

# **“Local Government – Tales of Creativity and Innovation”.**

**Robert Mellor  
October 2009**

**A Thesis Submitted for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Faculty of Business  
University of Technology, Sydney**



## **Certificate of Originality and Authenticity**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

.....

21/10/09

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to most profoundly thank Professor Kevin Sproats, who got me into this, and Professor Carl Rhodes who helped me get through it.

I would also like to thank all those people who work in local government, both in Australia and abroad, who gave up their time and assisted me by participating, commenting, or simply encouraging me during this research.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family and friends who simply cheered me on and put up with me.

## **Preface - A Note on Terminology**

Typically, in Australia, local government units are referred to as local '*Councils*'. This terminology can be confusing as the term '*the Council*' is often used to describe both the local government organisation and also the collective body of elected local representatives - "*the Councillors*".

For the purposes of clarity, in this research, the terms '*Council (s)*', '*local Council*' or '*the Council*' will be used to refer to the local government unit or organisation. The elected representatives shall be collectively referred to as '*the Councillors*' or '*the elected Council*".



# Table of Contents

## **Chapter 1: Introduction: an Overview of this Research**

Chapter Overview	p.1.
1.1. Local Government as the Context for this Research - Pressures for Reform and an Environment of Change	p.2.
1.1.2. The Need for Creativity and Innovation in Local Government.	p.7.
1.2. Some Key Questions for the Research	p.9.
1.2.1. Questions and Issues of Definition.	p.9.
1.2.2. 'Usefulness Risk and the Attribution of Creativity and Innovation	p.10.
1.2.3. Creative and Innovative Councils and Their People	p.12.
1.2.4. Summary of Key Questions	p.13.
1.3. Aims, Importance and Structure of this Thesis.	p.14.
1.4. Methodology	p.16.
1.5. Findings and Conclusions	p.18.
1.6. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into next Chapter	p.21.

## **Chapter 2. The Setting - Local Government in Australia and the Need for Creativity and Innovation**

Chapter Overview	p.22.
2.1. Australian Local Government and Governance - the Context of the Research	p.23.
2.1.1. The Beginnings of Australian Local Government.	p.24.
2.1.2. Waves of Reform	p.29.
2.2. Reforming Local Government and Local Governance - a Reaction or a Revolution?	p.34.
2.2.1. The Arrival of New Public Management	p.34.
2.2.2. The Mechanics and Effects of NPM	p.38.
2.2.3. New Public Governance - a Reaction to NPM or a Complimentary Groundswell?	p.42.
2.3. The Calls for Creativity and Innovation in Local Government	p.46.
2.3.1. The Changing Role for Local Government Professionals	p.50.
2.4. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into next Chapter.	p.53.

## **Chapter 3. Mapping the Journey- Drawing the Conceptual Framework for the Research**

Chapter Overview	p.54.
3.1. Introduction	p.54.
3.2. Understanding Creativity and Innovation	p.56.
3.2.1. Difficulties of Definition - What is Creativity and what is Innovation?	p.56.
3.2.2. The Importance of 'Usefulness' and the Issue of Risk.	p.59.
3.3. Local Councils as Creative and Innovative Places of Work	p.63.

3.3.1. Where and Why is Creativity and Innovation?	p.67.
3.3.2. Creative and Innovative Councils within their Suburbs, Towns and Cities	p.69.
3.3.3. What are Creative and Innovative Councils?	p.72.
3.3.4. Creative and Innovative People	p.74.
3.3.5. Creativity as a Set of Professional Capabilities	p.77.
3.4. The Key Research Questions.	p.80.
3.5. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into next Chapter.	p.82.
<b><u>Chapter 4. Building Stories and Using 'Ethno-Narrative'</u> to Research Creativity and Innovation</b>	
<b>Chapter Overview</b>	p.83.
4.1. Introduction – a Quick Personal Story of the Research Design and Rationale	p.84.
4.2. Key Elements in the Research Design and Methodology	p.90.
4.3. A Qualitative Approach	p.93.
4.4. From Ethnography, Auto-Ethnography, to 'Story- Building' and 'Ethno-Narrative'.	p.95.
4.4.1. Ethnography	p.95.
4.4.2. Autoethnography	p.98.
4.4.3. 'Story- Building' and ' Ethno-Narrative'	p.100.
4.5. A Note on the Methodological Approach	p.104.
4.6. Tales of the Field – the Empirical Phase	p.106.
4.6.1. An Expert Panel and the Expert Observer	p.107.
4.6.2. Three Case Study Councils	p.109.
4.6.3. Executive Workshops and Individual Interviews	p.109.
4.6.4. Data Collection and Recording	p.110.
4.7. Alone in a Room With all These Stories	p.114.
4.8. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into next Chapter.	p.116.
<b><u>Chapter 5. Adventures in the Field – 3 Visits and an Expert Workshop</u></b>	
<b>Chapter Overview</b>	p.117.
5.1. Ask the Experts	p.118.
5.1.1. Getting Started	p.120.
5.1.2. Reviewing the Evidence	p.122.
5.1.3. Building Criteria	p.126.
5.1.4. What about their People?	p.129.
5.1.5. Selecting the Councils	p.130.
5.1.6. Coffee with the Expert	p.132.
5.2. Marrickville - "You Just Know!".	p.134.
5.3. Narrabri – the Sportiest District in Australia	p.142.
5.4. Coffs Harbour- the first Big Thing in Australia	p.151.
5.5. Thinking back on the Journey so Far	p.158.
5.6. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next	p.159.



Chapter.

**Chapter 6.   Voices - Speaking of Creativity and Innovation in  
Local Government**

Chapter Overview	p.160.
6.1. Introduction	p.161.
6.2. So what does Creativity mean to you?	p.163.
6.3. What about Innovation?	p.164.
6.4. Creativity and Innovation at work?	p.167.
6.5. Is it a Real Culture of Innovation?	p.169.
6.6. Why You?	p.172.
6.7. What's just too Risky?	p.173.
6.8. What are you actually doing...and how do you do it? - the Professional Capabilities Framework	p.177.
6.8.1. Profession-Specific Skills	p.178.
6.8.2. Generic Skills	p.182.
6.8.3. "Stance"	p.187.
6.8.4. Contingent Thinking	p.191.
6.8.5. Diagnostic Maps - "Nous"	p.195.
6.9. What about the Community Benefit?	p.198.
6.10. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter.	p.200.

**Chapter 7.   Creativity and Innovation in Local Government  
- Building the Stories**

Chapter Overview	p.202.
7.1. Introduction - Answering the Key Questions	p.203.
7.2. Finding working definitions of Creativity and Innovation for Local Government	p.205.
7.3. Innovative Councils - What Sort of Organisations are They and What are They Doing?	p.209.
7.3.1. Developing Criteria	p.209.
7.4. Innovative Councils - Evidence from The Field	p.212.
7.4.1. Welcoming Strangers	p.212.
7.4.2. Triggers for Innovation	p.215.
7.4.3. Strong Leadership and Values	p.218.
7.4.4. Risk, Usefulness and 'Good' Innovation	p.221.
7.4.5. Learning Organisations	p.225.
7.5. Creative and Innovative People - Who are they and what are they doing?	p.230.
7.5.1. The Right People	p.230.
7.5.2. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF)	p.231.
7.5.3. Learning and Using the Capabilities	p.234.
7.6. Why Bother - Innovation, Good Government & Good Governance	p.240.

7.7. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter	p.243.
<b>Chapter 8. Conclusions: Is there a Beginning, Middle and End?</b>	
Chapter Overview	p.246.
8.1. Unravelling the Tapestry - Summarising Key Issue from the Research	p.246.
8.2. Discussion of Key Issues and Lessons Learned	p.249.
8.3. Some Final Brief Comments about Methodology	p.255.
8.4. Conclusions	p.258.
<b>A Recent Story as a Small Post-amble</b>	p.261.
<b>References</b>	p.263.
<b>List of Appendices</b>	p.276.
Appendix 1. - Collated Descriptions and Indicators of 'Innovation' used by various Australian Local Government Awards 2004.	p.277.
Appendix 2. - Some Broad Definitions of Innovation from the Literature	p.277.
Appendix 3. - Criteria for 'Innovative Councils' developed by the Experts from the Case Study Selection Workshop.	p.280.
Appendix 4 - Request Letter Sent to General Managers	p.265.
Appendix 5 - Typical Guide questions used in Executive Team Workshops	p.283.
Appendix 6 - Typical Guide Questions used in Individual Interviews	p.284.

## List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1.1.	Scott's (2001) diagrammatic representation of the Professional Capabilities Framework and its 5 interlocking components:	p.13.
Figure 3.2	The Domains of Organizational change, Innovation and Creativity (Kilbourne and Woodman, 1999)	p.67.
Figure 3.3.	(Repeated) Scott's (2001) diagrammatic representation of the Professional Capabilities Framework and its 5 interlocking components.	p.78.
Figure 3.4.	A Diagrammatic model of the Key Research Questions	p.80.
Figure 7.1.	A Revised Diagrammatic Model of the Key Research Questions	p.203.
Figure 7.2. -	A diagrammatic representation of Scott's Original Professional Capabilities Framework	p.233.
Figure 7.3. -	A diagrammatic representation of Scott's Professional Capabilities Framework - with further possible modification suggested by this research	p.233.
Table 8.1.	Summary of Key Issues and Lessons Learned from the Research	p.247.

## **Abstract**

Local government in Australia (as in many countries) has been urged to be more 'creative and innovative', but with little clear definition of what the two terms mean. In the context of the 'New Public Management' (NPM) reforms of local government in recent years, local Councils have often turned to the private sector models of 'entrepreneurialism' and 'innovation' for guidance, but in a number of cases this has not been satisfactory nor overly successful. There has been little work on a model of public sector innovation that integrates the principles of good local governance and produces real public value and a tangible result in the local community .

This thesis contributes to our knowledge of creativity and innovation at work and how they are understood in local Councils in particular. It also contributes towards a model of 'local governance innovation'. The research uses an 'Expert Panel' to discuss and develop criteria for selecting 'innovative' local Councils. The thesis then examines three case study Councils in NSW, Australia, utilising an 'ethno-narrative' methodology that borrows from the practices of ethnography, autoethnography, and uses narrative as an exploratory tool and a style for describing results. Observations are made, artefacts are examined, key staff are interviewed and their stories of creativity and innovation are collected and analysed. Scott's (2001) Professional Capabilities Framework is used to guide questions about the professional capabilities being used by staff to be creative and generate innovation in the Councils. The research methodology also uses the process of 'story-building' between the researcher and the participants, and this is discussed.

This thesis shows that there are professional staff working in NSW Councils, who are committed to generating innovation for the benefit of their communities. Their understanding of creativity and innovation are shared through their stories and

these shape their meanings. The thesis finds, that whilst precise definitions of the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' are not evident, there is a generally understood meaning of the concepts – at that it is one that produces community benefit. There is an understanding of 'appropriate risk' and organisational cultures that support "learning from mistakes". The key capabilities used for implementing 'innovation' are those that involve communication', and 'story-building'. Fundamentally, these people understand and pursue innovation not only to promote efficiency and effectiveness but also as part of what they believe is 'good local governance'.

## **Introduction: A Pre-amble from a Personal Journey.**

At the outset I feel it is worth to say just a little about myself, as, in many ways, the conduct of this research was part of a personal journey that has often placed me as much as a participant as an observer or researcher.

I was born in England, but when I was nine (in the middle of the night) my family emigrated to Australia. Even at such an early age, this experience taught me profound lessons about seeking out and exploring new possibilities, and also that when you are a child many important things happen in the middle of the night. My parents, seemingly ordinary people, did something that few others from their community had done...they just left...and they did something different. So I grew up with the notion that this kind of exploratory pursuit of other options was quite normal and (for me) usually led to noticeable improvements in quality of life.

In my later teens, my circumstance meant that I had to leave high school find employment. I had to accept almost any job, doing all variety of things, and there I found that I often shared the company of people who loved their work, had passion and found creativity in whatever it was they were doing – no matter how smelly, dirty, or menial, or mundane it may have seemed to others. In the evenings I scrubbed myself clean and I went to acting school and pursued my own passion for drama and the theatre, and indulged in my dream of being a ‘Famous Actor!’ Frankly, upon reflection, my so-called acting career was a bit of a fizzer (although many colleagues may say that I am still acting- and in a way they are right).

Like many hopeful actors constantly waiting for the ‘Big Break’ I still needed to seek out real work to survive... and so I took up an offer to run some screen-printing workshops at the local Council community centre...that led to more workshops, as, due to my eclectic work history I had a broad but basic suite of

skills that I found increasingly satisfying to apply in a community development context. One day, I walked into my agent's office and my photograph was no longer on the wall. I gulped hard and realised that the 'Big Break' probably wasn't ever coming. It was unlikely that my life was to be that of a successful actor - but concurrently, I realised that I had developed a passion for local government.

So my local government career started at 19 and it is still going on. Local government is, in a sense, now my vocation. True to form, I have held a number of positions: community worker, training advisor, employment counsellor, HR professional - and more recently as a local government trainer, teacher, consultant and advisor. I gained a Masters degree in Public Policy and became the Program Manager at the UTS Centre for Local Government in Sydney. I work as a local government advisor and consultant in Australia, throughout South-East Asia, and now for the UN. As such I have spent nearly 30 years "crossing the line" between observer, teacher, practitioner, consultant and participant. This multiplicity of roles seems perfectly natural to me and it is an important factor in why and how I conducted this research.

Throughout my local government work I have typically tried to use a creative approach that I felt made the best use of my personal skills, and (unabashedly) offered me the greatest potential for me to enjoy my work. Work in local government is a series of interrelationships, so, naturally, it also was important that those around me also valued (or at least, tolerated) this approach. Over time I have not only developed a solid experience of using a creative and innovative approach in training or project activities, but I have also met and built up a significant network of other local government professionals who also choose to work in this way. I became curious about this whole notion of 'creativity and innovation' at work. On odd occasions, other colleagues had sometimes feted me and said "oh, you are so lucky, you are creative!" Although it felt it was a little

simplistic I greedily took it as a personal compliment but also held a nagging suspicion that was unfairly attributing something special to me - like some gift, or attribute. This conflicted with my personal experience of ordinary people being creative and innovative and passionate about their everyday work. So the early seeds of this research began to grow. I wanted to find out about what people understood by creativity and innovation and what were the skills or capabilities (not these mystical 'personal attributes') that helped people to be more creative and innovative in their work? I wanted to find out what could be shared - maybe what could be taught, what could be learned and what could be supported by the workplace - to help local government foster and encourage creativity and innovation.

So I decided I would write a book. I actually had no idea at all how to write a book, so I just started thinking about things and then writing them down. I supposed that if you just wrote down a lot of things that you thought were interesting, then you could put them all together and make it into a book and hopefully other people thought they were interesting too and they would read it. Then a colleague and friend at UTS said to me, "why don't you do a PhD, it might help to give you some structure?" So I somewhat naively said "yes" and enrolled and got accepted into a PhD in the Faculty of Education.

Originally, I agreed with my supervisor that I was going to write three, small novellas about three significant and impressively creative/innovative/passionate people that I had met in local government. These would be in a literary style and describe my 'ethnographic homestays' with some very interesting local government people - in Australia, Africa, and the UK. The idea was that I would then de-construct their narratives and look for some extrapolated and grounded theory. So, I set off on my three-month inter-continental voyage, observing and mingling and writing. Back to Australia and it was all going fine... until my



doctoral supervisor resigned. This meant I had to re-negotiate a new supervisor. “Scotty” came to my aid and this meant a change of focus and a new approach. He offered me the gift of the PCF (the Professional Capabilities Framework), a no-nonsense, straight-down-the line investigative tool that had proven to work well in profiling successful students. He also encouraged me to use his “Boom, Boom, Boom”, project-management style of research design, conduct and writing. I gained my appropriate ethics and doctoral approvals and I began to undertake the early empirical fieldwork for my data collection.

During the empirical fieldwork phase, I was constantly shown generosity and hospitality by the so-called subjects of the research. I spent time and shared and laughed and discussed and argued with some truly wonderful people in local government. Again and again, I came home with armfuls of notes and tapes and interviews and with a sense that I owed it to these people to try and tell their story and discuss what it was that they were doing and give it the dignity, if you like, of some academic research.

Then...I turned around and Scotty also left! To his enduring credit, Carl picked up the clipboard at the end of the bed and ‘took on the patient’. He also reminded me to “find something you love” in the research. As my final supervisor, Carl helped me re-discover my joy in narrative and guided me to help stay within the boundaries of the requirements for a PhD. In the meantime I have also needed to do my other work in local government. That has meant that I have also been actively involved in local government as a participant and also an observer during the course of this research.

One of my interviewees once said “I want to you know a bit about who I am, so you can see where I am coming from”. I have taken the liberty of commandeering his statement as an explanation for this pre-amble to Chapter 1.



## Chapter 1.

# 1. Introduction: an Overview of This Research

### Chapter Overview

This thesis examines the stories of creativity and innovation in local government in Australia. Local government in Australia (as in many countries) has been urged to be more 'creative and innovative', but with little clear definition of what the two terms mean. In the context of the 'New Public Management' (NPM) reforms of local government in recent years, local Councils have often turned to the private sector models of 'entrepreneurialism' and 'innovation' for guidance, but in a number of cases this has not been satisfactory nor overly successful. However, there has been little work on innovation in the public sector generally and less on innovation in local government.

Hence, this thesis explores the meanings and understandings of creativity and innovation in the context of Australian local government and three local Councils in New South Wales in particular. It also explores and describes a model of 'local governance innovation' at work. It uses an 'Expert Panel' to discuss and develop criteria for selecting 'innovative' local Councils. The thesis then examines three case study Councils in NSW, Australia utilising an 'ethno-narrative' methodology that borrows from the practices of autoethnography and uses narrative as both an exploratory tool and a style for describing results. Observations are made, artefacts are examined, key staff are interviewed and their stories of creativity and innovation are collected and analysed. Scott's (2001) Professional Capabilities Framework is used to guide questions about the professional capabilities being

used to be creative and generate innovation in the Councils. The research methodology also uses the process of 'story-building' between the researcher and the participants, and this is discussed.

This thesis finds that there are professional staff working in Australian Councils who are committed to generating innovation for the benefit of their communities. Their understanding of creativity and innovation is shared through their stories and these shape their meanings. The thesis finds, that whilst precise definitions of the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' are not evident, there is a generally understood meaning of the concepts – and that is one that produces community benefit. These people understand and pursue innovation not only to promote efficiency and effectiveness in their local Council, but also as part of what they believe is 'good local governance'.

This chapter firstly introduces the background for the research, and the key conceptual questions. It then discusses the nature of the thesis, importance of this research and the methodology used. Finally, it gives a summary of the major findings and an introduction into the next chapter.

## **1.1. Local Government as the Context for this Research - Pressures for Reform and an Environment of Change**

Australian local government operates in a three-tiered political system that evolved through history. The nation was formed upon Federation in 1901, which joined together a group of British colonies that had been previously separately governed. As the State governments and the Commonwealth (National) government continued to grow in responsibility and revenue, local government declined. Australian local government is not validated in the Federal Constitution and is hence, subservient to the States. Until recently, this has left Australian local

government with a very narrow group of responsibilities and an even narrower income base.

However, as with many other countries in the world, local government, along with other public sector agencies has been the subject of significant reform agendas as well as an increased pressure for change. The world is changing rapidly and therefore local government organisations need to be able to operate effectively and efficiently in this environment. Once, the stereotypical image of local government was one of the most conservative sphere of government - apparently plodding along, simply 'doing what it has always done' and constraining its attention to the management and delivery of the "3 R's (Roads, Rates and Rubbish). Over recent decades, it has been recognised that local government has both the potential and the responsibility to be a dynamic public institution that facilitates democratic local governance and delivers effective and efficient services. Where once there appeared to be an element of certainty about what was the "right thing to do", now there is more uncertainty and an (sometimes disconcerting) array of choices, and an increasing number of decisions to be made. This pressure/ potential dichotomy - the pressure for reform along with a concurrent realisation of the potential for increased capacity - has been brought to bear on local government within an environment of broader public sector reforms and reform of government in general.

Worldwide, government agencies and institutions have been subject to a wave of enforced 'reforms' aimed at achieving reform in two areas - the reform of governance and the reform of government. Usefully, Osborne and Gaebler (1995, p. 6.) offer an explanation of the difference: "Governance is the process by which we collectively solve our problems and meet society's needs. Government is the instrument we [often] use". Governance reforms have been aimed at reviewing and revising the very role of government, the place it takes within society and the

fundamental principles that underlie its activities. Governance reforms have often been aligned with social movements of “grassroots democracy”, “people power” and the growing emergence (and recognition) of “civil society”. Typically, governance reforms have aimed at: increasing transparency and accountability, increasing citizen participation and consultation, enhancing access and equity initiatives, encouraging public judgement and facilitating educated discussion.

There has also been emphasis on instituting significant changes in the way in which government is structured and the operating practices and procedures that government entities use - primarily in pursuit of ‘structural efficiency’. Such government reforms have been called many things: ‘Reinventing Government’ (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), ‘Public Sector Reform’, ‘Managerialism’ (Pollitt ,1990) and more recently grouped and labelled as ‘New Public Management’ or ‘NPM’ (e.g. Pollitt and Bouckert ,2000).

Bonina and Cordella (2008) note that:

Despite the open debate regarding NPM main attributes and the different names (e.g. Reinventing Government, public management revolution, public management reforms) used to identify policies aiming at achieving these objectives, scholars have observed the NPM’s common features are: downsizing, accountability, focus on performance, concern for results, decentralization and organizational disaggregation, the ‘importation’ of several private sector practices (such as contracting out, privatisation, customer orientation, competition and personnel management) and the separation of politics and administration. (p.5)

In Australia, NPM reforms have typically focused on initiatives aimed at:

- Enhancing a 'corporate' or more 'businesslike approach' and adopting private sector practices
- Restructuring organisations to enhance efficiency and effectiveness
- Increasing competition, privatisation and outsourcing
- Increasing use of private sector accountancy methodologies
- Structuring organisations along a 'Funder/Provider separation'
- Creating of semi-corporate 'Business Units' and using contractual relationships within organisations
- Developing 'customer service' relationships
- Increasing the use of 'Economic Rationalism' to justify policy decisions.

For local government, the move towards NPM has typically been mandated by other levels of government and has largely been focussed on improving the effectiveness, and efficiency of local government as a provider of services. There has been a concerted effort to 'force' local government to review its practices and procedures and to access the 'best' from the private sector – either by allowing the private sector access into traditional local government areas of activity and/or by adopting more 'businesslike' approaches to the way they do things themselves.

In Australia, this has led to a portfolio of mandated reforms that have:

- amended local government legislation to require a more 'corporate' approach to organisational design and behaviour. 'Town Clerks' are now known as 'CEOs' or 'General Managers'. The policy and goal setting sections of local governments are now often organisationally separate from those which provide the service (the 'Funder/Provider' separation);
- required local Councils to identify their 'business' activities and introduced competition to local government through the application of the National Competition Policy.

- required open and transparent management planning and reporting;
- introduced more 'businesslike' approaches to accounting with the introduction of accrual accounting and the National Accounting Standard AAS27;
- introduced performance-based contracts for senior staff and increased the focus on performance management generally;
- encouraged the use of Activity-Based-Costing (ABC) to allow local governments to understand the 'real' cost of their activities.

Concurrently, whilst there have been strong mandated requirements for the structural reform of local government, there has been a concurrent and growing emphasis on the role of local government in providing more effective 'local governance'. Jones (1993, p.16.) comments: "local government's main role is to help local communities to learn to make strategic choices by balancing the costs and benefits of efficiency, effectiveness, economic growth, quality of life, social justice, participation and legitimacy". He highlights an increasing recognition that local government is a primary sphere of government in facilitating local communities to make collective choices about their futures and then implementing local action to realise those choices. Community consultation and participation are not only encouraged, in some areas of activity they are also mandated.

In Australia, there has also been the well-documented process of 'cost-shifting', where the (predominantly) State Governments have allocated new roles to local government but without the commensurate funding. Whereas in the past, Australian Local Councils were involved in a relatively limited range of activities (disparagingly referred to as "Roads, Rates and Rubbish"), in recent years they have had to become involved in dealing with a wide array of issues. Once there was relative simplicity, now there is increased complexity and rapid change. These days, the average local Council has increasingly become an arena of convergence, where a multitude of 'big' and 'little' issues converge on a local area and a wide



range of responses need to be developed, considered and acted upon. The current environment for the local Council in Australia is therefore one of continuing change. Local Councils need to be constantly alert to a vast array of emerging issues and able to identify and analyse the possible effects on their community. They then need to develop an innovative and effective response – drawing on the collective resources and capabilities of the organisation as well as the resources available through the participation of the community itself.

### **1.1.2. The Need for Creativity and Innovation in Local Government.**

There are difficulties in accessing precise definitions of either ‘creativity’ or ‘innovation’ (this is discussed in more detail later and in chapter 3). Nevertheless, despite this, in recent years, local government has been strongly urged to develop creativity and innovation as a response to the pressures mentioned previously, and these have come from a variety of perspectives. Some have tied innovation to ‘structural efficiency’ and the maximisation of efficiencies – what Al Gore labelled “Government that works better and costs less” (1993) and the necessity “... not only to maximise the efficiency in the provision of services, but also to innovate and discover new ways of doing things” (Bartlett & Dibben 2002, p 108). In the UK the Labor Government reforms were noted as having “...a strong political drive to stimulate innovation in local government” (Newman, Raine and Skelcher, 2001, p.61). The UK developed a Prime Minister’s Performance and Innovation Unit, and its head stated that: “Effective government and public services depend on successful innovation – to develop better ways of meeting needs, solving problems, and using resources and technologies” (Mulgan, 2003, p5).

Others such as Hall (1995, 1997, 1998) and Landry (1995,1998,2000), were advocating for ‘Creative Cities’, as they built on much of their European work that promoted the ‘creative and cultural industries’ as the way to stimulate depressed

regional economies. Works such as these also pointed to the need for "...a vibrant, creative public sector" (Birchard, 2000, p.41) and even went as far as to suggest that, "the creativity of those who live in and run our cities will determine future success" (Landry, 2000, p. xiii). This was emphasised in the work of economist Richard Florida, in his work on the so-called 'Creative Class': "creativity – the ability to come up with and implement a new idea – has always been a prime source of economic growth and advantage" (Florida, 2002, page27). Florida's work proposes that 'talented and creative' people will be attracted to live and work in certain regions or cities that score highly according to his so-called 'creativity indices'. He asserts that this high incidence of creativity is directly linked to the local economic growth and development.

Commentators such as these began to spread and inculcate their message around the world. In countries such as New Zealand, the rhetoric of innovation intermingled with NPM ideology and saw a strong advocacy for 'public entrepreneurship'. In Australia, 'creativity' and 'innovation' also began to become common terms in the documents and declarations related to local government reform. The Australian Local Government Association's 'State of the Regions' reports started using Florida's 'creativity index' from 2002. In the public forums, conferences, seminars and awards of Australian local government – 'creativity and innovation' began to be spoken of the most desired and advocated objectives for Councils. Martin (2002) stated that "... an innovative local government organisation ...that deals with uncertainty, brings new ideas into fruition, values creative thinking and learning... goes to making the community a better place to live"(p.2).

## **1.2. Some Key Questions for the Research**

### **1.2.1. Questions and Issues of Definition.**

At the heart of this thesis lies a fundamental question: "what do 'creativity' and 'innovation' actually mean in local government?" The terms are often used interchangeably in both the literature and in everyday usage. Clegg (1999, p.1) describes them as: "concepts that everyone has a feel for but few can actually describe", and De Sousa (1999, p. 9) states they are: "...easily understood but difficult to explain". The literature search supported Higgins & Morgan's (2000) finding that: "...there is no clear and consistent distinction made between the terms creativity and innovation in the literature [and] where the term innovative is used, it is sometimes interchangeably with creative." (p.119)

Those advocating for creativity and innovation in local government offer little help by way of definition – their urgings simply imply an understanding. Indeed, this issue of definition becomes central to the thesis. As will be shown, people in local government used the terms variously and told stories to explain their understanding. Their stories did not illustrate more precise definitions but this did not seem to trouble those people involved in being creative and generating innovation. This point will be elaborated in the findings.

This thesis supports the notion of a continuum between idea-generation (creativity) and idea-implementation (innovation). It follows from statements such as: "creativity is, more broadly speaking, discovery or recombination of ideas, and innovation is more usually used to describe an end product which is new". Higgins and Morgan (2000, p.119); "creativity is not an end in itself, but a capability which can lead to effective solutions" (Garavan and Deegan (1995, p2.); and "Creativity is the pre-condition from which innovations develop" (Landry,2000, p.15). This research finds that more typically people used the term

creativity in relation to individuals (or groups) but innovation more in relation to organisations. This supports Martin, Christie and Rowe (2002), who suggested that, "Innovation refers to the implementation of creative ideas within an organisation" (p.4). De Sousa (1999) suggests communication as the link between individual creativity and organizational innovation. He states: "In fact once we speak of an idea, practice or object, whether it is in the arts, science, technology or other domains... as being perceived as new by someone else then we are probably talking about innovation, because communication is added"(p.26). De Sousa's comments also highlight the issue of 'newness'. The literature contains considerable discussion on the topic of 'novelty' or 'originality'. I have followed Newman, Raine & Skelcher (2001) who noted that an innovation may be "...completely new to a particular local authority [but] may have previously applied elsewhere"(p.61).

Hence, as will be explored in chapter three, the thesis proceeds on the basis that:

- creativity and innovation lie somewhere on an understood continuum between idea-generation and idea-implementation
- the terms are often used interchangeably
- an idea may be 'new' or the idea may be regarded as new by those who view it or use for the first time,

### **1.2.2. 'Usefulness', Risk and the Attribution of Creativity and Innovation**

This research focuses on creativity and innovation at work in a public sector context. The thesis asserts that the private sector and the public sector are fundamentally different, and therefore creativity and innovation should be implemented in different ways in the two sectors. Local government (as an arm of the public sector) is publicly-funded, charged with the responsibilities of 'public

service' and the 'public interest', and should relate to its community as empowered citizens and not simply customers. This is not to suggest that local government could not selectively borrow practices from the private sector, but only where they do not conflict with the fundamental aims and objectives of 'good local governance'.

Therefore we need to explore what kind of creativity and innovation is 'useful' and would be considered valuable to the community. The literature on 'artistic' and literary creativity focuses on novelty that is sometimes even 'shocking' and 'confronting'. The literature on business creativity and innovation often focuses on 'beating the competition', 'market advantage' and 'staying profitable'. Whilst those who promote 'managerialism' in the public sector would suggest that local government should perhaps look at innovation in these terms, others (e.g. Cardow, 2005, Cox, 1995, Denhardt, 2003) would oppose any such notion. If, as Martin (2002, p2) suggested, an aim of local government innovation is to make the community "a better place to live", then we need to explore how do innovative Councils know what is 'better', useful and valued and what is just 'too risky'. This raises the issue of attribution of the titles and values of creativity and innovation. As is further explored in Chapter three, the terms are most often imbued with a positive value, but who attributes this value and on what basis? This thesis agrees with De Sousa (1999) that the nomination of 'creativity' is 'hetero-attributed' - attributed by others - and also the suggestions of other authors (Csikszentmihalyi 1996, Amabile 1983, Stein 1984) that the same is true for 'innovation'. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) asserts that an innovation is considered valuable after a process of social evaluation (p24) and Borins suggests that public servants can demonstrate "integrity in innovation" (2000, p.506) by going through a series of organisational processes to test and gain support for the innovation. There is an important question of how and by whom is the label of 'innovative'

attributed in local government? Hence this thesis will explore these interrelated issues of usefulness, risk and attribution.

### **1.2.3. Creative and Innovative Councils and their People**

Previous works on organisational creativity and innovation (e.g. Amabile, 1988, Clegg, 1998, Dacey, 1989, Dahlen, 2006, Ekvall, 1997, Grudin, 1990, Jackson and Messick, 1965, Kao, 1996 and Ramachander, 2006) have largely focused on the business environment. In such an environment "...by far the most important aspect of creativity is the result...in the end this is what really counts" (Dahlen, 2006, p.57). However, for local Councils, this kind of definition may cause problems as noted by authors such as Goodsell (1993) and Hood (1991), where the pursuit of such creativity may conflict with 'traditional' public sector values such as: due process, accountability, honesty and fairness. It may well also conflict with what Aulich calls "...the traditional 'local democracy' role and its primary concerns for the values of access, diversity, local representativeness and responsiveness" (1999, p.3.). Hence this thesis explores whether there is a model of creativity and innovation that does not cause such conflict. If so, what kind of organisational aspects and behaviours may support such creativity and innovation in a local Council?

Concurrently, we need to investigate the kind of people in these Councils who are using their creativity to generate the innovations? What kind of people are they and what are they doing? Rather than viewing creativity as a set of 'traits', behaviours or attributes (e.g. Amabile,1988, Grudin,1990, Jackson and Messick,1965) This thesis explores 'creativity' as a set of 'professional capabilities' - as 'tools' that are used on a day-to-day basis by local government professionals. When explored in this way, it is hoped that the research may allow us to identify some key 'creative capabilities' that are being used and investigate how they were learned - and therefore, how we may assist such learning in the future.

A particular feature of this thesis is the use of Scott's (2001, 2002) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) to prompt and guide questions in the field, and to order and examine the capabilities. Chapter three discusses the PCF in more detail the reasons for its use, along with its design and evolution. However, I present it here in diagrammatic form to introduce the reader to its five interlocked 'spheres' or groupings of professional capabilities

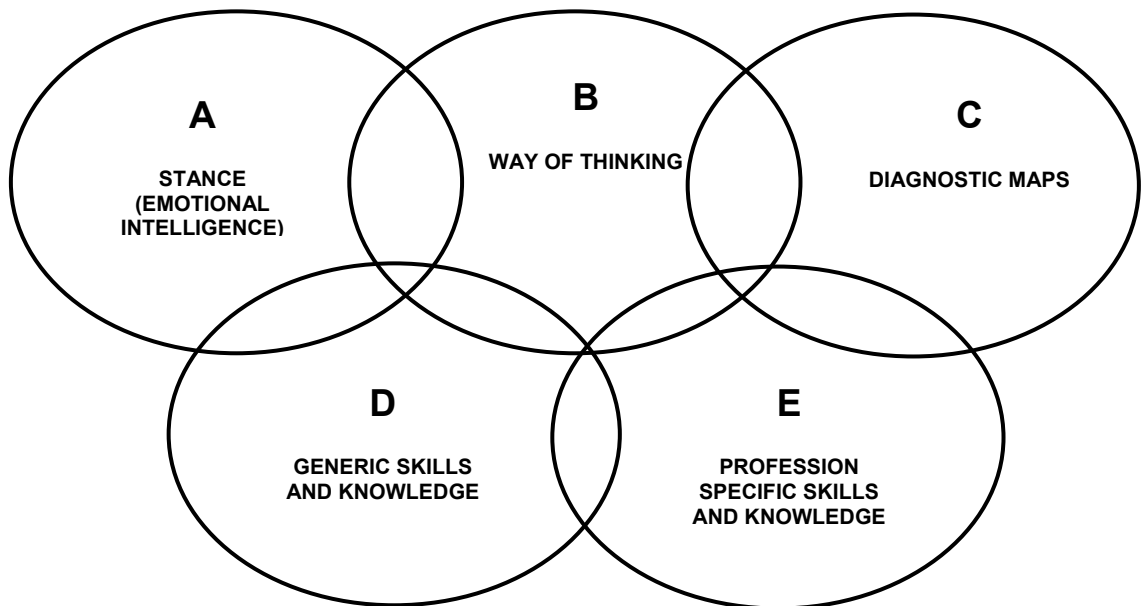


Figure 1.1. Scott's (2001, P.4) diagrammatic representation of the Professional Capabilities Framework and its 5 interlocking components:

### 1.2.4. Summary of Key Questions

I introduce here a summary of broad questions addressed in this thesis:

- How do people in local government understand 'creativity' and innovation?
- What criteria could we use to identify 'innovative' local Councils?
- Why do such local Councils innovate - what are the pressures and catalyst for the creativity and innovation in local government?
- How do they support their staff to be 'creative' and build innovations?
- What are these staff doing - what capabilities are they using at work?

- What might be the descriptors of ‘useful’, ‘valuable’ and ‘appropriate’ creativity and innovation in local government and how do we know if all of this is in the ‘public interest’ and supporting good governance?

### **1.3. Aims, Importance and Structure of this Thesis.**

This thesis aims to explore ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ at work in Australian local Councils. It seeks to understand what is meant by ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ in such a setting, and as such it listens to the stories of people who work in local government. The research also aims to discover what criteria are used to identify ‘innovative’ Councils and whether those criteria are valid. The thesis seeks to explore how ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ are understood and spoken of in local government, why they are considered valuable and what practices support and encourage them in local Councils. Most importantly, the thesis aims to examine whether there is a model of creativity and innovation that can be described that does not conflict with the principles of good local governance. Hence it asks not just “what are you doing?” and “how do you support this in your Council?” but also “why are you doing this?” The thesis aims to investigate the people who are responsible for using their ‘creativity’ to produce ‘innovations’ for their Council – what capabilities are they using, how do they use them, how did they learn them...and lastly, but significantly, “what do you think is the benefit of all this?” In these ways, the thesis contributes to knowledge of: creativity and innovation at work (in local Councils) and a model of ‘appropriate’ creativity and innovation for local government.

I believe this thesis and the research are important on a number of fronts. Firstly, it contributes to the work on public sector innovation and creativity. It explores practical case studies to gather real-life examples of creativity and innovation at work in local Councils. It investigates the issues surrounding public sector



creativity and innovation and it contributes towards the understanding of a model of local government innovation that corresponds with the objectives of good local governance – ‘local governance innovation’. The thesis explores and describes creativity and innovation as a set of professional capabilities being used by staff in local Councils. In this way, the findings will provide further knowledge to those that are involved in local government learning – either through formal education programs or in promoting local government learning. Finally, the thesis uses an unconventional ‘ethno-narrative’ methodology (explained later) to explore, build and share the stories of creativity and innovation working in local government.

The thesis is structured in the following way:

- Chapter One provides an overview and summary of the thesis.
- Chapter Two describes the environment (and history) of Australian local government as a context for this research.
- Chapter Three discusses the key conceptual questions that underpin this thesis.
- Chapter Four describes the evolution and use of the methodology and explains the use of ‘ethno-narrative’ techniques.
- Chapter Five uses the ‘ethno-narrative’ technique to share the stories from the field research.
- Chapter Six again use the ‘ethno-narrative’ approach to share some of the stories from the people working in the case study Councils.
- Chapter Seven collates and describes the findings in a narrative style.
- Chapter eight reviews the findings, offers some suggestions for further study and concludes the thesis.

## **1.4. Methodology**

This thesis utilised a 'transdisciplinary' (Van Kerkoff, 2000) methodology in that it uses a number of approaches from a variety of disciplines to explore many aspects of the same issue. The thesis uses many of the exploratory procedures of Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) 'Grounded Theory' approach. However, there is an element of theory-testing as the thesis uses the Professional Capabilities Framework (Scott, 2001) to examine and order the professional capabilities used for creativity and innovation, and then compare this to the stories collected in the field. The PCF also guided the dialogue during interviews.

The thesis uses a qualitative approach as described by authors such as Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Miles and Huberman (1994), Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Wadsworth (1997). The thesis focuses on a series of comparative case studies, as this methodology allowed an interactive exploration of the key questions in the organisational setting. Techniques included: a workshop with a panel of local government 'experts', three field trips to local Councils in NSW, Australia, workshops with the 'Executive Management Team' in each case study Council, 17 individual staff interviews, and countless conversations – all conducted in 2004. I examined some organisational artefacts and made observations, but the largest body of evidence came from people's comments and answers during discussions, workshops and interviews. – and the stories people shared.

As the research unfolded I realised the richness of these stories-as-data and I used what I describe as an 'ethno-narrative' technique. The methodology borrows from the practices of ethnography as described by key authors such as Agar (1980), Atkinson & Hammersley (1994), Creswell (1998), Geertz (1973) and Wolcott (1994). It involved observations in the field and examination of organisational and social artefacts. It also has clear connections to the established practices of auto-ethnography (Ellis and Bochner 1996,2000,Richardson 2000, Chang, 2008) and

utilises both the personal stories of my own experience as well as those told and presented to me. This 'ethno-narrative' technique acknowledges my subjectivity and my participant/observer role in the field and as such is linked to autoethnography. It focused me on listening to the stories of the people I met, to try to understand what their stories meant and to help them tell their stories (Wolcott, 1994).

The methodology has a strong emphasis on the use of narrative as both an exploratory tool and style of ordering, sharing and observations from the research. This follows from the work of others (notably: Boje 1991, 1995, 2001, 2006, Czarniawska, 1992, 1999, 2003, 2004, Denning 2004, Gabriel, 1995, 2000, Rhodes & Pullen, 2005, Weick 1995) who have used stories and narratives as a way of exploring and understanding organisations and the people that work in them. During the research I often became a 'co-producer' (Boje, 1991) in the 'story-performances' and this led to a re-iterative and shared process of what I have come to call 'story-building'. These jointly built stories, combined with my observation and elements of testing, became the experiences that formed the basis of my auto-ethnographic contribution to this 'ethno-narrative'

I am aware that the use of this methodology is unconventional in local government research. However, the 'ethno-narrative' technique helped build the stories in the research, and the style gives texture, order and meaning to the final narrative. I use narrative in this thesis to organise and "...to make sense of actions and events and objects, whilst also explaining the relationships between them" (Weick 1995). It is also hoped that the narrative style provides the "thick descriptions" as advocated by Geertz (1973), and in doing so offers the texture to "engage the reader" (Wolcott, 1998). An objective of this 'ethno-narrative' technique is hopefully to enhance readability for both an academic and non-academic audience and also to invite readers in to share some of the journey.

## 1.5. Findings and Conclusions

In section 1.2.4., I outlined a set of key questions to be answered, and in varying degrees and in different ways they have.

The Thesis has shown that people in local government speak of creativity and innovation in varying ways and they draw on a variety of discourse and 'language' sources for their descriptions and often use stories to share meaning. Whilst they often use the terms interchangeably, 'creativity' is more used to refer to an individual, whereas 'innovation' is more usually used for an organisation – but there was no apparent discomfort in a lack of precise definition. It was found that there is solid support for the notion of a creativity-innovation continuum, with creative ideas going through a series of processes before it became implemented and attributed as innovation. Both terms are spoken of positively and both are regarded as valuable. The attribution of both creativity and innovation supports De Sousa's concept of *hetero-attribution* – attribution by others. In the case of local government it would appear the others are: work colleagues, industry peers and the community itself.

The research search also found that the 'experts in the domain' also were as imprecise and demonstrated a similar lack of precision in the criteria they used to select 'innovative Councils'. Again, the research reveals that this did not overtly worry them and that they saw such Awards as an encouragement in the pursuit of innovation that was "good for the community". None of the selected case study Councils disputed their nomination.

The thesis has found that in the case study Councils, they may win Awards (and were proud of them) they did not aggressively pursue them – indeed, they spoke clearly that the "ultimate judge" was their community. These Councils all told stories of a strong commitment to community engagement, and they all were

proud of the diversity in their communities. There was evidence to support Florida's (2002) suggestions in that they welcomed new and different people into both their Council and their communities.

The research found that increasing demands and the reduction of resources was the most common pressure to seek innovation. One Council identified the need to re-build a positive relationship with their community as the 'trigger' for innovations. However, there were also internal motivations to pursue innovation that usual built over time and on top of previous 'improvement' programs

Within the case study councils, it was revealed that there was an expectation that the Executive Management Team would: demonstrate leadership, work as a team and model organisational values. It was expected that organisational values would be developed collaboratively between leaders and staff, and that the Executive Managers would give clear direction but flexibility to experiment. The research highlighted the importance, in a local government setting, of political "trust" between elected Councillors and staff - and "where there is "no trust there's no innovation".

The selected case study Councils were careful about risk and had a number of formal and informal 'checks and counter-checks'. They often used stories as organisational 'parables' about risk. Staff used their technical expertise to minimise risk but reliable community engagement and processes of 'good governance' gave reassurance that they "were on the right track". Ultimately, as I was repeatedly told, the usefulness and public value would be decided by their communities.

The research found elements of both organisational learning and 'learning organisations' in all three case study Councils (with no definitional distinction between the two) and often this was spoken of as innovation in itself. Most

importantly they all fostered a workplace culture of learning from mistakes – this was highly evident in their stories.

The thesis shows how the staff who were nominated as ‘creative’ (and therefore interviewed), spoke clearly of a “good fit’ to their job – an alignment of their capabilities and what was required by the position. They all told stories of how they enjoyed and like being good at their work. They had a wide range of profession -specific capabilities and often eclectic and mobile career paths. They valued what they called ‘Emotional Intelligence’ and suggested it was best developed by diverse life experience. They identified communication, presentation and writing as the most important generic skills, and suggested that these (story-telling) skills provided the link between creative ideas and implementation of innovations. The research showed support for Scott’s (2001) proposal for ‘contingent thinking’ - different ways of generating and developing ideas, but they demonstrated a preference for generating ideas on their own and developing innovations in a group. There was a suggestion that ‘Nous” –commonsense built up over time – was essential for successful development of innovation in a political environment. They consistently spoke of the belief that their learning skills underpinned their ‘creativity’.

Finally, and perhaps succinctly, this thesis shows evidence of a model of ‘local governance innovation’ that is genuinely being pursued with the objective of community benefit. The Australian local Councils that are pursuing such innovations are using processes of good local governance to engage with their community, who in turn guide them, and also to attribute the value of ‘innovation’.

## **1.6. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction Into the next Chapter**

This chapter firstly introduced the background for the research, and the pressures for reform facing Australian local Government and the urging for local Councils to be more creative and innovative and some issues arising from this. The chapter then discussed the difficulty of definition – what do the terms ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ actually mean. The idea of a creativity-innovation continuum was proposed as a continuum between idea-generation and idea-implementation. The chapter then discussed the difficulty in defining creative and innovative Councils and understanding the capabilities being used by their staff.

The Chapter then outlined the aims, importance and structure of the thesis, and highlighted that there was relatively little work looking at creativity in a local government setting, and little work looking at creativity as a set of capabilities used at work. There then followed a discussion and explanation of the ‘ethno-narrative’ methodology with its combination of ethnographic practices and ‘story-building’ techniques. Finally the chapter outlined some of the key findings of the thesis and the major conclusion that there is a model of local government innovation that is integrated with the principles of good governance and serves the community interest.

In chapter two I will provide a detailed discussion on the context and setting for the research – Australian local government. I will detail its evolution and history, recent challenges and pressures for reform; the emergence of NPM as a dominant paradigm, and how this led to the urging for creative and innovative local Councils

## 2. The Setting - Local Government in Australia...and the Need for Creativity and Innovation

### Chapter Overview

This chapter contributes to the whole thesis by setting the context for the research. In this chapter I will explain the historical evolution of Australian local government, and the emergence of an environment promoting the need for local Councils to be creative and innovative. I will explain how both history and the socio/geographic realities have left Australian local government with a relatively narrow functional role (within the legislative arrangements) and also a limited revenue base. I will also highlight that within the three-tiered Federal system in Australia, local government is not recognised in the Federal Constitution but is 'validated' in the State Constitutions. Hence local government is legally subservient to the State Government. New South Wales (the State in which this research was conducted) has one of if not the weakest recognition in a State Constitution.

The chapter also shows how two key paradigms have dominated local government in recent times and highlights a dual responsibility for local government - the provision of efficient local services and administration (local government) and effective local representation and engagement (local governance). The chapter illustrates how recent waves of 'reform' have emphasised one or the other of these roles. The 'New Public Management' (NPM) ideology of the late 1980s-1990s emphasised the need for more businesslike, efficient and competitive local government, but often failed to recognise the political environment or the role of the citizen rather than the customer. This led to the emergence of the concepts of 'New Public Service' and 'New Local Governance', with an emphasis on



participation and local governance. The chapter concludes by discussing how, charged with these two concurrent responsibilities, Australian local Councils attempting to meet the needs of their local communities have been urged to be creative and innovative. In turn, Councils need to have an understanding of what these terms mean and also have creative and innovative people to work with them.

## **2.1. Australian Local Government and Governance – the Context of the Research**

In recent years, it has been recognised that, prior to the British colonisation of the continent, the indigenous peoples of Australia had systems, rules and schemas of behaviour, along with procedures for making decisions, resolving disputes and directing community action (undoubtedly a form of ‘governance’) <sup>1</sup>. They also had deep knowledge of what interventions were appropriate to manage their environment in order to survive. However, it is reasonable to state that the original inhabitants of the country did not have institutions of ‘government’ as such. These institutions were imported from Britain.

Australia’s current system of local government grew from that of its colonial parent. However, it also emerged within a mongrel ‘Washminster’ (i.e. half Washington/ half Westminster) system of Government that is a blend of some British structures with an American-style Federation. When you also take into account that the physical operating environment is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, then it is not difficult to see why Australian local government has developed some unique aspects within the western world. Starting from relatively weak and slow beginnings, Australian local government was legislatively allocated a narrow domain of functions (compared to many other OECD countries) and it has persistently suffered from its narrow financial base.

Functions often designated to local government in the two-tiered systems of other countries (e.g. police, education, and housing) are typically carried out by the historically more powerful State Governments in Australia. All of this is compounded by the constant effect of Australia's sparse population and the physical remoteness of many communities.

This environmental context (both governmental and socio/geographical) coupled with the ongoing organisational tension between the need to serve as an efficient institution of 'local government' and an effective institution of 'local governance' – is an important aspect of this research. For Australian local government there has always been a duality of purpose – to serve the local interests and needs for governance and also to provide efficient and effective government services to their communities. It is therefore useful to briefly examine the historical development of the roles, responsibilities and reforms of local government in relation to these two purposes.

