

Chapter 7

CREATING NEW KNOWLEDGE



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Introduction

Those involved in any learning situation whether as educators or as students, come to their tasks enmeshed in the contexts which form part of their wider environment. Hence they are both knowingly and unknowingly influenced by the web of conflicts, dilemmas and power differentials which are part of their system of origin. In this chapter we, the authors, recall an experience of a course where the four key players – the students, their lecturers and their respective organisations – did not share the same learning goals. The chapter examines from our perspective, the impact these differences had on classroom dynamics and highlights the need to take account of the prevailing values and circumstances in the broader environments that impinge on adult students and on their educators.

Our exploration of the experience incorporated three distinct but interconnected processes. We sought (i) to construct a narrative of events; (ii) to reveal the non-conscious processes through which we filtered our experiences; and (iii) to attend to the systemic dynamics that formed the framework for interaction among the different players involved. We recognise that our reality is no more privileged than that of any of the other parties (Usher and Edwards, 1994) and therefore we recounted the events more as witnesses than as holders of the ultimate truth of what happened. Our goal was to record only our 'truth' at a particular time, recognising that this has probably changed and evolved over the years since the course was delivered, and that it is but one of a range of possible perspectives (Kenny and Gardner, 1989). We have afforded ourselves this position of 'knowing subjects' in order

to further our own learning and in so doing to create useful knowledge for use in the future. We are also aware that the meanings and understandings generated by our enquiry, cannot be divorced from our subjectivity. Our approach to the topic is not that of impartial investigators. On the contrary we were active participants in the events and undertook this reflective process with the express purpose of learning how to do our job better.

The context

The department espouses a radical adult education pedagogy that values critical thinking, the active involvement of students in interrogating all aspects of a course including the content and delivery methods, and learning that has a primary purpose of promoting a more equitable and just society. This is a pedagogy that:

... points to the future rather than the past. It is about new meanings and knowledge and its emphasis is on the conditions and means through which these can be developed – rather than on simply increasing access to existing knowledge (Barr, 1999: 71).

The focus on developing new meanings and knowledge permeates all of the department's courses including the one studied here. It also fuelled our desire to reflect on our experience of designing and delivering this course. Although many years have passed since the course was run, it has stayed with us and assumed a somewhat legendary status, largely due to the high level of discord that dominated the classroom atmosphere. Students were often discontented and expressed their feelings forcefully. It could be said that this is not unusual for a class of adult students, however, what was noteworthy was the degree and intensity of the students' disgruntlement. At the time staff were unsettled by the experience. In retrospect it became clear that reflecting on an experience of such intensity might reveal the hidden dynamics that lay at the root of the discord. We also hoped that through such an exploration we would become better able to respond to such situations by approaching them as an educational opportunity rather than a problem to be contained.

In this chapter we describe how we explored our experiences by contextualising them within a broader framework that illuminated hitherto obscured factors and gave meaning to events that were previously mysterious or confusing. The primary purposes of this reflective exploration are (i) to further our understanding of the external factors that impinge on the classroom (ii) to enable us to create learning environments conducive to our espoused pedagogical principles and (iii) to inform any future collaborative endeavours that may necessitate working with and within systems that consciously or otherwise may not share our view of education.

Creating purposeful knowledge from our experience

In order to explore the dynamics involved in the exercise of knowledge creation we decided to case study our experience of this course, a part-time undergraduate diploma, taken by a group of twenty students, all of whom worked with a large statutory agency. Students were released from work to attend the course. All the academic staff in the department were involved in the course. For most this involved teaching course modules. Three staff members designed the course in collaboration with two representatives of the employing agency and together they formed a course management team.

Although considerable time has elapsed since the course was completed, it is still mentioned, due largely to the level of disturbance which it engendered for staff. As we discussed the experience with colleagues it was apparent that similar difficulties to those encountered in delivering this diploma had surfaced in other courses, albeit to a much lesser extent. Issues and problems at the heart of this specific case study are widely accepted as rooted in the department's espousal of a radical adult education agenda and its commitment to provide both a useful and academically rigorous service to external contracting agencies. There was widespread agreement among our colleagues that the department's agenda and commitment are immutable and therefore the measures taken to resolve such difficulties should not compromise but rather strengthen them.

