

INTERVIEWING

PROBLEMS

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Introduction

Epston & White (1990) speak of people as being “**rich in lived experience**” and having life stories containing only a fraction of that lived experience at any one time. When the way a person’s life is storied is problematic for them it is this huge resource of un-storied experience that provides the raw material of a preferred re-storying of their life.

The response of narrative therapy to the presence of a problem in a person’s life is to **separate** the person and the problem; that is, the problem is **externalised**. The influence of the problem in the person’s life and relationships is then mapped through the asking of questions about how the problem has been affecting their lives and relationships.

It is through this process of externalisation and mapping of influence that the **tactics** and **intentions** of the problem are made clear.

It is also through this process of externalisation and mapping of influence that the ways in which the problem has not been influential and ways in which the person has been resistant to the problem becomes clear. These new awarenesses, which would not have been predicted by the problem story, are themselves part of the person’s huge unstoried resource of lived experience and go on to displace the problem story with a **preferred alternative story**.

“This context brings forth new choices for persons regarding the authoring of themselves, others, and their relationships (p18)”.

Roth and Epston (1996) have developed an exercise to provide an experience of a problem-externalising conversation. (as have Freedman & Combs (1996)). Titled “Whose Life Is It Anyway” this exercise involves interviewing the Problem about its’ influence on persons. Participants are invited to take up the roles of The Problem itself and Investigative Reporters interested in how the Problem ‘works’. The investigative reporters are asked to question The Problem as to

- a) its purposes
- b) its hopes and dreams for the person’s life
- c) the myriad techniques it uses to get its way
- d) the voice, tone, and content that it finds most persuasive, and
- e) who stands beside it, that is, what people and forces are in league with it

Having clarified the Problem's tactics and goals the exercise goes on to question The Problem as to it's experiences of failure to influence the person. The reporters are instructed to inquire about

- a) times the person has frustrated the Problems plans, schemes, dreams*
- b) what the person has done to keep some of his or her territory safe from the Problems grasp or to defy the Problem*
- c) what plans the Problem has to re-assert itself in the face of such resistance or defiance*
- d) what voice, tone and language the Problem plans to use to re-assert itself towards regaining influence in 'the person's life'*

In all this interviewing the reporters are requested to address every question directly to the Problem by name such as "Jacks Fear of the Unknown" ... or "Amy's Temper" etc.

What this exercise introduces to the notion of externalising conversations is the possibility of having an externalising conversation directly with the Problem (or at least by role-play).

This in turn allows the possibility of a larger number of people participating in the externalising conversation (and in the attending awareness) through observation of the conversation.

This possibility has been taken up recently in Malawi and in Australia (Dulwich Centre Newsletter: 1996/3) where community wide problems (AIDS, and diabetes and grief) have been externalised and interviewed in ways that have allowed alternative stories about the lives of people influenced by these Problems to be expressed.

Yvonne Sliep (Dulwich Centre Newsletter (1996/3) writes "In Malawi chiefs of certain villages have invited CARE counsellors (Community Action Renders Enablement) into their communities to talk about HIV/AIDS. The CARE counsellors have developed a particular way of facilitating these conversations. One worker plays the role of Mr/Mrs AIDS, who represents HIV/AIDS; and another plays the role of Mr/Mrs CARE, who represents the community. Members of the village are invited to ask questions of these two characters, and a conversation develops. These conversations are spoken in Chichewa, the local language, and are often held outside in the shade of trees. The conversations are accompanied by drama and song, and invariably the atmosphere is one of curiosity, open heartedness and laughter" (p.5)

Questions asked of Mr/Mrs AIDS might include "who are you?" "Who are your parents?". "How do you manage to get into a person's life?" "What effect do you have on our community?"

Questions asked of Mr/Mrs CARE might include "Who are you?". "Where do you come from?". "Who are your parents?" "What are your hopes and dreams?" "Where does your power and strength come from?"

This exercise has been powerful in Malawi creating a context for a meaningful exchange of information and knowledge, an open forum for community concerns, and space for a community to join together against the problem of AIDS.

This exercise was in turn taken up and responded to by the Aboriginal Womens Health and Healing Project.

In this context a project member played the role of 'Sugar'. Participants were given a number of questions as starters to use in questioning Sugar as to its tactics and goals.

An example of this was

The Group: Who are you?

Sugar: My name is Diabetes but a lot of people call me Sugar. You can call me Sugar. I can be anybody's disease but I do my best work with Nungas because they can't quite control me yet.

Other questions included "what makes you powerful?" and "what weakens you?"

The article ends with "Perhaps the biggest thing that reduces shame is doing something all together - breaking down the isolation. Sugar is just one of many issues facing Aboriginal peoples lives. This offered a different way of seeing Sugar. They looked at Sugar that day as something that should be taken notice of, something that is affecting the Aboriginal community. It's a community problem. If it's not affecting you it's affecting your grandmother, uncle or aunty. Every family is effected by diabetes, one way or another. By all talking with Sugar it gave the feeling that together we need to take notice, and that together we can take action." (p.29)

A third response to the idea of externalising a problem with a large group was from a member of the Aboriginal Women's Health and Healing Project addressing a Stillbirth and Neo Natal Deaths (SANDS) conference relating her experience of the death of her 2 day old son.

