From Being in Their Own Shadow, to Finding Their Place in the Sun: First World Mature-Aged Unemployed Men

Glamorgan A*

'Back on Track' Australia Working Together research project, Challenger TAFE, Fremantle, Australia

Abstract

Welfare nets in First World countries give material protection to men who are or become long-term unemployed in the middle of their lives, but such material support does not much meet their need for esteem, involvement in the community and purpose in their lives.

How do you re-engage these men into the community? There appears little social urgency to resource mature aged men to make their re-entry into the workplace or find new educational and retraining opportunities, let alone for them to become more involved in their community. Now, a pioneering Western Australian technical and further education (TAFE WA) course, Men's Access, is exploring how this could change. What is emerging is not just a question of matching skills set to occupational opportunity, but also one that addresses the crisis of meaning and social relevance these men often confront in the process. Story and action research are integral parts of the curriculum which engage men in their inner and outer life.

Facilitating these men to step out of their own shadow, to find their engaged 'place in the sun', is a challenge vital to first world communities, where increasing age — especially where it is connected with social marginality — tends to diminish status and rob the community of their accumulated experience. This paper suggests ways of engaging men in the wider community by:

1. seeing poverty as essentially a *relationship*, because this relationship can become the source of engagement
2. using action learning and storytelling as key engagers
3. providing sufficient and appropriate support to the learning needs of mature age men (who often carry bad experiences of formal schooling).

Keywords

Men, Max-Neef, storytelling, action learning, poverty

The context: affluence and poverty

To be sure, Australia is a rich country. The United Nations Development Program produces an annual *Human Development Report*, with a Human Development Index (HDI) for all countries, and in 2004 registered Australia third-highest after Norway and Sweden. These HDI numbers tell a straightforward story. Australians have a life expectancy at birth of 79.1 years; around 99 per cent adult literacy rates; amongst the highest aggregate participation in primary, secondary and tertiary schooling of 113 per cent; and a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of US$28,260. We're doing all right, mate, as Australians might say, compared with the very last on the list, Sierra Leone, where there is a life expectancy of 34.3 years, and only US$520 GDP per capita; or the second-last on the list, Niger, with 17 per cent literacy rates; or third-last on

the list, Burkina Faso, with 22 per cent schooling. The bottom one hundred HDI countries have an average GDP that is still less than what an unemployed person gets in Australia in allowances from the Australian Government. It could almost seem we live in different worlds.

But these are raw figures. The *Human Development Report 2004* also records that 17 per cent of Australian adults aged 16-65 years lack functional literacy skills; there is a detectable problem of long-term unemployment, and around 15 per cent of the population live below the income poverty line. Australia ranked 19th out of 30 OECD countries in terms of upper secondary education attainment (OECD 2004). These aggregate figures mask the particularly disgraceful situation of our Indigenous people, who labour with even more severe problems, more rightly described for many Aboriginals as Third World conditions. So the situation of development is more variegated than a first glance might suggest. Australian women have a higher life expectancy, higher enrolment in education, but one-third less earned income than men, and a 'gender empowerment measure' that ranks Australia down from third to eighth. On the other hand, according to the Brotherhood of St Lawrence, low-income men have worse health, more chronic illness and higher disability than low income women (Poverty Watch). For a country that considers itself classless, in the top twenty HDI countries, Australia records amongst the highest for inequality (35.2 under the Gini index, which measures inequality over the entire distribution of income. A value of 0 represents perfect equality, and a value of 100 represents perfect inequality). Contrary to official assertions within Australia, research by the St Vincent de Paul Society (John Wicks, 'The Reality of Income Inequality in Australia', *Social Policy Issues Paper 1*, May 2005) argues that income inequality in Australia is growing. Also answering official claims of improvement, in 'Why widening socioeconomic inequality should concern us all' (<http://www.newmatilda.com>, 9 June 05) Professor Graham Vimpani has argued:

> "Whilst it is true that there has been a rise of 165 per cent in average private household income in the bottom 10 per cent, this represents a rise of only $26 per week, whereas the top 10 per cent of income earners have had a rise of $770 per week — a paltry, so [the Australian Prime Minister] would have us believe, increase of 38 per cent. Even more telling is the change in the income gap between the top and bottom deciles which has increased from $556 to $652 per week over the period 1994–05 to 2002–03."

