Australian Home Education: A Model

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If home education is not just school in another place, how can we conceptualise it and how does it work? This paper considers the peculiar set of relationships that characterise home-educating families and traces their extension out into the wider community. It further shows how, through the ongoing family conversation, experiences gained from domestic occupation and accompanied excursions into the field of authentic adult practice are problematised, built into the developing family worldview, and adapted by individual members for their own personal learning. It is proposed that a more useful model for home education characterises the family as a community of learning practice. Such a perspective views home education as the modern development of a tradition older than schooling in its response to the problem of secondary socialisation in a developed society.

Home education has been practised in Australia since European settlement (Barcan, 1988). Jacob (1991: 14) defined the modern practice:

> Home education occurs when parents choose to educate their children from a home base. The choice is the outcome of a conviction that home based education will better meet the child's needs. The parents plan, implement and evaluate the child's learning programme using a variety of resources . . . the total responsibility for the home education rests with the child's parents.

This definition is better than many but it is still limited by the narrow perspective of the children learning as a result of adults teaching. How does education happen in these families and what does it mean? This paper seeks to understand the process of Australian home education and to propose a particular model that arises out of that understanding. It is based on 1997 nationwide research.

Pioneer Families

As home education is a family enterprise, we begin with the question, 'Is the family a strong originator of its own world views, as Reiss (1981) argues, or has it been weakened and rendered inadequate by division of labour based industrialisation?'

Harking back to the pioneering families who, facing an entirely alien environment, successfully settled the Great Plains of the USA, Reiss (1981: 170) notes that they created out of their success a sense of order, balance and coherence. Such families he dubs 'originating families' and of their internal interdependencies he says they are:

> . . . families with a particular kind of relationship between its members: each member accords the others the power of independent regard . . . ,

these families originate and maintain collaborative constructions of reality as part of their own development.

Much of what such families do arises from within themselves rather than being a passive reflection of surrounding society. They develop a specific family culture that is transmitted across the generations and extend its development by dealing with contemporary problems within its context.

The Australian environment was even stranger to the eyes of European settlers than that of the USA, and the pioneer bushman who survives by his own wits and inventiveness is the fundamental Australian cultural icon even though the population is now predominantly urban and non-European.

Different Values

The reasons given by Australians for their choice of home education indicated the presence of strong, family-based, explanatory systems that were in conflict with those they believed were promoted by local schools. Often values were expressed in contrasting pairs; conformity with individuality, competition with cooperation, fear with love, threat with trust and other-directed with self-directed (Barratt-Peacock, 1997).

The Role of Children

Children are important joint venturers in the originating family enterprise making practical contributions to its success. Consequently they are consulted, their opinions heard, and they have real input to the family's joint construction of reality. That situation, part of the history of Australian settlement, is true of modern home-educating families. One mother of a large family came to a formal agreement with her children about sharing domestic work.

> . . . because I had to give my mornings over to them to start with, they had to help me in turn. They had been involved in chores before, but there was this more immediate involvement, you know? . . . This need to do jobs. So they felt they were important to the running of the place and all these things made them see themselves differently. (Barratt-Peacock, 1997)

She describes the preparation necessary as the family takes a day trip to explore a visiting submarine.

> Well, we were going out so we all had to get up very early to help with the chores: the milking, the wood, the yoghurt, the cottage cheese [and] watering sprouts. We have to make fresh bread rolls. We had to make apple crumble for breakfast, which started by grinding the oats and cooking the apples . . . grinding the oats by hand. There's a lot needs to be done to get us out of the house. (Barratt-Peacock, 1997: 159)

Migrant Parents

Further, in the 1997 research almost 50% of families had at least one parent born outside of Australia. The proportion in the general population was 10.5%. The data indicate that for the person coming to a new culture there is a distancing that allows for the explicit selection of elements of the culture and those practices judged to be of value and rejection of others.

Jan and Cleo, for example, went back to their place of origin (Bavaria) to gather elements from the past in terms of their European farming and cultural heritage. They deliberately blended that with elements from the Australian culture and practice to create a situation that satisfied them. The social domain in which they did this was that over which they had most control: their family. It was a new creation, and home education allowed them to involve the children in the process and to facilitate the transmission of the attitudes and values that they prized.

