

# IMAGINATIVE EDUCATION: NURTURING OUR SOCIAL ECOLOGY

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*The pattern which connects:* Why do schools teach almost nothing of the pattern which connects? ... What's wrong with them? What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all four of them to me? And me to you? And all six of us to the amoeba in one direction and to the back-ward schizophrenic in another?

—Bateson 1988: 8

There is a story which I have used before and shall use again: A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private large computer. He asked it (no doubt in his best Fortran), 'Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?' The machine then set to work to analyse its own computational habits. Finally, the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper, as such machines do. The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words: THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY.

—Bateson 1988: 13

## Introduction

Here I want to work with imagination as a quality of relationship rather than something that is perceived or asserted or experienced individually. This identifies imagination as 'something I am participating in'. The focus is not on a thing. It is on a process of participation, of being in or becoming through relationship. It is in this respect a relationship that arises through 'the pattern which connects'. When that subject matter is enriched through inquiry into the quality of the relationship opportunities to tease out meaning are extended further. Meaning is constructed or imagined rather than seen or argued or encountered. This identifies imagination as a form of knowing and reflection upon the process of imagining as a form of epistemological inquiry. Any such inquiry has ramifications beyond the desire to know. Knowledge arises in context and inquiry is informed by consciousness. In this regard, 'we make a world for ourselves by living it'

(Maturana & Varela 1987). This sort of radical constructivism suggests, via von Glasersfeld that “knowledge does not reflect an 'objective' ontological reality, but exclusively an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience” (cited in Whittaker 2003). Thus, it is through the experiential compounding of meaning that imagination constructs a way of living.

A focus on imagination, relationship, constructivism and context has marked the Social Ecology program offered at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) since 1988. From its earliest days Social Ecology at UWS emphasised an integrated, participatory approach to learning. This has come to be discussed in terms of ‘ecological thinking’.

Ecological thinking leads us to the view that we are part of the systems in which we operate, and we cannot avoid taking responsibility for the impacts we might have (even ‘inaction’ has a consequence). Because we cannot place ourselves completely outside our contexts, we need to also explore non-analytical and more subjective ways of exploring them (Social Ecology Postgraduate Student Handbook 1995).

Courses in ‘Social Ecology’ are offered through several organisations. The most widely known are those offered by the Institute of Social Ecology in Vermont, USA. The institute was formed under the influence of eco-libertarian Murray Bookchin (1982), and continues thus, despite Bookchin’s 2006 death. The UWS model did not arise under Bookchin’s direct influence or that of any other prior model. It is a construction of disparate staff (bought together in the Hawkesbury Agricultural College prior to its inclusion in the University of Western Sydney), and reflects overlapping interests and the limited capacities of the institution to accommodate those interests. Nevertheless founding staff have identified several influences. These include Bookchin’s work but also that of the Tavistock Institute and Steiner’s Camphill movement. Alongside this the contributions of systems theorists such as Bateson (1972, 1988), von Foerster, von Glasersfeld, Maturana and Varela (1980, 1987) and Emery and Trist (1972) have been important. To this can be added the influence of deep ecology (Naess 1989) and archetypal theory (Hillman 1997). Of influence also was work in ‘systems agriculture’ at UWS (Bawden 1995), which carried several of the above influences and sponsored then housed initial developments in Social Ecology. The thread linking these, according to long term staff member David Russell, lies in understandings of “the co-evolution of any system and its environment”. This interweaving is pivotal in Russell’s response to the question “what is Social Ecology”.

Social ecology is ... a way of integrating the practice of science, the use of technology, and the expression of human values. It draws from any 'body of knowledge' in its pursuit of designing activities that result in self-respecting, sensitive and social behaviors, which show an awareness of social and ecological responsibilities (Russell 1994).

It is worth noting that it is the *activity* of social ecology, a way of imagining, integrating and designing, rather than any academic field or sub-field that Russell prioritises here.

In 1999, a time when UWS enrolments in undergraduate, postgraduate and research degrees in Social Ecology were at their peak, another staff member Brendon Stewart tried to identify Social Ecology as an academic domain. He positioned it within the overlapping fields of Jungian/archetypal psychology, "a 'sense of place', home making, 'imagination in action', community and organisational theory, the Gaia hypothesis, contemporary systems theory and a biology that favours symbiosis as the coherent and organising function of life" (1999: 4). At first glance this is a fractious bundle. Common ground can be found however in process, and the process is overwhelmingly situated in imagination, interpretation and representation. Metaphor rather than fact is to the fore: biology and culture interconnect through story, feelings are embraced and mystery is welcome. A decade or so years later content could be seen as similar, with less emphasis on psychology and organisational theory and more on education and environment. However, the structure of offerings, as determined by institutional pressures, social pressures and government policy does differ. This could be discussed in ecological terms: Social Ecology, at UWS, has always been a system in evolution, along with its environment. It could also be discussed in political terms. It is a clear example of the systematic inhibition of a marginal field of study in a time of ideological and budgetary constraint. A time in which, by the early 2000s, "the university's cultural missions have declined at the same time as leaders in politics, economics and the media have lost much of their capacity to understand the world in non-economic terms" (Newfield 2008:15).

