

# 'Practice Story Exchanges' and their Creative Invitation to Informal Learning

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## ABSTRACT

*This is a study of how members of a collaborative group interested in promoting convivial civilisation in human 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 were an attempt to 'tell the truth but tell it slant' as Emily Dickenson put it, 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 productivity in society; of the nature and importance of informal learning and its links with story exchanges and how this is pursued in the work of the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC).*

*Keywords: Artistry in Story Telling, Backyard Civilisation, Convivial Civilisation, Informal Learning, Storytelling Exchange*

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## INTRODUCTION

*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)*

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 shared experiences, ideas and judgments which were often founded on unspoken values and assumptions about life. I was unaware that this yarning in pubs and around campfires and kitchen tables was such a strong source of informal learning. People with mastery of song and story in Australia – entertainers like

Slim Dusty, Ted Egan and Archie Roach and other less uplifting come to mind - had huge influence on Outback people of all races and attitudes. I think at this period rural and outback women yarned less publically and commercially but no less enthusiastically. I realised that this practice needed closer examination: What was good enough for these convivial types might be good enough for us as well.

I have been with a group who have been interested to generate informal learning about a more convivial and human civilisation to balance the stories particularly from the media about consuming, about being beautiful, about winning, about being rich and about being famous. We wanted to share stories of creative insight into a more humane and creative way of living in the world avoiding too early engagement in debate by inviting not statements of fact which require evidence but stories of life which require experience and artistry.

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 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 enrichment. The final part looks at practice story exchanges and their enrichment particularly through the metaphoric imagination, as a way of evoking

informal learning about a just and convivial society particularly in community settings. The example is the 'Practice Story' Exchange meetings of the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC).

## BALANCING CONVIVIAL AND COMPETITIVE CIVILIZATIONS

The educational challenge for the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation is to explore and reflect on conditions of conviviality in human society. *Conviviality* is about courteous, equitable, creative and compassionate living. Convivial living evokes pictures of people sharing a meal together. It is used here as a working image of mankind as a human family: at home somewhere in the world and its various eco-systems, inter-related, respectful and inclusive. It traces an oblique and possibly more humanistic line from Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* (1973)

The *convivial table* is a working metaphor alongside images of contemporary competitive value: the *champion* winning in competition leaving the defeated unseen behind; the *armed soldier* giving security against attack from enemies; the *scientist* who discovers a new drug or physical correlation; the *inventor* who develops new technology; the *entrepreneur* who founds and builds up enterprises and becomes enriched as the enterprise and its stakeholders prosper often in competition with others who are toppled. These tend to give weight to heroic human individual and competitive achievement and not so much to collaborative and non-competitive human service.

The *convivial table* is offered as an idealised image to redress the balance of too much competition and too much individualism both of which are needed in modern society but not to the detriment of other values and needs. In his recent book, *The Righteous Mind* Jonathan Haidt (2012) wrote:

*We may spend most of our wakening hours advancing our own interests, but we all have the*

*capacity to transcend self-interest and become simply part of a whole. It is not just a capacity; it's the portal to many of life's most cherished experiences. (p. 317)*

The question for idealistic people in search of conviviality is how to create a way to become invited and drawn 'to transcend self-interest and become part of a whole'. One way which has emerged has been to attempt to create a *catalytic narrative space* where certain kinds of informal learning can be evoked and never mentioned. This is the agenda of the ACCBC's monthly story exchange meetings. Before we look into these exchanges I want to have a brief look at kinds of human knowing and the learning that generates it.

## KNOWING AND LEARNING

This brief summary of the human knowing and learning process is really to lead into the section on human learning and especially informal learning.

### Human Knowing

The main foundation for this came late last century in John Heron's phenomenological study *Feeling and Personhood* (1992) and later variations on his work by Byrne (2009), Hunt (2009), and Kasl and Yorks, L. (2002). John Heron suggested that there were four elements in the process of knowing which people use in the course of everyday living. The first is *direct experience* as when a person's hand feels and grips a door handle and the person becomes aware of being in contact with a smooth or rough surface. The second is when the person apprehends and dwells on this experience *as an image before their mind* which can evoke other images and memories of the experience of door handles some of which can have gut emotional evocations like freedom (relief), artistry (joy), enclosure (fear).

