Chapter 10

Learning Physical and Digital Conviviality through Practice Stories

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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‘YARNING’ IN PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL SPACES AND THE ACCBC

In my early work as community worker and religious minister in the Outback, I became aware of the importance of ‘yarning’ as an indirect way in which people who were often physically isolated for long times, connected through stories of common experiences, ideas and judgments which were often founded on unspoken values and assumptions about life. I became aware as well that this yarning in pubs and around campfires and kitchen tables was a strong source of informal learning. People with mastery of song and story in rural Australia – entertainers like Slim Dusty, Archie Roach and Ted Egan - had huge influence on Outback people of all races and attitudes. I think at this period rural and outback women yarnd less publically and commercially but no less enthusiastically. I realised that this practice needed closer examination: What was good enough for these convivial people might be good enough for us as well.

In later years I found another source of isolation for the younger generation many of whom occupy a digital world which has varying degrees of leverage over them, in which they are offered all kinds of enrichments. Many of these are direct connection with friends and relatives. Others are more virtual, more innovative and exciting and in many cases considerably less demanding than the ongoing interactions of the real world.

I have been with a group who have been interested to generate informal learning in search of a more convivial and humane civilisation to balance the stories particularly from the commercial media on TV and other mobile devices where a desirable life seems often to consist of consuming, being beautiful, winning, being rich and being famous. Paul Armstrong (2004:p1) citing Bassey (2002) referred to this competitive, acquisitive culture or discourse as ‘wealthist’ - largely concerned with wealth acquisition, consumption and display - whereas he was thinking and judging within a ‘convivial’ discourse. We wanted to share stories of actions of a more kindly and creative way of living in the world in pursuit of a convivial culture.

Actions toward this democratic and celebratory culture were to be reported at our meetings through ‘practice stories’. We sought to encourage attentive listening (cf. Palmer 2004: p.115) and avoid too early engagement in debate by inviting not statements of fact which require evidence but stories of life action which require experience, reflection and artistry. Most of us did not directly inhabit the digital world like our children and grandchildren but noticed a drying up of convivial exchanges between generations when the younger were reluctant to leave their digital world to converse and exchange ideas and stories even at family meals.

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

This paper has three parts. The first looks at the learning challenges of creating a convivial civilisation in Australia. The second looks at the nature of human knowing and learning with particular interest in the imagination, and how different kind of knowing and learning can be evoked and shaped for human