Sally wrote about her deliberate policy of creating a family tradition. She described the collecting of family stories on audiotape from aged overseas relatives, the keeping of a journal that recorded significant events in the family history and many other techniques because,

> The point to reflect upon, to my mind, is whether the traditional family-based lifestyle helps make for a people who love, care, contribute and have a sense of belonging; a people with character. . . . To develop a renewal of family–community traditions seems to me to be a move towards redeeming the family as a unit and securing a future hope for our children while instilling that sense of belonging and identity which is lacking in so many of our young people. (Mineur, undated: 336)

In choosing to educate their children outside of the socially sanctioned, culturally established, institutions, Australian home educators could be seen as encompassing key attitudes ascribed by Reiss to originating families.

Family as Community

Although Australian home education can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of originating pioneer families in the field of education, we will also consider the form of that pioneer education.

Dewey (1915: 6) found his ideal education in those same pioneer homes 'one, two or three generations' before his writing. There, children were exposed to the whole industrial and social fabric of the time. In the local community the workshops of local manufacture were open to view. At home the entire process of production from raw materials to the finished product was part of the everyday experience of the children.

Reiss (1981) argued that the family is the originator of explanatory systems and Dewey (1915) saw the children primarily learning through the family conversation and participation in the domestic occupation in what has been described by Barratt-Peacock (1997) as the intimate zone. Then the child would have the opportunity to learn by experiment in a family workshop, laboratory or garden and beyond that proximal zone into the surrounding fields and

forests to the remote zone of the wider world. All experience gained and questions arising had the potential for more structured study and all was turned into secure knowledge through participation in the ongoing family conversation (Dewey, 1915). Thus education happened as a result of the child playing a full role in the everyday activities of a family community that was connected to the wider society in which it was located. However, anticipating Berger and Luckmann (1967), Dewey saw the family as rendered inadequate by industrialisation and unequipped to manage the secondary socialisation of their children. He therefore sought to institutionalise those principles in a school that focused on the life of the child as its main object in a carefully structured community that was a simplified model of the real world (Dewey, 1915).

Situated Learning: Communities of Practice

More recent research takes the earlier view, that the learner is advantaged when learning is situated in the world of real practice rather than school (Lave & Wenger, 1991). For them, 'learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived in world' rather than the 'teaching of abstract representations, with decontextualisation' characteristic of schooling. They dealt with the issue of the complexity of modern society by the adoption of a particular perspective. Each division of society, in the sense of division of labour, though not confined to that, is identified with a discrete community of practice (COP). Such a community consists of all those who identify with a particular practice and its associated perspectives. Members collaboratively engage in the maintenance and development of a joint construction of reality as part of their own development. Learning then, is a process of 'becoming' through deeper involvement in the community.

Lave and Wenger (1991) observed much learning going on between the members themselves and from a variety of other sources. Where a master, in the apprentice/master sense, was involved, there was still little conventional pedagogy and they concluded that the master was therefore decentred, leaving the focus on the 'intricate structuring of a community's learning resources', because it was in the community that mastery resided and the master was as much a part and product of the community as any other member.

Hay (1993), however, postulated a modification of the model such that the centre was moved from the community to the learner. In his model the learner was not finally committed to any one particular COP but moved through a number of them according to his or her own life plan.

The picture of the family put up by Reiss, and referred to in its positive aspect by Dewey, also fits the notion of a community of practise put forward by Situated Learning theorists such as Brown *et al*. (1989a, 1989b), and Chaiklin and Lave (1993). Further, this perspective provides a significant departure point for a more complete understanding of the practice of Australian home education, but before considering that practice we will examine the record of one family on one typical day.[1]

The necessary preparation to get the family out of the house to visit a submarine was noted above. The kitchen is very small, and six or seven people moving around to get ready makes it feel even smaller, but by the time they got to the submarine . . .

> It was so confined! I've never been on a submarine. When we came back afterwards we thought we would never complain about shifting around this kitchen with seven people because 76 people in that confined space!, . . . After that we went to the airport. Jesse [the husband] is very interested in light aircraft . . .

