Fettia's Story – Bringing constructivism and humanism into the design of modules

Squeezed by the system

Part 1: A scene in a workshop

Fettia:

*I am here today at our last workshop for the Tools for Learning Design project. We are supposed to present our project today. I almost wasn't going to come because I feel I have failed. I was not able to do my project. Sue[1] has said to me that what we learn from **why things don't work** are as important as what we learn when they do. She asks me to speak up and tell my story and to trust that it has an important part in revealing the whole.*

I feel I cannot. I am mute.

In telling my story I will get in trouble.

It is too personal. I will be too vulnerable.

But something shifts for me in the morning session. We are asked to write in person shaped cut-outs the different roles that we play. I start off with the normal ones, my job description and then I can't help myself as other roles and other selves pour out of me… I have 10 cut-out heads with different selves scattered on the floor. I hear the stories of the others whose description of their roles surprise me – they are dealing with fragmentation between who they are at work and who they really are. I feel supported here. I ask Sue if she can help me to work out something to say for my presentation over the lunch break.

"I work in a training organisation. I am the link between the national agency overseeing the quality assurance for Continuing Education and Training and the courseware developers in my organisation. I have to make sure our WSQ modules are up to the standards of the agency and that all the documentation is filled in appropriately. I need to ensure the designers get the courseware

---

[1] Report author Dr Sue Stack

developed within the timeframes. I work with the designers to help them understand the parameters.

"In the past, our curriculum was developed primarily to get accreditation to meet all the requirements of the agency overseeing quality assurance. There is not much thought put into different learning styles or the developmental aspects of learning. The framework is skewed towards reinforcement and conditioning to bring about desired behaviours and transfer knowledge. It does not encompass the learner-centred paradigms of humanism and constructivism.

"My project is to explore **what does it mean to bring more humanism and constructivism principles/paradigms into WSQ courseware development?** However, I am not able to do my project."

Sue: Last Friday, Fettia and I sat outside, our first real meeting in several months. She is here on a course but missed a session to talk to me. Everything seemed to pour out of her. Her situation at work instead of becoming better is becoming worse. She told me story after story of the way she was being treated and shunned, and how she is becoming a person she didn't like to be. A monster. She feels she is losing her human being-ness. The web she is in is so entangled that there are no easy answers or ways forward. Even cutting the web and leaving the situation is not the easy solution it first appeared to be. Changing herself, acting differently, developing more personal capacities might not be enough. So embedded are systems, behaviours and the ways her workmates have of framing who she is and can be. At one point in her story, a most horrific moment, I reached over and held her hands. I felt her pain, her helplessness and tears ran down my cheeks.

Fettia: No-one had ever cried for me before. I felt cared for. Seen.

*Sue: So when Fettia asked me to help her to work out a presentation for the group over lunch, I asked what she would be comfortable sharing. "Not the personal stuff." For me, her project isn't telling us so much about the issue of putting humanistic paradigms **within** the teaching modules, it is a bigger story about the dehumanising aspects of the system. I wonder what are the mechanisms of the system that created this "cog" who could become and be seen as a monster.*

Fettia: We sat down together over lunch with a big sheet of paper and worked out the causal effects between particular policy, action and behaviours. At first I saw the agency overseeing quality assurance as the problem with their requirements and their deadlines. However, I now see that part of the issue is that my courseware developers don't have the skills needed to be able to fill out all the forms and the requirements, leaving me chasing them up constantly and working late hours trying to fill in the gaps. But why don't the developers have the skills? They have ACTA certificates in doing this? But competence in a training course doesn't mean actual competence in the workplace. There is a gap. Whose role is it to build our people's capacity? How can we innovate in creating the courses when time is going into meeting these skill gaps in providing the course documentation? I am beginning to see more nuances in the system and feedback loops that emphasise different behaviours. The ACTA assessment modules act to shape us rather than grow us. I am hoping that by explaining it to the others, they can see how we can create a better system.

(During the presentation)

Sue: As Fettia presents her model to the group, I can see her getting excited. As she tells it, she seems to be internalising it, and beginning to think about her situation in a new way. I wonder if this system analysis perspective is helping her to re-frame her issues.