In 2010 Social Ecology is located in the School of Education in UWS and taught to many students with little awareness of its history, its influences and indeed often its actual existence. Ironically, what was once a specialised study with its own suite of courses has become a small postgraduate program and a connected set of individual units, placed within a much larger undergraduate Education major.

## Imagination

Story and story telling have been central to the enactment of my own social ecology. I came to the work from a background in writing for performance and some of my strongest memories of working with the learning process have built from a story base. An earlier article, ‘Divining the Aleph’ (Wright 2001) is an example of this. It built inquiry through story, via reference to other story-tellers, and began in the following way;

Surely, when one takes the time to reflect upon it, reading and writing must be understood as something truly magical by those denied access to this form of knowing. To find meaning, to make connections and find knowledge, in something which another experiences very differently, could be seen in many ways. It could be seen as bluff... as trickery, even conspiracy, but once it is accepted that meaning is there to be found... it is inevitable that other questions will be asked. ...These are the questions asked by many ‘foreigners’, suddenly lost in a new language and... cultural reference system and they were, David Abram (1996) suggests, the questions forced upon members of ancient cultures when they first came into contact with phonetic writing systems. Abram tells us that “anthropological accounts from entirely different continents report that members of indigenous, oral tribes” who saw Europeans reading from books “came to speak of the written pages as ‘talking leaves’, for the black marks on the flat, leaflike pages seemed to talk directly to the one who knew their secret” (p.132).

This story telling works, in style and content, with the notion that how we think, interpret and experience is critical in the unfolding of our lives, and that the depths of this are easily overlooked. Humberto Maturana argues that, “what is said can under no circumstances be separated from the person saying it.... All observers are part of their observations” (Maturana & Poerksen 2004: 26). The same could be said of imagination. It, like story telling, is not a neutral process. It is a form of participation: a way of engaging with experience. Maturana’s work on the biology of cognition and consciousness draws attention to this by focussing on ways in which we, individually and collectively, ‘bring forth a world’. Maturana argues that this comes about through the process of ‘autopoiesis’.

*Auto*, of course, means ‘self’ and refers to the autonomy of self-organising systems; and *poiesis* - which shares the same Greek root as the word ‘poetry’ - means ‘making’. So *autopoiesis* means ‘self-making’. (Capra 1996: 97-98).

Here, science and imagination are married in a process marked by the participation of the meaning-maker and imagination is an integral element. Through autopoiesis patterns of relationship come to consciousness. Intelligence of this kind brings with it responsibility. Bunnell and Forsythe, who work with concepts developed by Maturana, argue that “intelligence is not primarily the capacity to solve problems; rather it is the capacity to participate in the generation, expansion and operation of consensual domains – domains of co-ordinations of behaviours and emotions through living together.” Inevitably ‘living together’ is influenced by emotional history but Bunnell and Forsythe assert, “we all have the bodyhood (including our nervous system) that enables intelligent development – that is our evolutionary inheritance” (2001: 159). From a biological perspective, imagination is an aspect of intelligence that has an intimate relationship to bodyhood.

Maturana and Varela argue the case for an equivalence between the molecular processes of life and the experience, interpretation and explanation of those processes. This work is taken further by sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995) in his theorising around ‘communicative systems’. Luhmann applies Maturana’s analysis of biological change directly to social relationships. Accordingly he describes society as autopoietic on the basis of the ‘communicative events’ that maintain it, thus acknowledging the centrality of the languaging systems that we participate in. Imagination is contained within such communication. It is what enables science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin (1989) to track a creative path, through science, to arrive at equivalent conclusions.

They [bodies] arrange things. They make sense, literally. Molecule by molecule. In the cell. The cells arrange themselves. The body is an arrangement in space time, a patterning, a process; the mind is a process of the body, an organ, doing what organs do: organise. Order, pattern, connect. Do we have any better way to organise such wildly different (dream) experiences as a half remembered crocodile, a dead great-aunt, the smell of coffee, a scream from Iran, a bumpy landing, and a hotel room in Cincinnati than the narrative? - an immensely flexible technology, or life strategy, which if used with skill and resourcefulness presents each of us with the most fascinating of all serials, *The Story of My Life* (p. 42).

