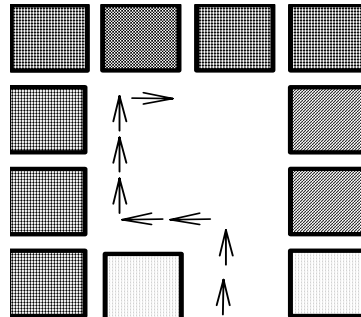


**Risky Journeys: Using Expressive Research to Portray Cross-Cultural Adult Education Practice in Aboriginal Australia**



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**Introduction**

This article has five parts. The first is a brief introduction to the expressive agenda used in this article and the rationale for its use. The second explores links between the expressive approach and phenomenology. The third discusses the application of this approach in my recent book, where a major part is made up of seven five-panel “installations,” each about an event in adult education practice in which I had been involved. The fourth is an example of this process excerpted from the book. It concerns an episode of cross-cultural awareness education run at the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD) in Alice Springs, Central Australia, in which I was involved. The final part provides a brief comment on the method and its capacity.

## Background

This article is built on a research journey that began when, after more than a decade in various forms of adult education practice in several locations, I took up university teaching and research about adult education and its practice. In this work I wished to find ways to revisit significant moments of adult education practice as I had experienced them. I wished to create living texts that would present these experiences such that their risk and challenge and reward would be at least a little visible and tangible. I wanted to be able to say, “See, the experience of adult education is like that. It will make similar demands on you for which you will need to be personally and professionally prepared.”

I had been disappointed with texts in the adult education literature, which tended to speak of compliant learners (they are adults, of course!) and lesson aims and objectives, outcomes, and achievements as if the whole adult education project were a kind of technology, when I had experienced it as a kind of risky invitational dance.

The text I finally wrote (Willis, 2002), which was drawn with some modifications from my doctoral dissertation, attempted to develop an expressive way of presenting forms of adult education practice as lived experiences following a phenomenological methodology. My concern in writing in this expressive style was to pursue a phenomenological agenda and to avoid abstractions and distancing texts. The aim was to find a way to represent as vividly as possible what the experience of adult education practice was like and some of the implications of this portrayal on practice and on the preparation of adult educators.

A twofold academic foundation for my quest had emerged. The first was the expressive form of knowing and writing. The other was phenomenology.

## Expressive Knowing and Phenomenology

The expressive approach, which I was seeking to develop, is based on an epistemological distinction inside constructionism. Constructionism and its more individualist version, constructivism (Crotty, 1998), holds that,

all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context. (p. 42)

It is suggested here that there are two modes of constructivist knowing: one called “explanatory” or “analytic,” the other “expressive” or “narrative” (Reason & Hawkins, 1988; Bruner, 1985; Eisner, 1991, 1993; Eisner & Peshkin, 1990; Barone & Eisner, 1997). Eisner and his colleague Barone (1997) have elaborated this expressive approach in their work on applying what they have called arts-based rather than scientific approaches to research.

The explanatory constructivist stance approaches the work of knowing and naming by seeking how this newly encountered phenomenon can be located in existing mental categories or whether its accommodation will require a modification to existing categories. The expressive constructivist stance wishes to contemplate the phenomenon as a whole and allow it to present itself to the mind as “how it first appears” before it is classified or “read” or derivatively “named” in terms of categories to which it can be attributed.

The work of representing appearances in this expressive mode tends to call on the naming power of metaphor and other aesthetic tools. Heron (1992) suggests that in knowing the world the mind uses four modes, each feeding the next, in what he calls an “up-hierarchy.” The initial contact is achieved through initial feeling, an “attunement with that being with which the perceptual process is involved” (p. 92). Heron further points out that feeling in the sense used here is much deeper than emotions and refers more to a person’s generalized bodily and mental awareness of being in the world in specific locations and postures. Feeling is followed by imaging (through imaginal perception) and then classification of the phenomenon (through conceptual classification); and finally, in many cases, action or praxis follows.