(Immediately after Fettia stops speaking, a harsh voice speaks up.)

"Stop complaining girl, you have your work to do, you have to do it. We all have to do it. If we don't do it, the system won't work. The system is there for a reason. You need to be organised."

Sue: Fettia's jaw drops. She looks in shock. She looks at me. I had set up the room to spatially represent different perspectives or voices and each of us in the project is sitting in these perspectives, listening from that perspective ready to give our feedback. I am sitting in the "system dynamic" perspective. I

realise that Fettia is getting feedback from an aspect or voice in the system. What is it? The voice of outcomes, of getting things done, of continuing behaviours unquestioned? How often does Fettia hear this voice? It is not the one she expects to hear in this group where we are normally so supportive of each other.

(Another voice speaks up.)

"You might feel squeezed by the system, but that is just your perception. Others, like myself, can find freedom within the system to do what we want. We push a little and create room for ourselves. In fact, even now, I am someone who is creating part of the system. You are too, you are creating some of

I – Why I do How I experience, feel, think, believe, value, grow.	**IT – What I do** Behaviours, products, measurables
WE – Why we do Relationships, shared, values, cultures, norms	**ITS – How we do** System dynamics, social systems, policy

the system there in your workplace, you can change that, build capacity of your developers." (*Voice of actualised person within the system?)*

(Fettia's body tenses up; her face seems to cave in.)

Fettia: "You may have made room, but there is no room for me. You just don't understand what it is like." *Her voice rises in pitch.*

(Another voice speaks up, coming from the side of the room representing the inner self.)

"I hear in your voice something much deeper than what you have described here. You have given us an analysis of the system but you have left out yourself. What does it mean to put *yourself* in this? What is the root cause of your frustration? What is the impact on your career?"

Fettia: "I have the passion in terms of developing curriculum, but with all of this going around, I have to ask, *do I want to do this?* I believe in humanism yet I have been dehumanised. The way people have treated me. The way I behave – a monster. I hate who I am, I keep getting sick. I can't leave to do something else, something that could be worse – I have to support my family. I am trapped.

I am feeling myself disappearing in that place. The self I like is dead. I want to be my natural self, the one that can laugh and grow."

Tears start rolling down her eyes, tears she couldn't cry when talking to me. She walks over to the Inner self voice as she is talking and sits down and they hold hands, leaning towards each other.

Inner self/counsellor voice: "I hear your pain. You have been going through a tough time. It seems like you are at a crossroads. What helps at this moment is often a mentor who can help you preserve your passion and make it work to advantage within the system."

Fettia: "Could you be my mentor?"

Sue: Fettia is now calm and hopeful, but as facilitator, I know there is more here. I ask the counsellor/mentor to leave, and Fettia is sitting alone on her chair. She looks bereft. I ask the cultural voice to speak up.

"I listen to the undercurrent of your story – I have heard it before, listened to it before. Your story is one of so many within our system. People with battle scars; many who cannot find a place where they can bring the whole of themselves, where they can be seen and valued. People who get sick by being suffocated and eaten up in the system. We become powerless, and feel there are no parts of the system in which we can have some control and no place to express our passion. In Singapore, we operate in survival mode. We often don't ask if we have a choice. We don't often have the space to realise we might have a choice. It becomes a vicious cycle. It is important that these stories of the individual in the system are recognised as a cultural systemic phenomenon, not just for individuals to solve by themselves."

Sue: Fettia is still looking shell shocked and bereft. This cultural perspective voice does not speak to her right at this moment. She wants the counsellor, the healer back. The system analysis perspective is left abandoned on the floor.