The third way of knowing is when the person locates the imaged thing in a particular category and *classifies it* as a door handle. The classification of a unique entity into a category

brings the experience into the critical rational energy of science and law. The final way is *praxis*, knowing through practice, as when the person actually turns the handle and opens the door and becomes aware of the actual way the door opening occurs through the turning of the handle.

### Human Learning

When the knowing process stays in our heart and mind and shapes our thoughts and actions we call it learning. Knud Illeris (2007) has pulled together contemporary ideas about many aspects of learning particularly but not exclusively the learning linked to forms of education. When the focus is linked to informal learning, the links to structured forms of education are much less evident. A major difference is between existential and functional learning.

*Existential learning* is concerned with making meaning in life's challenges and seeking to act accordingly. Much of such learning is pursued informally in conversations, and stories of living. It can be contrasted with more deliberate *functional learning* which is about gaining knowledge and skills for engaging in the practicalities of personal, social and work life. In practice these distinctions are more theoretical than real. For example, functional learning so often leads to change in self-awareness and esteem and to new sense of agency which can be seen as existential elements. In other cases existential learning will often enrich functional learning in line with a new sense of self and meaning. This leads to a brief consideration of ways in which learning is promoted by various forms of facilitation.

## FACILITATING LEARNING: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

### Formal and Non-Formal Education: The Functional Focus

Much functional learning is pursued through structured formal and non-formal education. (cf. Rogers 2009) There is also space for the

indirectly evoked existential learning about self and meaning and belonging which goes on all the time in informal interaction with fellow students and teachers and is often given some space in formal and non-formal courses. It does not usually feature much in assessment.

## Formal Education

Formal education refers to education for accredited degrees and diplomas provided traditionally in Australia by University and TAFE colleges and now by Registered Training Providers (RTOs). Formal education promotes specific learning outcomes with careful instruction, assessment and evaluation. The learner takes on the significant identity as *student*, effectively submits to the discipline of being taught, being challenged and being assessed. He or she seeks to gain the new knowledge and skills of the course and to take on the identity of a professional or a qualified tradesperson with new status and new economic capacity in the workplace. Students often find the learning of formal education difficult, absorbing and challenging to their sense of self-worth and agency but worth the struggle in the hoped for benefits particularly in economic capacity but less obviously in a sense of personal enrichment and even transformation.

## Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education (or structured not-for-credit education) is implemented through similar approaches to those used in for credit courses but there is no degree, diploma or certificate. The focus is primarily on gaining the knowledge and skills offered in the course, for which payment is often required but the parallel social and intellectual processes in the course dynamics are often of value to participants.

## Informal Learning: The Existential Focus

Schugurensky (2000) wrote:

*... informal learning, is a residual category that includes all that learning that is not acquired through the formal and non-formal educational systems. At first glance, it seems that there is little left. A deeper look will reveal that we learn many important and relevant things outside of organized educational programs. Informal learning could be self-directed (intentional and conscious), incidental (unintentional but conscious), or tacit (unintentional and unconscious). (p. 6)*

Informal learning in the three categories outlined above by Schugurensky by reason of the learner awareness and control is by definition outside the structured educational system. It is generated in the activities and conversations of everyday life at work, at college or at home. It has a strong link to existential learning concerned *socially* with group membership and its expectations (Stehlik & Carden, 2005) and *personally* with ideas, values and activities which are considered worthwhile.

Existential learning is difficult to teach using instruction since it relates more to learners' ongoing sense of self, sense of belonging and sense of agency. It is more concerned with cultivating certain dispositions or life stances and is often the fruit of evocative stories and performances than direct instruction. As Barry Schwarz said in a recent TED talk on wisdom (Schwartz, 2011), one of the key elements of learning of this kind is that it tends to be learned but not taught. It is linked strongly to the power of the compassionate imagination. The adoption of a life stance or life attitude can often be a helpful catalyst for people deciding to engage in and persevere with functional learning. While this occurs in every state of life by different people in different ways, the more there are stories and imitable models, the more likely it is that existential learning will be evoked and it is this that introduces mysterious power of colourful stories which can invite informal learning. Stories are an elusive human invention which have been a source of considerable research and reflection which is of interest to this project.