### **2.1.1. The Beginnings of Australian Local Government.**

From the outset, legislatively, local government in Australia was subservient to its Colonial Government(s), which in turn was subservient to the King of England. Not long after the colonial settlements such as Port Jackson (Sydney), and Port Phillip (Melbourne) were established, free settlers along with emancipated 'ticket-of-leave' ex-convicts were encouraged to explore inland and establish self-sufficient communities. The colonial governments provided some services, infrastructure and regulation around the major settlements – mainly to assist transport of cargo to and from harbours and facilitate the import and export of goods. Other local communities were largely left up to their own devices and

---

<sup>1</sup> Such as in the discussions and judgements of the '*Mabo v Queensland (no 1) 1988*' decision

whatever meagre services were provided were on a self-funded basis and local governance was enacted within local communities, often through the local church.

Soon after their foundation, the Colonies received instructions from Britain to divide up their territories along the British local government model of counties and parishes. However, these boundary markings have “never had such significance and were used primarily to describe titles to land” (Halligan and Wettenhall, 1989, p.77). They also note that it is generally accepted that the first local election to constitute a municipal organisation was held in Port Adelaide in October 1840 , and following this, municipal Councils were established in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Geelong. Historically, the emergence of local government in Australia coincided with the colonial movements towards self-government. The original basis for establishment of local government was ‘permissive’ – it was not initially enforced by the Colonial Government, and municipal incorporation only occurred after a stipulated number of land holders had petitioned the Colonial Governor and requested that they be allowed to establish a local Council. Despite a brief campaign of ‘compulsory incorporation’ in the late 1800s and early 1900s, this basis predominated.

Hence, not all of the Australian States are currently covered by municipal institutions -parts of South Australia, a strip of western New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory (as the Commonwealth bought all the land from NSW) are unincorporated. Northern Territory is now all incorporated but the other territories- including the ACT Antarctic and the small island territories – operate under a variety of administrative arrangements.

Authors such as Balmer (1989) suggest that in Australia “... the early settlers experienced ‘the tyranny of distance’ rather than the ‘challenge of the frontier’ of their American cousins” (p.1.). Hence, he explains, there was a focus on

“overcoming physical obstacles rather than socio/cultural ones”. There was an emphasis on the physical service of local government rather than the expression of local governance. This led to a long-standing preoccupation within local government on services provided to property rather than people – and the development of a narrow revenue source based on services to property.

Balmer further elaborates on this important point:

“... when the colonial governments did devolve the opportunity to be self-reliant, it was to the provision of roads, the means of crossing rivers, and the provision of wharves and jetties that local attention was first directed. And in most, if not all, of the colonies, the spur to active encouragement of local responsibility was fiscal; when the colonial government was experiencing hard times, communities were exhorted to provide for their own needs – and to finance them by their own efforts. The only revenue made available, even in colonial times, was a rate of properties. It is probable that this, even a century ago, encouraged decision makers to argue that if the revenue was derived from property, then it should be hypothecated to the provision of services to property, not people. (p.1 -2)

The early Municipalities Acts of the mid-1800s transported a British model of local government, but with reduced roles and responsibilities and a restricted revenue source. The allocated roles were based on the key issues of the time within the Colonies, namely: “roads, bridges, ferries, wharves, cemeteries, water supply, lighting, sewerage, public hospitals, asylums for destitute children, gardens and libraries” (Jones,1989,p. 53), and also some other ‘health’ services, such as drainage and control of building quality. There was a brief period where local governments were encouraged to take responsibility for schools and hospitals, but this quickly was deemed to be unworkable and this responsibility returned to the Colonies

(and in the case of schools, often to the churches). Local government revenue was almost entirely based on a single property tax to landholders (known as “rates”). This limited role/revenue model persisted well into the twentieth century.

Whilst being theoretically based on the British model, Australian local governments have never acquired the same range of roles and responsibilities as attributed to local government in the UK. In one way this is explained simply by the fact that only two tiers of government historically evolved in Britain, whilst Australia developed three – hence the allocation of revenue expenditure and revenue assignment between each tier would be proportionately less.

However, this alone is not the reason. There have always been significant and ongoing issues of capacity – the capacity of small local government bodies to deliver wider services and even more so, the capacity of small and often remote communities to fund such activities. As Jones points out, “Australian local government has always laboured under the disadvantage that most of the people live in very large cities” (p.55). Around the turn of the century, in early attempts at ‘rationalisation’, “...network services such as public transport, water, sewerage and drainage, and gas and electricity supply were all gradually removed from being local government responsibilities and transferred instead to special purpose authorities established by State Governments” (Balmer, 1989, p.2.). Also there were State Government programs across the country to forcibly amalgamate many smaller Councils. By turn of the century and Federation, the role of Australian local government was weak and caricaturised by the label “Local government - Roads, Rates and Rubbish”.

In 1901, the Colonies (by then constituted as States) federated into the Commonwealth of Australia - adopting a hybrid model, with an American-style Senate as the Upper House of Parliament and a British-style House of Representatives as the Lower House. The Commonwealth Constitution was

promulgated and this set out the respective roles and revenue assignments of the Commonwealth and State Governments. In simple terms, it was agreed that the Commonwealth would be given responsibility for a limited number of matters that affected the country as a whole (e.g. foreign affairs, defence, postage, communications, customs & excise) and the States would retain all their other functions. It should be noted however, that these divisions have never been really clear-cut and over time various adjustments, duplications and disputes have occurred between Commonwealth and State Governments.

Importantly, the Commonwealth Constitution made no mention of the role for local government (a fact that still causes resentment and rancour). This absence of constitutional validity continues to this day. Within this legislative framework local government in Australia continued (and continues) to be established by and directly subservient to the State and (more recently) Territory Governments and regulated by their legislation. In a few areas of activity local government must obey National legislation as well in areas such as environmental protection, childcare and industrial relations, to name but a few .

The end of the First World War coincided with a period of significant legislative reviews in all States and the passing of more comprehensive local government Acts. Whilst the State Governments continued to broaden their role there was little if any expansion of local government roles. In what can be seen as the first major attempt at local government consolidation and rationalization the unified City of Greater Brisbane was established in 1925. As explained by Halligan and Wettenhall (1989) the establishment of Brisbane City “...can generally be seen as being driven by the need for greater efficiency in government and “... contained within it, components often assumed to be of more recent origin – as, for example, the search for ways of overcoming the costs and inconvenience of administrative fragmentation in the rapidly enlarging urban areas” (p.79). Nevertheless, the

'Brisbane Model' did not become widespread, and up until quite recently, Brisbane stood unique as a local government entity with a scale of operations unlike any other in the country.

The period between the two World Wars saw two significant developments. Jones (1989) explains that "...State Governments accounted for 52% of total public spending, the Commonwealth share had expanded to 38% and that of local government had fallen to less than 10%" (p.57). However, at the same time there was an increase in the number of employees in local government. After the Second World War, Australian local government continued developing along the same themes – a large labour force, limited revenue base and a limited scope of activities. The growing development of the so-called "Welfare State" was predominantly taken up as a Federal/State responsibility. "The world Depression, the Second World War and the adoption of centralized economic management and tax collection locked local government into a declining role" (ibid, p.58). Local governments in Australia continued as largely rather simple administrative units until the 1960s. State Governments often "intervened" and resumed powers where they felt it was an easier approach to dealing with complex issues. Hence, many Australian local governments slowly but surely became institutions of both limited governance and limited government. There was clearly a need for reform.

### **2.1.2. Waves of Reform**

As a number of observers (e.g. Jones, 1989, 1993; Dollery and Marshall, 1997; Aulich, 1997; McNeill 1997) point out, the last decades of the twentieth century saw an expansion of the roles, functions and expectations of Australian local government. Ironically, this expansion of roles coincided with a relative decline in local government's financial base. This is an important contextual point for this

research – local Councils have been increasingly forced to try to do more with less, which anecdotally implies a need to be innovative in practice.

Halligan and Wettenhall (1989) explain;

The renaissance in local government can be dated from the 1960s, when a combination of enthusiasm for grass-roots participation and the discovery of the urban problem stimulated a wide interest in its potentiality. Fuelled in the 1970s during the Whitlam<sup>2</sup> years by Commonwealth Government efforts to have an urban impact and by the expansion of service areas already colonized by local government, the prospects for the third sphere of government looked promising. A substantial transformation was occurring at this time. (p.80)

During the 1970s, it became apparent to the Commonwealth Government that local government was a potentially effective agent for the delivery of a range of Federal services. The Federal Government 'reached around' the State Governments and began to fund local Councils directly to provide a range of community services, particularly in the area of social and 'welfare' services- such as childcare, employment training, services for youth, aged care services, and services for people with a disability. Whilst these areas remained mainly Federal and State responsibilities, local government was often contracted to deliver services in an agency role. Additionally, local government was encouraged to take on an important role in local economic development and increasing sporting and leisure activities. Following international trends, local government was also seen as having a vital role in environmental protection, management and planning. It was also seen that local government would have a key role in promoting and maintaining Australia's commitments to Multiculturalism.



There was also a broadening of local electoral participation and representation. The franchise of local government had originally been restricted to property owners (in keeping with its predominant focus on services to property) but voting eligibility was eventually extended to that of parliamentary franchise – i.e. all adults that have the right and obligation to vote. Local government had also become what Jones (1989) refers to as the “Democratic Classroom” (p.21) and was often seen as a training ground for aspiring politicians. The major political parties (either explicitly or implicitly) supported candidates in local government elections, and there was a huge increase in the number of ‘community independents’, ‘Green’, or ‘Non-aligned’ candidates seeking election at the local level.

Intergovernmental relations also continued to develop. In most cases the historical tensions between local and State Government persisted. However, this period also heralded a new Commonwealth/local government financial relationship. From the early enactment of the Local Government Grants Bill, 1974, through the Local government (Personal Income Tax Sharing) Act, 1976 and finally the development of the Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1986, the Commonwealth Government provided general purpose grants to local authorities. By the 1980s, local Councils (apart from small rural Councils) were no longer simply focused on providing services to property. They had become providers of a wider range of human services – in some cases as agents of the other spheres of Government, and in some cases due to the shortcomings or decline in services provided by the other spheres e.g. cutbacks in rural areas. The 2001 Commonwealth Grants Commission Enquiry (p.33) reviewed this history and offered three primary reasons for the increase in functions: enforced devolution of new functions; raised expectations by government or the community; and voluntary up-take of new services by Councils themselves.

---

<sup>2</sup> Gough Whitlam – Labor Prime Minister of Australia, 1972 -1975

There were ongoing efforts to 'rationalise' the number of small local government bodies through amalgamations. The reasons offered for this, were often adherence to the principles of the 'New Public Management' (see later section) and the persistent belief that there is an 'economy-of-scale' which deems smaller Councils are inefficient in terms of delivering services, and possibly ineffective as mechanisms of representation. Some of these mergers were (semi) voluntary, in a number of States (most notably Victoria and NSW) the amalgamation of smaller Councils was enforced by the State Governments. During the period of this research project, the three Councils examined in NSW still regarded the potential for forced amalgamation as a 'constant threat'.

Whilst this period provided some relatively small increases in local government revenue sources, there were often increases in the costs incurred by local government. Particularly for Councils in Australia, the issue of 'cost-shifting' by other spheres of government has become a critical factor in the increasing demands and expectations placed upon them. The 2001 Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Cost-shifting (2001) noted that whilst "...the assessment of the true extent of cost shifting from other spheres of government to local government is extremely complex...[the full extent of cost-shifting] could be between \$500 million and 1.1 billion annually" (p.51).

During this period it is now recognised that there has also been a critical deficiency in the funding and maintenance of local public infrastructure. As a vast and sparsely populated country, it was always recognised that Australia's public infrastructure would have a per capita cost that was amongst the highest in the world. However, by the early 2000s the poor state of local infrastructure was at an alarming level. The NSW Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government (LGI), 2006 noted "...a huge backlog in infrastructure renewals (over \$6 billion), which is expected to grow to almost \$21 billion within

15 years if the annual renewals gap (the difference between the rate at which Councils' physical assets are depreciating and the rate at which they are being replaced) stays at around \$500 million per annum". (p.7)

So, by the beginning of the new millennium, local government services were far more than just "Roads, Rates & Rubbish". Australian Councils were now involved in activities such as: local planning and building control, health control, waste services, water and sewerage, local roads, local infrastructure, parks, sporting and cultural venues, environmental control, airports, saleyards and abattoirs. State Governments still controlled the 'big-ticket' functions such as: police, emergency services, hospitals, schools, housing and public transport.

Dollery and colleagues offered their view of the state of Australian local government in 2006:

It is widely recognised that Australian local government has reached a pivotal threshold in its development. Legislative reforms [have]...served to empower local government with greater flexibility to change both the way in which it operates and the range of services it provides. Over roughly the same period, community expectations of local government seemed to have increased and higher tiers of government have simultaneously devolved various functions to local authorities. This has seen Councils provide a greater range of services, with a growing emphasis on human services.

(Dollery et al, p. 555)

However, this positive spin becomes more gloomy when viewed in the light of the financial situation. Australian local government had certainly become more sophisticated and complex in both the breadth and the standards of the services they provided. However, the legacy of early historical foundations – leaving local

government totally subservient to the States and providing such a limited income base - plus the realities of providing services and infrastructure in such a geographical environment, has left Australian local government with enduring pressures. In addition to its own unique developments, Australian local government also became swept up in the international reform paradigms of the 'New Public Management' and the movements to review and reform local governance.

## **2.2. Reforming Local Government and Local Governance – a Reaction or a Revolution?**

For the purposes of this research, local government reforms in Australia can usefully be viewed through two themes – the reform of local government and the reform of local governance. Using this paradigm we can understand the 'reform of local government' to encapsulate the reforms to the systems, legislative relationships, operating frameworks, structures, functions, regulations, and organisational practices of local government bodies: the 'mechanics' and 'efficiencies' of local government. There have also been shifts and reforms in the 'governance' roles and relationships of local government – those areas of activity that relate to the role of local authorities as: a democratic institution, a key institution for citizenship, an advocate for local wishes, an opportunity for participation, and an arena for local decision-making.

### **2.2.1. The Arrival of New Public Management**

In the years leading up to the 1990s, much of the literature dealing with local government in 'western' countries painted a bleak and undoubtedly negative picture of its capacities – both of its current inadequacies and its potential shortcomings to meet future needs. Dollery (2006, p. 559) calls this a "discourse of crisis" and identifies that the literature of the time is heavily biased towards the

descriptions of “government failure” and that a sense of pessimism permeated relationships between central governments and municipal authorities. He follows on from Pollitt and Bouckaert’s (2004) argument that this situation led to a series of strategies between central and local governments of “distancing and blaming”, and then suggests that this was logically followed by the development of strategies to “reform the failing state”.

When viewed as a response to purported ‘government failure’, it is reasonable to suggest that many of the programs and strategies aimed at reform of local government were largely viewed as an unwelcome impost by local Councils –and only undertaken when enforced by other tiers of government. Certainly there were few occasions where local government had undertaken such reform voluntarily and proactively. In the Australian context, this sense of ‘enforced’ reform was compounded by the continuing realities of the constitutional relationship with the States– a relationship that Dollery (2005. p.1) suggested, made local government “easy prey to manipulation”.

However, opinions and perspective differed - some senior managers and some professional groups in local government welcomed the reforms. Much of the enforced reform of government (at all levels) in the 1980s and 1990s, was underpinned by the philosophies of the so-called ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) which had become increasingly popular in some western liberal democracies. A practical working definition of NPM comes from Denhardt & Denhardt (2003) who offer: “that the New Public Management refers to a cluster of contemporary ideas and practices that seek, at their core, to use private sector and business approaches in the public sector” (p.12). Whilst there is certainly debate and conjecture about the precise definitions of NPM, many authors (e.g. Osborne and Mc Laughlin, 2002, Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003, Broadbent and Laughlin, 1998 etc) would agree that the early roots of NPM originated in the

challenges to the Welfare State posed by the UK Thatcher Government in the 1980s and 1990s, along with much of the work in the USA - themed "Reinventing Government" and following the principles espoused by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) in their important book of the same title. One of the most often cited original references on NPM is Hood and Jackson's (1991) Administrative Argument which purports that NPM is both an 'administrative argument' and an 'administrative philosophy' - it both offers an argument for how public sector organisations should be structured and operate, and also a philosophy on how they should 'think'.

Osborne and McLaughlin (2002) suggest that NPM is comprised of seven doctrines: "...a focus on hands-on and entrepreneurial management, as opposed to the traditional focus of the public administrator; explicit standards and measures of performance; an emphasis on output controls; the importance of disaggregation and de-centralisation of public services; the promotion of competition in the provision of public services; a stress on private sector styles of management and their superiority; and discipline and parsimony in resource allocation" (p.9). To this they add an eighth and a key doctrine - "the separation of the political decision-making from the direct management of public services" - i.e separation between the policy makers and managers (the 'steerers' and the 'rowers'). This separation has been less apparent at State and Federal levels - with retention of direct ministerial control over much activity, even where enterprises are supposedly corporatised

It is important to reiterate (and many authors have) that NPM was not simply forced on to government or local government - there were many from within the public sector who openly embraced the changes and the new philosophies. The proponents of NPM argued that it brought benefits of cost efficiency and service effectiveness to public sector organisations and hence helped expose and overcome fundamental weaknesses in their management as well as giving the community the

surety of improved accountability and control over public services. The NPM mantras were chanted repeatedly at public sector conferences and gatherings – NPM was ‘professional’ and not ‘bureaucratic’; it was ‘corporate’ (and hence inferred better pay); NPM was ‘bold’, ‘competitive’, ‘entrepreneurial’ and ‘innovative’; and, most importantly, NPM was just that...*New Public Management* and therefore unquestionably better than old public management. NPM inferred a fundamental premise that the Public Sector was a poor performer and Private Sector was good. NPM was (and is) inextricably tied to theories of economic rationalism, and neo-liberalist free-market economics and trade liberalization. Many authors (e.g. Pintard-Newry, 2006, Kelsey, 1997, Hood 1991) point out, NPM has been strongly supported by large institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and WTO.

Many of the elements of NPM were not taken up as enthusiastically in the rest of Europe as they were in the UK, nor in the USA. However its practices and principles found many willing converts and new devotees in Australia and New Zealand. In New Zealand’s case, NPM reforms were regarded as the ‘unavoidable’ solution to local Councils that were “...seen as ponderous, unresponsive and inefficient” (Anderson, 1993, p.65). A massive program of Council amalgamations took place and organisational requirements to transfer ‘commercial’ service activities to Local Authority Trading Enterprises (LATEs). Cardow’s work (2005, 2007) paints a detailed picture of the kind of zealous ‘NPM fundamentalism’ that gripped New Zealand in the 1980s and 1990s, with one resultant effect that the local government LATE ‘entrepreneurs’ he examined “...moved to distance themselves from the public sector” and even displayed “...a conscious desire to deny the public services aspect of the activities conducted” (2005, p.238). In Australia, the NPM bandwagon moved slightly more cautiously at first, but nevertheless there were pockets of strong support from within government in all three tiers. The Commonwealth applied the NPM reform regime to its own

activities and invited the States to follow its lead. In the case of the State of Victoria, due to its then dire financial situation, the State Government chose to pre-empt federal measures with a somewhat 'brutal' program of reform of State government organisations and the concurrent enforced (temporary) abolition of elected local Councils.<sup>3</sup> Immediately following this, the Victorian Government embarked on a round of forced local government amalgamations and the introduction of CCT - Compulsory Competitive Tendering.

### **2.2.2. The Mechanics and Effects of NPM**

In Australia there were some differences in institutional arrangements and varying degrees of legislative intervention, but there were also common elements of the NPM reforms. For Australian local government the changes did not happen sequentially - there were a series of overlapping reforms and interrelated shifts in both ways of working and underpinning philosophies that occurred in a relatively short space of time. Although they were sometimes not labelled as such at the time, collectively (and in hindsight) they could be seen as 'NPM in Australian local government'. In many of the States, the early 1990s saw the review and revision of their Local government Acts<sup>4</sup> - the legislative frameworks for local government operations. In NSW, the "new" revised 1993 NSW Local government Act in 1993 required local government to: de-regulate Executive positions<sup>5</sup>, undertake strategic planning, develop key performance indicators, conduct performance-based reviews, and, through 'performance-based contracts', attempted to hold executive managers accountable for delivering outcomes. These kinds of changes were mirrored in the revisions of local government enabling Acts all around the country.

---

<sup>3</sup> In 1988, using their State Constitutional powers, the Victorian Government removed all elected local Councils. They installed State-approved Administrators, forced amalgamations to create bigger local government bodies, and introduced a regime of Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) into local government

<sup>4</sup> For example : NSW, 1993; Victoria, 1990; Tasmania,1993; Queensland, 1993; Western Australia, 1995

<sup>5</sup> Previously, in NSW, it was required that a local Council have a Town Clerk, Chief Engineer, Chief Town Planner, and Chief Health and Building Surveyor . These positions also often required specialised and unique local government qualifications



In NSW at least, these steps could be viewed as the first attempts to 'corporatise' local government. The corporatisation of the practices of Australian local government had noticeable effects on the obvious indications of organisational cultures. This included such things as: changing position titles to reflect a more managerial approach (such as changing 'Town Clerk' to 'CEO' or 'General Manager', and 'Municipal Engineer' to 'Director-Public Works'); de-regulation of positions to encourage the entrance of private sector managers to take up Council management positions (in the managerialist tradition that good management skills were generic and hence easily transferable between private and public sectors); creation of organisational 'Business Units' and often changing the operational language of the agencies to reflect the new corporatism

As Van Gramberg and Teicher (2000) describe:

Local government managers were compelled to adopt a variety of private sector principles and practices; reorganise structures around programs and strategy; and adopt the financial and human resources approaches of the private sector. In particular, the move towards contract-based relations between local government and its various providers has been a defining feature of managerialism. (p.476-477)

Also in the 1990s, the principles and practices of NPM were picked up across the Australian Public Sector. There was strong encouragement of privatisation and 'contracting-out' of public sector goods and service provision - in the belief that it offered a more cost efficient delivery (the almost mythical 20% savings alluded to by Osborne and Gaebler). To the horror of traditionalists, one of the first most evident examples of this became the installation of private sector security guards (rather than uniformed soldiers) in the sentry boxes outside the gates of Australian

Defence establishments. The Prime Minister of the time, Paul Keating<sup>6</sup> spruiked that: “The engine that drives efficiency is free and open competition” and the Commonwealth Competition Reform Act (1995) ushered in National Competition Policy (NCP). The Federal Government created comprehensive suites of anti-monopoly and pro-competition legislation and policies, which promoted the abolition or re-structuring of all government monopolies, unless their continued existence was deemed to be ‘in the public interest’. There was also a requirement that larger government goods and service provision units were to be viewed as ‘Businesses’ and therefore be forced to undertake full cost accounting, inclusion of tax equivalents, and public disclosure of any government subsidy. Government entities (particularly enterprises operating in competitive markets) were expected to use private sector financial management practices in public sector agencies – including Activity Based Costing (ABC) and Accrual Accounting.

Many Government agencies undertook organisational re-structures to enforce a separation between the ‘Funders’ (those elements of the organisation responsible for setting policy direction, designing service delivery standards, and monitoring and evaluating the quality of service provided) and ‘Providers’ (those elements of the organisation that are involved in the provision of public goods, infrastructure and services). This in turn led to the development of ‘arms-length’ and corporatised service delivery units – often referred to as ‘Business Units’. They were often re-badged with new ‘corporate-sounding’ names and a complementary makeover of their marketing approach and staff image. Often these in-house units were forced to compete with private sector competitors (due to Commonwealth or State law or local Council decision) under a regime that claimed to ensure a ‘level playing field’.

---

<sup>6</sup> “*One Nation*”. Paul Keating was the Australian Prime Minister 1991-1996, and is widely regarded as the first promoter of Australian ‘Third Way’ reforms of Government – encouraging trade liberalisation, introducing far more competition, and encouraging private sector principles and practices in the public sector

The NPM snowball soon gathered weight and momentum in Australian local government circles. Some saw it as logically building on the earlier moves to corporatisation. However in some circles, there was an ongoing scepticism and there were those in Australian local government who held a pragmatic distrust of this new way of thinking and in blunt antipodean terms referred to it as “managerialist bullshit”. Due to timing and circumstance it became most commonly referred to in Australian local government as ‘competition reform’ - which sometimes also included Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT).

The requirements of the National Competition Policy were extended to local government through the so-called ‘Clause 7 statements’. The Federal Government had offered the States financial assistance (‘Competition Payments’) to undertake the reforms and re-structures. Most other States shared this financial assistance to local government to undertake the necessary reforms and adjustment, but in NSW, no such assistance was forthcoming. Following the examples of the UK and New Zealand, in some States (particularly Victoria) there were also wide-scale amalgamations of smaller local Councils in order to provide the claimed better ‘economies of scale’ for provision of public goods and services - this also allowed the letting of larger contracts for goods and service provision that were more attractive to the private sector (and hence encouraged greater competition).

The fundamental shifts in practices and ideologies during this period are an important backdrop for this research. They clearly represent significant reform of local government. The corporatisation of Australian local government brought with it many expectations of what were preferred outcomes, what were optimal organisational structures and practices, and indeed what were the preferred symbols of ‘new local government’. The rally cry of NPM was efficiency, and it is fair to say that its implementation instilled in Australian Councils a greater (and sometimes acute) awareness of the need for strategic planning, improved project

management, real understanding of costs, increased monitoring and accountability, and an 'outcomes-based' approach.

Advocates of NPM held the belief that "marketisation [would]...promote the efficient and effective provision of public services, while promoting responsiveness to individual choice in service provision" (Osborne and McLaughlin, p.9). NPM espoused a dominant rhetoric of self-interested 'customers' and 'clients' who would benefit from a greater range of more efficiently produced public goods and services. This is in line with the Denhardt's assertion that government should both "...serve and empower its citizens" (2003, 23) - serve them with efficient and appropriate goods and services, and empower them to participate in 'steering' their government organisations. It was also suggested that this competitive environment would promote more creativity and innovation.

### **2.2.3. New Public Governance - a Reaction to NPM or a Complimentary Groundswell?**

There is little doubt that the pursuit of 'Managerialism' and competition reform in Australian local government created impacts that were seen by many to be negative. There are some who believe that the later shift in balance away from NPM ideals, and the growing emphasis on reform of 'local governance' was a reaction to the failure of NPM and proof of its inappropriateness as a public sector ideology.

Vehement critics of NPM such as Eva Cox (1995) not only doubted its effectiveness in reforming government but also suggested that these 'economically-driven' models were contributing to a decline of social capital in our societies.

I have serious concerns about the current dominant fashion of macho, competition-driven progress and the intensity with which these economic frameworks are promoted. The dominant ideas of

competition and deregulation of markets and the attacks on the redistributive roles of governments are not only dysfunctional but positively dangerous. They are part of an oversimplified dogma which can destroy a truly civil society in pursuit of the cashed-up individual. (p.5)

In Australian local Councils, typical complaints about NPM were often articulated as: “loss of local public sector jobs to private sector”, “over-emphasis on economic rationalism and ignoring local needs”, and “reducing everything to an issue of cost”. In this vein there were many who would query the simple ‘government-as-funder/ market-as-provider/ citizen-as-customer’ interrelationship. In their purest forms the underpinning theories of NPM advocate a strong, central executive that sets strategic decisions and then contracts the provision of goods and services from a wide market of alternative providers. In this view, the (local) government authority executive are ‘steering not rowing’, but there was also a growing caution described by Denhardt (2003): “In our rush to steer, perhaps we are forgetting who owns the boat” (p.23). They put forward the model where, “...citizens would do what they are supposed to do in a democracy, run the government” (ibid, p 31). This is picked up by Sandel (1996) who states that “ the prevailing model of the relationship between the state and the citizens is in fact based on the idea that government exists to ensure that citizens can make choices consistent with their self interest by guaranteeing certain procedures (such as voting) and individual rights” (p.5-6).

Whether as a reaction to the early excesses of managerialism, or as a concurrent and powerful paradigm, an emerging body of authors (e.g. Barber 1984,1998, Mansbridge, 1990, Sandel 1996) were challenging the dominance of economic rationalism in government (and local government) and strongly urging a renewed interest and examination of the concepts of citizenship and indeed of democracy itself. By the late 1990s there was an emerging focus on these overlapping themes

of community governance ,public governance, social capital and civil society (e.g. Putnam 1995, Cox 1999, Latham, 1997), and the New Public Service (e.g. Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003).

Denhardt and Denhardt (ibid) offer Sandel's alternative view of democratic citizenship:

“..in which individuals are much more actively engaged in governance... [and] look beyond their self-interests to the larger public interest, adopting a broader and more long-term perspective that requires a knowledge of public affairs and also a sense of belonging, a concern for the whole, and a moral bond with the community whose fate is at stake” (p.30).

Importantly, they are quick to add, “...this alternative view of citizenship does not suggest the elimination of self-interest as an individual or social motive or its naïve replacement of the public spirit.” (p.31).

In Australia, there was a gradual shift in discourse as opposed to an abandonment of NPM, as noted by Dollery who explains:

However, over time discourse on local government policy shifted away from this emphasis on limiting the degree of local government failure and enhancing efficient service delivery towards a focus on governance... Scholars highlighted the importance of improved governance capacity in local government, especially through citizen participation. Democracy, rather than economic efficiency now became the key to successful local governance, with political accountability, participation and representation crucial links in the process. Policy should thus foster participative structures of local governance, seek to combine representative democracy and participatory democracy, and develop new mechanisms for participation.(p 559)

To argue whether or not it is true that 'New Public Governance' has evolved simply due to the failures of NPM is not useful for this research. Local government continues to operate in a dynamic philosophical and political environment and the dominant paradigms shift with time. The two paradigms may not be completely opposed and there are those who suggest that the reform of 'government' and 'governance', are in fact, complementary. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004) suggest that 'modernising' a local government system by "...bringing in faster more flexible ways of budgeting, managing, accounting and delivering services to their uses, typically deploying techniques imported from the private sector" often occurs in combination with "...bottom-up measures that attempt to engage the recipients of services into a [more] participatory role" (p187).

Hambleton (2004) also urges his 'New City Management' that "...is more than a set of managerial tools..[and] pays more attention to the motivation of public servants and the importance of refreshing citizen involvement" ( p.3). Schachter (1997), attempts to combine the two concurrent pincers of reform, by advocating the concept of 'Efficient Citizenship' - with responsibilities for both the local government official as well as the self-interested and 'intelligent citizen' in re-inventing and reforming local government , but asks "... whether it is realistic to expect modern citizens to adopt an owner's orientation" (p.16). These concerns regarding the challenges involved in developing a genuine relationship between efficient and effective local government and the engaged and intelligent 'citizen/ owner' underpin much of the recent work by British author Gerry Stoker (2007) who notes a recent comment from former British Prime Minister Tony Blair: "It may be asking too much to get people shouting from the rooftops. But it is not too much to expect most people to care enough to vote or to know who to praise or blame for what is going on in their locality "(p.14). Stoker responds with a simple but succinct challenge: "Above all, we need more of the 'wow' factor in people's response to local government" (p.9)

Hence, by the early 2000s local government in Australia was surrounded by these multiple pressures for reform, combined with a slowly emerging sense of self-direction and an increasing need for engagement with its citizens. The typical Australian local Council was now an arena of convergence –where a vast array of issues converged on Councils as part of the day-to-day milieu of local government and local governance. Australian local Councils entered the new millennium with an uncomfortable mandate – never before had local government been expected to do so much for so many... with so little<sup>7</sup>. They were expected to be highly efficient and competitive - using the very best of practices from the private sector – and also engage their citizens in the task of ‘steering’ the organisation. For Australian local government, these concurrent pressures needed to be addressed in a public arena that was more transparent and participatory than ever before - and there was an increased expectation that local government would be able to develop a creative and innovative response.

### **2.3. The Calls for Creativity and Innovation in Local Government**

The pressures for creativity and reform in local Councils have come from a variety of directions – both internal and external. In the UK, many of the urgings for creativity and innovation in local government were as much a British response to globalisation and economic downturns as they were about local government reform. As Bartlett and Dibben elaborate, “Under conditions of increased fiscal pressure, it is necessary not only to maximise the efficiency in the provision of services, but also to innovate and discover new ways of doing things. In the UK local government context, service innovation and improvement has become strongly linked to Best Value legislation” (2002, p 108). Newman, Raine and Skelcher (2001) point out that

---

<sup>7</sup> Apologies to fans of Winston Churchill



the Labor modernisation agenda, “... incorporates a range of centrally-driven changes [e.g. Best Value]...together with a strong political drive to stimulate innovation in local government”. (p.61).

In the UK, Sir Michael Birchard’s hope for a “vibrant creative public sector” was more than just a personal desire – as a key bureaucrat in the ‘New Labor’ Government he nominated public sector creativity as a key pillar of the reform policies of the time:

I hope... that, in this new millennium, the stars of the public sector will be those in the delivery front line and that we will have world-class schools, brilliant local authorities and outstanding government departments to celebrate. I hope too, that public sector leaders and leading politicians will feel able to say more confidently and more convincingly that a vibrant creative public sector really does play a major part in our national success. (Birchard, 2000, p.41).

This commitment to public sector creativity and innovation in the UK was formalised by the creation of the Prime Minister’s Performance and Innovation Unit (later re-named the Strategy Unit). The Director of this unit, Geoff Mulgan, clearly stated the Government’s views: “Effective government and public services depend on successful innovation – to develop better ways of meeting needs, solving problems, and using resources and technologies... Innovation is sometimes seen as an optional luxury or an added burden...it should be seen as a core activity”. (2003,p.5)

Creativity in local government (and the cities/towns that they manage) has also come to be viewed as both a stimulus to local ‘creative industries’ and also as a saleable product and service in itself. More so than at any other time in history cities around the world are competing with each other for a share of markets and

indeed the creation of new markets. Authors such as Hall (1995, 1997, 1998) and Landry (1995,1998,2000) have been strongly advocating that it is creativity that will provide the concurrent benefits of competitive advantage in the global marketplace and the ability to solve increasingly complex problems of urban management. Their work emanated from the 'creative and cultural industry renaissance' of depressed cities in Europe, they advocated the importance of 'Creative Cities'.

Cities have one crucial resource - their people. Human cleverness, desires, motivations, imagination and creativity are replacing location, natural resources and market access as urban resources. The creativity of those who live in and run cities will determine future success. (Landry, 2000, p. xiii)

Across the Atlantic in 2002 this theme was elaborated by Carnegie-Mellon economist Richard Florida, in his work on the so-called "Rise of The Creative Class". He contends his research shows a demonstrable link between the economic growth of a city or region, and the area's ability to attract and maintain a so-called 'creative class'. "Creativity - the ability to come up with and implement a new idea - has always been a prime source of economic growth and advantage" (Florida, 2002, p.27) . Florida's work, although disputed by some as simplistic, resounded throughout the world, and focused increased attention on the need to develop 'creative' cities and communities', that would attract and welcome "newcomers with different ideas" (ibid, p.20). Florida contends that this is critical for economic sustainability, if not growth. He suggest you can measure creative towns or cities using his so-called 'creativity indices' - including the 'coolness index', the 'bohemian index' and the 'gay index' - to measure a community's level of diversity, on the premise that these indices also indicate a positive ability to generate local wealth from creativity and innovation. Interestingly for this research project, Florida's work gained an enthusiastic audience in Australian local government as (with its ongoing issues of sparse population) cities, towns and

regions sought new and different ways to maintain local economies in the face of shifting global markets. His 'creativity indices' have been used as part of the Australian Local Government Association's 'State of the Regions' reports since 2002. They also form a core of the 'Creativity Targets' in the South Australian Government's Strategic Plan (2006, p.1-6). In local government, these propositions that 'local creativity equals local wealth' began to get an increasingly enthusiastic audience.

There has also been an evolving (post-NPM) amalgam of models for local government/governance - such as 'New Public Service' (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003, Mulgan 2006, O'Flynn 2007, Stoker 2006) 'Public Value' (Moore, 1994), 'New City Management' (Hambleton, 2004), and 'New Political Governance' (Aucoin 2008) - all of which continue NPM's utilisation of beneficial private sector practices but with a strong focus on ethics and citizen participation. Hambleton (2004, p.14) proposes that the 'public service ethos' (with its concern for: sound procedures, good control mechanisms, conforming behaviour, consistency, and working for the public) should be complemented with a 'public innovation ethos' (with its concern for: getting results, steering, enhancing performance, responding to diversity, and working with the public).

In the Australian context, Martin's work (2000,2001, 2002) articulates a fundamental question for this research:

What makes for an innovative local government organisation culture? One that deals with uncertainty, brings new ideas into fruition, values creative thinking and learning, actively encourages its members to learn about new ways of working, uses a developed wealth of employee experience and competence, and brings forth new and imaginative ways of working from across the organisation

to eagerly embrace change. All of which goes to making the community a better place to live.

(Martin,2001, p.2.)

Martin suggests that there are a number of interrelated factors at play in an ‘innovative local government organisation’: the role of individuals, the external pressures for change, the extent of experimentation, search for new ideas, extensive internal and external networks, the absorptive capacity and desire to learn, their capacity to build employee skills, the flexibility of the organisation and their commitment to community interests (2002, p.5).

In all of these works there is also an underlying assertion that local government is under pressure to be more innovative in order to: generate new and better ways of doing things (for both efficiency and effectiveness), find new and better ways of thinking about things and problem-solving, and find new and better ways of interacting with their citizens. So, in the lingua franca of Australian local government - in the public forums, conferences, seminars and awards - ‘creativity and innovation’ began to match ‘total quality’ and ‘excellence’ as amongst the most desired and advocated objectives for Councils. This research project explores creativity and innovation in public sector organisations - and specifically, Australian local Councils and the people who work in them. The clarion call for innovative and creative local government has been heard across the globe - but what do these pressures for ‘innovation’ and ‘creativity’ mean to the people who work in local government?

### **2.3.1. The Changing Role for Local Government Professionals**

Local government is a ‘people-centred’ industry - its outputs are largely the individual and cumulative effects of people providing services to other people. There may be some aspects of local government that could be improved by enhanced mechanisation, more effective computerization, or improved

organisational efficiency – but largely, any significant improvements in a Council’s achievements will be the result of the collective efforts of the individuals who work with the Council. As Martin (2002) describes, the effective capacity of a local government organisation is based undoubtedly on the elements of the external environment in which it finds itself, but importantly (perhaps echoing Florida) it is the capacity of the creative and innovative individuals within those organisations that really make the difference in: how they respond to that environment, how they seek ideas and learn, and how they implement them and demonstrate commitment to their community. Martin suggests “...it is the way in which particular individuals work together across organisations, sharing their creativity and enthusiasm from new ways of working that leads to organisational innovation”. (p.5)

Reporting on their Government-sponsored study into the need for creativity in local government planning, Higgins and Morgan (2000) highlighted the critical importance of the “creative practitioner” in local government:

“...creativity is important in terms of both process and product in a wide variety of contexts. On the one hand, creative practitioners are more likely to produce a valued end product...on the other hand, creative processes can, for instance, reinterpret data in a novel way, negotiate a solution between conflicting interests, devise policies responding to new dilemmas, develop new interpretations of the law or streamline procedures in innovative ways”. (p.119)

However, in recent years there has been a growing debate around public sector ‘entrepreneurship’ and the need for those working within the public sector to behave as entrepreneurs. This debate is important for this research as it raises the correlation between innovation and risk. In New Zealand - referred to by O’Flynn (2007) as an “...exemplar of NPM” - authors such as Best (2001) viewed the

environment of NPM local government and heralded the increased demands for the skills of so-called public sector “manager/entrepreneurs”. Others such as Cardow (2005) were highly critical and suggested that such public-sector entrepreneurs craved acceptance amongst their ‘corporate’ peers to the extent that they adopted behaviours and actively sought to distance themselves from the very citizens that they are meant to serve. In Canada, Borins (2000) discussed these opposing views regarding public sector entrepreneurship and noted that “...critics see entrepreneurs as people prone to rule breaking, self promotion and unwarranted risk taking [but] ...proponents view them as exercising leadership and taking astute initiatives” (p.498).

Within the NPM ideology there was a promotion of ‘generic management skills’ and an argument that the ‘business’ capabilities used by successful individuals in the private sector should also be the most appropriate for those in the newly ‘reformed’ public sector. However, authors such as Broussine (2003) describe the necessary skills for the new public manager, which appear to be far less concerned with efficient business practices and more closely aligned with those from the literature regarding creativity (e.g Amabile1998), Emotional Intelligence (Goleman 1998) and reflective learning (Schon, 1983) - tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, recognition of omniscience, maintenance of personal perspective and self-knowledge and critical reflection. Stoker’s (2006) work on Public Value, reminds us of the key factor of the political environment and he proposes that local government professionals will need to be able to “...manage through networks, to be open to learning in different ways, and to draw in resources from a range of sources”(p 41). In combination, these authors seem to call for a creative local government practitioner who: borrows the ‘best’ from private practice, can negotiate the political environment, builds networks and works with them to create innovation, is focussed on results whilst

being mindful of process, has well-developed reflective learning skills and emotional intelligence, and always remains an ethical servant of the citizens and the community.

## **2.4. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into Next Chapter.**

This chapter illustrated the historical evolution of local government in Australia (the context for this research). It revealed how the geographic realities and the legacy of history have left Australian local Councils in a somewhat unique position amongst their international counterparts. Australian local government sits within a three-tiered system, with relatively narrow mandated functions and a narrow income base. Yet, over the years it has evolved into a complex, multi-functional tier of government. The international waves of public sector reform swept over Australia and the rhetoric, philosophies and practices of New Public Management, New Public Service, and Public Value created new demands on local government. Combined with the unending realities of serving communities in Australia, these reform demands have created the demand for creative and innovative Councils and hence a new set of capabilities for the people who work in them.

The next chapter elaborates some of the critical issue that we need to explore, if we are to answer the questions: “what is happening in creative and innovative Australian Councils?”, and “how do the people working in those Councils understand and describe creativity and innovation?”, and “what sort of capabilities do the people who work in these Councils use to be creative and innovative?”

## Chapter 3.

# 3. Mapping the Journey- Drawing the Conceptual Framework for the Research

### Chapter Overview

In this chapter I outline the key concepts that inform the research, and provide the conceptual framework for this thesis. I examine the literature on creativity and innovation in order to develop working definitions of these terms, which I could then take into the field. In doing so, I recognise some of the dilemmas and controversies implicit in researching these topics. I also examine the literature on creativity and innovation in organisations, and, in particular, the relatively limited work on creativity and innovation in the public sector and local government. Following this, I describe the justification for examining creativity as a set of professional capabilities that are used in the workplace – in doing so I introduce Scott's (2001) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and its relevance as an important tool in this research. Finally, I show how the literature review leads to the development of the key questions for my research

### 3.1. Introduction

This thesis examines a number of concurrent and interrelated themes and hence crosses over several bodies of work. Firstly, it is an investigation of the use of 'creativity and innovation' in the workplace as an organisational response to environmental pressures and what professional capabilities people are using to sustain that response. It was necessary to develop a practical understanding of these concepts and also develop a viable set of working constructs and definitions



- “what is generally understood about the terms creativity and innovation?” This research did not seek to find a definitive answer nor enter into debate regarding boundaries between innovation and creativity. Rather, the literature search guided the development of working definitions that assisted the early dialogues. Importantly, this thesis attempts to narrow the scope of enquiry and perhaps more accurately ask people, “how are creativity and innovation understood in your workplace and in your understanding”? These questions became the foundation for conversations, discussions and stories, as the research subjects elaborated on their own understanding of the concepts.

Secondly, the thesis is focused on a very particular workplace – local government in Australia in the early 2000s. The primary aim of the research was to explore in detail how creativity and innovation manifests and is understood in such a local government context. I examined the organisational actions and culture that provide the support and encouragement of creativity and innovation and also explore the catalysts and triggers for such a workplace response. Within this there is a more detailed line of enquiry dealing with ‘useful’ creativity and innovation – i.e. creativity and innovation that results in outcomes that are perceived as valuable by local Councils and also the communities they serve. In pursuing this line of enquiry I was led, inevitably to explore the critical issue of risk, and the determination of ‘appropriate risk’.

Finally, the thesis examines the professional skills and capabilities of the local government staff that are being used to generate such creativity and innovation. In this thesis, creativity and innovation are viewed as both organisational and individual pursuits. Local government produces the majority of its outcomes as the result of the individual and collective efforts of its personnel, and therefore it was important to gain some detailed information about what its people were doing. Whilst examining the concepts of ‘creativity and innovation’, I chose to work with

people to explore the professional capabilities they were using rather than what might be described as their 'innate attributes', their 'creative personalities', or their 'special talents and gifts'. This was a deliberate choice (discussed later) as I was hoping to understand which professional capabilities are used to support creativity and innovation in the workplace, and also if these capabilities were 'learnable' and could potentially be enhanced through training, education and/or experiential learning.

## **3.2. Understanding Creativity and Innovation**

### **3.2.1. Difficulties of Definition - What is Creativity and what is Innovation?**

I had set out with what I thought was a straightforward aim - to examine 'creative' and 'innovative' professionals and how they contribute towards the objectives of their so-called 'innovative' councils. However, it quickly became apparent that this presented definitional difficulties as there is considerable debate in the literature about what constitutes 'creativity', what is actually regarded as 'innovation', and also what is the relationship between the two concepts. Even the first tentative discussions with colleagues revealed a vast and disparate array of personal definitions. As Clegg (1999) points out, "Creativity and innovation are classic examples of concepts that everyone has a feel for but few can actually describe" (p.1).

De Sousa (1999) elaborates: "Creativity seems one of those concepts that is easily understood but difficult to explain...this is due to the difference between the terms concept and construct - the former carries meaning in everyday speech and, while imprecise, is widely shared; as to the latter, the construct validity issues surrounding the term can be frustrating in the extreme for researchers" (p.9).

Whilst I intended to allow participants a degree of self-expression as to the useful meaning and understanding of these terms, I felt it was necessary to develop some kind of 'working definitions' to initiate discussion. This was not without difficulty.

There is a significant body of work on 'creativity' and an equally substantial body of work on 'innovation'. The terms are often used in the literature both independently and interchangeably. Some authors attempt to make a distinction between the two - but often add to confusion. Within their report on the "Creativity in Town Planning" project in the UK, Higgins & Morgan, (2000) recognise the inherent difficulties in trusting independent constructs of 'creativity' and 'innovation':

...there is no clear and consistent distinction made between the terms creativity and innovation in the literature... and ... where the term innovative is used, it is sometimes interchangeably with creative...creativity is, more broadly speaking, discovery or recombination of ideas, and innovation is more usually used to describe and end product which is new. Garavan and Deegan (1995) refer to creativity as the skill required in the development of an innovation...creativity is not an end in itself, but a capability which can lead to effective solutions". (p2.)

In early conversations with colleagues about this research, it became clear that one of the difficulties in distinguishing between creativity and innovation is a persistent lingering emphasis on the issue of creation and 'originality' and a persistent norm that suggests that creativity is often imbued with 'God-like' connotations. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) states bluntly that, "for most of human history, creativity was held to be a prerogative of supreme beings" (p.5.). Whilst certainly not wishing to enter into any debate around creation or evolution, I was mindful that there are a number of deep-rooted cultural norms that surround the understanding and perception of creativity. The emphasis on originality implies

that before the act of creation there was nothing – that the act of creativity fills a complete void and is therefore the ‘beginning’. However, these notions were not useful for the purposes of my research – we do not live in an empty world of nothing, and certainly local Council personnel do not work in a world of nothing. I chose to view the processes of creativity as perhaps not so much filling in an empty void, rather, as re-shaping the world we live in. The research was not simply looking about ‘idea generation’, it was about putting an idea into use – or as Parnes (2000) says so succinctly “Creativity does not end with an idea it starts with it” (p.229.). If we suggest that creativity may be seen as a necessary contributor to innovation, then innovation is about putting creative ideas into practice. This in turn suggests that creativity and innovation may be most usefully viewed as part of a continuum, rather than as independent constructs.

De Sousa (1999) suggests that communication plays a critical part of the creative continuum – and in fact forms the link between creativity and innovation. He states: “In fact once we speak of an idea, practice or object, whether it is in the arts, science, technology or other domains... as being perceived as new by someone else then we are probably talking about innovation, because communication is added” (p.26). He illustrates his point by citing Kaufmann’s (1993) distinction that “...creative theory includes the materialisation of the idea (the invention) and its communication and application (innovation)” (p.25). We also need to recognise that throughout this implementation there is a process of production, i.e. a perceivable and recognisable output.

Landry (2000), also offers some useful comment on this topic.

Creativity and innovation seamlessly interweave, the first generating ideas, which, if many may prove impractical, at least provide a basis with which to work. Creativity is the pre-condition from which innovations develop. An innovation is the

realisation of a new idea in practice, usually developed through creative thinking. An innovation exists when it passes a reality test; the creative idea on its own is not enough. (p15)

I heeded Csikszentmihalyi's urging that we should examine the environment (or *domain*) in which creativity occurs - an environment that is full of previous knowledge, experiences and "symbolic rules". This thesis examines how creativity is recognised in an institutional and public agency environment. In their paper on innovation and local economic development in Australian local government, Martin, Christie and Rowe (2002), also highlight the organisational context that is pertinent to this study. They cite Ramus and Steger (2000) and suggest that, "Innovation refers to the implementation of creative ideas within an organisation" (p.4).