Expressive knowledge is understood to be largely linked to perceptual knowing. It is generated by the researcher adopting a receptive rather than a proactive stance, allowing an element of the world—in this case the experience of adult education practice—to be an object of contemplation, then attempting to construct a text that presents that experience in its wholeness. Heron (1996) suggests a distinction between “linear, rational, Apollonian inquiry and Dionysian approaches which are more imaginal, expressive, spiral, diffuse, impromptu” (p. 45). I saw this expressive form of knowing and writing as perfect for my phenomenological project, which of course raises the question as to the nature and contribution of phenomenology.

### ***Phenomenology***

In its historical origins phenomenology rose out of a reaction to positivism, through which the discourses of the physical sciences were applied to all

forms of human inquiry. Husserl (1964) and his followers created a countermove, attending to the part humans play in the actual construction of the world as it is experienced. There is a tension between objectifying views that posit that the world as we know it exists “out there” independently of human consciousness; and mentalist views that think the world is purely a construction of the mind.

Phenomenology attempts “to understand and describe phenomena exactly as they appear in an individual’s consciousness” (Phillipson, 1972). The leading idea is that in order for humans to be aware of the known world in which they live as they experience it, they need to be aware of the power of the human mind to distort basic ideas of reality according to culturally preset prejudices and ways of thinking. The phenomenological stance does not immediately attend to or name the source of distortion, but rather attempts to bypass it. This is the process referred to as “epoché” or “bracketing.” It wishes to bring the inquirer’s eye and mind back to the thing itself and ask, “What is it like?” The “phenomenological eye” seeks to bracket out later interpretative constructions and reconstructions. As Crotty (1996a) puts it, “the focus should lie with what manifests itself in experience rather than what the subject has made of it” (p. 38).

A researcher in a particular field of human practice (such as nursing, teaching, hairdressing, flying an aeroplane) pursuing the phenomenological methodology attempts to *portray* rather than *analyze and theorize* his or her lived experience. He or she focuses specifically on what gives the experience its unique nameable qualities as a particular phenomenon impinging on her or his experience called her or his life world.

The expression *life world* used in phenomenological writings is defined by Valle and Halling (1989) as:

the world as lived by the person and not the hypothetical external entity separate from or independent from him or her. (p. 9)

This idea of life world refers to the actual experienced world of a person. It corresponds to that person’s “intentional awareness.”

Phenomenological research was originally developed by Husserl (1931), Heidegger (1962), and Merleau-Ponty (1962) and received elaboration from their great apologist Spiegelburg (1975). It has been applied with great effect to school education by van Manen (1977, 1990) and to adult education by Stanage (1986), Collins (1984, 1987), and to a lesser extent Brookfield (1990a, 1990b).

In practice, phenomenology wishes to slow the researcher down and hold his or her gaze on the phenomenon itself: the lived experience of some activity.

It is important to realize that following the constructivist line, all articulated human knowing is locked in language. The project to attend upon “the things themselves” cannot expect to find a way of knowing that somehow goes behind language. It is rather in the *way human knowers position themselves toward the world* that may at least contribute to a way of knowing that minimizes the amount of what might be called secondary processing occurring in and around the acts of knowing and naming the world.

### **Expressive Styles and the Exhibition**

Phenomenological writers have used a range of textual genres in their research inquiries. Some are explanatory texts that attempt to emulate the rigor of positivist scientific writing. These texts with their attempt to create innovative language to carry the freshness of their insight into the experienced thing (rather than the scientifically categorized thing) can become dense and tedious. Texts of this kind would not be helpful in the project here. This was when the idea of expressive approach was so welcome. It was to use aesthetic tools to create a living portrayal of the phenomenon: somehow to make it present and alive for others to be “taken into” and to be “made aware of.” Although it might lack the final word in creating an explanatory phenomenological account of the phenomenon, it would give readers a more impressionistic portrayal of the lived experience, which would then seem alive and interesting. My expressive project would, of course, need appropriate textual tools, but I knew that the expressive agenda seeking a portrayal rather than developing a linear argument might be served by the juxtaposition of different but complementary textual forms.

