

PEOPLE, PLACES AND LEARNING

Helen Sheil

INTRODUCTION

In speaking to you today about the Centre for Rural Communities I also wish to share with you some understanding that has developed for me along with the establishment of the Centre for Rural Communities. Personally I have had to ask myself seriously why this is important to me, and slowly answers have formed past the stage of a gut reaction of because I like living in the country, for I also enjoy the anonymity of the city, past the answer of the need for choice of lifestyle. I have found answers in a range of places, from rural people I have worked with, students and colleagues, across a range of disciplines, friends and communities. From Australian writers also struggling to use English words to describe this country and their relationship with it - a sense of acceptance, a celebration of place a partnership. So today I wish to share with you briefly, the process of identifying that things were not as they should be for rural communities, the questions this raised and the action which has followed.

Firstly, because this is central to my thinking, let me introduce myself, and locate myself within time, place and interest.

Helen Sheil, a rural woman from Gippsland in Victoria (slide) I currently live and work in South Gippsland so the pictures I brought depict places and people from that region. I live on a range, currently known as the Strezlecki's - wet, fertile, steep country which once grew the tallest timber in the world, or so the signs erected in bare paddocks tell us. These massive forests of which there exist remnants in the national parks (slide) over time produced great coal fields, and consequently I also live on the edge of coalfields and significant power industry with all the associated infrastructure, industrial, environmental, and health issues.

Previously I lived and worked in East Gippsland, also timber country, more remote, and to my mind, more beautiful. I include this time of my life for it was while living there in isolated circumstances that I became passionately interested in the role of rural education, particularly rural women's learning and ways in which this learning was immediately used for the survival of rural communities.

I have worked for over 20 years in the field of community development, only entering the formal arena of education in the last decade. (I believe it took me that long to believe that it had anything to offer after my own experience of schooling). But my view has changed and I am a great advocate of education in its many facets. I now see formal and informal learning as doorways to exciting personal growth and vibrant and sustainable communities.

Like many of you I have a great love of the places in which I live and work, each place has its uniqueness, and particular characteristics that often elude description. At times I have also been overwhelmed and isolated by the constant battles of life in a rural community, the struggles which often originated from elsewhere impacting severely on our community. The difficulty of gathering energy to try to communicate, to find someone who understood, who was prepared to listen, and hopefully to learn and act, while at the same time maintain an income and lifestyle which were often in dollar terms marginal and demanding in terms of time and emotional support.

So that's a bit about me, and where I come from. The pictures will continue just to show you around South Gippsland - the place and some people. There are any of the big black holes of the open cut because for the purpose of a definition of rural the Centre has defined rural communities as those with a population of under 10,000 people. This framework provides some commonality in ways of working, and issues faced by this size community.

In preparing this paper and in the establishment of the Centre three questions are commonly asked.

- 1) Why rural and how is it different? What's wrong with this question and how to ask it differently? (people in urban areas have similar problems)
- 2) What is significant about a place to people and the way in which they learn?
- 3) What can a Centre for Rural Communities offer?

Why rural and how is it different?

(This is a trap and how can we turn it around?)

As soon as we begin to explain that our communities are smaller, distances are greater, we have difficulty fitting quotas. Only this many children for a kindergarten, or as you can hear from Beverley Richard and Marcia Harrison from Munro in Gippsland, who ran a rebel school for two years, not enough children for the school. Or one lawyer to share between the school committee, sports clubs, economic development association etc. Same hard working fund raisers with kids at kinder, primary school, scouts and netball. To say nothing of deb balls and school camps.

What immediately happens during such a discussion is that urban is the norm, and rural is defined as problematic!!

For me, this situation where I am immediately on the defensive, having to justify why there is a need to have more than one centralist way of working and thinking, has a parallel. The other arena where I go through this process constantly is that of being a woman. Why a women's health centre, why women's education, why women's networks!!!

Just as women's experience of life is different to men's, and therefore requires different structures, different processes and different language so too does rural experience differ from our urban counterparts. Rural is not mini urban. Experiences in rural communities are different. What is needed is different thinking, different structures, different processes and a sensitivity to the knowledge of place, people and their relationship to each other.