In reporting the results of their study on "Innovation and Best Practice in Local government" (2001), Newman, Raine & Skelcher described:

For the purposes of our research, innovation was defined as discontinuous or step change as something that was completely new to a particular local authority (though which may have previously applied elsewhere) and a change which had already been implemented, rather than just an idea or an aspiration or planned initiative.... The definition also emphasised implementation, rather than simply just focusing on the ways in which new ideas or practices were generated. We adopted a process model of innovation, which identified how new ideas were adopted, sustained over time, evaluated and implemented (p. 61)

So, whilst some works espouse sound models that link creativity and innovation, it must be noted that there are other authors who declare that exploring the literature

for clear and precise constructs is not useful for empirical work in the real world. But Rickards (1996) notes that attempting to separate the so-called 'creative stage' and the 'implementation stage' has detrimental real-world consequences. In effect it allocates a higher status to some individuals as 'thinkers and creators' whilst others are simply seen as some sort of 'support staff' in the process. He concludes that: "To persist in such a demarcation of creating and implementing is to deny the possibility of organisation-wide innovation cultures of empowered individuals" (p.14). For the purposes of this thesis, whilst I propose that innovation may be viewed as the product of creativity, I recognise that the two terms (and processes) are interdependent rather than exclusive. This research does not primarily seek to develop more concise definitions, but rather to engage in a dialogue that allows people to discuss in their own terms how they view creativity and innovation in the workplace.

This thesis therefore proceeds initially on the basis of a number of fundamental propositions:

- that the constructs of creativity and innovation lie somewhere on an understood continuum between idea-generation and idea-implementation, and are spoken of in descriptions that often interchange the two terms
- within a organisational context of "symbolic rules, an idea may be 'novel', 'new' or 'original' or the idea may be perceived as such by those who view it or use for the first time,
- that within such an organisational context, effective communication of the creative idea(s) may be a vital link to the development, implementation and sustainability of innovation.

### **3.2.2. 'Usefulness', Risk and the Attribution of 'Creativity' and 'Innovation'**

This research focuses on creativity and innovation in a public sector environment. This thesis asserts there are fundamental differences between public and private sectors and therefore that creativity and innovation need to be explored in ways that differ from those in the private sector literature. Local government (as an arm of the public sector) is publicly-funded, is charged with responsibilities of public service and the 'public interest', and is intended to relate to its community as citizens and not merely 'customers'. This in no way precludes the notion that local government could usefully adopt some private sector practices, but only in such a manner that they do not conflict with its core roles and responsibilities.

There are questions of what would constitute 'useful' and 'appropriate' innovation that is valuable and beneficial for the community. The literature on 'artistic' or literary creativity focuses on novelty and even sometimes that which is 'shocking' or 'confronting'. Much of the private sector literature on innovation often emphasises 'staying ahead of the competition' 'taking risks' and 'building new markets' with a fundamental bottom line of 'making a profit' – not necessarily primary objectives for a local Council. A number of authors (e.g. Cardow, 2005, Cox, 1995) are highly sceptical of the adoption of private sector practices. Their concerns are at the heart of the "Public Value/Private Value' debate and hence how we might value creativity and innovation.

One of the first areas for examination in this debate is the differences in 'provider status and motivation' (Pollock, Shaoul, Rowland and Player, 2001). Pollock et al point out that:

Provider status and motivation is important. The public and private sectors are motivated and oriented towards two different sets of goals. Put simply; the private sector has moral obligations to investors that take priority over

social obligation to customers [and] the public sector is motivated towards social responsibility and environmental awareness (p.15).

It would appear at first glance that 'private value' (producing efficiencies and maximising profits) is significantly different from 'public value' (providing good value for the community, responding to public values and contributing to the building and maintenance of public value). However, it is not clear-cut, and the ongoing public value / private value debate has become complex. Those who advocate managerialism, espouse that government should adopt private sector practices in order to produce similar benefits (value). However, it is important to question whether such practices in government will produce the kind of 'public value' that is in their mandate.

The author credited with the foundation of the concept of 'public value' is Mark Moore (1995, 2000, 2008). Moore argued that "...just as the goal of private managers was to create private (economic) value the goal of government agencies was to create public (social) value" (p.2). He proposed his 'strategic triangle' that answered three key questions in relation to attributing 'public value':

What was the important 'public value' the organization sought to produce; what sources of 'legitimacy and support' would be relied upon to authorize the organization to take action and provide the resources necessary to sustain the effort to create that value; what operational capabilities (including new investments and innovations would the organization rely on to deliver the desired results (p.2).

In the private sector, 'private value' is created by efficient and effective management of inputs and outputs, and is recognised and attributed by investors and consumers making their individual choice to invest or buy. Moore contends that public managers secure their funds- the financial capital and operating revenue (the legitimacy, support and resources) "...not by selling products and



services to individual customers, but by selling the story of public value creation to elected people in legislatures and in executive branch positions". (p.2).

NPM ideologies suggest that if we regard our citizens as 'customers' then they will choose and purchase 'private value' goods and services, just as in the marketplace. However, authors such as Bennington (2007) suggest that the attribution of 'public value' is more complicated as it involves both the individual perspective: "what the public values", and also the collective: "what adds value to the public sphere" (p.7).

Davis and West (2008) highlight this plurality and note two perspectives of public value. They suggest public value can be viewed from a *generative* and an *institutional* perspective.

We first see public value as being generated directly from the deliberative processes in which principled public servants (elected and unelected) seek mandates for action. This strand is hence termed the *generative* perspective. The second, heroic strand of work seeks to map constellations of values the grouping of core and derivative values against the various institutions of government, their conduct and their mode of engagement with each other and their publics. This strand is termed the *institutional* perspective. (p.5)

The debate as to what constitutes public value, what adds 'public value' in the public sphere (and how to measure it) is lively and ongoing. For this research it highlights a contextual environment that may attribute 'public value' to innovation and creativity. Those working in the local Councils in this research need to use innovation and creativity need to produce 'public value' (through their improved efficiency and effectiveness) but also outcomes that are valued and deemed 'publicly valuable' (through alignment with their community and understood public values) - how they come to understand what kind of creativity and

innovation is appropriate in their organization and in the communities they serve is a core question for this research.

Humanists such as Rogers (1989), have explored the interrelationship between the creative individual and their environment – “... the emergence in action of a novel relational product, growing out of the uniqueness of the individual on the one hand, and the materials, events, and circumstances of his life in on the other”. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) asserts that creativity does not happen simply inside people’s heads and reminds us that we must examine also the “interaction between a person’s thoughts and a sociocultural context” (p23). It is important that this research remained focused on its designated sociocultural context – in this case local government. Within this context, we must view creativity and innovation alongside the issues of ‘usefulness’ and ‘risk’, as local government is primarily a public service organisation that is publicly-funded, and it is therefore important to determine whether what is identified as creative and innovative from within the Council is also believed to be valuable and useful by the communities that are paying for them. This study does not seek to examine the kind of ‘revolutionary’, ‘startling’ or ‘shocking’ creativity that may be found in the arts or other cultural spheres – the kind of creativity that perhaps challenges and confronts social norms and objectives, or what is lamented by Sharkey (2005, p.viii.) as sometimes perceived as, “...that fluffy stuff”. This thesis explores the generation and implementation of new ideas, or changes, that are both attributed as being creative and perceived as being contiguous with both organisational and community aims. Hence this thesis explores creativity and innovation in the context where they are perceived to produce results that contribute in some way to an improved quality of life for the local community.

Borins (2000) is clear about this issue in reporting his study into public sector 'innovators' identified through awards from the Kennedy School of Government.

He says:

Public management awards do not reward new but unproven ideas; they choose the best applications on the basis of the results (such as improvements in the well-being of program clients, service improvements or reduced cost) as well as replication and originality. Ideally the winning applications are relatively recent inventions that have been in operation long enough to show results and be replicated. (p. 2)

This research is conducted recognising that local government is a 'domain' is full of both symbolic and legislative rules and procedures. At the core of any public sector organisation is a raft of legislation that is typically explicit about what is not acceptable or allowed, and usually at least implicit about what is expected, aimed for, hoped for, or seen as acceptable. Some of what would be considered acceptable in local government is simply 'legal' and what is unacceptable is 'illegal'. Many in the community may view local Councils as largely inflexible bureaucracies, with a preponderance of rules, regulations, procedures, manuals and systems. Whilst the stereotype is constantly being challenged by the pressure for change and it would appear that the community welcomes government organisations that are 'flexible', 'innovative', 'creative' and looking for 'new ways to do things', concurrently the media often criticises the failures of government authorities that pursue initiatives that are 'too risky' and hence not in the public interest.

This dilemma – finding the balance of 'acceptable risk' and maintaining an organisational environment to support and stimulate creativity and innovation – is an important area of examination for this thesis. Local government at its heart is established to serve the public interest and undertake activities for the benefit of its communities. Even despite some 'corporatisation' of local government through the NPM reforms, there still appears to be a resilient but ill-defined difference between

acceptable public sector behaviour and private sector behaviour – and these behavioural norms and standards apply across organisations and also down to groups and individuals. As Csikszentmihalyi (1996) puts it, “ there is no way to know whether a thought is new except with reference to some standards and no way to tell if it is valuable without social evaluation” (p24).

A number of authors (Csikszentmihalyi 1996 , Amabile 2005, De Sousa, 1999) comment on the subjective and objective attribution of creativity when describing both the creative process and product – just who decides what is creative and how is it judged to be so? De Sousa offers a concept of ‘hetero –attributed creativity’ where the judgment or attribution is made by others (hetero) rather than just by the individual (self). Amabile (2005) suggests that “once an idea has been selected by the creator, developed and communicated there often is a second selection process by relevant individuals in a social group or intellectual community’ (p. 369). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) refers to these ‘relevant individuals’ as ‘experts’ or “gatekeepers in the domain” (p 28). These points are all valuable for this study as they raise the important questions of: who are the ‘experts’ and ‘gatekeepers’ in the domain of local government?; and how do they determine what is ‘creative’ or ‘innovative’? Therefore, another set of key questions for this research is: what is ‘acceptable’, ‘useful’ and ‘valuable’ creativity in a local government context? And how do you know what is ‘creative and innovative’ and what is simply just too risky? The social evaluation of creativity and innovation from (and within) a local Council will be conducted by the community – but is ‘the community’ their professional peers and colleagues or the local citizens that they serve?

### 3.3 Local Councils as Creative and Innovative Places of Work

#### 3.3.1. Where and Why is Creativity and Innovation?

“The first question I ask of creativity is not *what* but *where* is it?

(Czikszentmihalyi, 1996,p.27)

In examining organisational creativity and innovation, it is necessary to look at the interaction between the person at work and their colleagues, between the workers and the workplace, and also the interaction between the workplace and the broader context – in the case of local government, the community’ (as distinct from the ‘market’ when examining a commercial firm as the workplace). Kilbourne and Woodman (1999) stress that: “organisational creativity is the creation of a valuable, useful new product, service, idea, procedure or process, by individuals working together in a complex social system “p.127). They then go on to offer a theoretical perspective that builds on Woodman and Schonenedt’s (1989, 1990) model of interactionist creative behaviour. “From this interactionist perspective, creativity is viewed as a complex outcome of person and situation” (p.128). Their diagrammatic representation of their model has clear elements of concurrence with the key conceptual questions in this research.

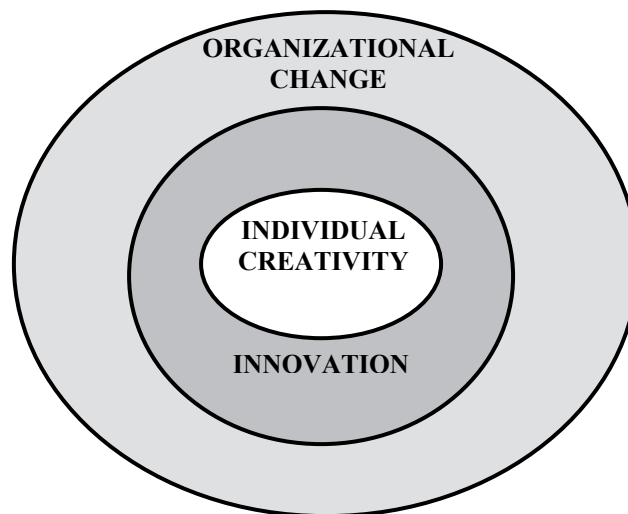


Figure 3.2 The Domains of Organizational change, Innovation and Creativity (Kilbourne and Woodman, 1999)

It is not useful (if at all possible) to attempt to disentangle the organisation from the people who work in it, nor the organisation from its context. The literature offers some guidance for examining the elements, design or attributes of so-called creative and innovative organisations. Amabile (1996) offers us a baseline framework of review that groups the criteria of organisational creativity and innovation into three areas for more critical examination.

She proposes that we investigate:

- (1) the **Organisational motivation to innovate**...the basic orientation of the organisation toward innovation, as well as supports for creativity and innovation throughout the organisation
- (2) **Resources** ...everything that the organisation has to aid work in a domain targeted for innovation (e.g. sufficient time for producing novel work in the domain, and the availability of training
- (3) **Management Practices** ...allowances of freedom or autonomy in the conduct of work, provision of challenging, interesting work, specification of clear overall strategic goals, and formation of work teams by drawing together individuals with diverse skills and perspectives. (p.3)

Her first proposal - to examine the motivation to innovate - is important: what is the driving pressure or catalyst? If "necessity is the mother of invention", then faced with such a necessity, wouldn't the creation of inventions and innovations simply flow? Authors such as Amabile (1988), Dougherty and Heller (1994), Kilbourne and Woodman (1999) doubt the simplicity of the old adage and suggest the original catalyst is firstly a recognition of the need to create. The concept of needs-based creativity is important for this work. Whilst, in the public sector, the need may not be market growth or even market survival, there is nevertheless

some imperative that urges the organisation to seek creativity and innovation. Examining this contextual element to both organisational and individual creativity, guides us to seek the 'trigger' or the catalyst for creativity and new ideas and/or processes: what was it that created the need to be creative? This question is echoed in much of the work on change management. What caused the sense of 'urgency' described by Kotter (1996) and triggered the need for discontinuous change?

### **3.3.2. Creative and Innovative Councils within their Suburbs, Towns and Cities**

The characteristics of a local Council and those of the locality and local community – the 'place' – in which it operates are logically interdependent. Local Councils are uniquely and primarily established to provide for, and manage the 'place' in which they are – a place that can be understood both in a bounded geographic sense and also what Sproats (2001) calls a 'recognisable community of interest'. Whilst, undoubtedly, other actors and key stakeholders are active and affect what happens in such a place – e.g. civil society, individual and groups of citizens, private sector and the business community, plus agents of other tiers of government – it is the local Council that is somewhat unique as a public sector institution in that it has a portfolio of concurrent roles that enshrine a dedication to a place and its local community.

Colebatch (1986, p.11), describes these roles succinctly when he suggest that a local Council can be seen from a range of perspectives: as a legal entity; as a representative body; as an agency of other levels of government; as a service body; as an organisation with a history; and as a place where people work. Finally, and most importantly, Colebatch goes on to declare that a local Council "... is a local body that asserts a distinct local interest" (p.17). This highlights the significant and somewhat unique links between such an organisation and its

immediate environment. This is a point that is important for this thesis and is part of its specific focus. The thesis seeks to investigate people being creative and innovative within a local Council so that they may produce results for the benefit of the local community in a specific location and place. In many local Council areas, the Council staff may also live within its local boundaries. This also adds an additional dimension to my research as it examines the work of people who concurrently seek to produce positive outcomes in both the organisation which they work and also the community in which they themselves live...and they often live or work there by choice.

Following from Amabile, I also seek to explore why would Councils want to innovate, and what resources and practices do they utilise to facilitate creativity and innovation? Why would local government as an employer and local Councils as workplaces want to support and nurture creativity and innovation, and what must they do to achieve this? How do they attract and maintain the creative and innovative 'talent' for their workforce?

Cities have one crucial resource – their people. Human cleverness, desires, motivations, imagination and creativity are replacing location, natural resources and market access as urban resources.

(Landry, 2000 , p. xiii)

Landry and others (e.g. Birchard 2000, Hall, 1995,1997; Plowman et al 2003; Florida 2002; Mulgan, 1995, 2006) all assert that it is the capturing and harnessing of 'creative talent' that offers the best chance of success for localities in the future. Florida's theories of the 'creative class' assert that local areas that foster the three "Ts" – Talent, Technology and Tolerance - attract and maintain talented and creative people, particularly talented 'strangers'. However as he points out, " For most of human history, wealth came from a place's endowment of natural resources, like climate, fertile soil or raw materials...but today, the key economic



resource, creative people, is highly mobile (2004, p.15). Given the primacy of its local interest, we may usefully examine the role of the local Council in attracting this mobile 'creative class' to work in the organisation and often (in the case of rural Councils) live in the local area.

Ashkanasy, Gardner, Letts and Plowman's (2003) study of towns in rural Queensland also attempted to identifying factors that distinguish 'innovative' towns that thrive and prosper and also innovation with such towns. The report's title, "Innovation in Rural Queensland: Why Some Thrive While Others Languish" also highlights their assertion that it is innovation that is the critical factor in towns thriving. Their report highlighted perceived characteristics in the 'innovative' towns that are clearly attributable to their local council – characteristics such as: "administrative and managerial capacity to run the town...and do what needs to be done; up-to-date professionals, experts who are constantly upgrading knowledge and skills; managerial attitude to change; freshness of management and leadership; decentralised decision making; have a healthy exchange of ideas internally" (p. 1-2). Once again, in line with Florida's work, they highlight mobility of workers and note that 'successful' towns, "have a higher proportion of residents who have lived elsewhere; have residents who had lived in this town least average amount of time; and have a higher proportion of residents working in the so-called 'creative class' " p.2).

These works directed me to consider the issues of mobility amongst professional staff in the Australian local government workforce. It is common practice for professional staff in Australian Local government to move from Council to Council in order to pursue their career objectives. It is not unusual for such staff to have a number of employers during their working career – even if they maintain employment within the local government sphere. Within metropolitan areas, local Council employees usually have a large number of local government employers

within reasonable commuting distance from their home. It has also been a common practice for younger professional staff from metropolitan areas to “go out bush” (go to work in smaller rural Councils) in order to get more varied experience. Others may move to non-metropolitan Councils to enjoy different lifestyle opportunities. Therefore it is important not to ignore the notion that Councils also need to ‘compete’ to attract staff.

### **3.3.3. What are Creative and Innovative Councils?**

What do creative and innovative Councils look like? What are the organisational symbols that signify that creativity and innovation are welcomed? What are the structures and practices that encourage and support creativity and innovation? What is the organisational history, and what lore and stories are told of innovation and creativity? I reiterate Martin’s (2002) comments that there has been relatively little research on innovation and creativity in the public sector, compared to the examination of private sector enterprises. Whilst there have been a plethora of Public Sector ‘Innovation Awards’, there has been little formal research into what is actually perceived as innovation in a local government context, let alone how creative people may be contributing to the ‘innovative’ outcome.

In an earlier study of innovation in local government, Richards (1987), utilised a workshop with ‘senior managers’ in Australian Local government, and having reviewed the literature developed an adaptation which took into account some of the peculiarities of the local government context. Initially, the model contained the broad criteria of: action orientation; closeness to citizens; autonomy and entrepreneurship; employee orientation; values; mission, goals and competence.

After further workshops and modifications, the project task force agreed that an innovative local authority will have the following characteristics: *Structure*; a flat organisational structure, lean staffing, minimal bureaucracy; *Close to citizens*; good

communications, responsiveness to complaints and needs; *Employee orientation*; concern for staff morale, provision of support for staff, good council/staff relations, a team approach –delegation; *Action Orientation*; implemented changes over the last two years, flexible approach to the Local Government Act, responsiveness to requests and the need for services, special revenue raising activities, services provided outside the LGA, what service from the outside are required?; *Values*; integrity, service; *Political*; delegation of authority to staff, team approach/good relations; *Missions, Goals and competence*; set goals, measure results; *Autonomy/Entrepreneurship*; forward planning and [demonstrated] planning initiative, tied grants v total income, awareness of, and search for innovation and successful operations “inside and out” [of the organisation], seizing opportunities (p.11.)

Mulgan’s work (2003) with the UK Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit used a similar approach and developed and evolved a series of questioning prompts for the assessment of British Public Sector organisations and how they foster innovation. Mulgan’s questions echo many of Richards’ themes – e.g. “What financial resources are focused on investment in innovation? Who monitors and assesses promising innovations? What is being done to encourage well-considered and informed risk-taking and rule-breaking? If a new member of staff has an innovative idea how does it get spotted supported and developed Who is systematically scanning overseas practice and how is the information made available? Are controlled experiments being used? Are there incentives, rewards and support, for individuals, units and delivery organisations to adapt and adopt useful innovations?” (p.35). Mulgan’s point about “informed risk-taking and rule breaking” returns us again to an important factor for this research – the element of and ‘informed risk-taking’ that is acceptable for local government?. How do local councils (and the individuals working within them) balance the tension between a culture of due process and procedure and the need to take risks and experiment?

Amabile (1996) summarises what she sees as the key factors affecting workplace creativity as: Encouragement of Creativity (organisational, supervisory and amongst peers); Autonomy and freedom of staff; Sufficient resources; Pressures; and the level of organisational impediments to creativity (p.1159). More recently and in Australia, Martin's (2001, 2002) work on innovation in local Councils suggests a series of interrelated factors to be examined in local government innovation. He draws from the literature and refers to the following organisational 'Innovation Factors': The role of individuals; External pressure for change; Experimentation; Constantly searching for new ideas; [how they] Maintain extensive internal and external networks; Looking to learn; Build employee skills; Flexible organisations; and Community interests (p.5).

Martin's factors show us the potential for a 'creativity and innovation model' that in many ways applies both to the Council and some of the individuals who work within it, and hence it aligns with Kilbourne and Woodman's (1999), notions of the interrelationship between the person, the organisation and the operating environment.

### **3.3.4. Creative and Innovative People**

Creativity and innovation can usefully be viewed in many ways. It can be seen as the complex interrelationship between the 'context' and 'domain' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, and Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1999), and those individuals that generate ideas (either alone or with others) as well as those that support and contribute to their adaptation, adoption and implementation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, Damanpour, 1991, Rogers, 1996, and Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1999).

Local government, as a 'contextual domain' for this research, is largely a 'people-based' workplace and the majority of its outputs come from the efforts of its

people. Local government uses technology to assist with delivering services and outputs (e.g. infrastructure construction and maintenance, or information services) it is largely a work environment that utilises people for their knowledge and skills as much as their labour – to deliver outcomes. Hence, at the heart of this research project is the examination of such people at work. One of the fundamental questions is: what sort of people are working in local government and responsible for producing the creativity and innovation?

There is a sizeable body of work that examines the attributes, traits, characteristics and habits of creative people. Early works (e.g Galton, 1870) focussed on the exploration of the 'creative genius' with a belief that creativity was a combination of ability, motivation and effort. Other works have explored creativity as "... a psychological phenomena, an aspect of behaviour" (Higgins and Morgan, 2000, p.118) or as an individual trait and the development of Trait Theory has persisted. According to Amabile (1988), creative people have traits including: attributes such as persistence, curiosity, energy and honesty, self-motivation; cognitive abilities- both specialised and generalised in problem-solving; social skills; naiveté; diverse experience; brilliance – high level of general intelligence; expertise in a particular area; risk orientation (p.p. 123-167). Grudin (1990) discusses the habits or characteristics of "inspired or inventive people" and suggests that such people have: "a passion for their work, a notion of fidelity – sticking at the pursuit or question for some time, a love of the problematic, a love of beauty, a sense of wholeness – thinking holistically, boldness, innocence and playfulness, courtesy and respect for different ideas, faced some suffering, memory, a sense of continuity, a sense of openness, a belief in liberty" (pp 12-23). Jackson and Messick (1965) prescribe four characteristics of 'creative people', suggesting they are: tolerant of incongruity (ambiguity) / original, analytic and intuitive/sensitive, open-minded/flexible, as well as reflective and spontaneous/poetic.

Other authors have viewed creativity as more an act of cognitive problem-solving. Ekvall (1997) takes such a problem-solving view of creativity and suggests that there may be two 'styles' of creativity. He offers two different cognitive styles of solving problems – the 'adaptive' and 'innovative' styles: " The 'Adaptor' is a problem-solver who seeks solutions in a well-known, common and safe ways, who accepts goal and frames, who sticks to the given paradigm and who tries to make better what is already there. The 'Innovator' on the contrary is a person who when meeting a problem attempts to reformulate it, to seek solutions from new and unproven angles, to break frames, to make new instead of improving old and customary " (p.196). Ekvall follows Kirton and stresses that there is an important difference between 'style' and 'level' and that "...adaptors and innovators prefer different kinds of approaches to problems, but the one is not by definition more successful as a problem-solver than the other" (Kirton, p.196). Ghiselin (1963, cited in Ekvall, 1997) also choose to delineate between higher-order and lower order creativity: "Creative action of the higher sort alters the universe of meaning itself, by introducing into it some new element of meaning or some new order of significance [whilst] creative action of the lower kind...gives new order to an established body of meaning through initiating some advance in its use" (p.196).

However, during this research I did not seek to differentiate between 'levels' or 'types' of creativity. Given the complexity of the context and the varied pattern of individual, group and organisational interrelationships, it did not seem valuable to attribute a higher or lower value to creativity that is seen to be a radically new idea or simply a clever and novel adaptation of existing knowledge. Existing theories of individual creativity and innovation from the literature acted as a guiding framework and pointed to areas for discussion and investigation. Whilst an examination of the 'creative' person (or more precisely, the 'person being creative at work') is a key part of this thesis, it is an aim of this research to encourage self-description and self-explanation – to hear the individual stories about creativity

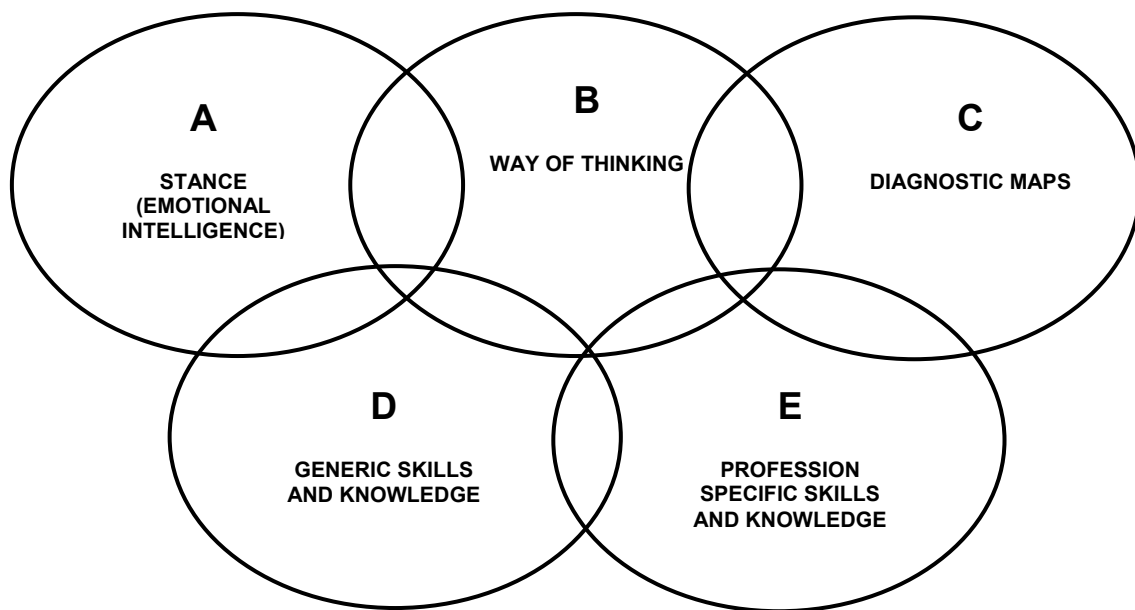
and innovation, to seek additional observations from peers and colleagues, and build the stories and experiences into a narrative. I chose not to focus on the examination of creativity as a set of individual characteristics or traits. If this research were to treat individual creativity as a 'trait', 'talent', 'gift' or an inherent personal 'attribute' then there is potentially less value to local government. If creativity is to be viewed in this way, then logically local government should identify these preferred attributes, somehow test and attract the people that possess them and then develop organisations that that best support and utilise the outputs of such individuals - or, alternatively, they could simply embark on a program of officially-sanctioned cloning. I chose to steer the enquiry more towards discussion of 'professional capabilities' – learned skills and competencies that can be demonstrated to increase capacity for creativity and innovation, to see if they may be enhanced by training and learning or supported by a particular workplace environment.

### **3.3.5. Creativity as a Set of Professional Capabilities**

This thesis examines creativity as a set of capabilities that local Council professionals (either alone or in a group) may utilise in their day-to-day work in order to produce innovation. In order to do this, I needed to access a tool or framework that allowed me to easily prompt and guide discussions about such professional capabilities with both subjects and observers.

Scott (2001, 2002) developed the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) that has been used extensively to track and profile successful graduates from the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). There are a number of other tools have been used to examine the characteristics of creative people - e.g. the Myers-Briggs Model (1962), the Herrmann Brain Dominance Model (1978), the Torrance Tests for Creative Thinking (1974) and Kirton's Adaption/Innovation Inventory (1976). For this project, the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) offered me a practical

and robust tool. It was originally designed to offer clear feedback to the designers of formal learning programs at UTS and that experience had shown it to be a useful and easily understood framework to prompt questions and discussion. The PCF is based broadly on the work of authors such as Schon (1983), Morgan (1988), Gonczi & Hager (1999), Gardner (1995) and Goleman (1998). Scott reports that the recurring findings from this research are that professional capability is comprised of 5 interlocked components.



**Figure 3.3. (Repeated) Scott’s (2001) diagrammatic representation of the Professional Capabilities Framework and its 5 interlocking components.**

Scott (2001) contends that from his research so far :

...the possession of generic or job-specific skills (D & E) is necessary but not sufficient for effective professional performance”. What is of equal importance is that the person possesses: A high level of social and personal emotional intelligence (A) ; A ‘contingent’ way of thinking- an ability to ‘read’ what is going on in each situation and match an appropriate course of action, and a capacity to deftly trace out and assess the consequences of alternative courses of action (B); A set of diagnostic maps (C) developed



from handling previous practice problems in the unique work context. It is these maps which enable the person to accurately 'read the signs' and figure out what is really going on in each new situation and to determine when and when not to deploy different generic and technical skills (p.4)

When seeking to describe 'creativity' or 'being creative' in terms of set of utilised professional capabilities, it was valuable to have a tool that allowed those capabilities to be ordered and categorised in some way. As a starting point, the PCF offered a useful visual and conceptual prompt to guide discussions and allow participants to examine the capabilities they used when being creative and order or group them into various categories. It is in plain language that requires little interpretation and is clearly focused on professional capabilities used in a work context. The research offered an opportunity to 'road-test' the PCF in a different work environment, although it was not a primary aim to further validate the PCF. The PCF was used as a questioning framework, and assisted discussions around whether the concept of 'creativity and innovation as a set of professional capabilities that can be learned and/or enhanced through learning' was plausible to subjects in the workplace.

### 3.4. The Key Research Questions.

Following from the examination of the literature and the development of the conceptual framework, the model below illustrates the key research questions for this thesis.



Figure 3.4. A Diagrammatic model of the Key Research Questions

From this diagram, I can illustrate the key research questions.

The thesis seeks to explore:

(A) – the need for innovative and creative Councils

- Why do people in local government believe that Councils and their communities need to be more creative and innovative?
- What is their understanding of creativity and innovation –how do they describe it and explain it?
- What are the desired community outcomes of creativity and innovation?
- What is acceptable, valuable and useful creativity and innovation?

(B) – Professional ‘Leaders’ in the selected Innovative Councils

- What is their understanding of creativity and innovation –how do they describe it and explain it?
- What was cause of creativity and innovation in their Council- why...what was the trigger/catalyst?
- How do they believe and describe that they are being creative and innovative?
- Who of their staff is being creative and innovative at work – how?
- How do they as an organisation support, encourage and sustain creativity and innovation?

(C) – Professional staff in the selected Councils

- What does creativity and innovation mean to them? – how do they describe it?
- What are their stories of creativity and innovation – How are they doing it and why?
- How do they know what is acceptable, valuable and useful creativity and innovation?
- What capabilities are they using to be creative and innovative and innovative and how did they learn them?

### **3.5. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into next Chapter.**

This chapter outlined the key concepts and issues in the research and the thesis. From developing an understanding and the working definitions of 'creativity' and 'innovation' I suggested they are interdependent and perhaps are part of a creative continuum. I raised the questions of what was the catalyst for change that brought about the need for creativity - in both a community and its local Council - which in turn highlights the question of useful and appropriate creativity. I have highlighted the importance of the environmental context for local Councils and their commitment to their context as a 'local place'. I then suggested we should look concurrently at the Council as a workplace and as an organisational context of creativity and innovation and the people that are 'doing' it. Finally, I proposed that we should examine what professional capabilities they are using at work to be creative and innovative. The chapter concluded with a summary of the key research questions for this thesis.

The following chapter describes and justifies the methodology used in the research.

## Chapter 4.

# **4. Building Stories and Using ‘Ethno-Narrative’ to Research Creativity and Innovation**

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter outlines the approach and methodology used in this thesis. The research utilised a hybrid methodology that combined elements of both theory-testing and theory-building. Whilst following many of the exploratory procedures of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 1998) Grounded Theory approach, the method also tested and challenged working definitions derived from the literature and used the Professional Capabilities Framework (Scott, 2001) to guide the dialogue during interviews. The thesis focuses on a series of comparative case studies – a workshop with a panel of local government ‘experts’, and three field trips to local Councils in NSW, Australia conducted in 2004.

The first part of this chapter describes the design of the research project, and how the hybrid qualitative methodology evolved as much by circumstance as design. I provide a personal account of the evolution of my research design and methodology, which changed over the years. I then provide some discussion of the key elements in the research methodology: a qualitative approach and the use of what I describe as an ‘ethno-narrative’ technique – a form of autoethnography that combines ethnographic collection/reportage of events as I observed and influenced them, tightly interwoven with the stories of the people involved in this research (including mine). The choice and appropriateness of the ‘ethno-narrative’

technique is explained and validated. I recognise that whilst this is not typical in local government research, the methodology helped build the stories in the research, and the style gives texture, order and meaning to the final narrative.

I then discuss the particular scope and context of the research – creativity and innovation in Australian local government workplaces - and the use of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) to explore what capabilities were being used at work. The final part of the chapter describes how the investigation of the case studies was undertaken using a variety of complementary methods and some of the issues that arose due to the approach taken.

## **4.1. Introduction – a Brief Personal Story of the Research Design and Rationale**

The origins of this enquiry have grown out of my own involvement in local government as a working professional and manager... and my interest in stories. My initial entrance into local government had been into the community services sector, surrounded by the language, artefacts and working practices of the social services and social sciences. This moved on to later work in adult education and training and even a one year dabble as a trainee playwright at the National Academy of the Dramatic Arts. I eventually achieved my ‘mature-aged’ completion of a Master’s Degree in Public Policy. This led, in turn, to my role as an academic at the Centre for Local Government in the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

Within this real-world environment, I often heard the urging around me that: “Local government needs to be more innovative and more creative”. This rally-cry was heard through stories in staff meetings and team workshops; in reports and bulletins; at seminars, and conferences; in professional journals and magazines; in

awards and prizes; and also in the occasional press statements from Mayors or the Minister for Local Government. This was a time of significant local government reform in Australia. On the one hand, the adherents of the New Public Management, Economic Rationalism, Public Sector Entrepreneurialism and Competition policies (such as Aucoin, 1995, Osborne and Gaebler, 1995) were beginning to have their effect on Australian government policy, and in turn, NSW local Councils. On the other hand I became aware of the emerging work of others (such as Cox, 1995, Hall 1995, Birchard and Landry 1995), who were meeting this head-on with calls for more attention to building social capital and more creativity and innovation. It seemed as if one group were demanding more efficient and businesslike local government and the others were advocating more effective and creative local governance.

I slowly came to the conclusion that the two approaches were not mutually exclusive, and I was interested to explore whether they could operate in concert to simply make better local government – perhaps a local government that offered the best value and choice to its community, based on local circumstance. By the mid-1990s, the call for more creativity and innovation in NSW local Councils had become almost a workplace mantra, but nobody seemed to actually describe what it meant. The term ‘innovation’ seemed to have replaced ‘excellence’ in the working lexicon of local government. I became an interested and inquisitive participant in this field of the research. I was both listening to the world around me as well as contributing my own voice.

My initial approach to this thesis had been highly literary and inspired by the narrative interests of my first supervisor. I would start by investigating and

writing three stories in the 'Gonzo Journalism'<sup>8</sup> style of writers such as Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe – three diverse stories of people being creative and innovative in a local government setting. The intention was to capture textural and empirical data and write it up as a narrative account first, then de-construct, analyse and look for conclusions later. I intended to try to keep pre-structured research designs to a minimum during the exploratory data collection period. I had never subscribed to the purist idea that ethnographic field data should not be analysed (simply recorded and described) but my initial intention was not to enter the field with any strong questions but rather to capture data from the local actors through “a process of deep attentiveness, of empathetic understanding... and of suspending or bracketing preconceptions about the topics under discussion” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.6).

Nevertheless, the approach was not completely loose as I had already had some key questions about the areas that were not well understood and had some idea of where/how I thought I could look for the answers. As Wolcott (1992) said “... it is impossible to embark upon research without some kind of idea of what one is looking for and foolish not to make that quest explicit” (p.157). My design lay somewhere between the exploratory, descriptive and the narrative.

I envisaged that I would just visit, observe, listen and...soak it all up -listening to the 'natives' tell their stories and speak for themselves in their own language and environment, but then I would use fictionalised narratives to communicate my interpretation of the observations. Early on, I quickly found that people I spoke to in the field also wanted to share some of the story-telling... they wanted me to be what Boje (1991) terms a 'co-producer'. He describes so aptly: “In just listening to stories, our personal experience mingles with what we hear and then see. As

---

<sup>8</sup> “Gonzo Journalism” – a style of subjective journalism, often written in first person, and typically narrative. It is stylistic and often combines fact and fiction. The label “Gonzo” was first used in 1970 to describe an



listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story. We become even more of a co-producer when we begin to prompt the teller with cues, such as head nods, changes in posture and utterances that direct the inquiry” (p.107).

I became interested in this approach and began some more reading into the area of stories and narrative as research. Then abruptly, following this first early period of fieldwork, my academic supervisor changed. As is often the case, this change in principal supervisor also necessitated a negotiated re-adjustment in research approach.

This is not to suggest that there were criticisms of my original approach. It simply emerged in the early discussions that I had with my next supervisor that he had the background better suited towards a much less narrative and more systematic approach. Professor Geoff Scott suggested and offered the Professional Capabilities Framework –PCF (Scott, 2001) as a useful questioning tool to assist in discussion of creativity and innovation in terms of professional capabilities used at work. This offer coincided with the results of my initial literature review that had revealed significant work on understanding creativity as a series of traits and attributes (e.g. Amabile, 1989, Guildford,1950, Grudin, 1990 etc) but relatively little on the kind of professional capabilities that allowed people to learn and express such creativity in a workplace environment.

This all led to an altered methodology design - more in line with the social anthropology tradition of taking a concept to the field and testing and refining it. It was a more structured and ‘theory-testing’ approach than I had originally envisaged and it also steered me more towards exploring key findings about the potential for ‘learning how to do creativity and innovation’ that might provide some useful advice to local Councils. I undertook a re-definition of the research

and adopted a more of a “scientific attitude” (Robson 2002, p.18) which focused on the processes of working systematically, sceptically and ethically.

I had already gathered some key data in three countries (Australia, South Africa and UK) but as part of the modification process, I made the pragmatic decision to re- focus the research to Australia and, in particular, to the state of New South Wales. I decided to adopt a local case study approach and identify three local Councils in New South Wales that were perceived and nominated by the local government sector to be ‘creative and innovative’. I utilised an ‘Expert Panel’ to design selection criteria and identify three categorically different Councils: an urban/metropolitan Council, a regional centre, and a small rural Council. This selection was intended to give broad coverage of contexts and also investigate the issue of local Council resources (smaller rural Councils in Australia constantly claim to suffer from a lack of resources and I wanted to investigate if this might be a trigger for innovation). I designed my three case studies so that I might explore whether there was any differences between creativity and innovation well-resourced metropolitan Councils and smaller, remote Councils with fewer resources.

So off I went! I held my ‘Expert Panel’ Workshop<sup>9</sup>, using judges from a variety of local government ‘innovation’ and ‘excellence’ Awards to review criteria and select my case study Councils. The Expert Panel succeeded in picking a metropolitan Council and a Regional Centre Council...but couldn’t come up with a nomination for small rural. So they sent me off to talk to the ‘expert observer’ who fulfilled the task and nominated my small rural Council. Now I had selected my Councils, contacted them, made arrangements, and...finally...went out into the field to visit the case study Councils. I was exuberant and energised – this was real field research! I spent about a week on site with each of the three Councils, holding

workshops, interviewing people, chatting and eating with them and just looking around.

During these brief but intense field trips I found once again that I was immersed in and surrounded by their stories. Stories of how they got to where they were, why they did things. Stories about the things that mattered and had meaning to them...and once again they wanted me to share my stories as well so they could add them to their own. By the time I left there were also new stories about my visit and about my research. I wondered how I was going to analyse this and codify it and then write it all up in my new 'systematic' approach.

Then my second supervisor took up an offer in another university. I returned from my initial field trips to be told I would, once again, need to meet with a new doctoral supervisor. This also involved moving my candidature from the Faculty of Education to the Faculty of Business. The shift of Faculty in itself did not have an effect on the research design, but the early discussions with my new supervisor certainly did. I told him the stories of the journey so far and he both re-kindled the desire and supported the appropriateness of a highly narrative approach. I was invited to explore a wide body of literature on narrative and storytelling in research (e.g. Boje 1991, 1995, 2001, Clough, 2002, Czarniawska, 1992, 1999, 2003, Denning, 2004, Gabriel, 1995, 2000, Rosen 1985, 1988). We agreed to de-emphasise the aim of producing a detailed and definitive model of 'learning for creativity and innovation' and to use a narrative style throughout the thesis.

---

<sup>9</sup> Described in more detail in chapters 4 and 5.

## 4.2. Key Elements in the Research Design and Methodology

As the key research questions developed, evolved and clarified over time, and so did the design and methodology. The approach has evolved to be a 'transdisciplinary' (Van Kerkoff, 2000) hybrid in that it uses a number of approaches from a variety of disciplines to explore many aspects of the same issue. The design and methodology for this research evolved to be a process of 'ethno-narrative' observation, interpretation and 'story-building'. I then reviewed and analysed the stories in relation to the theory and literature. In particular I compared the stories-as-data with the framework of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF).

There are a number of significant reasons for the development and adoption of this hybrid approach. The first is historical – as discussed earlier, the research design is partly the legacy of history and circumstance during the research period. The initial design was highly ethnographic, theory-building and with a strong emphasis on narrative. The second approach was more 'scientific', with the added use of the PCF, the criteria gathered from the literature and the 'Experts Workshops' as a pre-determined set of concepts to take and test in the field<sup>10</sup>. Hence it introduced a stronger element of theory-testing. The final evolution maintains some of the systematic approach but there has also been a negotiated (and highly welcome) return to the emphasis on the ethno-narrative aspects of the research.

The second and an important reason for such an approach is the recognition of my own role as the researcher and a 'participant observer'. A number of authors (e.g.

---

<sup>10</sup>Scott's (2002) PCF was an adopted construct developed from previous research and brought to this study – it was used to provide a pre-determined framework to discussions about creativity and innovation as professional capabilities.

Manis and Meltzer, 1967, Richards and Postle, 1998, Waddington, 1994) have discussed the benefits and challenges of this manner of data collection. They advocate this role and argue that :

...when working with people, scientific aims can be pursued by explaining the meaning of the experiences of the observed through the experiences of the observer...the task of interpreting these meanings and experiences can only be achieved through participation with those involved”

(Robson,2002 p.314)

For me such a role was unavoidable – for nearly 30 years I have participated in local government as a practitioner, manager, observer and commentator. Hence my potential role as an ‘independent’ or ‘scientific’ observer/researcher was limited from the outset. These elements of participation and subjectivity were not uncomfortable to me - on the contrary, I had always felt somewhat that my goal was to be a ‘learned practitioner’, and was taking on this role from within my own tribe of local government colleagues and practitioners, rather than self-nominating as part of the academic community. The benefit of this position for me was a high degree of ‘theoretical sensitivity’ (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and “...an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data” (1990, p.41). This role involved an acceptance that: I would be active in the research as both a participant and observer; that I was more likely to be empathetic, and the notion that my experiences during the research were an integral part of the way that I interpreted the meaning of what I had observed (Robson, 2002).

However, I still wished to ensure that the ‘story-capturing’, ‘story-building’ and narrative approach did not overwhelm the commitment to asking and answering questions that I felt were important. I was still cautious that this approach had some possible risks of becoming simply ‘good story-telling’ and there needed to be an underlying logical framework of questions and tools for guiding the enquiry.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) offer useful advice:

The principle here is to present an accurate description of what is being studied...reducing and ordering materials of course represents selection and interpretation. Many researchers develop great skill in weaving descriptions, speaker's words, field note quotations and their own interpretations into a rich and believable narrative. The illustrative materials are meant to give a sense of what the observed world is really like, while the researchers interpretations are meant to represent a more detached conceptualization of that reality. (p.22)

This is an important point for me. I eschewed any notion that objective and 'scientific' observation were superior (or even appropriate) for this line of research and early on in the research it was made clear that creativity and innovation were highly subjective concepts and not practically suited to so-called scientific measurement and description. The minute you even asked people about creativity and innovation they answered by telling you stories that highlighted their personal meanings...and they were very often different. However, I nevertheless wanted to see if there was any common ground of agreement, as understood amongst the participants not just by me.

Hence the idea of using the 'Expert Panel' to try and develop some mutually agreed criteria and using the PCF as a 'logical framework' for questions seemed to provide a valuable addition to an exploratory and a descriptive/narrative approach. As Wolcott (1998) reminds us; "Whatever is to be included in the qualitative account needs to be assessed for its relevance and contribution to the story being developed... Everything comes back to the purposes for initiating the research and preparing the account in the first place "(pp 57-58). Hence, in the field, the Expert Panel's criteria and the PCF prompted a set of initial guiding questions to explore and define creativity and innovation at work, and during the

interviews it proved to be useful tool to frame discussion. In the end, the final hybrid methodology contained a balance of the explorative story-building and narrative that I enjoyed and some useful field tools that provided a framework for clear dialogue, discussion and description.

### **4.3 A Qualitative Approach**

The approach I selected for this study was one that was clearly qualitative in design and methodology. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define qualitative research as:

...any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification. It can refer to research about person's lives, lived experiences, behaviours, emotions, and feelings as well as about organizational functioning, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interactions between nations. Some of the data may be quantified, as with census or background information about the persons or objects studied, but the bulk of the analysis is interpretive (p.p.10-11)

Initially, it was my personal experience that led me towards a research project with a commitment to a qualitative approach. Mine was perhaps a milieu of the arts and story-telling, social science, public policy, exploration of the narrative, adult learning, and local government. As Strauss and Corbin (1990) point out, it is common that researchers hold convictions based on their previous research and professional experience. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that the good qualitative researcher has: some familiarity with the phenomenon and the setting, a strong conceptual interest, and a multidisciplinary approach - I felt that I had at least some claim to all of these. It therefore seemed most appropriate (and perhaps inevitable) that my approach would be qualitative.

Miles and Huberman (1994) elaborate:

Qualitative data are sexy. They are sources of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, see precisely which events led to which consequences, and derive fruitful explanations. Then too, good qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new integrations, they help researchers to get beyond initial conceptions, and to generate or revise conceptual frameworks. Words, especially organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour, that often proves more convincing to the reader – another researcher, policy-maker, a practitioner – than pages of summarised numbers. (p.1)

These were the kind of words that got me interested, they hinted at the kind of intricacies and mysteries that intrigued me and also alluded to the potential of ‘serendipitous’ findings. They recognised and encouraged the use of stories and narrative to provide real ‘flavour’. Again, Miles and Huberman’s (1994) support this as a valid reason to approach the study using qualitative methods – the nature of the topic lends itself to this kind of approach.

Meaning, understanding and descriptive stories would prove to be at the heart of my research. Even in early discussions with colleagues, when I suggested that I would research creativity and innovation in local government, the howls would ensue immediately: “But what do you mean exactly by the terms ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’?” Similarly, early forays into some of the literature had introduced me to authors such as Clegg (1999) and De Sousa (1999) who articulated the difficulties in establishing clear definitions and descriptions of either term. De Sousa points out that they are concepts that are generally understood but as constructs for research they become much more difficult. However, it was this very difficulty that also interested me. A significant part of this study was to try and understand what



these terms actually meant to people in their workplace, how (and if) they used such terms to understand and describe their own and others actions. How were such terms used and understood within the organisation and, more broadly, through the local government sector? The study aimed to focus on personal, understandings, meanings, and then stories and narrative about creativity and innovation.

#### **4.4. From Ethnography and Autoethnography to ‘Story-Building’ and ‘Ethno-Narrative’.**

Throughout the research and this thesis I use stories and narrative. The bulk of the data for this thesis came from interviews, observations and experience: what I heard, what I saw and what I felt. This research project uses ethnographic techniques to capture and record data and a narrative approach to building the stories and then organising and representing the data in such a way as to give meanings and share understandings. This has much in common with the practices of autoethnography. Many of the stories were built together with the people I met and they used stories as organisational tools and artefacts. Hence, in some ways the final narrative became ‘stories about people’s stories’ and I have self-labelled this approach ‘ethno-narrative’.

##### **4.4.1. Ethnography**

Ethnography, as practice, derives its name from the Greek - *ethnos* ('nation or people') + *graphia* ('writing'), and generally came into use in the early nineteenth century. Ethnography is variously defined and applied and has both become a key practice in social and cultural anthropology and a science as a whole. Agar (1986) states: “the social research style that emphasizes encountering alien worlds and making sense of them is called ethnography” (p.13). Creswell (1998) offers a succinct definition of ethnography as “a description and interpretation of a cultural

or social group” (p.58). However, Ethnography is often described concurrently as a qualitative fieldwork practice of ‘story-capturing’, the practice of attributing meaning and then developing the stories (what I call story-building’) and then the final output - a (usually) “...written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)”. (Van Maanen, 1988, p. xvii).