This income inequality is going to be felt most by those who have least ability or engagement with paid work, and will be felt in new places. The employment rate for 45-65 year olds fell from nearly 100 per cent during the 1950s (when there was also a very high proportion of male workers) through to the early 1970s, to almost 50 per cent by 2000 (ABS 2000). Ranzijn et al. (2002) have pointed out that the problem of a decline in employment rates has not been actively targeting older people for retrenchments, but the ensuing lower rate of re-employment of mature aged workers. *Australian Labour Market Statistics* (ABS cat. no. 6105.0), October 2004, notes the unemployment rate for these older people is relatively low, but highlights "once unemployed, they tend to remain unemployed longer than their younger counterparts":

> "More than two-fifths (43%) of unemployed people aged 55-64 years had been unemployed for 12 months or longer, compared with just under one-third (33%) of 45-54 year olds and 23% of 25-44 year olds. Unemployed men were more likely to be in long-term unemployment than unemployed women. In September 2003, 45% of unemployed men aged 45-64 years had been unemployed for 12 months or longer compared with 25% of women. Long term unemployment may make finding employment

> more difficult because of a loss of relevant skills and employers' perceptions of their 'employability'. This may lead to the unemployed becoming discouraged and choosing to leave the labour force altogether rather than remain unemployed."

Our interest is in one particularly category: the middle-aged and pre-retired older, who by rights should be the most capable of maximising their opportunities for human development. This group — the discouraged more mature-aged men, usually unemployed or on disability pensions — is the one addressed by the Men's Access course (Challenger TAFE, Fremantle, Western Australia), in a course that goes up to 20 weeks, three days a week. Within a wealthy nation, they may not be the poorest of the poor (that unfortunate distinction probably belongs to our first nations people, and older women in certain demographics), but they are disengaged at the prime of their First World life, usually with a great deal of life experience — a group of men being wasted. This is the variegation of poverty, significant not only for First World people, but also those undergoing structural changes within Third World countries. Even though the problem is relatively insignificant compared with, say, the scale of devastation of HIV on African communities, these Australian First World men's malaise, and any solution to it, may point the way to dealing with similar fallout in developing countries, as new wealth changes social relationships, and sometimes leaves once well-endowed people behind. Here as elsewhere there is what Jacque Delors has called "The vital need to combat under-achievement." There is also the possibility that by solving the problems caused by affluence, while we simultaneously solve the problems caused by poverty, we begin to acknowledge the nexus existing between each.

Meet the men

For most of the life of the Men's Access course at Challenger TAFE (from 2000 on, and even earlier in 1996 when a similar course was mooted), the men have come from a few different places. They are men who have been thrown out of work by the contraction of the old economy, their jobs being lost from the local market to globalisation; or they have lost out in the cyclic waning in recession-sensitive industries such as resources or construction; or they have been forced to leave work because of the ill effects on their health — physical and mental — of their work. For some, addictions or crippling life circumstances have been major contributors to the demise of their working lives. Mental health, loneliness and drug-dependency issues are major problems in first world economies, even if it is hidden behind the welfare net.

> "Meet Rex. He's done a lot of heavy machinery work up north, but in his late fifties his networks have diminished, and his health has given away for all the usual reasons. He's been unemployed for too long, and feels something has to change. Rex comes to class with an abrasive style, but soon discovers he is challenged by the Socratic method taught in class, and he's fascinated enough to borrow Plato's biography, and read it from cover to cover. Rex turns a computer on for the first time, and gets together enough money to buy his own desktop, assisted by another classmate. By the end of the course he's energised, and soon after Rex gets a call from a mate and he's back driving plant machinery and earning a good income while he manages his health as best as he can."

