

TRANSFORMATION: FROM DESPAIR TO OPTIMISM

Helen Sheil

*Director, Centre for Rural Communities Inc.,
Monash University, Gippsland Campus,
Churchill, Vic. 3842, Australia.*

Tel: + 61 (03) 5122-6755

Fax: + 61 (03) 5122 6978

Email: helen.sheil@education.monash.edu.au

Just as the key to species survival in the natural world is its ability to adapt to local habitats, so the key to human survival will probably be the local community. (Suzuki, 1997, p. 8)

INTRODUCTION

Recent events in Victoria highlight the importance of politicians paying attention to the rural voice and the issue of rural well being. The substance of this paper demonstrates the capacity of rural communities to contribute a missing link in the chain of decision making in regard to the future well being of regional Australia. To achieve such a change requires new relationships with policy makers and planners in the creation of partnerships with community organisations. If community 'is re-established as the location of significant human experience and the meeting of human need' (Ife 1995, p.131) then the fundamental change needed to work with the diversity of communities throughout rural Australia can begin.

THE CENTRE FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES INC.

Established in 1995, The Centre for Rural Communities Inc. is an alliance of educational interests in Gippsland (Adult Community and Further Education, Tertiary and Further Education and Universities) with the common motivation of working towards the development of rural communities that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Within these organisations are key resources, skills and knowledge, which are of critical importance in responding to rapid change impacting on regional communities. The challenge is to develop ways of working that provide access within rural communities.

THE GIPPSLAND EXPERIENCE

Work within the Centre for Rural Communities paid attention to programs that stood out for their capacity to work in partnership with Gippsland people and

institutions that impacted on their lives. The documentation of this research, case-studies and current evaluation of projects, resulted in the development of a theoretical framework, and a methodology of practical strategies for implementation. The work provides an on-going process for meeting the challenges faced by regional Australia not by government alone but in partnership with educational resources, community groups and private industry.

The structure and strategies to achieve this change have been learned from practical experience within Gippsland and rural Victoria (Clarke, 1984, Brophy, 1985, 1986, Franklin *et al.* (eds) 1994, Bailey *et al.* 1996), informed by the theoretical work of transformational learning within education (Freire 1972, 1994, Postman 1996, McTaggart & Kemmis, 1996, Sher & Sher, 1994), and guided by community development theory from within Australia (Ife, 1993, Kenny, 1994). From this work educational strategies were implemented that have been successful in enabling Gippsland communities, transform from anger, frustration and despair to new found confidence, optimism and action. The outcomes are key building blocks for the development of healthy and resourceful communities able to work collaboratively for their future well being.

The solution-focused process begins within communities. People develop the skills, language and confidence to establish goals for the future of their communities and lifestyle. The status of communities shifts from that of fragmented and reactive responses, to well planned agendas originating from co-operative decision making. A critical difference in managing change. The result is the emergence of a uniquely Australian model of rural development capable of accommo-dating our sparse populations and vast landscapes in the provision of services and infrastructure.

THE MODEL: 'COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION FOR TRANSFORMATION'

The model 'Collaborative Education for Transformation' (Figure 1) is guided by the community development goals of social justice and ecological sustainability providing a theoretical framework to extend strategies from working with rural women, into work with rural communities.

IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION: 'BUILDING RURAL FUTURES THROUGH CO- OPERATION'

Informed by the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (1993) a format providing access