In 1994 when Katrina and Jonathon Sher (Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: Rural Development as if Australia's Rural People and Communities Really Mattered) were invited by Department of Primary Industries and Energy to prepare a paper on rural development through education and entrepreneurship, they discovered that in fact Australia did not have a national rural development policy. Rather there existed 13 pernicious, yet surprisingly pervasive Australian Myths: (ibid page 3).

- 1) Rural Australia is peripheral to the Australian nation.
- 2) Farmers and farming communities are the alpha and omega of rural communities
- 3) What is best for agricultural industry is the same as what is best for rural Australia.

This absence of government policy impacted severely on rural Australia (defacto rural policy) and has resulted in situations of on the one hand having record profits/export earnings from primary sector and record numbers of traditional primary producers, and business dependent of them trying to survive.(ibid page 7)

If it was thought out this is essentially flawed logic. Sadly though many of us could think of examples where this has occurred. The message is that:

Rural commodities may be important - but rural people and communities are not.

This message of rural being problematic becomes ingrained, many of us have even been grateful for the handouts we have received from government policy in the social and education arena predicated on a deficit model of Australian rurality that is overcoming/compensating for numerous iperceived rural disadvantages.

Rural is not a drain on society as banks, telecommunications, government etc would have us believe, rural Australia is the asset rich contributor to the national economy.

Rural Australia is the source of food self-sufficiency for the entire nation. Australia is not dependent on any other nation for a stable and diverse supply of good quality, low cost foods.

Rural Australia is the well-spring of national self-sufficiency in terms of virtually all other raw materials/natural resources.

Rural Australia is the cornerstone of Australia's export economy. Rural Australians are responsible for 2 out of every 3 dollars Australia earns from international trade.

Rural Australia is the foundation of a disproportionately high share of Australia's economic assets and economically productive activity. (banks, insurance companies, sharebrokers and government bureaucracies generate no new wealth , new wealth is created by extracting or cultivating primary products - rural activities).

Rural Australia is the safety valve taking pressure off the cities - and the preferred place for Australian city dwellers seeking to change their residence.

Rural Australia is the primary location of renewal and recreation for most Australians.

Rural Australia is the touchstone of Australia's international identity and cultural distinctiveness. (the Outback, the Reef, unique fauna and flora, traditional Aborigines). The Olympic Games and Tourism will build on this.

This work of Sher and Sher (pages 6-9) debunks some of the common myths about rurality, and challenges rural communities and those with responsibilities for rural communities (there are not many portfolios that this leaves exempt) to change their perspective. Rural Australia is not peripheral to Australia - it is central.

That was the first myth that rural Australians are peripheral to the nation. The next two Sher and Sher have responded to just as extensively and if you are interested copies of the paper are available. But today has a different focus - the point of including that work is to give ammunition to answer the question, 'Why rural?' within the economic framework which supposedly is the deciding factor determining the decline of the rural communities in which we live.

Moving on to the second question. If rural communities are important in the big picture at a local level how do we understand this. What is significant about a place to people and the way in which they learn?

Those living and working in rural communities have a particular relationship to the place in which they live. Think about this for a moment. Do you think of yourself as being a figure moving across an insensitive backdrop, a landscape - or do you have a more personal, interactive relationship with where you live. In Judith Wright's words earth, sky, water, tree, spirit - are part of a human continuum (in Tacey p. 148) a concept difficult to translate into English. Yet it is certainly more than landscape. How much more is still an unknown quality - an evolving knowledge, but not one that is difficult to tap into. All that is required is to put the person and place at the centre of learning.

My experience of learning, my own, my children's and as an adult educator in community development is based around a philosophy that learning needs to be personalised, internalised to be more than learned information. Like much well grounded learning I learnt this the hard way. I was very good at learned knowledge, I had an excellent memory when younger and the school system allowed me to move through almost totally in a vacuum. Information came from another country, written by adult males, given to me in chunks to learn. If questions were asked, the answers were in the books, not in my life. I could regurgitate them word for word!! My learning had no link to life, and I did not know what to ask to make the link. What a waste and how boring for my teachers as well, I'm sure.