She writes "I had decided that I would try to play the character of "Grief" and to invite the audience to ask me particular questions. I knew this would be very different to externalising AIDS or Sugar, but I thought that it might help us find common ground from where I could share the experiences of Aboriginal people. I wanted to make sure we could talk about our losses and injustices as Aboriginal people in a healing way. Playing the character of Grief and giving the participants questions to ask me was just a starting point. I'm telling this story in the hope that it will give people ideas that they could work on, so that they can come up with their own ways of working."

In questioning Grief the participants were invited to ask questions like "Have we met before?" "What's your name?" "Has your presence been with Aboriginal people?" "What's your way of doing things?" "How close is loss to you?"

The article concludes "We have to tell our stories in ways that make us stronger". (p.35)

This use of externalising conversation with Problems offers a powerful forum for exposing the role, tactics and goals of Problems within communities. This seminar booklet explores with a group of trainee counsellors a range of questions relating to externalising conversations with problems including

- *What are some useful questions for exposing the tactics and goals of Problems?*
- *In what range of contexts can these exercises be seen to be useful?*
- *How might the deconstruction of Problem's tactics and goals lead to the development of alternative stories?*

The results of the seminar and accounts of the authors own responses to externalising conversations with problems are recorded.

QUESTIONS TO ASK A PROBLEM?

PART ONE

- a) *The Problems influence on subjects life, relationships, feelings, thoughts, story.....*
- b) *The strategies, techniques, deceits, tricks it uses.*
- c) *Special qualities of the Problem which it relies on to undermine subjects own knowledge's.*
- d) *The purposes which guide the Problem. - its dreams and hopes.*
- e) *The plans already in action should it's dominance be threatened..*

PART TWO

- a) *Areas of the subjects life still free of Problem's influence?*
- b) *Counter-techniques/tricks used by subject to avoid dominance?*
- c) *Special qualities, knowledge's, skills of the subject which have proven difficult for the Problem.*
- d) *Purposes and commitments which guide the subjects efforts to challenge the problem?*
- e) *Who stands with the subject?*

f) *Options available to the subject for taking advantage of Problem's vulnerability's?*

Externalising Problems

The following questions, intended to assist investigative reporters question 'the Problem' have come from our seminar discussions. These serve as possible ways of questioning the stated problems to find out the ways in which they work.

***Part One** offers questions for reporters to map the influence, tactics and intentions of the Problem. **Part Two** suggests questions that could be useful in highlighting ways in which the Problem has **not** been influential and ways in which the person has been resistant to the Problem.*

The Problems addressed here are those chosen by the seminar members to work with.

Questions to Ask a Problem

Part One

- a) The problems influence on subjects life, relationship, feelings, thoughts, story...*
- b) The strategies, techniques, deceits, tricks it uses*
- c) Special qualities of the Problem which it relies on to undermine subjects own knowledge's*
- d) The purposes which guide the Problem, its dreams and hopes*
- e) The plans already in action should it's dominance be threatened*

Questions to Ask Self-Blame

- What do you talk people into about themselves?*
- How come you are so good at it?*
- How do you influence friendships/families/school-work?*
- What effect do you have on school-work?*
- How do you make people feel?*
- How do you know when to strike?*
- How do you soften people up so that you can get into their lives?*
- How do you get people to believe in you?*
- How do you block people?*
- Who are your friends?*
- Do you have some supporters?*
- What builds you up?*

- *Where do you lead people?*
- *What are your intentions?*
- *How do you measure success?*
- *How do you trick/deceive people?*
- *How do you convince people that you are too big to have an influence over?*
- *What is your favourite approach?*
- *If someone was planning to get rid of you, how would you hang on?*
- *When do you feel most threatened?*
- *How do you stop people from having fun/relaxing, feeling good about themselves?*
- *How do you show yourself at home/in physical health/beliefs/relationships?*
- *How do you effect peoples view and beliefs about themselves?*
- *When can you rest?*
- *How do you celebrate?*

Questions to Ask Bullying

- *So how do you get people to do what you want them to?*
- *How do you get people to group together?*
- *How do you win people over to your side?*
- *What do you promise people?*
- *Are you around all the time?*
- *When do you decide to be around?*
- *Are there situations/times when you have more influence over people?*
- *What are you offering people who use you?*
- *Where did you learn to be a bully?*
- *How do you recruit people?*
- *How do you teach people what do?*
- *Who do you use?*
- *What are your aims/purposes/ambitions?*
- *Where do you see yourself in the future?*
- *How do you protect yourself?*
- *What size are you?*
- *Are you a full-grown fully?*
- *Are you aspiring to be bigger?*
- *How do you trick people into believing you are strong?*
- *What do you do if people don't want to listen to you?*
- *Do you like working one on one?*
- *When do you have most influence?*
- *What allies do you have?*

- *What in the environment works positively for you?*
- *What happens when there are policies against you?*
- *What do you think about the recent anti-bullying campaign which is being circulated around the country?*
- *How does it feel knowing that people are wising up to your tactics?*
- *Do you have to work twice as hard as you used to?*
- *How might you maintain your influence in the face of this?*
- *What is it like to talk about yourself?*
- *What qualities do you appreciate about yourself?*
- *How do you hide your vulnerable sides?*