In the idiom of an exhibition, which is the structure of my book, five juxtaposed textual genres are imagined as panels mounted beside each other making an installation around each of the seven chosen episodes of my adult education practice. They are backgrounding (description of historical and social context of the event), sketching (a story of the event), and poetized reflection (poetic revisiting of the event written in verse). Then two linked panels attempt to intuit and distill the experience using direct metaphorical and imagistic language. The final comment panel provided a space for more open-ended reflections.

The most common expressive instrument by which people attempt to portray an experience is the narrative or story. An experience can be revisited such that the reader is taken into it and brought close to it. Readers use their imagination to be taken into the writer's world. Storytellers spin a web of words and sentences elaborating just what the experience was like and some of the meanings it had for them. I thought to use stories of practice in my phenomenological project, but in order not to get bogged down in setting the scene I created a separate process: backgrounding, to introduce the story and set the scene. Once the context of the story had been described in the backgrounding section, the story could focus more deeply on the experience under consideration.

I then discovered I could gain more intensity and focus by using poetic forms to look specifically at the experience of the event being described. The poetic approach gave me a chance to focus on how I was experiencing the event under consideration. It allowed me the freedom to express my experience as directly as I could. The poetic eye could move from the "whatness" of the experience as it appeared to me together with my subjective reactions to it. Although its claim to share the full artistic identity of poetry may be controverted (Willis, in press), the poetic reflections served the expressive research agenda by making use of the greater freedom and expression that the poetic genre affords.

### ***The Exhibition and its Work of Portrayal***

The expressive approach used in the installations with their six panels invites the reader/visitor to stand before each panel in turn and allow it to "speak," to present itself without too much analysis or debate. The gallery visitor can then begin the ruminative process: If that is what adult education practice is actually like for that writer (and presumably to a greater or lesser extent for adult educators similarly placed), then adult education practice in similar circumstances will require similar dispositions. Practitioners will need to be cultivated in these, as will educational programs preparing those wishing to join their ranks.

#### **"READING" THE PANELS IN THE INSTALLATION**

The readers/visitors enter the exhibition and follow the path from installation to installation accompanied by the researcher-turned-curator of the exhibition. Sketching is somewhat similar to and somewhat different from phenomenological anecdote as described by van Manen (1990). Insofar as it

has the character of a story that vividly brings out the structure of the lived experience, it has characteristics of van Manen's phenomenological anecdote. On the other hand, because it maintains more detailed physical links with actual events (following the backgrounding process through which it is located in real place and time), it is less purely phenomenological and somewhat more interpretive.

The intuiting and distilling panels focus on the phenomenon itself. They attempt to look past the subjectivity necessarily contained in some of the Backgrounding, Sketching, and Poetized reflection panels. Here the exhibition, through the panels, attempts to move from the contextualized and dramatized accounts of the experience that contain subjective and objective elements, to "the phenomenon of adult education practice itself"—that which presents itself in the experience. We are after the "that" which presents itself—the whatness of it—rather than the reactions of the subject experiencing the phenomenon, which of course is somehow also a part of the experience.

In the Intuiting panel, the researcher, having been brought back to an intense awareness of the phenomenon in the process of developing the various processes listed above, now attempts to bracket any theorizing conclusions contained in them. An attempt is now made to let the phenomenon itself speak and somehow to represent this revelation in text. Two strategies were developed to turn this contemplation into appropriate text: *reflection on four existential dimensions* and *sentence stem completion*

#### EXPLORING EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS AND COMPLETING SENTENCE STEMS

The first strategy follows Merleau Ponty (1962) and prompts the researcher to contemplate the phenomenon as it is experienced along four existential dimensions of human living: space, bodiliness, time, and interrelatedness. Van Manen (1990), commenting on Merleau-Ponty's approach, writes that "spatiality, corporeality, temporality and relationality are productive categories for the process of phenomenological question posing, reflection and writing" (p. 103).

