

TALKING RIVER: A JOURNEY TOWARDS WELL-BEING**ROLAND PLAYLE**

A group of Maori women gather in their ancestral meeting house to begin a participatory process. They gather to gain a better understanding of the relationship between their community and their environment. The women are part of the community health group, Hauiti Haora, based in a predominantly Maori-inhabited township on the remote East Coast of New Zealand. They hope to bring about interventions that can enhance the level of health of the township's inhabitants.

They work late into the night questioning each other, they dialogue and even create drawings around the subject to gain further insight into their community and place. They delve deeply into their knowledge of the township's history, their own experiences growing up in the area and all that they know of their community's current situation. At times emotional, at other times passionate, a great sense of enthusiasm fills the room from their strong intention to address the problems of their locality.

Is there a relationship between the inhabitants of their township having insufficient public access to the river running through their settlement, the township's poorly maintained septic system, and the dumping of waste that goes on covertly around their township? Are any of these problems related and, if so, how might they be? These are some of the questions they begin to address through a 2 day inquiry process.

The story below is a description of events that occurred during the course of the inquiry. The group, already very active in their township, had invited me to facilitate their staff and board members through a participatory inquiry to gain greater clarity around their organisation's purpose and current direction. The question they formulated for their inquiry was, 'What is the relationship between the community's health and their relationship to the environment?'. With this as a point of focus, we embarked on a journey together.

To 'participate' with a phenomenon in this case is to move beyond objective knowledge *about* something and to begin to enter into a 'dialogue-like' relationship *with* the phenomenon - in this case, the community's relationship to the environment and their health. The participatory inquiry aims to bring together the so-called 'objective' facts about the phenomenon, with the 'subjective' responses evoked in the inquirers, and in the process come to fuse the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of the health group's inquiry question. Our bodies, as sensing vessels, carry multiple capacities 'to know' beyond the rational thinking mind so heavily developed in western scientific traditions and education. Our senses, our feelings, emotions, intuition and even our capacity to imagine, all have the potential to illuminate our relationship to the world in multiple ways. This article uses the word 'participate' to refer to forms of meaning-making, born from the engagement of our senses and selves, in ways including and other than the rational-logical mind. In this example, we will see how such participation can open up inherent potential extant in our relationship with the natural and social world, precisely by shedding light on the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the social-environmental circumstances of the Maori participants.

The process of the Maori health group, Hauiti Haora, began by building up as rich and detailed a picture of the materially tangible facts underlying their leading question. The inquirers gathered as much 'objective' and empirical information available to them on the relationship between their community's health and the community's engagement with the local environment. A diverse and varied range of facts were collected, including statistical information gathered by a researcher from Wellington University involved in an environmental regeneration project in the township. The rich and varied information served as empirical grounding on which other 'non-objective' modes of participatory knowing could be engaged in. Participants were then asked whether they could perceive any patterns or qualities pervading the diverse facts they had gathered. This was achieved by creating space for a facilitated dialogue around specific leading questions, in which each individual was given space to respond freely. With the understanding that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers (but merely different perspectives), the participants were supported to see how each individual's responses were related to one another. In this way, the information collected in the first stage of the inquiry by participants were seen in a 'joined up' way. The seemingly disparate pieces of



information were now 'seen together' to be creating the conditions and circumstances of the community's health, through their relationship to the environment.

This way of 'seeing' resembles something of the view that Complexity Theory provides, of how the convergence of multiple elements can come to create a single phenomenon that emerges from the very amalgam of those diverse elements. For the Maori participants, this shift in perception to a dynamic and more holistic one, provided a comprehension ('comprehension' being more 'comprehensive' than 'understanding') of their community and environment that shed light on something of its evolving (process) nature, and the complex web of connections that was bringing particular states of health and ill health into being.

This way of seeing brought about an interesting turn of events for the Maori participants. The more they engaged with this way of 'looking', the more prominent they began to feel the significance of the river that runs through their township. The more they questioned the current state of their community with this way of perceiving, reflecting on the historical trajectories that brought them to where they were, the more the group's responses became animated in raising concerns about the state of their community's river.

The group spoke of how, historically, their township had emerged and grown from sustenance and trade made possible by the river and how, in their cultural and 'tribal' mythological stories, the river had always played a central role in their sense of place and identity as a tribal group ('*iwi*' in Maori) and people. Despite this centrality of the river in the township's history and development, the participants narrated stories of how, in the space of 2 to 3 generations, residents had become less concerned with the river and its prominence had gradually faded in the community. The participants talked energetically of how the township's houses had for centuries been built facing the river, but in the last 20 to 30 years were being built to face the roads. Public access to the river had become increasingly lacking, due to the privatisation of much of the riverbank through private land ownership and the more they unravelled the community's deteriorating relationship to the river, the more they came to see how this was reflected in what they felt were the unhealthy lifestyles of the township's residents. The youth of the community, for example, were using the river less for sporting activities and fishing (once the source of the community's livelihoods), and complaints about pollution from upstream logging companies affecting the quality of the river were rife, as well as the lack of mobilisation in the community to act in response to this concern.