PAUSE, REFLECT: **What perspectives might help Fettia now? What perspectives might help others like her?**

Fettia – my roles:

I am an individual working within the WSQ and CET system

I am an employee at a CET centre

I am a curriculum developer

I am a link between my company and the agency overseeing quality assurance to accreditation

I am working with associate developers

I am a learner who is curious and eager to find new ways of doing things

I am a learner in ACTA who is hearing a lot of negativity about the system and the standards

I am a learner who is puzzled by the rigidity faced in the system

I am a suffocated and tired human being stuck in the system who would like to explore and experiment

I am discovering a new self

The transforming self/transforming system voice speaks up:

"When I was in China, standing on the beach looking out at the Pacific Ocean, I began to get a sense of how big the world is. I thought there has got to be room in that world for a little guy like me. It is not just about having a system in Singapore which supports us [as] we grow old. It is about growing. How can we help to grow the system that can help grow us? For me, when I experience a sense of liberation within me, an ability to express my values, I have a power within me to help grow the system that can help grow me. If the system does not grow me, then something is wrong."

PAUSE, REFLECT: **What might it mean to grow a system that can help grow people who can help grow the system?**

Part 2: Continuing journey

Sue: It is now three months after the workshop. I rang Fettia and asked how she is going and what may have changed for her. She is still experiencing difficulty in her organisation and the way she is being treated by employers and work colleagues, which is affecting her emotionally. However, because of her increasing professional contacts outside the organisation, through this programme and others she is pursuing, she is now developing a better understanding of what is fair and reasonable for someone in her role, and is gaining confidence in her own experience and knowledge. She has found mentors from both the agency overseeing quality assurance and IAL she can go to for advice, and they have helped her navigate through some tricky system issues as well as referring her to personnel she can consult for course design. She is feeling a lot more confident in understanding and navigating the system; the advice of the mentor from the agency overseeing quality assurance means she can better discern between seemingly conflicting messages from the agency overseeing quality assurance. She is enthusiastic about furthering her own professional learning through DACE and Masters programmes, seeing that she has something to offer her industry. Her feeling of being squeezed on all sides has eased off a little. She no longer identifies with a 'soul' who needs help.

Although Fettia has not completed her intended project to bring humanism and constructivist approaches into her courses, she has made herself the project. Perhaps humanism in action is enabling people room to grow and flourish, to express their humanity.

PAUSE, REFLECT: **What is this humanity? What does it mean to be human in the system?**

Acknowledgements & Background

This is a fictionalised story based on one of the Tools for Learning Design participants. It was constructed by Dr Sue Stack (pictured, top) using a narrative inquiry research framework and "impressionist" writing that aims to capture the emotion, values and issues of an occasion. It aims to help the reader reflect on their own circumstances and issues. This is part of the Tools for Learning Design project led by Dr Helen Bound (bottom) and Dr Stack. We would like to thank the participant for allowing her story in all its vulnerabilities to be shared.

This story and the four others that are found in the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website convey the participants' questions, issues, processes and journeys. These stories have been slightly fictionalised with changed names to provide anonymity. They aim to express the authentic voice of the participants through using a conversational writing style.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website is a resource for trainers, curriculum and learning designers, and training leaders in the Singapore Continuing Education and Training sector interested in deepening understanding of their practice to create innovative and enlivening possibilities for their adult learners.

The Tools for Re-imagining Learning website and the Tools for Learning Design project overview can be found at www.ial.edu.sg.

For more information on the Tools for Learning Design project or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (content), please email Dr Stack at susan.stack@utas.edu.au or Dr Bound at helen_bound@ial.edu.sg.

We welcome questions or feedback on this publication, the Tools for Learning Design research report or the Tools for Re-imagining Learning website (layout or technical issues). Please email research@ial.edu.sg.

About the Institute for Adult Learning

The Institute for Adult Learning (IAL) aims to contribute to the competitiveness of Singapore by developing an effective, innovative and responsive Continuing Education and Training (CET) sector that is able to meet the needs of industries and the workforce. It achieves this by raising capabilities, catalysing innovation, and leading research in workforce learning.

About the Centre for Research in Learning

The Centre for Research in Learning (CRIL) undertakes research that seeks to understand and develop the processes and practices of learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum design in the CET sector from multiple perspectives, settings and contexts. We work with those taking part in research projects, engaging practitioners in the research process and thereby developing communities of practitioner researchers.