The second strategy draws on the work of Crotty (1996b), who developed a matrix of questions to be asked to facilitate phenomenological contemplation. Having reminded his readers to focus on "the phenomenon (what you are experiencing) and not on yourself (the one experiencing)," he then suggests the researcher attempt to complete sentence stems like the following:

What comes to light when I attend to practising adult education in this context is ... Practising adult education in this context is like ... I picture practising adult education in this context as ... Practising adult education can be described as ... What shows up when I think of practising adult education in this context is ... (p. 272)

The researcher thus builds a new text in which the phenomenon itself is directly intuited and named from several angles. Readers who have been looking at the previous exhibition panels need to go into this intuitive portrayal, allowing the event made present in the previous panels to present itself but trying not to attend to any theorizing ideas that might have sprung to mind while visiting the earlier panels. The text in this set may appear less finished and literary and more inchoate, as the contemplator holding gaze on the phenomenon tries to generate a text that is first and foremost faithful to the experience, before attempting to be interesting or entertaining to readers.

#### **DISTILLATION**

The distillation text is an attempt to summarize the meanings of the lived experience as illumined in the intuiting texts. It is an attempt to identify emerging themes that seem to be a central part of the experience.

In the text being constructed here, distilling represents what “unearthing something thematic” does in van Manen’s (1990) text. As he writes, “we try to unearth something ‘telling,’ something ‘meaningful,’ something ‘thematic’ in the various experiential accounts—we work at mining meaning from them” (p. 86).

The set concludes with the sixth panel that is designated for the curator, this time as a reflective practitioner locating and owning the experiences portrayed in the installation. This final section is deliberately open-ended. It provides a space for brief comment on learning that emerges from the experience, on the research experience itself. It also comments on the significance of elements of these experiences for adult education practice.

The following represents in an abbreviated form one of the installations from the main gallery in the exhibition taken from the book.

### **Dusty Journeys at IAD**

In the early 1980s I spent six years as an adult educator at the Institute for Aboriginal Development (IAD), an adult learning center for Aboriginal



people and some non-Aboriginal people who worked with them. Among my duties I was required to run cultural awareness workshops mainly for non-Aboriginal people working in human services with Aboriginal clients.

## PANEL I: BACKGROUNDING

### **Context**

Besides the courses for Aboriginal adults, which were the main concern of IAD, it also sponsored several cultural awareness programs each year for non-Aboriginal people to get to know the Aboriginal world and to gain some insight into ways of improving communication and collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

### **The Educator**

As an ex-missionary with an interest in egalitarian forms of adult education, I had come to IAD very much wishing to work in an environment where there would not be too much white dominance. IAD had an Aboriginal director whom I admired, and an interest in win-win collaboration with non-Aboriginal people. My attitude was optimistic. I believed that empathetic conversations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, combined with serious reflection on one's possible unwitting collusion with prejudice and racism, could lead to a change of heart and changes of behavior in civil life.

### **The Learners**

Participants in these cultural awareness workshops were recruited largely from human service organizations in Central Australia and beyond. They appear in more detail in the sketch below. The attitude of participants ran from sentimentalized glorification of Aboriginal culture from a small number, to hostility from participants required by their employer or superior to attend (also mercifully, a small number).

### **The Processes**

The cultural awareness program took about 20 participants (which was the maximum) in a bus to spend a weekend with Pitjantjatjara people at Finke, an Aboriginal settlement several hours drive from Alice. The group was met by an Aboriginal guide who showed the people where to camp and organized

conversations and visits to various points of interest on the settlement: store, clinic, church, school. The visitors were also taken hunting for kangaroos and digging for honey ants and witchetty grubs. There was a barbecue in the evening with some traditional Pitjantjatjara dancing and singing. On Sunday morning there was a Christian church service to which the visitors were invited, followed by a discussion with some of the Aboriginal people where questions could be raised.

The people returned to Alice Springs on the Sunday evening and then spent the next week in discussions, debriefings, films, and presentations from Aboriginal leaders in Alice about matters of health, law, land, religion, and civil life. At the end of the week the group again took the IAD bus, this time to a local restaurant to celebrate the completion of the program.

With the background in place, the set moves to its second component, the sketch. It is called "Tickets for the Harley."