Questions to Ask Teasing and Bullying

- *How do you effect the way people talk about themselves?*
- *How do you get other people to act on your behalf?*
- *Are there any places that work better for you?*
- *Are there other people who help you?*
- *Do you invent new tricks or use old ones?*
- *Do you pick on strong or weak people?*
- *Are you racist/sexist/age-ist?*
- *What are you best at doing?*
- *How did you become so good at what you do?*
- *What is your dream for the people you influence?*
- *What your hopes for our school?*
- *How are you feeling about current trends to get rid of bullying?*
- *How do you deal with resistance?*
- *What is it about our school that allows you to go there?*
- *What enticements/rewards do you offer?*
- *If you were to tell sexual harassment about yourself, what would you say?*

Questions to Ask Harassment

- *Where is it easiest for you to happen?*
- *Are there certain places that you delight in?*
- *What do you get out of it?*
- *How do you effect people's relationships with their friends?*
- *How do you effect the ways that people view themselves?*
- *What is it that you most like to see happen?*
- *What sort of things let you get a foot-hold?*

- *What do you promise people?*
- *What are your favourite words?*
- *How do you feel when you hear people speaking these words?*
- *Do you ever worry that your tricks might fail?*
- *What qualities do you applaud in people?*
- *What tricks works the best for you?*
- *Do you go behind people's backs?*
- *How are you going to recruit new members?*
- *What is your vision for 2/5/10 years from now?*

Questions to Ask A Problem Part Two

- *Areas of the subjects life still free of Problem's influence.*
- *Counter-techniques/tricks used by the subject to avoid dominance.*
- *Special qualities, knowledge's, skills of the subject which have proven difficult for the Problem.*
- *Purposes and commitments which guide the subjects efforts to challenge the Problem.*
- *Who stands with the subject?*
- *Options available to the subject for taking advantage of Problem's vulnerability's?*

Questions to ask Self Blame

- *Are there any places in people's lives that you find it harder to infiltrate?*
- *When is it harder to take over?*
- *What is it that people do that makes it harder for you to contaminate them?*
- *What do people do to weaken you?*
- *How do they do it? What steps do they take? Where do their supports come from?*
- *When do you start panicking?*
- *What has been your hardest case?*
- *When do you know that you've got no chance of success?*
- *What do you start doing when people start drawing on their own abilities/strengths?*
- *Do you have any insights in to how you get undermined?*
- *What is the biggest lie you've told?*
- *What is your favourite dirty trick?*

- *What do you do to try and wittle down people's defenses?*
- *Which ideas that people start to have about you are most threatening?*
- *What might motivate people to stand against you?*
- *When does a person's voice become stronger than yours?*
- *Do you pick off one person at a time, or is more than one more difficult?*
- *What is your most dangerous enemy?*
- *How do you commiserate when you fail?*
- *How do you know when to give up?*

Questions to ask Bullying

- *Are there areas of people's lives you can't get into?*
- *Are there times when people can resist you? When?*
- *How do people stop you from influencing them?*
- *Is it easier to stop you when people are alone or in groups?*
- *Are there things that if people knew about you would weaken their hold?*
- *What sorts of people/and places are the worst for you?*
- *Who are the people you don't want around?*
- *What might happen if they were around?*
- *Who are the people who encourage this person to resist you?*
- *What would you hate people to know about you the most?*
- *What happens to you when the person is/or gains popularity?*
- *What is the worse thing someone could do to you?*
- *What happens to you when you meet other bullies who are bigger than you?*

Questions to ask Teasing, Bullying and Harassment

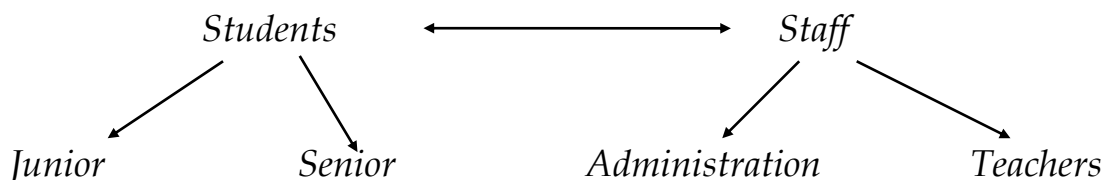
- *Are there people who consistently resist you?*
- *Where does that happen the most?*
- *Are there particular types of people who resist you?*
- *What mistakes did you make? How could you correct that?*
- *How do people avoid you?*
- *What tricks do you hate the most?*
- *What do people do to put you off?*
- *If you were training another person in bullying, what would you tell them to be most on the alert for?*
- *Who are the people you most dislike?*

- *Is it better if people talk about this? Or not talk about this?*
- *If there was a school of standing up to bullying, what would be taught there?*
- *What is it about the people you most despise?*
- *Have you had mates that have died? What finally did it?*
- *If you were to describe the sort of person who resists you, what would that sound like?*
- *Tell the story of your worst moment, what was happening?*
- *If you were to design the 'perfect person', what qualities would you leave out?*
- *How come some people stand up to you?*
- *If you were writing a school charter, what would you leave out/leave in?*
- *What word do you most hate in school charters?*
- *What words do you hear that sound good but mean nothing to you (e.g. "respect each other") in charters and in our conversations?*
- *Who are your worst enemies? Who supports your enemies?*
- *What signs/places turn you off, discourage you from going there?*
- *What is it about those signs/places that you most dislike?*
- *What do you make of these people, your feelings about them?*
- *Who coaches your people?*
- *Who coaches your enemies people?*
- *If you have advice to give, what would it be?*
- *Do you have any dark secrets that you don't want anyone to know?*
- *Do you have an "achilles heel"?*
- *Is there any "disinfected", "clean", "OK" bullying?*
- *Is there any legitimate bullying?*
- *What structures in society help you to survive?*
- *Are small departments/big departments better for you?*
- *How might the media support you?*
- *If people were trying to kick the habit, what would you tell them to do?*
- *Where do you find yourself struggling to survive/to feel alive?*

In what range of contexts can these exercises be seen as useful?