> "Sam grew up in another country and as a fifteen-year-old boy was conscripted, and forced to work as a sniper in a death squad. Beneath a usually affable exterior, these wounds have no doubt impacted

> on his ability to concentrate on study. His restlessness abates in class, and after successful completion of the course, he enrols in a certificate course as a carer."

> "Stu has been at sea all his life, in the merchant navy, but his first love has always been food. He's married late in life, and wants to settle shoreside and maybe do a hospitality and catering course to get a regular job closer to his new family. But he has no formal qualifications, and like many fellow students, has had bad experiences in the classroom."

> "Jack is just out from rehab. Like many others, in his past he has stumbled into extended encounters with alcohol or other drugs, and as a consequence has scrambled his own life and those near and dear to them. Yet newly sober, he lasts the semester, coming out the other side, chagrined, less mangled, ready to build a new life."

> "Occasionally there are middle managers who've been retrenched. Tobias was happy at home for the first few months, but ran out of jobs to do and gadgets to fix. He checks the papers, but they've been out of circulation too long. After a year, Tobias is at quite a loose end."

Whether blue or white collar workers, some might feel, as Dante described in *Divine Comedy*, that they have woken in the middle of their life 'wholly lost in a dark wood.'

They are men born and bred in Fremantle or beyond, as sons of Polish, Portuguese or Italian parents, or several-generation Australians, or men who've recently moved from Sydney, Melbourne or maybe Cairns, or have migrated from Tonga, Malta, Aotearoa/New Zealand or southern Africa. Sometimes half the class will be Indigenous, but more often Aboriginal men will number no more than one or two.

> "Laurence has travelled to get away from family issues 'over east'; he sits quietly in class, saying little, but his written work shows great promise. His shy smile at the end of the class is a sign that strides are being taken. He enrols in a human services subject."

Outcomes for men who finish the course are very positive. Many are now bright for learning or positive life experiences now that the hurt of poor school experiences and negative self-talk has been dusted off. They enjoy the stimulation of using their minds and being able to talk so openly with other men like, and so unlike, themselves.

A few manage to gain direct mature age entry into university. "I never thought I'd be thinking of university this time last year!" says Spiro with pleasure, as he realises the goal is now attainable. In one or two cases, the study skills they've learned in the course, combined with the bridging facilities offered as an introduction at the tertiary institution, catapult them from having no school qualifications at all to being a first-year university student, all in the space of six months. But this is the exception; most students are not heading off to academia. They want better work options, a living wage instead of government Centrelink payments, (or often more significantly, relief from the demands of Centrelink on their daily lives) and the sense that they are heading somewhere.

Many of these men are not winners in the new economy. Most have fished, mined, sailed, operated plant machinery, painted duco, x-rayed, sheet-metalled, dug, sold used cars, driven tractors, or gone stale at home, unable to find work, getting to know Springer, Oprah and Judge Judy. Very few have ever switched on a computer, but for those who are computer literate it is predominantly because they are conversant with downloadable games.

In developing a men's course, it must not be supposed that the men who do participate will conform with or automatically support many common aspirations of success in a 'man's world.' If anything, they have experienced how unsatisfying, how marginalising, how insufficient, the customary aspects of masculinity and masculine workplaces (and often the emasculations of unemployment) can be, even if they would enjoy having a wage and interesting work to do.

To finish, here is the story of one student who was thought would never start, let alone succeed.

> "Jeremy wants to do the course, but at the introductory talk he hides at the back, well away from the discussion. He has arrived late in his first classes, sits at a distance, and fails to join the conversations and group discussion. His eyes avert direct contact, and even with very gentle encouragement the words do not come. His arms cradle his face.
>
> At such times a teacher might wonder if anything is possible to transform a man in such a situation. Yet after only a few weeks Jeremy warms to the course, other people, and life generally. Jeremy's wit and intelligence start to shine. By the end of the twenty weeks, studying and interacting with other men, Jeremy graduates, enrols in a certificate course in human services, and embarks on his own challenge to walk a challenging trail. Every kilometre, for 900 kilometres, he meets new people and greets them openly. He is his own man. There are still issues to encounter and deal with, but there is strength and renewal in his stride. When he finishes his human services course, he will be giving back to the community."