## Stories

Stories are prevalent and common to the human communication (Coles, 1989) and Newman (2006) noted how people gain and retain a stance in social and political life through stories. Rimmon-Kenan (2006, p.10) suggests two significant characteristics. The first characteristic is that a story is a *longitudinal sequence of events* and the second is that this *sequence of events are told by a teller*. This was taken further by subsequent researchers who looked more at the effects of stories and their performative characteristics in being offered to an invited audience with the common enough possibility of being profoundly moved and even enchanted.

For Frank (2000, p.354) stories re-affirm and re-construct relationships; they can provide a kind of healing; they are told to be heard, to be listened to, to capture the imagination and move the heart and to find others who will answer its call for a relationship. For him story has a pedagogic dimensions in its agenda to shape and create relationships and that this was effected through its common elements and processes. Bochner (2002, p.80) suggested that stories had four common elements: First of all people were represented as *characters* in the story, secondly there was some kind of *plot* with a critical moment which resolved the dramatic tension. The third element was *time*. Stories place things in temporal order. Finally stories have to have some kind of *point* which can often have a pedagogic dimension.

Manfred (2005, N2.2.2) suggested that stories needed to be separated into *fictional* and *nonfictional* forms. Fictional forms present an imaginary narrator's account of a story that happened in an imaginary world. It is appreciated for its entertainment and educational value and for possibilities that could possibly occur. Nonfictional or factual narrative presents a real-life person's account of a real-life story where there is a claim that the described events actually happened although it is understood that such 'real' events in a story have become *represented real events* under the perspective and concerns of the story teller.

Ideas of the power of stories referred to by Frank above, is taken further by Baumeister and Newman (1994, p. 679). They distinguished two general categories which are not mutually exclusive. Firstly stories aimed at *affecting* listeners in some way. This has often been magnified by the marketing and advertising industry so that the story becomes subsumed in an agenda of persuasion. The second category refers to stories whose main objective is as a way of *making sense* of experiences. It is useful in narrative research to be aware of the kinds of narrative motivations being pursued by the teller of a story as well as the kind of knowledge she or he is seeking to create.

Stories will often have these affective and rational elements seeking to capture the imagination and move the heart of the listeners. The more the story works to evoke the imagination and the heart the more it can be referred to as focusing on imaginal knowing, Heron's second modality of knowing and learning mentioned above.

The more these themes have a certain gravitas concerned with major themes of life, the more such stories become linked with 'mythopoesis' (Bradbeer, 1998; Dirkx, 1998; Hillman, 1981; Holland. & Garman, 2008; Macdonald, 1981)

## Mythopoesis

The exotic sounding language of 'mythopoesis' is chosen deliberately in an attempt to harness the transformative power of a particular use of the imagination which links strong images which can inspire and mobilise people (like for example, a calm mother with her baby or a dishevelled rescue worker carrying a wounded person from a disaster site; an attentive nurse beside a patient, a scientist in her or his laboratory, an energetic teacher surrounded with enchanted children, an enthusiastic university lecturer with attentive students) with so-called archetypal images that have come to be called 'mythic'. These have been said by Jung (cf. 1957, 1963, 1969) and expounded by one of his many interpreters, Joseph Campbell (1988, 1990a & b, 1991) to reside somehow in the

human unconscious mind – even a collective unconscious, which individuals particularly those who share many elements of culture and language, are said to share. The link between evocative and generative images which evoke an imaginal response in students – like for example an admired mentor or a famous researcher represented in art – and archetypal images they may share, can have strong influence through non rational, powerful imaginal messages felt in the person's heart or emotions through moods such as fear, exaltation, desires and the like.

### Evoking Informal Learning: Imagistic Story Telling

The fruits of informal learning can be seen in people's attitudes and aspirations and currently infiltrated by commercial media advertising which carries powerful and often seductive images and interpretative stories promoting consumption, appearance and competition. It was this last that made us think that these stories and images that underpin our society needed balance to promote a deeper and more creative critical and inclusive civilisation.