Collaborative Education for Transformation

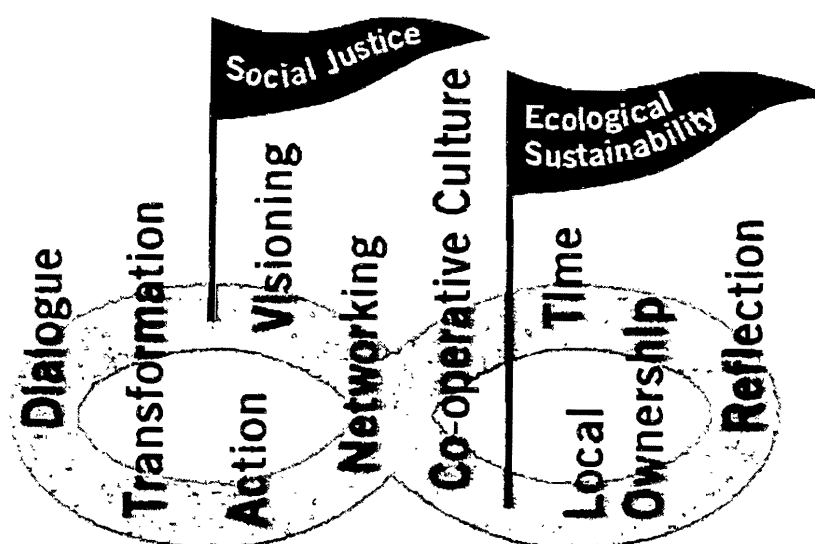


Figure 1

The methodology names nine common strategies and processes for implementation.

- Dialogue Ask and listen; Be a partner;
Develop language; Respect differences;
Be vulnerable and humble.
- Time Change takes time; Trust takes time;
Personal and Community development takes time.
- Visioning Safe environment; Share dreams.
- Local ownership Support don't direct;
Nurture; Develop skills/knowledge.
- Networking Gatherings; Newsletters/chat lines;
Radio; Invitations/visits.
- Co-operative culture Open and generous; Mutual development;
Working together; Group participation.
- Action Implementing change; Learning skills;
Being responsible; Celebrating the milestones.
- Transformation New confidence and involvement;
New stories; New language.
- Reflection Constructively evaluate; Grow stronger;
Include others; Use process to educate.

within rural communities became apparent.

Philanthropic Trusts provided the opportunity to implement this work with rural communities in 1997 when they funded the production of a Study Circle Kit, 'Building Rural Futures through Co-operation'. The kit incorporates each of the nine strategies of transformative learning within a context of rural/regional communities responding creatively to

withdrawal of services. The potential of co-operative ventures in health, agriculture, agro-forestry, power and finance are major themes featuring stories of Koorie managed education in Gippsland and community newspapers (Sheil, 1997).

THE STUDY CIRCLE KIT

The Study Circle Kit provided a forum for rural people concerned about the future of their community to come together, to learn the skills of working together, of respecting differences, of decision making, of sharing dreams and plans for the future, and of the potential for change if people work and plan together. The kit utilises the strengths of personalising information through narrative, each section includes inspirational and educational stories contributed by people with experience of a challenging situation, providing links and connections with resource people at all levels. Evaluation of this work demonstrates the effectiveness of this transferable model and the capacity for change originating at the local level.

THE NOWA NOWA EXPERIENCE OF THE STUDY CIRCLE KIT

In 1998 Nowa Nowa in East Gippsland was a classic case of a community in terminal decline (Sorensen and Epps, 1993). With a population of 170 people, people and services were leaving in a downward spiral. For example the Department of Natural Resource staff, Education support services, Community Health programs, and Local Government amalgamation all led to departures from the area. Timber, formerly the main industry, no longer employed people from within the town (Manley, unpublished).

The community faced challenges of poverty with one of the lowest average incomes in the State. The nearby Koorie community had few employment options with the resulting social issues compounded by environmental degradation caused by two years of drought, followed by massive flooding. There was a strong sense of despair. There were high levels of frustration, anger and despair often directed at Government employees, and between community members.

Local businesses were stagnant and despondent, the pub was shut, and unemployment very high. People were more withdrawn into their own world. With amalgamation of shires, no local representation, and it was felt that the Shire was not interested in Nowa Nowa.

(Study Group Member)

These were the circumstances facing the community in August 1998 when the local community health nurse became aware of the Study Circle Kit and canvassed local people for interest. The Study Circle began immediately. The process changed people's

relationship to each other, their view of their community and the potential they, as a group had to influence plans and opportunities for a healthy future for Nowa Nowa and District.

To demonstrate how this came about let me share changes that occurred during the process of using the Study Circle Kit and the significance of the nine steps in collaborative learning.