Often these men have been in the doldrums, and now are ready to strike out in a new direction. How can educational institutions and the wider community best assist? What is realistically possible for all parties? Mightn't much depend on the structural dynamics of poverty, as much as their own will to succeed?

Poverty is a relationship

Let's not see poverty as just a place or position. Of course poverty can be readily locatable in the rented cardboard shanty-towns of Nairobi, on the smoky mountains of rubbish dumps in Manila, in the endless waiting in refugee camps around the world, or in the harsh conditions of much rural life around the world, and sometimes without too much effort in the inner cities and rural areas of first world countries. But poverty isn't just a place; it's a relationship and it's a context. With a net flow of wealth from the Third World to the First World, poverty doesn't just happen. Poverty is both financially and ultimately socially organised. Poverty is a relationship that is created and maintained by participating parties, in complex ways. The income inequality implicit in poverty is both a manifestation and a motivation, which easily estranges the relationship between

the poor and wealthy; an estrangement that too often disconnects people, corporations and nations from their human responsibilities and obligations. Moreover, the context and the actuality of poverty is often made more invisible through social isolation, or social *isolating*, which aids, abets and disguises the inequality.

In Australia, unemployment, living in a sole-parent family and disability are key factors associated with poverty. The bulk of the population has an uneasy relationship with such people, and many national myths exist which keep the unemployed, sole-parents and people with disabilities estranged from the community, either conjuring up reasons to blame them, or keeping them tucked away from sight. People in these groups feel this estrangement, and may carry it as a burden, additional to the problem of impoverishment itself.

How to engage people in these groups? Engaging such people involves not only the recruitment of them while they are in their state of poverty, but also while they are in their *relationship* of poverty, in their 'disconnected relationship' with the more wealthy, and the structures of wealth and poverty creation.

Course approach and rationale

The course offers a basic 'back on track' skills set. There is a course in basic maths. There is an introduction to communications, which includes functional grammar (process, participant and circumstance) and genre (how all texts can be broken down into five instantly recognisable structures, which carry a particular purpose). In addition, recognising the primacy of technology in Australian society, the men are taught introductory computing. (Most men have never turned on a computer in their lives.) They are also offered classes in career directions, and life directions. Career Directions focuses on current economic circumstances and coaches individual motivations; life directions (personal development and community participation) broadens the question to consider the nine basic needs each of us needs to satisfy to stand outside of poverty (Manfred Max-Neef). Through storytelling, the Life Directions course helps glean our own inner purpose and the means to achieve it.

This approach to learning, to know self and change, is consistent with the direction being encouraged by UNESCO. Former European Commission President Jacque Delors in his *Learning: the Treasure Within*, (1996 report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty First Century) identified four pillars in education:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live together
- Learning to be.

Delors maintained that "formal education has traditionally focused mainly, if not exclusively, on learning to know and to a lesser extent on learning to do." The other two pillars are "to a large extent left to chance." Equal attention is required for all four aspects, so that "education is regarded as a total experience throughout life, dealing with both understanding and application and focusing on both the individual and the individual's place in society" (Delors 1996, p. 86). In reinforcing the Delors approach at the 1998 UNESCO Conference on Education for the 21st Century in the Asia-Pacific Region, held in Melbourne, the Australian

Education Minister David Kemp upheld that “to build the kind of society we want, we need to shape a flexible, innovative system which actively encourages lifelong learning with a global dimension.”

The Men’s Access course attempts to extend the traditional boundaries. Lecturers endeavour to ‘walk their talk’ so that the old school room is deconstructed and remade into a more egalitarian learning space. The curriculum combines basic skills in maths, computing and functional literacy, but also stretches participants with concepts of choice in life and career; by developing the Max-Neef matrix, students go beyond their experience of ‘learning to know and knowing to do.’