In response to this question seminar members put forward these ideas:

- *Working with sub - communities within your community ie : For a school*



- *Using Interviewing a problem as part of parenting education. Looking at the influence of parenting styles on childhood development. Perhaps externalising “Legitimized Bullying”. [Note: if that was the externalised problem, what would the externalised alternative story be..?]*
- *Looking at how institutions affect people. For example, the church. Using externalised “ characters” with synod groups, parish groups. Interview Dominant Discourses ?*
- *Driver Education - what would you interview as the problem? As the Alternative story?*
- *Interviewing a problem within a classroom (Interviewing Spoiled Identity - see later - is an example of this)*
- *Using these ideas with Health and Well-being promotion.*
- *In looking at the use of Externalised Conversations with a Problem as a school drama the question arose “how do you hear back from the students in the Assembly / audience?”*

This raised a conversation about socio-drama. Produce a drama which includes a number of people relating including the externalised Problem. Show this drama to the student audience. Over the next week give students an opportunity to comment on what they saw and submit alternative story lines, outcomes, questions etc. Re-produce the drama using the student audience input. Repeat the process several times - thus producing an on-going drama reflecting the responses of the audience.

Additions to this idea included

- *Inviting members of the audience to play roles*
 - *Casting staff members in student roles and *viva versa*.*
 - *Video-ing the dramas and reflecting on them in class time.*
- *In reflecting on the Interviewing Dak video the idea came that it could be useful to.*
 - *Video the initial interview with Dak*

- *Video the students reflection on what it was like for them to (a) do the interview (b) see themselves on T.V doing the interview*
- *Conduct another interview with Dak in the light of those reflections*
- *Show these video clips to other classes.*
- *Add to these video clips video of the other classes reflecting on what they had seen*
- *Add a final video section of the original interviewing Dak group summarising their experience of all this.*

All this could produce an interesting 50 minute video. How would you then go on to use that video?

INTERVIEWING RACISM

My (Donald's) response to reading about and thinking about the externalising conversations with problems undertaken in Malawi and Australia (see Dulwich centre Newsletter 1996#3) was to wonder how those ideas could be employed in a school setting. Initially I wondered if we could work on "mocking try-hard" - the attitude that it is not cool to make efforts towards excellence in the classroom. However in response to a situation that occurred I decided to look at the role of Racism in our school.

The idea was simple enough - we could set up an interview with Racism. How best to do that? As role play? This developed into the idea of a short drama.

I approached the drama teacher with the idea and he was enthusiastic. We called a lunch time meeting of his third form drama class. Here we presented the idea of externalising a Problem and interviewing it and outlined the sort of areas we would be curious about, using Roth & Epston as a guide. The group then brainstormed Racism's responses to these questions. All this was resolved and a script was generated in 3 acts.

At the same time I had been thinking about other methods of communicating these ideas. I approached a group of 6th form archipello singers in the school wondering if they would be interested in writing and performing music around the theme of an externalised Racism. They were keen and wrote a song of four verses. These verses were performed between the 3 acts of the drama providing a richness and a sense of continuity between acts.

Over a number of lunchtimes the group met to practice the drama. Costumes were prepared - coloured masks for race groups, black cowl for Racism, set pieces for actors like cards, rugby ball etc.

A sixth form video studies group needed something to video for their class assessments and they were drawn in to provide a 3 camera edited video of "Interviewing Racism"

This play was a first foray for me into the area of drama. I learnt a great deal about the mechanics of organising students and managing a script. The drama teacher (Eric Bernard - without whose expertise the project would not have advanced) and I decided to continue with the idea of using school drama groups to address Problems within the school. Eric is enthusiastic to use the skills of senior drama groups to explore these ideas more fully and to present them to wider audiences (eg school assemblies).

The presence of drama groups, drama teachers, video studies classes, ready made audiences at assemblies and "community issues" that are all found in schools make this way of working ideal for school settings.

The script developed by the group is as follows:

Interviewing Racism

Scene i) *(Lights come up on singing group on a small riser). They SING)
Song, Part One*

Scene ii) *(There are many masked actors on stage, each representing a racial group, indicated by a different primary colour. There are two DR talking, two DL are playing chess, two CR and C are throwing a rugby ball and four are UL playing cards around a table. RACISM enters from off R.)*

RACISM: (miked with distortion. He points to the two DR) Hate! (They stop talking and turn their backs on each other. RACISM moves to the two playing rugby.) Hate! (They stop playing and one of the boys throws the ball violently at the other. RACISM moves to the card players.) Hate! (One of the actors collects the cards and they disperse. RACISM moves on to the chess players.) Hate! (They stop playing. RACISM points to the audience) Hate! (RACISM exits L and the groups rearrange themselves along racial lines. All exit making gestures at one another.)

Scene iii) *(Lights up on singing group)*

Scene iv - The Interview

(Talk Show set) RACISM stands L behind a table. Two INTERVIEWERS are seated R behind the table. There are also two functional cameramen on stage)

1st INTERVIEWER: (to camera) Good day, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the "chat show". Today we have a very special interview. Our guest has come out of hiding especially for this programme - and it is my pleasure to welcome - RACISM.