Listeners to a story move away from the bounded world of logic to the boundless world of imagination (Kearney, 2002; Willis 2008). They can be transported to the world of the story teller and become caught up in the events that unfold with their fears, joys and passions. Depending on inclination and resources, the listeners listen empathetically to the storyteller and celebrate achievement and grieve for losses and suffering.

We wanted to pursue this by setting up an informal learning centre which promoting a more convivial local (backyard) civilisation. Perhaps we could use stories of creative local convivial action carried out by group members or by someone known to the group member, as the main *civilisation* vehicle and a shared meal as a kind of working sign of the *conviviality* we wanted to promote. This leads naturally to our exploration of practice story telling at the Australian Centre for Convivial Backyard Civilisation (ACCBC).

### PRACTICE STORY EXCHANGES AT THE ACCBC

We have been meeting in Adelaide for more than a year to find out what people are doing which look like convivial backyard civilisation in small scale groups and institutions. Our three words: convivial backyard civilisation needed clarification since they fairly dripped with multiple meanings. *Conviviality* is about courteous, equitable, creative and compassionate living with splashes of joy and glee. *Backyard* is a partly metaphorical, partly real way of referring to small scale, self-determining individual and group action with high autonomy, responsibility and awareness. *Civilisation* refers to human culture expressed in collaborative social relations, balanced ecology, appropriate technology, built environments and institutions.

### The Challenge of Convivial Living in Seven Life Dimensions

This project suggests that a flourishing convivial civilisation needs to be balanced and enriched by existential and functional learning relating to seven main dimensions of human life. The *philosophical dimension* to foster wisdom; the *communication dimension* to foster human connection and understanding; the *economic dimension* to foster commercial and entrepreneurial life; the *inclusive dimension* to foster social justice and social order; the *biological dimension* to foster health and a sustainable environment; the *technological dimension* to foster creative 'making and repairing'; and the *expressive dimension* to foster aesthetic activities – art and ritual

All of these informal engagements can need constant fine tuning and repair. And as citizens we need to learn appropriate responses to various challenges by discovering and critiquing relevant information, gaining relevant skills and by adopting various forms of personal modification at different times and situations.

This paper is a work in progress exploring how creative learning responses can be fostered across the seven different dimensions of human

life mentioned earlier by a local group members sharing stories of activities of convivial backyard civilisation. The practice stories traverse philosophising; communicating; making, spending and sharing resources; understanding, using and controlling power, making and using tools and technology; promoting health and sustainability in world ecology and lastly expressing ideas, images and feeling in art.

### **The Practice Story Exchanges in Action**

Our last ACCBC meeting was about hospitality in convivial backyard civilisation. We met at a little Besser brick Community Centre in the South West of the Adelaide City on the second Sunday morning of May. I've changed their names but of course they know each other already and have heard the stories. This Sunday, after the usual connecting, and the preparing of the meal and coffee, each participant was invited to give the five minute story they had prepared around their experience or that of someone known to them about a hospitality practice that reflected convivial backyard civilisation in some way.

Angela a working artist and art therapist had recently spent time in hospital and told her story taking the convivial initiative by welcoming the nursing staff with a special name badge she had fashioned that linked her name and profession as an artist. Bunny brought up the challenges to hospitality particularly at the end of life and real forms of conviviality when the patient's life is unbearable. Bertie mentioned the physical effort required when hospitality is taken seriously. He reminded us of when we had been morning tea guests at the house two of our members Dorothy and Peter and the amount of effort they seemed to have casually expended to create a rich convivial celebration. He recalled the plenty of their groaning table, the guests happily bunched together with dishes being passed, glasses refilled, cooking in the background and lots of talk. We mentioned the risks of hospitality and Bertie told a story about a party he had once organised when he was a

young youth worker more to which almost noone came. He said that he could still see the coloured lights swung between the trees in his garden and the empty seats. He then read a poem (Willis, 2002, p.18) about the risks of invitation which follows:

