

# Reclaiming Silenced Voices Through Practices of Education and Environmental Popular Knowledge Production

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## Abstract

To reclaim silenced voices, we must identify the source of our silence, find our voice, construct our stories and share them with others. This paper is the story of a community who with the support of the researcher, endeavoured to peel back the layers of debris, which had muffled their voices. This constructed debris—social, physical, cultural and historical—served to reproduce the power of the “other” through processes of false consciousness. To alter this power relationship—to give a voice to the hitherto silenced—meant supporting the community to perceive themselves not as mere objects of their social conditions but the narrators of their own stories.

## Résumé

Pour reconquérir les voix silencieuses, nous devons déterminer la source de notre silence, trouver notre voix, créer nos récits et les partager avec d'autres. Cette communication raconte l'histoire des gens d'une collectivité qui, avec l'aide du chercheur, se sont efforcés de retirer les couches de débris qui étouffaient leurs voix. Ces débris sociaux, physiques, culturels et historiques servaient à reproduire le pouvoir de l' "autre" au moyen d'un processus de mauvaise conscience. Pour changer cette relation de pouvoir, pour donner une voix au silence, il fallait aider les gens à se percevoir non pas comme de simples objets de leurs conditions sociales, mais comme des narrateurs de leurs propres histoires.

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As you drive into the western suburbs of Melbourne there is an acrid smell that pervades the air, the sort of smell that sits at the back of your throat and makes you want to cough. Cars, trucks and industry dominate the landscape and while you rub your eyes because those fumes are now invading your tear ducts you start to realise you're getting a bad headache . . .

## Introduction

Reflecting on a research project undertaken with a small urban working class community, this paper explores the approaches adopted by members of this community to have their voices heard. Although primarily concerned with providing a recreational area for community use, the project created the opportunity for local residents to expose their injustices of their position as silenced and marginalised. By sharing and constructing stories grounded in their lived experiences, the community members were able to articulate their grievances and expose the false illusions which hindered their capacity to be active agents in their own change process. It was an educative approach that allowed them to conceive themselves and the situation from a fresh vantagepoint. Or, as one resident explains:

this project [at Laverton Park] is about people. People getting out of their homes and working for a common goal. We can't do it by talking in committees, we need to have support of the local people, people who understand and know about the area, what their needs are, what they want, not what the bureaucrats want for us . . . (interview with local resident, May 1994)

Before embarking on an exploration of the program and the theoretical framework which emerged as a consequence of the community's action—it is imperative to pause from the “story” to reflect on the role of the researcher in activist research.

### The Role of the Researcher

If our research is to be praxis oriented, if our purpose is somehow to change the world, then of necessity we must get involved with those whom we study . . . I am arguing that the researcher/author has three tasks: the researcher engages the researched in a self-reflexive encounter; the research “act”—the book, article or presentation—brings to light the inequities of power that may exist; and the researcher actively works for care and change. (Tierney, 1994, p. 110 & 111)

Tierney (1994) alludes to the task of the researcher who within the context of researching individuals or communities is actively involved in trying to bring about change through political activism. The researcher's task in socially transformative research is to support the creation of a counter-hegemonic discourse—an alternative story to the dominant view. In a recent article I explored extensively the role of the researcher as activist (see Malone, 1999). By extending the sentiments of Tierney I argued for a

reconceptualisation of the role of the researcher to include the view that research ought to enable those under study to change their conditions—the “act” of participating in and writing about the research should contribute directly to a change in the conditions of the participants and that simply talking about or writing about change is a poor substitute for researchers’ actively working for change. Our research efforts should enable the research participants, the researcher and the readers of the research to reflect on their own lives in a way that is supportive of change through empowerment, ideology-critique, the production of popular knowledge and political action. It is an act to support empowerment (see Malone, 1999).