The recognition that the river had been neglected and undervalued as a significant part of the community began to provide understanding around the questions raised about the connectivity of issues, at the beginning of this article. The inquirers felt that, as the river carried an increasingly insignificant status, becoming an almost invisible feature in people's daily lives, it became easier for people to pollute it and turn a blind eye to the dumping that had become common around the river and township. "*Perhaps they [who are dumping] don't even know that some of us are concerned about the river?!*" was the cry of one resident. In the same vein, the problems concerning the poorly maintained, ageing septic systems used by the majority of households in the township, and of course the drain-off issues related to this, were also seen through people's lack of relation to and awareness of the river as an eco-system integral to the community's history and current state of well-being.

In the web of connections that was bringing about states of health in their community, the social workers saw that having a meaningful relationship to the township's river was a key piece in the puzzle of enhancing the future of their community. They felt that the sense of belonging, ownership, attention and care for their place had been lost in the recent history of the community and could see the way in which these sensibilities related to the current state of their township and people.

To engage in this dynamic way of perceiving described here requires an imaginative capacity to 'see' the connections that exist between and pervades the diverse facts underpinning their inquiry question. It calls on us to engage and participate in the facts, in a different way to seeing only what is sense-perceptible. The qualities that tie and unite the diverse sense-perceptible facts of a phenomenon are of course not tangible, and can only be 'seen' by engaging an imaginative capacity to 'move through' the empirical information gathered. It offers a different way to know or 'see' something, than our intellectual capacity to reason does.

The insight into the centrality of the river was an unexpected outcome of the inquiry process. It provided a mode of relating that moved away from a causal mode of thinking *about* or having *knowledge about* an 'object' or 'problem', as well as the sort of technological or mechanically-minded 'fixes' that are often presented as answers to complex social problems. Seen dynamically, the circumstances of ill health were perceived in a manner that recognised the emergence of current and future social situations as processes to be engaged and worked *with*, rather than finding one-off, fixed answers that solved a problem once and for all.

The nature of such an inquiry is like entering into a 'dialogue' with the inquiry question, in that in a conversation, we never know what the other party is going to say or express. In this way, we enter into a process with the 'other' (the inquiry question), giving to and taking from it with a flexibility that is responsive to that 'other'. Just as we can never be fully aware of how we respond or react in a conversation, a genuine inquiry also carries an openness that allows space for it to be 'led' by the process itself. In this instance, the openness of the participants to perceive the facts gathered with fresh and 'new eyes' allowed for the 'conversation' to be led to questions of belonging related to the river. It may not need mentioning of course that even this emergent realisation is a part of the process that will shift and change with time, especially once the community act on this new found clarity.

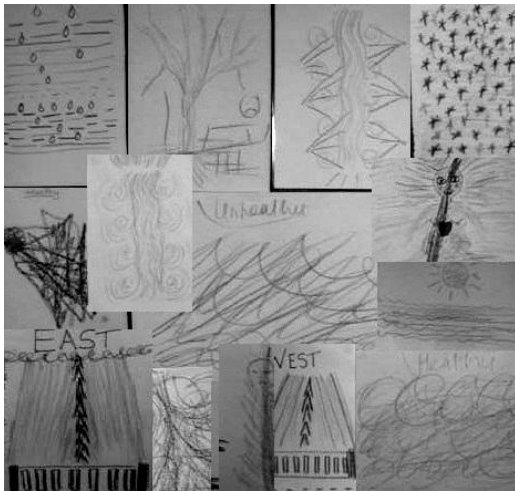


Figure 1: snapshot of drawings by participants during the workshops

We continued the inquiry by addressing participant's emotional responses (feelings) to the states of health and ill health of the township and river. The group took time to reflect individually and were asked to distil their feelings into images expressive of their internal responses. Symbols were drawn to reflect these and their drawings again expressed a range of concerns, often rooted in very personal places. These were displayed and presented to one another.