Importantly, Maturana and Varela place this process in a physical domain. They situate cognition as ‘structurally coupled’ with its environment, suggesting that self, which is constantly informed by imagination, arises in relationship, and disturbances in the environment that contains that self prompt organisms to consistently re-imagine and re-

structure themselves, and as a consequence engage and behave differently in the world.

If, as is suggested here, we act in correspondence with an environment and consequences unfold leading to further action, imagination is crucial in this unfolding.

More recent work extends and strengthens this understanding. Gallese and Lakoff (2005), writing in the journal *Cognitive Neuropsychology*, assert that conceptual knowledge, of which imagination is a form, is embodied. (They contrast this with the view of imagination as meaningful because of its symbolic import.) This is a most powerful observation. Gallese and Lakoff argue that imagination is actually “mapped within our sensory-motor system”. They conclude therefore that “imagining and doing use a shared neural substrate.”

When one imagines seeing something, some of the same part of the brain is used as when one actually sees. When we imagine moving, some of the same part of the brain is used as when we actually move.... We can imagine grasping an object without actually grasping it... The reason is that imagination, like perceiving and doing, is embodied, that is, structured by our constant encounter and interaction with the world via our bodies and brain (2005: 2).

This is understood by ‘method’ actors. It is less well understood in mainstream education. Ironically, it may not be new knowledge. Philosopher and novelist Stephen Muecke argues something similar, inspired in part he says, by indigenous Australian metaphysics. Muecke asserts that “communicative events (like telling a story) do not bridge gaps, but are things that exist,” that a literary text is “defined through its active relations with other things, human and non-human, in a sustaining ecology... that storytelling is a way of keeping things alive in their place” (Muecke 2009).

## **Stories of Social Ecology**

In the sections that follow I want to offer four stories of constructions of social ecology. Some make more explicit reference to ‘social ecology’ than others but each is designed to extend or enliven a knowledge system: a network of understandings. The first discusses insights offered by a poet, Aaron Williamson. I imagine the story of Williamson as a metaphor for the construction of knowing through imagination. The second addresses a colloquium on ‘sense of place’ held north-west of Alice Springs in central Australia. Here imagination is spoken of as deeply embedded in

relationships with the physical world. The third describes a workshop conducted by an adult learning theorist on desire, enchantment and learning. The fourth describes processes, practices and responses to the intensive teaching model that is the basis of postgraduate coursework teaching in Social Ecology at UWS. These four stories, offered as interpretations rather than delineations, are intended to both stimulate and illuminate the imagination as well as provide insights into its functioning in diverse settings.

### 1. The deaf poet, sound and silence

Aaron Williamson is a performance poet. He is also profoundly deaf. While deaf, the subject matter of much of what he writes and performs is sound. I remember my introduction to his work. It was late on a Saturday afternoon and I was in the city. I was due to see a show by the writer, actor and director Stephen Berkoff. The show began at 8pm and I needed a bookshop to while away one of those hours with and something to read as I waited for the show to begin. I chose Williamson's book not because I knew anything of him or its content but because of a quote on the back cover. The quote read, "*a book is in the act of becoming. It arises from the futility of searching for its own components. Everything here is fastened into its rigid embrace, especially the futility of its search*" (Williamson 1993: 8).

The 'book' and its 'becoming' caught me. I liked the suggestion that a book, like a story or a performance or any sort of relationship develops a life of its own, that it emerges differentiated from its creator and the circumstances of its creation. I was also drawn to the notion of a book "searching for its own components" and the associated "futility" of that search. I bought the book.

Early in the opening section the poet announces, "*There is to be an embarkation.*" A beginning point. "*All is known, charted and gridworked beforehand.*" Hope flies, anticipation prevails. "*This is in the act of becoming*" (p. 8). The next five segments in the opening section are composed of overlapping images of 'becoming'. Williamson writes, the "*nib is tracing*", "*a mirage (is) beckoning*", "*a lightning-rod (is) trawling for ignition*", "*the text, snaking, arches along such devious twistings and self delusions towards incendiary gratification*" (p. 9-10).

Curiously now, as I write, I remember I did not learn Williamson was deaf until some time after this first encounter. When I made mention of his deafness above, I did it out of need, as a storyteller. For a considerable time, for the writer to be deaf or not did not matter. Despite the fact that

his deafness is central to his work, I found my way into his writing without any need to consider such a condition. Subsequently of course, it seems ridiculous that I did not appreciate it. I failed to do so because I was absorbed in his work. I felt so drawn that learning of his deafness came almost as a relief. It released me from the painfully compelling exuberance of his writing. Exactly how or when the impairment became apparent I am unsure. It was as if I, like Williamson, found it convenient not to focus on the obvious truth. "*The affliction: Don't mention it. Untalked around. It speaks itself*" (p. 22).