Whilst there are ongoing discussions over other definitional aspects such as length of time in the field and the degree of ‘scientific-ness’ of ethnographies, there are agreed common elements of techniques and the practices are firmly rooted with the broad umbrella of qualitative research and anthropology. Wolcott (1994) broadly describes three principal ways of gathering data in qualitative research : observation (experiencing) and studying materials prepared by others (examining) and interviewing (enquiring) (p.10). Key authors on Ethnography (such as Agar, 1980, Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994, Creswell 1998, Geertz, 1973, and Wolcott 1994) describe the practice as involving: field work and observation of people in the real world – often participant observation; conversation with different levels of formality (interviews, group workshops, chatting etc); discovery and understanding of local (and shared) belief systems; examining meanings of behaviour and language, examining artefacts and symbols as well as their use; and listening to, creating and understanding stories. All of these story-capturing techniques of data collection seemed highly appropriate for this research as they both fitted the textural and contextual nature of the research topic and also they allowed for some practicalities of timing and conduct of the field visits. The data collection would be conducted through observation, interviews and workshops, viewing artefacts and documents - described by Robson (2002) as “watching people and talking to them” (p. xiii) and by Wolcott (1982) as watching, asking or examining.

However, ethnography is not simply the process of data collection alone – it is also the process of understanding, building meaning and presenting the outcomes of the research. Van Maanen (1988) ponders: “...let us first consider what ethnography ties together fieldwork and the culture – as well as the knot. Ethnography is the result of the fieldwork but it is the written report that must represent the fieldwork, not the fieldwork itself” (p.4). Agar (1988) echoes this definition: “Ethnographers set out to show social action in one world that makes sense from the point of view of another” (p.12). There is an important process of developing an understanding and meaning in the field then providing the sense-making for readers. Ethnographic outputs are typically delivered in a written form and the processes used to create this written form, as well as the final style, are an important aspect of the ethnographic process.

Wolcott describes some options for “what to do with the data”:

I propose there are three major ways to do something with descriptive data. One way...to stay close to the data as originally recorded...to treat descriptive data as fact...the second way...is to expand and extend beyond a purely descriptive account with an analysis that proceeds in some careful, systematic way to identify key factors and relationships among them. A third way [has] the goal to make sense of what goes on, to reach for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis (pp.10-12)

Wolcott suggests the approach to the final ‘write-up’ needs to be considered at the research design stage; “...if a descriptive account is to be rendered as some kind of story, the researcher needs to think like a story teller” (Wolcott, 1998, p58). So, in making decisions about the ‘writing up’ stage, the fundamental issues about degrees of subjectivity became highlighted clearly. Local government for me was not what Agar (1988, p.4) described as an “alien world”. It was known to me and I

was already known in varying degrees to the Expert Panel and the Case study Councils. Whilst this would allow me to take advantage of my level of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin 1990) but it clearly made my involvement as a researcher far more subjective. I needed to be conscious of how much, as a researcher, I was attributing understanding from within the world of local government. Agar (ibid) suggests that ethnographers "...sit between two worlds or systems of meaning – the world of the ethnographer (and readers the world of the cultural members (also, increasingly readers, although not the targeted ones))"

Humphreys, Brown & Hatch 2003 discuss their response to the issues of subjectivity and good ethnography and state: "That ethnographers seek understanding of the 'other' is uncontroversial. What constitutes a *good* ethnography, however, in the sense that it provides an adequate understanding of the *other* is a vexed question to which definitive answers have been elusive" (p.10). They go on to suggest a continuum between two views of ethnography – one that is "...rationally analytic, rigorously structured, systematic and systematisable and relies on a certain distance being established" and at the other end a view of ethnography as "...the product of in-depth, intuitive and empathetic understanding of the other" (ibid). Whilst I heeded their warnings about "an ultra-internal focus that can lead to narcissistic conceit" (ibid) I accepted that my work would fall more towards the second view and also their notion that "ethnography is a means of self-discovery and creative self-authorship" p.7. Rather than trying to artificially remove myself from the story I chose to write myself in.

#### **4.4.2. Autoethnography**

The approach I used for this research derives much from the practices of autoethnography. Autoethnography is variously described. "Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000,

p.739). "Autoethnography is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context" (Holt, 2003, p2.). "Autoethnography views the researcher's own experience as a topic of investigation in its own right" (Schoepflin, 2009, p.362.). In its purest form, autoethnography focuses on the writer's own subjective experience and sense-making, rather than the beliefs and practices of others. It is a reflexive examination and account of one's own experience situated in a culture (that of either other's, or one's own).

Autoethnography is multi-faceted in its origins and its practices. Chang (2008) point out that: "Autoethnography should be ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content" (p.48.) Chang points out that autoethnography uses personal experience as the primary data and explores and interprets the relationship between the self and others. He reminds us that autoethnography is both a process and a product. There is debate regarding the proper extent of *auto* (reflection and perception of the self) and *graphos* (the writing and description). Chang warns against an excessive focus on the self in isolation from what is really going on around us, and also an overemphasis on the narration rather than the analysis and interpretation. However, Boyle and Parry (2007) promote an autoethnographic approach to organisational research and suggest that, "...an aesthetic style of prose helps" (p.185.) as it promotes readability and therefore impact. They counter critics who may argue that this style is too subjective and hence not generalisable. They suggest that "...the critical 'n' factor in much organizational research is the number of people who read the research, rather than the number of people who are the subjects of the research" (p. 188.).

In this work I have clearly adopted some of the practices of autoethnography. I have reflected, examined and written in the first person, from my own self-view of

the experience and my understanding. I present the reader with accounts recalled through my own experience and coloured by my own reflexivity. However, the process proved to be more shared and collaborative than simply a reflexive account of my own autobiographical experience. Over time, and through a reiterative process I jointly built the stories with those I interviewed. They offered me stories (and bits of stories) and then we built upon them together to become our shared experience.

#### **4.4.3. 'Story- Building' and 'Ethno-Narrative'**

The limited time available for the three site visits had an effect on the methodology and outcome as well. I would not have the benefits of 'living amongst the natives' and observing their daily rituals of life for all but a short time. This meant it was possible that I may not be able to meet Geertz's (1988) challenge to "...seek to convince a sceptical readership that what [I] say is a result of truly having actually penetrated ...another form of life, of truly having been there" (p.p 4-5) .

Nevertheless, I wanted to try and offer what he calls a 'thick description'. I also realised that it would be highly unlikely (although not impossible) that I would be able to watch the real-time development of creative ideas being turned into implemented innovations. I had gathered some background information from the organisational artefacts (produced public documents, websites, Award applications etc) and I was hoping that my 'intuitive and empathetic understanding of the other' would allow me to gather data quickly and effectively. In the end, the thesis grew to be built around stories and narrative.

The works on ethnography, autoethnography and social research are full of references to stories, narration and narrative (e.g. Agar, 1986, Atkinson,1990, Banks & Banks, 1998, Denzin & Lincoln,2005, Richardson & St Pierre,1994, Van Maanen,1988, Wolcott , 1999). For the researcher, stories are treated and viewed in a vast variety of ways: as presentation of a personal, or secular 'world-view', as

recounted 'lore' or 'folklore', as entertainment, as personal and/or organisationally understood 'truth', as fragments of field data from conversations and interviews, as dialogues and 'living stories', as metaphors and homilies, as jokes, and as sense-making tools. Stories and narratives can 'belong' to (amongst others): the researcher, the respondents, onlookers, participants, the organisation, the tribe, the culture - and often can be 'co-owned' and 'co-authored'.

There has been an emergence of authors looking at stories and narratives to understand and explore organisations and the people working in them (Boje 1991, 1995, 2001, 2006, Czarniawska, 1992, 1999, 2003, 2004, Gabriel, 1995, 2000 Rhodes & Pullen, 2005, Weick 1995). This literature recognises that much of the social and organisational interaction in organisations utilises stories and narrative. They can be used for: sense-making, for organisational learning and transfer of knowledge, for leadership and change, to exert (or liberate) power and control, to provide identity and identification, to develop and maintain relationships, to deal with conflicts and offer healing.

Over the years, a healthy, ongoing debate and discussion has developed regarding the delineation, definition and interplay between 'story' and 'narrative'. Some organisational authors (e.g. Polkinhorne, 1988 ) use the terms 'story' and 'narrative' interchangeably but others argue where to place them along a continuum of evolution, significance and purpose. In recent years, Boje (1995, 2006) Gabriel (1995, 2000) and Czarniawska (2003, 2004) have been the most active in this debate. Boje (2006) contends that, " Traditional folklore and narratology, in the main, since Aristotle (350BCE) define story too narrowly as cohesive telling linear-plot, complete with beginning, middle and end" (p.1). In an early work, he stakes his claim on this topic: "By a story, I mean an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience... stories do not require beginnings, middles and ends..." (Boje 1995, p1000).

He criticises authors such as Gabriel and Czarniawska for imposing a narrow definition of 'proper stories' and argues that: "These *proper* linear story-plots are important yet exceedingly rare in organizations" (ibid). However Gabriel (1995) recounts: "Many of the stories I collected are highly charged narratives, not merely recounting events, but enriching them, enhancing them, and infusing them with meanings...Far from being obstacles from further study, such 'distortions' can be approached as attempts to re-create reality *poetically*" (p.480). Later discussions propose that stories are the ingredients of a narrative and go on to achieve meaning and coherence when they become constructed with plot as narratives- which by default are retrospective. Czarniawaska (2003) contends; "The raw material of organizational life consists of disconnected fragments, physical and verbal actions, that do not make sense when reported with simple chronology ...narrating involves organising this raw and fragmented material with the help of devices such as character and plot...Simultaneously, organising makes narration possible, because it orders people, things and events in time and place" (p.vii).

The debate swirls around issues of what constitutes a story, when does story become narration, and is it the narration that turns a 'living story' into a 'proper story' and ultimately perhaps into a 'petrified story'? ( Czarniawska, 2004) - a kind of organisational legend or folklore that provides stability.

Boje is critical of those who value 'narrative' as having coherence and plot but relegate 'storytelling' as a mere chronology of events. He urges that the researcher should not simply be a story-collector but also should examine the *in situ* 'story performance' in the 'storytelling organization' (2006) . He also offers the additional concept of antenarrative. 'Antenarrative' (Boje 2001) has a double meaning (inferred from *ante*) : it means earlier or before story and narrative, and also it is also 'a bet' that it will become a story. "To translate a story into narratives is to impose a counterfeit coherence and order...Stories are antenarrative when told



without proper plot sequence and the mediated coherence preferred in narrative theory” (Boje, 2001p.p. 2-3). So whilst there is disagreement about the correct evolution from antenarrative, to ‘living story’, to ‘story’, to, ‘narrative’ to ‘legend’, there is also a recognition within the debate that is perhaps that this a dynamic and reiterative relationship.

I find the ‘story/narrative’ debate interesting and this thesis accepts there are differences in opinion about what constitutes ‘story’ and what is ‘narrative’. However, I resoundingly agree with Boje when he discusses the collective story-performance process and says: “Finding our storyline is a life journey. We enter stories in the middle. Return in a year and you will hear the story told differently. Storytelling is antenarratively a collective process. We work out our plots in the intertext of other stories and narrators” (Boje 2009, p1.). I agree with Boje’s assertion that this is a collective and often collaborative process, and during the research I have been both a participant and observer. In this research, the participants were themselves involved in this holistic and re-iterative process of story telling. As they responded to questions and develop answers to explain meanings understandings, they were also engaged in story- gathering and production; as they sought clarification, further information and examples during dialogues with me and each other, they were involved in story-refinement and a form of sense-making. I have chosen to call this ‘story-building’.

I refer to my research technique as ‘ethno-narrative’. It is one that borrows heavily from ethnographic practice with a strong focus on the narrative (and antenarrative) aspects of the work. Early on, I was struck by a succinct line by Wolcott (1999, p.144): “The ethnographer helps people tell their story”. I went to the field working in an ethnographic fashion, recognising the limits, and dealing with short, intense and ‘unusual’ visits to the case study Councils. As such, the fieldwork phase was dominated by this collective process of ‘story- building’. My presence and their

understanding of my research led to 'story-performances' where I was 'co-producer' (Boje 1991). People gave me (by way of examples, evidence and answers to my questions) stories and fragments of stories that had meaning at the time and in the context they were told. They were offered generously and sometimes traded for parts of my own stories. I use narrative in this thesis to organise, but also "...to make sense of actions and events and objects, whilst also explaining the relationships between them" (Weick 1995). In doing so I am aware of my own subjectivity, and hence write often in first-person narrative. The final objective of this 'ethno-narrative' technique is hopefully to enhance readability. I hoped to make the research findings readable to both an academic and non-academic audience and also to invite readers in to share some of the journey. Wolcott characterised "good" qualitative studies as those that "engage the reader" (1998, p22) and I hoped that I may be able to achieve that goal through a narrative style that was attractive and relatively enjoyable. In order to provide the "thick descriptions" as advocated by Geertz (1973) I have, in some instances, added emphasis and plot, but this is done in the tradition of 'creative non-fiction' and is intended to faithfully communicate my interpretation of the experience, and to help the research participants tell their story. As Wolcott (1998) suggests: "...the reader ought to have sufficient information to arrive independently at the same conclusions as the researcher or to arrive at alternative and equally plausible alternatives (p58).

#### **4.5. A Note on the Methodological Approach**

Such an 'ethno-narrative' approach has not been used widely in local government research. There may be some who feel that this research context is better served by more 'scientific' methodology. As mentioned earlier, I am also aware that there have been relatively few research projects focusing on this topic, but it is worth quickly commenting on some key papers.

Richards' early study (1987) "Innovation in Local Government Management", utilised limited funds in a short time frame to conduct a limited sample study. The fieldwork was carried out by students and offered limited local government 'peer assessment' of innovations. Richards himself states "data drawn from such a limited selection could not be adequately validated nor any trends identified" (p.4). Higgins and Morgan (2000), as part of the UK Town Planning Network project "Creativity in Town Planning", used a core methodology of questionnaires followed by some clarification interviews. They reported difficulties in clear definitions of 'creativity' and 'innovation' and the methodology allowed limited scope for descriptions of meaning or understanding. Borins (2000) investigated the 'successful' applications for the Ford Foundation - Kennedy School of Government Innovation in American Government Awards. The research examined and analysed the initial award applications and the subsequent detailed questionnaires completed by finalists. Whilst this is a prestigious award, the methodology is limited to self-nomination, contains some opportunities for narrative description but no opportunity for fieldwork to see the innovation (or innovators in action). Whilst the study offered some general questions about who was the 'primary initiators of the innovation, it was unable to 'speak directly' to those people or observe them at work. More recently, Martin's "Innovation Strategies for Australian Local Government" (2001), examined the applications for the Commonwealth Government's National Awards for Innovation in Local Government. Four Councils were selected and 'visited' (no further methodological detail is provided). Whilst the final report is quite descriptive it is not possible to discern the origins of the narrative. Only Cardow's (2005) research into New Zealand local government 'entrepreneurs' similarly uses narrative as both an investigative tool and a style of reporting.

There are some consistent elements between these works and this thesis. I have utilised both the literature and local government 'Innovation' Awards as a starting

point for definition of innovation and creativity. However I then spoke directly to the Award Judges and engaged them in discussion that revealed a wide range of meanings and understandings. Almost immediately, it became evident to me that people told stories, and sometimes very different stories, to describe and make sense of creativity and innovation. These story-performances were collective and collaborative and both invited and sometimes required me to participate. I believe the highly narrative and 'story-building' approach used in this thesis, provides far more rich, textural data that helps us to understand how people understand what is creative and innovative in the world around them. The methodology speaks directly to people and allows them to speak back to both the researcher and the reader. By visiting them in their workplace they are offered an opportunity for a story-performance that helps me, as the researcher, help them tell their story. The use of narrative for both exploration and then ordering and sense-making, allows all the participants (including me) to have their voice heard.

#### **4.6. Tales of the Field – the Empirical Phase**

*“How long should a man’s legs be? Long enough to reach the ground”*

*J.D.Salinger*

The empirical phase of this research was conducted in two stages. The first interviews and international site visits (to South Africa and the UK) were conducted in 2001, and although I later did not make explicit use of that field data it nonetheless continued to guide my thinking. The second empirical phase– that which provided the data used in this thesis – consisted of workshops, interviews and site visits conducted during 2004. The design of the methodology for this second phase of data collection was guided as much by pragmatism and practicality as by any theoretical design. There were realities that I needed to be aware of when working within this local government environment. To a large extent, local government was a context that had been rarely studied in Australia

and it was unknown at the outset whether my intended research participants may or may not value the purpose of the research. I was pleasantly rewarded when I found that nearly everyone involved in this project was welcoming, enthusiastic and cooperative. However, they were also busy, and their priorities were to carry out the work allocated to them, not spend too much time participating in research. Local Councils have a political and legislative 'calendar' of meetings, budgets, reports and deadlines that had to be heeded, so I would need to try and visit during their 'quiet times'.

#### **4.6.1. An Expert Panel and the Expert Observer**

My first significant challenge of the empirical phase was to determine how to select the three 'innovative' Councils. In the first instance I undertook a brief review of the local government 'innovation', 'best practice', and 'excellence' awards. There are a variety of these awards handed out by Government agencies, professional peak associations, even regional groupings of peer Councils and often the competition for them is quite fierce amongst local Councils. My logic was, that those judging these awards could be usefully seen as 'industry observers' or even 'experts in the domain' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) . Their explanation of the selection criteria for these awards would provide some early and basic evidence of what was perceived to be an 'innovative' council. My preliminary review of the Award entry requirements (with details of the criteria that needed to be demonstrated) provided a collation of descriptors/indicator for innovation and a wide range of criteria. They were not really cohesive, sometimes appeared a little contradictory and also seemed to be reasonably conservative and supporting the declared and espoused principles of the nominating bodies rather than any discernable attribution of 'innovation' (see Appendices).

Late in 2003, a workshop was held with a panel of seven of the 'Expert' judges, representing the key groups involved in giving these local government Awards. I

had planned to videotape the workshop (with the proviso that the videotape would never be shown), but the equipment failed and I ended up recording through handwritten notes and retaining flipchart papers for later transcription. The workshop lasted for some four hours. After outlining the objectives and purpose of the workshop, the group was shown the collation of their publicised descriptors/indicator for innovation discussed and established some revised selection criteria <sup>11</sup> and then used these to identify some potential case study Councils (see the following chapter for more detailed description). They were asked to select three local councils in NSW – one small rural, one metropolitan, and one regional centre – but agreement was reached only on the metropolitan and regional centre (one ‘first choice’ and one ‘second choice’ for each category. The process gave me the added assurance that I was not imposing my own subjective definition of what constitutes an ‘innovative local Council’ - which proved to be significant as one of the Councils chosen was the local government area where I lived at the time. Whilst the panel were not able to come to consensus on the selection of a small rural council they collectively nominated a well-known local government ‘expert’ observer who they felt confident would be able to make the selection. Following the workshop, I met with and interviewed the individual observer. I showed him the agreed criteria developed by the ‘expert panel’ and asked him to reflect on these and select a rural Council. The expert observer suggested a rural Council on the basis of his experience and his understanding of the criteria. This meeting took about two hours and was recorded in handwritten notes. I relayed the details of the nominated Council back to all members of the ‘expert panel’ and they all concurred.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Appendices

#### **4.6.2. Three Case Study Councils**

The selection process had nominated three local Councils in NSW – Coffs Harbour, Marrickville and Narrabri<sup>12</sup>. Using the internet and the existing library resources at the UTS Centre for Local government, I sought out any initial information about the three local Councils. I initially concurrently contacted them with a standard request letter and invited them to participate in the research study. Not surprisingly, they responded positively to the fact that they had been nominated as ‘an innovative Council’. However all three Councils had just been through the NSW local government elections, and were busy ‘settling in’ their new Councillors. So, all three Councils requested a postponement of my field visit. After an agreed delay I contacted them early in 2004 and they all offered me welcome invitation and we negotiated a date for my field visits. In all cases the field visits were conducted for a period of 4-6 days each. The respondent Councils were informed of the proposed methodology prior to my arrival (see appendices) – a workshop with the ‘Executive Management Team’ (typically, the General Manager and the Directors of the various Divisions/Departments), followed by in-depth interviews with hopefully 6 nominated staff members who were identified (by the Executive Team) as being ‘creative’ and responsible for contributing to the Council’s status as an ‘innovative’ organisation.

#### **4.6.3. Executive Workshops and Individual Interviews**

The Executive Team workshops in each Council were semi-structured in that I had a series of ‘trigger’ questions plus the Expert Panel’s outputs to present to participants, but I also allowed a degree of free-flowing conversation to the process. I firstly presented the Executive Team with the criteria developed previously by the Expert Panel and asked them to respond in relation to their own

---

<sup>12</sup> All of the Local Councils involved in this study agreed to being identified. However, it was agreed that individual participants interviewed (either as part of a workshop or singularly) would remain anonymous and pseudonyms would be used.

Council and how they understood their innovation. Quickly I found that people wanted to tell stories as a response and also ask me for my stories as well. In all cases I found that participants often indicated a desire for a very re-iterative approach where I would ask an initial question and they would respond with “tell us more about what you mean”, or they would tell a story as an answer and then follow this with, “is that the sort of thing you are talking about?” In response I might sometimes suggest an example from the literature (usually described in layman’s terms) and ask them what sense they made of it. Gradually by this process of overlaying each of our questions and answers we built a shared and common understanding – a process I have chosen to call ‘story-building’. I chose the moments during the workshop when to ask other broad questions for clarification or to pick up on some point that had been mentioned earlier. The workshops generally went to schedule and I videotaped them and later transcribed the results.

The Executive workshop was charged with the task of nominating six individual staff members who they felt were contributing to their status as an ‘innovative Councils’. These would be people whom I would approach to conduct one-on-one interviews. In all cases they agreed on and nominated six persons – although in Narrabri three of the six nominees were the three members of the Executive team (I initially was cautious but later felt confident about this choice). In one Council, of the six persons nominated for interview, one chose not to be interviewed and the Executive Team did not suggest a replacement. So in all, 17 individual interviews were conducted and recorded.

#### **4.6.4. Data Collection and Recording**

The one-on-one interviewees were conducted in private, although often not without interruption. Typically the interviewee location would typically have a table where I could display the diagrammatic representation of the PCF. As with



The executive workshops, the individual interviews were semi-structured in that I had a series of pre-determined interview questions (see appendices) and the visual prompts of the PCF diagram. However I attempted to allow as much flexibility as possible, both in the conversation and in the timing of the interview. On a number of occasions the interviews were interrupted briefly by work issues, and on others people would return with objects and artefacts to illustrate their answers. A number of people spontaneously drew pictures and diagrams on an available whiteboard or by taking my PCF diagrams and drawing on the back.

During the interviews people behaved differently and answered questions in a variety of ways, but again there was a common use of stories to explain meanings and concepts. As with the executive workshop, there was often a re-iterative conversation and a request for me to be active in the discussion and 'co-produce' (Boje 1991) the story-building with the interviewees. People would return to previous answers and re-shape them or use a story to clarify their meaning. On a number of occasions they indicated that they were telling the story for the first time, or that it was a not-yet-complete, living story (e.g. Bakhtin, 1993) - "I'm not sure as I've never really thought of it like this before, but...". The stories were also often reflexive (e.g. Tyler and Rosen, 2008) as people used the story-telling as a way of understanding meaning as they were telling the story. Sometimes they simply alluded to other stories: "You know what I am talking about, what I am saying - because you are from local government". I recorded their answers using (firstly) a tape recorder and then a digital voice recorder, plus notes and copies of the pictures or diagrams they sometimes drew. It was not uncommon for 'early' interviewees in each of the Councils to seek me out in the corridors or around the Council buildings and revive our conversation to update and modify their earlier answers...or sometimes just to tell me another story.

In all of the Councils I also chatted to other employees and sometimes members of the community. I would walk around the streets of the local area and observe the visual information of the area. In some instances, 'onlookers', such as other Council staff and community members provided their unsolicited comment and input. In one instance, I was contacted unexpectedly by the editor of the local paper, who explained that he had heard about my research and wondered if I had read much of the work of Richard Florida (2002, 2005). We met later in the week and he gave me some welcome suggestions for my reading list – many of which turned out to be significant.

The field data was collected in a variety of forms and media – videotapes, tape recordings, digital recordings, scribbled pictures and diagrams, and handwritten notes. Ad hoc comments and conversations were not recorded instantly and sometimes field-notes were written at the end of the day. I also kept general field trip notes and amassed the kind of organisational 'textural' information from brochures, reports, websites and also 'promotional' materials from tourism information offices or general publications. In addition, I reviewed the artefacts – what I called the 'organisational packaging' in each council – the organisational literature, brochures, documents, reports, media releases etc – and also any relevant 'outside' documents and/or reports relating to each of the case study Councils. Not surprisingly, as the research was conducted over a period of some 8 years, it was also important to keep up with any 'ongoing' news of the three case study Councils. Such multiple sources of data are important as the complementary but differing data sources allow a triangulation that should make the research more robust. Whilst this research is fundamentally about exploring ideas, understanding, stories and action – "tales of creativity and innovation" – my narrative also includes my own stories from my observations and the meanings I have developed.

The data was initially transcribed as quickly as possible. I wanted the confidence of having the body of my collected data in front of me as ingredients and as collateral. I am sure, not unlike many researchers, I still left the field or an interview time and time again, banging my forehead and muttering to myself "why didn't I ask that?...why didn't I follow up on that?" Notes were filed, videotapes were reviewed key points noted for further analysis, and interviews were transcribed. As Wolcott (1998) points out: "everything has the potential to be data - but nothing becomes data without the intervention of the researcher who takes note - and often makes note -of some things to the exclusion of others...[this is the] idea of transforming data" (pp. 4-5). I began to build the stories early, with preliminary drafts of the case study stories. The reflection on experience, the searching for remembered conversations, the reflexive contemplation, the sharing of initial tales with friends and colleagues, all contributed to the first drafts of story-building. These early story-drafts began to inform the coding process as I looked for patterns, significance and meaning from what I had experienced and what I had learned. I was immersed in, and surrounded by, Boje's (2001) antenarrative - full of 'pre-narratives' or 'possible narratives'.

Part of the ongoing discursive nature of this research was the process of people finding their own ways to articulate their precise understandings of commonly-held concepts after a process of questioning and reflection. Many of them commented that this was brought about by my intervention as a researcher and statements such as: "I guess I never really thought about it that precisely" were common in many responses to my questions. It is also important to note the time-span of this project (8 years) and that as a part-time researcher, during this time I also interacted with the case study Councils in other roles. This had the effect of blurring some of the precise time boundaries of the stages of research, as conversations would be ongoing in some instances and people would approach me and make further comments after reflection. Also I was asked to make some early

summary comments in a number of forums (local government seminars and forums, staff workshops etc) prior to the completion of this thesis. Whilst some of these issues challenged the purist notions of 'scientific' and 'objective' research, as a real-life researcher I regarded them as positive signs of the participative nature of my work and the genuine interest in the findings. This ongoing interaction also was the mark of the collaborative story-building process that was fundamental to the core of this project.

#### **4.7. Alone in a Room with all these Stories.**

I'd let people see me listening, being a 'co-producer' and 'co-author'. They could see me scribbling notes and sometimes we would do it together- jotting points down on the PCF diagrams. In the background, my tiny digital recorder would be snuggled on top of its old football sock, silently recording and usually ignored.

After the field trips I was often alone once again. Alone in a room with all these stories - armfuls of scribbled field-notes, jottings, videotapes, digitally recorded interviews, documents and brochures, and my memories and recollections of stories told. I transcribed everything. I watched the videos endlessly and transcribed their conversations into notes. I posted their PCF diagrams on the wall and looked for patterns. As I listened to the recordings I heard the stories again and often this gave them new and additional meaning - adding again to the story-building. Then I would go to my transcripts and highlight the key words. Perhaps I could have used a more sophisticated computer-based analysis, but this way I felt still more of a participant in the story-building.

I was aware of trying to offer a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) that shared the texture of the stories and the experiences. But slowly, the stories also began to unravel into the threads of antenarrative and fragments of stories. Some answers to

questions had an almost cautious tone to them –as if people were ‘trying out’ a piece of a story to see if it could become story. At other times, people would tell a story and then follow up with comments like: “So what that shows is...”, to make sure that I got the story meaning they wanted me to get. This aligned with Boje’s antenarrative and White and Epston’s (1990) concept of ‘restorying’. Even though I had usually asked the same set of guiding questions, in the same order, the narrative was not always chronological. People would double-back and segue here and there. Stories would contain answers to many questions all at once, and then answers to questions never asked. Sometimes I would sit in my study and “talk to them” all over again in my mind, and then search through the notes and transcripts to find a script for their reply.

I began to build our stories, and picked out key pieces of narrative that I felt offered exemplary examples of the common themes, but also those that offered contrasts and juxtaposition. As you will see in Chapter six, I have used the guiding questions as a way of ordering the narrative, but filled it with bits and pieces with their responses and my reflections. I began to write and fill out the stories of my field trip, to offer a narrative backdrop in which the voices in chapter six could be heard. In all cases there was an element of fictionalisation, as I ordered and emphasised the story-fragments to share the meaning that I believe was understood by the participants, as well as my own. This followed some of the practices of the ‘creative non-fiction’ genre as described by authors such as Gutkind (1997) and Johnson and Wolfe (1975).

## **4.8. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter.**

This chapter presented the methodological aspects of this thesis. It describes how the research design and methodology evolved through three phases, influenced by a series of Doctoral supervisors, by circumstance and by my own learning. The methodologies employed are transdisciplinary and borrow from the practices of ethnography and narrative research – and hence my the use of the term ‘ethno-narrative’. I discussed issues of my own subjectivity and participation in the research – in the conduct of the fieldwork, in the collaborative ‘story- building’ and in the development of the narrative writing used in this thesis. In the following, chapter I invite you into some of the stories of this research – stories of my journeys and my experience and the journeys and experiences of others. There are stories of creativity and innovation in local government and what it means to the people that work there. I believe that the style has for a moment brought together the stories into a narrative that (perhaps for a moment) makes sense of these things.

## Chapter 5.

# 5. Adventures in the Field – 3 Visits and an Expert Workshop

### Chapter Overview

The previous chapter described and justified the research design and methodology. This chapter shares some of the stories and adventures from the field. It is written in a narrative style to provide the 'gaze of a traveller' (Atkinson, 1990). I blend observation with description and comment – all with the aim of weaving together some of the threads of event, appearance and significance into the fabric of the story, and hence, share my sense of the places and the people within them. I have not simply captured and described data as that would deny the reality of the interrelationship between my role as a researcher and a participant. During the empirical phase it became obvious that I could not just step back, observe, and comment. So, like so many ethnographers before me, I took the invitations to participate and became part of the story-building process. At some times, in the Councils I visited, I was simply accepted as being amongst them and, for a brief period part of the daily texture. The chapter tells the story of the 'Expert Panel workshop' my meeting with a specialist 'expert' who reviewed the workshop discussions and helped me select a small rural council. Following this, the chapter shares some of the stories from the field trips to each of the three Councils, and other events that occurred during the course of this research projects. The Councils and organisations are named and described, but all personal names used are pseudonyms.

## 5.1. Ask the Experts

*"Buddy ...can you spare some time?" ... or... well alright...words to that effect.* My invitation had been short, slightly formal and to the point. I'd felt a little awkward sending such a note, but I needed a panel of experts to help me select my case study Councils – I certainly didn't want to make that choice myself and then find I was having to spend endless hours justifying my choice and defending myself against accusations of personal bias. So I sent it out along with an outline of my research topic, all the necessary consent forms, a location map and promises of freshly-brewed coffee, tasty snacks and spring water. I felt confident that I had done my groundwork, done my homework, jumped the hurdles - passed the test - well at least this far! I'd done endless revisions of conceptual frameworks and key questions, given Powerpoint presentations of findings from the literature. I'd re-jigged the methodology design and made a promise to the Ethics Committee that no cute animals or Council staff would be harmed in the research and all the data would be secretly stored in a big black box, offsite, in my sister's garage hidden behind all the Christmas decorations. Now was time for the real bit. Real people, real questions, and real research!

However, I was edgy and I felt strangely anxious. It was also a new role for me. Up until now, my doctoral research had been a somewhat private peccadillo - a secret process confined to my family, close friends, and my supervisors, along with the faceless and endless 'approval committees'. But these people... the 'respondents', were my colleagues, my professional kith and kin, and now I had to expose myself to them as the doctoral student – a character I had never portrayed to them before. But soon the responses poured in and they all agreed to attend. I was unsure of whether they were responding as a favour to me, or because of their interest in the topic. It was impossible to disentangle their motives and ultimately...well, I figured in the end it didn't matter.



These were the 'experts'... the 'learned elders' of the local government tribe. Well, not exactly 'elders' (hmmm...some would have baulked at the invitation I am sure if I had addressed them as "Dear Local Government Elder"). They were judges though. Every year, Australian local government, through its professional associations and peak bodies, hands out all sorts of awards with the ubiquitous titles of "Excellence Award", "Best Practice Award" or, more recently "Innovation Award"<sup>13</sup>. My logic was that surely the people who judge these awards and make decisions about what actually constitutes "innovation" in local government would be able to give me some decent ideas about how to select my 'innovative' case study Councils. So I had gathered seven of the judges for these awards- most of them well-known and prominent figures in local government and all with a pedigree that carried some weight against any potential scoffers.

I prepared the venue...first things first. I booked a boardroom on the university campus as this seemed a useful location for local government folk (easy to get to, close to public transport...all the logistics). Coffee, tea, water, pastries, sandwiches: check! Whiteboard, paper, pens, laptop with data projector: check! Voice recorder, flipchart paper, video recorder. I jokingly referred to it as "Bwana Bob's Doctoral Safari" - I had half a day of their busy time and I need all the gear and provisions to make sure I wasn't going to miss a thing. I had converted some of my early findings into 'flash-cards'. I didn't like the idea of us sitting in the sleepy warmth of a semi-dark room and watching Powerpoint slides, so I had gathered up some key points, quotes, questions, as well as some of my early attempts to describe creativity as a set of professional capabilities, and printed them out as a series of A4 paper cards. I figured this might help us interact more and also allow us build the stories between us by laying out the cards and perhaps moving them around

---

<sup>13</sup> E.g. : the National Local Government Innovation Awards (now re-named the Leading Practice Awards) <http://dynamic.dotars.gov.au/nolg/nalg/index.aspx>, Sydney Morning Herald Local Government Management Excellence Awards, <http://www.lgmansw.com.au/default.asp?id=77&parentid=11&parentid2=77>, The AR Bluett Memorial Awards, <http://www.lgsa.org.au>.

on the table-top to make new connections in the discussion. I had done up a basic agenda<sup>14</sup> but the reality was that the simple time constraint of just over two and a half hours would mostly govern our interaction. These were busy people and they had limited time... even for me.

I'd sent out twelve invitations and got back seven positive replies...which I was really pretty happy with. I reminded myself, "it's the quality that counts". My quick check back for guidance from the literature highlighted 'multi-dimensional' and 'trans-disciplinary' coverage and I was looking for 'well-rounded' responses to my questions. So I had amassed a collection of individuals representing a broad and varied view of local government in NSW. From the NSW State Government, there were 'Frank'<sup>15</sup> from the Department that had specific responsibility for most aspects of local government, 'Laura' from the Planning Department, and 'Jim' from the Environment Department. 'David' was from a University research centre focused on the public sector and 'Nastassia' was the feisty Executive Director of a Regional Organisation of Councils. 'Mark' represented the engineer's professional association and 'Joel' headed up the judging panel for the annual awards given out by a large daily newspaper. All of them were known to me and a number had been workmates or colleagues on various projects over the years. As a local government 'Expert Panel', the gathered group seemed pretty reasonable to me.

### **5.1.1. Getting Started**

As they arrived, at first they buzzed around the coffee and pastries like busy hornets. In my experience, local government folk are, by and large, a pretty

---

<sup>14</sup> See Appendices for the Workshop Agenda

<sup>15</sup> In this chapter, none of the Expert Panel members are identified by their real names and their organisations are identified by generic titles. Similarly, Executive staff from case study Councils are not identified by their real names. No interviewees and workshop participants expressed any desire to remain anonymous – but they remain so in order to meet agreed Guidelines with the UTS Ethics Committee

friendly bunch and it is a common ritual of greeting to spend some time and just stand around and gab and gossip for a while. But I eventually I had to draw them to the table with the sheepish waving of a bit of paper and pantomime pointing at my wristwatch. They seemed, like me, to be very slightly unsure of this new relationship with them as 'experts' with me at the front of the room as 'a student'. But they were all smiling as I handed around the prepared rough agenda. I read out the workshop aim: harrumph...cough... "The broad aim of this workshop is to discuss and develop some criteria of innovation in local government and then to use those criteria to select five NSW Councils for further study. It is not a competition and hopefully out of the five we will get three Councils who agree to participate". Frank instantly jumped in: "are we talking about 'innovation in local government' or 'innovative local government'?" I knew him well enough to know he wasn't splitting hairs, and I could see how it was an important difference. We all talked around the topic for a bit and I watched them turn to engage enthusiastically with each other. No way was this lot going to just sit there and answer my questions -they wanted to engage in dialogue and discussion. It was like an African choir with my lone voice singing out a question and them singing back the massed harmonies of their mixed response. During a moment where they were talking amongst themselves, I turned to my so-far trustworthy video camera, to find it blinking and bleating at me. The battery had failed... so it was rapid scribbled note-taking right from the start!

I stowed the now-useless camera and tripod and they had turned the conversation around to the criteria for awarding the so-called excellence and innovation awards. As the conversation slowly evolved I was quietly amused. They began to reveal that even though they were all judges on these awards, (indeed that had been the criteria for their own selection for this workshop) after some reflection and some discussion, they now thought that...well... actually the Councils that won their awards may not necessarily be really 'innovative'. And as Jim pointed out maybe

the Councils which are lauded for being 'leaders' may be more about them being consistent rather than innovative. It was a good-humoured conversation but with an ever-so slight sheepishness as they admitted that whilst they advertised to be promoting innovation maybe they were probably rewarding other things – such as “appropriate professional behaviour” or “... demonstrating preferred ideals”.

### **5.1.2. Reviewing the Evidence**

“So okay”, I said “let’s look at your actual criteria from your various Innovation and Excellence awards”. They quietly munched on their pastries, murmuring as I laid out the cards. I had collected the ‘innovation and ‘excellence’ criteria from all of their awards. I had trawled through their websites, brochures and application forms and had collated a broad list grouped under some key statements. I read them out: “ We’ve got – ‘Clear evidence of innovation’ (someone chuckled) ‘Cost-effective’, ‘Ratepayer satisfaction’, ‘Consistent project/service delivery’, ‘Identify key strategic directions and make them happen’, ‘Transferability’ ”. I hadn’t intended to be critical, but a couple of them squirmed nonetheless and they were collectively unresponsive towards the criteria. Slowly, they sipped their coffees and murmured. Heads were shaking and there were slight frowns. “Nope” said someone. No, these criteria probably did not identify ‘innovation’ nor ‘innovative Councils’.

There was a flurry of discussion around the criteria. In relation to ‘clear evidence of innovation’ it was pointed some Councils were “shameless-self-promoters”. Some Councils they said, spent a lot of time and effort in self-publicising and applying for awards, and hence ‘evidence of innovation’ might be seen to be more obvious in such organisations. But this raised the question of whether they really were ‘innovative Councils’ and whether there might be other ‘innovative’ (or even more innovative) Councils that we not aware of, because they were not able to (or chose not to) allocate resources toward publicising their actions. Frank looked at the term

'cost effective' and commented: "As an accountant I have to say the focus on so-called cost-effectiveness can often be, in my experience, one of the biggest barriers to innovation. Sometimes innovation is costly but also highly worthwhile". He went on to give some brief examples of where a conservative approach to cost-effectiveness may have been a disincentive to the appropriate amount of risk-taking that might have led to innovation. They were also nods of agreement when we came to 'Ratepayer Satisfaction' – the ultimate judges, if you like, of the innovation should be the ratepayers and citizens. This all prompted discussion on the important question of what was an "appropriate level of risk" that may be necessary to achieve useful innovation, and the realities (in terms of mandated role and also political pressures) of simply keeping the community happy. Joel immediately saw a contradiction between the terms 'Consistent project/service delivery' and what he viewed as 'innovation. Surely, he proposed, there was a conflict between "consistency" versus "doing something new". Others agreed that there needed to be efforts to ensure that 'consistency' didn't also equate to 'mediocrity'. There was a strong all-round agreement for 'Identify key strategic directions and make them happen'. This turned the discussion to the importance of innovation being "more than just a good idea". It was felt that a critical aspect of innovation was taking creativity and "good ideas" and "making them happen" through a process of successful implementation.

I found a gap in the verbal traffic and shot out "well... shall we see what's come out of the literature?". Ahah... the body of knowledge! The crumbs were brushed off chins and the last slurps of coffee were gulped as I put up an overhead projector slide with some key statements that I had found during my literature review. I explained that I didn't want to bamboozle them with the vast array of different perspectives relating to creativity and innovation, and I reinforced my intention to try and look at people being creative and innovative at work. I pointed out that my short collection of issues, keywords and statements was merely meant

to be a trigger for their discussions. On the wall in front of them was now the illuminated list: 'The way that creative individuals and their organisations work together'; 'A new idea put into practice'; 'Implementation of creative ideas in an organisation'; 'Adaptation of an existing idea'; 'A discontinuous change'; 'Usefulness'; 'Sustainable'; and 'Produce results for the well-being of clients'.

Once again they were nodding and smiling. Every so often someone pointed up at the words on the wall as they talked amongst themselves. They liked the statement 'The way that creative individuals and [their] organisations work together'. They said it was important to recognise the relationships between creative individuals and the way in which they worked together and within an organisational context to develop innovation and also 'innovative Councils'. The discussions highlighted the interpersonal aspects of the innovation process and also the need to examine "people coming up with ideas and then working together to make them happen". They pondered for while over the statement 'A new idea put into practice'. To them, implementation was a critical factor and an idea "...may have been around for a while but it needed the process of implementation to develop into an innovation".

There was a brief debate about what was a 'new idea' then they returned back to their understanding of the phrase 'put into practice'. Laura suggested, "That's what this is about" and she pointed at the next statement: 'Implementation of creative ideas in an organisation'. Implementation was clearly a key part of what they regarded as innovation and there was an important distinction between "just good ideas" and "good ideas that are actually implemented". I was absorbed in trying to jot down the key phrases from their discussions so mostly I just listened and let them talk. A few of them had got quite excited were getting into enthusiastic discussions about 'new' ideas, 'originality', and the tricky old debate between 'adaptation or adoption?' - or as Mark called it "revolution or evolution?".

The next statement, 'Adaptation of an existing idea', brought out more comments about innovation meaning adaptation of ideas that may have been pre-existing and/or implementing "old ideas in a new way".

They were moving through the list unprompted by me and picking up threads of ideas, crossing them and weaving the discussion amongst themselves. The talk turned towards 'A discontinuous change' – that moment where organisations sometimes took what had been called "the big sideways step". They said that organisations needed to be not only being willing to "do things differently" [albeit within a framework of acceptable risk] but also needed to be regularly "on the lookout for new ways and opportunities to do things differently". "It really does need to be useful" said Laura. This 'Usefulness' was felt to be a critical aspect of innovation in local government. The innovations needed to be perceived, both within and without the Council, as being useful and producing a desirable result or valued outcome for the community. Joel suggested that this aspect may prove to be a differentiation between 'innovation' in the private and public sectors, and perhaps the final determinant of innovation in local government would be measured by its effect in the community (rather than company success or profits).

When it came down to 'Sustainable', everybody looked at Jim from the Environment Department, but he just smiled and shrugged. Councils that sustained innovation would be involved in a "cycle of innovation" – from idea generation, to idea testing and implementation, to institutionalisation, to then seeking new ideas and so on. It was also important that individual innovations were broadly sustainable (i.e. that they could be implemented on more than just a one-off occasion). However once an innovation had become 'standard practice' in a Council, then wouldn't it be necessary for it to evolve and adapt to continue to be labelled as 'innovation'? This caused a lot of discussion accompanied by hand movements demonstrating cyclic ideas of innovation, new ideas, implementation

and then “old hat”. Finally, we got to the last statement; ‘Produce results for the well-being of clients’. We’d been close to this topic before and again this criteria highlighted the panel’s commitment to the idea that the ‘ultimate test’ for local government creativity and innovation was the production of a ‘useful’, ‘valuable’ and ‘real’ result for the community. Any so-called innovations in Councils that didn’t produce these kinds of results... well...they weren’t really innovation were they?

### **5.1.3. Building Criteria**

I’d been writing some key words and phrases from their discussions on the back of bits of paper and had managed to get a few of them up on the whiteboard as well. I grouped them as clusters of responses to the statements up on the wall. So now I asked them to reflect on what they had been talking about and try to blend it - to synthesize it into some useful and functional criteria for us to select our case study Councils. I wasn’t after definitive research results here. We just needed to go back over all of this stuff and see if we could come up with some useful way to pick our case study Councils. So we began to build a list together. We put up everything we had - I laid out whatever bits of paper I had and we also had the overhead projector slide and the notes on the whiteboard.

They looked and reflected. Some of them got up to find a fresh cup of coffee. I prompted and tempted and goaded - using the whiteboard to draft and wipe then reiterate the results of their conversations. In this way we moved with through a reiterative waltz as we built up our list of criteria. I grouped some of their criteria together under obvious themes and then we discussed them again before coming to consensus.

In the end, we came to the final list: ‘An Organisation and Individuals that Genuinely Embrace Change’, ‘Using and exploring new processes’, ‘The approach



is different every time', 'Organisations that encourage the environment of change', and then 'Doing it a different way'. They suggested that we should be looking for an organisation that was comfortable with change and saw it as part of a dynamic and fluid process of dealing with day-to-day issues.

I listened to some of their discussions about each of these criteria. They were adamant that it should be "a genuine organisational culture of innovation, rather than just an innovative output". They wanted to see that there was a "qualitative change" and a "change in culture". They scoffed at "just a simple output"...no! Innovation was about organisational and culture change. Their discussions raised that in order for a Council to be innovative, the organisation needed to do more than just produce innovations as outputs but also needed to be seen to have an evolving organisational culture that regarded innovation as the normal way of doing things.

"But what about risk?", I chimed. David, who had been silent for so much time, suddenly spoke: "there needs to be a relative allowance of caution". He went on to explain- the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable risk need to be clear but also that there is a tolerance and even encouragement of 'acceptable' risk-taking. The rest of them fell upon this topic with gusto. They declared that the notion of 'acceptable risk' is particularly important in public sector organisations. They felt that there are legislative and societal constraints within which Councils must work and innovative Councils must be aware of what would be deemed as 'acceptable risk'. They thought it was likely that innovative Councils would be engaged in a constant process of determining what level of risk was acceptable and that this evolved and shifted with experience. There were some questions as to whether this level of 'acceptable risk' may be higher or 'lower than in the private sector. Their discussions were not conclusive but it was generally agreed that the determinants of acceptable risk were probably different in the public and private sectors.

When they returned to the topic of 'A Sustainable Culture of Innovation' they talked about "...a sustained achievement of results" and the fact that the innovation "survives the champion" - that the idea/notion/process outlasts the efforts of a single 'champion' and gets built into the culture of the organisation. Did this further support their idea of incremental change? They were sure that it "needed to survive the external factors" and that it should go beyond one-off pressures or one-off environmental factors and, "last". Not just reactive but the innovation becomes an ongoing process of being proactive. Someone piped up, "The innovations are buoyant...they survive the storms". This then led to talk of an "embedded culture of innovation". We were looking for a Council that continually seeks out innovation and innovative ways of doing things, not simply as a reaction to adverse circumstance, nor simply because an unusual opportunity presented itself. This could be an incremental 'adaptation and adoption' process, whereby the Council has an ongoing process of gathering new ideas and then adapting and using them as they saw fit.

Joel suggested "A Learning Organisation" and I wondered where he had first learnt the term. By now some people had begun to get up from the table and move around, physically altering their position in the discussion. "Peer learning and development!" someone shouted - Councils that actively seek out new ideas and fostered relationships where they both gained access to, and contributed new ideas and knowledge. Councils that communicate and share with others, contribute to the broader community - to help others to share and learn. "That's it...an innovative Council is involved in sharing and learning things - they are a true learning organisation". I wrote it up quickly as the topic developed. They raised the idea of 'obligation' to the 'local government community'. Innovative Councils would be active in mutually beneficial information-sharing and also promoting innovation through participating in professional learning programs, conferences, and also making information available through articles and websites. I quizzed

them then about the notion of 'transferability' that was a favoured criteria for Government-sponsored awards. The test of this 'transferability' could be that the innovation was robust enough to be shared and used by others. There was considerable discussion about whether this test conflicted with the notion of "new ways of doing/viewing things". Perhaps this focus on transferability may discourage an organisation from seeking new ways to do things and encourage them to just "run with the pack" or even "copy others".

#### **5.1.4. What about Their People?**

I looked at my watch and noticed how quickly the time had past. "I want to talk about their people", I announced, "and how these creative people might work inside the innovative organisations". "They have the right people in the right roles and they use them properly" replied Nastassia. Mark described what he called 'Alignment', the notion that in innovative organisations a person's role and position is respected and is fully utilised to achieve the organisational aims. "People know their roles and play them properly". This meant that the organisation had to "think across silos and disciplines" and focus on exploring both collective and individual talents and skills.

In an innovative Council there should be a discernable set of organisational relationships. Firstly, individuals were aware of their respective roles and were aware of how to (and strived to) fulfil their roles in order to produce the benefit for the Council and hence the community. Secondly, that there was an organisational management system that expected people to carry out these respective roles. However, finally, they offered that innovative Councils may also encourage a constant re-evaluation of roles and "...not rely on traditional concepts or stereotypes". Frank quickly reminded us that this would all be within the legislative frameworks which prescribed constraints on certain relationships (e.g. between Councillors and staff).