2nd INTERVIEWER: This is a one-off opportunity so lets get straight to it, shall we? RACISM, the first question we have for you is quite simple - where have you been hiding?

RACISM: Ah yes yes well - hiding - yes - I've been unseen rather than hiding - yes?? Unseen - I've been unseen in lots of places. A long time ago I was unseen in Germany, after that in South Africa. Recently nobody saw me in Bosnia, in Rwanda and in Burundi. You can see where I've been but often people don't realise its me that's been there - you know? And I've been here at your school for a while but this is the first time I've come out in the open like this.

1st INTERVIEWER: so why are you here at our school?

RACISM: Same old reasons! I want to stop people getting on with each other. I want to split up mixed groups into single race groups. I want conflict, I want jealousy, I want fear!!! Yessir - that's why I'm here!

2nd INTERVIEWER: I don't think the school will fall for that! How do you expect to be able to trick us into that?

RACISM: Hahahaha! Not fall for that? So long as nobody sees me you'll fall for it, all right! I've got everything on my side - the movies show people in race groups, the newspapers blame races for crimes, the T.V. does stuff by race groups! All around people are getting divided up by their colours! Well it's too easy! All I have to do is get those groups to stop trusting each other - to stop talking to each other - and BINGO - next thing we've got conflict, we've got jealousy - we've got fear!! Excellent!!

1st INTERVIEWER: Sounds like you've got some help in your plans - some friends on your side!

RACISM: Well - not **friends** exactly. Lets say there are lots of people who help me without really meaning to!!! (I prefer not to have friends!) So the TV helps me, radio and newspapers help me. They don't mean to - but they do anyway! Also - anytime I can trick a group of people into not trusting another group - that helps me too! So - yes - I do get help! That's part of the fun of it for me - tricking people into helping me!

2nd INTERVIEWER: Is there anyone or anything that does not help you?

RACISM: Oh yes - curse their eyes! Oh yes. No matter where I go there are always some people who can **see** me. If I can shut them up its OK. If I can make them look silly or stupid its OK. But if people **listen** to them - if people pay attention to them - ahhh - the game is up for me. I can't win when people see me. Oh yes - curse their eyes - I've got enemies all right!

1st INTERVIEWER: These people who can **see** you - what is it they **see** and what is it they **say** about that?

RACISM: Somehow they can **see** that my lies aren't **true**. Somehow they can see that people of different races are actually very much alike - much more alike than I want them to see. And when they talk to people of different races they find out that they are often interested in the same sort of things. I **hate** it! How can I split people up when they have common interests. **And** they talk about it. Loudmouths - why can't they keep their mouths shut? I want people to believe that different races have nothing to **say** to each other. Damn their eyes!

2nd INTERVIEWER: Well that's very interesting. And apart from people who **see** you, does anything else stand in your way?

RACISM: Yes Yes dammit - I hate that sport. When people play sport together they mix up the race groups I've been working so hard to get going. And then they **talk** to each other. And they have fun. I hate it when people have fun. Yes - I'd say that sport is a real problem to me!

2nd INTERVIEWER: Well RACISM - this has certainly been an eye-opener for me. I can't help wondering if you haven't made a mistake by coming on our programme and letting all these people see you. However, thank you very much for coming out of hiding and providing such an interesting interview.

RACISM: I'm not coming back here.....

THE END!

The Song 'RACISM'

By Dylan Regler

*Verse (1) Why do we fight
Why can't we get along
Lets do what's right
Lets replace what went wrong
The future is near and our kids live in fear
So why don't we change
Leave the past live again.*

*Verse (2) Isn't it time for us to change
Time for us to rearrange
The problems that we've made
The controversy got to end
Time for us to make amend
Of the problems that we've made*

*Verse (3) Will the peoples racise be clear
Will they have live in fear
Maybe the noises you hear
Could be a voice in your ears
Racism is near
Be careful be strong be aware*

*Verse (4) Now you've seen the pain it's cause
And you've seen how it went wrong
Long before the children were born
But it's time they learn to fight this war
Let live, as one people
The world, is one people*

INTERVIEWING SPOILED IDENTITY

Vanessa Brown (English Teacher and M. Counselling student) and I (Donald) have been working with a group of fourth form (yr10) English students looking at how language positions people and at some of the effects of that positioning.

The first 3 classes were spent looking at the ideas of social construction as a group idea of something, of discourses as packets of understandings and of positions as being offered by discourses.

We developed these understandings using exercises like:

Mr D.J. McMEnamin Dip hort, B.Hort Sc, Dip Teach

Mr McMEnamin

Mr Mac

Donald

Don

Dad

Darling

- *How do you know which one to use?*
- *Where did you learn that?*
- *What are some meanings/understandings that go with each of these names?*
- *What can you say about the language, dress, behaviour, attitudes associated with each of these names?*
- *How do you know all that?*

This exercise led on to similar discussions using different types of names ie: surfie (students commented on the different meanings of surfie/surfer), rugby head....

We went on to discuss different constructions of "teenager"

- *Ours?*
- *Parents?*
- *Cokes?*

And looked at the real effects on individuals of these constructions. Who gets to choose which construction is being used? This led to a discussion on the idea of agency.

Later students were asked to reflect privately on their understanding of what it would be like to be positioned as having a spoiled identity - an experience of not measuring up to discursive standards.

