Agricultural Extension and Rural Development: Breaking out of Traditions:

As the title suggests, this book is about challenging traditions. It challenges notions about both the way extension is carried out and the kinds of objectives that may be appropriate to extension. It is certainly not for those looking for a ‘recipe’ for extension, nor for those looking for a way to ‘influence’, ‘persuade’ or ‘convince’ others to adopt particular techniques or practices. On the contrary, it is an account of an emergent approach to extension practice, as well as a trenchant critique of past theory and much of current practice.

The core subject matter for the book is an account of a specific project undertaken in the early 1990s in the Western Division of New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The brief of the team involved was to look at the ‘problem’ of why graziers/pastoralists in this part of the state ‘failed to adopt new technologies’. Whilst the book is collection of contributions from several authors involved in the project, it none the less has a clear structure and a unified message. The differences in perspective on the same project were refreshing and enriched the text at the same time as offering an insight into the way team processes operated.

The book is in four parts dealing with the theory, the context, the process and finally some reflections on what has been learnt. There were also several themes woven into the structure of the work. Most important among these was the idea of ‘enthusiasm’ as a well spring for action, a contrast to the sometimes pernicious role of tradition in causing people to fail to see alternate approaches. Other themes included the importance of reflection and process in the conduct of extension programs as well as attention to narrative, language and listening. They also introduce a comparison between what they call first order R&D (research and development) and second order R&D. This comparison is made in the context of notions of empowerment and disempowerment.

In challenging the construction of the question on which the research was founded, about ‘failure to adopt’, not only were traditional approaches to extension challenged, but the rationale, power relations and the nature of R&D came under scrutiny. The approach taken is very much in the emergent participatory traditions associated with Robert Chambers’, but was unusual in that the program was undertaken in a developed country. The approach also has links with action research. It is somewhat paradoxical that while the authors were critical of tradition their work can readily be located within a tradition, albeit an emerging one.

In common with Chambers and others, the opening theory section is highly critical of extension which attempts Transfer of Technology (ToT). This section links the ToT approach to communications theories originating with Shannon and Weaver (1949). The parallel is clear, communications in the Shannon and Weaver model involve the transfer of information from a sender to a receiver, ToT involves the transfer of technology or practices from senders to receivers. The receivers in both cases are constructed as essentially passive and relatively powerless. This way of conceiving communication is one of the ‘traditions’ that is suggested as disempowering and destructive to the development of new approaches to extension. The alternative presented follows Maturana (1987), and it begins the development of the authors’ position on
the idea of enthusiasm as a spiritual and emotional commitment, and of communications as a mutually satisfying engagement. For me this latter material was the least satisfying.

By contrast, Ison’s refutation of the proposition that graziers ‘fail to adopt new technologies’ was compelling. His account of the adoption of a variety of often ‘home grown’ technologies and practices over along period of time shows clearly that what works in the situation, what reduces dependence and what directly addresses problems as people experience them will be wholeheartedly embraced.

The second part considered the context of the research. The Western Division of NSW is understood through the particular technological processes applied to its identification and incorporation within institutional patterns in NSW, in the first instance map making, followed by control of bush ranging and so on. The area itself is seen as a particular social and historical construction. This is an unusual approach that clearly contextualizes the region as it emerges for government agencies, for agricultural researchers and for local residents. The context of the research is also very clear as a result. The question of why graziers ‘fail to adopt’ is a question that arose out of a quite particular orientation in NSW institutional patterns. The question none the less is one that will have resonance for many first order R&D professionals, to use the language of these authors. The answer may not be quite what they were expecting.

The third part, describing the processes used, their generation and the responses of graziers was the most interesting part of the book. The picture that emerges is of a well-integrated team working to develop a meaningful relationship with local families in a remote and difficult landscape. The authors are not shy about showing where they learnt from their mistakes, nor about how they developed their ideas and their approach in the field. The final section of this part allows participants to speak and differences in perspective emerge which add richness and texture to the overall account.

It is in this section that the critique of conceptualisation of problem ‘failure of graziers to adopt new technologies’ and the idea of enthusiasm as a well-spring of action emerge strongly. The authors emphasise the importance of attending to the language and the stories participants told in the interview stage of the process, it was in reflection on the narratives of participants that the importance of enthusiasm became clear to the authors. The workshop processes were aimed at further identifying the problems about which local people are concerned, those they care about and have the enthusiasm to do something about. Here also the idea of second order R&D is clarified. Rather than have others solve the problems identified, the team together with interested locals set about generating solutions for themselves. The contrast here is between doing research ‘on people’ and doing research ‘with people’.

The final part again makes clear that the approach outlined is not one for those wishing to ‘influence’ or to advise others on how things can be done better. On the other hand, for those who wish to work with others to support their action and their learning, the book provides a very nice account of a particular experience in the Western Division. While the experience and the precise detail of the processes are indeed unique, it is none the less the case that there is much to be learned in the account of this alternate approach to extension.

The work on which the book was based did break out of existing traditions and challenges practitioners and theorists to rethink much of the received wisdom on extension in developed countries. The great pity is that we had to wait 6 years from the completion of the project to the publication of the book. In that time, the extension literature has started to catch up with Ison and Russell’s extension practice.

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