THE NINE STEPS IN COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Dialogue

We have learnt to work together and accept each other's views.

(Study Group Member)

People from different professional and community interests came together tentatively, each with their own hopes for the future, wanting to ensure that their ideas were included, not knowing each other, but sharing a concern for the future of the community and their place within it.

Study circles operate on the principle that each person brings their life experience to the group, and the ground rules require people to listen and respect the experience that has led to a particular point of view. Each person took a turn at facilitating and became aware of what this involved. Initially there was frustration that the group did not just get on and do something. Early minutes record bursts of anger, frustration and some people leaving the group.

Group members later shared examples of how relationships within the group strengthened, friendships and tolerance developed, resulting in an openness and honesty. From this base people could speak of their hopes and fears.

Networking

Stories useful. Putting in front of you what others have achieved. We can do it.

(Study Group Member)

Print networking was incorporated into the Study Circle Kit, plus opportunity for face-to-face contacts with other rural communities. A statewide 'Networking Extravaganza' focused attention on the potential of co-operative ventures. Networking facilitated contact between rural people, as well as extending knowledge in particular interest areas.

Members of the group contributed their experiences in regional forums on the future of rural communities.

and a video link-up to regional universities across Australia featuring good news stories originating from planning at the local level. These public events provided opportunities for reflection and celebration by those within the study group, adding to the inspirational stories of productive work within rural communities.

Time

Takes time. At first general impatience, enthusiastic to get ideas out, had a good laugh. Now prepared to sit back.
(Study Group Member)

The Nowa Nowa group met weekly for 10 weeks using the Study Circle Kit. Since this time (Dec 98) the group has continued to meet weekly, applying the skills and principles learnt in the process. They enjoy the gatherings and are excited by the ability of a group to achieve significant outcomes.

Visioning

Beauty of living in small community. We can define the future – unbelievable.
(Study Group Member)

A session on dreams, or plans for the future is incorporated into the kit. While at first some dreams were presented tentatively, members of the group report being amazed at the support for personal dreams to become reality. Nothing was discarded from the list. While the group elected to begin with smaller projects of benefit to the whole community, other dreams have been incorporated into long-term plans and private ventures involving study group members.

Local Ownership

Have own input to decisions.
(Study Group Member)

Nothing has been imposed on the group. Agreement has been reached on achieving visible outcomes for the whole community as starting points. Motivation and commitment comes from within the group.

Within the first year the group initiated:

- Work on a Sculpture Trail along the river, involving local TAFE Resource Management students.
- Landscaping of roadside involving discussions with local government.
- Plans for design and funding construction of environmentally friendly public toilets.

- Signage in the forest negotiated with Department of Natural Resources and Parks Victoria, resulting in further consultations with the town to develop a 'strategic recreation and tourism plan'.
- Involvement with Vic. Roads on re-positioning of Highway. Submissions prepared detailing improvements to the town with all options.
- Federal funding from the Rural Communities Program has been obtained to develop future plans.

Townpeople are understanding how to work with authorities.
(Study Group Member)

In partnership with the:

- Recreation Reserve the group has supported submissions for the construction of a new boat jetty funded by State Government Department of Ports and Harbors.
- Members have initiated and supported private co-operative ventures within the town.

Co-operative Culture

In the year since we started the group, slow changes have been made within the town. I feel personally more a part of the community as I socially feel comfortable with the group. I feel that politically I have made development as we make decisions as a group for the benefit of the town. We are planning projects involving the environment and culture.
(Study Group Member)

Members of the group discussed the importance of caring for each other in the development of projects and the need for social events to enjoy each other's company. Concrete evidence in the benefits of working together are expressed in new private ventures as well as the community projects. Local businesses (pub and stores) support each other and advertise accommodation and food together. The publican has breakfast over at the store and the storeowner loans his canoes to people staying at the pub. The local general store now has flags flying and improved counters.