## PANEL II: SKETCHING: TICKETS FOR THE HARLEY

There were about 20 people in the IAD course. A number of missionaries on their way to their first posting with Aboriginal people had registered. There were men and women employed in welfare and service organizations: the hospital and the jail; a small group of women who had come to Alice Springs to a women's camp-out protest at the American surveillance installation at Pine Gap just outside the town; two police officers, one an athletic young man who had been recently posted to Alice Springs, the other older, with some years experience in the region.

The young police officer was extroverted and articulate. He offered his opinions confidently about the importance of having "one Australia" for everyone; that anyone who really wanted a job could always find one; and that there were certain things, pursuits in the world that naturally fell to men, like public life, engineering, medicine, and police and military work. Others, like cooking and rearing children, were best done by women. He was puzzled why Aboriginal people could not just get out and get a job and a house as he had done.

His comments appeared to be founded on an unshakeable assumption that the way society was set up was good as it was, and the way things were was the way they were supposed to be. He had difficulty going through the reflexive processes of the course and, in one exercise where participants were

invited to explore what being white meant, complained that he couldn't see the point. His frequent reference to the women on the course as girls (to correspond with his reference to himself and other men as boys) irritated some of the women, who more than once attempted to suggest alternative language and points of view.

The length of the workshop—five days plus the introductory journey and camp-out at an Aboriginal settlement—gave time for people to get to know each other and for some disagreements, friendships, and their opposites to emerge.

As the facilitator I had confidence in the workshop's formal processes, which I had developed from earlier programs. It had talks by Aboriginal leaders and experienced non-Aboriginal community workers and anthropologists, with linked discussions about set and open-ended questions. The open discussion times were designed to provide an informal process through which the aims of cultural awareness could also be achieved. On the last day of the course there was an evaluation session in which, again, the young police officer asserted that he couldn't believe there really was such trouble between Aborigines and whites. He suspected it may have been a "beat up" from the city journalists.

During one of his loud, cheerful remarks, it became clear that the three women who had come to Alice Springs for their peace camp were being goaded almost beyond endurance. During the coffee break, one of them said to me that the young police officer's remarks were offensive and irritating and had really made the workshop difficult.

I then asked the women in their small cluster if it was possible in the spirit of cultural awareness to develop a way to understand police, and in this case male, culture. There was a disconcerted pause and then one of the women said that although this might assist her in understanding where he was coming from, it was clear to her that the white patriarchal regime privileged his culture and aspirations. It was unfair and oppressive to women, and of course to Aboriginal people, and that she had better things to do with her time as, she felt, had Aboriginal people.

I pointed out that, at least in this course, Aboriginal people whose current situation was indeed linked to the inequities and prejudices of the white system allocated some resources and time to expressing and explaining their way of being in the world to members of the white culture, even though it was evident they had much to work on with their own people.

At this point we were interrupted by the young police officer who joined the women from the side while I moved some distance away. I could see him animatedly showing a photograph of a shiny Harley Davidson motorcycle, which, he explained, was the first prize in the police raffle being drawn soon, and would they like to buy some tickets.

The women during the week had explained the ideological stance that had drawn them to the Pine Gap protest camp. They had spoken of attempting to develop inclusive, more ecological symbols for their life and work together, like certain flowers and moving water. They spoke of the great circle in which each was accorded space and time to be heard. The Harley, with its black paint and gleaming chrome and its surrounding aggressively male “bike” culture as a symbol beat across the women’s sensibilities. They refused his offer with the coolness that had characterized their earlier exchanges with him over the week, once they felt they had not been able to achieve an understanding. On the bus going out to the final celebratory dinner, the officer, although with few tickets sold, pronounced the week-long workshop a great idea. “Everyone should do it!”

As the adult educator presiding over the last moment of that course, I had to realize that there was still plenty of room for improvement.

With the sketch completed, the next element in the set is the poetized reflection, with much to think about.

### PANEL III: POETISED REFLECTION

You greet the latest student group,  
at the Aboriginal Learning Centre.  
The Yankunytjatjara director, dignified and friendly,  
bids them welcome; bids them listen.  
At the course's start  
you invite introductions, expectations,  
and look for hints of predisposing stance:  
interest, resistance, collusion.