The relationships constructed by Williamson's deafness are inescapable. He lives them. But his relationship to sound is of particular interest. He invests the full energy of his imagination in it, something that he cannot have, and in so doing finds it, for himself. He writes of "*the sounds of words, trapped in the torso (that) continue with speaking. Silently.*" And of being "*Possessed by sounds... they have me... I feel them...I catch them before they reach out*". To him, "*the text is timpani/ the text is mallet*" (p. 37). For sound is not denied him. It rises from the ground, up his legs and resonates between his diaphragm and his stomach. This is a sensation he has learned to hear. It resonates alongside his own voice, which "is something I experience primarily physically, through the jaw, in the chest etc. rather than in the site of the inner ear" (personal communication January 11, 1995). Through imagination this experience attains such clarity that the purpose of his writing and performance becomes in part, his communication of his experience of sound. This can be especially confronting. Dyer (1992) describes his performance as a response to profound deafness mediated "not by the use of conventional body language, but by a new and affective 'language of the body'." It is, in Dyer's words, "a deeply felt cathartic experience... a process of public encounter with a most private and intimate anguish" (p. 113). Catling (1991) writes, "Williamson's body spasms are not emotional semaphore, but the violent pulse of the work... It is impossible to know if the moving, explosive purges of language that are spitefully contorting his body are generated from it, or its irritant cause."

Necessarily, any attempt to represent Williamson's performance in words runs counter to his intent. Williamson not only seeks to but needs to move beyond the verbal to imagine and give form to a means of communication he can become 'able-bodied' through. Williamson knows this. "I'd... like to emphasise that my disability is not deafness... but speech as it is used by others and which disables me in terms of social exchange... Language literally fails us and yet, we have no other medium, no other direction to turn" (personal communication January 11, 1995).

The relationships through which Williamson arrives at language enable him to appreciate both creative expression and the limits of abstract reason. This frustration is accessible to all of us who have sought to understand something beyond our grasp, but in reach of our imagination.

The limits of language are the limits of language. For here is the person before language. Not able, finally, to disappear. Capable of human form (p.67).

Herein lies the metaphor. Williamson's imagined relationship to sound, which is something I can access with ease, connects me to my imagination: my yearning. As Lakoff and Gallese suggest, such aspiration constructs further networks of relationship. This constructs also a knowledge system, a way of knowing. This, the aspiration and the imagination, is the base from which all knowledge systems grow, within and through the communities that are defined by them.

In social ecological terms, the relationships that sustain meaning, that in effect sustain community, are a consequence of a desire to look beyond appearances. The act, rather than the 'truth' or even the aesthetics of imagining is what is most important. It is this that 'brings forth' the realities we step into. Williamson's reality is different to my own because I am not deaf. But in creativity and imagination we both construct, enrich and connect our experience and consciousness.

## **2. Encountering 'country'**

The second Australian national colloquium on 'sense of place' occurred at Hamilton Downs, a disused cattle station turned youth camp, 70 kms north-west of Alice Springs in September 1997. In an article published some years later John Cameron and Craig San Roque (2002), the co-ordinators of the colloquium, tried to capture their thoughts on the event. Cameron was, at the time, a Senior Lecturer in Social Ecology at UWS. San Roque was a PhD student at UWS, a Jungian therapist and a long-time resident of Alice Springs. This section draws heavily on their conversation. The aim is to illuminate thoughts on the systemic construction of knowledge through place and to identify imagination as deeply invested in relationships to the physical environment.

Cameron describes the process of co-ordinating the sense of place colloquium as that of 'designing a social ecology': "the design of the conditions for effective social and environmental interaction using ecological principles" (p. 76). To understand how this was attempted it is

helpful to record some of the assumptions Cameron and San Roque brought to the event.

San Roque: In Australia, the country, or at least the Aboriginal country, is a seething mass of consciousness. Rocks, trees, watercourses, hills, ranges, all are impregnated with consciously held meanings, events, stories, all woven in intricate patterns of relationship and embodied in designs, song phrases and dance steps. This is a geographical literature which can be read once one has been taught the language and the perspective. Most of us who now live in Australia, and to some extent are the inheritors of this library, know of the existence of this inland sea of 'song lines' but are nevertheless profoundly unconscious of the subtle intimacy of the Creation Being's life and their role in keeping Aboriginal consciousness healthy and alert (p. 77).

Cameron: So, the interaction between Aboriginal and western senses of place must start from the recognition that Aboriginal people have a completely different conception of the relationship between consciousness and place than most Western people. Our first issue in designing the colloquium was how to bring out this difference, conceptually and experientially, with a varied group of visitors from academia (p. 77).