Although it has been successful in many ways, there are still improvements to make. In reviewing Australian educational strategies, Louise Watson (2005) noted that:

> “adult learning for people with little formal education appears to be most effective when it is delivered outside of traditional educational institutions — in workplaces and within the community. People with low levels of formal education tend to resist any “formal” learning that reminds them of school.”

Watson’s alert is important. The staff of the Men’s Access course are investigating taking part of the course delivery off-campus, in order to give the men a variety of stimulating learning opportunities in semi-work situations, build civil society partnerships, and to foster the notion that learning is ongoing and supra-institutional.

There is also the employment context to consider. In February 2005 the Australian Government launched *Skilling Australia: New directions for vocational education and training*, which responds to the relatively new phenomenon of skills shortages in occupations ranging from plumbing and electrical, to hairdressing and commercial cookery. For men in the course, these more traditional occupations may be more attainable for most participants than jobs arising from the skills shortages in ‘new economy’ occupations such as IT or advanced medical. We simultaneously need to raise participants’ expectations of what is possible without putting unrealistic demands on them.

Perhaps foreseeing the contemporary skill shortages of 2005, Kerr et al. (2002) argue that there is a frequent mismatch between the skills of older workers and the demands of the contemporary labour market. They argue that a rigid focus on tangible outcomes in policies simply disadvantage mature age jobseekers. In particular they identified a tyranny:

> “perverse incentive structure of current funding arrangements, under which payment is contingent on tangible employment outcomes. Less tangible incremental steps and interim outcomes are not rewarded. This approach is at variance with the intensive and integrated approach to employment assistance, combining counselling, personal support and employment services…” (p. 89).

Kerr et al. (2002) say the “change to outcome-based funding of employment services contracts and increasing precariousness in the labour market both increase the need for articulated pathways to employment for mature age unemployed people” (p. 93).

Such dynamics make it difficult to recruit some men. This is outside the power of the Men's Access course to change. The existence of the course and its success for many suggests another path is justified and worthwhile.

Engaging those in a poverty relationship

The problem is the way we tend to define poverty by income. It's understandable, because we can easily measure US dollars. And of course, money does matter. We want to get people off welfare into jobs because that's an income gain for welfare recipients and an income saving to governments. But the reductionism of limiting the definition of poverty to dollars is part of the problem of poverty itself. It reduces the complexity of human interaction to its dependence on dollars. That reductionism and obfuscation can make us overlook what makes and might unmake that poverty.

Manfred Max-Neef is a Chilean economist who, with the CEPAUR (Centre for Development Alternatives) he helped found, has pursued an "economics as if people mattered," for which he was awarded The Right Livelihood Award in 1983. In the 1987 article 'Human-scale development' Max-Neef outlined a process by which communities can consider their 'wealth' and 'poverties' according to a fundamental matrix of needs that are satisfied. This is not like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but a matrix. Fundamental human needs must all be satisfied to escape the condition of poverty. These needs are classifiable and limited in number, perhaps only nine, ten at the most. The means for satisfying a need may be highly variable, but the need itself may be the same everywhere, existing as a constant across cultures, places and historical epoch, and all these needs are necessary for a satisfying life. A need that is not satisfied is an indicator of poverty.

Max-Neef's is a systems approach that allows individuals and communities to evaluate responses to poverty alleviation across all their human needs, not merely focussing on one factor such as income, but rather properly allowing for the complexity of human experience. This matrix of basic or fundamental needs also challenges self-defeating initiatives for human development, which may carry destroyers, pseudo-satisfiers, inhibitors, or one-hit wonders (which satisfy one need while steadfastly ignoring others). Importantly, Max-Neef's method foregrounds people's personal participation by encouraging action research into these matters at a community level.