I no longer have an excellent memory, various aspects of my lifestyle have robbed me of that, but I have had the great pleasure as an adult of being involved in learning that developed my understanding, my experienced learning. The creation of insight which does not disappear after an exam, it is part of me.

Involvement in learning is the key. A student, with whom I had the privilege to work, described herself as a repeat offender of the school system. This student also found in adult education the opportunity to take part in the debate - a change which transformed her attitude to learning. "I never learn if I'm not part of the conversation", is an expression of Debbie's that constantly goes through my mind when I am planning classes. Being in the picture, able to include her own life experience, to locate herself within a continuum, not an external or marginalised other, made the difference between someone who dropped out, and a student who is now constantly learning, applying that knowledge and growing.

The challenge then for us as educators is to consider how we can provide learning environments that create a space for the local reality within which we live and work, and for the people with whom we work. What are the qualities of the place you live in, the people who live there now, who lived there in the past, think too about the land and place before European settlement. Many of you will already work in a way that interacts constantly with the reality of people and place through your particular discipline: art, politics, history, geography, marine life, industry, lifestyle, economics etc. In my own work I still constantly battle between, bursting to tell of some wonderful thinking, work that I have come across, and that longer process of being able to ask questions, and listen actively to what people have to contribute for then we both learn, are healed, often transformed by the adding of new knowledge.

There are many examples in Gippsland of this dynamic form of learning : 2 examples of programmes with local content in Gippsland. One from the past, one present.

The first is the Rural Women's Programme, begun by Victorian College of Agriculture and Horticulture in Sale, and carried on by East Gippsland Community College of Tafe.

The concept of this programme taught by Helene Brophy was based on the principles of:

- working locally with groups of women.
- the content based on examining through a practical example the role of major institutions such as family, church, school, bureaucracies, law, medicine etc and their impact on our lives.
- process: each group spent time identifying and agreeing on an issue of common interest in that particular community.
- skill development proved to be fast track into research skills, communication, publicity, report writing, presentation, networking etc. Work produced was equally of 2nd/3rd year University level.
- the reason. Motivation came from topics chosen by the group and in which they were keenly interested.

Some of the topics chosen were:

The effects of chemicals/sprays on ourselves, partners and children. (This was in a crop dusting area where a number of women in the group, or their friends had recently miscarried all at different stages of pregnancy, other children had suffered diarrhoea, mild-tempered partners had been irrational and violent, cattle developed sores).

A phone in on the Tax Summit. Women were concerned at how they would be affected by changes to taxation. Hundreds of women phoned in. The information was collated and relayed on to Canberra.

A phone in on Domestic Violence. (phone ins were a realistic strategy as women in East Gippsland lived many hours travelling time apart).

Some groups wanted to work on projects that involved physical skills, not just intellectual knowledge:

the researching and reconstruction of an old whaling boat was an interest of another group.

the establishment of an acrobatic troupe and the production of a women's health kit.

The list went on. Over 300 women participated in small communities throughout Gippsland, meeting weekly, or fortnightly, actively involved in developing their own learning.

The second example has a different focus but again its success and high participation have some characteristics in common. It is a locally managed project, those involved direct the content. The model provides a base from which to develop further.

"Gourmet Professional Development" is the title of this project from South and West Gippsland, not as you might think anything to do with the taste buds, but rather the icing on the cake, the upgrading of skills to meet the multiple demands on teachers in small communities.

Rural teachers face the common barriers of distance, time and cost if they attempt to enter into professional development, plus of course the constant issue of translating urban content to rural situation. The Management team was able to audit local skills, and match this with the concerns of staff which were commonly raised at staff gatherings. This quite elaborate programme has evolved whereby schools in West and South Gippsland have formed a partnership with "Gourmet Professional Development" which in turn has formed a partnership with the School of Education at Monash University (Gippsland Campus).