Action

The jetty is going in. The pub has re-opened after being closed for 9 years. Three members of the group bought a block of land in town, cleaned it up and improved the landscape in Nowa Nowa.
(Study Group Member)

Cultural events are held in a new private venue linked with the East Gippsland Arts Network. The pub provides a new meeting and social venue. Community Development Group meetings have moved from the Community Health Centre to the pub, and the publican is an active member of the group.

The group is gaining credibility and other community members have approached them for support on local projects:

- Monitoring of water quality in the local river.
- Support for the Recreation Reserve Committee to become manager of the foreshore at Nowa Nowa enabling it to apply for funds for a jetty and clean up the waterways. This led to greater understanding of the Lakes System and regulations governing management.
- Involvement with Clean up Australia campaigns.
- Supporting discussions between parents and the bus company for transport for secondary college students.

Transformation

Since starting this project the Shire has taken a bigger interest in the upkeep of this town. People are more aware of the beauty of this district and there seems to be a more positive air.

(Study Group Member)

The local group has educated local and state government on ways they can work together. It is a win win situation with pride on all sides. The federal government provided assistance through the rural communities program and the Bushcare project officer is delighted to assist such an active and enthusiastic group.

(Study Group Member)

Between members of the group there is a spirit of generosity and optimism for the future that is very different from the isolated and despondent individuals that tentatively came together 12 months previously. Along with the internal transformation of understanding what is possible through working together, the growing skills and confidence have educated public and private sector organisations on ways of working in partnership with this community.

The group has merged with the Progress Association and incorporated as the Nowa Nowa Community Development Group. Local Government now willingly supports applications for funding. State Government departments are on first name terms with locals and work constructively on projects.

Reflection

Constantly comes to mind – reaching decisions. I can live with 100% of the people being 70% comfortable with each decision that was made.

(Study Group Member)

Working in this co-operative way has required a change of role for the professional people in the group. While challenging, the time sharing responsibility for decision making has created time for involvement in new ventures.

The group is conscious of the need to include the wider community. Public meetings have been held to discuss their work and welcome new involvement. Information is shared through a newsletter. There are now new members in the group and plans for an annual session, to both celebrate the work of the group and note areas for improvement, have been discussed. The cycle of involvement for new people can begin again.

TRANSFERABILITY

The story from Nowa Nowa of the potential of the strategies within the Study Circle Kit to result in transformation from despair to optimism is replicated in other Gippsland communities, such as Bruthen, Meerlieu and Sandy Point. Each group has undertaken projects to improve the social interaction in the community: local papers and celebrations feature along with partnerships with Landcare, environmental planning with local government and involvement of young people. People within the groups have a strong sense of belonging in the community, the responsibilities that are part of this, and they have the confidence to be involved.

OUTCOMES

Common Outcomes From These Groups Include:

Personal change

- Respect and trust of group members;
- Confident, skilled community members able to work together;
- Attitude is positive and constructive;
- Responsibility is first within community.

Community change

- An agreed upon long-term vision for their communities;
- Solutions are sought locally around their own agendas;
- Capacity to work in partnership with relevant authorities and organisations;

- Active partnerships with all levels of government.

Planning agendas

- Principal concerns are social, and environmental;
- From these principles there is a sound basis for sustainable development;
- Reference point for development is the community group;
- Involvement and opportunities for youth are priority.

The work generates social capital (Putman 1993, Cox 1995) in the process of building healthier communities, yet it moves beyond this, recognising the interdependent nature of political capital, economic capital, personal and spiritual capital, cultural capital and the environmental capital on which these depend. (Ife 1995, Henderson 1991, p.30). Communities struggle when the environmental capital on which their well-being depends is threatened. The communities of East Gippsland are stark evidence that those within communities cannot make good decisions about land management when there is no feed, but the few remaining trees, left for stock; when the water flow in the river has stopped; when the soil blows, or is washed away. Rural and regional communities have intimate knowledge of environmental concerns that must be included in decision making.

At the beginning of the project 'capital potential' within all these components was low, a year later there is evidence of increased capital potential in five of the six components. While capital is essentially a quantitative term, it is used here to provide a conceptual framework for consideration of the need for balanced development, in working towards healthy and vibrant communities.

