

3.1.1 Protocols: 'Project information' and 'Consent' forms

We were averse to and careful of any sense of 'appropriating' stories of lived experience: Aboriginal people have been telling their stories for many years, often with little evidence of structural or attitudinal change in return. It's the process of sharing stories, 'getting to know each other', that becomes the relationship-building that leads to understanding, and facilitates 'active' reconciliation – for 'getting on with what's needed'. See **Project Information and Consent forms (Appendices 4, 5)**

3.1.2 Our commitment to storytellers

The commitment we made to storytellers was that:

- strategies for service improvement will be established in consultation with local Aboriginal reference groups, and that
- all of our workers will undertake appropriate Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Training, promoting its uptake in our local areas, to assist this 'listening' process.

Cultural awareness learning is in process across our organization on an ongoing basis: support workers training in groups of 20 commences in June 2010; for Management, Admin and Service Coordination staff, inclusion in this will be our second (and for some, third or fourth) *formal* cultural awareness 'learning time'.

3.2 The reflexive process: examples from Val's stories

Meeting and listening to Val, sharing stories in our conversations, transcribing/re-reading/editing them, - and later through adding to and filming the conversations, the learning was 'embodied' and enriched. The learning was an **interactive** process – 'getting to know each other'. And the learning about differential ability and Aboriginal service needs continues. Reflexive comparisons of personal stories and cultural practices with other stories offer different perspectives and depth.

Val spoke about people who'd been stolen by 'the Welfare', and how she understood their experience as 'disability':

'I see that as a disability: because once you're removed from your family and your roots and your culture and everything ... some of these people are very lost persons. Once you grow up, you're a **'lost person'** ... '

The effect of exclusion on the 'lost persons' of *terra nullius* is understood by Colin Tatz¹. An expert on genocide, his work is referred to in a paper² on the experience of 'placelessness'.

'Colin Tatz identifies four dimensions of the genocidal policies of, or condoned by, Australian authorities:

The reflexive process: examples from Val's stories continued

First, the essentially private genocide, the physical killing committed by settlers and rogue police in the nineteenth century ... second, the twentieth-century state policy and practice of forcibly transferring children from one group to another with the express intention that they *cease being Aboriginal*; third, the twentieth-century attempts to achieve the biological disappearance of those deemed 'half-caste'...; fourth, a *prima facie* case that Australia's actions to protect Aborigines in fact caused them serious bodily *or* mental harm.

The outcome of genocide – the most extreme form of exclusion – is either death or **placelessness**. The human consequences of **placelessness** include anomic suicide, massive levels of incarceration and of ill health, and the life expectancy of people living in an LDC (a least developed country).'

Val also spoke about her own recent professional experience of the **power of listening to and responding reflexively to storytelling**. As a child protection worker, she had recently been working with a family where the parents' continuing arguments were endangering the children's welfare, and they'd been temporarily placed in foster care. Val asked the children to come and tell their own story to their parents - of what they wanted to happen.

The children told their parents their story: that they missed them very much and didn't want to be in foster care, but that they hated being around their arguments and didn't want to come home if that was their experience. The parents were moved to **transformation by that interpersonal process**, and their 'new behaviour' had continued since that day.

Her people didn't generally have a use for the generic term 'disability' – but Val talked about experiences related to Aboriginal culture or attributable directly to colonisation processes, that did result in a 'substantially reduced capacity of the person for communication, social interaction, learning/mobility and a taxonomic 'need' for continuing support services. She identified the 'placelessness' above as a 'disability':

And that – again, I see that as a disability, because once you're removed from your family and your roots and your culture and everything ... some

¹ Colin Tatz, 'Genocide in Australia' (Research Discussion Paper No 8, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1999)

² Havemann, P., *Denial, Modernity and Exclusion: Indigenous Placelessness in Australia*, Macquarie Law Journal (2005) Vol 5 57

of these people are very lost persons. Once you grow up, you're - a 'lost person'.

Another 'disability' observed was her mother's culturally-specific grieving/healing process after Val's father's recent death: it meant that she couldn't stay in her housing commission accommodation, and was now needing to share accommodation with her sons' and daughters' families. This rendered *all* of their housing 'culturally inappropriate' to their needs. Her resulting situation fitted the 'reductions in capacity' and 'need' that define disability under the 1993 Act. But our causal definitions of disability do not account for spiritual and cultural differences, nor the effects of a history of colonisation.