- *what's it like?*
- *what effects does it have on you?*
- *on your relationships?*
- *what would you prefer?*

The problem - Spoiled Identity - was externalised. Using the question guide lines from Roth & Epstons externalising conversations exercise students were invited in groups to brainstorm the sorts of questions they could ask spoiled Identity to uncover (a) its power, strategies, goals and (b) times when it failed, what worked against it etc.

Each group was then invited to prepare and present a drama where the cast involved the Spoiled Identity the Antidote (Groups? Mates? Self Confidence?....)and some people questioning them.

To summarise this unit of learning students were asked to write an essay outlining their experience. With their permission I've included some comments from those essays.

"Spoiled Identity has one of the biggest effects on the person without them having a lot of agency over it"

" In our class peoples identity's get spoiled every day by a range of people - teachers and students"

" Agency is being able to name and put your ideas into action"

"Maybe people are getting numb about spoiled identities because there are too many of them around and they're getting used used to it"

"When bad discourse [spoiled identity] is put on me I loose the power of confidence to talk and feel thrown out. It makes you feel you don't deserve to be talked to".

" When I started this school and realised how this [the social environment] would affect me I changed my name from the rather formal Jeffrey to Jeff"

" Since I have been shown what a spoiled identity is I have been aware if a lot more of it around the classroom. I used to think of it as just teasing."

"After learning about there topics I have found myself stopping and thinking before I call someone something".

Having an “Externalising Conversation with Dak”.

Introduction

Ron and I had been working (at Melville High School) with two small groups of students who were wanting to “say NO to Dak”. The first group, third form students, were friends who had come together and requested that Ron help them “kick Dak”. The other group comprised of fifth-form students who had recently been to see me individually, to explore the influence of ‘Dak’ in their lives. Because I was working with five young people as individuals, I wondered whether they would like to hear from each other and asked each of them if they would be interested in forming a group to explore ‘Dak’. They agreed that this would make sense, and so we had begun to work as a group. This group were not necessarily saying they wanted to be rid of ‘Dak’, rather that they wanted to find out about it and then decide on its usefulness.

Ron and I decided that we would ask both groups of students whether they would like to be a part of an experiment that we would like to try out, and whether they would be happy to form a whole group to work together as third and fifth form students. We explained the purpose of our seminar and initiated our plan of making a video which could be used as an educational and informative resource. Both groups expressed enthusiasm for this idea and seemed keen to share their work on video when they realised that it was to be presented to our colleagues at University. When we gathered as a larger group we firstly discussed externalising conversations, which we had done previously in the small groups when we had begun our work together, and then introduced the idea of having an externalising conversation directly with the problem. We talked with the group about the wealth of knowledge in the group about ‘Dak’, and asked them if they were interested in finding out all that they could about it. We discussed what kinds of things they might ask ‘Dak’ to find out about the influence that it was having amidst us. We discussed with the group our ideas about interviewing the problem, or the issue, to try and understand how ‘it’ works. The group were enthusiastic about being part of our project and felt that they would benefit from this exercise.

Interviewing 'Dak'

*Interestingly, the two members of the group who insisted on taking up the role of 'Dak' were the two who have kicked it out of their lives. The rest of the group decided that they would like to write their **own** questions as investigators and they then shared their questions with one another. We wrote their questions on the board, and more questions were generated through this exercise. These included:*

- What do you aim to do to people?*
- What do people use you for?*
- Who invented you? Are you the same all the time?*
- What do you want for your users?*
- What dreams do you have for the future?*
- What influence do you want to have in the world?*
- How did people first hear about you?*
- How come they still want to know about you?*
- Who persuades people to start with you?*
- How do most people feel after their first experience of you?*
- Why do people keep coming back to you?*
- How do you get people 'hooked' on you?*
- How are you affecting our community?*
- What are some of the risks people take when they invite you into their lives?*
- Do you invite people to be honest and open and share with your family/teachers and the Principal?*
- How do you feel about Principals/Guidance Counsellors/the Police?*
- What makes you so powerful?*
- Do you play tricks on people to make them think you're 'cool'?*
- What is your interest in money?*
- What do you give to people who can't afford you?*
- How do you invest the money you earn?*

After the group had asked 'Dak' the questions that they wanted answers to, we stopped the video and discussed how they had felt, as 'Dak' had answered their questions. This brought about a heated discussion about how powerful and arrogant 'Dak' was and how it had written them off as 'dicks'. We talked about the friends of 'Dak' about the times it had failed to influence people in the ways that it had wanted and desired to.

Questioning 'Dak' about rejection

The reporters decided that they would ask 'Dak' some more questions in order to find out a 'counter-plot' to the story it was telling them. Again, we wrote the questions on the board and added to them as they requested.

- What happens when people say 'NO' to you?*
- What happens to your dreams when you get rejected?*
- Dak, how have people managed to avoid you?*
- How and when does a person's voice outmatch yours?*
- How do you deal with resistance and determination?*
- Does determination frustrate your plans for people?*
- How come some people have managed to kick you?*
- How come some people have never been interested in you?*
- How come some of the people who know you reckon you 'suck'?*
- How are you going to get back into the lives of people who have turned against you?*
- What do fitness and good health say about you?*
- What voice do you use on those who have rejected you?*
- What do you say about those who won't try you, or who defy you?*
- Some people control you, how does it feel that you don't control them?*
- People we know have kicked you so that they could get fit, what do you think about this?*
- How does the media reject you?*
- If groups of people stand together against you, what will you do?*
- Who is most likely to stand against you?*
- What is it that people do to shun you? How do they do it?*
- How do you know when to get lost?*

On reflection, Ron and I both felt that we had not given enough attention to this stage, and thought that it would have been good to allow time in between these sessions so that the above questions could have been developed more extensively as well as more reflection given to the impact and influence which 'Dak' insisted that it was having in the community. However, the constraints of time demanded that we proceed if we wanted to present this video as part of our seminar.