The role of the researcher in empowerment—to support the exposure and acquisition of “power”—is more than just providing the opportunity for participants to become aware of the source of their oppression but to provide a climate for participants to break free of their oppression (see Malone, 1999). The role of the researcher in this project emerged from the development of a participatory relationship between the researcher and researched—to support the participants and document their emerging theoretical framework as a means for self-reflection and as a source of empowerment. The focus of my study was to observe and to support the educative potential of the community’s formal and informal exchanges and to document the critical project.

### **Laverton Park: Reclaiming Community Voices**

The site of the study was Laverton Park, a small housing commission estate developed in the early 1960s to service officers and their families stationed at the Laverton Royal Air Force base. The Laverton Royal Air Force relocated its officer accommodation to a nearby suburb, Hoppers Crossing, in the late eighties. What remained was affordable housing for low-income families, the unemployed, and newly arrived immigrants.

The housing estate is 778 hectares in total. It is bordered on all fronts by built environments serving as physical and social boundaries. Along its northern and northeastern boundaries are a fast train line and a 6 lane freeway. The railway line has no fences and has been the focus of a number of community concerns as many children use the area for play and as an access point to the main shopping complex. The freeway has a constant flow of traffic, consisting of commuters travelling between the city and outer western suburbs and large trucks that service the industries, the regional city of Geelong and the southwest coastal towns. On the southern and western boundaries are large expanses of “open space” owned and

occupied by the Laverton Royal Air Force base. The Laverton Royal Air Force use these large areas of open space for training and as a buffer zone between the administration and residential housing. These areas of open space are not accessible to local residents. The unique geographical features of the entire western plains region have made it a targeted site for a large number of offensive industries. The Laverton North offensive industry zone is north of the estate. These industries attract a persistent flow of trucks and car traffic to the area and contribute considerably to visual, noise and air pollution. These industries who, through employment and land rates, contribute significantly to the local and state economy, have slowly infiltrated into the residential areas and as a consequence of decreasing buffer zones and increased populations. They have substantial impact on local communities. Local residents supported these claims: "It is a bit late; we are surrounded by industry polluting all the area so bad that children occasionally come home from school with hands on their mouths to try to breathe"; "Living close to industry can become very depressing, especially on windless nights when the stench of industrial fumes permeate the air."

The area has few parks or playgrounds with the only substantial area of public open space being McCormack Park. Other concerns about quality of life in the west have been centred on the lack of facilities and parklands and the sporadic maintenance of existing areas. A study of the Laverton area revealed that although there are a large expanses of vacant land owned by the government or industry, they had lain idle for years. They had, in fact, become more of an eyesore through neglect and provided little, if any, benefit to local communities for recreational use. Even the areas put aside for recreational use were predominantly of a sparse "open nature" containing little or no vegetation. McCormack Park was one of these neglected areas of open space and became the focus of the environmental education program at Laverton Park.

The Let Laverton Creek Live Committee emerged from community interest in a socially-critical community-based environmental education program at the local primary school called "My Place, Our Place." This program was established as a means for instilling a sense of pride and ownership of the local environment in the children and residents. The Principal at the local primary school described the program in the following terms:

It was about developing a system of values for life—that you have the right and ability to change your world, change your society, that you can influence it. A lot of people from this community don't believe they have

the ability or right to do that. We're trying to set up something where the community would in every real sense own it and make it, would drive it and lead it to wherever it goes—empowering people to change society. (Interview with school Principal, October 1993)

The environmental focus of the committee was McCormack Park. Once the local tip, McCormack Park was reclaimed over thirty years ago as a storm water overflow. The water was highly polluted due to run off from industries located along its courseway and was choked with weeds and airborne litter. The surrounding parkland, described by the land managers as “a paddock of scotch thistle” was a haven for snakes and trashed cars and presented many dangers for young children who used it as their only area of recreational space. Until the introduction of the environmental education program, attempts to redevelop the park by the land managers had been thwarted by large-scale incidents of vandalism.