The result is that currently 800 teachers are enrolled in this project participating in skill development in:

Computing in school the curriculum
Basic Counselling skill
Catering for individual Differences in the Classroom
Intermediate Counselling Skills
Maths
Reading and Writing in the Primary School Classroom
Healthy Living - Time and Stress Management
Bright Sparks - Gifted Education
Developing Skills for leading teachers
Managing Classroom Behaviour
Lote - Japanese (What can you do after the lote teacher leaves?)
Technology Education in your primary Classroom etc.

Each subject is advertised, with a profile of the lecturer(s) expertise and qualifications, fee and enrolment details.

This model of learning is essentially interactive. A "listening" a team will meet with individual schools to ascertain what issues they may have concerns with and how skill development may assist. Consequently the programme is a dynamic and evolving one which is receiving extremely positive feedback. Schools become the central resource for their own learning and for the community.

For anyone interested I will leave a copy of details on this project with Peter de Plesse, or there are a couple of copies people may wish to have a look at and take down details for further information.

Many of you will have your won stories to share. At this stage we will break for 10 minutes. In this time could you introduce yourself to two other people you may not know, go through the steps of locating yourself in time, place and interest. Think about the characteristics of the place you come from and explore strategies you may use to link in to the extraordinary learning that comes from adding this reality to learning.

For some of you the process will be automatic and you will have wonderful strategies and stories to share, swap names and addresses and continue the dialogue after the conference, we all need this kind of support in what can be a very demanding occupation. There will be others who work in different ways, of course there is always more than one way. This happens to be one I chose to share.

Let's move on to the core of this presentation.

What can a Centre for Rural Communities offer?

In their work on a reconstruction for rural Australia Sher and Sher proposed a number of strategies with education as a major player. However what has stuck with me over the years since hearing their presentation was the introduction which claimed the need for conspiracy.

To conspire merely means to plot together toward a common goal:

Conspiracy in favour of rural Australia. People ought to be staying up late at night not only across the country side, but also in state capitals and Canberra - scheming together to advance the interests of Australia's rural people and places.

Well in Gippsland, a number of people came together to attempt to do just that, largely from an educational background with a common experience of living and working in rural communities, seeing their decline, the exodus of skills and services from those communities, and the slow deadening and decline of areas rich in resources. The current status is terminal for many small communities.

Just prior to this a speaker from Glasgow had addressed a group of community development students about the structure of The Scottish Community Development Centre. A centre linked to the university but independent from it, working with the new local government authorities and communities on areas of concern. The structure and operation of the Centre for Rural Communities stems from this model. The Management Committee will be drawn from individuals and groups living and working in small communities. Relationships with Universities and other institutions will be established as working partnerships. This is the only rural centre with management by rural communities.

The working group to establish the centre has been meeting in various localities across Gippsland for approximately two years, discussing the concept of a Centre for Rural Communities, writing up a document to formalise the process of working with rural communities in this interactive manner. The Centre will see its geographic priorities to rural communities in Gippsland, then to rural Australia, and then to rural communities internationally.

A consultancy was carried out with small communities throughout Gippsland to discuss the concept, to hear concerns and ascertain the reaction to the proposal of a Centre for Rural Communities. From the meetings set up in small communities patterns emerged. People told stories of the high unemployment rates in their town, the closing of services, the small number of young people left in the area, the increasing problems with drugs and alcohol, the high suicide rates, difficulty in responding to domestic violence, the lack of access to training etc. Due to their isolation from each other each community claimed the worst situation.

As resources were withdrawn, each community attempted to deal with these issues on their own. Very few had either the structure, or the history of working co-operatively across their region, or the state, to look at these issues. Alliances across country areas, across disciplines, across the state or nation, even internationally have almost disappeared at a time when we are on the edge of losing, perhaps for ever, the infrastructure and populations so vital to the well being of rural Australia, and as I have argued previously, the well being of the nation.

My own experience of assistance to rural communities, has generally followed a formula. Useful if managed locally with adequate resources, (which can include outside knowledge, funding and contacts) Expensive (in dollar and community terms) if dropped on that community from outside. State and Federal Governments have danced in the minefields as they have responded to pressures from a particular lobby group only to find that broad band legislation across diverse rural communities frequently impacts adversely on a community with a very different economic base.