> Got home soon after lunch. . . . Then everybody wanders off to do their own important things. Didge is building another under-ground tunnel. He built his first one after we read 'The Wooden Horse'. (Barratt-Peacock, 1997: 160)

His last tunnel took four months to build, had an outside entrance that went down a meter and along two meters before coming up in the cubby. The whole thing was very well camouflaged with leaves and bark and he'd carried the soil away from the site, scattering it to make the tunnel completely secret.

> We have these three trees we just felled and that is going to be a wonderful toy this winter. The big trees have got just such a lot of play areas in the tops of them. So [the little girls] spend all day down there; cubbies, horses, the works.

> Abelard [15 yrs] worked his calves yesterday afternoon. . . . They're about five months old and he's got a second yoke now. He built his first yoke, which he carved, shaped to fit their necks. He had to spend a day at the metal workshop in [nearby town] to bend the metal pieces. He did supermarket work and earned the money to buy all the metal and the bolts and things. He's bought himself . . . an old plough and an old rake and an old mower and all the chains. . . He's built himself two sleds and a cart all to attach to these steers. He killed wallabies, tanned the leather . . . cut it into strips and plaited whips. . . . The whip is very long so he holds it and when he drops it in front of their eyes they stop. When he raises it up and says something, they go. They pull logs. They pull loads of wood. They've pulled the children. They've pulled me!

> It has taught him a lot of patience. . . . He hopes to keep training them and eventually to show them at agricultural shows. (Barratt-Peacock, 1997: 161)

Four key processes of home education have been identified. They are:

(1)   domestic occupation;
(2)   parents as tutor/guides to fields of authentic adult practice;
(3)   family conversation as a forum; and
(4)   role modelling.

There are three connected zones: intimate, proximate and remote, in which home education takes place. In identifying these processes and zones we will refer back to the day mentioned above.

Domestic Occupation

This was the main focus of Reiss' pioneer family unit which, 'alone on the dangerous and desolate prairies . . . came to see itself as a well integrated mechanism for accomplishing virtually every task of frontier living' (Reiss, 1981). In this sense domestic occupation also qualifies as the focus of a COP on some ongoing activity in the world (Lave & Wenger, 1991), but Dewey (1916) saw it differently. For him, domestic occupation typified the social situation and was a way of connecting learning to the real, rather than the academic, world.

Working in the confined quarters of the kitchen preparatory to going out was quite explicitly connected to the confined quarters of the submariners. Following the military theme, a family reading in the intimacy of the home, of the account of a prisoner of war escape led to the practical business of secretly building a hidden tunnel to the cubby in the proximate space of the paddocks. The learning in the house was situated in the activities proximate to the house and they, in turn, were informed by the activities in the spaces remote from the house. There was a constant flow back and forth between the spaces mediated by the learning experiences of all members of the family.

Similar connections could be seen in Abelard's activities. Training calves and carving the yokes was done in the proximate space following guides drawn from books read in the intimate space of the house. He worked in the remote space of the town to earn the money for the materials and in the metal workshop there to form the steel parts of the yoke. The scanning of *The Trading Post* newspaper for bullock-drawn, farm equipment was connected to travelling around to inspect and purchase it and to glean advice from older members of the community who had memories of how it was used. The overall goal was to work the animals at agricultural shows in a 'remote' space. Even the single activity of whip making was connected to all three zones. The wallabies were hunted in the remote zone of the bush. The skins were treated and the whips plaited in the proximate zone of the outbuildings, but the instructions for the tanning and whip making were gleaned from books read in the intimacy of the home. This connected use of space was common to each of the home educators interviewed,[2] but the degree and proportion of use varied between families.

Parents as Tutor/Guides to Fields of Authentic Adult Practice

It will be recalled that the development of modern industrial society threw doubt on the family's ability to manage its children's secondary socialisation.[3] Faced with those changed conditions one could either bring a simplified simulation of the real world to the children in a school or organise a guide and interpreter to go with the child into the world of authentic adult practice. Home educators go to authentic practice because one or two adults can only master a small proportion of the socially distributed knowledge of the modern

world and few could find the resources to provide the simulations commonly found in schools. The world of real practice includes specialised clubs and societies of all kinds and the directory of such community organisations in Australia's smallest state lists in excess of 4000 (Webster, 1993), many of which home educators access (Jacob, 1991).