Telling one's own story invites the narrators into the often difficult and turbulent waters of personal reflection (Church, 1995). We felt it necessary to engage at this level in order to reveal the many layers in our response to the experience. In this process it was crucial to take account of the emotions and the non-cognitive, to acknowledge their primary importance both as a starting point for the investigation and as meaning-laden resources that would direct us to the hot spots that needed to be probed. Emotion is central to subjectivity and to lived experience. It affords recognition of the power and influence of the non-conscious in the positioning of both the individuals and organisations involved. We sensed that understanding the unconscious drives that were present in our reactions would disinter the reasons for our responses to classroom situations and that these reasons were ultimately of more significance than the responses themselves. The unconscious, by virtue of being unconscious, is not readily or immediately available to conscious processes. Recognition, however, of its presence and the creation of ways that invite a critical reflection allow some of its influences to be revealed.

While exploring our own stories and allowing the implications of our personal experiences to surface, it was also essential to attend to the organisational and systemic dynamics that

form the backdrop for our recollections. To do this we drew on a systemic theoretical model that directed our attention to the organisational context in which our narratives were embedded. This created a synergy that impacted on how we interpreted the events and on our understanding of the systems that shaped our perspective (White, 1996).

Philosophical differences among the main players

The systemic perspective which we adopted facilitated our awareness of significant differences between the four main players, while simultaneously allowing us to consider the inter-relationships and interdependencies which were central to each of the player's ways of being in the wider environment. There was ample evidence that although the discord was most evident within the classroom, the causes were frequently not located there. We suspected that the assemblage of values and beliefs that determined the positioning and experience of each of the players with regard to the nature of knowledge and learning was likely to be important in this regard.

With this in mind we considered the opposing and largely conflicting perceptions of the nature of knowledge among the players. For the purposes of this investigation we felt it was useful to focus on the differences between these perceptions rather than the similarities. The use of an oppositional analysis of this kind helps to reveal fundamental differences that have serious and far reaching implications for how educators and students relate to knowledge. Santos (1999: 36) identified two specific forms of knowledge:

...knowledge-as-regulation, whose point of ignorance is called chaos and whose point of knowledge is called order, and knowledge-as-emancipation, whose point of ignorance is called colonialism and whose point of knowledge is called solidarity.

Knowledge-as-emancipation sees difference as a virtue rather than a problem. It is about creating new knowledge from diversity rather than hegemonic order from chaos. Santos (1999: 36) went on to state that "...all critical knowledge must begin by a critique of knowledge itself". Intrinsic to Santos' emphasis on the importance of an epistemological critique of knowledge is a concern to broaden the knowledge base by including those who have been relegated to a not-knowing position within the knowledge-as-regulation approach. The task then of creating knowledge calls for finding new ways to engage with those who have been silenced so that their voices can be heard. Without their voices the richness of diversity is diminished. Essentially Santos' knowledge-as-emancipation extends the meaning of inclusion beyond merely enabling wider access to existing courses and firmly locates it in the realm of broadening participation in the process of knowledge creation. These fundamental principles are fully consistent with our radical adult education philosophy.

Such a critique of knowledge is rarely evident in conventional educational programmes. Within such programmes, delivery modalities tend to focus on teaching inputs rather than on learning outcomes while the content emphasises the dissemination as opposed to the interrogation of information. Assessment procedures primarily measure the intellectual capacity of the candidate to articulate and rephrase a specific body of information rather than critically appraise it in a broader context that includes lived experience. The transmission of knowledge-as-regulation relies on the logical sequencing of data, building on previous knowledge acquired in a similar incremental fashion. Even at postgraduate level, when students are required to 'add to the existing body of knowledge', it could be argued that the 'new knowledge' merely extends what is already known rather than challenges the fundamental constructs that underpin that knowledge.