I was struck and moved to hear one participant say, "I've now realised that the river has been talking to us all this time and only now have I listened to it." I was moved to see that such a strong sense of connection to the river had been established. That in her way of relating to the river she was able to 'listen to it', or 'let it speak to her' rather than approaching the river from a preconceived view. What she said, for me, had broken down something of the separation of the 'subject'-'object' dichotomy. Not that she was 'free' from her subjective responses to the river, but that through them, and becoming more aware of how they related to other participant's, she was able to come to a more sensitive awareness of the river itself. She had moved beyond (without excluding), her objectified knowledge of the river. For her, her awareness seemed to shift from a position based on her own ideas about how the river and community 'should' or 'ought' to be, to a place of awareness and recognition of the river's qualities, as expressed through her knowledge of the social circumstances of the community and her own emotional responses to the river. She had seen how her own experience of the river related to the facts and information gathered, even to the chemical analyses of the Wellington University researcher, and felt she had come to know the river from a more intimate place. The German romantic poet Goethe, who's scientific work grounds and inspired the facilitated inquiry process described here, talked of a "delicate empiricism that makes itself utterly identical with the object, thereby becoming true theory. But this enhancement of our mental powers belongs to a highly evolved age." (Goethe in Miller 1995:307)

The Greek word for theory (*theoria*) carried the meaning 'to behold'. In the process of fusing different capacities of the inquirers to 'see', a *knowing* of the phenomenon can be reached that is much like having an embodied sense of the phenomenon itself. It is a *knowing* similar to the one that comes from having a close familiarity to something, as in the way a sensitive and attentive mother might *know* her child. It is not a relationship that enables the perceiver to predict or foresee aspects of the phenomenon allowing control over the perceived, but one in which an intimate relationship based on a respect for the respective values of the 'other' can be established. Such a *knowing* offers insight that can unlock something of the potential that exists in the engagement between the observer and observed in a way that can facilitate the enhancement of that relationship.

Art practices have the capacity to open and reveal such qualitative elements to us when they are engaged in particular ways. However, as Goethe describes, these sorts of perspectives are an 'enhancement of our mental powers', and ask of us ways of participating that are generally unfamiliar to our habitual ways of living. The example of the inquiry described here required patience and diligence to stick to a process with an open mind,

as well as to engage the faculties and capacities of knowing that our bodies offer us the possibility to do. There is also a degree of sincerity and honesty required in the participation, if we are to illicit something novel from the process. Just as the Maori participants opened themselves up to creating and sharing drawings made from individual and personal places, these sorts of participatory inquiries can be seen as acts of reflection, where the phenomenon in question becomes a mirror of the inquirer him/herself. Our multiple capacities to know reflect our very relation to the phenomenon in multiple ways and in this respect, the sincere inquirer is propelled to face his/her own reflections and engage in a transformational process. By allowing the phenomenon to pass through the self and having the opportunity to reflect the views of fellow inquirers to confirm and affirm one's own position, a mutual reciprocity can emerge where we come to know ourselves and the phenomenon from a more insightful and aware place. (Zajonc 1993:203)

To draw this inquiry process to a close, the health group were asked to reflect on the symbolism expressed in their drawings of health and ill health in their community, as a source of inspiration for the practical interventions they wished to bring in their community. They used their images to see how they could transform states of ill health to ones of health, and due mainly to the level of consensus already reached through the inquiry, decisions around practical solutions were made without much disagreement from the residents. A number of key approaches were put forward as directions for their future work.

The focus of course was the river and its inherent benefit as a source for activities related to community cohesion, environmental awareness and of course health. Strategies were created around reviving and organising community-led activities focussed on the restoration of native flora and wildlife areas along the river, aimed also at addressing the erosion of banks that had become common. They devised steps towards involving the community to create more public spaces along the riverbank for gatherings as well as a longer-term aim to make public walkways along the banks. Several other opportunities were also recognised such as working with the community sports group to encourage more swimming and canoeing for the youth of the township. The process ended with a sense of enthusiasm and excitement with the clarity that participants had gained, as well as of course a renewed sense of belonging to their own home.

Discussions concerning quality of life and 'well-being' common in today's social and political spheres take on a relational dimension when viewed in the context of the participatory approach described here. The sense of good health and well-being in the community in this instance was closely linked to participant's needs for a sense of belonging and in their participation with their own place and environment. The state of the river's good health was also directly related to the community's participation, connection and involvement with it, suggesting that there is an intrinsic relation between the members of the community finding their own sense of well-being (through meeting their genuine human needs), and the enhancement of the quality and well-being of their own environment. More precisely, it is the community's involvement and participation in their environment that brings about an increase in the well-being of the whole social-ecological web.

The conclusions of this article may seem simple, however it seems that we have a long way to go in terms of the current realities of communities, organisations and even political systems. To collectively inquire, recognise and empathise with one another's genuine needs, seems to call us to engage in different ways to those we have become accustomed to. On the other hand, perhaps we are simply called to face the reflections of our very own selves, openly and sincerely. My own experiences have been that the dynamism of perception emerging from participating with the world around me, breeds a dynamism for life itself. It is invigorating and enlivening and although at times challenging, it is certainly the road I choose to travel. I invite others to join on the way, if only because the process is one of emerging mutual reciprocity and enhancement.

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