Val is diabetic, and recently took on the care of her two grandchildren, aged 6 and 1 – her sugar levels have since been consistently high, and she's likely to be insulin dependent soon. More than one of Val's and her family members' life situations, dispossessed status, and impairments seem to establish their eligibility for ongoing support, at least in terms of 'effect': i.e. *they result in a substantially reduced capacity of the person(s) for communication, social interaction, learning or mobility.*

The reflexive process: examples from Val's stories continued 2

One reading of the definitions of the act is as a description of the effects of previous government policy.

Awareness of this personal context allows us to understand and acknowledge, for example, that government imagery (e.g. in organizational uniforms for staff, or location in government office blocks) may signal trauma, loss and abuse, and that initial outreach services, for example, can avoid this. It suggests, for example, trialling practical alternatives to 'intimidatory' form-filling that allow us to gather information in other ways, and exploring flexibility in forms of service provision. For this process, the context of a **learning organization** can offer the:

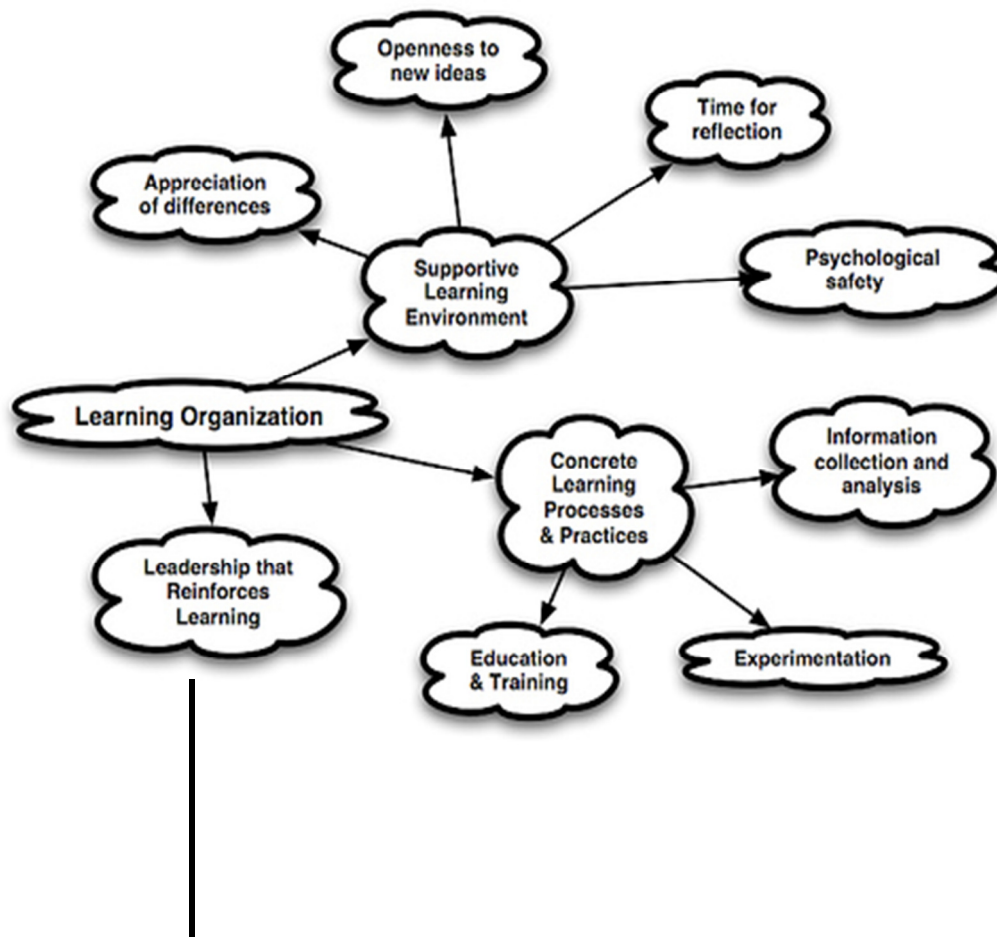
- openness to new ideas,
- time for reflection,
- appreciation of difference, and
- support for experimentation

that facilitates such inclusive service developments. Ethical and **discerning leadership**, knowing what is needed and displaying a practice-wisdom that is willing to take risks to achieve it, offers powerful support for necessary change. **Learning from listening** signifies promising organizational contexts for safe, effective service provision.