THE NEXT STAGE – FROM PILOT TO REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

The transferable model 'Collaborative Education for Transformation' provides a way to humanise bureaucracies as locally initiated ventures work in partnership with public and private sector organisations. To consolidate this work of transformational learning there is an urgent need to move it past the 'pilot stage' to a visible and legitimate status. Investment aimed at regional implementation on a more systematic and resourced approach is required.

The Study Circle Kit has proved it can meet the requirements of flexible delivery, providing access within communities at minimal cost. A weakness of the work so far has been the lack of trained facilitators within regions, and the capacity to provide

face-to-face contact between community groups, relevant departments and organisations.

PRACTICAL STEPS OVER NEXT TWO YEARS

- Rewrite the Study Circle Kit incorporating changes from the current evaluation, ensuring transferability of the material;
- Develop a training manual for regionally located facilitators;
- Provide a training program educating on the key principles of transformational education;
- Implement a regional approach to raise awareness of the potential of this work;
- Regional infrastructure support to link and network community groups is of primary importance: newsletters, face-to-face gatherings and forums are important strategies in educating for change;
- Work in partnership with existing educational providers;
- Prepare material in partnership with rural/regional communities.

The process can be utilised with geographic and interest based communities. Involvement of key decision-makers within the regions would establish key links of importance to communities.

INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE

Potential for Implementation

Discussions with the Director of Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies (Gippsland), and indigenous community members indicate a number of benefits for indigenous communities from working with the model presented in this paper.

- The model has the goals of social justice and ecological sustainability as clear goals. Both critical issues within indigenous communities;
- The way of working to locate decision making within the community through the use of a Study Circle Kit is compatible with collective decision-making within communities and capable of complementing the work of the Regional Councils.
- Knowledge is located within the community and not imposed.
- Community values can be central to planning.
- Traditional culture can be promoted.
- Status and ownership of cultural knowledge remains the property of community.
- The capacity to celebrate environmental values is inherent.
- Decisions can be made for long-term programs.
- Locating decision making within the community is an essential step in reframing relationships with the

wider community, government departments and private industry.

- Professional development for public and private sector agencies in this way of working in partnership with local decision makers, would increase understanding of the importance of local knowledge in decision making.

Experience within Gippsland of all levels of education working with the local community to establish the Koorie Open Door Education school in Morwell is evidence of this process in action. The KODE School, managed by the local community, has proved to have excellent retention rates, and been of benefit to non-indigenous children as well as the Koorie community.

ACCREDITATION THE LONG-TERM GOAL

The long-term goal is for the accreditation of transformational learning across the spectrum of adult education, vocational education and graduate certificate courses with open entry to ensure professional development remains directed by community. The training and negotiation of these steps will take time to gain credibility and recognition.

Cross-sectorial qualifications based on local and community action would increase tertiary participation in rural localities. The barriers of fee structures, distance and academic culture would be overcome. Active partnerships, between rural communities and educational institutions have the capacity to reframe opportunities and lead to dynamic partnerships.

These steps are vital to ensure that this training does not remain outside mainstream funding and curriculums. The way forward requires more than 'one off' strategies to be learnt in weekend workshops, isolated, and fragmented with no access to the educational resources of libraries, infrastructure and inter-disciplinary knowledge. Linking training to accreditation would provide a valuable link to resources for regional Australians, providing pathways for community members, educators and policy makers, to learn of the challenges facing regional Australia. Post graduate research and development would become accessible and a resource for communities.

CHANGING ROLES

The role of government would be to develop structures which are inclusive of local knowledge and expertise. Excellent examples of structures to implement communication and involvement in

decision making from the local to central level exist through the experiences of Land Care (Chamala & Mortiss 1990) and Credit Care (1997). Both provide a means for local people to work together and achieve outcomes far greater than could be achieved in isolation. The Rural Transaction Centres, while in their infancy, operate on a similar principle of respecting and working with rural communities.