### **Exposing False Illusions as a Pre-requisite to Empowerment**

Considering the disempowered and marginal position of the community, due to a history of social stigmatisation, is fundamental when reflecting on the approach adopted by them. The degraded social, political, historical, and physical environment of Laverton Park meant many community members had embodied the view that there was no means for reconstructing their reality. The process of enlightenment based on a guiding meta-theory of false consciousness<sup>1</sup> seeks to eliminate this socially constructed misery by supporting, through consciousness raising, the opportunity for people to recreate themselves as active and deciding beings (Fay, 1987). Based on the belief that people's suffering is in part caused through a failure to develop the powers of rational reflection by which false illusions can be exposed and scrutinised—enlightenment is a process of self and social determination. That is, by providing an opportunity for ideology critique, rational self-reflection, and collective autonomy people are able to appreciate their place in history and learn they are the narrators of their own lives—that they can exercise power as self-determining agents of change. This self-determination is a pre-requisite to empowerment and is both the means and product of developing environmental popular knowledge.

The sources of disempowerment for the community at Laverton Park, when expressed as false illusions, could include:

- Their powerlessness and voicelessness was a consequence of their class status, lack of political clout, lack of education and income and this was their “destiny” or “lot” in life and couldn’t be changed.
- They were not knowledgeable about the environment or environmental issues because of their lack of formal education and consequently they had nothing to offer decision-making processes.
- Through their choice to live at Laverton Park they had made a rational decision to endure the degraded environmental conditions and it was “their cross to bear.”

Giving up these illusions required the community to abandon self-conceptions and social practices that served to reproduce the power of the “other” through false consciousness. At Laverton Park this meant altering power relationships by reconstructing new identities, where the community no longer perceived themselves just as mere objects of their social conditions but also creators of their social reality. Freire (1972) articulates this critical consciousness, learning to see the source of oppression as due to certain social forces, as *conscientizacao* (conscientisation). Freire (1972) argues that education based on a theory of critical education must aim to develop in people their latent ability to critically assess their situation with the view of changing it. The essential element of this education is that the “oppressed” realise that they have internalised the values, beliefs, and worldview of their oppressors. That they the “oppressed” willingly cooperate with those who oppress them by maintaining the social forces that result in their oppression.

The educative process at Laverton Park therefore was two fold, first it created the conditions for participants to expose the basis of their false illusions (enlightenment) and second, it provided opportunity to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse—based on the production of environmental popular knowledge—that allowed them to change through social and environmental activism the conditions serving to sustain their .

### **(Re)constructing Lived Experiences Through Environmental Popular Knowledge**

In this section of the paper I will briefly illustrate how this theoretical construct-based on the relationship of enlightenment, popular knowledge production and empowerment—were enacted in practice. In keeping with the focus of the paper, the discussions are centred on the production of environmental popular knowledge. Popular knowledge as expressed by

Fals Borda (1982) is:

knowledge belonging to the people at the grassroots and constituting part of their cultural heritage. It remains outside the formal scientific structure built by the intellectual minority of the dominant system because it involves a breach of the rules. (p. 26)

The notion of popular knowledge draws substantially on Gramsci's (1971) notion of the "organic intellectual" by popularising experiential knowledge—knowledge vehemently dismissed by the dominant culture as "subjective," "value-laden" and not valid (Merrifield, 1993). The production of popular knowledge is congruent with the construction of an alternative world view within environmentalism and; therefore, the activities of the community at Laverton Park have a direct relation to grassroots environmental activism in support of the universal environmental movement. Gaventa (1993) advances the view that by reclaiming knowledge from the dominant system has a number of benefits for the producers of the knowledge:

In seeing themselves as capable of producing and defining their own reality they become activated to change it; a greater consciousness and clearer analysis of their situation may develop; and the new knowledge produced can become a resource for challenging the hegemony of the dominant ideas. (p. 39)

The community at Laverton Park engaged in a number of activities to support the production of environmental popular knowledge. These activities emphasised an educative process where all participants (including educators at the school, students, and community members) participated equally with the environmental experiences and where their understandings were represented through authentic dialogues. The educational process was reliant on the valuing and legitimisation of people's knowledge and supported the appropriation and reinterpretation of knowledge advanced by the dominant system. The environmental education activities served to reconstruct false illusions held by the community that they were not knowledgeable about the environment and therefore had nothing to offer in regard to environmental issues in their local area. The following quotations express the frustration of participants when encouraging community members to contribute to the production of environmental popular knowledge. As one local resident stated:

