

CHAPTER 5

Project story

“Story telling is what makes us different from cattle. When you see two people together you think: Ah, there is a story there!”

(Achebe, 2003a)

“Moyra, do me a favour: give me a call.” This man needs a palmtop, I thought as I was enlisted as his diary messenger for the nth time.

I enjoyed reconnecting with Ms Mbhele. (How funny it is to call her “Ms”! Even when I met the Dean for the first time I said: “Hi, Colin.”) The poor cell-phone connection does not allow easy chatter – but when we meet to put together the final report she will join me and a couple of others at the Retreat Centre for two nights. She sounded amused and pleased. We also look forward to presenting at the SAARMSTE conference together next year.

Sihle is now in his second year of University. Dumisani matriculated. Nomfundo had a baby. TC resigned from the primary school and joined Woza Moya. TT graduated. Lavine went to Pretoria, Nirmala to the University of Fort Hare. Even the University of Durban-Westville has changed to the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The chickens have laid thousands of eggs. The committee still meets but has a new chair. Dozens of the children have been orphaned, some have dropped out of school. Many people have died. A lot happens in three years.

I was arranging the final (final?) gathering in Ixopo to produce the (final?) report. The familiar time-tension still nagging me: three days – I can do that. Who will come? How will we know? Should we cater lunch? How? Where? Who will come? Consider protocol. Seek TT’s advice (as usual).

I was looking forward to this: seeing everyone, working again together, in some sense with less pressure. This was really for the community. I do not need the report: I need not even take notes: this will be fun!

Three years ago I visited Mr Hadebe, the principal of the Lusiba Primary School near the Retreat Centre near Ixopo. Well: not really *near* to anywhere. I had taken some microchem equipment: it felt a bit like my 'party-piece'. I showed the teachers and chatted and usually I am quite shy and it is difficult but people were friendly and said 'Come again'. And I knew the microchem was a bit silly. Like thinking of taking a new neighbour a cake, I went home and thought about what I could take: how about a science research proposal?

I visited Sinevuso Secondary School too – it is just down the road from Lusiba. Like siblings with a big enough age gap between them, the two schools ... well ... like two siblings. It was the principal, Mr Mkhize, who always said: "Moyra, please phone me next week to remind me." This time he told me he was free all week and would be available to participate in the report project: I had not imagined this – I was lost for words.

Now in research reports and proposals one extols the benefits of 'on-going participation' and establishing 'deep relationships'. But you can see here I keep coming back to Mr Mkhize. Why? I ask myself. Relationships come with people. There was the matter of the ox-head for example. Then the very polite altercation about no alcohol for the science festival. TT being locked out the school. All this has nothing to do with this thesis.

Back to the focus: we undertook to explore concepts of 'relevant science' with the Chibini community in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Now 'we'? So in finding this 'neighbourly cake' to take down the road I joined in with the Human Rights and Democracy Science and Mathematical Literacy Project run from the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) and part of the EPU¹ research. I had decided to drop my year-old PhD study which I was engaged in at Wits. This new, large research initiative allowed me resources to work in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

So 'we' – means the (UDW) project manager, Cliff Malcolm (also my co-supervisor), and members of the research team who were recruited to help at times. The University research team was a diverse group: young and old, White, Zulu and Indian, local and

¹ Education Policy Unit

urban, with skills ranging across science education, technology education, school management and cultural studies: TT Bhengu, Nirmala Gopal, Lavine Kowlas, Bill Kyle. The team included, initially for three months, two young 'community researchers' from the village: Sihle Mchunu and Nomundo Ndlovu. Sihle continued with the project. The whole group contributed a variety of skills and individual ways of perceiving and interacting in the project.

'We', at times, also extends beyond the research team. It includes our collaboration with a range of groups including teachers, students, community members, local leaders including the *Induna*, *Inkosi* and *Sangoma*; a locally-based AIDS NGO: Woza Moya, a farming NGO: Heifer International, sponsors: Rohm and Haas, Education Department representatives, a representative from the Department of Agriculture.

Mr Mkhize is youngish (younger than I am anyway). He dresses smartly always. He must be at school today, as I see some students are washing his BMW, which is parked under the new carport, next to the staffroom. It is the only car.

We began the research confident that 'science education' *can be defined* in such a way that it offers creative links between rural and urban, African and Western, local and global, and promotes human rights and democracy. As we started off, the community, teachers, parents and students told us that the problems they were having were ones of survival – their primary concern was not the science curriculum – but certainly this was not offering any solutions.

Perhaps it seemed strange that we were determined to answer their concerns through the design of curriculum – as the community reiterated the issues as health, lack of employment, poverty, lack of resources and the erosion of values, our concept of curriculum expanded to include life and learning outside the school. Receiving neat answers to the questions of relevance which we could use as the basis of a science module was clearly an artificial construct that was receiving little support. This realisation took time. I made many visits to the two schools, and through interviews and community meetings slowly got to know people and issues. The principals were always key in the arrangements. Meetings happened at the schools and it seemed no curriculum changes could be considered without the schools' interest and support.

Mr Hadebe is older than Mr Mkhize – and bigger. Sioux teases him about his waistline – I was embarrassed: was this proper? He has a big laugh too. He has a lot to say about creating farming projects in the community. He has a neat vegetable garden at his school: also flowers and trees. The school is run like a military operation. One feels he has ‘connections’.