Domestic occupation, then, stimulates interest, which carries the learning beyond the intimate zone of the family home into the communities within which it is located. Parents accompany children in pursuit of learning objectives into the worlds of real practice. What is gathered there is brought back to the home (or community of learning practice in which the child is a cognitive apprentice) where it is discussed in the family conversation, reflected upon and incorporated by the learner into his or her education. Thus there are three levels of family learning based on domestic occupation.

(1)   There is that derived from involvement in the immediate domestic routine of the family;
(2)   that obtained as problems and interests arising from the routine are mediated between the intimate zone and proximate zones; and
(3)   then there are the guided excursions into the remote zone of wider society from which knowledge and skills located in authentic situated practice are obtained.

One aspect of how these work-based sources are managed by the family as a community of learning practice is the next consideration.

The Family Conversation as a Forum

This family spent 4.1 hours of a 10.25-hour observed day in family conversation with a further 1.35 hours of private conversation between pairs of people.[4]

In what Thomas (1994) calls conversation learning, specific topics were raised, points of view offered or questions asked. These events changed private conversation, which then lost its casual nature and became a focused exchange and an obvious learning experience. This was a constant conversation going on throughout the day with people joining and leaving as they wished. For example, during a general conversation about household duties someone asked if the cows had been fed. Didge said that he had given them some hay. Abelard came into the room and into the conversation at that point to say that hay should not be given to cows in the same place each time because then they congregate there and churn up the ground, thus spoiling the hay and the pasture.

Before Abelard's intrusion the conversation had been jogging along in desultory fashion but with it the conversation and attention of the participants sharpened focus. Abelard gave an opinion that was authoritative within the family because of his special interest in cattle, but he also backed it with a reasoned argument. Didge felt that his action had been criticised and defended himself, but Abelard's point was finally accepted and something learned about animal husbandry. The mother took part in this conversation but it was Abelard's point that was carried.

On another occasion the children spent some time discussing how to round up a horse. On this occasion no one point of view was finally accepted, but a lot useful information was aired and presumably internalised by those present as they challenged, modified or accepted it during the conversation. The value of what was learned would be discovered in practice the next time the horse was brought in.

I was present long enough to realise that the family conversation did not move forward in neat, encapsulated units but rather grew with many references back to points mentioned previously and to new experience. Taken as a whole, it appeared to contain a lot of repetition, reconsideration, reconfirmation and adaptation to new input or circumstances. There were always new connections being made between 'old' content and new experience, and between discrete units of 'old' content. While it was not part of the research to examine the process in detail, the repetitions over time and in a variety of contexts appeared likely to enhance learning. The ongoing connections being made at a social level also provided a model for the internal thinking process (Vygotsky, 1981; Walker & Meighan, 1981). In any event the constant exposure of views, questions and issues to 'public' debate and scrutiny was not unlike the atmosphere of learned institutions and the potential for these events was always there.

Role Modelling

Finally there was role modelling in which the younger members somehow absorb a family tradition of values that I can only express as 'the right attitude' and 'the way this family does things'. This was not observed as specific events but rather felt as a pervasive background to all of the activities. It was the deliberate manufacture of a family tradition that prompted an attitude to learning and a stance of followed-up curiosity vis-à-vis the world. It exactly parallels the journey of the newcomer to old timer in a COP, the 'becoming' described by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Conclusions

We have traced the practice of home educating families in Australia back to the pioneering families from which Reiss developed models of strong families. Those same families, via Dewey, gave us an outline of the core processes of home education that is replicated today with one important addition. The description of a COP and situated learning as a process of 'becoming' provides a more modern, but not completely satisfactory, model for home education. It is not satisfactory for three reasons.

The business of involvement in the creation and development of originating families is clearly more complex than becoming a tailor or plumber.

Australian home educators routinely visit and learn from the practice of other communities when children are accompanied to sites of authentic adult practice by parents acting as mentor/guides.