By contrast, courses that espouse knowledge-as-emancipation call for a very different level of engagement on the part of the student and the educator. Within these programmes all previous learning is open to interrogation, as are the assumptions and beliefs fundamental to the constructs that determine the learner's and educator's perception and interpretation of reality. Learning of this sort can have far reaching impacts on the personal and work life of the individual and on the perceived function of and relationship with the educational provider. Consequently, supports that enable the learner to engage in this kind of learning must transcend the immediate study environment and take account of the broader arena in which the learner operates. Determining the adequacy of the support provided to the learners in this case study necessitated a consideration of how their learning was facilitated not only within the classroom but also within their work environment.

A critique of the philosophical differences between the main players, namely the university, the department offering the course, the students and their employing agency provided insights into how the different positionings of each entity impacted on the course. The dominant veridical discourses among the different players, particularly as these pertain to what was deemed to be 'worthwhile learning' were of particular significance. Foucault (1971) defined veridical discourses as those discourses that define good from bad and truth from error (Gordan, 1980). These discourses provide frameworks, techniques and structures through which behaviour, thoughts and experiences can be interpreted. We wondered if there were significant differences in the dominant veridical discourses of each player and if so, how these differences manifested themselves in the classroom. Bearing in mind Foucault's concern with the dynamics of power, we considered the status of the players in relation to each other, and within their organisation.

Relationships between the main players

The relationships between the four main protagonists in this case study varied from intense, in the case of the staff and students who interact on a weekly base, to marginal, in the case of the employing agency and the university. While the university was ultimately responsible for the course, interaction between both these bodies happened via the department. The students obviously had constant interaction with their employing agency throughout their working week. The extent to which each grouping related to the other, and the positioning of each in relation to the other emerged as significant.

Engaging in a systemic analysis of the relationships allowed us to explore the question of change. Charting both the effect and the process of change calls for an analysis of the distribution of power, an awareness of culture and values, and an understanding of the play of inter-personal and inter-role dynamics (Campbell, Draper and Huffington, 1991). It is impossible to create change in isolation; any movement in a part of a system creates resonances and reactions throughout the whole resulting in some distortion within the existing state of delicate balance central to every system's on-going stability. Even minor change or perturbation creates imbalance in the totality, setting in train reactions that aim either to restore the original balance or status quo, or to accommodate the reaction, resulting in the creation of a new entity. Although change and development are central to the long-term survival of any organisation as it seeks to adapt to its environments, they can be perceived as threatening, especially within large bodies with fairly rigid structures.

In this case study key issues pertaining to power and change surfaced. It became apparent that the main players did not share a common vision of the purpose and likely outcomes of the course. In negotiating the course the agency seemed to be responding to pressure emanating from the employees for professional recognition. The agency was willing to facilitate this. It did not, however, envisage creating changes in the status quo within the organisation nor did it anticipate or welcome the students creating pressure for change within the system, structure and hierarchy of the agency. In fact one of the purposes of running the course from the agency's viewpoint seemed to be to contain the students and keep them 'happy'. The students on the other hand, seemed to see the course as a way of increasing their status and their bargaining position. They saw the course as an opportunity to gain certification, additional information and knowledge. The department offering the course espoused a knowledge-as-emancipation approach to education where interrogation of the status quo is basic to the process of gaining worthwhile knowledge. The students were not necessarily seeking entry into a process that would challenge their core values and expose them to an explicit encounter with the inequalities and dissonances that

exist within society and in the system where they worked. It is also questionable as to whether these fundamental differences were ever acknowledged, much less spelt out in terms of their implications, by representatives of the agency or of the department. Neither were these positions made clear to the students. It is also questionable as to whether department staff were even aware of the significance of these dissonances at the time. There was thus, from the outset of the course a profound unclarity about the nature of the project.