Your agile eye, including smile and joke  
find out what they bring  
to mix into the course's alchemy.  
You spot reluctant learners  
already shaped by years with Aboriginal people  
on station, settlement or town;  
directed by their employer to attend,  
suspicious and resistant in the course.  
Others you reassure  
who bring interest, hesitation,  
whose paths have never met or crossed  
the Aboriginal world; excited and  
alive to possibility,  
bringing nothing to forget.  
moves to form the learning group,

+ + +

You share the long bus journey  
and camping near the settlement.  
You walk with the visitors past Aboriginal houses  
and store and church: children playing easy  
in the sand, dogs in every camp.  
You invite the learners to be open;  
you watch for the signs of doubt or question.  
You listen as the Aboriginal speakers  
welcome all the guests and talk  
of 'country' and their culture,  
what they do and what they hold as sacred  
in their world. And you keep watch  
as the strangers are attracted  
or enchanted, repulsed or confused.

+ + +

In the classroom back in town,  
reflecting on the settlement visit;  
attentive to compassion, insight, irritation,  
you listen for puzzled half-formed questions,  
hoping for resolution in the days ahead.  
And now you hope the Aboriginal speakers,  
commissioned to explain  
their life in white Australia,  
show eloquence and forbearance  
as you sit tense and watchful.

you note the students' comments and reactions  
as the living landscape of life together,  
Aboriginal and white, begins to show  
its tracks and intersections and its scars.  
You try to move from information and debate,  
listening for how the people feel  
in the course's different times and places.  
You lead them to confront whiteness:  
privilege entrenched in race,  
uncomfortably exposed, contested,  
in the stories and reflections of the week.  
And at the workshop's end, most speak of moments  
of awareness and change. An angry few write of wasting time,  
of being gracelessly subjected to exercises without meaning  
and being harangued by angry Aboriginal leaders  
whose jobs, they think, are paid for  
by the 'white system' that they, at least verbally, reject.  
You know heart movements are hidden unless displayed;  
you look for signs of empathy and attunement;  
like when conversation or debate  
resonates in compassion  
with Aboriginal voices once briefly heard.  
And then you bring the risky two-edged meeting  
to an end; hoping for some signs  
that all the conversations, visits and debates,  
have made a mark and wrought  
some soul change, compassion, transformation.  
You pack up the textas and butcher's paper  
Ready for next times people.

#### PANEL IV: INTUITING THE EXPERIENCE

##### **The Experience in Body, Space, Time, and Social Relations**

As I dwell on the experience of adult education practice in this event as a *bodily* practice, I feel tension, dust, mobility. The experience involves me standing, greeting, sitting in the bus, greeting and setting out the camp site, walking around the settlement, walking with the gathering women, and riding with the hunting men. In the classroom the body becomes the

instrument of order, standing to welcome, to take questions; and the instrument for engagement, sitting to join groups moving in various simulation games.

The *spaces* in this experience are not constant. The original settlement experience confronts me with expanding and contracting spaces between the educator and the participants. They contract when the participants huddle in a circle with the educator leading discussions. They expand when the learners move around the settlement and become opened to each other and the messages and spatial experiences of the settlement: when they watch the plastic bags and papers blowing and caught in the piled-up sand at the sides of graded dirt roads; when they feel the red dust and see the corrugated iron fences, unpainted sheets of house and shed walls; crows, black shapes near the store rubbish bins and their desolate cawing in the early afternoon.

Adult education practice as a *time* experience has lots of waiting in it: the waiting at the beginning and then the long trip in the dusty bus and then waiting in what shade can be found when the bus first arrives at the settlement until an Aboriginal guide can be roused. There is also the sitting on rolled swags at the campsite waiting for the planned program to get under way. In the subsequent classroom interaction time has a different, more urgent feel, linked to the experience of risk and the sense of building tension on the one hand, and the experience of tedium on the other, when speakers go over time and the engagement of the participants seems to evaporate into a kind of torpor.