“The organisation needs to show people that it values creativity and innovation”. They said this meant recognising, recruiting and using and valuing ‘talent’. The organisation needed to demonstrate that it valued ‘creative people’ and show that “innovation fits the values”. People would be given the message that creativity and innovation were things that were valued, with the continual aim of producing outcomes that were in the ‘community interest’. These organisations would be “committed to real continuous improvement”.

### **5.1.5. Selecting the Councils**

We stopped to gather thoughts, take a quick break and fill water glasses. I asked them to look at all of the notes and words around us and I reiterated our final task – to use our rough criteria to select five Councils. I hoped that out of the five, three Councils would agree to be case study partners. I stressed that this was not a competition to find the ‘most innovative’ Councils. I was looking for examples of Councils that fit the criteria, and hopefully, a Metropolitan Council, a Council in a Regional Centre, and a small Rural Council. Not that my classifications were scientific, rather that they reflected the three commonly viewed categories of Council in NSW.

The panel began to name and discuss Councils and suggest them as possible candidates. The conversation was somewhat tentative and people offered nominations a little cautiously at first. Nastassia suddenly burst out, “You know all these criteria are great, but when you find a truly innovative Council.... you just know!”. People nodded. “Like who?” asked Joel. Nastassia thought for a moment and answered “Marrickville!” There was no debate and others at the table murmured agreement. For a blinding second a hot flush of relief coursed through my body –Marrickville was an inner-city suburb in metropolitan Sydney and it was also where I lived. Thankfully the panel had picked my local Council not me!

They talked a bit further and suggested that Marrickville Council had characteristics like: “enthusiasm and support for new ideas”, “a real culture of innovation” and that the approach to innovation “is not just project-based” it was “across the whole organisation”. Mark cited them as an example of where innovation was: “...entrenched in the organisation”, and that there was “...good alignment between people and their roles’. Marrickville is a very multicultural area and the Council was commended for being “...good at balancing all their different communities”. Finally Nastassia concluded “they tick all the boxes”.

The group looked pleased with themselves as they had succeeded in picking their first Council. The discussions that followed were faster, more staccato...machine-gun fire of suggestions and comments. Everyone contributed and people shrugged if they knew little about the Council being discussed. They nominated Penrith Council as a second choice for “Metropolitan Council”. Penrith was a rapidly growing ‘new’ suburb on the western edge of Sydney, and had transformed from being a down-at-heel, semi-rural fringe town, into a bustling new centre of local wealth and pride. The Council had “changed the attitudes in the community”. Despite being a big Council it was noted that, “They haven’t lost the little Council feel”. It was said that they were “involved in a wide variety of endeavours” and that “they contribute a lot to the industry”. Two more choices for possible ‘Metropolitan’ councils emerged and then I pointed to the clock on the wall and suggested that we turn our attention to selecting a ‘Regional Centre’.

By now, people were not so hesitant to offer their nominations and out they came – Coffs Harbour, Eurobodalla Shire, Dubbo City – along with verbal bullet lists of factors to support their choices. In the end they recommended ‘Regional Centre’ was Coffs Harbour City Council. “Coffs” is a medium sized coastal city about 6 hrs drive north from Sydney. They had recently won some fame for successfully luring the National Rugby Team (the Wallabies) to use the city as their training base, in

preference over the larger capitals... and this was cited as the first reason for their 'innovative' status. It was observed that they were, "always trying something new", and, in particular, "they have made some really significant developments in IT". Frank noted that on a recent visit he felt that "the General Manager has cultivated an environment that is conducive to creativity and innovation". Someone else concurred and noted that "innovations are generated by the staff".

They quickly nominated two other regional centres, and now I was feeling confident as we had two out of three first-choice nominations. However, we struck an obstacle when it came to selecting a small rural Council. There were lots of frowns and grimaces, a long lingering pause and few useful comments. Finally, the Expert Panel had to admit that they couldn't select a small rural Council. Perhaps, someone suggested, that whilst they had a broad variety of experience, maybe they might be "too Sydney-centric". Also, it might be that there may be small rural Councils who could fit the criteria, but due to lack of resources (or even choice) they had not broadcast their achievements. For a moment I was downcast. We had been going so well, but I really wanted to examine a small rural council as well – in order to see whether the relative scarcity of resources had any effect on their innovative capacity. Frank then recommended an 'Expert', "Sean", who he said, "certainly should know". The rest of the Panel members agreed with the suggestion unanimously so I agreed to meet with Sean, get his suggestions and then get back to them by email. Everyone looked immensely cheered up and there was general feeling that we had done a good job. We celebrated our morning's achievements with sandwiches and orange juice.

### **5.1.6. Coffee with the Expert**

Following the advice of the Panel, the next week I contacted 'The Expert', Sean, and I arranged to meet in a busy coffee shop in central Sydney. I agreed with the panel's choice of Sean, their conferred status of 'expert' and I also felt confident

that he had the necessary breadth and depth of experience in NSW to help me select a small, rural Council. At the time, Sean held a senior position with a peak body in NSW local government and was very highly regarded throughout the industry as someone who really 'knew his stuff' in a very practical way. Whilst a little embarrassed when he learned of his 'Expert' reputation, he agreed participate in a personal capacity based on his own experience, but he made it clear at the outset that he did not necessarily represent the views of his employers.

After exchanging some pleasantries and a couple of cafe lattes, I pushed aside the coffee cups and outlined the aim and broad methodology of my research project and then explained how and why it had been suggested that I contact him for his assistance. I then showed him the final copy of the criteria developed by the "Expert Panel" during the Case Study Selection Workshop.

At first he wanted to talk more generally about creativity and innovation. "Going outside the square might be creative, but not always innovative". After this Sean turned his attention to some of the Panel's criteria that I had jotted down as a list. "I'm not sure about this 'Approach is different every time' " said Sean, "that could simply mean a disorganised approach and may not always be a good positive indicator of an innovative Council". "It's about doing what you have to do better. It must produce an outcome. Innovation leads to change... a change in the culture, processes and mindset of the Council". He talked about risk. "Risk-taking is quite important...but "they need to consider the environment in which the industry sits and take account of how far they can go". He also emphasised the importance of 'thinking differently'. "These things don't just happen...there are triggers. Certainly it requires an enthusiastic Mayor and Councillors as well as Senior Management... who are prepared to think differently. So it requires part of the organisation, or the entire organisation, to be able to think differently under various circumstances". We talked about people for a while and he suggested that,

from an organisational perspective, “it’s about unleashing people’s potential within a particular operating framework”. In the end he thought that innovation in local government was inextricably connected to their role as ‘place managers’. “A lot of it you can attach to creating a uniqueness of place... it’s about giving people ownership, difference and a sense of place”.

I pushed our discussion closer to the task of selecting a small, Rural Council. I explained that I was keen to include one such Council in the case studies, as I was interested in this issue of resources – whether the limited availability of resources (common to small, rural Councils) had any effect of the ability of the Council to be innovative. Sean agreed that it was a difficult task and he pondered quietly for while, and nibbling on the last of his almond croissant. After some reflection, he tapped the paper in front of him and nominated Narrabri Shire Council. “Yeah Narrabri... for a small place they have done a lot of good stuff with cultural development. Just look at their Cultural Centre. They are a bit of a beacon Council for the smaller rurals. They used their own resources and have got their community onside...they really consider community concerns... when it could so easily go the other way...and if you compare their agenda ten years ago – there is a complete change in the persona of Councillors”.

So...now I had my three case study Councils.

## **5.2. Marrickville - “You Just Know!”.**

‘Marrickville Matters’ is the name of the Council’s quarterly newsletter. It’s not just a play on words, it communicates one of the fundamental values within the local community – Marrickville, as a place, matters a lot ... it counts, it’s important to the people who live there. How did I know? I live there and it’s my home. Luckily I didn’t personally select it as a case study location or I could have been



easily accused of bias. When the Expert Panel was quizzed as to why they picked Marrickville, one of the members said, “because... well...when you go there...you just know!”

It's Multicultural Marrickville, with 39% of the population born overseas. You can hear and smell and see this diversity on the streets, from Vietnamese butcher sitting next to the Greek restaurant, up the road from the Spanish deli and all just round the corner from Little Portugal with all its cafes and cake shops. Visitors from the yuppie suburbs come on pre-paid gourmet walking trips to find the Asian food shops that sell the exotic ingredients that are so well-photographed in their glossy cookbooks. We locals smile contemptuously as they then head for the smartest, brightest looking so-called Vietnamese restaurant, which we all know is really Chinese. Everybody round here knows the really good *Goi Cuon* and *Pho Ga* is only served off the plastic tables in the tiny hole-in-the wall cafes back in the side alleys. Marrickville's also got a significant and proud indigenous Australian population who maintain a fascinating website (linked to the Council's website) that gives the indigenous history of the area and an explanation of the significance of the local plants and animals. There's lots of Islanders - Tongans, Fijians, Cook Islanders - the deep harmonies of their church singing can be heard wafting throughout the suburb every Sunday morning and the delicious scent of their after-church pit barbeques sniffed in the afternoon.

Marrickville's had a long history as a migrant suburb. By the 1930s the place had become a little run-down, following its original but brief period in the 1890s as a wealthy merchant's suburb full of substantial brick homes on English-style garden blocks. The European migrants (particularly Greek, Italian and Portuguese) who came to Australia after the Second World War bought up these houses and replaced the roses and gardenias in the front yards with their tomatoes, runner beans and citrus trees. Local real estate remained relatively cheap for some time, as

the stereotypical Australian dream was a big cream home in the suburbs and Marrickville was just a bit too 'ethnic' and multicultural for many Australians. Like many such areas in cities all over the world, Marrickville's low-cost housing continued to attract new arrivals looking for an affordable place to start a new life. After the Europeans came the Lebanese. Then came the Vietnamese, and recently the waves of Chinese, Somalians, and Bangladeshis. It's not just ethnically diverse – the 1990s brought in the gays, the lesbians, transgender people, single parents, and the DINKS (Double Income No Kids).

Marrickville used be what's called "Daggy" in Australia – low-class and no style. It was poor, it wasn't cool, it didn't have the pale sun-soaked colours of the Tuscanised beachside suburbs in the east of the city, and there wasn't enough space for the garish McMansions found in the big new estates in the west. But times and values change and soon many people found the combination of close proximity to the city centre (15 minutes by train), a range of riverside parks and the colourful diversity of the place was both attractive and affordable. Even some of the areas of light industry have been transformed with intermingled townhouse and villa developments tucked in between factories. Of course it does still always have the main Sydney flight path overhead, but for those of us who live just slightly off to one side or the other, the occasional thump of a 747 is hardly noticed.

Many of the original migrants have now sold up and moved on, as they cashed up on the vastly increased values of their homes. But there are still a significant number of lower income residents living in rental property, public housing and government licensed boarding houses. Most local people you talk to enjoy this diversity, but it has recently brought out tensions between wealthy and poorer citizens and occasional bursts of NIMBY ("Not in My Back Yard") selfishness from some of the wealthy new professionals. It's a place in transition. As the wealth of the area slowly increases, so does real estate prices, and protecting that social

diversity is a real challenge for the local Council. So the Council is big on promoting a sense of 'belonging' amongst all of its citizens. Marrickville Council has had a long-standing reputation as being big on public and citizen engagement. For nearly 20 years it has invested significant time and resources into community consultation, workshops and community education. Why did it start? No-one really knows. Perhaps it was just the sheer challenge of such diversity that required putting so much effort into making sure that all the messages got heard in all the different languages, or maybe it was the fundamental principles of the Labor (Party) - dominated Council. Anyway, in local government land, for a long time it was widely perceived that Marrickville didn't have a lot of money but Marrickville was good at governance and good at people. They'd win awards for all sorts of things, but there was always this consistent focus on community engagement.

As I drove down the main street I smiled at the 'shop-top sculptures' - humorous and brightly-coloured steel sculptures depicting the activities in the shops below. The Council encouraged them and people either loved or hated them but everybody agreed they made Marrickville special... and that was good. The recent restoration of the Victorian bronzed 'Winged Victory' statue outside the Old Town Hall had pleased and placated the old Diggers<sup>16</sup> immensely. However, they may well have had mixed feelings had they realised that the statue was overlooked by the restored caretakers flat, which was currently occupied by a purple-haired Taiwanese 'electronic mixed-medium artist' who was provided accommodation as part of the Council's annual International Artist's Exchange. Many of the little things - like the fairy lights at night in the main street trees - seem to please everyone. At the end of the street, "Saint Brigies", the Benedictine church and monastery with the imposing, blue neon crucifix on the top of its spire, had

recently accepted the nature of the community around it, abandoned any Catholic secularism, and put a newly-painted sign out the front that simply said “ St Brigid’s - a Christian church”.

I was strangely nervous as I parked my car outside the Council offices. Apart from being a local resident I’d had a professional relationship with the Council for about ten years. I had worked as an advisor with the last two General Managers, knew the current General Manager, most of the Directors, and a number of the staff. I was unusually self-conscious about presenting myself to them in this new guise as ‘researcher’. However, I was greeted warmly by Mary the General Manager. She’d had big boots to fill as the previous two General Managers had been regarded as genuinely charismatic, well known and had been seen as ‘leaders’ in NSW local government. Three of the Directors: Shayne, Joanna and Diana arrived quickly and also greeted me with hospitality. Not surprisingly, they were pleased that they had been nominated as ‘innovative’ although they still displayed a degree of humility (this proved to be the same in all three case study Councils). While they busied themselves with making us all coffee I set up and turned on the recorders.

Okay – let’s start. The big pressures for change and the search for innovation came from money... or the lack of it. “Why did we get innovative? Because we had to!”. Marrickville’s recent history as a somewhat down-at-heel inner-west suburb, with a population of largely ‘poor migrants’ had meant that the Council had done what it could with its limited Rates-based income, but generally people had not wanted to pay much, and they hadn’t really expected so much. However, in recent years, the increasing number of more wealthy, professional residents wanted better services (and more) but they were keen to still see their Council Rates bill stay as low as possible. “One of the hardest things to do annually here is to make the

---

<sup>16</sup> “Digger” is an Australian expression used to denote lower-ranking army personnel. Many of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand) troops who served in WW2 would have used this term and hence many elderly

numbers work, as all the prices are increasing and there is extreme pressure on us to make better use of available funds and find ways to make more funds available – the big, wealthy councils don't have that pressure and sometimes they get lazy".

They also explained that they had come to a point about ten years ago when their Workcover OH&S<sup>17</sup> insurance premium reached crisis high levels of two and a half million dollars. "One of the reasons we have been innovative is because we wouldn't have survived if we didn't get our costs down". They described how they embarked on the 'SAFE' program – a program to improve workplace safety – and that became the springboard for an ongoing culture of workplace improvement. 'SAFE' had three planks: excellence in management of safety, excellence in management of injured workers, and excellence in managing a safe environment of work. "The key was involving the staff from the very beginning, and because they were involved in a process of assessing their tasks and looking for risks and improvements it sort of evolved into a continuous improvement program – not just about safety but then about other things".

Whilst the 'insurance crisis' slowly reduced as workplace safety improved, the legacy of the participatory approach to continuous improvement lingered on. "They began to understand their role better and look for better ways to do their job and we began to introduce a culture of small teams looking at a problem and working out what to do". They said they genuinely value innovation and explained that it is more about doing things better rather than just inventing new things. "Every time we come up with a new program we think about what is the best way to do this and not just do what we have always done". They said they

---

returned servicemen are known affectionately as "Diggers".

<sup>17</sup> In NSW, the State Government legislates that all employers must have Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) insurance and have programs in place to improve workplace safety. This is regulated and overseen by the NSW Workcover Authority. Where a workplace has a poor work safety record, the OH&S insurance premiums can be very high, and their activities are scrutinised very closely by the Government Workcover Authority.

spend about 10% of their rate income "... doing things that other Councils just don't do!"

So why did they think they are innovative? "Well... 'cos we are... we do it our way!" Hahaha . Lots of self-deprecating laughter. But the real reason, they believed, was because the Council understands and is engaged with its community. "We spend a lot of time checking our community surveys and they show that we are well-regarded and the things we do for... and with... the community are well-received". They work together as a team. "We have had a really good period of the Mayor, elected Councillors , General Manager and Executive team working together ". They talked about how the previous Council had a very supportive attitude to the staff. There had been a re-configuration of the political shape of the new Council (after the recent local Council elections) which had brought some initial caution and uncertainty but they were all hoping that it would settle back in to a productive and trustful relationship. That notion of 'working together', they say, permeates through the whole organisation. "People well underneath are throwing up good ideas and they aren't being stopped by their managers. Their ideas are being tested and usually put into practice". They have formalised this even more by having a development program focused specifically at managers just below 'middle manager' to help them understand all the strategic objectives of the organisation and create a forum for their input. "All around me I see people trying new things, looking at new things, trying to do better and really trying to seek out good ideas and then adapt them to do the best thing for this community".

I asked them about risk. "Well... we don't break the law!" they laughingly retorted. "If you stay focused very much on whether this will do something better for this community then you minimise your risk. Our people and the organisation get to know the community really well and we put a lot of effort into getting

genuine and reliable community feedback. This gives us the assurance that if we don't deviate we are on the right track. Of course we have other checks and balances to make sure we stay within the rules but mostly we listen to our community". Again the conversation came back to teamwork. They explained how the 'risk-takers' are balanced with those that take a more conservative view to make sure "... that the risk-takers stay within the corral and don't expose us to risks that we can't manage". They saw this working together, mixing up different kinds of people and approaches, as critical to innovation. They also invest a significant amount of time and resources into staff training and learning... and not just formal programs. "We work hard to attract excellent staff and keep them... by keeping them interested in their work".

They said that the "language of innovation" had now spread throughout the organisation. Where the old excuse was "we can't afford it", they reckoned the new challenge is now always "is there a way we could afford it?" The staff were encouraged to come up with ideas and look for ways to put them into practice. They said that it will be the ongoing skills and capabilities of the staff that will keep driving innovation. Managers are encouraged and expected to have a "hands off/ but very interested" style and encourage their staff to achieve their greatest potential. That, in turn breeds pride. "I get my staff coming up to me and saying that they feel proud to work for this Council". They became slightly quiet and reflective towards the end of our session. When they looked at the Expert Panel's criteria but their reaction was muted. They didn't really care if what works for them doesn't work elsewhere. "Yeah...we are an organisation that genuinely embraces change... that's a reality around here... it's probably cultural".

So at the end of the day, what was the benefit of this pursuit of so-called 'innovation'? "For the community it is the things they can see and people use and interact with and that become part of their everyday life. Like events and

streetscapes and the environment around them. For instance our parks are well-used because they are very well-designed and managed and we put resources into them. When I first came here... I couldn't believe the number of things that they [the community] didn't have, so I started on working ways that they could have them. There was a whole bunch of facilities that this community never had access to in the past and now they have them".

I asked them if they have any hints or lessons for other Councils - "If you want real change, you can't cut corners and take short cuts".

### **5.3. Narrabri – the Sportiest District in Australia**

Narrabri apparently means "Forked Waters" in the language of the traditional indigenous owners of the place. Narrabri is about half way between the two State capitals of Sydney and Brisbane and about a 6 hour drive from Sydney, up the Newell Highway on the inland freight route that serves the two cities. The Newell is a 'Big Truckie's Run' as the inland journey is far less scenic than the coastal Pacific Highway, but offers a more efficient route for the 24 hour stream of huge, diesel-powered semi-trailers and B-Doubles, as they haul produce to and from the city supermarkets. I'd chosen an easier mode of transport and opted for the 'Milk Run' – the once-a-day flight up to Narrabri with a brief stop at Dubbo to deliver the mail, and then after Narrabri, on to Brisbane. My arrival on the small turbo-prop Dash 8 that typically serves rural Australian air routes also proved to be a source of mirth for much of my stay in town.

The small plane touched down on Narrabri's runway with squirt of blue smoke and a shudder. It's a small local airport, owned and operated by the Council and has a reasonable runway and a small but modern tin shed that houses the so-called passenger terminal. I'm an experienced air traveller, so I waited patiently in my seat as we taxied to a halt. I knew the routine - shut down propellers, co-pilot



emerges and open doors... then the announcement to invite passengers to stand up, get their overhead luggage and disembark. I had seen over the years how disgruntled the flight crew got when passengers leapt up immediately and started ferreting around for their bags before the plane had come to a halt on the ground. So I sat patiently and politely. The plane stopped, the co-pilot opened the door and every else jumped up, grabbed their bags and just headed straight out the door! Ahah!... not me!. I knew to sit tight until they announced the disembarkation. But they didn't. Eventually, the ground crew manager, complete with signalling light-wands, stuck his head through the door and asked, "Is there a Robert Mellor on the plane?". Errr... "yes". "Well could you eventually get off sometime so we can all go home!" Much laughter from the other passengers, the flight crew, the ground crew, the baggage man... and later, even a gentle giggle from my host Max. Max was the General Manager of Narrabri Shire Council and he'd come to personally greet me and give me a lift into town. I felt like a proper goose. Ah well, there goes my image as 'an important academic researcher' out the door!

That night I checked into the motel across the road from the Council offices, and, being a small town, the owners had already heard the tale of my airport arrival and were shy and chuckling as they handed over my room keys. In the safety of my room, I grabbed a beer from the mini-bar and skimmed through the ubiquitous tourist and information brochures on the bedside table. Narrabri was voted "Australia's Sportiest Shire" in 2001. No fewer than 110 national representatives were born in, or started their career in Narrabri. It calls itself "Big Sky Country in the Heart of Country NSW" (I guess so you don't get it confused with Montana). It's got a population of about 14,500 people in an area of 13,000 square kilometres. Narrabri is the heartland of Australia's cotton industry, home to the Australian Cotton Centre and some of the largest broad-acre cotton farms in the world. If you value your health you don't come up from a city like Sydney that's got water restrictions because of the drought, and then go into Narrabri and complain to

locals about the massive water pumping allowances given to their cotton farmers! It's also got coal, broad-acre crops, meat production and some niche products like olive farming and honey production. Not far from town, and within the general district, are a number of Commonwealth Government research stations, including the CSIRO<sup>18</sup> Australia Telescope – “the most advanced radio telescope in the southern hemisphere”. Its small local National Park at Mount Kaputar is also gaining more of a reputation as a tourist destination. But frankly, I hadn't been overjoyed and elated when the expert panel had nominated Narrabri as a case study destination. I am not such a city boy, but I had hoped that the non-metropolitan destination might be somewhere picturesque on the coast, rather than a dusty, farming town in inland NSW.

The next morning, after a typical motel breakfast of toast and rubbery eggs, I took a quick stroll around the town centre. At first glance the town looks pretty much the same as many others of its size in rural NSW. The town centre is neat and tidy enough to justify its “Tidy Town” award, but luckily (to my taste at least) it's neither quaint nor twee. It's got a mix of heritage buildings and unimposing commercial buildings of various vintages, and it has seemed to avoid the scourge of the textured cream-brick architecture that spread like plague through country towns in the 1970s. For a country town it is also surprisingly pedestrian-friendly with wide footpaths and lots of little places to stop and refuge from perhaps a speeding farm truck full of hay, fertilizer and testosterone. There's four or five places to get a decent cup of coffee and two of them even roast their own coffee beans! A quick peek through the window of the local DVD hire shop showed an impressive rack of “foreign language” titles and the menu on the door of the Thai restaurant looked as good as I had ever seen in Bangkok. Hmmm.

---

<sup>18</sup> Commonwealth Scientific Institute & Research Organisation – the Australian National Government's highest research institute.

Back at the Motel, I gathered up my briefcase and my 'implements of investigation' and sauntered across the road to the Council offices. The friendly receptionist on the front counter was apparently expecting me so she showed me into a meeting room just off the side of reception and next to the actual Council chambers. She enquired if I wanted a cup of tea, she then ushered me into a small kitchenette, showed me where all the "mugs and "makings" were kept and alerted me as to whose mugs I should not ever touch - and then left me to my own devices. So I made myself a mug of tea, set up my camera, voice recorder, flipchart, overhead projector and arranged all my pens in a nice neat row... and then sat and quietly sipped my mug of hot tea. I was early but I was ready and prepared!

Max, the General Manager and all two others of Narrabri Council's 'Executive Team' sauntered in, not long after. All three of them - Max, Richard and Trevor - were dressed somewhat formally in dark suits and ties. They reminded me at first like the big black crows that often sit on the wire fences out here in the wheat fields and just stare at you... but of course I didn't mention this. I shook their hands, pressed all the buttons on the video camera and the voice recorder, and we got started. I explained what I was sort of on about and why I was there and it seemed quiet at first. The three of them were quite reserved at the start and sat, with arms crossed and appearing somewhat defensive or at least uneasy. However, as we began to talk, they slowly started to slouch and melt down into a less defensive pose. They spoke as a sort of 'tag team' and worked together to tell their tale. Soon we were just chatting comfortably and working through some of my broad questions

At the time, as I had arrived in Narrabri, the State-wide local government elections had recently come and gone, and for this 'Executive Team' it was clear that the result had not been good. They quickly explained that they had come from a period of relative stability, where there was a strong feeling of trust and respect

between the Mayor, the elected Councillors and the management staff, and now that was history. Apparently, some members of the community had perceived this previous relationship as “much too cosy” and suggested that too many of the decisions about the Shire were in the hands of the Council’s ‘Professional Managers’, and now power should rightfully be returned to a cautious and suspicious group of “democratic community leaders”. But as I listened to these men, I heard little of what I might be called ‘managerialist’ rhetoric. Instead, I heard a genuine passion for the well-being of the town and a profound sense of disappointment at this new political climate of mistrust. They were confident that they knew their jobs and did them well. However, they all felt that their personal employment contracts were under threat, and were resigned to the fact that, in local government, political tides ebb and flow and, well, perhaps this was the time of a conservative, suspicious and cautious period. But still they cared about the place immensely.

It was not surprising that they were happy to take the Expert Panel’s nomination as an ‘innovative Council’, but they took the compliment humbly and without any arrogance. It was noted that the perception of organisational innovation can be sometimes seen as cyclical. “Innovation is a cyclical thing. We have experienced a period of being considered as innovative and there are a series of good reasons for that. That has led us perhaps to being recognised. The question is: whether those reasons are sustainable or whether it’s on a cyclical basis. Councils go from performing poorly, being managed poorly – giving them a whole lot of potential for improvement or innovation. We saw them as improvements but others might have seen them as innovation. But then... when things are going well where do they go from there, other than down”.

They described the “glory days” of 1999-2003. The pressures for change and innovation came at first from the realities of simply having to do more with less.

There were community expectations that the Council will provide more and more as the years go on – especially roads. “You need to get a solution because you are not goin’ to get any more money. Whatever social or community services... whatever there is, is mostly provided by other [volunteer] organisations – but we’re continually having to look for innovations... especially in building and maintaining roads”. Whilst the Narrabri population was bucking the national trend and remained fairly constant, the external pressures were mostly common to much of rural Australia (drought, distance, lack of State and Federal funding). Within the Council organisation there was also a serious ‘cultural problem’ – the workforce was seen as being dominated by a belligerent trade union, work efficiency was poor, absenteeism was rife, workplace “accidents and illness” were excessive and had forced the worker’s compensation insurance premiums sky – high. “We have had people reporting in as injured at work but then going fishing for the day”. It was estimated that the workforce needed reducing by about half – from about 180 down to 90. They clearly saw innovation as integral part of change management and part of their role as managers.

“I think it started when Max got here... we didn’t have cohesion until then. I think it started then, when we three came together and hit our straps and became the ‘Three Amigos’ “. They laugh. “The pressure for real change came from us. The pressure to change the culture came from us. Why? Well we’ve had that conversation but there’s doin’ things and then there’s doin’ things! But not just us...we had a Council that was very supportive. We went from 180 employees down to 90 and we couldn’t have done that without the support of the Council... and then they all got big pats on the back after that. But this new Council will simply not fight any big battles”.

I put it to them that it seemed that, as a management team, they had got heavily involved in the politics. They agreed but were adamant that it was necessary to get

things done. "At least to have tried...we've all committed to the place, so it's our home". However, they were crystal clear on the issue of risk. "Nothing's too risky to talk about... but we have never taken any risks that put public money in jeopardy. The risk that we took is doing things in the face of some opposition". They talked about how they sorted things according to risk and only when they were comfortable with a proposal as a professional management team, did they then put them to the Councillors.

I asked them about the organisational 'culture'. Did they think they were a learning organisation? "We try to get the right people more than just the right qualification, and we are spending a lot on training". They went on to describe the process of tackling the workplace safety problem and change the culture in the workforce, whilst at the same time almost halving the employee numbers. Rather than just 'buy in' a solution from consultants, they sent their small HR team off to intensive training to that they would have the skills to "run with it on a long-term basis". They even ended up being recognised as one of 5 safest workplaces in the State! "To work here, people have to make a commitment and come and live here to be part of this community. So we have to take a risk and try to spot really good people before they have been recognised by others as such... it's hard". They have tried to attract and keep people that showed talent and creativity and said it was important that staff feel respected and safe. It was okay to have fun at work, because "... there is a difference between having fun at work doing your job, and simply wasting time". Interestingly they were very clear about the value of the intellectual capital brought into the region by three National Research Centres". We pick up a few very highly-qualified people who have come here with their partners, and these people are still willing to work with us for relatively small salary".

They talked quite a bit about recognising people's potential and "letting them have a crack at things". They regularly talk to their people about their ideas and just bounce ideas around – "so they know there is more to happen, there's more opportunities for innovation in the future". Max said it was important to let people have the freedom to "go off and do it... as long as it fits into our big picture". They reckoned they had good ideas by the truckload... "just on the simmer" , just waiting for the right time. "The Crossing Theatre's an example- we discussed it and we were united on it, but we did raise the idea immediately before an election because we didn't want it to become an election issue". So they waited for the right time. So...why bother? What's the benefit of all this innovation? "We do it because we are part of this community and we want to see it better. In some ways it's selfish... I want this community to be the best place to live in. The community pride is tangible. I know people who have come back from holidays and talked about other places and they've gone 'they've got nothing on Narrabri'. People come here and see the place and go, 'how did you do that? How did you get the Crossing Theatre?' That's the benefit – that's real innovation".

I had heard about this Crossing Theatre. A seven million dollar complex with two cinemas showing first run movies, a 1,000 seat auditorium boasting "a better piano than the Sydney Conservatorium", an art gallery, a function centre seating 500 and a concert hall capable of taking in the touring State Symphony Orchestra. The week I visited the complex and it was full of people. They were showing a Bollywood Film Festival and advertising "Indian Buffet and Bellydancing Demonstrations". Not bad for a little country town of 7,000 people. They told me that when the 'Nosh on the Namoi'<sup>19</sup> tour came through they might have as many as 500 folks 'noshing' on local foodstuffs down by the riverbank. Walking into the local tourist information office it was clear that news of my arrival had spread. "So,

---

<sup>19</sup> "Nosh" – Australian slang for 'food': hence "Nosh on the Namoi" is a food festival held in the towns along the Namoi River in NSW

you're the bloke that's doing the research about us aren't you love?" said the woman in the local tourist information office. She was bursting with pride and eager to tell me what a wonderful town it was and what a great Council they had. Later that evening I found myself sipping a beer with a couple of young, local farmhands, their scratched and sun-browned arms bared from their khaki work shirts. "We used to piss off and leave town every weekend just to get out of the bloody place", said one, "but now we hang around to see what happens next".

After all my interviews and discussions and questions, I finally caught up with Barry, the editor of the local paper. Long before my arrival he had given me an unexpected telephone call one evening in Sydney. He'd somehow heard "from a mate at the Council" that I was looking at Narrabri "because it was innovative", and he was wondering if I would do an interview for his paper. With a Council election coming up in just a few weeks I had politely declined his offer. But I promised we would catch up and I was true to my word. In his small office he was gruff and dry, but also generous and garrulous. He sung the praises of the Council management team, and explained how people either "loved 'em or hated 'em... but look what we've got!" I was a little surprised when he passed me a small stack of printed articles. "Have you read any of Dicky Florida?" (Richard Florida, economist at Carnegie-Mellon University and author of "The Rise of the Creative Class"). Over the next hour he summarised Florida's ideas of how communities attract creative people and that becomes the real source of their wealth. "Yeah, real creativity - that's what we've got here in Narrabri mate".

Five days after my arrival, I shook Max's hand warmly at the airport and passed the smirking airport staff who had given me instructions. "The first stop with the little lights, that's Dubbo, so you stay on the plane, but the next one with all the big lights, that's Sydney.... so you get off there!". Hahah - nothing funnier to them than a clumsy city boy - but they also shook my hand warmly and very genuinely.



On the flight south, I quietly reflected on these people and their great town. Eventually, we did indeed touch down in Sydney. The Captain went through his usual spiel of “Welcome to Sydney, and the weather is cool...etc.” But he finished up with “... and to our very special passenger, Mr Robert Mellor, we would like to ask you...to please get off the plane here!”. Oh, ha ha ha...very funny!

#### **5.4. Coffs Harbour- the First Big Thing in Australia**

Coffs is bold and brassy – what my Yorkshire dad would call a “strumpet of a town’. It’s been there, about half way up the coast of NSW and a decent holiday car ride away (just about at the end of Dad’s car-driving patience) ever since I was a kid. It was the place where school mates told tales of caravan holidays by the beach, with bare feet, beaches and barbeques and a Friday evening trip by the grown-ups into town to visit the ‘club’ for a few beers while the kids looked after themselves back at the campsite and fell asleep before mum and dad lurched home. There was the lure of the ‘semi-tropics’ and the affordable illusion of a tropical holiday, fuelled by garish postcards from the ‘Big Banana’ – a shabby concrete structure with its greasy snack food and plastic souvenirs. The hillsides were covered with large areas of banana plantations, thriving in the moist and temperate climate – Coffs used to produce 75% of Australia’s bananas, but in the last ten years that accolade has moved north to Queensland and now the region produces only about 20% of the national crop and everyone is looking for new sources of income.

These days Coffs Harbour is still a ‘Regional Growth Centre’. It’s advantageously located on the east coast of NSW about 5 hours drive from Sydney and with its own small airport, which has recently been approved to take 737s from New Zealand and hence is now classified as an ‘International Terminal”. This access allowed them to attract the Wallabies, Australia’s National Rugby Union team, to make Coffs Harbour their off-season training home. At first glance it seems like all

the boxes are getting ticked. It still has a strong and thriving agricultural community, and they celebrate their surviving banana production with significant pride. It's also become a bit of a place for the "sea-change". As the average age of older Australians increases, so too does the migration out of the major cities. The cost of real estate alone means that you could sell up an average family home in suburban Sydney and then buy an extremely comfortable beachfront apartment or house for two (perhaps even with a spare room for when the grandkids come to visit) in somewhere like Coffs... and still have some money for enjoying your retirement living.

Drive into town and it looks like holiday - there's boldly-coloured banners proclaiming their recent win in the local government 'Bluett Awards', and street-side posters proclaiming all the virtues of the Banana Coast. The State's main north/south highway, the Pacific Highway, runs up the east coast of Australia, and it used to charge right thorough the middle of town, but these days it is a little off to the side of the main centre. In recent years' the physical centre of Coffs Harbour has become dominated by a deliberately-built combination of a huge Westfield Shopping Mall and the Coffs Harbour RSL club. The RSL clubs once used to be a relatively small and quiet haven for returned servicemen (hence the name: Returned Servicemen's League clubs) to sup a quiet libation, but with Australian's proclivity for both drinking and gambling, many of the RSL clubs have become huge venues - with restaurants and cabaret venues and of course... rows and rows of 'pokies' (slot machines). Coffs Harbour RSL is a whopper, with two or three bistro/buffets and a weekly program of bingo and raffles. So it is hard to see if there is any actual 'main street' left of Coffs Harbour, but there is certainly a big parking station and then kilometres of shopping arcades to explore within the mall complex. Mind you, the locals don't seem to mind one bit. It as if it has been generally agreed that the centre of town will be just that...the centre of town, and the 'other bits' of perhaps interest and beauty, will be located nearby. The

town centre becomes functional and undeniably vibrant – but don't look for much in the way of architectural or urban aesthetics in this part of town.

The Coffs Harbour City Council offices have been built as a deliberate adjunct to the commercial development in the centre of town. The foyer displays proudly celebrated their recent award as the 'World's Most Liveable City' (population under 75,000) from the recent UN-sponsored 'Nations in Bloom' contest. I was warmly greeted by the receptionist who ushered me into a meeting room just off the main foyer. This time there was already a fresh pot of coffee and biscuits waiting. Minutes after, Stephen, the General Manager, bounded in a shook my hand enthusiastically. He was followed by two of his other directors... Frank and Mary. As I continued to set up, they were intrigued by my mini digital voice recorder and we talked about the digital voice technology for a while. "Yeah, one of our guys that you should interview invented the program to convert that into word processing".

Stephen had apologised that his time would be limited so I pushed all the various buttons to 'record' and we began. What were the pressures for change? Again the first reason was community expectations. Whilst the Coffs Harbour area was not exactly poor, it had become asset-rich but cash poor. In recent years it had become an extremely popular destination for retirees from Sydney, who sold up their expensive homes in Sydney, revelled in the cheap real estate in Coffs, but quickly began to demand the level of infrastructure and services that they had left behind in the big cities. This grey diaspora was largely well-educated, well-informed and pretty vocal. "We just have to do things better – they expect us do it better and quicker – and the idea of doing more with less is magnified in a place like this". The irony was that this same section of the community that had enjoyed the all benefits of cheaper housing on Sydney's green-field developments was now demanding the protection of the natural environment around them in Coffs. And, as they were now on fixed incomes they keep pressuring the Council to make sure

there is no increase in Council rates, fees or charges. All of this requires clever money management by the Council, but also clever thinking about how to balance the triple-bottom-line of Economic, Social, and Environmental factors. “We just got forced into being smarter, probably a lot faster. At one time there was huge demonstration against our original proposal for a sewage outfall off the headland at Emerald Beach- there were thousands of people linking arms and forming a human chain that was filmed from helicopters and shown on news all around the world. They made it very clear that they thought the Council stunk”

So there is a huge pressure to improve the public infrastructure and also protect the environment. Right next to this wealthy, ‘grey power’ group is a large body of young and disaffected unemployed people. Coffs is the 27<sup>th</sup> biggest city in Australia, but with the second highest unemployment and the second lowest average wage. “So we also have to look for ways to grow our budgets, and grow local wealth and create employment - or it’s all just going to fall over”. The 20-35 year olds are simply leaving to try and find work elsewhere and the oldies are coming in at a rate of 1500 -1800 per year, in a local government area with a population of 62,000. “We are always looking for new ways to achieve results...not a Rolls-Royce standard but a similar outcome. We’ve got less staff, more work - so we just have to try and be efficient and innovative”.

They also admit that they have created their own internal pressures. They talk a lot about seeing areas that could be changed... to help free up resources and manage things better. “We keep identifying bottlenecks, and bottlenecks don’t get dealt with theoretically - they need action and resources”. They also realised it needed a whole ‘corporate culture’ and developed a set of ‘Corporate Core Values’ to complement the structural changes in the organisation. They got the Trade Union onside and they say they had to develop their own model because there wasn’t one around for what they wanted. The values were developed with staff and are as

much about how staff wanted to be treated as what is expected of them. They list these as things such as: emotional intelligence (“yeah...and I even read the book!”), professionalism, respect, teamwork, communication, innovation, stress management, relaxation and pride. These values are embedded in the Industrial Award and employee evaluation systems (70% for demonstrating core values and 30% technical achievement). “Round here it’s EQ and not just IQ – when you build values into people they can make better decisions because they have confidence. So now it is very much about how people do their job as well as what they do”.

They describe it as both top-down and bottom-up and remarked that this meant that as the General Manager and Directors they needed to work better as a team and be seen to be working as a team and embodying all the Core Values in everything they did. From the quiet laughs and sly grins I sense there is a library of untold tales about when this didn’t work so well, but it was all treated with good humour. This is kind of leadership is particularly important to help people continue to look for innovations. “We’ve got some very innovative people so we try to lead them and not dominate them...let them have a bit of slack and we don’t shoot the first guy that makes a mistake – let’s try to get rid of this blame mentality”. They let people make decisions and let people make mistakes, “... you empower people and they just puff out their chests and take pride”.

“It’s about people fulfilling goals, reaching outcomes and having pride in their work with the community outside”.

The last factor was a significant shift as, for some time until recently, the Council had been “on the nose” with the community, with such a poor reputation that many staff would not admit socially that they worked for the Council. But the last five years had seen a turnaround, with a really good and trustful relationship between the Executive Management team and the elected Council, a good relationship with staff, and the ensuing improvement in the relationship with the

community. Councillors understood their strategic role and respected the professional and operational roles of the General Manager and the staff. “ This is about doing it and not talking about it that much – we’re still pretty conservative in some ways but people are proud of what we are doing... both in Council and in the community”. I show them the comments from the Expert Panel and they just nod quietly and list some tangible examples such as: piloting a total new local government information management system, developing pre-fabricated pumping stations that are now being sold around the world as far as Ghana, and swapping the previous town hall to make land for an educational precinct with a university campus in the middle of the city.

Just then, the last of their cohort, the City Development Manager, arrives back from skin cancer treatment at the doctor, so the serious talk turns briefly to scabs and spots and more laughs and jokes. After a brief coffee and levity break (including an uncomfortable but hilarious demonstration of skin cancer treatment involving a chocolate chip cookie) we got back to the questions. What about attracting and keeping the “right’ kind of people? They admit that the poor employment prospects in the town work somewhat in their favour as people want to live here for the lifestyle so are keen to keep their Council job. But also, all the work on organisational values has generally made the Council a positive place to work. “I love my job, best job in the world you could ever do – I just wish there were more hours to do more”. They talk quite a bit about this idea of ‘emotional intelligence’. They reckon they are definitely a ‘learning organisation’ and not just because of the usual stuff about training and education. They say they dedicate quite a lot of time to reflecting on how they have done things and what has worked or not worked. They say this reflection process is critical to help them learn, and it’s that learning helps them build confidence to take more calculated risks in the future. Without that confidence, they wouldn’t be able to explore for innovation. They talk about the airport project, and how the staff had learned from

some previous projects and then convinced the Council let them do the work instead of getting in contractors – it was risky but by all accounts the project was a complete success. “If, as a management team, we can build trust with the Council, then we can pass that on to the staff and that means we can support them and back off and let them take a risk”.

So what was ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ to them? In their context, they resonated with the idea of ‘innovation as implemented creativity’. “Yeah... creativity may be personal or it may be organisational, but the innovation is organisational. It needs and actionable vision that is implementable, and that is up to us as leaders. By staying focused on that vision gives you the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable risks. The vision must be based in reality... but then no risks no gain!. When someone has been through the eye of the cyclone and it works out, they come out a different person – they’re more experienced, more mature, more open to ideas and challenges. And when people find an alignment between their work and something they are on about, they can open up and become really fulfilled. Like many people here I have been really fortunate to have been given the opportunity to grow, and that makes me even more committed”.

By now I had grown used to the fact that this conversation was going to meander in and out of the bounds of my ‘structured workshop questions’. The whirlpools and eddies of the conversation had their own dynamic and it became a delightful ‘milieu’ as these people laughed and joked and told their stories. As they spoke to me it seemed as much about answering my questions as articulating ideas that had just emerged to them – almost as if by saying them to me they were testing them and mulling them over and feeling them for size. It all seemed to be to keep coming back to these three big things: strong and strategic leadership, a culture of trust and ‘no-blame’, and focusing on people’s values. To them, it seemed ‘creativity and innovation’ was about doing things better.

But better for whom? Okay, maybe better for the Executive Management Team – they seemed pretty happy with them selves and their results... but better for the elected Council? The organisation seemed to be getting a pretty good reputation and there were mostly good news stories in the local and the national press. They had just managed to attract the Wallabies to base their training camp in Coffs. They'd won quite a few awards. But what was the value of all this to the community? Where was the 'community benefit'?

“At the end of the day, there is a sense of pride. The staff have pride, we have pride and the Councillors have pride. The local community looks to local government to deliver services but also to generate pride... and I think we do that. So the community builds its pride and the Councillors get some pats on the back... oh, and we are saving money at the same time”.

## **5.5. Reflections on the Journey so Far.**

As I returned from the field trips I felt a strange mixture of elation, exhaustion anticipation and satisfaction. I had set out with, what seemed to me to be, a simple and logical objective – to find out what criteria a group of so-called 'Local Government Experts' would use to identify 'creative and innovative' Councils in NSW. They revealed that the selection criteria often used in their own 'Excellence' or 'Innovation' awards were not reliable to actually use to select case studies. So they gave me a new and more reliable set... and helped me select three Councils. The three Councils – 1 rural, 1 regional centre and 1 metropolitan – welcomed me with hospitality and interest. The Executive Management Team in all three Councils spoke plainly and succinctly about what 'creativity and innovation' meant to them, the organisations they managed and led, and the community they served. They spoke in concrete terms that related to the daily work of the place – not rhetoric and learned truisms. They told me how they tried to turn these elusive concepts into real practices in the workplace and to the support the people who



showed the desire and ability to develop and implement innovations. They gave up time to meet with me and encouraged me to interview staff and key individuals. They often urged me on with personal support for my research. In the streets and surrounds that were served by these three Councils, it seemed that there was something 'different' ... something 'special' ... and every so often ordinary people on the street, or in pubs or shops, would comment about how much they valued the work of the Council in improving their quality of life.

## **5.6. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter.**

In this chapter, I have used a narrative style to share the story of my journey. I have shared stories of the empirical phase -the Experts Workshop, the meeting with the Expert, and the visits to the three Case study Councils. I have written myself into the narrative as I was part of the stories and also one of the story-builders. Within this narrative scrapbook of stories, bits of stories and images and artefacts are many critical points that inform the research. Many of the words are spoken by ordinary people doing some extraordinary things. I have tried to stay vigilant to Wolcott 's (1999) expectation that the ethnographer helps people tell their stories.

In the next chapter, I will share some of the many conversations I had with those staff I interviewed in the three Councils. These are the practitioners and professional staff that were nominated as 'creative' and who are implementing the projects and initiatives that have been identified as 'innovation'. Once again, a narrative style is used, so that their voices and their stories from the field may be heard clearly.

## Chapter 6.

# 6. Voices - Speaking of Creativity and Innovation in Local Government

## Chapter Overview

In the previous chapter I shared some stories from the workshops, field trips, meetings and discussions. This chapter shares the stories and voices of the nominated 'innovative and creative' people that I interviewed in the three case study Councils. These were the people who were actually 'doing' the creative and innovative things and also actively involved in building and maintaining the 'creative and innovative culture' in the visited Councils. I wanted to talk to these people to find out what they were doing, how they were doing it, and why were they doing it. I also wanted to talk to them about how they learned to do these things and what sort of professional capabilities they were using.

Again, the chapter uses a narrative approach to describe their answers to my questions. It uses their words to describe their understanding of key terms and the meaning they attributed to certain concepts. They used examples that were given in stories, fragments of stories, narrative and antenarrative - This is how they chose to explain themselves and their Council to me. During my time with them I also became part of their 'living story' and we built new stories together.

## **6.1. Introduction**

Over a period of three months in 2003, I visited the three case study Councils in NSW, Australia – Marrickville, Coffs Harbour and Narrabri. In each Council, during workshops with the ‘Executive Team’ (General Manager and Directors) I asked them to nominate individual staff members who were responsible and/or contributing to this ‘innovation and creativity’ in their organisation. In some cases the Executive Team pointed at each other and nominated one or more of their members, in other cases all of the staff were ‘mainstream’ and not part of the Executive Team. In one instance, I interviewed one person following urging from both the Executive Team and a number of community members. All in all, I conducted 17 interviews that typically lasted 2-3 hours in length.

All of these people were fulltime staff members, with varying lengths of employment, both with their current employer and also in local government. The broad position descriptions of people interviewed ranged from “General Manager”, through “Director” and “Middle Manager”, to “Professional Specialist”. Of the 17 people, 6 were women, and all would probably fall into the age group of “30s -50s” (although I did not collect data on exact age of interviewees). Whilst I offered them anonymity, they all declined and said they would be happy to be identified openly. Nevertheless, I maintained the original edict and have recorded their comments using pseudonyms and in a manner that does not identify them personally.

The interviews were held in their workplace – mostly in private and in meeting rooms, interview rooms, lunch rooms and in one case, a park bench. They were recorded with a Dictaphone, a digital voice recorder and with hastily scribbled paper notes and scrawlings on available surfaces by both me and the interviewees. One person got up and spent nearly 30 minutes silently constructing an elaborate and explanatory diagram on the whiteboard before he turned to speak to me.

Often, we would stop and pause for coffee or tea, and on a number of occasions, real life intruded and they were drawn away to their work, only to return sometime later. On one occasion, one person was so clearly excited at explaining an idea, that his animated gesturing and squeals of glee drew a nearby alarmed manager to the window, who mouthed “are you okay?” to me through the glass. I was okay... I was more than okay. Many people commented that the interview process was enjoyable and it gave them a chance to be guided through a reflection on their daily lives. The conversations were thoughtful and most people truly seemed to enjoy pondering and savouring the questions... often smiling wistfully. One man brought me close to tears when he concluded the interview by shaking my hand firmly and announcing “I am now going to go home to have lunch with my wife and tell her something about me that until now I have not been able to explain properly... thank you for your help”. The profound effects of the process of reflection, articulation and conversation should never be underestimated.

I had followed much of Wadsworth’s (1997) practical advice about preparing for the interviews. I had a set of guiding questions (see appendices) and the PCF drawn up on sheets of paper that we could put between us. But it turned out to be more of a conversational adventure. I found that these people wanted to engage with me in stories and then wander back and forth across topics. Sometimes in response to questions, their answers and explanations wove their own unique fabric, and between us we built the stories together. Each of these people found their own way to speak to me. Some were initially reticent and sat waiting to answer my questions... quiet and thoughtful, whilst others flew off into telling their stories quickly, like a kite playing in a gust of wind. Some of them spoke like poets, others like mechanics...some drew pictures like artists. I became intrigued as to how these people came to be working in local government. It became clear that all of these people, in their own particular styles, engaged in this so-called ‘creativity and innovation’ at work as both a fundamental part of their job and also

as part of the social processes of work. Some seemed...ordinary, but yet they were doing things that others may deem extraordinary. In all cases they were welcoming and open. They answered questions eagerly and were (typically) humble about their nomination. In order to share some of their stories about being creative at work, I have constructed much of this chapter with a conversational style of narrative

## **6.2. So what does Creativity mean to you?**

I cut straight to the point with my opening question and most people usually paused before responding. Despite the fact that they all knew the topic of my research it still required some moments to reflect before they would answer. Their responses were varied their explanations of 'creativity' and 'innovation' were often quite abstract and overlapped with no clear distinction between the two terms<sup>20</sup>.