See diagram next page: Learning and Leadership: promising organizational structures for Culturally Secure service provision

Learning and Leadership: promising organizational contexts for Culturally Secure service provision

Learning organizations:



Characteristics³ of Leadership:

- It implies **discernment** (= practice wisdom) – can recognize what's needed
- It's imperfect - 'fails', gets things 'wrong', **takes risks**
- It's **ethical** – *how* you do what you do is important, not just the outcomes

³ Errol Cocks, 'Leadership and Transformational Change', presentation at Country Services Forum, 2010 (our parentheses)

- Leaders are willing to **persevere in the face of resistance**

3.3 Some more of the stories ...

First, we asked for input and advice from persons across our networks whose culture, experience, practice wisdom, or current endeavours meant they were aware, informed and discerning of 'what needed to be done':

- 'T', a Perth playground designer and builder, who has worked over many years in remote Aboriginal communities, offered: **'Remind Aboriginal people of the power of their culture; then go away'**.
- 'E', a sexual assault counselor: **'First, look at your own staff'**.
- 'N', teacher educator: **'Employ and work with an Aboriginal co-researcher'**.
- 'A', Department of Child Protection employee: **'Trust your values, and your heart'**.
- 'S', a Community Development worker: **'Make contacts across the region: don't be Bunbury-centric'**.
- 'NS', an Early Years network coordinator: **'Go to the school; it's a centre of community: be at the 'Family Day' assemblies consistently.**

We approached, and were approached by, individuals and organizations who had stories to share, and we located 'stories' of arts and cultural production: in the media; community links; and other human services - that we shared with our project partners and other service providers.

Regional Indigenous-specific health service organizations stories to us included concerns regarding a range of disability issues:

Communication problems and time lags with Local Area Coordinators re: Disability Service Commission responses to registration applications. An example was given of an application that took *one year*, rather than the *one month* suggested by the LAC to receive an answer;

Poor liaison between, for example, the Housing Department and the Disability Service Commission – where the wrong aids and adaptations were repeatedly installed/provided to a person for whom they were clearly not appropriate or useful;

Young people's sporting groups who'd been effectively harassed out of a town centre courts by local residents;

Question: When would **Foetal Alcohol Syndrome** be **recognized as a disability?**

Question: What's the **structure for evaluation of local and agency implementation of DSC 'Policy and Practice guidelines'** re: Access for Aboriginal people with disabilities?

.....

Elder's stories ...

have been offered to service-providers through 'Yarn time' stories.

At one session, Aunty Pat and Auntie May, schooled in the 1930's, told stories – again with humour - of their experiences of breathtaking discrimination in education and employment, and of 'Protection' board practices that removed them from jobs they'd acquired to place them in what were considered to be more 'appropriate' positions. **Aunty Pat said: 'That's the only thing that makes me sad; that people don't bother to learn about us'.**

Indigenous 'people want to look after their own' as far as is manageable, that was clear. But when support *is* needed – it must be **safe** i.e.:

- respectful (and **you can't respect what you don't know or understand**), and
- it *must not* carelessly trigger memories of past abuses, or be thoughtlessly discriminatory itself (again: **awareness, learning, understanding are essential**).

E. is a social worker and counselor ...

who has wide experience in domestic violence and sexual assault counseling, and whose **work is with an Indigenous-specific organization**; Her 'social policy' story for us is one of 'the need for the non-indigenous population to begin a 'decolonisation'⁴ process in respect to service provision'. She recounted a local service-user's recent story in relation to this social policy observation:

An Aboriginal woman in her early thirties presented at a local hospital accident and emergency department, with slurred speech and a very bad headache. Hospital staff questioned the woman about her drug and alcohol use to which the woman explained that she used neither drugs not alcohol. The staff did not believe her, and administered only panadol to the woman, which did nothing to address the pain of her

⁴ She cites Edwards, T. and Taylor, K., Decolonising Cultural Awareness, *Australian Nursing Journal* 15(10), 31-32: '**decolonisation ... requires an unpacking of history and preconceptions, and recognition that our professions, health policy and services, are founded upon and privilege western cultures and world views**'.

headache. The woman was left unattended in a chair in the hospital corridor. Hospital staff returned later to find the woman collapsed on the floor. The woman had suffered a massive stroke, and due to the inadequate response to her health need, almost died...