The experience of *social relations* in this episode of adult education practice is characterized by the unstable interactions of various groups. The participants do not have a stable relationship with one another, or with the educator, or with the Aboriginal presenters. The Aboriginal presenters have an unstable relationship with the educator, the participants, and the groups with which the participants are affiliated; for example, some Aboriginal presenters find it difficult to treat police officers and correctional service workers from the gaol as if they are just participants in the course. The trust, respect, and affection the educator gives to the participants tends to be spasmodically reciprocated and mixed with episodes of hostility and distrust.

This episode of adult educational practice manifests what can be experienced when the educator is attempting to generate a particular kind of learning by exposing participants to direct experiences and attempting to shape their

responses. The following comments explore some of the emerging themes in adult educational practice that are strongly evident in this episode.

### **Ways of Naming the Adult Education Experience**

Adult education practice in this episode is intuited *as being in fierce contest for minds and hearts* while at the same time struggling to display intercultural respect; of dragging, mobilizing people who are physically present but may be ideologically removed from the necessary empathetic disposition required for the course to be useful. Adult education practice is like being immersed in an orchestrated group experience and subsequent debriefing processes with limited control and authority. It is like being called to a long act of trust. The experience of adult education practice in this episode is also like *risking to offer things you hold dear to another person hoping they will cherish them as well*; like introducing a friend to another friend and hoping they will like each other; standing tensely as they engage and, at least in the early stages of the encounter, trying to clear up misunderstandings and facilitate clear communication. The experience is also one of *pedagogic opportunism*; of “going with the flow” that is generated by putting people together under the “cultural understanding rubric”: of working to shape the flow as it evolves, trying to protect participants and Aboriginal resource people involved while supporting the energy of the process.

The phenomenon of adult education practice in this episode is like *sponsoring a fragile truce*; attempting to broker and moderate conversations between the participants, permanently risking conflict and withdrawal from the exchanges due to memories, prejudices, and fears of both parties.

The adult education experience is like *accepting helplessness*; of having little influence over what the participants think, judge, conclude, and learn; of surrendering control for the sake of the experiential process; of risking misunderstanding and resistance and having low control over the learning outcomes.

Finally, the experience is like being *put on trial* by the participants, who of course pay money to attend. It is like putting out different elements from the learning facilitative menu, seeking to engage their learning palate while not offending them or directly assessing or measuring their learning.



This panel now provides a space to distill major themes, which when added to themes distilled from the other events of practice begin to coalesce around key ideas. The distilled themes from this episode are: *Respectful but passionate intervention; Trusting the process and the learner; Risking to offer things close to one's heart; Indirect pedagogic tact and opportunism; Sponsoring a fragile truce; Accepting helplessness; Being put on trial by the participants.*

#### PANEL V: COMMENT

This installation presents the experiences that took place with a group of participants already mobilized to engage in some kind of learning. The learners were enrolled in a gazetted course, but there was still a strong element of passivity and persuasion. The change agenda involved attempting to persuade participants who had deliberately enrolled in a learning course to adopt a learning stance offering respect for Aboriginal people, their culture, and their history at the hands of white colonizers. The experience was thus about the attempt to generate deep and empathetic learning, rather than surface or rote learning within an agreed learning generative activity. It was experienced as worth doing as a good pedagogic strategy that incorporates respect for the learners and the Aboriginal people with real experiences and encounters, but also intensely risky and tiring, but in the odd moment of illumination worth the effort.

## Conclusions

### *Using the Method*

In the course of writing the phenomenological accounts of adult education practice for this study, I have become more consciously aware of the experience of constructing such accounts. The experience has a link with Horton's (Horton & Freire, 1990) famous phrase: "We make the road by walking." Here the expressive researcher is "making windows by looking." This refers to being illumined and obfuscated variously by the three calling-to-mind processes described above. Each approach, each way of looking, seemed to *create* as well as *open* a window, illuminating and enriching the awareness of the lived experience and hinting that all is not revealed: that other ways of looking might also create other windows.