Thirty academics and research students, from Australia and overseas, were invited to the colloquium. As one of those invited my initial response was to the unexpected diversity of the environment: the richness and variety of plant, insect and bird life, the array of colours and the unflinching power of the MacDonnell Ranges that dominate the view to the immediate south. Of significance early also was the story, told by ethno-botanist Peter Latz, of the watercourse that runs beneath the sandy riverbed that traverses the property and feeds the underground forest that peeks its branches above the red-brown earth. This and additional stories told by Latz and other locals, including Aboriginal custodian Bobby Stuart, enlivened the environment and made it, for me, considerably more than harsh scrubland.

The majority of these stories were told in the opening sessions of the colloquium. A period described by Cameron as a "day and a half of explanation of the depth of layering of Aboriginal stories of place, and why it isn't culturally appropriate or realistic to tell more than the outer layer to visiting white folk at the outset" (p. 78). San Roque observed: "Some of the group were powerfully moved by the end of (this day and a half), and understood they were in a different country in which different forces were at work on them." He added, "there are techniques and protocols for becoming accustomed to Aboriginal country and there are

techniques (emerging) for recognising and decoding the communication from country” (p. 79).

One of the methods employed to extend this decoding was a voluntary ‘morning dream circle’. San Roque argued this “was to enhance the participants’ capacity to remain open and vulnerable to pre-conscious perceptions, to allow dream imagery to help in binding human consciousness to the place.” He situated this in the context of traditional Aboriginal practice. “It is the custom among some aboriginal groups to have what is often called in English ‘the morning news’, when soon after waking, people will chatter, mutter and pass on the news from the night, this includes the news from dreams” (p. 79-80).

Another of the methods used was gendered retreats and performances. For one day male and females separated and, under the guidance of locals, gathered to talk, sing, make music and learn. This sought to acknowledge, among other things, the depth of difference in traditional male and female relationships to place, something traditionally marked in Aboriginal communities. This separation culminated in performances by the men for the women and by the women for the men. It was followed, the next day, by a group excursion several kilometres up a nearby series of canyons to a natural waterhole.

‘Fishhole’ is a deep oval pool, and something completely unexpected in such a hot, dry location. It is accessible only on foot following a walk along a series of rising and falling, rock strewn, broad, deep, dry canyons. The pool, a third the size of a football field, nestles between overhanging rock formations and is a consequence of the temporary surfacing and settling of artesian water.

During the walk to Fishhole two conference keynotes were delivered. The first, on immigrant hardship in outback Australia from a rock platform mid-way up the face of a canyon. The second, on hidden and repressed parts of our culture, from the sandy bottom of a deep canyon. In each the physical place contained and ordered the content powerfully. In both Cameron observed, the speakers addressed “what lay beyond the visible and immediate” (p. 84) and in the process revealed something of the depth of engagement in place that had by then arisen.

In reflecting on the ‘design’ of the colloquium Cameron and San Roque write of the adaptive nature of the process. While Cameron argues the difficulties in containing the potentially deranging influence of country, San Roque argues the need to recognise the limits of human influence. “Fortunately” he says, “it (the design) wasn’t just left to you and I. The country acts as both deranger and container.” They agree finally that

design is far too strong a word for their accomplishment and their roles could be better described as ‘catalytic agents’.

Acknowledging this leads finally to the role of country. San Roque describes the colloquium as something arranged “so that we could begin to think about such things in a place that still has the power to influence human being and human thought.” Cameron agrees. “I have a feeling that although our planning and catalysing helped, it was the quality of this presence that was most important and most enduring. Perhaps this is one of the hallmarks of a social ecology” (p. 88). Cameron’s reference to the particular qualities of the place is the crucial observation.

Imagination seems almost too soft a term to describe the construction of meaning in such a location. Here imagination has also constructed responsibility and this is reflected in the custodial relationship to country accepted by Bobby Stuart. I remember most particularly a story he told to myself and three others in the final days of the colloquium. His story depicted a nearby section of the MacDonnell mountain range as a consequence of the interaction between a collection of mythological beings and as he told the story I could read the story in the mountain range too. I could read it in the rises and falls that he pointed to, in the outcrops and escarpments, in the ridges and valleys, in the wavering tensions of this fragile, fractured scape. I could see this person chasing that person and at that place making camp. I could see the tension of the pursuit and the weapons and the old men and the young girl. I could see the place where the spear was thrown and the place of transformation where death gives birth to new life, which then becomes myth. This is the place where the story becomes the mountain range: not *explains*, not *creates*, but *becomes* the mountain range. It becomes in the telling. Without the storyteller and the moment and the place of the telling I would not have encountered this mountain in this way. In telling the story of the range the custodian tells his story of its coming into being: the story he has learned, responded to, remembered, embellished perhaps, made his own such that he can pass it on to others, who will pass it on again in their own way, as I have here. The story creates the land, in relationship. Language imagines it as dust or myth (hence the importance of indigenous language as a reservoir of local social ecological understanding). In maintaining a story, a custodian maintains relationships that enrich being. In this case, near that particular mountain range and the particular land in its vicinity Stuart testified to its creativity: its divinity. To the degree to which we share in it, it is our creativity too: our cathedral, our text, our social ecology – alongside other cathedrals, other texts, other relational knowledge systems – embracing, encompassing and being expressed through us.