3.4 Creative production, awareness, and the 'safe' power of Performance:

'Cinema is performance, that's how us blackfellas have connected with it. It's where we come from, with our storytelling. A lot of dreaming stories are about moral stories and news and teaching... that's the way Indigenous filmmakers are thinking.—Warwick Thornton, Aboriginal director of *Samson and Delilah* - see (Appendices 6,7)

See also: <http://www.creativespirits.info/resources/movies/#ixzz0rBgTIAIy>

We have 'listened to' and observed first hand the profound **power of cinema and theatre**⁵ as a fertile ground for empowerment. We made connections through sharing these stories; a relationship to the land⁶ was expressed and began to be understood, and humour made 'safe' space for non-Indigenous awareness and understanding.

Feelings of discomfort, anger and fear are often identified by non-Aboriginal persons in approaching a close understanding of Aboriginal experience. Engaging with creative media - film, artwork, performance and other textual production - offers the chance to access the story in a psychologically secure way, and to share it with others - indigenous and non-indigenous, promoting reflection and discussion: **interactive** learning. This was the productive experience we enjoyed in Bunbury, and it is continuing to happen through a range of partnerships.

Creative and performative approaches offer a safely 'periscopic' access to these 'Other' stories. This constitutes a learning practice that engages *'emotions, bodies and spirits; produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; ... encourages compassion and empathy; features multiple voices and repositions 'readers' and 'subjects' as coparticipants in dialogue (Ellis: 99)* And there were more films:

Liyarn Ngarn: http://www.antar.org.au/shop/sound_vision; and catalogues of indigenous production that enhance awareness and understanding:

'**flickerfest**' distribution catalogue:

http://www.flickerfest.com.au/distribution/Catalogue_list.aspx?s=3715. and:

⁵ including, e.g. *Bindjareb Pinjarra*, a 'cross-cultural' Deckchair theatre company exploring stories of the Pinjarra Massacre that used humour in representing the realities of colonisation and racism to great effect.

⁶ A Southwest community arts drama project manager/teacher told us the story of a drama project in a Central Desert school that effectively engaged the students by casting the visiting teacher up as the 'Stranger in a Strange land' – "which is, after all, what we are..."

'For a long time it wasn't taught at school, so many non-**Indigenous** Australians know little, if anything, about Aboriginal culture ...
www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture

Richard Frankland's story: *Stone Bros.* was the second film we hosted in Bunbury in collaboration with local Indigenous organizations, joined this time by the South West Community Drug and Alcohol Service's 'Ana Kadjininy' Aboriginal group workers.

Working together to organize the pleasurable event around Aboriginal creative production was a pleasure; and the event another sell-out at the local cinema we hired. It encouraged the cinema to hire the film itself!

Again, ***STONE Bros.*** used comedy to deal with issues around Aboriginal experience – of imprisonment, spirituality, comedy and substance abuse. It presented the healthy, empowering alternatives of self-care and reconnecting with place and culture in a context of humour, with popular music and a cameo performance by Mary G. (Mark bin Bakar). (**Appendix 8**).

And the pleasures of visual arts practices: email from Enable's finance officer, on a Regional Art Gallery exhibition including local Noongar artworks, including a remarkable and perfectly presented, dot-painted Ford Station Wagon and a similarly treated 1960's fridge:

" ... keeping my interests and commitment peaked towards learning. ...Listening and appreciation has awakened all my unbalanced interests and joys. The true joy of my visit to the Art Gallery was the time spent in tapping into my sense of looking ... seeing .. and appreciating as an individual.

I did see the Sandra Hill pieces and I loved your story of the clothes horse. Actually, I felt awe at the talent of people being able to demonstrate their opinion through all forms of art ... John had already gone in search of the painted car ...

..Isn't it great that through our recent discussions and experiences we are 'hearing' and 'seeing' and 'talking' – a great example of how this can be translated to broadening and opening your mind..."

And there were and are more, and more stories (see Appendices 9-12)