Instead of having extracted recurrent and general laws that are concluded to be verified in each instance, the study has endeavored to bring facets of the experience as a whole to attention. The critical mind that seeks to expose truth and avoid prejudice and unwarranted assumptions has this time sought to apply the same critical rigor to the perceiving rather than conceptualizing process. In other words, the research in this study has attempted to represent rather than measure, to portray rather than analyze; to present the realities of experience not as some imaginary objects, separate from the human subject knowing and naming them, but in their experienced whatness.

As has, I hope, become apparent in these portrayals, adult education practice emerges as a far juicier, fraught, and exhilarating process than might have been concluded from the instructional manuals that set out objectives, strategies, and competences, as well as the generalized information about the adult learner and what she or he would be like.

This has called out different genres of thinking and writing that are closer to the immediacy and particularity of aesthetic work than to the general laws of positivist scientific analysis.

The use of artistic, aesthetic forms of writing with particular use of simile and metaphor uses a process of experience-focused imagination, in which, while letting the experience speak to one's receptive self, the receiving person casts about for a way to represent the image as a whole. It is this imaginal process that emerges in metaphor and simile and the range of poetic ways of writing and using language.

Expressive approaches purport to assist people to be more awake and more aware of what can be experienced in adult education practice: to be more prepared to accept and, as it were, factor in its actual lived and experienced reality.

### ***Salutary Lessons***

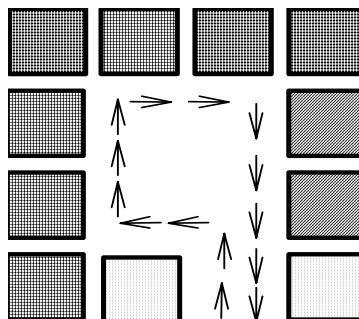
The fifth panel of the installation explored the challenge of attempting to generate deep rather than surface learning. The project was shown to be *risky and tiring and, in the odd moment of illumination, worth the effort*.

The fifth panels of the other installations had different takes on the experience of the various episodes of adult education practice. In my book these are collated in a final section together with their implication for adult education practice and the practitioner. The headings (Willis, 2002) are listed here:

- The element of personal challenge and the call for selflessness
- Respectful mobilising for learning and the requirement of respect
- The implications of needing to monitor and serve the learning group - the call to be 'safeguarding'
- The implications of the mentoring element: the call to engage, challenge and nurture
- The implications of listening, hearing and responding: the call to attend and be present
- The implications of rendering things to be learned, learnable: the call to didactic clarity
- The implications of making friendly spaces and silences for learning: the call to let go, to relinquish control
- The implications of cranking the flywheel and allowing time for healing: the call for patience, care, commitment
- The implications of the 'feeling to learn', and the 'invitation' experience: the call for tact
- The implication of being transparent to inspire and assess: the call to vision, consistency and clarity. (p. 201)

And so the risky journey of adult education practice that was graphically experienced in the cultural awareness workshop with Aboriginal people in central Australia has been revisited and the methodology and method described. The major concern has been to integrate expressive phenomenological research within the more general ambience of arts-based research (Willis, in press) leaving aside for the moment the questions that still arise about the kind of art being produced in arts-based research.

## Notes



<sup>1</sup> The icon at the beginning of this article is taken from my book, where it is used as an abstract representation of the exhibition structure.

This graphic figure represents the exhibition as a whole. It has 11 small squares to represent the chapters of the book, arranged in an open square with a line of arrows representing the visitors' path. The exhibition begins with the Entrance Foyer, with its single introductory chapter represented by a dotted square. Seven checkered squares follow in sequence, representing the seven chapters that are the installations of the Main Gallery. The two chapters of the Gallery of Method, which follow, are represented by diagonal hatched squares. The final chapter, which constitutes the Exit Foyer, is represented by the second dotted square. In the book each chapter has its corresponding square. This square is highlighted in the exhibition graphic to locate the reader and the tracks inside the exhibition stop outside that square.

The case study used in this article is located as chapter 6 in the book. The sixth square is correspondingly highlighted with a different hatching, and the tracks are halted outside.

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