduct in the workshop. Immediately, people have experienced collective rule-making, taking agency and being in control. To use a Freirian phrase, this is education as the practice of freedom; utilizing an education space in which to practice the exercise of the right of self-management. Note that practice has a ‘double-meaning’ here. It is practice, in the sense that it is preparation for doing it elsewhere; but it is also practice, as action. Moreover, it is a practice on which reflection can occur, demonstrating the dialectical unity of theory and practice. Almost always, when people move away from the protocols e.g. by becoming too dominating, or by not listening carefully to another contribution, participants themselves remind people by referring to the protocols they have collectively established. However, the process also establishes clearly that it is the participants own words – and, more importantly, their feelings – which are the subject of the workshop, the material which we will be discussing and analysing. The simple task of this first activity can then lead into more complex tasks, dealt with in a similar way e.g. listing the key issues or causes of conflict in a community.



Talking paper display of Working Well Together activity

Using ‘Talking Paper’ is not unlike the research phase of a Freirian project, where the research team spend time in a community listening and writing down the words of the people, to be used later to identify generative themes and words. The difference is that the peoples’ words are produced/generated in the workshop itself, and the work of refining them, and choosing which are the most important, is done

in a more participatory way. However, a similar dynamic is at work, because the educators are discovering what words the people use themselves to speak about their reality, and then using these words as building blocks with which to build a more critical, coherent and collective account of that reality.

Action-Reflection

The overarching learning paradigm of our process is the concept/practice of action-reflection. Every activity undertaken in our workshops can be utilised as an opportunity for reflection; and every reflection can be utilised as an opportunity to suggest further action. When we reflect, we ask people to focus primarily, not on what they have done, but on what they have felt as they did it. This is because words have an emotional charge to them, and what people want and do not want, what they value and do not value, can only be discovered by opening up the 'feeling channel.' We think this is especially important in the settings in which we work, because the feelings associated with a history of colonization and dispossession are constantly denied and ignored by the beneficiaries of those processes. People regularly tell us that we have listened to their pain, and that is certainly what it feels like when we hear the stories that people have to tell. Equally important, however, is that they have also listened to each other.

In the stories that are told of the struggles of people against colonialism, there are two contradictory tendencies. One is to emphasise the victimhood, the suffering, the disadvantage; and the other is to emphasise the heroism of resistance. Both are true, and both must be acknowledged. However, what is less often recognized is that victimhood, and also sometime struggle (especially in conditions of severe repression) is known and experienced individually and within families or small groups; and so each individual or family's experience may only be known to a few. This is the lived experience of the colonial strategy of divide and rule; people do not necessarily know and experience the extent to which their suffering and their struggles are shared with others. It is extremely common in the workshops we conduct for people to say that they have only now discovered how much they have in common with people who may be living quite close to them, especially in terms of the way they feel about what has happened to them. This is also due to the so-called shame factor, that it is very hard for people to speak about things that have damaged them, and what they have lost, because they have taken upon themselves the responsibility and guilt for what has happened. It is also the case that parents and older members of communities sometimes choose not to talk

about the earlier phases of colonisation, which were extremely violent, out of a desire to shelter the next generation from the pain that knowing and experiencing these things can bring. The ‘Talking Paper’ technique assists people to see the commonalities in their experience and aspirations concretely, because as the words go up on the paper around the room, it becomes easier to see that commonality. More importantly, perhaps, the participants own writing reveals that commonality, demonstrating in practice the unity of reading/writing the world and the word, i.e. that the act of writing/reading collectively produces a clearer view of the world. Reading and writing is revealed as an act of discovery, of uncovering a reality that was previously known only partially.

The pedagogy of Aboriginal governance

Historically, the state, including its education systems, have been active agents in the colonization process, in ways too numerous to mention, but including devaluing Aboriginal languages, knowledges and cultural practices; attempting to ‘fit’ people into lower end menial roles in settler economy; teaching versions of history which denied or ignored the reality of prior Aboriginal occupation, including a functioning sustainable and peaceful polity and economy; and belittling Aboriginal religion and moral philosophy. The most basic law of the Commonwealth, the Constitution, did not even require Aboriginal people to be counted as citizens, until 1967. Public schools excluded Aboriginal children and young people, forcing them to attend mission schools staffed by unqualified teachers. The police and justice system constantly criminalized Aboriginal people, especially young people, and rates of imprisonment in gaols and juvenile correction facilities have always been very high, as they still are.