It's not so much that they don't know how to think for themselves, it's just that they have got out of the habit of thinking for themselves. It's not a role

they feel comfortable in. (Let Laverton Creek Live Community Meeting, Local Resident, February 1994)

The following quotations highlight the embodiment of the illusion that legitimate knowledge existed as a consequence of “formal” institutionalised educational processes:

I went to this meeting at the old school house at the other side of the creek and I looked at some photos of the Laverton Royal Air Force base and there was a house here and a house there that was it. And I was talking to a lady there and she said “I can remember when it was like that.” I said “well you must know a lot about the area,” “oh not really” was her reply. I mean she was there when there was probably a dozen houses in the area and yet she doesn’t consider she knows anything (Let Laverton Creek Live Committee member, February 1994)

Well Norm actually said that one night when we were planning for the festival. We were here and Mark and Benice [they were a team of professional landscape architects employed by the council to draw a revegetation plan based on the needs of the community] and they were doing this and that for the festival getting their displays ready and then Norm said “Well whose going to be there on the day?” and I said we were going to be here, us and Norm said “no, no, no” he said “What experts are going to be there, are you [turning to Bernice and Mark] going to be there on the day? Any other experts?” I take umbrage to that. I didn’t go off at him but made a point of telling him, your as much an expert as anyone else, more so then Mark cause you live here. Gets back to one of Peter’s terms the local providence . . . That’s the beauty of indigenous planting, the seed stock comes from that area, it’s specific to that soil, that microclimate and that’s the same as the people. If you’ve been here thirty years you know the place better than anybody else. Probably that well you don’t know it that well. What experts are going to be here? You’ve got to have an alphabet after your name before anyone takes any notice. (Let Laverton Creek Live Committee member, February 1994)

To overcome the embodiment of the false illusion that “valid” knowledge was constructed by the knowledge elite and that living in an environmentally degraded area “was their cross to bear” the community in cooperation with the local school set about organising a variety of forums where the knowledge and concerns of community members were valued and legitimized. These activities included: Public and community meetings, an oral history program, mural painting, an environmental festival, tree planting, environmental education and open workshops. What emerged from these forums was the development of a shared “discourse” of hope, cooperation and participation. They no longer felt they had to “put up and shut up” to use an Australian colloquial expression.

The development of these alternative discourses were used as a means of first creating shared meanings of lived experience but also when articulated as valid and legitimate stories served to expose the many inconsistencies presented by other stakeholders. The stories were printed in the local newspapers, presented in reports to council officials and shared with other communities. The dual process of writing and sharing stories were the foundation stones in reclaiming silenced voices—an educative process which served to illuminate the source of the community’s oppression and provide them with skills which could be adapted and appropriated in the ongoing schema of their life experiences.

### **Significance for Environmental Popular Adult Education**

In writing this paper I have described only a small aspect of the community based environmental education program initiated at Laverton Park. The discussions have centred on the development of environmental popular knowledge as a tool for enlightenment and empowerment through self and social transformation. In some respects it could be viewed as a “heroic” story, the community struggling against the powerful “other” and succeeding. In reality the struggle for the communities embodiment of a new and equitable social relation with the powerful was wrought with many less heroic endeavours and the utopian goal of social change and emancipation did not succeed on all fronts. The closure of the school due to educational restructuring, and the loss of momentum the program endured as a consequence of this, served to disempower members of the community and reinforce in many instances the powerless position many had become accustomed to. There is a fine line between the work we embark on to support empowerment and the detrimental impact of individualistic or humanistic views of agency—the inference being that if community members are empowered through critical consciousness they can be agents of change. This view of individualism assumes an agonistic relationship between the self and the “other” and between self and society and ignores how society acts forcefully to construct the individual (Davies, 1991). Through my experience I believe we must be prepared for the possible negative implications of attempting to shift the balance of power or as Freire and Shor (1987) aptly state: “swimming against the current means risking and assuming risks . . . it means to expect to be constantly punished” (p. 37).