It is one thing making choices when there are two or three options. In finding a way forward in curriculum design there seemed an infinite number of options – all difficult but all would help the research and the community. One option, for example was to co-design a module, say, on AIDS education and run this in the classrooms in partnership with teachers. Sioux and Woza Moya would help. If I came down every two weeks the teachers could carry on in the meantime and I could offer input and track research data.

There were seldom the same teachers present at each visit. Timetables did not run as expected. This was not going to work.

Peter Fensham visited the village in the second year of the project. We walked between the neat homesteads, as he chatted to the students about the plants and trees. No, the students did not know the names of the trees nor what they were used for. When I complained of the difficulties of getting curriculum development working, Peter suggested that we work with the students in a concentrated way over a week or two, in preparation for a ‘science festival’. What a fortunate suggestion and what a happy day.

So advice and help came from outside the project too. Leadership and decision-making were always shared by a committee (formed in the first public meeting), the farming NGO, and researchers, such that participation shaped the research and development methods. The early meetings established that achieving ‘relevance’ involved two broad strategies: addressing poverty and social stresses within the community; linking school and community in curriculum, teaching, research and development. Following from this a number of small student assignments continued. They were oriented to both learning and data creation.

I was searching for an NGO that could help with skills development and vegetable farming – but had limited success. Then through a lucky serendipitous meeting Bill had with Heifer International and the sponsorship offered by Rohm and Haas the chicken farming project presented an opportunity. The community was excited about this but there were many

questions. Who would be chosen to receive chickens? What would happen to profits? What if someone dropped out? The solution was to formalise the community management committee (Mbumba committee) who drew up a constitution. Over many meetings difficulties were resolved and the farming project took off. Heifer provided training and support. However, the curriculum aspect appeared now to be sidelined.

We needed to balance our primary concern for curriculum and science with the community's primary concern for survival. After all, this was the community's loudest message. Relevant science should help with community development – in economic, social and cultural ways. Linking curriculum with the chicken farming was an ideal solution. This was agreed in the secondary school, with the primary school focussing on vegetable gardening projects and community assignments.

Before long Mr Mkhize and his teachers announced that they were unable to be directly involved in the project. They would support it, but could not be part of the teaching and curriculum design, because they were under too much pressure with the standard curriculum. But they believed in the project. We could work with the students, taking care not to make too many demands in terms of time. As Mr Mkhize explained, it was necessary to choose between a Mercedes Benz version of the project, and a Volkswagen version, but from the school's perspective, it was necessary to settle for the Volkswagen.

Late in 2003, with the help of Sihle and Numfondo, secondary school students linked with community chicken farmers, visiting, interviewing and learning from them the new method of egg production. Then, in the two weeks leading up to the Festival, a core group of about 30 of these students worked with research team members collating and analysing this information and developing other topics that they and the community had identified as important. These topics included AIDS awareness, careers, computers, technology applications and farming generally.

Ms Mbhele, who was a member of the Mbumba committee remained active in our work with the students and participated in the Science Festival. The secondary school did not attend the festival although all the primary school children and teachers took part. For the broader community and the researchers alike, the secondary school's choice limited the educational achievements of the project and the prospects of sustainability.

I have this picture of Sean Kyle walking down the valley with a bottle of water on his head. (My Black friends tease me that I can't do this – it is not easy.) He was so interested in visiting the chicken farmers and kept up our enthusiasm as we walked the muddy paths from farmer to farmer in the pouring rain. Sean was in South Africa with his father, Bill, for the Science Festival.

The festival day was a great occasion with about 400 primary school pupils and 30 secondary school pupils, 20 farmers, parents, funders, the Mbumba committee, Heifer, Woza Moya, the *Izinduna*, principals, Ms Mbhele, the researchers, the school governing body and the *Inkosi*. About 500 people in all. Students put on performances about farming and traditional practices, and AIDS. They displayed posters, photographs and drawings of what they had learnt. There was dancing and speeches and songs.

A year later TT interviewed the *Induna*, Mr Ngcobo.

TT: What has been happening regarding the project since the science festival?

Induna:

“There is a new committee ... Mr Mahlaba is the new chairman...a couple of days ago, I met with one man Mr Khambule, who is also a farmer in the same project, and he told promising stories about the project, its successes etc. he said that through egg sales, chickens now provide for their own feed and he can save money. His chickens have never been seriously ill because he can notice symptoms of illness and acts promptly as they were taught by their advisors. He boasted about the fact that his eggs were of good quality and people were buying from him.”

TT: Do you think the chicken-farming project is sustainable?

Induna:

“Of course yes, the whole community will benefit, in fact the community will develop as Mr Khambule's example indicates. Everybody can do the same thing Mr Khambule has done. Perhaps people need more training and that can obviate teething problems such as right feed. In my personal opinion, I strongly commend the presence of the project in our community, and I wish that it would continue, and it will bring more help to the community as it is now used to doing things, and not just standing by.”

And though the education component (in the sense of 'school') seems to have come to an end, this is not quite clear. Certainly the model of curriculum that the project introduced

will not find its way into the secondary school programme. On the other hand, for example, there are moves in the community to create an adult education programme, with computers as a likely component, and the students who worked on the Science Festival are well placed to provide input to that.

I need to phone Mr Mkhize. I understand now it is not about his needing a palm-top, it is about relationships.