In this context, it makes little sense to speak of a functioning democracy, or a rule of law which guarantee life, peace and liberty. The reality of many if not most Aboriginal communities in Australia is that people in them enjoy very little peace and security, which is the most fundamental requirement for a functioning democracy. As individuals, people are regularly subjected both to interpersonal violence and abuse, and to the structural violence of poverty, neglect and disrespect of their basic values and traditions. Sometimes this violence is internal, as in the high rates of physical attack, domestic violence and child abuse. Less acknowledged is the structural violence, expressed in high rates of unemployment, high rates of arrest and incarceration, inadequate housing facilities, high rates of educational failure in schools, school expulsions for behavioural problems, and high

rates of preventable disease. Even less acknowledged is the fundamental violence of land theft, the fact that the vast majority of peoples' ancestral lands have been forcibly taken from them, and are currently being exploited in ways which despoil them and rupture peoples' capacity to relate to them in accordance with their own spiritual beliefs.

The institutions of the state and of civil society are therefore quite rightly perceived, especially by the most marginalized, as a hostile force, perpetuating and reinforcing historical injustices. At the same time, these institutions are all-pervasive, and there is no utopian experimental space to which Aboriginal people can retreat to build an alternative system, even in the most remote reaches of the continent as described in the first case study. The challenge, therefore is to decolonise the institutions themselves, including the education institutions; to dismantle and reconstruct 'the master's house' with 'the master's tools'. This struggle has been going on since Aboriginal people first found themselves being treated as British subjects, i.e. subject to and governed by the laws of another people, the occupying power. While sometimes resistance took the form of violent struggle and refusal to comply, more often than not it was more strategic, and involved some cooperation and accommodation with settler authority. In each location, as the colonial authority extended its rule and began to build the institutions which secured its power and control over the Indigenous people and their lands, those same people found ways to resist and to advocate for their own interests. This produces what has been called a local governance history (Hunt et al 2008), a history of contest over how power will be executed. Our approach focuses on the educative nature of this history, to uncover what can be learned from it about how power and control is exercised. In other words, our focus is the 'pedagogy of governance', as it is experienced at the local community level.

There is a national narrative, and some key events in that, such as the armed guerrilla resistance of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the struggles to overturn the slave labour regimes in the mid twentieth century, the Constitutional reform movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and the campaigns since the 1970s for education rights, for land rights and for recognition of native title, and for an apology to the 'Stolen Generations'. But each of these national stories is underpinned by local events that while moving along roughly the same trajectory, varied enormously in rhythm and detail. In the fifty five years since the Commonwealth itself became more directly involved, this local diversity has in some ways been further reinforced, because with constitutional recognition as

citizens came the right to form local associations and to seek funds for local development projects. At the same time, as the complete suppression of Aboriginal identity – the so-called policy of assimilation receded – it became possible again for the different peoples of the continent to re-assert their own locally-based identity, languages and cultures. The aspiration to recover, reconstruct and re-assert local identity is therefore a major theme which emerges in many of our workshops. This creates a complex challenge for colonial authorities which prefer to see all their citizens as one, or, failing that, to group so-called disadvantaged people into a small number of manageable categories, of which 'Aborigines' is one. Few government agencies have yet grasped that they are dealing with hundreds of different, distinct 'peoples', and that one size does definitely not fit all.

Literacy, violence and conflict transformation

In both our examples from practice, physical and structural violence, especially but not only against women and children, is an integral part of past but also present experience. People are products of these violent circumstances, and to change them, new ways of doing things have to emerge. This requires a combination of critical reflection and external intervention. New ideas are needed and, to some extent, these have to come from outside. But these 'outside' ideas also need to be transformed, because they do not make sense, they do not become "really useful knowledge" (Thompson, 2000) until they have been analysed through the experience of the people 'inside'.