This matrix can be readily applied within an education framework to help interrogate outcomes. Increasingly under pressure to show its productivity, technical and further education institutions customarily demonstrate competence by establishing graduates proceed to further study or employment. As it happens, the Men's Access course has a high success rate in that regard. But more importantly, the matrix of basic human needs enables a faculty committed to its students to consider the broader definitions of wealth enhancement. How well-sheltered and fed are people? How secure do students feel they are, physically and in terms of broad health and mental health coverage? Do they consider they have enough affection and social interaction in their lives? Welfare recipients and students are impacted upon by policy decisions by the government, but do they understand how policies arise and might be influenced or even challenged? What are the ways to participate in the community? The baseline is quite low. For example, one class was set the task of joining the local library if they weren't already members. Most weren't. One man went along and joined, admitting that hitherto he had felt that other people's judgements of his culture precluded him from

belonging to such a place. He took to the library with great enthusiasm; it was more than books that had been liberated. Many unemployed find themselves time-rich, but how well do they actually re-create themselves, and are they able to enjoy leisure? What about their need for identity, meaning and transcendence? Encouraged by first world pressures to be exclusive consumers, can they find creativity and productivity to satisfy themselves? How free do they think they are? And of course, behind each of these questions, if participants are in a self-identified state of poverty with a particular need, how might they find greater wealth in that particular need? Can this satisfier also feed other needs?

As part of the project Australians Working Together (2004–05), funded by the Australian Government through the Western Australian Department of Education and Training, previous Men's Access course participants were surveyed. The survey reveals that the great preponderance of students felt that they shifted along all nine basic needs, from a position for many of 'not enough' to 'enough' or more. This, in addition to the overwhelmingly positive work and educational outcomes, suggests that an intervention such as a twenty-week, three-day-a-week course can improve the wellbeing and wealth, in the wider sense of the word, of part of a population that has been left, and feels left, behind.

While it is tempting to focus on the success stories, not everyone might be ready to move to the next stage of employment or training. The same method using Max-Neef's nine basic human needs can be directly applied to that subset of marginalised people who, given the parameters of the present economy and their own skill set, are highly unlikely in the short term to access meaningful jobs or be able to extend themselves beyond basic courses. These nine basic human needs can map an individual's progress within a a matrix that can more comprehensively measure positive changes to life circumstances, compared with the quantum jumps of further education or paid employment.

The matrix also provides a means for participants to interrogate their own context rather than solely focus on and strengthen their skills or experience deficits. All the students comment unfavourably about their early schooling experience, and some have the physical scars from teachers to back up their distasteful experiences. The confidence scars run even deeper. What are the gaps in mental health programs? Why has schooling produced such little understanding? Where is the strength in their community life, and where and why is it weaker? What do the students want to achieve in the second half of their lives, so that their biographies will satisfy their own ambitions for meaning and significance? What apparent satisfiers have in the past led them into overconsumption, misconsumption or numbness, undermining their wealth in their basic human needs? To what extent are these apparent satisfiers encouraged by social mores as 'normal' to their needs?

These questions can be applied across the course curriculum, giving an integrating function. Consider the basic human need for recreation. For example, in computing we can test through the experience of our own lives whether computers, e-mail and the Internet genuinely refresh us or diminish us. We do not take for granted the new technologies are a complete blessing. In maths we can wonder whether in our culture maths is a place for recreation or leisure — and if not, why not, and how could it be? In communications, we can study texts on different recreational activities. In life directions we can ponder why, with so much time on unemployed hands, there is so little genuine leisure and recreation. In career directions, we can consider

how some work would satisfy needs such as the means to subsist and the excitement of participation, but in other ways might reduce our satisfaction of these same needs too — long hours keeping us away from our home or excluding us from participation in our families, or keep us away from the wider community and its concerns. Given the choice of two jobs which differ in their ability to satisfy our fundamental needs, participants can consider how or why they might make a particular choice. Students are being offered a 'forensic tool' to examine current circumstances and guide their future choices.