The simplification of the structure of complex modern society by the adoption of a single perspective is not what happens in the home educating

family – nor does the child pass through a number of COPs in following a personal life plan (Hay, 1993).

Although Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that, 'we might equally have turned to studies of socialisation; children are, after all, quintessentially legitimate peripheral participants in adult social worlds', they initially chose studies of apprenticeship. They did warn against too close a focus on apprenticeship as such, but even so, practising a trade or profession is still far more focussed and straightforward than involvement in the complex roles and functions of family.

Although an important function of communities of practice is to reproduce themselves, family reproduction involves a member marrying outside of it and thereby the introduction of significantly different conceptions of reality. Every new family has to start again right from the beginning in the development of its own traditions and worldview. The transition is seldom as seamless as the creation of a replacement 'old timer' plumber, for example.

Although members of a COP may regularly meet with practitioners from other COPs and learn from them – a plumber may meet bricklayers, architects, carpenters etc. on a building site – that is peripheral to their basic practice and unnecessary for membership. The visits of home educators to sites of authentic adult practice are an integral and necessary part of family practice, not simply for the sake of the children but for parents too, as our example showed.

We could make the point that what is involved is learning and present the home-educating family as a community of learning practice, but no other COP so far identified in the literature has, as a major source of learning, the practices of an unlimited range of other COPs. It would thus appear that the home educating family is more than a COP. We will return to this point.

We have noted above that there are four possible ways of obtaining a secondary socialisation: through the simplified simulation of wider society in a school, by membership of a COP that has a particular perspective on wider society and by the learner moving through membership of a number of COPs according to their own life plan. None of these is essential to home education, but the fourth is: home-educating families networking across three zones into the situated practices of wider society in the company of adult mentor/guide. If we could characterise the Australian home-educating family as a community of learning practice involving all of its members at some level but situate it differently we may arrive at a model that does meet the observed data.

The world could manage without the COPs of the developed countries of the north, and most of the world still does, but it simply would not exist without families.[5] They are primary and privileged in relation to wider society. Home-educating families eschew the simplified simulations and social isolation of schools. They go beyond the single, simplified perspectives of those COPs so far described. Rather they draw, potentially, from as many communities of practice as exist in their society. They maintain a living and reciprocal network of connections between themselves and wider society

mediated through three zones. From their situated experience of domestic occupation and their connections to wider society they originate and maintain, through family conversation, idiosyncratic family cultures and conceptions of reality. It thus may be possible to position them, as it were, higher up the ladder than other COPs and see them at another level, arguably at least, as super COPs.

Edgar (1988) has argued that the movement of children from net economic contributors to their families to noncontributing consumers and a major drain on family finances also has a net negative effect on the developing child. He concludes that unless they can, without exploitation, be made useful again:

> We deny or reduce their achievement of competent self worth, and we weaken the chances of greater social investment in childhood itself. A return to meaningful tasks, to learning skills and doing things that are useful to others, now as well as later on, is essential if our children are to learn a sense of responsibility for others and a sense of self-respect.

The Australian home-educating parents who assisted this research made it clear that their choice of home education was, *inter alia*, a positive response to this problem but they also explicitly mentioned a feeling of personal responsibility, enhanced self worth and fulfilment in their own lives. They felt that an important dimension of parenting was diminished or lost when a host of professionals took over aspects of their role, status and authority as children attended school. Others mentioned the pleasure of stimulating their child's intellectual and social development and observing the joy on the face of a child as understanding dawned. Home education restored all of this (and more) to them and accompanying that restoration was a new sense of status and purpose. It was not just about children learning but about whole families developing new relationships, perspectives and attitudes as they learned together to become whole people networked into their family, local and wider communities.

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Notes

1. Home educators routinely deny that there is such a thing. I asked what they had done 'yesterday'.
2. i.e. to internalise its structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1967).
3. The data underlying this research comprised 205 taped, transcribed interviews (total 462 h); 239 self-published accounts taken from home education magazines, family news letters and submissions to government enquiries and 12 day-long observations of six core families using a modified form of an instrument devised by Pitman *et al*. (1989).
4. The average for all observed families was three hours.
5. However, there appears to be a very wide range of social arrangements that bear the title 'family'.

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