To understand why this situation arose we explored the nature of the organisational systems to which the main players belonged. We also examined aspects of the structures and elements of ideologies within each system which served to inhibit the dialogue needed to arrive at a shared commitment to the learning outcomes for the course. First, we considered issues to do with the separateness and identity of each of the players as defined by the concept of boundary. A healthy system is seen as having a sufficiently loose boundary to enable it to create an exchange of energy with its environment. This boundary needs also to be strong enough to maintain the coherence and identity of the system. Too tight boundaries create situations in which a system becomes divorced from the creative energies of its environment (Browne, 1980). If the boundaries are too loose the system is in danger of losing its identity and being subsumed by its environment or by more powerful systems existing within its context. A second focus that enables an understanding of how the players interacted with each other is that of hierarchy and power. Larger, more complex superordinate systems are seen as having great influence over subordinate systems existing either in their own specific environment or as sub groupings within the system itself. The central preoccupation of any system is its own survival, which is frequently achieved at the expense of either internal sub systems or of any weaker systems within its environment (Browne, 1980). Thus, an analysis of hierarchy, power, control and influence is important in any systemic analysis which tries to make sense of change, perturbation, growth or disintegration.

Locating the students in their contexts

Of the four main protagonists in this case study the issues of boundary and power were most significant for (i) the department, which is a sub system within the larger system of the university, and (ii) for the students who formed a sub system within their employing agency. In the case of the department, its coherence and identity is largely defined by its commitment to knowledge-as-emancipation. However, the department is located within the broader university system that may not be fully sympathetic with this approach. In the context of this case study, however, what is important is that the academic status of the course was secured within the university's validation system. This, to a large extent, negated the effects of dissonances between the department's and the university's

approach to knowledge. The influence of the larger third order system over a subordinate system was more pronounced in the case of the students.

In all courses that call for transformative learning and critical positioning regarding knowledge, students begin to apply the implications of this thinking within different facets of their lives. In their work life they generally attempt to reconcile any discord between what their employing agency values as appropriate work practices and their on-going questioning of the thinking underpinning these practices. If students encounter barriers that curtail their potential to engage in this process they tend to relocate their questioning from the workplace to the course. In doing this they seek security and assurances that what they are learning is valued within the broader university system. The validity of the learning in which they are engaged becomes a major concern. This concern is more pronounced in courses such as the one being studied here, where all the participants come from a single agency. In courses where the students come from a variety of work environments the sites of tension within each workplace differ and therefore it is easier for the students to identify the patterns that emerge in each person's experience and to recognise that these are part of a change process instigated by the individual's repositioning in relation to his or her assumptions and beliefs. By contrast when all members of the learning group come from a single agency they tend to encounter identical difficulties and blockages so that the bigger pattern is obscured while the particular blockages assume a significance in their own right. In such instances the barriers to change appear insurmountable and the challenge to engage with the change process is abandoned, at least in the short-term, as unfeasible.

The students on the course under review worked with a client group who are at the margins of society. Many found that the positioning of the people they worked with was reflected in the peripheral status they as a group were afforded within their employing agency. As such they not only interacted with a particularly marginalised sector of the population but they also saw themselves as marginalised within their work setting. In systemic terms they found themselves in a position where they effectively formed a weak sub system within a powerful agency. Frequently course participants displayed high levels of dissatisfaction directed initially at their employer, in time this was extended to include the course and course personnel. Their antagonism appeared to stem from a strong sense of powerlessness in dealing with both systems. They felt unable to apply their learning within their specific work context and they also felt excluded from fundamental decisions pertaining to the course. Furthermore, although all the students in this case study chose to take the course, many experienced a high degree of compulsion to make that choice, believing that a decision not to take the course would reflect badly on their future prospects within their agency.