Understandably rural issues frequently get put into the too hard basket for bureaucrats and policy makers do not have the time, or resources to work with each individual community to understand the complexity of impact of change. This for me was embodied in a saying by a rural worker, a statement that was regarded as a paradox, a local joke. "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you!".

Yet models and ways of working that are bi-partisan do exist in Australia. Landcare is an excellent example of local management with state and federal resourcing, as is the Rural Women's Network. Both are cost effective structures with outcomes that have been recognised locally, nationally and internationally.

Many of us would also be aware of the short term fixes operating as one off initiatives. A consultancy, a report. External consultants with no knowledge of local dynamics, necessarily take time to appreciate the complexity of an issue, and are often limited in time and with whom they speak. The production of a report usually ends the consultancy. Local people rarely meet and discuss the issue with other proponents, at the end of the consultation, locals are no more informed, and little new knowledge is gained from the process.

Reports on their own rarely result in change. When I left my youth affairs position in East Gippsland, I cleaned out my cupboard of youth reports. Six large boxes! Little had changed for young people in rural Australia in that time, each report tabled similar concerns and change was still awaited. Local people knew the issues, knew the barriers, had constructive solutions to implement change, but had few avenues through which to be heard, or given the recognition of being a significant group to meet with.

The proposal of a Centre for Rural Communities was welcomed for it came at a time when rural communities were becoming more and more isolated from services and representation in any regional planning forums, or through government (for those of you not from Victoria local representation to local government is currently still suspended in rural areas).

Strategies the Centre for Rural Communities would offer include:

Network Function: The Centre considers that the networking function is the most important aspect of its work. Information sharing is not a static one way process. It is dynamic, changing and interactive. The range of mediums by which this will occur recognises the many ways in which groups and individuals access and share information. Personally, by face to face contact with those that they trust, by print media - newsletter, by radio, teleconferencing, computer bulletin boards and E - mail.

Clearing House Function: This will involve the development of a data base of information that will be of strategic and particular use to rural communities and others who support the goal of sustainable rural communities. (Sharing of examples as you have been doing today)

Action Research Function: Participatory Action Research is highly compatible with the Centre's Statement of Purposes. It will increase the skills and the capacity of rural communities to respond to change creatively and constructively. (i.e. with planning, dignity and positive outcomes.

Information Research Function: Secondary to the action research function. The Centre will provide information that is relevant to their activities, their planning, policy and development.

Training Function: Training of people and groups within rural communities is an essential component of communities whose vision is to be sustainable in the long term.

Advocacy Function: The advocacy function is a specific response to needs identified during the consultancy. Many communities expressed a sense of being unable to be heard. It is also likely that there will be an expectation by government and others that the Centre can speak on behalf of or for rural communities on occasions.

Partnership Projects Function: Projects are the method by which the Centre will facilitate the long term sustainability of rural communities. Priority will be given to projects that extend the skill base in rural communities.

The Centre for Rural Communities will provide a forum where questions such as 'Why rural?' are not asked, and we no longer have to survive on the disabling deficit model. Rather the actual issues facing rural communities can be focused on.

Rural communities have always had to be strongly independent, resourceful and creative. Establishing a partnership with the Centre for Rural Communities would be a way of working with rural communities on their terms, at their pace and in a manner that establishes a knowledge base, develops skills and resource that all levels of government can access to ensure well formulated policy.

To this stage such a resource has not existed in Australia. With the proposed strategies the Centre for Rural Communities can work positively with the diversity of economies and lifestyles that comprise rural Australia. Diversity is the very strength of rural Australia, and will ensure its sustainability in the long term.

Thank you to the conference organisers who saw the link for such a centre to education. As you participate in the various aspects of the conference do give thought to strategies that you may introduce locally to place rural at the centre of learning. Anyone interested in being involved with the Centre, or being on the mailing list I am happy to take names and contact numbers over the period of the conference.

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