At first, a number of people highlighted the issues of novelty and originality. They gave answers such as: "Doing something out of the ordinary I suppose...well... doing something that's a bit special"; "Probably coming up with new ideas...and those ideas may not necessarily be your own, they may be someone else's... it could be just recognising good ideas"; "...thinking of something that is new"; "going somewhere where nobody's been before". Bill <sup>21</sup> the Parks Manager emphasised the expeditionary aspects and described creativity as: "...about really going in and exploring something and I like that". I had fleeting visions of Bill in his khaki council uniform, hacking through the undergrowth with his machete, trying to discover the original source of the creative idea. Many people talked about creativity as a cognitive process - it was about the way people think and conceptualise things differently. They used terms like "thinking and looking outside the square", "seeing things differently", and "being able to sort of stand

---

<sup>20</sup> This concurs with the findings of others such as Higgins and Morgan (2000)

<sup>21</sup> As with previous chapters, these accounts of interviews use fictitious names and generic job titles

back from something and think of alternates". Sally delighted me with her bright tapestry of mixed metaphors: "Being creative is... you know...probably about pulling so many things together to see the big picture from outside the square...thinking about what could be instead of what currently is...newness is important...to be blown away...yeah". Even normally conservative Trevor (who had once quietly confessed to me a deep personal satisfaction in balancing each year's Council's budget down to the last cent) intrigued me with his respect for creativity as a form of somewhat radical behaviour: "These people they have come at the problem from a completely different angle and they're thinking outside the box and not necessarily just accepting a system because it's just... been like that for... you know, since day dot".

One sunny afternoon I went with Shane, the Landscape Designer to visit the new public park he had resurrected out of an old degraded rubbish tip site at the 'bad end of town'. It is a wonderfully iconic place with crazy garden beds 'painted' with coloured bark, sensory gardens and a delightful Dr Suess-like playground with flying chairs and toys where adults can play alongside children. He is a humble man and he suggested limits to his own creativity. "Creativity, I guess it means using some certain skills necessarily...but it's about doing things that require a bit of passion. If my interest is there and I decide to front it, I can be very creative, but I think sometimes I am inherently lazy". Looking around, I found it hard to think of him as ever lazy.

### **6.3. What about Innovation?**

Creativity is the skill that brings about innovation...and innovation to me is making changes to things where you apply something from one field to another field to get a better result. Picking up an idea and translating that into an action of some description.

(Trevor -Director, Administration)

In the Executive Team workshops I had suggested a continuum and offered a working definition that innovation may be viewed as “creativity put into action and implemented” and this definition was greeted favourably and seemed to resonate. However, in the ensuing interviews I didn’t want to propose any definitions. Nevertheless, this idea of creativity and innovation being somewhere along a continuum between idea-generation and idea-implementation seemed to course naturally through our conversations. Carol once put it succinctly by stating: “Innovation is actually doing the things that have been developed by the processes of creativity”.

During the interviews, many people returned to the point that using an idea or concept for the first time makes it ‘new’ to the user, and applying and adapting it to your own unique situation can be seen as ‘innovative’. Not all the changes needed to be the so-called ‘Big Sideways Step’ - small but consistent incremental changes could also bring about innovation. Bill talked about the gradual work re-design project in the Council gardens that he believes resulted in them winning an international garden award for ‘Most Liveable City’. “I think it doesn’t have to be revolutionary, it can be evolutionary...little incremental things that go towards being innovative and improving the services we deliver...it has to be practical, where you can pick up an idea, think it through in your own situation and then make it work, or discard it”. I noticed that his language that sounded almost identical to that used in ‘continuous improvement’ or “quality improvement” programs - and reminded myself of comments from the executive team workshops that indicated that the origins of their ‘innovative’ culture had often grown out of some sort of continuous improvement program. Bill now says, “I’ve kind of relaxed a bit about all of the terminology stuff and realised that you can be quietly innovative in a system of continuous improvement”.

There was talk about innovation as a process of using creativity for problem solving - making use of scarce resources and trying to get an improved results and outcomes. These were truly stories of creativity and innovation at work - about management, organisations, and producing results. As Max once scoffed: "If the creative process doesn't produce results...from a management perspective... well, I guess creative in an arty-farty sense is fine for arty-farty's sake". So people talked about real outcomes and results. "Innovation... I put that more in an outcome context...you are trying to get to a result or come up with a product or a solution to a problem...innovation is really goal-orientated". Con told me stories of re-building the IT system from ground up in his council and how he needed to focus his thinking. "I think it's about a mindset really, and it's about focusing on why you're here and what you're doing...about the outcome you're trying to achieve. So you need to know what the end result needs to be, and it's how you get there that determines how innovative you are. Innovation is probably a step further than creativity, where you work through something". But don't let all this serious talk of problem-solving infer that it wasn't enjoyable: "For me it's more...coming up with a better way of doing things and it's often fun".

Quickly I began to realise that these discussions confirmed Clegg's (1999, p.1.) assertion that, "creativity and innovation are classic examples of concepts that everyone has a feel for but few can actually describe". The terms were used were used variously and interchangeably. Their comments echoed those of Mouly (1968, P.403) who suggested that creativity involved "uncommon responses, novelty, flexibility and fluency". Creativity had elements of "originality and imagination" (Best, 1982, p.280) and also "openness, tolerance of ambiguity, task motivation, confidence and risk-taking" (Sternberg and Lubart, 1991). Many of these statements seemed to suggest that the criteria of attributing the term 'creative' to a process or an outcome, could just as easily be attributed to the people 'being creative'. This was borne out in later discussions around creativity as a set of



professional capabilities. Creativity involved using both logic and imagination (Smolenski and Kleiner, 1995) and involved both 'problem-solving' – to make something go away- but also 'problem-seeking' to bring something into being (Fritz, 1989). There was also strong support for the idea of a 'Creativity/Innovation continuum' and the discussions followed Higgins and Morgan' working definition that, "Creativity is, broadly speaking, discovery or recombination of ideas and innovation is more usually used to describe and end product" (2000, p.119).

The idea of a creativity/innovation continuum appeared throughout their stories and antenarrative. Innovation could usefully be seen as putting creative ideas into practice –implementing them. They most typically laughed and nodded their agreement when I cited Parnes (1988, p. 229. ) that creativity "...doesn't end with an idea it begins with it. Their stories also supported Landry's (2000, p.15) assertion that "Creativity is the pre-condition from which innovations develop. An innovation is the realisation of a new idea in practice".

#### **6.4. Creativity and Innovation at Work?**

From the outset I had always been clear (in my mind at least) that I was not investigating the kind of creativity that Max had scornfully dubbed as "arty-farty". We were not talking here about splashing paint around the floor in some kind of Jackson Pollock drunken frenzy or wrapping the Mayor and the Council chambers in a Christo film of cling-wrap. Listening to these people already, I had clearly got the message that 'creativity and innovation' were part of their work and the way they chose to work towards results. I wanted to push further on this point because it was central to my research – I wanted to know more about people being 'creative and innovative' in their jobs – what were they actually doing"?

At first, quite a lot of the talk was again about little things... about constantly looking for the small ways to do things differently and try new ways of doing,

well...the small things. Max was really strong on this point: " Because a lot of people...when they think about creativity and innovation, they forget about the little stuff...if you do the little stuff right in an organisation and improve the little stuff, it just makes the organisation run so much better and provides a much better service to everyone. You can't lose sight of it. It's alright to come up with these big ideas... but don't ever lose sight of those other ideas...the little ones".

But others talked about a balance between the big and the small... how the community wanted both - the surety of the small potholes being fixed but then also knowing that the organisation was pursuing new approaches to enduring problems like global warming. It was also about looking for a local response to a common issue - finding something that was unique to the organisation and their local community. Sarah described her project to develop a 'unique brand' for the local area that would enhance local identification and pride: "The branding project, which was about branding our community as 'diverse/vibrant/ innovative' and using lots of iconic images of people...that was unique...instead of taking something that's off the shelf already, we worked on something that was uniquely ours and about ...here". Karl had been described to me as 'a bit of a mad genius' and he certainly was intense, but I discovered he was also responsible for a number of significant worldwide inventions and now found himself working for the Council. He talked to me about pushing the organisation: "...pushing, pushing... pushing them in areas that it hasn't been before and improving systems and improving all the areas of work".

I probed further on the issue of what triggered the desire, or perhaps the necessity to do something different. Some talked about simply questioning the status quo and looking at different ways of doing things...of 'tweaking it'. Others talked about a specific organisational challenge to meet a clear objective: "The street lighting project...was simply about 'can we reduce our energy consumption and

our costs of our street lighting’?” Some talked about using innovation to produce beneficial results for others: “...things that give people a sense of well-being or happiness. ... that people are going to actually appreciate at the end of the day”. Yet others described the personal pleasure they got from playing with the creative process: “I tend to start with a blank piece of paper and scribble and you know, draw connections between things...or other times I will say ‘I’ve got this problem’ and I won’t think about it and I’ll go away and you’ll end up where the idea will just drop into your head, and I just find that that’s really amazing that that happens”.

These people were clearly aware that we were discussing creativity and innovation at work, and not the pursuit of some kind of personal creative urge or ‘hobby’. They were a clear example of Rogers’ (1989) ideas about the creative interrelationship and their environment – in this case the environment in which they worked. They were also articulate about where they worked – not just their individual Councils as an organisational workplace, but also local government as a context. This pointed back to Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) reminder that we must always examine the ‘sociocultural context for creativity”.

## **6.5. Is it a Real Culture of Innovation?**

The Expert Panel had talked at length about looking for a “real culture of innovation”. Despite being a selected group of ‘prize-givers’ they had been sceptical about those organisations that they saw as simply being successful at bidding for and winning prizes and awards. There were some local Councils, they said, who had a reputation (either deserved or undeserved) for being overt self-promoters. What they thought was important was a ‘real’ organisational culture that supported and encouraged innovation and creativity as part of the daily work of the place. So I asked people about how real was this culture and in what ways it manifested itself in their working lives.

To a person, everyone I talked to all said that there was something real and tangible about the 'culture of innovation' – albeit, sometimes in varying degrees throughout the organisation. Simone thought it might be simply because they were seen to be so busy: "We've sort of got this reputation of being innovative ... maybe is that because we're constantly doing things...look at the events calendar, almost every week there is something happening...so it's not necessarily that it's all really new, it's just that there is always something new happening". However, just like pinning people down to a firm definition of innovation, it proved hard to get these people to give me to clear and explicit examples of organisational support for innovation. Jacinta proudly pointed at the poster on the wall that showed innovation as "...one of our Organisational Core Values". Max gazed over his small, rural Council and declared: "...I was at another Council the other day and I was just so aware of the endless opportunities that they had, that we don't have, but staff here are always looking for better ways to do things... better outcomes". Standing next to him Richard echoed: "Generally, I think it is fairly conservative here...there's support for innovation, but it's different in different areas...well, actually...well no...no, maybe we are not that conservative... I don't think I'd be here if we were".

I pushed and probed – I wanted to hear some more concrete examples and found...well... a few. Shane explained: "Every two months I think, everyone across the organisation has the opportunity to nominate a staff member for good work, and there's six areas they can be nominated... one of them is innovation. It's possibly a bit of a wank...you get a prize and you get a mug with your name on it... you got the 'mug of the month award' ... hahah...But it's actually working, because it's more about the celebration of the innovation I think". One of the Councils had not only embedded 'innovation' as part of its declared Corporate Values but had then had explicitly devised a salary and remuneration system that was based around those values. Their HR Manager, Lucy outlined: "...our

performance management system is based on a core set of competencies... such as leadership, and management, and innovation...and that part of it is worth seventy percent, and the technical competencies are only worth thirty percent". Trevor pointed out that it was therefore imperative to recruit what he called 'real talent'. "We've got a philosophy of trying to get talented people – people who can read the place and see what's actually needed, not just what they want to produce. People who take exceptional pride in what they do to produce a result...not an average result...an A-plus result". There was a lot of talk about the symbolic effect of offering lots of training and building on the existing skills of the workforce – even to the extent where one Council had every one of its park labourers enrolled in technical college courses.

A key point that was emphasised in all three Councils was that staff saw that the Executive Management Team worked as a team and modelled this throughout the organisation – this was seen to break down the 'silo effect' between Departments and create a 'whole-of-Council' approach that was more conducive to innovation. Richard explained: "Part of the role of this senior management level is to work together to keep up the organisational energy. You have got to keep the enthusiasm levels up...so that they don't get tied down...that really stifles them....but it's a fine line... everybody has to do a bit of the hack work to make the world go round". 'Krazy Karl' was typically explicit: " What I think has happened here, is that the people at the top have been prepared to let people below them use their God-given skills and abilities to achieve things".

Their answers suggested an organisational 'creative climate' that contained many of the dimensions in Ekvall's (1991) work: 'challenge, freedom, idea support, trust, dynamism, playfulness, debate, conflict, risk-taking and idea time'. This embedding of 'innovation' into the declared organisational values would also entwine it into the organisational narrative (e.g Boje, Gabriel, Czarniawska).

However people were aware and articulate about the difference between 'living stories' of innovation and an organisational narrative that was perhaps 'petrified' (Czarniawska, 2004) and was really just 'hype' or even... 'bullshit'.

## **6.6. Why You?**

When I moved on to ask people why they thought they were nominated as creative and innovative...to a person, they paused for a moment as they thought.

Jacinta, the Administration Team Leader attributed her nomination to sheer enthusiasm. "I guess ...well I think I'm seen as 'can-do', for want of a better expression...my whole team...have trouble saying no. We see opportunities and think 'we can't let this go'... so we jump on the wagon and try to work it in with what we are doing, or try to add value to what's happening". Others such as Lucy referred to limited resources and the ability to extract efficiencies in an almost "magical" way. "I think I am recognised as being creative with budgets and dealing with limited resources....I know my boss continues to say to me, "I don't know how she does it... how did she fund that?" ...so I'm seen to be creative with that process". Richard spoke of his supposed 'Midas Touch': "Someone said to me the other day...'everything you touch turns to gold' ...hahah...what he meant was, that everything you have taken on as a project, regardless of how impossible it seems, and regardless of the opposition - you manage to get it up and you manage to pull it off...and, not only pull it off and then have it fall over, but pull it off and then have it successful".

But for many of them, they thought it was because they simply enjoyed it and it showed. "I get quite excited about a new idea ...often they come - often they cross your desk and you just have to seize them really...and see the potential in them. you know in yourself the problem-solving thing is something you enjoy doing and I think there a probably some amongst us who like it most - maybe there is some

problem-seeking behaviour in that. It's about looking at how all that big picture fits together... about finding out how the puzzle works". They spoke simply of the challenge and the stimulation: "Probably the incentive for me is...if I haven't been there before...it's a real challenge, and once a challenge is established...I am committed to giving it my all...every day is a challenge". And what if the challenge is not there? "When it's not that stimulating, you're simply not going to become that innovative or creative...I like to keep stretching how we do it or come up with new things... if you have a go in life, you know you can sometimes do it".

A few people spoke eloquently of their deep-seated personal beliefs and a sense of vocation and duty. As Karl said, "I come here, and I'm paid to do my job, and I do it the best I can... I have a very strong work ethic because I am a Bible-based person and that comes from there... that reflects in my ethics as well...that is maybe something I like about local government... it does have a set of ethics". Their replies often expressed a genuine commitment to public service and a very real approach to local governance and participation: "One of the things I enjoy most about my role and I would say it supports the innovative stuff, is around working in collaboration with people...listening to other people's opinions and to where they'd see the issue as sitting."

## **6.7. What's Just Too Risky?**

I was keen to ask them about risk. Borins (2001) and others had identified this as an important issue in the public sector. Yes we wanted creativity... but not crazy, wacky stuff. We wanted 'useful' creativity and innovation... so how did these people decide what was 'just too risky'?

Karl described the organisational response when something was considered 'too high-risk': "You've gone over there, you've stepped over the boundary of what's normal for local government... and so the guns come out...and I'm not saying the

guns are all bad...the guns are good too, because they make you refine the process to make sure that you are squeaky clean". Others echoed this notion of ideas being refined and that there were in-built processes of checking. "In public organisations you need to cross all the 'T's and dot all the I's ...you need to be careful". Lots of people talked about being careful - about thinking ahead to what would happen if this idea was implemented... what could go wrong and what questions would be asked? Almost everyone told stories of using their technical capabilities and following procedures that allowed them to minimise and manage risk. Later, on reflection, I realised that all of these people had a high awareness of risk but were not inherently risk-averse. Shane explained: "risk is a relative thing...I do a proper risk analysis of all the design and construction aspects and all that... I don't see any part of my job as too risky because I think well ahead of time before I implement things". Max described this risk analysis as part of 'professionalism': "...in my own professional training there are different types of risk... its part of the requirements to think in-depth about every aspect".

But what about political risk? Councils are, at the end of the day, political environments, and Councillors can be fickle with ideas being either approved or denied on the basis of party politics and/or personal bias and opinion. Sometimes, Richard said you had to take it slowly and wait until the Councillors were 'ready to make the decision' ... and often there needed to be a process of 'educating' the Councillors before getting them to make decisions about major change.

Interestingly, everyone was able to describe what sort of decisions they would make on their own, what went 'up' to a manager or supervisor and what went to the Council. Innovations needed to be practical, and by the time they were presented to the Council they needed to be accompanied by evidence that the potential consequences had been well thought through. Matt explained nicely: "For me, innovation always needs to be tempered with pragmatism, and that needs to take into account a lot of things... one is the political climate of an idea...I



mean, 'is this innovation something that we can pursue, which is going...to be favoured?'. We do need to look at – and we do – look at the social, and the environmental, and the economic implications before we proceed. Innovation needs to be accomplished in that context'.

There were stories of ideas being 'tested' with the community through a variety of consultation and education mechanisms – this was seen as vital to assure Councillors that there was minimal risk to their political reputation. "We take solid steps to try and avoid risks", explained Carol, "and part of that would be ensuring the consultation takes place beforehand". This consultation process was seen as especially vital when deciding about high-cost proposals. Richard described his perception of this critical relationship to the community: "You can't go too far ahead of the community or you'll get your head chopped off! So even you are pushing the boundaries with the community on these sorts of things...if I lose community support I lose political support". Hence, the need for reliable information – 'market analysis' on the community's wishes, priorities and concerns – was seen as vital, and hence this risk management process became part of the broader governance relationship of engaging with the community. I pursued this link and asked a few people outright if they thought that perhaps creativity and innovation were fundamental parts of good governance - being engaged with their community and trying to develop innovations to meet their needs? Nearly everyone nodded and Richard simply declared "our creativity is part of the good governance that contributes to the social capital of this town!"

The more people I interviewed, the more I became fascinated with their stories of balancing this 'risk-minimisation' but also maintaining an organisational culture that didn't stifle creativity. Clearly, knowing that 'you were heading in the right direction' was important, and for these Council staff that was most often was the result of genuine community engagement and the faith that Council objectives

flowed from that process. But people also talked a lot about “being able to make mistakes” and learn from them.

Max described how he viewed this issue as a General Manager:

I appreciate people having a go at things. If they make mistakes, well and good...and they might ask you help them to fix them. I suppose there are degrees... but they've got to learn from mistakes. Especially, if somebody has experience and qualifications. If somebody makes a half-million-dollar mistake then I really want answers. And if they kept making mistakes...you'd verbalise 'look this shouldn't happen... how are we going to prevent this from happening again?'

Knowing when to 'ask for help' and knowing when and how to involve others in reviewing ideas featured as an absolutely critical ability. In all the Councils they could clearly show the organisational expectations and procedures that needed to be followed...but people seemed to have their own private 'checking mechanisms' and then circumstantial 'alarm bells' that would signal when they should proceed with any decision on their own.. Making decisions 'on your own' depended on personal experience, risk aversion, the nature of the project and any 'peculiar' circumstances. Sarah talked about managing Childcare services and when she chose to 'play it straight' (and avoid anything risky): “I tend to play it straighter when there is media involved [or]...if we are working with any particular cultural group...And anywhere where there are parents involved... of course then I play it very straight”. Shane said that 'big things' went through at least three levels of review and approval. Others identified that there were some issues and/or options that were just 'no-go zones' because of the attitudes of the Council, the community or Executive Management. In some cases the checking and cross-checking was enforced by law, professional practice and a process of due diligence, but sometimes it just came down to a personal decision about confidence. “I guess it is

when I become uncertain about something”, Simone revealed, “...if I am no longer confident in my own ability and my own judgement...I need to call in the cavalry to maybe expand on something that I’ve not yet thought of....or if I can’t justify it myself... if I feel I am being co-erced into the decision, or something like that”. Carol echoed her comments: “Yeah, it’s very clear to me when I need to check with other people...and there’s a whole other level of little risks that we have to manage... while we might be innovative, there’s a fair bit of pulling on the brakes as well”.

Their discussions of risk harked back to the work of Borins (2000) and others. Clearly, part of their process of developing innovation in this local government context was to be mindful of, but not hampered by, the need to assess and manage risk. Part of their reassurance came from Moore’s (2004) ideas of being clear about what ‘public value’ they sought to create and what ‘legitimacy and support’ would authorise them to take action. The systems and checks of this ‘legitimacy and support’ were complex but also considered vital to these practitioners. Understanding theseis complex system was deemed to be a key element of the ‘nous’ they described as part of their professional capabilities.

## **6.8 What are you actually doing, and how do you do it? – The Professional Capabilities Framework**

I’d made it clear - in my approach to the Councils, in the Executive Management Team workshops and in the brief introduction to each of the interviews - that I was looking at creativity and innovation being used at work in local government. I stressed I was also most interested in what capabilities people were using and less interested in what personal attributes, traits or pre-dispositions people may have. Most people seemed quite happy with that and many quickly responded to the value of investigating this topic and exploring these professional capabilities and

how they could be enhanced. The Professional Capabilities Framework<sup>22</sup> (PCF) had proven a reliable field tool in discussions with employers in the workplace and therefore may be similarly useful for in my interviews. I'd reproduced the diagrammatic representation of the PCF model, (as discussed in section 3.3.6) with its five overlapping spheres of 'professional capabilities'. Many of the interviews took place not long after the Sydney Olympics so many people laughingly commented on the 'Olympic' style of the five rings. I'd printed it out onto a sheet of A3 paper that we could place between us and also we could use to scribble notes. I would explain the origins of the PCF and how it had been used to track the professional capabilities demonstrated by 'star' employees in the workplace. Some people talked about other 'profiling' models around<sup>23</sup> but nevertheless they seemed to appreciate the no-nonsense and visual framework that the PCF provided. It proved to be a robust tool that helped both instigate and sometimes order the conversations - at times people would physically point at one of the PCF circles and ponder: "I think what I'm talking about fits there...or maybe there?" Sometimes the clear categorisation of particular capabilities was left still unresolved at the end of our interview, but, if so, most people seemed unperturbed.

### **6.8.1. Profession-Specific Skills**

The people I spoke to had varied and eclectic job titles: e.g. General Manager, Director - Administration, Finance Director, Parks Manager, Community Services Manager, Environment Manager, Manager-Parklands, Technical Officer, Human Resource Manager, and Team Leader. I was reminded of how the Australian Government's attempt to map out the 'competencies'<sup>24</sup> required for various jobs around the nation had discovered that Local government was the most diverse

---

<sup>22</sup> Scott, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. the Thomas Disc model, the Myers-Briggs model etc.

<sup>24</sup> The so-called National Competency Framework

'industry' and had more 'job families' than any other workplace. Nobody had 'trained for local government', although a few had entered a Council with their first, unqualified job, then 'decided what to do' after that. Local government in Australia has no general admission qualifications, nor exams (unlike countries like Japan). Since 1993, the Local Government Acts around the country no longer stipulate any qualifications specific to local government, although of course there are still legal requirements for training of many professions such as engineers, building surveyors, childcare workers etc.

Hence, as a group, these people held a vast array of profession-specific skills and qualifications. People spoke of their 'profession' by referring to their job-role rather than the particular Local government context - there was very little mention of the need to understand the raft of specific Local government Legislation, various Acts and Regulations. Chris shrugged and gave me a not untypical answer: "Oh yeah... I suppose there's the legislation side of things...State Records Act etc, interpretation of the statutes, Council policies....all learnt on the job". A number of people spoke of how the legislative context was could be seen to be a barrier to innovation. As the General Manager, Max told me: "I don't think my knowledge of legislation allows me to be innovative, mostly, in terms of Council management planning it's prescriptive sort of stuff. In fact I would say, in local government it's a constraint... the approach to planning that's in the Act". Shane, however, was hesitant to succumb to the constraints: "Environmental law, water restrictions... things change constantly, so if people tell you the constraints of something there is no reason you have to just limit yourself...knowing what you need to know for all the statutory and legislative, technical points of view, you can then begin to explore parts of the work that you think are worth doing... that you are good at and you care about".

Everyone I spoke to had gained some form of post-secondary education, ranging from TAFE<sup>25</sup> Diplomas, to Undergraduate degrees and some Post-Graduate degrees, and often had completed a range of 'professional' short courses. However, all of them spoke of a personal and eclectic learning journey where they selected their study options according to: "availability, need, and circumstances". The list of formal education qualifications ranged widely through: Diploma of Electronics Engineering, Bachelor of Business, Diploma in Health and Building, Masters in Environmental Health, Diploma in Agriculture, a Degree in Biology/Land Management, a Bachelor of Arts degree, Master's Degree in Organisational Development and Training, Graduate Certificate in Industrial Relations, and a Master of Public Affairs. They credited their formal education with giving them technical expertise that they used in their daily work, although many of them brought skills and capabilities from 'other professions' into their current job, and none of them had a 'linear' career path. Karl drew me a detailed and convoluted flow chart on the whiteboard: "I trained as an electronics engineer at TAFE...just a Diploma...from my qualifications I went into satellites and then data communications and then to computers....and R&D and software development. The next thing... I went into commercial communications...so I picked up some business skills here, because now it was commercial see. Then I went to [the next employer] and I picked up mechanical engineering... at this time, there would be specific IT skills here...PCs and servers...hardware...and now...water and sewerage skills". Whoa!...From satellites to sewerage!

Many of them credited their formal education with giving them 'rigorous discipline', 'ethics', 'professional practice', and a 'way of looking at the world'. Carol credited her background in science as giving her a 'robust methodology'- "To think about widely and to test your assumptions, and to test different alternatives and scenarios before making a decision. I can think of the bigger

---

<sup>25</sup> Technical and Further Education – the system of Technical Colleges in Australia  
180

picture, the outcomes, and weigh up the different alternatives... and come up with something that is a mix of different actions. Maybe [other] people come up with great ideas, but it's not an overall strategy. So I'd say that my science has helped that ". Whilst few described a journey quite as diverse as Karl's, all of them had moved around in their careers, and learning had come from a mixture of initial formal education, practical experience, mentors, conferences, seminars, short courses, and through opportunities to gain new experience – mostly opportunities from working on projects that they had created themselves. All of them were learners...lifelong learners...they all clearly enjoyed learning and told stories of their delight in learning something new. Lucy was clear: "I'm the sort of person who likes to learn something new every day".

Perhaps because of their eclectic career paths they often pondered whether a capability they were describing was 'profession-specific' or 'generic' and the distinction was often blurred. At one time it may have been specific but now it was generic...or vice versa. Or they were using a capability that had been learned for one purpose but now they were using it in a different way and in a different context. These capabilities provided them, as Colleen said, "a palette with which to paint" –they allowed them to explore and pursue some of their creative ideas – but the subject and style of the painting changed over time. There were common tales of how it was their technical capabilities that allowed them to do what they did and to lessen risk. All of them seemed to be good (if not very good) at what they did – they had a high level of technical capability in their professional area and they relied on this as a sort of 'safety-net' to provide due process underpinning their decisions that others may have seen as 'too risky'. Shane told me a great story of how he built this towering 'climbing tree' in the new playground – a sort of Christmas-tree shaped structure with rope nets for kids to climb up. "At the first site inspection the Councillors just gasped when they saw this thing and they were demanding that I pull it down because some kid might fall and they'd all get sued.

But I had done all the modelling and had a diagram on the CAD system, so I could show them that even if a very strong five or six year old was able to climb up say, this high, with an average body mass and the space between the ropes they would only be able to fall say 40 cm". Richard, as usual, was direct: "My legal training has taught me a better perspective on risk. Having done law, you know how much, much closer you can go to the line...and this bit of the line shows you where you need to get more expert advice".

When it came to keeping up to date with this professional detail and expertise – with new legislation, or professional and procedures – most people told me stories of constant reading. Professional journals, email bulletins, websites, magazines... all were prolific and efficient readers. Jeff beamed "Reading...oh yes, I do a tremendous amount of reading" and Karl proudly claimed to have "never finished a fiction book in my life". They also usually belonged to professional associations and would attend regional 'chapter' meetings or go to the annual conferences... but they were cautious if not plain cynical about the value. "I used to go to the Annual Parks Conference", said Bill, "but I have tended in recent times to send my staff. I suppose that there was a time in my life where I used to go every year...where I could get my ideas and interact, but lately it had no relevance to me... they were talking stuff that was crap as far as I was concerned". Carol echoed this sentiment, "I try to attend just one update seminar each year...as long as its' relevant ...I'm really choosy on what I go to...sorry, it just...I often feel that I've got more smarts than some of the people there...more worldly experience".

### **6.8.2. Generic Skills**

We would sit with the PCF laid out in front of us on the table. We would talk with a little recorder off to one side – in the early days it was my trusty but cumbersome Dictaphone with its short tapes, unreliable batteries and poor sound quality... later is was my little pen-shaped digital recorder that could even pick up the throb of



the air conditioning unless I wrapped it in an old football sock. As we talked I would take notes and also scribble on the PCF chart between us. Often people would take their pen and alter my scribbles or add or delete things themselves. The printed PCF provided a visual pattern and these people seemed to like patterns. As we talked about generic capabilities, those broader skills and knowledge, some of them would hover over the PCF like quizzical birds and tap their pens backwards and forwards between the circles – pausing, pondering, pointing...trying to decide whether it was ‘profession-specific’, ‘generic’ or even ‘stance’. If you review local government job advertisements, they commonly describe the required generic skills in areas such as: planning, project management, financial management, IT skills, skills in people management, teamwork etc. So I had expected these capabilities to feature in our conversations. They did... but only to a certain extent.

Planning and project management were identified as important by some people. Trevor attributed planning as the key to his ability to have a number of projects ‘on the go’ at any one time. “I think I am a good planner, and I think I’m good at juggling fifteen things at once...and getting them finished. I work well under pressure so the fact that I know I have a deadline to plan for is a good thing”. “Planning skills I think are pretty crucial”, said Max, “Strategic planning skills I guess – thinking about why, what, where, who, how much?...is it real, does it work, does it serve any purpose”? Budgets? Budgets seemed to be just a fact of life and people really didn’t talk about them. Some people talked about all the IT tools available to them and how it was important to use them effectively. Chris explained: “Because the tools and the resources are there... you just use them. But I like to use some of the advanced features... even in things like Microsoft Office. I believe the Help button is there for a reason – it’s an exploratory tool”. Shane was a

self-confessed “CAD<sup>26</sup>-monkey” and really enjoyed using his IT tools: “For me, I enjoy doing Excel modelling...so in all the projects I do, I will do the modelling...and that helps me select the sort of projects I engage in. Because I have a lot of flexibility about the sort of projects I select. Only Max suggested ‘people management’ as an important generic capability, but when I asked him for more detail about the actual skills involved he obtusely explained: “It’s really just about experience and understanding that people don’t perform well when they get their head shot off for making a mistakes... people learn from mistakes”.

Overwhelmingly, the most important ‘creative’ capabilities according to these people were their communication skills – listening, writing, presenting and communicating their ideas and information... and telling stories. Will smiled wistfully at my question: “I tend to listen very well...and when I need to communicate something I don’t have any problems at all if I can talk one-on-one...that’s the way I prefer to work. It’s the way I have operated the Branch for so long they are used to it”. But Max explained how he tailored what he said and how he said it...and even how he looked, for all the differing sorts of people in the organisation. “I can be an academic if I need to be, or I can talk to the guys in the yard...but I don’t get out there and swear...hah...I try not to. The worst thing you can do is get out there and sound like a pompous old fart. But I try to talk in a way that is honest and open. I think that honesty is vital”. On the topic of public speaking, Richard was far more animated than his usual self (which often resembled a caricatured mortuary assistant), “Oh yeah...you’ve got to be able to speak publicly... you’ve to be able to do interviews and speak on the radio, and speak to groups. I try not to umm and ahh when I am being interviewed. I talk to the local ABC<sup>27</sup> all the time. I see that as part of my job. Do you know how many comments I get from people saying, ‘oh, I

---

<sup>26</sup> CAD- Computer Aided Design

<sup>27</sup> ABC- Australian Broadcasting Commission – the National Government radio network.

heard you on the radio' or 'I saw you on the news...that was really good!'. You know what it does, it lifts the profile of the area...it lifts people's spirits".

Some talked about this capability for public presentation as if came naturally, but for others, like Carol, it required preparation. "People usually say that I am fantastic at giving presentations...but that is only because I have prepared beforehand. I still get very nervous... it never seems that I am going to get over it. So I prepare... I have to consciously make a real effort". Carol has started a 'Speakers Club' at her Council - to help give tips and practice at public presentation for other nervous speakers like her. "Well I started up the speakers club because I learnt so much from attending Toastmasters and I thought it is such a great way to learn, for people who are basically nervous speakers". Will also admitted his lack of confidence in his usual self-effacing way: "Actually my offsider is better at communicating with people. I think he communicates things better to the layperson than I do. It's sort of one of those skills that I really wish I had... all I end up doing is just saying it louder...hahah". However, Karl nodded and gesticulated wildly with his hands: "Yeah ...obviously I have to do presentations and talk to many people... I don't much like it much... but you've gotta have that ability to think of the picture...visualisations... and then show the people".

Everybody talked about writing. Writing reports, memos, plans, press releases - writing not just to convey information but also as a distillation process of refining ideas, getting the message across or as a way of 'showing the picture' as Karl described it. Colleen told me of how she managed to get Councillor support for a somewhat contentious environmental project, and what was required in her briefing report "I just had to work out what I was telling the Councillors, what did they need to know to start with... what was the purpose of my whole report. I went back through other Council papers to see what they were set out like. You

needed to keep it very brief and to the point". Concise and succinct was the rule said Richard: "I try and give the facts and don't try and fill it up with bullshit. The thing I am always very strong on is having a positive recommendation. I think in general the Councillors favour that style. 99% of the issues that we put up are reasonably straight forward". This emphasis on honesty was echoed by Trevor: "You have to try and remove the bullshit factor...always be honest, always be up-front. But you always have to point out where there is a likely impact to the organisation".

As well as its communicative role, some others told me about using their writing as a convergent process...as a way of refining and distilling their ideas. Carol explained: "I can communicate with people in writing and I understand about communicating to different audiences. But writing to me... is when you can get the meaning out of the chaos... to give it to people. To give them a clear picture and to take something that is very complex and put it into simple terms is, I think, a skill that is very important. This writing skill really allows me to communicate in that sense". Surprisingly it was the grey-cardiganned Trevor who spoke most colourfully about being 'poetic': "I think being able to write the metaphors for all the stories is really important. Having a joke and laughing at yourself is also important. You know a cartoon can do a lot of communication that would need an awful lot of words". But Bill had his typically forthright opinion of the need for writing skills: "I do some writing but I have got others who do my reports for me. I haven't got time to do that... I'm too busy thinking about the wider things all the time. Well, that's the way I see it...maybe I am being lazy. Talking to my staff and the community about what is going on and then thinking about what they are telling me...that's what it's all about for me".

Moore (1995, 2004) developed his model of a 'strategic triangle' when assessing the strategies required of public sector managers to create Public Value: understanding what was the public value that was sought, gaining sources of 'legitimacy and support', and ensuring access to appropriate 'operational capabilities'. He suggested that, in order to secure both the legitimacy and support as well as the necessary resources such managers need to "...sell the story of public value creation to elected representatives" (2004, p.5). This was certainly confirmed in the discussions I had with these local government innovators. Not only did they need to 'sell their story' to the people around them (both 'upstream' and 'downstream') but they often needed to build stories around their ideas that would resonate with Executive Managers, elected Councillors and members of the public. There was a fine line between this skill and simple 'hype' or 'spin-doctoring', but there was a discernable distinction for these people. Hence, these story-building and story telling skills (social, verbal and written) were critical for the successful implementation of the innovations..

### **6.8.3. "Stance"**

Geoff Scott had called it 'Stance' in his Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). 'Stance' was an amalgam of elements of Goleman's (1998, 2000) Emotional Intelligence, Schön's (1983), Reflective Learner and Csikszentmihalyi's, (1996) work on creative thinking. Local government, however, is susceptible to the lingua franca of the time, and so most of the people I spoke too quickly renamed 'Stance' as 'Emotional Intelligence' or simply 'EQ' - these were terms that they had become more familiar with through conferences, seminars and workshops. They used the term Emotional Intelligence to talk about "the human side of things", and though their comments clearly verged over into some of Amabile's work on attributes, it was about what personal and human capabilities were required for the job. Sarah's explanation of 'compassion', illustrated that such capabilities were not always used simply because of personal traits: "You need compassion. My sense of compassion

comes from my belief in Buddhism ... but I believe it is part of my job...although sometimes I find it hard to apply compassion in my job”.

From his position of General Manager, Max gave his personal view on this topic. “When a lot of people get themselves into the General Manager’s job they get a very inflated opinion of themselves... but like to be a friendly person at work. It doesn’t make me a better person... I’m doing my job – and that’s all”. What Max called being a ‘friendly person’, others referred to ‘people skills’, ‘compassion’, ‘being sympathetic’ or ‘being a good listener’. They were certainly self-aware, and spoke of themselves easily. Their ability to ‘self-regulate’ sometimes revealed itself in conversation. These capabilities were not only important for serving the community (as you might expect) but for interacting within the organisation. Alex highlighted the need for empathy, and whilst some others thought this was more likely a trait or an attribute, he felt it was developed: “It’s certainly not an innate quality. It would depend on your background...I use the word empathy on a number of occasions, because you know, I’ve been on the other side of the counter to know what’s going on, and to experience the frustrations”. Richard explained with candour, “It might sound dumb, but I think it’s a maturity thing, maybe it’s an experience thing as well. I think in my professional life I have not always been an empathetic person...I have to work very hard to do these things...I am increasingly finding it more critical actually”. Trevor was succinct and related empathy directly to his need to achieve outcomes with other people at work. “It’s about understanding your people really. This is a workplace. In the roles I’ve had I have always had the positional power to get what I want anyway, but all of a sudden I came to a point of view... I thought there’s got to be a better way to do this. The best people at this stuff are the ones that can do all that people stuff well”.

Often, I asked people to try and just give me a few words that described their chief characteristics. All sorts of words would crop up and provide an opportunity for

further elaboration. 'fairness', 'honesty' and 'ethics' came up a lot, along with the importance of 'walking the talk'. Carol explained her fundamental honesty and how that caused her some disappointment at times. "I think I am pretty honest in that way and sometimes that seems like I am naïve. That's been a source of frustration of times when you are faced with a reaction from others in the organisation, that "you don't need [to give] such an honest response". Others suggested it was critical to their work, and particularly to the way they approached developing innovation in local government. "You've got to be genuine and honest...and if you promise something – either deliver it or be honest that you can't. If you are involved in creating something then you build up expectation, then if you realise this is not going to happen that needs to lead to an apology on my part, absolutely. So my personal responsibility is in there as well". Sarah bundled up honesty, ethics and responsibility as a key component in her work with community groups: "Honesty and ethics are vital. Because of the issues we are involved in, being ethical is implicit. I represent the Council but I also expect them to represent the community and with that comes my responsibility to do that justice...that notion of personal responsibility is vital...it's part of my risk assessment". Karl, who usually seemed to be brutally frank about most things, surprised me with his guarded approach: "Yeah...honesty's important...having said that... I'm not saying dishonesty is okay... but perhaps 'not showing all your cards' is a better way to put it".

The conversations would sometimes steer over to the topic of bravery. The literature was full of references linking creativity to risk-taking, and this often featured in our conversations – but did these people think of themselves as brave? "I don't think I'm brave...bold maybe", said Sarah, " I wouldn't say I'm that bold, but perhaps at times I am...having confidence in yourself...it's about overcoming fear". Some credited their bravery or ability to deal with fear as having come from playing competitive sport at a high level. Will learned his in the Army: "In some

senses it has enabled me to step out in good faith...and just face it. There are times when you simply haven't got enough information but there's a gut feeling...so you sort of step out and face it and say, 'yes, we'll go with it' ". A number of them told me private stories of overcoming great misfortune and trauma. Richard once revealed to me the deep tragedy and personal sorrow that was the reason behind his stony face and his tale sent me to my motel room to sit in silence and just wonder at the strength of human spirit. As they told their stories, it was clear that whilst these people may not call themselves brave or fearless but all of them had well-developed mechanisms for dealing with fear. As Carol said, "you mentioned that managing risk thing ... well it's also really just about learning to go 'oh my god, I've got it wrong and now I'm going to lose face...aaaah well...it's not a big deal' ". Shane explained how he had mentored a workmate who was nervous about presenting a project proposal: "I said to her 'it's not about you... you're not going to be judged, it's about the project, just understand that' ".

One thing that really stuck out is that they all seemed very good-humoured, positive, hospitable and friendly. I was mindful that I was in the company of people who had been told that I wanted to speak to them because they have been singled out for being 'creative' and 'innovative' - it was likely that this might put them in a good mood to start with - but they did all seem to focus on the positive aspects of their life. Although some, like Sarah admitted it didn't come naturally: "I've worked hard at it and I've tried to make myself positive". They usually had a good sense of humour and enjoyed telling stories that would sometimes leave me giggling for hours. Carol explained to me: "I think I have a sense of the ridiculous...yes...I mean, it's gone wrong for me when the sense of humour hasn't exhibited itself for a while". She then went on to describe how she livened up a boring Powerpoint presentation by squirting the participants with a water pistol - "That kept 'em interested!" she giggled. Sarah described explaining different perspectives by opening the contents of a handbag onto the table - "A woman's



handbag reveals all sorts of different ideas”, she smiled deviously. Jacinta described “a sense of fun” and told stories of trying to instil that in her work team. Shane admitted to being “committed to playfulness” and described his work as being all about “human beings enjoying playing together”. Max summed up his perspective: “It’s just much better if people feel they are having fun - as long as the work still gets done, why not have fun for all those hours of your life?”. Above all, they seemed to love their work... maybe not their job, but their work. For them, the line between work and play was blurred. Will went as far to declare, “It’s not just my work, it’s my vocation – it’s what I was meant to do, its deeply rewarding”. Others used work like ‘pleasure’, ‘passion’. Chris told me of his pleasure in coming to work each day: “If I won Lotto<sup>28</sup> tomorrow, if I won ten million dollars...what would I do? I would be here...I would still need to do what I do. Richard was uncommonly exuberant in his response: “I don’t live to come to work... but I enjoy coming to work...I enjoy the job. I like working in a country environment like this, and I like working in this community “. Lucy probably summed it up when she said, “I couldn’t imagine not doing what I do”. And they all liked being good at what they did...not just okay, but good. Doing well at work was a real sense of achievement and important to them. I asked Jacinta if it was important to her that she did her job well and she unflinchingly answered, “Yep... better than well!”

#### **6.8.4. Contingent Thinking**

In the PCF, Scott had called it ‘contingent thinking’ – not just convergent or divergent thinking, but being able to ‘read’ a situation and then choose the best way of thinking to achieve the outcome. It was about having different ways of thinking to suit different purposes – a palette, a portfolio of thinking styles. In particular I was interested in exploring how these people generated ideas and then turned them into implementable innovations, and to find out whether they were

conscious of having different thinking styles to suit different purposes. I was also interested to find out which of the activities along creativity- innovation continuum they preferred to do alone and which of them they undertook with others.

The response to my question, "how do you generate ideas" produced a wide variety of responses: "in the shower", "in the car", "lying in bed". "Mowing the lawn" was popular response amongst the men, and Con added unexpected extra visual detail by answering, "mowing the lawn in my undies". Bill had gone so far as to make sure there was always a pen and paper handy in the bathroom: "I get a lot of really good ideas in the shower, but these days I just gotta get out and write them down...because otherwise I'll lose it." Most people talked about having ideas 'on the simmer', of having ideas that they picked up and worked on and then left alone for some time... only to re-examine them later. Will talked about his lateral thought processes: "I tend to be a lateral thinker...I am a dreamer. Because when I think about things I will think about it in snippets, and then ultimately sometime I will pull them all together. I might do that over three or four days if something is really bugging me. At the end of the day, my subconscious mind will keep working on it...and all of a sudden...there's the answer". Amabile (1988) had called this a 'tolerance of ambiguity' and many people told me that they were quite comfortable to have 'unfinished' ideas or questions in their minds. For Sally it was about have the time and being in the 'right state' as she called it. "There are ideas that are sitting in the background that come to the fore when I have got the time...and I am ready...or it's the right time to do it". Bill explained: "Say you've got a problem...so you slot it away in the back of your mind. Maybe lying in bed at night you process it. And you wake up in the morning and you might have a solution...or not. The one morning you wake up and you've nussed that out and you've got a solution". This also sounded a lot like Cohen's (1972) 'Garbage Can'

---

<sup>28</sup> The Australian National Lottery

model of organisational decision-making- a swirling of problems, solutions, opportunities and actors. Chris talked about it being the nature of the work: "The nature of this work is where, when we do put proposals up to Council for the coming year... it might be three or four years later before you can actually do the work...that makes a lot of time for ideas to float around and develop". However, my people spoke of a different approach when something was urgent - then the idea generation became far more logical, far less ambiguous.

Interestingly, nearly everyone told me they preferred to generate ideas on their own. Only two people said they liked to start coming up with ideas in a group situation but most people dislike the 'cold start' brainstorming approach. As Trevor said, "I like to come up with ideas on my own. Then I come back and discuss and talk through the ideas with the next person...and then they might give me other ideas...I'll go away and think about something... to be sure of myself...I want to be sure of myself". Carol's response was also typical: "I enjoy a group discussion, once I have my mind clear on an issue...but going into a discussion cold...I much prefer having my own time initially. I probably go back into a group process to validate my thinking... I don't always have the right idea". Will told me quietly "I find the brainstorming thing difficult, because it's so extrovert... I throw two bob's worth in but it's not really my preferred way". It seemed that they preferred to 'think alone' at first and draw on their own beliefs, knowledge and experience, but once they had something to offer then they would seek out the company of others. When asked about brainstorming or group sessions Jacinta was blunt: "I can like to do it...if I was forewarned about it, I would probably be able to positively contribute. I'll brainstorm, but it needs to be within the context". A number of people articulated their need to feel confident that they had developed their ideas enough or 'got their head around the issues' first before they shared it with others.

Despite the initial preference for solo work, everyone spoke of the importance of groupwork. It was variously described in terms such as 'tossing ideas around', 'bouncing off each other', 'throwing something to the group and seeing what spits up'. Colleen seemed still a little cautious. "I am just plain stuck, or I have to a stalemate...I might say to people, 'I would like to come to you with this, or I would like your expertise in this area'. And I will show them what I have done and they will come to it from a different angle, due to their background...or maybe it's just me not seeing the trees for the forest". But for others the group communication and the reiterative process of refining ideas and exploring options was vital and enjoyable. Max saw it as essential: "Sometimes I latch onto their ideas...somebody says 'what about this?'...and maybe I latch onto it or add to it. I feed off other people for ideas...I don't say that my idea is perfect. So I feed off others". Sarah liked to use the group for developing options: "I like doing that as a group. But I also need there to be though a little bit of quiet in doing it. In the larger groups I tend to be more ... jostled. I find it harder to keep my focus. But the smaller groups are probably my preference". These people use these interpersonal processes for a variety of creative purposes: idea generation, idea validation, idea development, idea sharing, option development, challenge and debate, risk assessment, and just... sharing and enjoying the company. The occasions when they met and worked together could be just as easily planned as unplanned – a chat in the corridor, a team workshop, a specific workshop, or just stopping by each other in the course of their work.

If they did hold workshops or planned group sessions, they used all sorts of techniques – just talking, brainstorming (in a variety of forms), drawing, visualizations, De Bono's 'Six Hats'<sup>29</sup>, SWOT analysis, mind-mapping,, cost-benefit analysis. A number of people explained how the process of developing and presenting an argument to a group of their peers, as part of the covering process-

polishing and packing their ideas, and then building a story to present to others. Some called this 'selling the idea'. One called it 'giving 'em the picture'. At times they described a process that seemed like interpellation, or defence, where as they responded to the questions of others they slowly refined and re-engineered their ideas and argument, adding emphasis and colour here and there. In this way they were using their creativity to come together and develop innovations through this process of story-building. Some did it visually Sally confessed: "I am very visual in that sense...normally, when the General Manager and I get together we very quickly end up getting bit of paper out...yeah...I'm very visual and I draw it". Many people explained how they used writing as the final 'packaging' process - the process of selecting the words and ordering and structuring, taking the ideas from concepts or issues through to implementable recommendations. Shane described how he used the development of a computer-generated 3D model as a way of collecting and converging his ideas into a final 'actionable step'. "It's the final stage for me, it's got everything in there - the context, the parameters, the variables, the risks, the ideas, the data, - and then I can massage and manipulate it until I get a picture that people can look at and understand...and then we go and do it!".