Although the agency was involved in designing the course, students were not convinced that the agency representatives on the course design team could be relied on to adequately represent their specific interests. We cannot adjudicate on whether this concern was valid or not. However, we do know that the agency staff who liaised with the department were training officers whose main objective was to create a course offering a formal university qualification. Little attention was paid at the design phase to the likely implications of the course for work practices across the agency or to the likely impact of a knowledge-as-emancipation approach on the agency. Once these implications became manifest, it was apparent that the agency representatives neither welcomed nor wished to respond to the challenges these implications posed to the agency as a whole. It was also evident that as training officers they themselves were not well positioned within the agency to influence changes at the levels necessary to address the emerging issues. Apart from the two representatives on the course management team the department had no formal relationship with the agency. As such, no forum existed in which to discuss the position of the students within the overall context of the larger system, neither were there structures in place within which the students could be supported while exploring new ways of exercising their work responsibilities within the agency. This gap in communication between the department and the employing agency compounded the levels of discord that permeated the classroom. Essentially the classroom served as the only viable site for the students to have their voice heard in order to articulate their discomfort. Although the students were vocal in expressing their dissatisfaction, they had in effect been 'silenced' within the workplace.

Strategies used to resolve differences

On reflection it is clear that much of the difficulty experienced by both staff and students could have been mitigated by a better appreciation on our part of the differences between the systems involved. An awareness of the ability of the two larger and more powerful systems to influence the practices of sub systems within their orbit would have highlighted the constraints impacting on the staff and students. This level of reflective observation also necessitates an acknowledgement of the power and influence of the non-conscious. In times of crisis the emotional and pragmatic impetus to survive can take precedence over the ideological and cognitive. This is true for systems as well as individuals. Paying attention to epistemology alone, therefore, does not ensure that a commitment to knowledge-as-emancipation will not, under difficult circumstances, become subsumed by the practice of knowledge-as-regulation. Thus, it appears that in times of conflict the group or individual, although deeply committed to a pedagogy based firmly in the practice of knowledge-as-emancipation is likely to retreat into positions and practices rooted in knowledge-as-

regulation. Responses to the difficult situations encountered in the classroom during this particular course were indicative of such a retreat.

The most frequent responses fell within a comforting/rejecting continuum (Elkaim, 1990). The comforting response focused on offering reassurance regarding the validity of the course. This was combined with distractions designed to curtail the students' expressions of anger. Latent in this response was the implicit suggestion that compliant behaviour on the part of the students would be rewarded with a diploma. The rejecting response was characterised by a punitive approach that refused to tolerate expressions of anger. This manifested in a tendency to set impermeable behaviour boundaries including a refusal to allow the discussion of confrontational issues within the classroom. Both of these responses indicated a retreat to a traditional model of teacher-based power, consequently, students experienced themselves as 'silenced' yet again.

Department staff found themselves preoccupied with trying to manage the students' anxiety and disaffection, while at the same time wanting to ensure the quality of the learning opportunities provided. In terms of the earlier discussion on knowledge-as-regulation these attempts to impose order could be interpreted as a retreat to a conventional educational model. They could also be interpreted, to use a Freirean term (1972: 37), as a 'nostalgia' for the mainstream approach. In the circumstances the educators needed to act as brokers between the students, the agency and the university. In reality they found themselves adrift rather than actively mediating the relationship.

Those staff who recognised what was happening attempted to move beyond the comforting/rejecting dichotomy and re-establish a more collaborative and exploratory learning environment. They began with an acknowledgement of the validity of the students' feelings and moved on to find ways that enabled the students to become observers of the wider systems in which their experiences were embedded, thus revealing the systemic dynamics that were contributing to their sense of disturbance. It was intended by way of this process to enable students not only to validate their own experience but also to explore ways of viewing and managing their relationship with their employing agency and the university in a new and more creative manner. Although these attempts came late in the life of the course they succeeded in substantially dissipating the profound sense of unease engendered by the earlier difficulties.