There is a difference between what we are describing, and the way Paulo Freire described his way of working. He worked with the words the people themselves used, and then he helped them analyse those words in a way which opened up for them a more complex view of reality than the one they began with, which he called 'naïve'. While we begin with the words and ideas that are in local circulation, our workshops introduce new and complex words and concepts, which derive from a way of organising society which in the past has not been part of peoples' experience. These words and concepts arise from the modern concepts of democracy and the rule of law. Even if these words and concepts were present in the history people have lived through, they did not mean anything, because they were denied the right to use them as tools of their own liberation. In both our examples, people are being asked to take hold of these ideas and make them work for them.

Clearly, part of what we have presented is about literacy, about how people learn to

read, speak and write words which give them power. Second, it is about conflict transformation, because we are suggesting that it is only when people can use words in these ways that they can turn back the tide of violence which has engulfed them now for centuries. We are not claiming that the structural and internal violence will stop, just because people have access to a new language. But the language of democracy and the democratic rule of law offer a pathway through the violence, a way over time to replace it with other forms of conflict management. Third, if popular education is to make the contribution it clearly can to peacebuilding, it also has to focus strongly on gender relations. The gendered nature of violence in post-conflict situations is indisputable. In Aboriginal Australia, as in all other colonised countries, the incidence of violence against women approaches epidemic proportions. Women are also, and perhaps because of this, at the forefront of efforts to end the violence, and restore some form of peace and security. This means that women need to be supported to take more leadership of the process of social transformation. Fourth, this is about self-determination and governance. Self-determination occurs when a people freely choose their social economic political and cultural future. In order to make such choices collectively, and implement the actions that those choices imply, people need institutions and practices of collective decision making, ones which work in the contemporary world. Such practices need to be learned, and the institutions which sustain the practices, like constitutions and community councils and parliaments, have to be constructed. Moreover, the institutions of governance and self-determination are not like a house that someone else can build for you, and you just move in. You have to build them yourself. As Horton and Freire said, we have to “make the road by walking.”

Conclusion

At this stage in the development of this practice, we offer the following systematisation (Torres, 1992), setting out five ways in which a popular education approach contributes to Aboriginal development.

First, and perhaps most importantly, our popular education approach encourages people to believe in the possibility of a less violent and more peaceful future, in which they will have greater control over their lives. At the same time, we do not pretend that this is a quick or easy process. We acknowledge that it is something that can only be achieved over a fairly long term. Second, the approach sets out very deliberately to create a safe and secure space for people who had been parties to conflict and are living inside a conflicted world, so they can share experiences

and engage in dialogue. Note that this requires the educators to bring some resources into the situation, sufficient to open up that space which would not otherwise be there. Third, the approach encourages people to connect their experiences to a wider social and political context and history. People who are inside a conflict or whose families and communities have lived through a conflict do not necessarily have more than a very partial knowledge of the conflicts history. They therefore need to see how their experience fits into a much bigger process, which is historical. Fourth, popular education calls for a dialogic approach, to generate the experience of working collectively to analyse situations and to devise strategies for collective action. This is above all a process of building and consolidating relationships of trust and solidarity. Fifth, the educators need to continue to support the people to take actions based on the decisions they have made, and then to reflect further on these actions, in a cycle of action-reflection designed to move people out of the conditions which generate the problems and issues they have identified. This action for change then forms the basis for further reflection.

The proviso is that, for every community, the experience of colonization has been different, and so each community has to deal with its own specific reality, based on that experience, that history. There is no template, no over-arching model, that can be applied, only ideas and concepts and activities which may help people find their own specific path. What we have discovered, however, is that collective agency can only be learned by doing, by working collectively to achieve a collective product, and in so doing, breaking out of the isolation and division, the fragmentation and fracturing that colonial history has imposed on Aboriginal peoples. As Freire taught, this is about becoming subjects, not objects; learning that it is possible to take agency, especially in relation to government, and agency which is not simply negation and opposition, but is using the ‘masters tools’. This process is a necessary part of reconstructing individual and collective identity, and, in the long run, perhaps, a new form of national unity, building over time, from the base, inter-connected structures of localized power and agency which are sufficiently robust to support a more radical and widespread movement for change.

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