### 3. Re-enchantment

In November 2008 at a conference on “Critical Pedagogy and Participatory Learning for Social Transformation” adult learning theorist Peter Willis opened his presentation (titled “Evocative portrayal for Transformative Learning”) in characteristically irreverent style. “All you people talking about critical pedagogies, popular education and democratic education need to push your imagination,” he said. “What you should be talking about is social ecology.” In retrospect, Willis describes this as both an intellectual and an emotional assertion. First the intellectual rationale:

The big thing I discovered about social ecology is its wholeness and its location of human endeavours and struggles in the larger organic and inorganic world. I also felt that social ecology could be taken to include a caring approach that could encompass all forms of human action – loving, consuming, ploughing, building, bombing etc. I found that critical pedagogy, while important - even essential - for keeping some kind of protective guard over freedoms in human cultural life, seemed to me to be limited to largely logical, rational discourse and linguistic exchanges.

Then the emotional:

I think a feeling of academic inferiority may also generate my strong reaction to exclusively critical approaches. I often have felt a kind of superciliousness among critical pedagogy devotees as if there is a concern with being right rather than being good. My background seeks goodness and wisdom (personal communication April 17, 2009).

The workshop Willis constructed built around “dramatised ‘imagistic’ presentations of episodes of educational practice”. He drew the images from a work of cinema – the film *As it is in heaven* - and invited those present to “imagine themselves in actions, as educators, in similar circumstances.” An online reviewer responded to *As it is in heaven* in the following way. “The story is simple. The characters are stereotypical archetypes that are predictable in their every line and action... but at the core of this sincere film is something real and close to our hearts” (Retrieved 16, April, 2009 from <http://www.tonight.co.nz/reviews/asitisinheaven.html>).

The strong archetypal images and clearly identifiable role-types that the film works with make it ideal for Willis’ purposes. After viewing a segment of the film and discussing responses Willis set up a series of improvised interactions between workshop participants via representations of featured characters. This process was designed to “create vicarious imaginal experiences through presentation of dramatised educational

enactments to evoke in learner/educators their own imaginal responses". The intention is, according to Willis, "a transformative maturing process by which a person becomes consolidated in their self story and related self images and seeks to manifest strong authenticity and integrity in life" (Willis 2005). For an educator Willis says, such exercises offer a phenomenological encounter with the experience of educational work and an opportunity for students to "become aware of how... (such work) sits with their aspirations and self stories." Such processes are in turn critical, reflective, imaginative, constructive and an exemplar of learning.

The exercise was introduced as an abbreviated version of an extended workshop Willis runs with his adult education students. He describes this as 're-enchantment education', in that it "tries to focus the mind on the images that are placed before it... and allow space for an evocative response of imaginal acceptance, which is a kind of enchantment." The voyage to re-enchantment is he says, "the imagistic mythopoetic journey": an exploration of the stories that give meaning to our lives. It is 'open and emancipatory', collaborative, respectful and 'somehow embodied'. Timothy Leonard (2008) describes mythopoetic teaching in the following way.

Grounded in story telling, mythopoetic pedagogy strikes awe in the hearts of new learners and establishes the domain upon which they are focussed. It shows how reasoning is done within that domain and informs the community of the consequences of the... work.... Through engaging students in experiments, conversations and... presentations it challenges them to imagine the real, to illustrate their understandings, to critique each others' work, to participate in a drama that is truly beautiful (p. 90).

I encountered the term 'mythopoesis' - which Willis is led to through his interest in archetypal theory, Jungian 'individuation' and Heron's (1992) heuristics - subsequent to my introduction to Maturana and Varela's 'autopoiesis'. In autopoiesis 'self' is encountered also, but rather than through cultural myth or story it arises in the personal experience of embodied encounter. It is sensed or felt. Because personal experience is necessarily socialised through story, autopoiesis is also an extremely powerful encounter with the imaginal. It is an encounter that has allowed me, for example, to locate myself (via story) in culture and community through reference to my participation in a biological system that is interpreted by consciousness: to identify, validate, and mythologise my own encounters. Here intersections with mythopoesis arise. Through these processes I bring feeling, emotion, ideas, language and story to considerations upon experiences I have participated in. These acquire a mythic character when it is patterns rather than particularities that are the

focus. When reflection enables these stories to be placed in consciousness rather than simply enacted these become what Patrick Harpur (2002) calls ‘soulful’ encounters. “Without soul,” says Harpur, “without imagination and its daimons, the world is laid waste” (Harpur 2002: 284). It is this depth of engagement that leads Willis to prefer the descriptor ‘social ecology’ to ‘critical pedagogy’: a move beyond critical analysis, with its focus on elite and authoritative knowledge systems, towards a creative imagining of the encounters that enable the construction of resilient, sustainable relationships, through engagement and participation.