The lessons learned

While it took a great deal of reflection to recognise the patterns embedded in this experience and to unearth the meanings these patterns signified, the process clearly points to the potential for apparent chaos within the classroom to become a valuable site of

learning. The overarching lesson emanating from these reflections is that the creation of purposeful knowledge necessitates attending to the learning environment not only within but also outside the classroom. Establishing a learning environment conducive to knowledge-as-emancipation is dependent on the capacity of educators (i) to become observers and active managers of the learning process and (ii) to establish empathic relationships with all of the parties involved.

Observing and managing the learning process

It is clear that the responsibility of the educator as a facilitator of learning has to extend beyond the classroom. The educator needs to observe and manage the learning process by reflecting on the group dynamic within the classroom and on the external environment that impacts on this dynamic. An awareness of the primary contexts in which the students explore the ideas encountered in the classroom is vital. Educators need to have a sufficiently well developed knowledge of the students' significant systems to hypothesise how these contexts will react to the new ways-of-being invited by the course. This implies a clear understanding of the students' power positioning within their organisation, the organisation's response to change, and its ways of dealing with perceived threat. Central to the educator's role is the ability to enable students to understand the dynamics of their organisation and to facilitate them in managing their own process of change within these contexts in ways that allow them to not only become effective agents of change but also to survive on a day-to-day basis.

Understanding the broader context impinging on the classroom enables the educator to predict the students' likely reaction to themes and issues that challenge their present constructs and experiences of reality. Too much new or threatening material can invite a procrustean response from students, implying a risk of dislodgment from their core identity resulting in a retrenchment or shut down and a consequent inability to engage with new material. If this happens the students remain 'silenced' and unable to find their voice. The pace and degree of perturbation needs to be moderated so that students can move back and forth between old well known realities and territories that may be challenging and threatening. What is needed is a learning context in which students are enabled to become explorers of new frontiers while retaining a modicum of safety and security.

In situations where confrontation or withdrawal has happened, staff need opportunities or spaces for reflection in order to deal with that experience. They need to adopt an observer position in which they can analyse all the systems impacting on the process of change. If educators cannot find the space or time to refocus themselves they may lose their nerve

and their professional confidence and resort to inappropriate responses that seek to impose order, thereby retreating into the domain of knowledge-as-regulation. Maintaining an environment that validates the students as 'knowing' then becomes difficult if not impossible. There is an onus on any educational provider that espouses knowledge-as-emancipation to support and validate staff in what is often experienced as a risky enterprise. Support of this nature is integral to the knowledge-as-emancipation educational endeavour.

Establishing empathic relationships

A pedagogical commitment to knowledge-as-emancipation involves not only the students and educators but also the systems to which they belong. Educational courses such as the one reviewed highlight the significance of any dissonance and tensions between subordinate and larger super-ordinate systems. The relationship within the classroom is helped or hindered by the relationship established at the course design stage. At a minimum the partners need to acknowledge each other's perspectives and agree on course objectives. As part of their learning management role, the onus is on the educators to value and find ways to reveal what is known by those who come to the partnership as 'others'. Students do not benefit from being isolated from these realities. Substantive differences between the players can provide a valuable site for critiquing the hegemonic position of knowledge-as-regulation within the dominant educational discourses. Dialogue within the classroom that is based on a reciprocal understanding, empathy and analysis of the opportunities and constraints determined by the larger super-ordinate systems that impinge on the course, is essential.

In attending to the totality of the partnership dynamic we as educators need to position ourselves as observers of what is essentially a complex and multi-faceted relationship where we are likely both to experience powerlessness and to exercise power. To create new and purposeful knowledge requires a willingness to reflect on and expose the range of opportunities and constraints that accompany this position. We cannot hope to realise knowledge-as-emancipation if we curtail our capacity for observation and empathy by excluding the systemic landscape in which we are embedded. In our case the advantages attendant on being part of a larger university system that affords access to accredited courses, and that enables progression within the formal educational system have to be considered. We cannot ignore the gatekeeping role we play by virtue of being located within this system. Neither can we ignore the necessity to continually interrogate the meanings that underpin our experiences as educators.

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