The strength of the nine fundamental human needs is that it addresses the relationship of poverty. It is a tool for self-understanding and self- and community-actualisation. Since it helps uncover the deficit in basic human needs, it can provide some useful focus for future action.

Barriers to progress

Max-Neef's matrix maps out areas of need, to test for poverty and wealth, stepping out of the well-worn paradigm of how poverty is commonly understood. Despite its attractions, applying this action research method is not, in the Australian context, all 'beer and skittles' (pleasurable). It requires each person to actualise their personal responsibility, to find their individual agency. Many of the men might be familiar with or self-comforted by the adage of 'poor but happy' but a winning lottery ticket still feels like the obvious passport they need for a better life. The polarity of rich and poor continues to be readily denoted in income terms by most of us. This experience should not be lightly shrugged off. The welfare net is entangling for many, and a job that earns money gives choices beyond the withered welfare that one has immediately on offer. The tool's importance is that it offers a wider interpretation of solutions for life fulfillment.

Are there cultural limitations? One exciting aspect of Max-Neef's matrix is its potential for organising power. It is an action research template. In Chile, it has been used with success with *indios* in their own setting: a culture already familiar with collective discussion and action. There may be similar uses within Indigenous Australia. In the context of a strongly individualised (if not strongly individuated) wider society, where men are especially and strongly infused with the notion of self-reliance, the call to engagement in a community tends to have only strongly restriciting, individualised, self-reliant responses. Thus the use of this powerful pedagogical tool needs to acknowledge what may be a very first world requirement — to pass through the threshold of individuation, for each to find their own 'place in the sun'. Yet it is important not to rush to culturally specific conclusions. In *Learning as a Treasure,* Zhou Nanzhao gives "an Asian perspective", which is the possibility that the "Neglect of individuality" has been an impediment to development:

> "While the collective/societal interests were overemphasized to the extreme, the individual was reduced to merely an instrument. At the same time, the rights of the individual were not made compatible with the duties."

Storytelling

Telling a story involves a storyteller and the story listener. It is necessarily relational. Stories often arise from a community experience and will find a unique home in an individual's own context. The orality of storytelling is also useful in a pre-literate group where there may be little confidence in working with the written word. Through retelling they grow more confident in narrative development.

Both the career and life directions courses incorporate story. In careers, the stories are very much the experiences of men in the class, many who have sought work for decades and often succeeded, and also often been beaten back. This collective learning, and the wisdom that arises from it, is a key to the program's success. The congruency of the lecturers' own life experiences is also central — they will have walked the talk.

In life directions, a wider cultural approach is explored. Accepting that we live in a European-colonised country, in an economy that is infused with European worldview, students are asked to consider the lost wisdom within this European culture that can address some of the excesses and losses endemic to our current time. For Indigenous students, it is also an opportunity to look behind the Big Macs and shiny cars of what's now regarded as 'Western culture' to see that this Western culture has cannibalised its own civilisation just as much as it has rapaciously destroyed others. The stories of this 'European Dreaming', if it can be called that, are worth investigating because they might hold the individual and collective correctives to what is proving to be very destructive in their own lives and in the wider community.

In studying personal development and community participation, for example, Ancient Greece is revisited, for stories about responsibility. Orestes, who owns the wrong deed, thus frees himself from madness to give us a demanding picture of individual and democratic emancipation. The myth incites much discussion. Socrates meanwhile gives us a method of reason to work in partnership with this responsibility. Similarly Celtic tales provide understanding the importance of containment and discovering one's inner purpose. The beauty of these stories is that they are not therapeutic, in the sense that emerged for psychology in the twentieth century within the psychoanalytic tradition. The myths contain their own self-referent wisdom, complete in themselves, the narrative and characters containing the 'whole story' for that situation. Students can consider their own situation one step removed, and in so doing, strengthen the part of themselves that observes themselves. Pedagogically, these stories are invariably engaging — we are a storytelling-starved nation — and these stories are connective, reaching down through dozens of generations to say: "Yes, we know something of what it is to be you, and what you are faced with. Believe us, there is a way forward to freedom, and there is hope."