### **6.8.5. Diagnostic Maps...Nous**

A critical part of Scott's concept of contingent thinking, was the ability to 'read' a situation and then select not only possible actions but also an appropriate way of thinking about the issue. He suggests that successful people have the capability to do this quite quickly, and over time develop a series of 'diagnostic maps' or 'shortcuts' to assist them. When I talked to this collection of 'creative' local government people, a number of them quickly re- labelled this 'Nous' (the old English expression for commonsense knowledge about a particular situation or place). Nous was the kind of knowledge that would be difficult for a newcomer at

---

<sup>29</sup> Edward de Bono,(1985, 1999)

first, but much easier for an 'old hand'. Whatever they called it, everybody understood the concept and agreed that it was important. Primarily it was about understanding the context, the domain you were working in and understanding the actors within that domain. Some of it was peculiar to local government they suggested, but much of it was about people, power and communication. It was also one of those concepts that people could explain through its absence – i.e. what happened when those diagnostic skills were not there. “When you get a Graduate [trainee] in”, said Max, “you can see, they have not got those diagnostic skills. You have to make the mistakes yourself to learn from them”.

People told stories of needing to be able to 'read the political map', which interested me as (in theory) Council staff are expected to remain relatively un-politicised...but you still need to be watchful they said. Watchful out of interest or in order to survive I wondered? Trevor told me about explicitly 'massaging the numbers' – knowing how to label and present the financial aspects of a proposal in order to get the most positive response from Councillors. This was not Machiavellian manipulation he claimed, it was about: “Putting things in the right place and in a way that the Councillors felt most comfortable with...and they appreciate you doing that”. But it wasn't just behind the walls of the Council Chambers...it was needed out in the community as well. Sarah told me her work with community groups. “In some ways it's commonsense. Commonsense and knowing your audience is the thing -knowing how to frame something. Working with your communities is very important. Learning how to frame proposals and questions to meet different views, and seeing things from different perspectives”.

Colleen told me a story where it all went wrong because of a lack of nous – and someone got the diagnosis wrong.

You need to be able to read where things are going to and who is going to receive this...and what message is it giving them. There's an example just recently where we commenced a Travel Management Study and we have a young uni student working with us to do that. What we are ultimately trying to do is to reduce the vehicle kilometres travelled by all Council vehicles. But in a briefing paper to senior staff all that he had said was that we wanted to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and therefore we were going to re-assess our fleet of Council cars. This immediately raised the hackles of the fleet managers, and all the people that like to drive their Council cars, so suddenly there are all these industrial relations issues in Council. I think it was about communication skills...maybe it was about being perceptive and keeping your ears open and listening skills? Also not having the experience to understand the audience was the main problem.

Many people were adamant that these 'diagnostic' skills, this elusive nous could only be (and indeed had to be) learned through experience. Chris talked about learning nous: "I went from here and I went over to another Council... I had learned to read this Council here but when I got there it was completely different. I was eventually able to pick up how to read them which was essential for my job". But what about keeping these diagnostic capabilities up-to-date? Just like a doctor, isn't it important to make the effort to keep re-assessing and updating? "Oh yeah", said Richard, "As you refine and hone your skills, you can't always have to keep going back to square one. Having said that, there are often times where I have had to go back to square one, because it's been a long time between drinks. You know, it's between the last time and this time when you have to use those particular skills. So I have to make a real effort to keep my information up-to-date". Ever-generous, Max told me stories of mentoring, of coaching and training people in nous - even to the extent of trying to 'read' and 'diagnose' situations for them. "I also try to read it for the others... I also know how it is from all the other sides. I

have been fortunate, that I have worked as a General Manager only with three Mayors...I have learnt how to keep them out of trouble. You learn due process...and politics”.

I began to see an interesting possible link between ‘nous’ and narrative. Could it be that ‘nous’ was also an expression of the organisational narrative? Perhaps ‘nous’ the ‘diagnostic maps and shortcuts’ of Scott’s (2001) PCF were also the performance of the learnt scripts of an organisational narrative. If this ‘nous’ was actually the process of aligning with the organisational narrative in order to ensure Moore’s (2000) ‘legitimacy and support’ for action, then couldn’t this simply be an exercise in compliance rather than ‘new thinking’ and ‘originality’? It was a delicate balance.

## **6.9. What about the Community Benefit?**

Finally, after all the talking and laughing and story-telling, I wanted to ask them why...why should we care, what was the benefit of all this to the good of the community, to the ‘public interest’? These were funded public servants, paid from community monies. They had no right waste valuable money, time and resources on things that Max once called “a self-indulgent wank”. Was all this ‘local government Creativity and Innovation” just an organisational fable...or did it produce any tangible benefits in the community?

Some things seemed obvious. There are very few Australian towns the size of Narrabri that have such a high-quality and highly patronised cultural centre. Richard concurred: “I believe they get serious value. The Crossing Theatre, the Main Street improvements...they wouldn’t have been possible without it. At the end of the day it’s about using our creativity to get the most out of the dollar, for them”. It wasn’t just the infrastructure – the Crossing Theatre provided a venue that attracted artists, musicians and touring groups to the town. Lucy talked about



service improvements: "Our services get better, or quicker, or it's more informed...or even a whole new service". There was a lot of talk about 'getting more bang for your buck' and being able to improve or even maintain the Council's services and projects on restricted budgets. People said that their innovations were leading to 'increased efficiency and effectiveness' and someone even said 'best value'.

Others talked about more social or environmental benefits. Bill's crew had recently won an international award for their parks and gardens, so he was justifiably proud. "I think our innovations have allowed us to build a more liveable city...liveable in the sense of providing them with the facilities which makes their life better... from all perspectives. It's a much more pleasing place to live in". Carol talked about the increasing complexity of the social pressures in her local community and bluntly stated: "I strongly believe that it is innovate or perish...I mean, this community has changed so much...this is a whole different kettle of fish. I think the biggest innovative goals that we have are all the social capital ones. To maintain social capital is an area that is so changing and has got so much mobility now is a worthwhile but very difficult goal to attain. I think the dynamics of the community are harder now... if we want to keep on top of it... you need a very innovative organisation to achieve that". Shane walked me through his sensory garden. "Everything you do at the end of the day is about the people, about this place. I believe I am offering more choices and alternatives to people. People get 'play value'. I'm just giving people more choices for how they can play. Max had a whole list of interrelated benefits from his Council's innovation which he ticked off on his fingers as he spoke. "Look...people can see their money is put to good use. We are helping local businesses...bringing new business into town, so we have their health at care. We're boosting workplace morale... people are more switched on to what they are doing. Being able to be creative in their work they are happier ...and the people that work here live here...so we are involved in the

health of the community... we are stopping potential social problems". Karl was unusually reflective and took some time to answer. "I think us using our creativity...makes for an organisation that is...being...much more helpful to them, much more useful...just a better Council for them all round".

In their comments, it was clear that the whole notion and debate of 'public value' was alive in their minds - even if they did not articulate it as such (in some ways this represents the lack of penetration of academic writing on this topic into the practitioners world). It was evidence of Bennington's (2007) suggestion that the attribution of 'public value' is complicated and therefore we should ask: "how can we give [good] value to the public?", "what is it that the public values", and also the collective: "what adds value to the public sphere" (p.7.). These people were keen to create both public 'value for money' but also 'things of public value'.

## **6.10. Summary of the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter**

In this Chapter, I have used narrative and elements of Boje's (2001) antenarrative, to explore and describe the conversations with Council staff. I have shared their responses to my questions and some of the stories they told during the interviews. The stories highlight their understanding of the key terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' and illustrate how these are being used in their work in the Council. They elaborated on the important topic of risk and showed that whilst they were also politically aware and recognised that there were some areas that were simply 'no-go zones'. Importantly they all highlighted that genuine community engagement was essential to minimise risk, and hence good governance was an important factor in them being able to explore creative options and develop innovations.

I have recounted their reactions to the Professional Capabilities Framework and their understanding of the five areas of capability defined. Interestingly, they nearly all chose to re-label 'stance' as 'emotional intelligence' - a term they were more comfortable with, but that they felt had the same meaning. They also added the concept of 'Nous', using a colloquial term to re-label 'diagnostic maps'. Finally, their stories highlight the motivation for their pursuit of creativity and innovation as being of genuine public service and a commitment to seeking public benefit and value.

In the next chapter I will disentangle some of the fabric of these stories to address the objectives of the research. I will use their stories, and mine, as the field data to answer the key research questions. The next chapter still uses a narrative style, and provides the major findings of this thesis.

## Chapter 7.

# 7. Creativity and Innovation in Local Government - Building Stories

### Chapter Overview

The previous chapter shared some of the stories and the voices of the people I met in the field. This chapter discusses the major findings from this research. In this chapter I return to the research questions posed in Chapter three and reflect on data from the field and return to describe what has been learned. This thesis supports those authors that suggest that definitions of creativity and innovation are difficult and that people often use the terms interchangeably. It also supports the notion of “hetero-attribution” of creativity suggested by authors such as De Sousa (1999) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996). I comment on the meanings attributed to the terms ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ and I discuss the way language, stories, narratives and antenarratives are used to describe them. I share my observations and findings of what these two terms mean from the community and organisational perspectives as well as from the personal perspectives of the people who work in local government. In this chapter I also discuss the issue of ‘appropriate risk’ and the organisational behaviours required to support creativity and innovation.

In this chapter I continue to use a narrative style to discuss the findings, especially the personal capabilities used by the Council staff that allowed them to be ‘creative’. Whilst an earlier intention had been to focus on investigating how people learned these capabilities, as the research unfolded this became less of a primary focus. Instead I became more attentive to listening to them; recording understanding, and sharing their stories, and building stories for future use.

## 7.1. Introduction -Answering the Key Questions.

In Chapter Three (Section 3.4.) I presented a diagrammatic model of the key questions in this thesis. Therefore it is useful to present the (slightly amended) model once again by way of an introduction to this chapter and a framework for addressing the research questions.

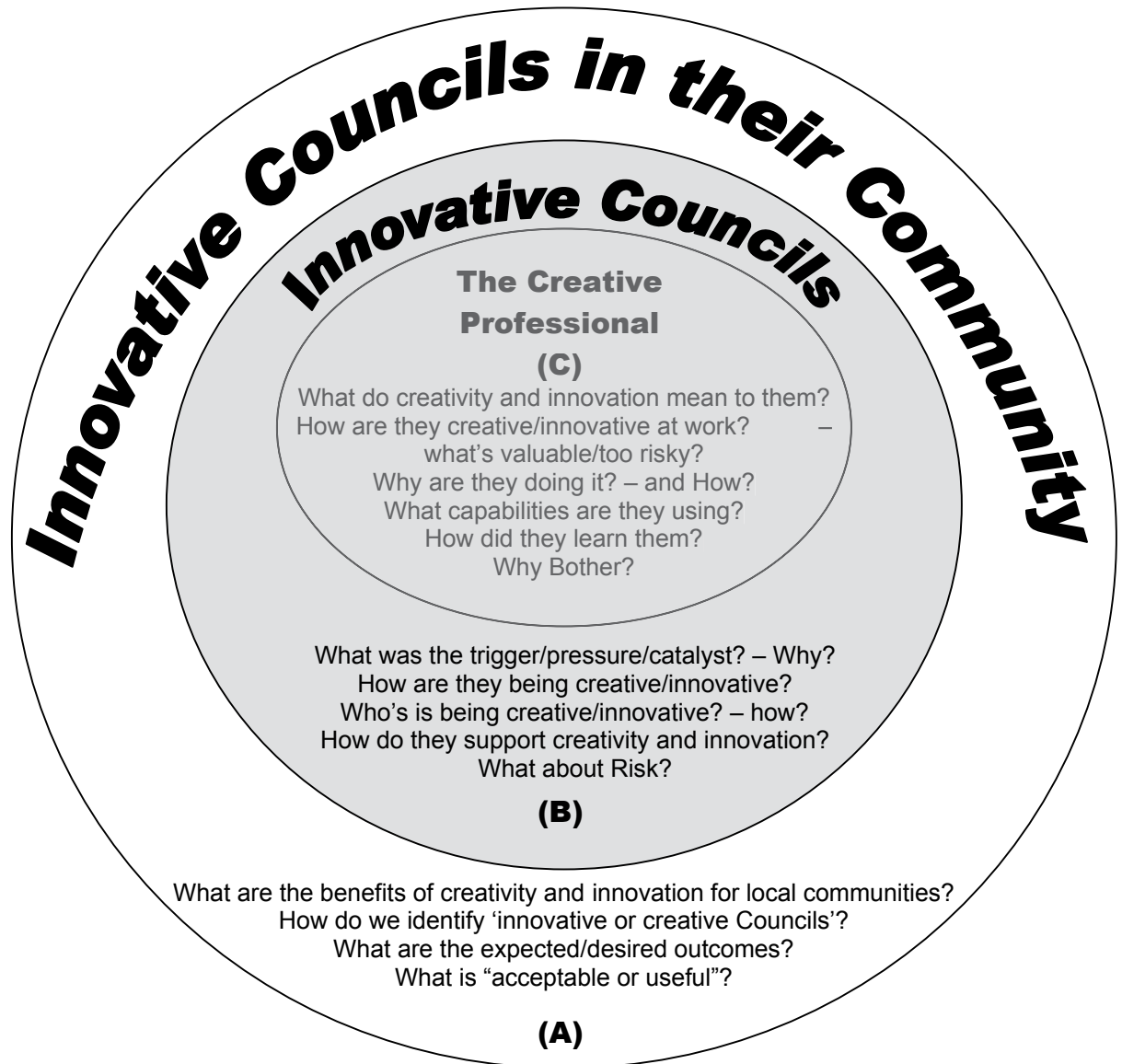


Figure 7.1. A Revised Diagrammatic Model of the Key Research Questions

The attentive reader will note that the label for sphere (A) has been altered to “Innovative Councils in their Community”. This more accurately describes the line of enquiry pursued in this thesis and reflects the notion that local Councils are part of a ‘local government community’ full of ‘experts’ and colleagues and peers, as well as their own geographic community. This thesis proceeded from a ‘given’ basis that local Councils need to pursue creativity and innovation in their activities. This urging has been articulated in the literature, Government statements and publications, as well as the lingua franca of local government seminars, conferences and professional magazine articles. ‘Innovation’ is constantly spoken of as a desired outcome in local government Awards.

Hence, the thesis has explored the questions of “what are the benefits of creativity and innovation important to local communities” and, in doing so, has focused on the creativity and innovation of local Councils as important public institutions in their community. However, taking a quick step back, before that we have needed to be able to agree some working (and workable) definitions of what we actually mean by creativity and innovation...and in a local government context that involves risk and a public ‘duty of care’? Then was it possible to identify Councils that are perceived to be creative and innovative?

I visited three Australian Councils in order to find out why they thought they had been nominated as innovative and the findings describe what the concepts of creativity and innovation mean to them. The findings also reveal how they understand that they are being ‘innovative’, who was doing it and how they were supporting innovation organisationally. Finally, these findings discuss the understandings and meanings offered by some of the individual staff members in the case study Councils. The findings reveal their various understandings of creativity and innovation, the professional capabilities they are using at work and their motivation for pursuing creativity and innovation for the benefit of the

community. The discussion of the findings is not always linear- it is not always useful to discuss findings in relation to key questions (A) then (B) then (C) – where the findings from the three perspectives have concurred I have combined them.

## **7.2. Finding Useful Definitions of Creativity and Innovation for Local Government...and who decides?**

From the outset I understood that in order to examine ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ in a local government setting I needed to be able to develop some working definitions of these two concepts. I was mindful of Clegg’s (1999) and De Sousa’s (1999) warnings of difficulty in explanation. These difficulties were certainly highlighted throughout this study. It was never the intention of the research to develop definitive constructs of the terms, and rather than analysing and confirming the terminology being used in all instances, my discussions around the understood meanings of ‘creativity and ‘innovation’ became more a process of agreement between me and the people I spoke to – the development of agreed passwords that allowed the conversations to proceed in order to then explore and build our stories together. It became evident that their definitions of creativity and innovation were couched in language and terminology that suggested a number of key findings.

Firstly, participants often drew from a glossary of well-known (from a socio-cultural perspective) phrases and ‘pop jargon’ – such as: “thinking outside the square”, “seeing the bigger picture”, “thinking outside the box”, “pushing the envelope”... terms commonly used in popular media and also the lingua franca of management presentations, publications and seminars. Secondly, whilst the idea of novelty and originality were often emphasised - with participants talking about: “new ideas”, “ going somewhere no-one’s been before”, “thinking differently”, “do something out of the ordinary” and “exploring something new” – it was

usually amended with comments like "...well something new to us" . . Thirdly, many people used broadly emotive terms to describe creativity, such as: "passion", "talent", "gifted", "special" and "seeing the patterns". However, they often spoke of innovation as processes of problem-solving, using terms such as: "how you come at the problem", "how you see the problem", "it's about being resourceful", "the manipulation of materials and resources", "a time-saving tool", and "being able to establish, methods, patterns, processes".

As pointed out by Richardson and St.Pierre (2005) "Language is not the result of one's individuality; rather language constructs one's subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific - what something means to someone is dependent on the discourses available to them (p.961). These people had a number of discourses available to them and often used more than one of them when building their stories of creativity at work: broad socio-cultural (pop jargon), societal/organisational (perceptions of novelty), personal (emotional expression) and organisational/workplace (problem-solving). They spoke of creativity and innovation in many ways and were comfortable with using various terminology when talking about creativity and innovation at work. They offered fragments of stories, akin to Boje's (2001) antenarrative and our interviews were 'story performances' in which I was a co-producer. During the interviews, we would build stories together and the narrative became a way of ordering and giving meaning. As Boje has often noted, stories are not always sequential - we would backtrack, clarify, re-iterate and re-emphasise as they ordered the story so that, by the end of interview, they seemed mostly satisfied with the final narrative. During the telling, they also enriched them, enhanced them and infused them with meaning (Gabriel,1995)

The descriptive terminology they used was always imbued with positive values - creativity was spoken of as clearly valued and even prized. This positivist aspect of



attribution links well with those authors (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, Amabile, 1983, De Sousa, 1999,) that have discussed the 'hetero-attribution' of the descriptors 'creative' and 'creativity' by observers, onlookers and 'experts in the domain'. Within the context of the Council and their work with the community, certain things were deemed to be innovative and hence were attributed value. Their stories revealed that the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' were not seen as exclusive and that the processes were comfortably spoken about as not being independent (but rather, as being interdependent) and as Landry suggests, for many people "...creativity and innovation seamlessly interweave" (p.15). The stories about innovation tended to be more organisationally oriented, and strongly focused on action and implementation. In discussing 'innovation', the language used by the people I spoke to clearly highlighted the application and implementation of ideas, using terms and expressions such as: "picking up an idea and applying it to your own area", "an odd response to a problem", "come up with a solution", "a better way of doing things", "continuous improvement", "thinking about new ways of doing what you're doing, but doing it better". This bears out Martin's (2002) earlier findings that "innovation refers to the implementation of creative ideas within an organisation".

When confronted by my questions of providing exclusive definitions of 'creativity' and 'innovation', these people usually responded to the difficulty by, instead, describing the interrelationship between the two. Through our discussions it was clear that these people had a strong support and a real understanding of the notion of a continuum between 'idea-generation' (creativity) and 'idea-implementation' (innovation).<sup>30</sup> Hence they offered statements such as: "creativity is the skill that brings innovation to bear"; "where creativity and innovation comes together in my

---

<sup>30</sup> I did not offer the idea of a creativity/innovation continuum until after the participants themselves offered the idea of such a linkage. Most typically, in such instances, the participants would then view my offered model of such a continuum and regard it as supporting what they were saying- sometimes re-iterating and re-shaping the idea with some language changes of their own.

mind... is where you can pick up an idea, think it through in your own situation and then make it work...or discard it"; "I perceive innovation as goal-orientated; "innovation is probably a step further than creativity....it's another level where you go through something, or think about the exception...to solve an issue". Carol delighted me by once explaining: " It's like describing 'night' as 'the time before day' ... and...'day' as 'the time after night' ". Having said that, no-one spoke of it as a linear process and in fact our reiterative conversations often seemed like an example of the, swirling 'creative milieu' (Landry, 2000) of idea generation and action that lies somewhere in between the two concepts.

Despite the variety in expression, there were some common observations I could draw from stories and answers. At no time did the lack of precise definitions seemed particularly bothersome for any of the people I spoke to. It seemed that it is generally accepted that the terms 'creativity, and 'innovation' are highly subjective and contextual (environmentally, organisationally and individually) and nobody really questioned this or ever seemed overly concerned. As De Sousa (1999) points out, perhaps any discomfort in not being able to transform the commonly-used concepts into more definitive constructs is only felt by academics and researchers. My questioning and seeking of more precise definitions often caused reflection and a common answer to early questions was along the lines of "oh...I've never really thought about it". During our conversations, interviews and workshops, people would often re-visit and re-define - a re-iterative process of building an acceptable meaning. Lastly, when discussing 'creativity' and 'innovation' it seemed people were most comfortable with a definitional continuum - with creativity (idea generation) at one end and innovation (ideas put into practice) at the other - and the real meaning of creativity and innovation as lying somewhere between the two.

## **7.3. Innovative Councils – What Sort of Organisations are They and What are They Doing?**

I had used a process of ‘peer identification’<sup>31</sup> to select the case study Councils. Once the three councils agreed to participate, I spoke to their ‘Executive Management Team’ (usually consisting of the General Manager and the Directors of the council’s Divisions and Departments). Not surprisingly they agreed with the nomination and the staff I interviewed (who were working in these organisations) also all agreed with the such a nomination - although sometimes with varying degrees of caution, sometimes a degree of scepticism and comments such as “I can see why others might think we are innovative, relative to the rest... but...I don’t really know how innovative we actually are”. Early in the research it became clear that many local government people were more comfortable with attributing the label ‘creative’ to people rather than organisations, and hence the stories became more commonly about ‘creative people working in innovative Councils’.

### **7.3.1. Developing Criteria**

In the early stages of this thesis it seemed less useful to try and clarify precise definitions of the terms ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ than to simply develop and explore working definitions for the field – i.e. acceptable definitions that would allow the conversations and the story-building to proceed. An early starting point in the search for definitions of an “Innovative Local Council” had been, naturally, to review the literature and search for any relevant information. As discussed in an earlier chapter, whilst the literature is carpeted with a vast array of works on topics such as ‘creativity’, ‘innovation’, ‘entrepreneurialism’, much of it directed at (and emanating from) the private sector. There has been far less study of ‘innovation’ in the public sector, let alone in the narrower field of local government – with the

---

<sup>31</sup> Local government in Australia is valid as a separate sphere of government and local Councils (both individually and collectively) maintain and foster peer relationships with other local government bodies across Australia as well as internationally.

notable exception of authors such as Bingham (1976), Borins (2000), Cardow (2005), Higgins (2000), Martin (2001) and Richards (1986).

Hence, I turned to those Australian local government organisations that conferred awards for 'innovation' (although often such awards may be publicised under other titles such as 'excellence', and that 'innovation' may be one of a set of sub-criteria of awards given for 'Quality' or 'Progress'<sup>32</sup>. I felt reasonably confident that I had assembled an 'Expert Panel' that would act in the manner of Czikszenmihalyi's (1996) 'gatekeepers' in the local government domain but also as a group of interested colleagues. The Panel's initial review and discussions highlighted an important finding in relation to the attribution of the labels 'creative and innovative' - that whilst the terms were hard to define, it was the pursuit of these broadly-understood concepts that was more important than the achievement of precise definition. It was discussed that whilst publicised criteria used by their organisations may not actually define 'innovation', the pursuit of innovation nonetheless helped promote "better local government". The panel discussions highlighted that such local government awards are usefully seen as both 'rewards' (for appropriate behaviour, concerted effort, notable achievement etc) and a 'promotion of values and ideas' (e.g. innovation) that are generally seen to be positive.

The key themes of the Panel's developed criteria can be broadly grouped, and are generally in line with the thematic criteria suggested by Martin (2002):

- **An Organisation and Individuals that Genuinely Embrace Change** - 'problem-seeking' as well as 'problem-solving'; attributing novelty and originality in an organisational and/or environmental context, seeking and valuing difference;

---

<sup>32</sup> For a compiled list of key criteria, see the Appendices.

- **A Sustainable Culture of Innovation** – a genuine organisational culture change, sustained and continuous innovation rather than “one-off” successes; surviving the role of specific individuals
- **Balancing and Managing Appropriate Risk** - understanding “appropriate” risk, allowing room for flexibility, understanding the political environment, concern for safety
- **A Learning Organisation** - the role of networking (internal and external), welcoming new information and “talented strangers”, valuing learning and education, promoting and supporting learning
- **Effective Organisational Relationships** - “the right people in the right roles and they use them properly”, “Alignment” – the notion that in innovative organisations people’s role/position is respected and is fully utilised to achieve the organisational aims, [thinking] across silos and disciplines, attracting and valuing “talent’, having strong and clear leadership.
- **Valuing Creativity and Innovation** – sending signals and symbols to employees and the community that they are a Council that values innovation
- **Usefulness and Value** – producing a desirable and valued outcome for the community

These criteria echoed many of the themes of Ekvall (1997) and also those of Amabile (1996) – especially her emphasis on management practices, the necessary “...supports for creativity and innovation throughout the organisation” and her reminder that resources need to be available (such as time and training) to support innovation (p.3). The identification of ‘Effective Organisational Relationships’ also supports Kilbourne and Woodman’s assertion (1999) that organisational creativity is the creation of “...individuals working together in a complex social system” (p.127). Importantly, the identification of ‘Usefulness and Value’ clearly supports

the notions of Public Value espoused by authors such as Bennington (2007), Davis and West (2008) and Moore (1995, 2000, 2008).

## **7.4. Innovative Councils - Evidence from the Field**

During the conduct of this research, the case study field trips (to Marrickville, Coffs Harbour and Narrabri) produced a wealth of data from observation, workshops, interviews, review of artefacts, general observation and...chatting with local people. In some cases, individuals from the case study sites continued to contact me by phone and/or email to discuss the research topics further (or simply to say hello and ask how it is all going). In keeping with the narrative style of this thesis I will present the summary of the findings relating to this topic in the chronological order of their discovery and observation, and with reference to the relevant literature.

### **7.4.1. Welcoming Strangers**

I found that all of these three Councils were 'welcoming organisations' - i.e. they all responded positively to the opportunity to have a stranger enter their midst to make enquiries and appraisals of their organisation. They were not shy to open their door and welcomed me - and the also the opportunity to participate and reveal themselves in the research. Hence, all three Councils displayed a solid attitude of self-evaluation and self-review. This may well have also been a reaction to having been nominated as 'innovative' by the Expert Panel but is also indicative of an organisational culture of information-seeking, reflective self-review and networking.

In some ways this was mirrored on the streets outside. It can be noted that all of these communities in which these Councils serve have quite strong and well-established elements of diversity - both cultural and socio-economic. This is seen as evidence of the 'ease of access' that Florida (2002) deems a necessary pre-cursor in

the local community, to the development of a 'creative class'. Marrickville is considered one of the three most culturally diverse communities in Australia and also has a wide range of socio-economic resident groups; Coffs Harbour has a strong and long-standing element of diversity from a unique and well-established Sikh community to an increasingly diverse socio-economic community profile, and Narrabri celebrates a culturally and socially diverse community that is uncommon in Australian rural towns. In the week I was visiting, their small Indian population proudly led the "Bollywood and Curry Festival", locals told me they valued the large collection of foreign-language DVDs in the local hire shop, the local Thai restaurant proudly displayed their State-wide food award in the window...and on a number of occasions I was passed by groups of laughing, smiling Filipino people living in the local area. The people in the Councils spoke clearly of the value they placed on such diversity - whilst it occasionally caused tensions and competing demands the Council staff spoke of it as both an observable result of the "attractiveness" and "amenity" of the local community, but also as a range of symbols of the community dynamism that, when broadcast, in turn attracted a continuing diverse range of people to live and work there.

Florida's (2002) work on the 'The Economic Geography of Talent' shows that talented and creative people are drawn to communities having a "thick" range of lifestyles and amenities, and also those that have ease of access and are "welcoming". Narrabri offered a strong example as the "talented" staff posted to the nearby Commonwealth Government research stations could choose to live in any of a range of towns in the region, but (as explained proudly by one of the Council staff) "... they live in Narrabri... 'cos it's... better!". Similarly, the cultural and socio/economic diversity of Marrickville is an often-touted attraction of the suburb and even appears in real estate agents billboards though phrases such as "vibrant local culture" and "the world in a suburb!" Importantly, the encouragement, support and effective management of such community diversity

was spoken of as key focus for the Council's activities and efforts. Participants in all three of the Councils spoke clearly and articulately about building and maintaining the social and intellectual capital in the local area, and also highlighted that the presence of such a rich and varied local community also was a drawcard in attracting talented staff to the Council. As mentioned during the Executive Team workshop in Narrabri: "You know there is a skills shortage on in NSW local government<sup>33</sup>. Well in the last couple of years we have noticed that we have no trouble getting good people to come and work here!". In all three cases the solid link between the Council and its community was evident and was given a high degree of focus in all the organisations planning and activities. Even in Coffs Harbour, the Council that (during the period of this research) "bounced back" from being "totally on the nose" with its local community as was now viewed as an important local 'community-building' institution.

Hence in all three Councils, the concept of attracting and welcoming (possibly talented) 'strangers' was important for the organisation but also important for the local community. In some ways, the acceptance of new strangers, and the changes they brought, contributed to an organisational equivalent of White and Epston's (1999) therapeutic process of 're-storying'. New people bring new stories and also help re-order and build new stories. In this process, some bits are (perhaps deliberately) forgotten and other pieces of antenarrative and story fragment are combined to contribute to a new narrative of the organisation and place.

---

<sup>33</sup> During the period of 2005 – 2008 it became generally accepted that there was a "skills shortage" in Local government in Australia – i.e. local Councils were finding it difficult to attract and maintain staff (particularly professional staff) as it was believed that they sought better conditions in the private sector. This was further exacerbated in the small rural Councils who commonly faced similar difficulties to small towns worldwide in attracting professional people to live in remote communities.



## 7.4.2. Triggers for Innovation

“These things don’t just happen...there are triggers”

“Sean” – a local government ‘expert’.

The literature on private sector innovation has given significant importance to the ‘trigger’ or catalyst that led to the “big sideways step” of doing things differently and generating innovation. For many private sector companies it is the pursuit of market growth and/or the threat of market decline that have proved to be the single biggest trigger. Typically, there is some discernable threat to their comfortable market position (whether occasional or constant) that drives companies to develop innovation and hence stay ahead of the competition and/or build and maintain their position in the market place.

For Australian local government it is not so. In relation to many of the services they provide, they are often ‘local monopolies’, and many of the regulatory and planning functions they undertake are mandated by law. Martin (2002) draws upon the earlier work of Bingham (1976) to suggest that: “Fundamentally, what is happening in the broader environment is the driving force for change within local government organisations...we have to ask, what was happening in the broader community that caused the organisation to respond?” (p.13)

This research supports this claim and has shown that it is clearly true that in recent decades there has been an increasing pressure on Australian Councils, caused by external factors, that has created environmental pressures for change. It is a well-documented reality<sup>34</sup> that increasingly Australian local governments have been required to “do more with less” – in relative terms, their share of the public purse

---

<sup>34</sup> See for instance the “Percy Allan Report” - *Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local government*, Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW. May 2006, and The Report of the Australian Commonwealth Government into “*Cost-shifting*” onto Local Government – available at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/efpa/localgovt/report.htm>

has been shrinking whilst the demands on them (from both the public and other tiers of Government) have been growing disproportionately. Hence, there is an economic imperative to look for efficiencies, look for 'new and better ways of doing things', and also sometimes for Councils to look at 'ways of doing new and better things' in order to meet community expectations. One manager said, "The sums are just there in front of your nose...you don't need to be a rocket scientist to see that the list of demands is getting bigger, but the pile of money isn't". All of the Councils investigated in this research spoke in strong terms of these ever-increasing pressures and yet they also spoke of the "Catch-22" of building and maintaining stronger relationships with their community, whilst recognising that this meant they could not be "pretend to be deaf" to an even greater range of community demands and wishes. Hence, in this thesis, stories of creativity and innovation are often described in terms of "finding efficiencies" or "better ways of doing things" in order to make better use of limited resources.

However, despite the shrinking of financial resources and the ever-increasing amount of 'cost-shifting' and 'un-funded mandates', along with the increasing demands of a better-educated and more articulate community, I found other 'critical triggers' for innovation that were primarily internal within the Council organisation. In all three cases there was undeniable pressure from the external environment but this research has shown that the "straw that broke the camel's back" and the critical decisions that led to a fundamentally new way of doing things were largely a reaction to an internally perceived 'crisis'. Whilst the external pressures were recognised and acknowledged (as perhaps similar to many other Councils), in all three cases there was an "organisational motivation to innovate" (Amabile 1996) and this had built up over time.

In two cases, a clear factor to trigger the process of self-review and seeking to find 'better ways' was workplace safety. Both Marrickville and Narrabri Councils were

facing a situation where their OH&S<sup>35</sup> Worker's Compensation Insurance liabilities were rapidly becoming ...simply unaffordable. As they said in Marrickville: "one of the reasons we have been innovative is because we wouldn't have survived if we didn't get our insurance costs down". This created a necessity to critically assess work practices throughout the organisation. These two Councils embarked on participatory processes of workplace review and analysis, where staff and management co-operated to look for safer (and by default 'better') ways of doing things. In Coffs Harbour, very public and massive local protests against a proposed sewage outfall system forced a major technical review of that individual project, but they then decided to extend that review to all of their decision-making procedures across the organisation. In all cases, a clear message was broadcast that the organisation and its leaders were highly supportive of looking for new ideas and new way of doing things.

This research found these Councils fulfilled the Expert Panel's criteria of organisations that genuinely embraced change. Quickly, the practices of 'problem-solving' expanded into broader practices of 'problem-seeking' as staff and management focused their attention on other areas of the Council - looking for "bottlenecks" and hence potential improvements. Narrabri started "...continually having to look for innovations...especially in roads", and Marrickville continued expanding the participative elements of its "SAFE" (workplace safety) program into other areas of organisational improvement. "It sort of evolved into a continuous improvement program - not just about safety but then about other things". This demonstrates many of the elements of Senge's (1990) learning organisation as and Martin's note that "learning begets learning" (2002, p.10) - this will be discussed in a later section

---

<sup>35</sup> In Australia (as in a number of OECD countries) workers are covered by compulsory workplace safety (Workcover) insurance. Employers are required by law to also make all efforts to increase safety in the workplace, provide safety training and equipment and assist any injured workers to return to employment as soon as possible. The insurance premiums for local government are often costly.

I recognised that the answers and stories relating to this topic, highlighted Kilbourne and Woodman's (1999) model of organisational creativity within a 'complex social system'. Their model suggests that individual creativity, leads to innovation and hence organisational change – and this was certainly borne out in the discussions I had with these Council staff. They suggested (in varying ways) that organisational change was both an aim and target, but it was also the outcome that would help shift the 'complex social system' and perhaps support the efforts of other 'innovators' in the future.

### **7.4.3. Strong Leadership and Values**

I found that in all three Councils there was evidence of strong leadership from the General Managers and the Executive team. These people often spoke articulately about their leadership role and the staff in interviews commonly supported their comments. In all cases it was felt to be vital that the Executive Management team worked (and was seen to work) as a coherent team, offering clear and consistent messages to the rest of the staff. This teamwork was exemplified by the nickname of the Narrabri Management Team – "The 3 Amigos". It was importantly noted that, whilst they may have lively and vigorous discussions (and disagreements) about the goals to be set and the directions to be taken, any disagreements were treated "professionally" and kept behind the closed doors of the Executive meeting rooms. Significantly, in all cases, the Executive Management teams spoke of the importance of good political leadership and necessary trust between the elected Councillors (especially the Mayor) and staff (especially the General Manager and the Executive team). It was seen as a critical factor that the elected Councillors understood and fulfilled their role as civic representatives and "direction-setters", but that they allowed the staff to fulfil their role in developing and implementing options to achieve the strategic directions. There told stories of a pride in professionalism amongst management and staff and the firm belief that there must be respect for that professionalism and a trusting relationship where people were

allowed to “get on with doing their job well”. Without such a relationship, it was strongly stated that creativity and innovation would not be possible, and would be actively stifled.

During the period of this research, there were ebbs and flows in this relationship of trust. Following the NSW local government elections, there were a number of newly-elected Councillors which caused a “political shift”. In all three Councils, the Executive team and staff spoke with disappointment about the cyclical nature of this mistrust but how their experience had shown them it was common with ‘new’ Councils. They described a varying degrees of hesitancy and disinclination to pursue any “new innovations” until they had re-built a strong and trusting relationship with their elected Councillors. It is notable that, during the years in which this research was conducted, all three of the General Managers in the case study Councils sought (and gained) alternative employment, as did a number of Executive Management Team members and some of the “creative” individuals who were interviewed.

The stories of the Executive Teams were full of the importance of their personal values in leadership and consistently contained references to aspects of ‘Emotional Intelligence’ (Goleman, 1996) - i.e. self-awareness, self-discipline, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship-management . In many instances, they spoke of their ‘values-based’ approach to organisational leadership and management. “It’s EQ not just IQ ‘round here’”. The staff also spoke of the importance of personal and organisational values being clearly articulated and implemented by individual managers. Managers were expected to “walk the talk” and personify the organisational values through their behaviour. In two of the Councils, these organisational values had been formalised in some way and integrated into the Council’s staff performance management systems. In Coffs Harbour, the importance of the ‘core values’ was such that the performance-based salary system

had been revised to reward the demonstration of these corporate values (such as professionalism, respect, teamwork, communication, innovation, stress management, relaxation and pride) and the proportional emphasis was 70% for the values and 30% for demonstration of technical competence. In this way the values as much represented what the organisation expected of the employee as what the employee could expect from the organisation.

Whilst it was often clear that the specific terminology for such 'core values' was drawn from the language used in popular articles, professional conference papers and from the parlance of management consultants, all three organisations explained that the development of the agreed values was a collaborative and participative process between staff and management. Often in this context, innovation was spoken of as an important core value, which again supported the notion of hetero-attribution (e.g. De Sousa) - "being innovative" was viewed positively by onlookers and observers and as being in line with the organisational values, and therefore the demonstration of "innovation" was spoken of as a behaviour that should be rewarded and encouraged.

Significantly, the value (and behaviour) most discussed was honesty -personal, professional and organisational. It was expected that Executive managers would model behaviour and that they would be honest about their opinions and values. It was also described as imperative that the organisation has an honest relationship with its community and that it did not attempt to "gild the lily" or over-emphasise its achievements. Local pride was one thing... but it needed to have a genuine basis. "We spend a lot of time checking our community surveys and they show that we are well-regarded and the things we do for... and with... the community are well-received". When in some cases it was clearly evident (such as through the protests against Coffs Harbour Council's proposed sewage outfall) that they had

“clearly got something fundamentally wrong”, and then the Council management and staff accepted responsibility and took steps to address the situation.

#### **7.4.4. Risk, Usefulness and ‘Good’ Innovation**

Private enterprises may be driven to seek innovation for a variety of reasons and if they ‘fail’ it is usual that their shareholders and employees will largely feel the consequences. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) promoted the idea of ‘entrepreneurial government’ and the ensuing NPM literature often makes explicit links between ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’. For example, DeLeon and Denhardt (2000) describe: ... entrepreneurship connotes more than simple resourcefulness...specifically it entails creativity and innovation, a strong focus on ends (outcomes, mission) rather than means, and a proactive stance towards problems.(p.92).

However, local Councils are public institutions and as such are funded by public monies, are the trustees of public assets and are accountable to their communities. As noted by Cardow (2005,2007), despite the positivist spin in the NPM rhetoric it is important to remember that in many cases local government is a public monopoly and that it is intended that local government will serve its citizens, not simply sell services to customers. This is not suggest that local Councils should avoid the pursuit of innovation, but rather that their ultimate goal should be ‘community benefit’ and ‘the public good’ rather than ‘the benefit for the firm and the shareholders’. Whilst there is recognition from all sides of the potential benefits of entrepreneurship, there has also been considerable debate (e.g. Borins, 2000, Cadrow, 2005, DeLeon & Denhardt 2000, Behn, 1998, Terry, 1998) about the role of public entrepreneurs and the potentially negative aspects of their behaviour in the public arena. Again DeLeon and Denhardt explain: “on the credit side of the ledger, entrepreneurs create and innovate; on the debit side they may take excessive risks and run roughshod over people and principles” (p.92).

This research found that, contrary to the suggestion of DeLeon and Denhardt, many Council innovators and leaders in local government take risk very seriously and maintain a fundamental adherence to the principles of the 'public interest' and 'community benefit'. Amongst the Executive Teams, there were consistently strong statements such as: "obviously, we don't do anything that is illegal" and recognition that this required significant effort in keeping up with the multitude of legislation that affects local government. Participants also demonstrated a keen awareness that they were dealing with public funds and were mindful that at any time they should be able to justify their financial decisions and operate with a high degree of transparency. They stated that political risk was part and parcel of their working environment and recognised that, ultimately, they had to make decisions that were within the risk tolerance of their elected Councillors. This sometimes required education for their Councillors, sometimes necessitated "waiting until the time was right", and sometimes simply abandoning ideas. They assessed such political risk through a process of discussions and conversations that often involved stories from the past and stories of successful innovations in other organisations – most pertinently from other local Councils.

All three Councils had extensive systems of 'checks and balances' that were both formal and informal. Many of these 'review' procedures were formal and contained within law, due diligence, Council policy, professional codes of practice, and/or employee codes of behaviour. However, such formal practices operated alongside complex systems of workplace relationships between managers and staff, project teams, colleagues that involved discussions, reflection, and story-building where innovations were gradually 'tested' before being fully implemented. Staff frequently drew on their technical capabilities and those of their work colleagues to review and assess any technical risks and make necessary modifications – and many participants expressed that it was their confidence in such technical capability that significantly minimised the potential for risk.



It is a finding of this thesis that innovation in such local Councils involved a significant 'development and testing' process. 'Creative ideas' would often be discussed and "tossed around a bit" in a variety of conversations. Frequently such ideas would be "left alone and put on the back burner for a while. Commonly, participants spoke of their suspicion regarding 'innovations' suggested by consultants or private sector providers - they generally felt these suggestions were motivated by self-interested individuals and companies that had no understanding of the principles and responsibilities entailed by "caring for the public good". More often, they researched innovations within local government networks and analysed what actions were necessary to satisfy elected Councillors and what processes of community consultation were put in place before ideas were implemented. Management practices and styles within the three Councils recognised different levels of risk aversion amongst staff and often balanced "creative risk-takers" with more conservative colleagues and/or managers to minimise excessive risks. However, the participants in all three Councils insisted that there needed to be a "culture of learning from mistakes" and that "...you won't get much from people if they get their head shot off the first time they make a mistake". Experimentation was encouraged, 'acceptable risks' tolerated and it was often expected "...that you won't get it right first time every time".

A key finding in this thesis was the link between good governance and assessing what was an 'acceptable risk'. Significantly, many participants spoke of their faith that the Council was truly engaged with its community and genuinely understood what its community wanted; and (following from that) that this understanding of the community it served was translated into strong guiding values, policies and objectives that were broadcast throughout the organisation. Hence, working within the context and intent of public service, these people felt that they were working on issues that were genuinely important to the community, which therefore made it politically less risky. Genuine consultation that provided reliable information on

community concerns and priorities also was mentioned as being critical for selection of options and warnings of “no-go areas”. One of the Directors at Narrabri Council noted that the construction of their elaborate cultural centre required a borrowing of funds by the Council and explained that “...the community made it clear that servicing that loan should not lessen any spending on roads –so we had to take that into consideration”.

Working through the processes of innovation development with an ongoing and reiterative practice of discussion and story-telling, meant that there was a constant checking of the alignment between what were perceived to be organisational values and objectives and those in the community. Additionally, when the innovation was actually implemented in this way, it arrived with a fully-developed and ‘history’ where people could see the part they had played. This process seemed to contribute significantly to the attribution of the title ‘innovation’ and the notion that the innovation was ‘good’, and ‘highly valued’. A woman in Narrabri spoke to me outside the Crossing Theatre and said proudly, “I remember when it was just crazy talk, but we made it happen didn’t we”?

This research showed that there is strong support for Moore’s (1995) model of Public Value. In fact, his Public Value model aligns with the organisational model and ethos that was shown to develop Local Governance innovation. Through genuine and reliable consultation and engagement, these Councils understood the answers to Bennington’s (2007) questions: “what does the public value?” and “what adds value to the public sphere?” (p.7.). This was translated into legitimation and support through: the organisational narrative, management practices and behaviours, policies and ‘rules’, organisational culture (both published and unpublished) and through the resources (time, technology or money) allocated to creativity and innovation. There was also a strong recognition of the need to address the organisational capabilities for creativity and innovation: the

recruitment of talented staff, as well as the training and learning support for the ongoing development of the professional capabilities (Scott, 2000) necessary to generate creative ideas and innovative actions.

The individual (private) values of these key staff were aligned with the organisational (public) value of the Council. This did not appear to be the dominance of the organisational narrative or 'propaganda'. Rather it seemed that these Councils encouraged a daily menu of 'ideas and bits of ideas on the simmer' (Boje's antenarrative) that they gambled would become full ideas and 'living stories' and then go on to become part of the organisational story and narrative. In a reiterative fashion this would then go on to encourage future antenarrative and story-building.

#### **7.4.5. Learning Organisations**

The Expert Panel had suggested that an innovative Council would demonstrate elements of what they described as a 'learning organisation'. In broad terms, they went on to elaborate this description to include organisations that: seek out and encourage peer learning and development; actively seek out new ideas and develop networks from which they can continue to learn; communicate (i.e. share) the innovation; and contribute to the broader community and [helps to] share and learn. This research found this to be true in all three Councils, and it would be reasonable to suggest that their participation in the research project was partly a way to undertake 'self-learning'.

According to Peter Senge (1990, 2006) 'learning organisations' are those: "...where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together". (p.3.) He proposes 5 five core 'disciplines' for the learning organisation:

developing and utilising personal mastery, use of mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and using systems thinking, and whilst the three case study Councils may not have described themselves in this exact manner they exhibited many of the key characteristics.

A number of authors (e.g. Easterby-Smith & Arujo,1999, Finger & Brand, 1999, Smith, 2001) suggest a deal of conceptual confusion relating to the terms 'organisational learning' and 'the learning organisation'. In the opinion of Finger & Brand (1999), Senge's model of 'the learning organisation' "is an ideal, towards which organisations have to evolve..." (p.136) and suggest that "...organisational learning is the activity and the process by which organisations eventually reach this ideal of a learning organisation" (ibid). However, they go on to stress that "organisational learning can take place without a learning organisation resulting from it' (p.137). Much of the work on 'learning organisations' focuses heavily on Senge's 'systems' thinking approach and much on 'organisational learning' examines the activities and practices within the organisation and the individuals in it. Kerka (1995) offers us some characteristics of 'learning organisations', but it is not hard to see how they could equally be used to describe individual and collective learning with the organisation: " Provide continuous learning opportunities; use learning to reach their goals; link individual performance with organisational performance; foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks; embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal; are continuously aware of and interact with their environment" (p.3). Yet again, it is not the purpose of this thesis to resolve the conceptual confusion between the two terms, so I use them somewhat interchangeably to reflect on the findings about the organisations and those who work in them.

The stories told by the participants gave strong evidence for the notion that these Councils supported the development of 'personal mastery' in its employees - as

Senge describes: “personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively” (2006, p7). In turn, these personal skills appeared to be embodied in the organisation and there was an observable importance given to “knowing where we are now, where we want to go and staying focused on how we get there”. There was a focus on developing shared vision and outcomes and this was reflected in far more than just jingoistic slogans and workshops – it was discussed frequently and reflected in organisational stories and management practices that were flexible enough to allow people to explore new and alternative solutions to achieving the vision. The organisational stories were also the way of building and sharing a variety of different ‘mental models’ (Senge, 2006, p.8) or new ways of looking at situations. Narrabri’s managers challenged the common survival paradigm of small rural towns – i.e. “to do only what we can afford because towns like us are suffering everywhere” - and instead built a magnificent cultural centre because they felt that the town, “...deserved something we didn’t have to apologise for”. Marrickville Council constantly tests its models and approaches to community consultation by using ad hoc citizen interviews from shopping centres to challenge the formal citizen feedback surveys and workshops.

This vision-building/refining process was also discussed as something that was a day-to-day part of managing the organisation and the place. Coffs Harbour Council realised that its previously-held vision for the community was not shared and the Council re-bounded successfully with its ‘Liveable City’ vision and then subsequent awards. Marrickville’s visionary theme of ‘Belonging’ is referred to in planning meetings, team meetings and also in corporate stationary and public advertising. The theme also recognises that the ‘belonging’ is within a community that is diverse and constantly changing and hence the vision and aspirations of the community will shift accordingly.

The research found clear evidence of team-learning in all three Councils. There was an advocacy for team-based and 'project-style' work, where staff came together from right across the organisation to work together on developing a solution to a problem or looking at how to do something better or differently. People told stories of how this kind of multi-disciplinary teamwork was both essential to innovation, but also as their preferred and most enjoyable way of working. They often commented that it may be difficult for other employees involved in mostly 'process work' to enjoy the benefits of such a teamwork approach. People gave examples of how teams had come together for one project, and had been maintained to work on others because they had "learned how to work so well with each other".