Through processes of this kind Willis, like Cameron and San Roque, acts as a catalyst for the emergence of a social ecology: a form of selfhood that is structurally coupled to the environment – the place, the community, the systems of thought – that contain the self and change as the self too is changed. This active embrace of the radical constructivist position that ‘we make a world for ourselves by living it’ places imagination in direct relationship to the future that we will, sooner or later, be inhabiting.

#### **4. Performing social ecology**

Willis’ acquaintance with Social Ecology at UWS began when he was invited in 2003 to a postgraduate residential as a ‘scholar in residence’. The residential, which is a 4-5 day intensive teaching block, is central to the pedagogy of Social Ecology postgraduate coursework degrees at UWS. It is run in the opening weeks of each semester and is designed to provide structure and content for the project work that students undertake in following weeks. That content comprises an introduction to ideas and processes as well as intellectual and emotional engagement with a community of inquiry: a social ecology. These events work through a performative structure, as described by performance theorist Richard Schechner (1977). Schechner describes performance as a process that arises between the activities of ‘arriving and ‘dispersing’. Positioned thus, performance moves through a series of phases. These commence with the recognition of a “breach (norm-governed social relations are challenged)”, and conclude with “reintegration or social recognition and legitimisation of irreparable schism (the breach is overcome or accommodated)” (p. 121-122).

Each residential commences with a ritual opening. Peter Willis described his experience of this in the following way.

The opening ceremony, with John Cameron’s dignified ritual of ecological awakens, respect and welcome, included moments of silence and that old greenie staple, ‘cleaning up’. I thought it had the effect of making us

‘valued visitors’, but as pilgrims of learning and active environmentalists (Willis unpublished notes 2003).

This is followed by an introduction, of sorts. Often, but not always, humour is a part of this. In 2003 a comprehensive set of interviews were used to inquire into students’ experience of the residential. One student (let’s call her Shirley) described her experience of this introduction in the following way:

With the first residential I had a real sense of stepping back and watching what was happening and feeling quite amazed and deciding the whole thing was like a mad hatter’s tea party and I wasn’t quite sure where I fitted in....

Another, Sarah, commented similarly;

... each time I have come to the residentials, particularly the first one of the year... the ways that staff have introduced themselves have been very creative... like it just drops all those barriers immediately.... they are accessible people, they have a sense of humour and they make mistakes and they are like everyone else. The ability of the staff to engage students is great.

A ‘theme’ is decided on for each residential. This informs the selection of guests as well as the pedagogy of staff, but its principal role is as a provocation to students. Themes have included: ‘*Questioning compassion: taking action*’; ‘*Radical action in a changing world*’; ‘*Beyond managerialism: Other ways of knowing and being*’; ‘*Inclusiveness: dilemmas, reflections, designs*’. The theme aids in the construction of Schechner’s ‘breach’. It challenges students to imagine relationships between the theme, their own experience and the learning they encounter. Importantly, the event allows plenty of time for learning beyond teaching sessions. Naomi described it thus:

(It comprises) learning by experiences, everyday experiences, be they exercises in the class, interaction with other people or interaction with myself... (these are) all teaching me things... the biggest thing I noted is that a lot of learning happens without words, just through being in the environment and absorbing it through my skin as well as through words and information.

Ruth, when asked to comment on possible changes to the course said, “I wouldn’t want to see (the) creativity and responsiveness and sensitivity and that spark (that is central to the course) somehow dispersed and mainstreamed.” This is evident also in observations of Peter Willis.

Whatever might be said tentatively of the cultural forces and themes at work in the general discourses of social ecology... in practice there was evidence of strong communitarian ideals and practices in the official structures and the way these were taken up: the communal rituals of welcome and farewell, the encouragement of participants to have their say at many times in the four days.... One always hopes that great things will come of these events and that the intense work of the staff who plan and set up the residential comings together will bear fruit. And of course the enriched quality of subsequent assignments and theses represents a major fruit (Willis unpublished notes 2003).

Following the intensive students return to their home and workplaces: to forests and farms, communes and suburbs, community centres, classrooms, councils, publishing houses, health practices, agricultural co-ops and more in Australia, New Zealand and sometimes beyond. When back home students undertake their individual project work, supported by online contact. Project documentation is finally submitted 3-4 months after the introductory event.