### **Invitation**

*I risk inviting; I want you here.  
And when you come I feel enriched, believe  
you feel the same.  
If you refuse,  
that says  
I have no worth to you,  
And if, when you agree to come, you don't show,  
your absence makes a wound and I fall lower  
than before I invited.*

*No-one invites for fun; if you say 'drop in if  
you like'  
that is not a real inviting; there's no risk, a  
bob each way  
against rejection.  
Inviting is for keeps; a friend, a lover in pursuit:  
no half measures. It's black or white,  
not blurred or luke warm.  
And guests know the rules to dress up, cradle  
the eggshell of friendship  
at your place;  
And trust that while you stand  
unarmed and welcoming your guests will not  
turn;  
refuse to dance the party's tune; humiliate and  
bring you down  
and turn your grapes of bounty  
into ash.*

Olga's story was about the joy of looking after and making special food for her guests. A few of the participants particularly those who have not developed cooking skills were impressed and a tad by this convivial energy. Germaine spoke of a very different hospitality when she had gone with Giles to an arty film and had been welcomed into his knowledge and appreciation which she saw as a convivial form of hospitality. Cecilia who was interested in and enchanted by music

told a story of the hospitality of her family who on her recent major birthday practiced pieces she had arranged for them which they then played at her birthday celebration. Rocco told a moving story of the hospitality of animals and humans and how animals can look after each other as well as humans. His story of the survival of a lizard whose foot was accidentally impaled by renovators, fed by another lizard evoked a kind of image of a broader conviviality than human alone.

Annie told the story of the hospitality built into her rural community and the welcoming of people and collaborators around their annual festival. The relationships seem to her to have lasted long after much of the town festival was lost to memory. I was able to think of Jonathon Haidt's (2006, 2012) research into competing groups breaking down a little by members of such groups being drawn into the larger project group which recruited members of several usually pretty separated if not slightly hostile, associations. In this case, the town celebration recruited members of nearly every small group who reported a much higher level of friendship among many members of different groups.

Annie's story was witty and well crafted. I could see the attention of the group members which had been somewhat lacking while some of the others had told their stories. It was the contrast between the impact of hers and some of the others that raised a key issue in this approach. In my reflections on the nature of story summarised in an earlier part of this paper, I had not realised that stories have intrinsic challenges for the storyteller. The imaginal world of stories requires awareness of and familiarity with its protocols. The beginning, the middle and the end; the sense of sequence and plot; evoking 'sensed experience' – the sour taste, the smell of lemons, the sound of a train, the accidental touch and the sight of an angry red face. These aroused sense snapshots will enrich precise description and their capacity to hold attention and provide enrichment to answers like: What actually happened? Where was it? Who was there? What was the scene like? What was it like? How did you feel?

It was useful to be aware of the 'enchanting capacity' of story-telling to evoke informal learning and to realise that story telling of this strength needs a degree of skill and awareness that accomplished story tellers seem to manifest and to which others aspire.

## CONCLUSION

People have been exchanging stories of different elements of a convivial backyard civilisation and it is their stories that have built up a kind of rough composite installation on convivial backyard civilisation as a work in progress – a kind of working oral history drawing from stories of real life.

We are still working with the format. The action story exchanges and the experiences behind them have aroused our interest and aspirations. We don't know to what extent these practice story meetings are acting as an informal learning environment and what kind of imaginal incubation is being generated from monthly meetings and the quality of exchanges and action stories over that time.

We want to start a website to load stories and conversations and various reflections on the previous sessions. We could see a significant deepening in the convivial idea of hospitality as the welcome of the guest in so many ways. What we won't know for a while is to what extent we have actually taken up the informal learning on offer in these practice stories; to what extent will the impact of practice stories reach from the mythopoetic, the capture of the deep 'gut level' imagination, to actual choices to put the visions into one's own 'backyard' action

The ACCBC is still very much on a kind of quest in the search for a deeper imaginal as well as theoretical understanding of convivial backyard civilisation and its de facto practitioners. There is room for further study and historical reflection and of course more stories of activities under the ACCBC ideal

Informal learning evidently depends on the quality of the general environment in which people live and this is where the hard thinking

and investigation about humane elements in a Convivial Backyard civilisation needs to continue. It would be good to hear from other practitioners.

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