One last thought

As a worker with individuals and communities, I believe that you have to start where you are, not where you would like to be, which might be in a fully engaged community. The course at Challenger TAFE is delivered in a standard setting for First World education: fluorescent lit rooms with individual tables, a whiteboard and a pin board at the back. It is, to this writer, a soulless place. In a sense it is a picture of the problem of what I have been calling the First World (not because it is prime, but because it has often created and benefited from, the economic structuring of the Third World). This soullessness is material wealth. Many Third World training facilities lack all the elements I've described. Our material wealth also carries an emptiness, a surrendered space which doesn't particularly please the eye or bless anyone with a sense of belonging. This could describe many first cities of the world today. It is time to reclaim this surrendered space. In future courses, it is open to us as lecturers to make our training room much more of a testament to our men's course and our collective aspirations. But that is the pleasure of teaching: the chance to see some new learning opportunity uncovered.

Suggestions for engaging

Through the Men's Access course, men similar to those you've met here might find a track to the new economy, centred in the information and services revolution, or meet the newly emerging skills shortages in some more traditional trades, or go on to further learning. These possibilities are there and available, but the gap can sometimes be too wide. This course is an occasion for men and lecturers to work together to be inspired about possibilities and work out some of the practicalities. The problem of underachievement now becomes transformed into a problem of choices to be made.

To travel this terrain, I am suggesting that for anyone who longs to engage differently within strongly individualised cultures, or subcultures, needs to take two strategies. The first is an action research tool that enables people to re-examine themselves within context. A plan for action can naturally arise logically out of what is being examined and, depending on cultural mores, the possibility for mutual help can also arise. This action research tool can integrate the various curriculum areas, and give a powerful tool for self-awareness and self-motivation to action. But in a strongly individualised (if not individuated) culture, there is still the need to address the problem of meeting personal individuation; without which the impulse to work together and engage with community has a low value. One way is to engage through storytelling — calling up the wisdom of the inherited culture whose values dominate the economy and life of the community, to locate the missing truths left behind in our current circumstances. In Australia, that might be the European Dreaming; in Burkino Faso it will be another Dreaming altogether. As we listen to those who came before us, we are taken back within their wisdom, comforted, and inspired. We return to a world made wider, now more guided in our effort.

> "Ricardo is on the mobile phone; he has just finished his first ever exam, in his first semester of university. He can't believe he's come so far in such a short time. He has friends; he is enjoying studying philosophy. From our course, this was just one student's choice, his particular journey, from where we began together. A few days before, I met Andrew, a talented but frustrated man in his fifties who is now doing his senior high school certificate. He tells me how he doesn't let depression stop him in the way it used to. At the shops, I bump into Falzon who, soon after finishing with us, found rewarding work as a hospital carer. He's loving it. "It's right up my alley," he laughs."

The right path into the sun has to be chosen by each individual, but when it's found it opens up greater self-respect, a freeing of vigour and a strength of purpose, often accompanied by a deeper engagement in the community. The world needs more of this.

If poverty is a relationship, there are those other parties with whom we need to engage, both in the discussion of pedagogy and in the resourcing of what must be done. Too often, those parties stand in the shadow.

It is their turn to stand in the sun. It is time for our relationship to be understood. It is time for our relationship to be mended.

Further conversation

If you are interested in discussing this paper, or obtaining a version of the survey materials used in the Men's Access course, please contact the author via imaginationworks@iinet.net.au.

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Biography

Adrian Glamorgan is a participative researcher for the Australians Working Together project reviewing the pioneering 'Back on Track' Men's Access Course. Adrian has worked in overseas development for reconciliation with Aboriginal people is an adult educator and a freelance writer. In 2002 he was shortlisted for a United Nations Association of Australia Media Peace Prize.

Adrian Glamorgan, imaginationworks@iinet.net.au, PO Box 236, South Fremantle, Western Australia, 6162