The two people who were in the role of being 'Dak' reported to us that they were feeling strong, and that the questions being asked were easily swept aside. With this display of dominance by 'Dak', the group soon abandoned their investigation as reporters, and resumed asking questions about the problem, and trying to argue with 'Dak'. The group finished this part of the session and many expressed that they were feeling a bit deflated and overcome by the immensity of the problem. We discussed this as a group and talked about 'where to from here' and decided what we'd like to do next. Many in the group stated that this experience and project was indeed 'real' to them, and reflected their own positioning to the problem at a [personal level. 'Dak' was having its way with some of them, but for the first time they weren't happy about it, they no longer wanted to feel silenced by 'Dak'. They wanted to begin the next session with re-screening the video.

Re-engaging with 'Dak'

The group watched the video again, at the beginning of the next session, and Ron and I noticed a definite change in positioning. Many did not want to be reporters, they wanted to talk to 'Dak', to trip it up and catch it out. "We want to bum 'Dak' out" they stated, and they wanted to tell 'Dak' about how it was affecting their lives and "make it listen", They wanted to gather together as a group and stand against it. Even though this was not strictly following the seminar project or our hopes for the video, it was still very much following the spirit of Roth and Epston (1996) and having a problem-externalising conversation.

During this video session, many of the above questions were asked, and both persistence and determination were exhibited when 'Dak' became evasive. At the conclusion of this part of the video, the group were beginning to notice that 'Dak' was becoming weaker and more silent, and that their voices were gaining strength. The group have asked that we commence our next session by reviewing this section of video, so that they may see the changes in positioning and the gaps opening for a different story to emerge.

Reviewing the Dialogue

When we commenced again after a two week holiday break, I expected that there would have been some changes within the group, and feared that holidays, boredom, peer pressure and other factors could have provided space for 'Dak' to regain its strong voice in some lives. The group gathered and we talked about the holiday break, two students reported that 'Dak' had lured them back, but both said that they'd felt "so stink" after a session that they had been able to refuse after that. Other group members who stated that they had "kicked 'Dak'" were all pretty proud of themselves. Some talked about being "unsure" how long they could keep 'Dak' at bay, and others said that they'd never "let it control" their lives again. They talked about whether they could use and be "in control" and expressed concern over the fact that 'Dak' was so deceitful that it could trick them into thinking that they were in control when they might not be. All group members have taken to having 'externalising conversations' without the need for any outside modelling.

They asked to see the video, which they reviewed from the beginning, and afterwards the two people who had played the part of 'Dak' asked if they could ask some questions of the group, remaining in the role of 'Dak'. I did not know where this was going to lead, so asked that they check out if it was appropriate with the group, all of whom consented. This seemed to be a big mistake, because it gave 'Dak' back a voice, and with this voice these students, in a taunting and dramatic way (which I now know they had pre-planned), asked questions about why the group would let them speak in their lives. They asked about what these users had expected of 'Dak', and laughed mockingly at some suggestions like, "I'd hoped that I could use you without becoming addicted to you", "I am in control, you're not", "I hoped you would help me control anger", "I thought if you helped me control nervousness, I'd get through School Cert.", "you bring me friends", and "my mates think I'm cool when I'm stoned".

These two students then asked if they could "de-role" and whether they could lead two groups in a discussion about what had just been said and how they had felt in their roles as 'Dak' and how the others had felt during the interviewing. Again, the rest of the group agreed and a hearty discussion took place about how they can actively support each other in "overcoming Dak". I wished that I had been able to video this session, it highlighted for me the possibilities of ongoing video work, and of extending the characters involved, and in so doing providing for a wider audience as part of developing a resource which could be used in other areas of our school (ie Health/Life Skills/Social Studies).

Conclusion

Roth and Epston (1996) developed an exercise which involves interviewing problems to ascertain their influence on people's lives. This use of externalising conversations with Problems offers a powerful forum for exposing the role, tactics and goals of Problems within communities and thus has the potential to provide a useful educational tool. While the students at Melville abandoned their roles as investigative reporters who were conducting an experiment for an educational resource, and reverted to being members of a 'Saying NO to 'Dak'' group, their work on video upheld the positive influences of 'problem-externalising conversations' which could be shared with a much wider community. Promoting problem-externalising conversations as a language practice could provide ways of making meaning which could generate alternative constructions of reality (Roth & Epston, 1996).

There are many aspects of this first experiment that were not planned, and the seminar date did not allow for practice or for the whole project to evolve. These students were willing and enthusiastic about being a part of an exercise to develop an informative, educational resource which could be used to inform other groups in the school about the ways and workings of 'Dak'. However, in the middle of this exercise they re-established themselves as a therapeutic group who wanted to get involved with the process in a whole-hearted way. Their way of interviewing the problem was unique to them, and the way they made sense of what happened and where to go was negotiated by the group as they went along. I felt that this was more important than returning to the script and role-playing as non-involved investigators, this way it was theirs.