Regional policy across all departments could incorporate structures and strategies to establish partnerships with rural and regional communities. Partnerships requested from within informed communities, capable of working together, will tap the energy, motivation and knowledge at the local level. Communities would have a means to communicate issues emerging from this new way of working with increasing responsibility locally. Voluntary involvement requires recognition by government to ensure sustainability.

Resourcing of the second stage of implementation would create opportunities for greater understanding of the ways this work can be incorporated within departments.

Private sector organisations can be partners in sustainable development if they move from a commodity focus to that of the community. Communities require an economic base for the long-term and will work with private sector organisations that have sound environmental and social practices.

Community organisations can take on increasing responsibility for the provision and management of services at a local level if they have access to relevant training, support and expertise. Collaborative ventures between communities and private and public sector organisations are emerging within rural communities as ventures which return social and economic capital to communities. Recognition of this vital contribution is critical to sustain involvement.

Australia's rural/regional communities are diverse in their social, economic and environmental base, in their local cultures and spiritual persuasions, these are not things that can be planned for centrally in broad base policy. One size does not fit all. Rather, strategies that support the development of local decision making processes would both ease the burden on staff within bureaucracies to 'get it right' for all regional communities, and tap into the energy, knowledge and resources at a local level. Without this knowledge, good planning decisions for people or the environment within rural communities, will not be achieved. It is this base that the well being of Australia depends on for the long-term.

Change is created by people who need access to education to establish the skills, knowledge and confidence to participate actively in their communities well being. The strategies of collaborative education presented in this paper are achievable, and have the capacity to provide the key link between being merely a coping culture, and moving *towards* a thriving culture, (Salce, 1997, p. 4).

REFERENCES

Bailey, A., Barker, J., Brinkley, C., Brown, D., Butler, C., Grey, S., Penny, L., Sheil, H. and Webb, M. 1996, *More Than One Way, Hearing Rural Women's Voices*. Office of Rural Affairs, Horsham.

Brophy, H. 1985, *Rural Women's Program*. McMillan Campus of Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture, Sale Campus.

Brophy, H. 1986, *Annual Report, Rural Women's Program*. East Gippsland Community College of TAFE.

Chamala, S. and Mortiss, P. 1990, *Working Together for Landcare*. Australian Academic Press, Brisbane.

Clarke, V. 1984, *Potential of Rural Women in Gippsland: Educational Opportunities: Needs and Employment*. V.C.A.H. McMillan. Sale.

Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1993. *Reconciliation Study Circle Kit*. Australian Association of Adult and Community Education, Australian Government Printers, Canberra.

Cox, E. 1995, *A Truly Civil Society*. The Boyer Lectures. ABC Books, NSW.

Credit Care 1997. *Information Kit on Credit Care*, Sydney, NSW.

Franklin, M. A., Short, L. and Teather, E. (eds) 1994, *Country Women at the Crossroads*. University of New England Press, NSW.

Freire, P. 1972, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin, Hammondsworth.

Freire, P. 1994. *Pedagogy of Hope*. The Continuum Publishing Company, New York.

Henderson, H. 1991, *Paradigms in Progress: Life Beyond Economics*. Knowledge Systems Inc., Indianapolis.

Ife J. 1995, *Community Development: Creating Community Alternatives in Australia*. Thomas Nelson, Melbourne.

Kenny, S. 1994, *Developing Communities for the Future. Community Development in Australia*. Thomas Nelson, Melbourne.

McTaggart, R. and Kemmis, S. 1996, *The Action Research Reader*. Deakin University, Victoria.

Manley, J. (unpublished). *Community Development Study Circle*.

Postman, N. 1996, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. First Vintage Books Edition, New York.

Putman, R. 1993, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Tradition in Modern Italy*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Salce, M. 1997, *Business Plan for Australian Agriculture*. Newsletter of Foundation of Australian Agricultural Women. *Directions*, Autumn Edition, 1997.

Sheil, H. 1997, *Building Rural Futures through Co-operation*. Centre for Rural Communities Inc., Monash University, Gippsland Campus, Churchill.

Sher J.P. and Sher, K.R. 1994, Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered.' *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, vol. 10, pp. 2-43.



200112486

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a licence from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)