Empowerment for raising critical consciousness is aimed at revealing fundamental power imbalances—naming the silenced and giving them a voice is the first step towards challenging and changing these imbalances.

The oppressed may not through their experiential learning become the agents of broad social reconstruction, but they will through popular knowledge production become the narrators of the stories produced and consumed about them (Lincoln, 1993). They will become agents of their own personal change process. A community member expressed this point when I asked him to respond to the question "What did I gain from being involved in the project?"

It gave me the opportunity to reflect on and assess my participation/performance thus far and judge what effect/change if any, and to what extent my involvement has had on me. Moreover, it has engendered in me a greater appreciation/respect for the power of individuals, representing themselves personally/*not the state*, by making me aware of my own unrecognised/un? under? realised abilities, and giving me a desire and increased confidence to act on and fulfil this potential. Not merely as an anarchist anti-government activist but as a spirited morally motivated, proactive citizen advocating socially just reform. (Community member, October 1993)

Reflecting on the activities of the community at Laverton Park there are a number of elements that can serve to advance discussions on environmental popular adult education, the most useful being the importance of providing a supportive and nurturing environment to foster participatory research approaches to social and environmental activism. These approaches guided on theories of false consciousness, critical education, and collective action emerge from the community's own identification of the false illusions from which their "oppression" is specifically located. In our story, environmental education as formal, and non-formal critical education, based on the development of school and community partnerships, became the impetus for initiating participatory dialogues through which false illusions were exposed. Sharing stories in the context of building alliances, community solidarity, and identity can be an empowering process. If through the production of environmental popular knowledge we can begin to articulate the grievances of a specific group of people, to provide a vocabulary of self-expression and self-reflection that values their lived experiences as a legitimate way of knowing and being knowledgeable, then we can begin to provide the catalyst for enabling the oppressed to realise they have a voice. Through practices of education and environmental popular knowledge production the capacity exists to encourage individuals to challenge and change the very definition of what constitutes valid knowledge. Or as Gaventa (1993) states, "it raises fundamental questions about what knowledge is produced, by whom, for whose interests, and toward what ends" (p. 40). Through sharing lived experiences community members can begin

to identify what the “real” social, environmental and health implications of living on the fringes of industry impose, and then propose plans of action that benefit the community rather than economic imperatives.

Communities and educational institutions in the current political climate are being pushed further to the margins of society. For the marginal and silenced to be heard in these times of “New Right” politics conditions need to be created which support the development of dialogues between decision makers, educators, and community members (McLaren, 1994). The value of the program at Laverton Park was its capacity to value and legitimize lived experience as a practice of education and produce “new stories” of being through the production of environmental popular knowledge. The words of a local resident (interview, May 1994) at Laverton Park reflects the importance of this educational work:

We as a community set about to change our situation and in many ways we have. Not just the planting but because we as a community hadn't talked at meetings shared our anger, if nothing else we can say the community has learnt to identify itself as a community. So next time if we have a concern we know now we can do it and we have the skills to set up a process of change—we aren't scared of making our voices heard. And as events unfold, and the benefits become obvious for positive social reform, it will inspire more people to actively participate and lend their voice and hands to the growing chorus of dynamic harmony for social and environmental change.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A theory of false consciousness is premised on the view that the self-understandings of people in capitalist society are shown to be illusions in which they take forms of their own self-activity—such as God, the market, or the state—to be objects independent of themselves which they must obey. These illusions function as the means for the maintenance of social order and in the process of recreating social conditions through the elimination of false consciousness fundamental changes can be made.

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I would like to thank the community at Laverton Park for their generosity in telling their story—for showing me how a community *can* overcome social, historical and cultural barriers and develop a counter narrative—a new story of reality. I have endeavoured to repay their generosity by sharing their story. I hope in the telling it will inspire and encourage others to reclaim their silenced voices.

## Notes on Contributor

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