When I presented these notes to the group to check out, they discussed the importance of them of investigating and interviewing the problem to find out all they could about it, and then in reviewing this part of video. It was as they watched that they noticed 'shifts' in the ways they were thinking. They asked me if I thought all 'problems' would be so "arrogant" and wondered if it would work if they were to interview other problems. They also talked about how important it was to them that the two people who had chosen to play in the role of 'Dak' were strong members of the group who had a lot of knowledge about 'Dak'. They said that when they noticed them becoming defeated and withdrawn, they knew they were beginning to beat 'Dak'. I asked them if they would find videos with people interviewing problems a good way of learning, and they responded that as long as it was student-directed that they would. They asked me what I thought of interviewing "different cultures" not as problems, but as ways of making meaning from a "safe" outsiders viewpoint. Some said that they would not feel guilty about things that they did not know and felt that they could not ask.

A Seminar Evaluation

The initial idea of interviewing Problems came from reading Dulwich Centre Newsletter (1996 #3) where this work is explained in the context of African villages (externalising AIDS) and Indigenous Australian groups (externalising Diabetes and Grief).

The idea of externalising problems is a profoundly therapeutic one. As we (Kathy, Ron and Donald) reflected on the applications of interviewing externalised Problems within our schools we became excited by the possibilities. That we began pursuing these ideas in response to a seminar topic was only one small part of our motivation.

We are all closely entwined within the stories of our schools - both Problem and Preferred. We work actively and daily to undermine and expose Problem stories and we are keenly aware of their destructive influence in the lives of the young people with whom we work. Being offered such an effective tool as Interviewing Problems was a blessing for us. We each saw, in our different ways and in our different contexts, immediate applications of this idea. Our forays into applying these ideas are outlined in the booklet Interviewing Problems. In this evaluation we would like to reflect on the value to us of this work.

I (Donald) have been working this year on the twin projects of 'having a conversation with a school' and 'teaming'. This is about on the one hand asking "how can we have the same sort of therapeutic conversations that I have in my own office - that young people find so liberating and hope-producing - how can I have that sort of conversation with a whole school?" and then on the other hand it is about asking "who can I team up with so as to locate my work more fully within the community, drawing on the wider strengths and talents available there, in a way that produces a wide sense of ownership of these projects?"

Interviewing Problems has proven to be a marvellous mechanism for implementing these twin projects. The drama - Interviewing Racism - was written by myself, the drama teacher (Eric Bernard) a group of Year 9 drama students and a group of Year 12 archipello singer/song writers (principally Dylan Regler). A group of 4 Year 12 video students recorded the drama (only the sound as it turned out!). Fifteen Year 9 students acted the parts. The potential then existed (unrealised as yet) to show this work to large groups of students (300 at a time).

If this work of showing dramas to large groups were combined with Gerald Monks idea of inviting the audience to view the drama then write in script changes/adaptations to be used in a second and third showing, the potential for 'speaking to' and 'listening to' a large group of students about a given Problem is really enhanced.

So the writing and producing of Interviewing Racism was a fine example of having a conversation with a school and teaming.

Similarly Interviewing Spoiled Identity involved myself, the English Teacher (Vanessa Brown) and 28 Year 10 students discussing, exposing and scripting the tactics and dreams of Spoiled Identity in a way which was fun, creative and a fine learning experience for all. Again, video copy of the mini-dramas produced has potential for use with other class groups.

At Melville High School, Ron and I (Kathy) worked with two small groups of students who were wanting to "say NO to Dak". Ron had been working with a third form group of students who had requested his help so that they might "kick Dak", and I had been working with a group of senior school students on a one to one basis exploring the influence of 'Dak' in their lives.

As we (Don, Ron and I) began pursuing the idea of interviewing externalised problems for our seminar we became excited on two levels. Firstly, we believed that it could provide an opportunity to share the work that we do in an educational and creative way with a wider audience. 'Dak' is currently presenting itself as problematic in schools all around the country and because our workload at Melville had escalated to such an extent this year that we realised that we were not able to meet the needs of the whole school community on our own. Secondly, it would bring this group of young people together so that they could support and work with each other and alongside this help educate Ron and I about 'Dak'. Up to this time we had been working with facts, stats and literature, we wanted to know more about this problem issue and through the stories of the young people within 'our' community. Up to this time we had referred many students to outside agencies for drug counselling, and especially if they told us that the problem was around all the time. When we talked with our students they were indeed willing and enthusiastic about our experiment and thought that it would be great to have a conversation with 'Dak'.

Time constraints, the seminar date and school events, including the loss of one of the group members who died prior to the second video-shoot, hindered the production of the video, and certainly hurried the session for screening. This was a pity because the group have since reviewed the whole production and come up with ideas which

could be added so that they could present "our video" (their words) to their respective Health classes. I think that the therapeutic value was immense and

although the large group abandoned their role of being investigative reporters they continued having conversations and arguments with 'Dak', which was very real to their situations. The group believe that others would look at the video and learn from it because it was "real" and because it had come from their own ideas and not ours. The group were also interested in putting forward other problem issues to test out whether they would be so "arrogant."

Ron and I learned a lot from this exercise and from the group who conducted it. We came to understand 'Dak' and the many ways it lures our young people and its intentions for them. We believe that the potential of such an exercise in reaching out and speaking to a wide audience is immense. Within the audience there is always the possibility that the older members of the community will listen to and learn from the young what it is like for them and how these issues are affecting their lives. It can be a creative and fun way of working in a group and the potential for ideas springs forward and is negotiated within the group.