The power of a residential gathering such as the one I have been part of is its capacity to create a catalytic space for students to mature as activists and writers. On the one hand there are opportunities in the scheduled interaction times for students to clarify their ecological ideals and plan grounded ways to put these into practice. At the same time the academic program provides opportunities for students to explore more deeply the academic foundations of their work and of ways to write about and critique their social ecological projects (Willis unpublished notes 2003).

Schechner's performative analysis is helpful in a number of ways. It helps to appreciate the depth of commitment that so many students feel towards the process. Experiential encounter is central to this. Its transformative power lies in the immersion in process. Self and subject matter are constantly intertwined, as imagined by Shepherd, in the context of scientific research.

If we are conscious of how our research is symbolic of ourselves, we can try out solutions in the laboratory as well as integrate them into our lives. Our inner and outer lives become progressively linked. Solutions to technical problems may even present themselves in our dreams... once we solve the inner issue, the energy seems to withdraw from the topic (Shepherd, 1993: 122).

This necessitates that the conclusion of the event is emotional for many, and then symbolically or ritualistically marked.

While not all staff would identify the process in performative terms – disciplinary skills, interests and vocabularies differ – each would attest to the residential as a structured process with overlapping emotional and intellectual encounters that invites analysis, interpretation and active imagination. It enables learning to be recognised as a process arising in relationship to the contexts within which it occurs. In my case this was and is a systemic understanding of process and the transformative discourses generated therein. Thus my learning (that of my students) arises out of and feeds back into its source. It contributes to something larger than itself. This means that my pedagogical practice and the teaching and learning arising from it are creating something other than learned content. They are creating a knowledge form – an epistemology - which the self and others can participate in. This has a future orientation and a systemic or ecological underpinning.

### **Concluding Comments**

Augusto Boal (1992) works with equivalent understandings. To him theatre, the art of looking at ourselves, is “a form of knowledge”. He extends this by arguing that this perspective as much as the practice is “a means of transforming society” that “can help us build our future rather than just waiting for it” (Boal 1992, xxxi). Eugene Gendlin argues similarly. “We do not first interpret things, we live and act in them. We inhale and cry and feed. We are already within interactions (situations, practice, action, performance...)” (Gendlin, cited in Todres 2007: 33). “The lived body,” Todres adds, “provides the intimacy needed for knowledge as meaningful practice” (2007: 33). The characteristics of such knowledge deserve to be discussed alongside the way in which imagination is a part of it. However, it is the larger perspective that most demands appreciation. This is that an effective understanding of process instils awareness of and responsibility for the manner in which we participate. This identifies imagination as a social action and the consequences of this action as something for which we must take responsibility. This makes sustainability a base line in the valuing of experience, it presupposes ethical considerations and affirms the centrality of conscious awareness to our collective encounter.

The four ‘stories of social ecology’ revolve around a common axis: the powerful dynamics of the construction of meaning via applied imagination. Williamson, San Roque and Cameron, and Willis respond to problematic learning environments by imagining other ways of relating to, in turn, sound, ‘country’ and academic knowledge systems. The

consequence in each situation is the enactment of a new way of knowing. This requires the initiation of new languaging relationships, the development of new terminologies and an opening to new understanding. Williamson grapples most powerfully with this in his acknowledgement of the ‘limits of language’ a concept that brings to consciousness other limits, including the limits of imagination. Cameron and San Roque seek to construct a languaging bridge between traditional and contemporary knowledge systems through myth, symbol and story and in doing so suggest the relativity of social imaginings, while Willis facilitates an imaginative and critical inquiry into understanding through a greater focussing on experience. These, along with the description of the processes employed in intensive Social Ecology teaching programs suggest the power of a reflective and interpretive approach to the systems that facilitate learning. Through such an approach imagination constructs understanding that is not only tested against experience but used also to enable that testing experience to be better appreciated.

Social Ecology has long worked with Tarnas’ (2007) homily: “change the world-view and change the world”. At a time when the highly individualistic neo-liberal perspective is being challenged most profoundly by emerging understandings of systemic relationships via ecology the role of the imagination as a determinant of future learning is of enormous significance. When imagination is appreciated as a primary contributor to the world we are ‘bringing forth’ the challenge to appreciate it for its systemic qualities is increased. The philosophical renderings of radical constructivism bring the responsibility that accompanies powerful acts of learning to the fore. The work of Lakoff and Gallese leavens this through biological consciousness. This is a futures-oriented responsibility that requires us to appreciate the relationship between our imagining and the relationships that sustain, extend and enrich consciousness and communication. This is the means whereby we focus and re-focus our knowledge, our intention and our practice.

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