Senge's final discipline was the ability to utilise systems thinking and understand the complex interrelationships both within and surrounding the organisation, and this was borne out in the three studied Councils. People in these Councils clearly described how their organisations worked and also the elaborate complexity of the interrelationships between the Council, its community, and also the broader "local government industry and the world at large". They spoke of "taking a step back to see the bigger picture" and "trying to understand how the whole thing fits together". The value of learning from history was emphasised, and many stories were peppered with examples of how they "learned from their mistakes". I found evidence of the kind of 'double-loop learning' discussed by Agyris & Schon (1978). There explained how they de-briefed after significant events (both 'successful' and 'unsuccessful') and discussed what they had learnt. These occasions were rarely highly formalised and often simply came up as part of team or staff meetings, discussions around tea-breaks, and as part of the process of "celebrating wins". Nevertheless, they said that such discussions were important and contributed to their ongoing learning and building organisational stories that shaped their thinking and approach for the future.

The three Councils, and also the individuals working within them, utilised various networks outside the organisation to learn – and they said they were selective to ensure that they were not “just wasting their time”. Whilst all three Councils attended many of the significant conferences, seminars and events on the local government ‘calendar’, there was an element of caution in their descriptions of what and why they attended and what they offered up to share with others. They felt that these occasions could too easily become opportunities for “grandstanding”, “local government back-slapping” and spoke with disdain of those Councils that were considered as “wanton self-promoters”. Often they said that they would only attend such network events and share their achievements and learning if they felt that they would “get something back of equal value” - “you’ve gotta be careful of the tyre-kickers”.

Interestingly, the scepticism and caution given to local government events was not so clearly attributed to broader networking opportunities and these Councils displayed a quite eclectic and varied range of ‘learning relationships’ with a range of organisations from the private sector and civil society. In the case of Coffs Harbour Council this had led to an ongoing relationship with a private-sector IT company which entailed the Council being the trial site and ‘partner’ for the development of new IT systems to be marketed to local government. In the case of Marrickville Council it led them to be part of an ongoing study by Loyola University in Chicago into the value of maintaining diversity in city communities. In all three cases, the Councils expressed a willingness to participate in this research and as one of the General Managers said, “it will help us learn more about ourselves”.

## **7.5. Creative and Innovative People – Who are they and What are they doing?**

### **7.5.1. The Right People**

The people I spoke to in this research were, in most ways, ‘ordinary’ people. One of the people interviewed could be best described as ‘intense’ but, as a group they did not commonly exhibit any particular personality trait. However, they were all passionate, committed and dedicated. Their stories were filled with words like “love”, “passion”, “vocation”, and “care” to describe their work. Nearly all of them said they “loved their work” and it was obvious that, for most of them, the line between work and play was blurred. Everybody used the word “fun” in some part of their stories about work. Commonly, they expressed the opinion that they were “right” for their job and it was “a good fit” – a number of them explaining how they had some influence on shaping and moulding the position to best fit their capabilities. In the time it took to complete this research, a number of these people changed employers, but to take up similar positions. They told me how they enjoyed working in local government and especially the opportunity it gave them to work on a variety of different projects, but all with the common theme of providing ‘good public service’ and ‘Public Value’.

The research found that they all worked in ‘project-based’ positions with the opportunity to work on projects from beginning to end. So they “got to see the results’ of their work and this was important and motivating to them. A number of people pondered if they would be able to generate innovation if they were involve in a very process-based function such as processing garbage levies or dog licences. They typically worked in teams with members from across the whole organisation , and their ‘whole-of-Council’ approach was encouraged by the leaders and



management practices in all three Councils, but I got the sense that these people would have sought out such relationships anyway.

They were typically inquisitive and interested. They enjoyed learning and exploring new challenges. Some had worked in other industries and some had always worked in the public sector - many of them had a relatively eclectic 'career path' and they moved from one job to another as part of their life journey rather than any particular career plan. Many of them were well-travelled and had explored various parts of the world seeking to broaden their experiences. They told me stories of their personal journeys as they explained how they had come to form their beliefs and the way they viewed the world. Their beliefs, values and ethics mattered a lot to them. Some told me of deep religious values that guided them and encouraged them "to do good things". All of them described, in various ways, how they used their creativity to develop 'useful' innovations for the good of the communities they served.

### **7.5.2. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF)**

Scott's (2001) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) proved itself to be a robust and useful tool for this research. The explicit focus of the PCF on 'professional capabilities' quickly made it clear that I was not exploring 'character profiles' or 'personality traits', but was clearly looking at what capabilities people were using in their work. When printed out on large paper, the diagrammatic representation of the PCF was a welcome visual focus for our conversations and interactions. We would hover over the printed spheres pointing and talking, drawing lines and making notes. At one point Shane lifted his coffee mug off the paper and revealed a faint brown (additional) circle on the edge of the paper - "and that's for all the other stuff" he giggled.

In general people responded positively to the five 'spheres' in the PCF - although they were more comfortable with re-labelling Scott's "Stance" as "Emotional Intelligence", which they described as being a more commonly-used and commonly-understood term. Often, while they understood and agreed with the intent, they offered alternative or additional labels - e.g. adding "ways of seeing things" to "ways of thinking". They suggested "Short-cuts" and "Nous"<sup>36</sup> as additional labels for Scott's "Diagnostic Maps". Also there were some discussions around "what should go where". Some participants designated a particular capability as 'profession-specific', whilst others deemed it to be 'generic' or sometimes even 'emotional intelligence'. This difference was not worrisome to me - rather it highlighted the variety in their understandings of profession, work and also their personal and organisational experiences.

There were a notable number of instances where participants pondered on the most appropriate diagrammatic location for 'learning skills'. They often expressed that 'learning skills' and 'learning to learn' were critical to them and a significant factor in their ability to produce innovation... but they were unsure whether it should be located within the sphere of 'generic capabilities' or if it had a broader and more fundamental place as encompassing all five spheres as a kind of underpinning foundation. As Carol pondered and drew a big circle on the paper with her finger: "maybe learning and learning skills is what really surrounds all of the others... I don't know".

I have included the following diagrammatic representations Scott's original PCF diagram and then the possible modifications that have emerged from this research.

---

<sup>36</sup> Nous – an English language expression that means "common sense built up over time through experience".

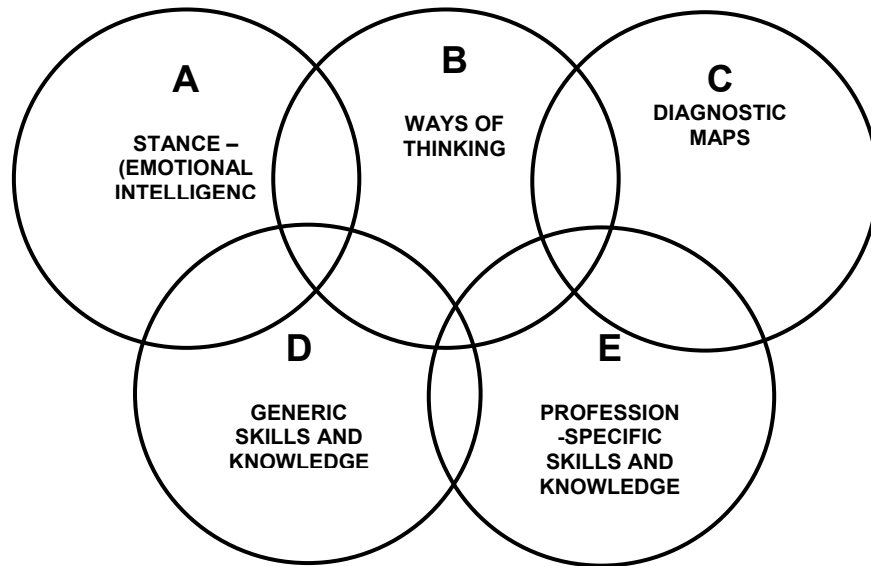


Figure 7.2. - A diagrammatic representation of Scott's Original Professional Capabilities Framework

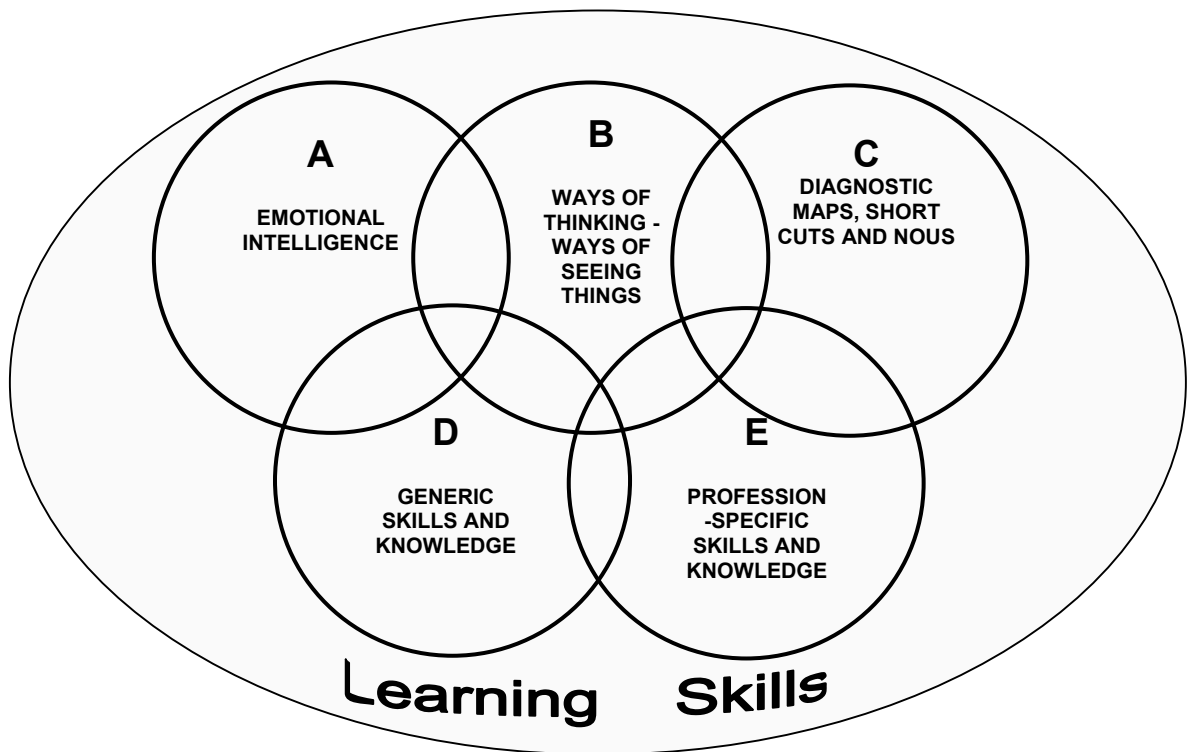


Figure 7.3. - A diagrammatic representation of Scott's Professional Capabilities Framework - with further possible modification suggested by this research

### **7.5.3. Learning and Using the Capabilities**

This thesis has found that ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ can be usefully examined as a set of ‘professional capabilities’ that people use at work and not simply ‘character attributes’, ‘traits’, or ‘gifts’. Undoubtedly, some individuals may have innate characteristics or ‘talents’ that pre-dispose them to various activities, but when viewed as capabilities, the potential for improvement becomes available to all of us. People at work can (and do) create and they then follow through a series of developmental and testing processes to produce innovation – and this is clearly occurring in a local government context. In local government, this ‘creative continuum’ most typically leads to an outcome that is perceived and described by the people working in Councils as “in the public interest”, or “in the community interest”, or “value to the community”.

These people working in local government use a variety of skills and capabilities to create the innovations and this research has shown that they can be usefully categorised within the framework of the PCF. They described to me a vast array of ‘profession-specific’ capabilities that were part of the professional skill-set required by their jobs, and learned through formal education programs at Technical College or University. In some cases, people had undertaken part-time study in a ‘new field’ that led them to a change in career direction. All of them placed a high importance of updating their professional capabilities through reading, attendance at training, conferences and seminars. Of particular interest to me was the fact that many of them relied on this high level of technical expertise to mitigate potential risk – it allowed them to foresee potential problems and they also had the technical capabilities to develop measures to minimise the likelihood of then actually happening. Whether it was backlash from an angry councillor, budget blowouts, scandals in the local paper or kids falling through dangerous playground equipment – they were always on the look out for risk and took it in their stride rather than being risk-averse.

The most commonly described 'generic skills and knowledge' were: reading, writing and communication skills – and many people saw them as being inextricably linked. Overwhelmingly, these two key capabilities were learnt through continued practice and peer review. Many had learned writing skills from school and then tertiary education, but all of them said that they 'honed' their writing skills on the job and through reading the work of 'successful' authors around them. They told tales of writing drafts, seeking (and getting) feedback, and developing a variety of styles to use in various situations.

In order to write better, all of these people read a lot. These people read manuals, novels, magazines, websites, articles, journals, reports and brochures. Reading was wide and varied: "I read everything I can get my hands on" said Max. They clearly enjoyed reading, and also appreciated and commended 'good' writing - they sought to understand its techniques and then emulate them in their own writing. They all talked about "writing for different audiences" and writing "so people can clearly understand the message". They understood and practiced the steps of story-building – drawing from their own understandings and shared experiences to build stories that had meaning to others who would hear and read them. They used metaphor and 'poetic' language to try and communicate their messages. Particularly, for many of them they used writing as a critical part of the creativity – innovation process. Sometimes "writing things down and then looking at them" was a productive activity for idea-generation and review. At other times writing was used a convergent process to distil and refine ideas, or as Carol said "writing helps me pull it all together". Writing was a way of capturing, sharing and building stories and hence was part of the creative process. In many ways it seemed this story-building process was the organisational passage that led from creativity to innovation.

Everybody told me that communication skills were essential. Karl told me, "If you've got something important you've got to have the communication skills to share it with other people". Sometimes this would be with co-workers and small groups, but other times it would be meetings with Government agencies, Council briefing sessions, conferences, Powerpoint presentations and public gatherings of all sizes and types. They understood the theatre of communication – how to give the meaning to their message, at the right time and in the right way. They also described the politics of communication – when to discuss certain issues with Councillors and/or the community and when to "...sit and bite your tongue and let them come to that point themselves".

Importantly, it was seen that story-telling (and story-building) skills were prevalent and important generic skills. This allowed them to build and order their own living stories and also contribute to the organisational and indeed the public narrative of creativity and innovation. They confirmed Moore's (1995) model, that requires public managers to 'sell the story' of the public value of their innovations in order to gain legitimacy and support. Their stories lent strong support for De Sousa's idea that communication (story-building and storytelling) the link between creativity and innovation. It seemed that often people used the process of story-building as a way of bringing their fragments of creative ideas (antenarrative) to the organisational processes of story-building. Through such a collective and reiterative process, the development of the ordered and understood organisational narrative became part (if not the whole) of the implementation of the innovation. If, as suggested earlier, we are to view innovation as the implementation of creative ideas, then it is the story building and the storytelling that is the link between the two.

Collectively, they chose the label of 'Emotional Intelligence' to describe the kind of interpersonal and human skills they needed to do their work. Only one of them

professed to having read Golemans's book, but all of them had some sort of general understanding of the terminology, gleaned from training workshops, articles or seminars. The people I interviewed were certainly all very self-aware but they presented various degrees of humility and self-effacing behaviour. Whilst they approached their interaction with others with various degrees of politeness, they all spoke with self-assurance. They described how this creativity business was about 'them' - what they did at work and how they did it was about who they were as people and how they viewed themselves. The things that we discussed as creativity and innovation were part of their individuality and their self-identity... this was the sort of work they wanted to do and how they wanted to work. They talked about: humour, humility, empathy, compassion, pride, support, sharing, listening, patience, caring, fun and laughter. "It's all about people really, isn't it", said Shane. They told me they had learned these skills through life experience. All of them said they liked working in teams with other people and often with people who they viewed as 'different' from them - different in background, skill-sets, beliefs and approaches. They learnt from these interactions and they valued them.

The research found that, true to Scott's findings they illustrated a variety of different ways of thinking. Most notable was the differences processes described for 'idea generation' (creativity?) and 'idea development and implementation' (innovation?). Mostly they preferred 'idea generation' as a solitary process - they usually came up with new ideas on their own. They all had "...ideas on the simmer ...and on the back burner" ... ideas just bubbling away that they would return to from time to time. They confirmed Amabile's proposal that creative people have a "tolerance of ambiguity" ... it seemed to me that these people not only tolerated ambiguity but they relished it. New ideas happened "in the shower", "looking out the window", "driving" and even "mowing the lawn" - but rarely in organised 'brainstorming' sessions. At work, it was typical that these people liked to be forewarned of any upcoming group work - briefed on a topic

and a problem – and then they went away and worked on creating solutions on their own. However, once they had developed some preliminary ideas then they would often seek out others to further develop their ‘creative ideas’ into ‘innovations’ that could be implemented.

Many spoke of ‘idea-generation’ as a divergent-thinking process, and ‘innovation-development’ as a ‘convergent-thinking’ process but highlighted that, on occasions they used a variety of ‘thinking styles’, and hence they supported Scott’s notion of ‘contingent thinking’. Their stories highlighted instances of thinking in different ways to suit the challenge at hand. Indeed some of them articulated how it was their life journey that had taught them different ways of looking at the same situation - and this was something they truly valued. This converged with Boje’s idea of antenarrative. An ability to ‘play around’ with ideas and story fragments – to toy with them and view and express them in different ways – before composing them into a story that will become the narrative.

It became clear that all of these ‘creators’ and ‘innovators’ had developed what they most often described as ‘Nous’. Nous is an Anglo- Australian expression that describes a particular kind of common sense that is built up over time, through experience of a certain environment. It can’t be taught in schools, colleges or universities... it comes through life experience. They learned by taking controlled risks and sometimes by making limited mistakes. Many of them credited mentors or coaches with helping them develop this ‘Nous’. These mentors had pointed out and showed them the lessons from previous situations and helped them develop understandings that could be transferred to future situations. This correlates with Scott’s concept of ‘diagnostic maps and short-cuts’. These people had learnt to read the political landscape and to scan around for “...what was just too risky”, they had learnt “when to wait...when to bide your time”, and they had learnt to see when to be very cautious as there was, as Steve said “... a huge fuckin’, looming



black cloud of a political nightmare” about to appear over their horizons. They also used their *Nous* to “cut quickly to the chase” – to speed up the process of working through options and to quickly ‘get on with the job’. So they had learnt the skills to quickly appraise situations both for risk and opportunities... but most often for risk. Their creativity and innovation was kept within the realms of what their ‘*Nous*’ had taught them was acceptable and most likely to “get up”. They used their own stories and those of colleagues to learn about “...what went right and what went wrong”. These stories were built and shared, and they became part of the organisational folklore to which people referred on a daily basis. In turn, people used these stories to learn the lessons and pick up the treasured ‘*Nous*’. *Nous* in many ways was the realisation of the Council’s narrative- it was the fables and legends and folklore that contained the messages and lessons that people need to learn.

We had a lot of conversations about “learning to learn”. Nearly all of them regarded themselves as inquisitive (sometimes asking as many questions about me as I did about them) but in different ways, at different times, and in relation to different topics. There were often stories of a pleasant and exciting time at school and college or university. They had grateful recollections of good teachers who inspired and motivated them. They looked back on the knowledge, skills and practices they had learned through formal education as an important core of their ‘creative capabilities’. Amongst them, they had experienced a variety of schooling styles – from “hippy Steiner stuff”<sup>37</sup>, to “typical Aussie schooling”, to “old-fashioned classical education”, but all seemed to have enjoyed it... and seemed to have valued learning from a young age. They had also learnt from their sporting

---

<sup>37</sup> **Rudolf Steiner** (born 1861) – Austrian Philosopher and the founder of biodynamic agriculture as well as an holistic educational philosophy. There are a number of private schools in Australia that teach according to his educational principles.

pursuits (often to elite championship level), military training and service, church service and even spicy Ashram retreats with gurus in India. They tried to keep their skills up to date and they also developed new ones. But they were selective about the type and amount of 'professional' or local government seminars and conferences they went to. Dave explained his approach: "Now I just can't be bothered to go down to Sydney every year and see the same tired, old faces talking the same old bullshit", said, "...so I try to go to something different but relevant". It was the same with industry or professional networks and sharing - they were selective and extremely suspicious of the "braggarts", "wankers" and "self-promoters". But they recognised that they often need to stay in contact with others in Local government as well as networking in broader circles. Day-to-day, they learned by listening, watching, reading, watching "stars" and simply experiencing. They de-briefed and discussed lessons learned as part of their project cycle. Undertaking project work was highlighted as the most important way for people to learn how to: operate effectively in teams, "...learn from each other", and "see the whole thing through from start all the way to finish" and hence be able to take responsibility. Donna explained, "Everyone's gotta have even just one project, even if it's not normally part of their job to do project - based work...give them the staff cookbook or the annual Christmas party to organise!".

But most of all they learned because they said... it was fun.

## **7.6. Why Bother - Innovation, Good Government and Good Governance**

By the end of the project I had learned to like most of these people. Through the course of the interviews, workshops and conversations I grew to know many of them better as we worked together to build their stories. At some point in our conversations I would ask " Why bother...why go to all this effort ...why not just

do your job like everyone else, take the money and go home?”. After all, they were not paid any bonuses for being creative and none of them ever told me they had job description that said “must be creative and come up with innovations”. And how did we know that the community valued what they did... what if they were just being self-indulgent on the public purse? Mostly the question would make them smile.

For many, it was “part of the job”, especially trying to find creative ways to get better results out of limited resources and sometimes declining funds. Karl was adamant: “It’s about trying to make the ratepayer dollar go further!” One or two commented that it “was the job!” Many of them saw it as a mark of their ‘professionalism’, and as a part of the expectations of their professional peers. Maybe it was part of just striving to be better, to improve. Neil surveyed his new proposed ‘user-friendly’ Council website and citizen response system and said “you would hope that it means the service is better – either quicker, or it’s more informed – a new and much better service”.

Others admitted freely it was a personal choice about their beliefs, values, principles, ego, identity, passion, and simply who they were – Shane shrugged and said “I see it as something that I just...do”. They worked this way because that is how they chose to work and they had the capabilities to work this way....and often it was fun, and that was important. They liked working like this and it kept them interested and motivated. All of them felt that their creative pursuits were supported by the job they did, their manager and generally by the organisation. Sometimes there were awards and medals and presentations that you had to do if you were “mug of the month”. However, mostly the rewards were personal and introspective – and that was just fine.

There was a lot of looking out the window and pointing to somewhere outside the building. Donna said: "it's out there...the biggest innovation goal is social capital". This was a commonly-held view. All this creativity and innovation was for the good of the community they served. Giving them more choice, better choices, better service, quality service. Having something that "...they didn't need to apologise for". Setting an example in the community. Building a place where their young people don't leave every weekend but they "stick around to see what's happenin' ". It was about supporting the community and using the creative resources of the Council to help find innovative solutions to the issues that were important "...out there...to 'them!'" They told me that they believed their innovation was 'useful' and that it produced 'good' outcomes in the community. Anna even suggested, "it makes people happy and that alone helps solve a lot of social problems".

But how did we know? - they knew because they asked and because they were involved and engaged with their communities. How did I know? In Narrabri people would just come up and tell me - they'd see me standing outside and looking at the Crossing Theatre and they'd say "yeah...she's a beaut isn't she". They'd even ring up me and tell me that I should know "what a bloody great job the Council has done". Max told me of one man who followed him one night and flashed his headlights constantly until he finally stopped on a lonely country road. "He just wanted to thank us for this road that had just been upgraded by the Council after many years. He just hung on to my hand, and shaking it, and just wouldn't let go ... thanking me just for doing our job well!"

Marrickville keeps check with surveys and community committees. They approach people in the local supermarket and ask if they can get their feedback. They meet people in the parks and the festivals down by the Cooks River. They talk about schooling to the parents and schoolteachers and the monks and priests. Coffs is

certainly not “on the nose” any more and the local news is glowing and complimentary. Creativity and Innovation are the public service that these people, these Councils, offer to the communities they serve.

## **7.7. Conclusions from the Chapter and Introduction into the Next Chapter- Lessons from the Stories.**

This thesis has examined the work of ‘ordinary’ people working in Australian Councils. The people that I spoke to were not extraordinary, but spending time with them and working together to build the stories of creativity and innovation taught me some important lessons. This chapter has outlined the lessons and described them using parts of the stories that we built together. Very often, the trigger for innovation in local government was the scarcity of resources and the need to do more for their communities, but this built upon by organisational ‘motivation to innovate’.

This thesis has shown that people used the expressions from their personal and professional experiences to describe their understandings of creativity and innovation in local government and that they were valued. However, precise definitions of creativity and innovation were hard to find, although people have a personal sense of what the terms mean. The research found support for a ‘creative continuum’ – between generating new ideas, using various processes to develop and test those ideas, and then successfully implementing them in the workplace.

Organisations that encourage and support creativity and innovation are typically outcomes focused and project-oriented. They recruit talented people and allow them flexibility to use their talents. These Councils expect people to take ‘appropriate’ risks, to make mistakes and learn from them. It appears that people in Australian local government are acutely aware of risk and follow through a

wide variety of testing and checking processes to minimise potential risks to their communities. This does not seem to make them conservative organisations, but rather the checking seems to be regarded as part of the 'innovation process' – part of the continuum from creative ideas to successful implementation.

These Councils considered themselves learning organisations, and whilst there may be different understandings of learning organisations and organisational learning, they seek out new knowledge and ideas as well as welcoming diversity into the Council and its community. Such innovative councils have strong leadership and a clear focus on values and outcomes. There is a trust between the elected Councillors and the Executive managers and staff. When that trust is challenged or wanes, then the capacity for innovation lessens. These Councils rely on genuine engagement with their community to provide accurate direction for their policies and actions, and this provides guidance for 'useful' innovation. They encourage a 'whole-of -Council' approach, with people working on projects in multi-disciplinary teams.

This research found that creativity and innovation could be usefully viewed as a set of professional capabilities as well as a profile of personal qualities and characteristics. The people who I worked with in the research demonstrated a variety of professional capabilities that they were using to be creative in their work and produce innovation in the Council. They were passionate about their work and considered themselves the 'right' person for their job. They valued the organisational support for their creativity and they usually regarded work as fun. They had a variety of skills, but reading, writing and communication were the most important generic skills – with and underlying platform of learning skills. People used a variety of thinking patterns to generate ideas and develop innovation and worked both alone and with others through the process. They also used diagnostic maps and learned "Nous" to develop ideas and options.

Ultimately, these people used their capabilities to pursue creativity and innovation to produce benefit for the communities they serve.

In the next chapter I will summarise the key findings and discuss the issues and lessons learned. I will conclude with some implications of this research to local government, its value, and recommendations for further work.

## **8. Conclusions: But is there really a Beginning, Middle and End?**

### **Chapter Overview**

In the previous chapter I reported the findings of this thesis and presented some initial analysis. In this concluding chapter I will further summarise the findings and distil some issues arising from this research. I will present a table of key issues and then follow this with an elaboration of the lessons learned.

Further on in the chapter, I briefly discuss the methodological approach, including the unconventional use of narrative in a local government research setting. I will also discuss the use (and benefits) of the Professional Capabilities Framework as a fieldwork tool and any suggested modifications that have arisen out of this thesis. Finally, I comment on the journey described in this thesis and provide some concluding remarks on the contribution of this thesis to the body of knowledge and its contribution to Australian Local Government.

### **8.1. Unravelling the Tapestry - Summarising Key Issues from the Research**

In the previous chapters I used a narrative approach to describe my experience and observations in the field and also share the voices of the people I spoke to. I also continued to use the narrative (or perhaps more the antenarrative) to discuss the findings of this thesis. However, now it is important that the thesis 'unravels' some of this collectively woven 'intertext' (Boje, 2009) and presents some of the key issues and lessons learned. I have chosen to firstly present this as a table, for ease of reading, to be followed by a further elaboration.



Key Issues	Lessons Learned from the Research about Creativity and Innovation in Local Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definitions of 'creativity' and 'innovation' are difficult to prescribe</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People use a variety of language to describe the two terms – both collectively and individually</li> <li>• There was no apparent discomfort at the lack of precise definition</li> <li>• People often use stories to illustrate their understanding of the two terms</li> <li>• There was tendency to use 'creativity' to describe people and 'innovation' to describe organisations</li> <li>• There was a clear support for the notion of a creativity-innovation continuum</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attribution of Creativity and Innovation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both terms are attributed as a positive accolade There is clear evidence of the notion of "hetero-attribution" by others</li> <li>• The "expert gatekeepers" may be from within the Council, local government colleagues – but most importantly the community</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existing Criteria and Awards for 'Innovative Councils'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Government Awards do not necessarily identify and correctly describe 'innovation' – but the awards promote the pursuit of innovation</li> <li>• Revised criteria still imprecise but felt useful</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the 'Innovative Councils'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not dispute the nomination or the criteria applied to them</li> <li>• They won Awards but did not the pursuit as important</li> <li>• All suggested that the 'ultimate judge' was their local community</li> <li>• Showed a strong commitment to community engagement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welcoming Strangers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative Councils were keen to welcome in new and different people – and so were their communities</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triggers for Innovation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource shortages were the common external trigger - increased expectations/ decreasing resources</li> <li>• Also internal "motivation to innovate"</li> <li>• "Innovative culture and practices" built upon previous work and built over time</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Council Leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive Management team must work as a team and "walks the talk" and model organisational values</li> <li>• Values developed collaboratively between leaders and staff</li> <li>• Clear direction but flexibility to experiment</li> <li>• Political "trust" between elected Councillors and staff (especially Mayor and GM) seen as critical -this trust</li> </ul>

	<p>“ebbs and flows’ according to the political cycle of elections –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where there is “no trust there’s no innovation”</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk and Usefulness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative councils were aware and careful about risk</li> <li>• Many formal and informal ‘checks and counter-checks’</li> <li>• Use of stories as organisational ‘parables’ about risk</li> <li>• Technical expertise lessens risk</li> <li>• Community engagement and good governance, minimise risks</li> <li>• Usefulness determined by the community –Public Value</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning Organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No clarification to the confusion between ‘learning organisation’ and ‘organisational learning’</li> <li>• Councils demonstrated many attributes of both a ‘learning organisation’ and ‘organisational learning’</li> <li>• Learning from mistakes – mistakes are okay</li> <li>• ‘Organisational learning’ evident and critical to innovation – and often seen as ‘innovation’ itself</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ‘Right’ People – Creative and Innovative people in Councils</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They “fit their job” - Alignment</li> <li>• They liked being good at their job</li> <li>• Enjoyed (even loved) their work</li> <li>• Were highly mobile</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using and Learning their Professional Capabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional intelligence came from diverse experience</li> <li>• Diverse profession-specific skills -likely to remain</li> <li>• Profession-specific competence still very important</li> <li>• Most important Generic skills: Communication, presentation and writing (story-telling)...providing the link between creative ideas and implementation of innovation.</li> <li>• People had very different ways of generating and developing ideas</li> <li>• They usually developed initial ideas on their own then built them up with others</li> <li>• Recognised and developed “Nous”</li> <li>• Learning was all encompassing – both individually and with others</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Value of Creativity and Innovation in Local Govt?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The value of Creativity and Innovation is to the community – the notion and value of public service</li> <li>• Improved Quality of Life for citizens.</li> </ul>

**Table 8.1. Summary of Key Issues and Lessons Learned from the Research**

## 8.2. Discussion of Key Issues and Lessons Learned

Following on from the Table above, I offer the following discussion of the points raised. I draw upon my findings and aspects of the literature to discuss and elaborate their importance and meaning.

This thesis has borne out the finding of many other authors who state that the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' are difficult to prescribe. For instance, Clegg (1999) points out "creativity and innovation are classic examples of concepts that everyone has a feel for but few can actually describe". It also supports De Sousa's (1999) suggestion: "creativity seems one of those concepts that is easily understood but difficult to explain". This research found that people drew on a variety of 'discourses' (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) to describe meaning of the two terms.: broad socio-cultural terms, pop jargon, various perceptions of novelty, personal expressions of belief and meaning, and the organisational language of problem-solving. The variety of these different discourses did not trouble the research participants and precise definitions did not seem important to them. People used stories to both gather and describe meaning. During the research they engaged in 'story-building' with me and offered and traded pelts of 'antenarrative' (Boje, 2006) in order to illustrate stories and build a later narrative. The language in the stories tended to use 'creative' as a personal attribute and 'innovative' as an organisational attribute. In turn this highlighted the clear evidence of support for a 'creative continuum' for local Councils: 'creative individuals' generated 'creative ideas' that then went through a variety of processes to be implemented as 'organisational innovations'.

In this thesis, I examined local Councils in Australia. As such I sought to find out why it was thought that Councils (or their staff) were 'creative' or 'innovative'. My findings strongly support those of authors (e.g. Amabile, 1983, Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, De Sousa, 1999,) that have discussed the 'hetero-attribution' or the

attribution of 'creativity' or 'innovation' as positivist labels of reward and value – bestowed by others. In many cases (perhaps with unreliable humility) many people did not think of themselves as 'creative', they nevertheless welcomed the attribution to themselves and their work. The research suggests that although the winning of an 'Innovation' Award for Australian local Councils, may not actually identify their 'innovation' precisely, but perhaps it identified a "pursuit of innovation" that should be rewarded and applauded nonetheless. The Expert Panel, acting as the "gatekeepers in the domain" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) provided a "...useful but not much better" set of criteria to use to select the case study Councils. Nevertheless, they suggested collectively, that it should be the local community that offered the final attribution of 'Innovative Council'.

Not surprisingly, the three Councils studied did not object or disagree with their nomination and attribution of the title 'Innovative Council'. This again demonstrates the power of the attribution of 'innovation' as generally positive. 'Innovative' was seen as a title or reward, a positive attribution to be proud of – even before they had begun to explore its meanings. None of the Councils disputed or amended the criteria suggested by the Expert Panel (those which resulted in their nomination). However they were still cautious. They admitted to entering local government competitions but strongly denied that these awards "...were really important". Significantly, they all proposed that the ultimate judge was their local community.

In all cases the Councils welcomed strangers. This links with both Florida's work and some of the works on learning organisations. Firstly, all three Councils showed evidence of welcoming diversity and of trying to give ease of access to strangers that was clearly in line with Florida's (2002) work. In their communities and on the streets was evidence of diversity, and all cases this was celebrated.

Similarly, they welcomed me as an investigator and interloper, which link with other discussions on 'learning organisations'.

In all cases the trigger for innovation had been external pressures – typically, the pressure of decreasing resources and the increasing expectations of local communities. This was, no doubt a similar situation, felt by every Council across NSW, let alone Australia. These Councils were aware of the principles of NPM and of the broadcast urging for 'innovation', but for them it was a unique combination of local factors that had 'triggered' innovation. The external pressures had stimulated Amabile's (1996) "motivation to innovate", building on the results of previous 're-engineering', 'TQM' or 'workplace improvement' efforts. As such, it was clear that this motivation did not arise from radical workplace change - rather it had built over time.

This thesis has clearly shown that strong leadership is critical for local government organisations to achieve (and even pursue) innovation. As typical with many organisations (both public and private sector) this required that the 'Executive Management Team' provided clear and coherent leadership with a coherent behaviour that visibly spanned the whole organisation. It was revealed that they needed to both model the behaviours and reinforce the organisational messages that innovation is welcomed and supported. This entailed a management style that was supportive, gave clear direction, but then allowed flexibility of interpretation and some tolerance for learning from mistakes. In the local government context of this thesis, it was shown that, in order to foster innovation in a Council, it is vital that there be a relationship of trust between the Executive Management Team and the elected Councillors, where the Councillors supported the Management Team and the staff in their search for innovative ways to meet the requirements of the elected Council's strategic direction. This thesis has confirmed that this is a unique public sector relationship as the 'representative democracy' role of the Councillors

should not be viewed simply as that of, say, a Board of Directors. Additionally, this thesis has revealed a public sector context for innovation where there is strong evidence of 'participative democracy' and direct engagement with their citizens – distinctly different from generating innovations to sell to 'customers' in the market.

Whilst a number of authors (e.g. DeLeon and Denhardt ,2000 and Cardow, ,2007), have been rightfully worried about the effects of unfettered 'Public Entrepreneurialism' , this thesis discovered group of local government leaders and staff that sought to use innovation for the community benefit and not just for profit-making or economic gain. In doing so, they were mindful of risk – risk of wasting public resources, risk of political disfavour from elected Councillors, risk of losing public faith and confidence, and mostly risk of not producing a public benefit. In order to ameliorate this risk they had a sophisticated array of practices that minimised risk but also allowed opportunities for innovation. Principally, all three Councils engaged with their communities and felt assured that they were aware of what their community wanted and how they wanted it done– so any efforts to achieve those aims would be considered positively. They were “in touch” with their communities and used their community feedback to guide their activities. Along with formal 'duty of care', 'due diligence' or legislative procedures, within the studied Councils they used stories, story-telling and discussion as part of the mechanisms to check and re-check ideas as part of the implementation process. Staff utilised their technical expertise to minimise risk, but spoke clearly of their faith in the Council's community engagement as a major source of guiding principles.

During the research, an Expert Panel had nominated that innovative Councils would be 'Learning Organisations'. I did not set out to resolve any confusion between Senge's (2006) systems-oriented learning organisation and the models of 'organisational learning' offered by others (e.g. Easterby-Smith & Arujo,1999,

Finger & Brand, 1999, Smith, 2001). In the field, people I spoke to often used the two terms interchangeably without discomfort. The three Councils examined were all 'adaptive' organisations and exhibited characteristics that aligned with those suggested by the literature, perhaps with less of an emphasis on systems thinking. They spoke clearly about using learning to achieve goals (Kerka, 1995) and there was significant discussion about learning from mistakes – both as an organisation and as individuals. In many ways, our discussions led me to believe that, for them, that being a learning organisation and encouraging organisational learning were synonymous with being innovative- they learning not only assisted the achievement of innovation, but it was an element of innovation in itself.

This thesis proposes that there are 'ordinary' people working in local government and implementing innovations for the good of their communities. None of the people I spoke to, considered themselves 'extraordinary', but all of them considered themselves "good at their job" and this was important to them. Whilst the evidence supported the possession of traits or attributes (e.g. Amabile,1988, Grudin,1990, Jackson and Messick, 1965) I found no evidence of a singular 'creative profile'. However, what was clear was that they all seemed to 'fit' their job, to be 'the right person in the right job' (although they recognised that this was not true for all their work colleagues). In the case of these people, it was found that the Councils they worked for had achieved what the Expert Panel had called 'alignment'. Not surprisingly therefore, they all spoke passionately and of "loving their work", and some even saw it as their "vocation". They described very few differences between work and play and it was important that work was challenging, enjoyable and fun. Perhaps as a consequence, they were quite mobile, often had eclectic career paths, and sought out new jobs, with their existing employers and others. They often told me stories of "making their job to suit their talents best", and therefore they sought out employers that supported this. In a

number of cases they explained how they had been attracted to the Council because of its innovative reputation.

As mentioned earlier, as the research progressed (over time and through shifting circumstance) the design de-emphasised the focus on developing suggested learning strategies for the 'creative' and 'innovative' capabilities. The use of narrative to explore and help 'build' their stories, has highlighted the difficulties of precise definition – not only for what constitutes 'creativity' and 'innovation', but also for describing the professional capabilities used, and how they should 'best' be learned. The discussions and stories used an array of terminology and people allocated capabilities to different spheres in the model. Nevertheless, this research has shown that local government will continue to rely on a workforce with a wide array of multi-disciplinary capabilities – learned through formal tertiary education and professional development programs.

The research has shown support for the five 'spheres' of capabilities in the PCF. The importance of 'emotional intelligence' was validated - although its definition was varied the suggestion was that it could only be learned "through life and experience". My findings also support Scott's notion of "contingent" thinking, with evidence of a variety of mental approaches to idea-generation, idea-development, and implementation. The most common suggestion was that such 'contingent' thinking skills were developed by working in a multi-disciplinary team with "people who challenged you with other ways of thinking". The findings also show that people use (and rely on) "diagnostic maps and short-cuts", which they often referred to as "Nous". This Nous only came with time and experience but was assisted discussion and story-telling, which contributed to the building of stories which would be used as personal and organisational parables. I found that the three most valued generic capabilities were: reading, writing and presentation – all learned through a combination of formal education, mentoring and practice. From



this, this thesis elaborates on De Sousa's (1999) findings and proposes that these 'story-building' skills "... form the link between creativity and innovation". Telling stories of ideas with others and slowly building an ante-narrative and narrative is not only a record of, but also a vehicle for, moving along the creativity/innovation continuum. Finally, the research highlights the importance of support for 'lifelong learning' through both institutional and experiential means. Such was the significance of these 'learning skills' that the research proposes a modification to the PCF model with 'learning skills' best shown as an all-encompassing sphere.

Finally, this thesis has revealed that there are organisations and individuals working in local government who are using creativity to produce innovations for the good of the communities. Whilst their definitions may be imprecise their commitment is genuine. The thesis also shows that those 'industry bodies' that attribute 'innovation' awards, do so in the belief that they are promoting "better local government" and their criteria for innovation evolve and shift. I have found that there are local Councils who have chosen 'innovation' as a way of dealing with declining resources and increasing demands. They support Borin's (2000) contention that they are not "loose-cannons and rule-breakers" , but rather they use good governance and an engagement with their citizens to minimise risk and pursue 'useful innovation'. These innovations are generated by the collective efforts of their staff, including some 'creative' people who show a genuine commitment to public service and a real desire to "make it better for our community".

### **8.3. Some Final Brief Comments about Methodology**

This thesis used a methodology with three key elements: a Case Study approach including the use of 'experts' to review and develop criteria, and select case study Councils; the use of the PCF as a questioning and framing tool; and what I have termed an 'ethno-narrative' technique that combined ethnographic practice with

the use of 'story-building' and narrative as both an exploratory tool and a way of interpreting experiences, observations and findings.

The case study approach proved valid. There may be some caution regarding the 'truth' of the attribution of 'creative' and 'innovative' status to the three Councils. This is the nature of such 'hetero-attribution' and requires a recognition that it comes in a fluid milieu of understandings, meanings and values. The use of the Expert Panel revealed that the broader 'local government industry' used and promoted a 'fluid' and 'dynamic' interpretation of creativity and innovation. The Expert Workshop demonstrated that there was a general lack of precise definition of the terms and they used its attribution to "promote better local government". The workshop and the use of the individual expert observer also removed me from the role of nominating the case study Councils and hence did not add another layer of attribution. The three Councils represented three 'archetypes' of Australian local Councils, but their size nor location showed not to impact on the extent of their innovation .

This thesis uses Scott's (2001) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) as a logical framework for asking questions in the field. The PCF proved a valuable tool for this purpose and offered a foundation for story-building. It's diagrammatic representation proved to be easy to understand and people quickly grasped the interrelationships between the clusters of capabilities. Printed out onto large pieces of paper, the PCF also allowed people to physicalise some of their answers by pointing to different circles or scribbling directly onto the paper in order to show where certain capabilities "fit in". Perhaps this was due to very nature of these people - that they couldn't resist the opportunity to improve things and they suggested modifications (discussed earlier).

I used what I called an 'ethno-narrative' methodology in this thesis – borrowing from ethnographic/autoethnographic practice to capture and record data and a narrative approach to building the stories and then organising and representing them in such a way as to give meanings and share understandings. The ethnographic practice in the field allowed people to show me and tell what they wanted – through discussions and stories and observation. It led me to concur with much of the work of Boje ( 1991, 1995, 2001,2006, 2009). My level of 'theoretical sensitivity' (Strauss and Corbin 1990) meant that I understood some of their meanings quickly, and perhaps that is why they drew me in to 'co-producing' (Boje, 2001) their stories and being a partner in what I have termed the 'story-building'. I am also keenly aware, that my presence (for such brief visit) meant that I was often witnessing 'story-performances' and also people were sometimes using the occasion to review and perhaps 're-story' (White and Epston, 1990) their previous narratives. The people I met used stories and tales to explain how they were being creative and innovative in their local Council. Finally I could see how they used the 'antenarrative/to story/to narrative (fable)' process to build their creative ideas into implementable and implemented innovations.

I have taken up Wolcott's challenge to "...help people tell their story" and I have recognised my subjectivity and participation in this process. Hence, in this thesis I have "written myself in" to the narrative. There may be those who would prefer a more objective style of research and description, but I believe in this case it is honest. I have also used narrative as a style of description that provides (I hope) "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), readability, organisation (Czarniawaska, 2003), and helps "make sense" (Weick 1995) .

## 8.4. Conclusions

*Stories do not require beginnings, middles and ends.*

(Boje 1995)

Stories may not require beginnings middles and ends, but, by tradition, a doctoral thesis does. However I do offer these concluding comments mindful of the fact that the stories have shifted even as I write. This research evolved over time and through circumstance, in terms of both design and methodological approach. So in many ways this thesis tells the story of a journey. I have included some of my own journey as I believe it is both relevant and honest.

At the outset I heard the clarion calls for more creativity and innovation in local government, but I was unsure of what that actually meant. In the context of Australian local government, the definitions and descriptions of these terms were often inter-twined with 'entrepreneurialism', competition and 'managerialism'. My efforts in this research to find precision in definitions have instead found imprecision but meaning – and that is, I hope, a contribution both to the knowledge of creativity and innovation at work, but also to local government. This research demonstrates that whilst there may be difference and discussion on precise definitions, there is still an implicit general agreement on intention, purpose and meaning. It importantly emphasises the hetero-attribution of the terms creative and innovative (to both individuals and organisations).

The thesis has also 'road-tested' Scott's Professional Capabilities Framework and utilised it for a slightly different purpose and in a different context. The findings from this research suggest some possible modifications, but they are offered here (on behalf of the people who suggested them) as contributions to the ongoing development of the PCF. I believe this thesis has demonstrated that the PCF is a simple and effective framework for discussing and analysing capabilities used at

work. This thesis has used the PCF to explore creativity and innovation, and, hence, demonstrated its applicability in another context. Again, I recognise that this research has not produced a definitive list of detailed professional capabilities and located them more precisely within each of the 'spheres', but I also believe that is highly contextual and subject to shifts in understanding and meaning. It is an area, perhaps, where further research would be valuable. It would be valuable to re-visit the line of enquiry and further explore the learning experiences that may enhance people's 'creative capabilities'.

I have developed and used what I have self-labelled an 'ethno-narrative' methodology in this thesis. As an ethnographer, I hope that I have given credit to the practice by my behaviour. In local government, I have recognised that in some ways I am "of the tribe", and was seen as so. In response, my research approach has been subjective but I hope not self-indulgent. This subjectivity and my participation as far more than an observer, led to me using the term 'story-building' to try and explain the kind of 'back and forth story-telling' that occurred. People didn't just tell me their stories, they sought a 'co-production' (at times it felt like a barter), and hence my stories became intermingled with theirs. Along the way, I believe that this helped us develop shared and common meanings, and build stories that gave us all better understanding. I suspect that some of my work may have been lurking somewhere in the neighbourhood of Boje's antenarrative, and I hope that my work has made some contribution to lively debates and discussion on using narrative as both an exploratory and descriptive tool.

In the end, the doctoral process charges me with writing the final narrative – the beginning, middle and end. So therefore I must impose some conclusions on a story that I know is still unfolding.

Local government in Australia has evolved to be a multi-functional sphere of government in its own right, but pressured with a weak resource base and vastly-increasing expectations from its communities. The 'New Public Management' reforms have brought challenges to both the fundamental philosophies underpinning local government, as well as the practices they adopt to carry out their roles. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growing urging for local Councils to be more innovative and their staff to be more creative – without describing exactly what that means. We need to find out more about what professional skills and capabilities people need to fulfil their roles and functions in such an environment.

Many have suggested that local government look to the private sector for definition and clarification, but this has also led to some well-documented 'failures' in public sector entrepreneurialism. In doing so, it has been suggested that this has distanced local government 'managers' from both the citizens that they are meant to serve, and the fundamental principles of public service. This research provides an alternative view. It tells the stories of three Australian Councils who, faced with similar pressures, decided that they would use the creativity of their staff to produce innovations that were of benefit to their community and provided and improved quality of life. Once again I report that their definitions were imprecise but their intentions were clear. Some may suggest that these are simply well-functioning Councils, but they, their peers and their communities have attributed the title of 'innovative' to them. They develop their innovations using the principles of good local governance, and, hence, they perhaps offer us a model of 'local governance innovation'.

There are people working in those Councils that use stories to describe and understand what they are doing and who tell tales of creativity and innovation in local government. I hope this thesis honours their stories and helps them to be told.

## **A Recent Story as a Small Post-amble**

Last November, I found myself sitting at a table in the humid and muggy offices of the People's Provincial Council of Tra Vinh Province – in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. I was deep in the heart of the Mekong Delta, carrying out my new role as a UN advisor on local government reform projects in Vietnam.

The project designers at the UN had quite correctly identified that the capacities of the local government elected members (People's Deputies) and their support staff was a key issue in the general level of effectiveness of local government. So they had designed a project activity grandly entitled "1.7. Conduct a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) for People's Deputies – with particular reference to the needs of Women and Ethnic Minority Deputies". Working within the confines of the UN office in Hanoi, and in concert with their Soviet-trained Vietnamese counterparts, the project designers had prescribed a 'robust and scientific' approach to the TNA and suggested a methodology that centred around an extensive survey of all 6,000 People's Deputies across the country. Upon my arrival, I looked at the methodology design with (probably visible) shock and dismay. "Couldn't we take a more qualitative approach?" I pleaded. There was a lot of scowling and collective resistance on their part and also a noticeable lack of understanding of qualitative methodologies. Eventually they conceded to allow me and two colleagues to go to four selected Provinces and undertake a small Scoping Study – "Just to make sure the survey questions are correct" they pointed out.

So here I was in Tra Vinh watching a small, pink lizard climbing up the power cord stapled onto the wall. To my right is my indispensable assistant Em Van – the 'Modern Girl' who doesn't pay much heed to the traditions of how young women in Vietnamese society should behave. She translates so well for me and has grown used to whispering in my right ear, but occasionally she gets distracted by text

messaging her new husband who teaches English, is Indian and alarms her parents no end by cooking very fiery curries. To my left is my dear friend and colleague Anh "Guru" Lam. He is a gangly and loping man with a deep knowledge and even deeper compassion. He makes me feel safe when we travel and work together as I trust his wisdom and he guides me through the intricate jungles of Vietnamese politics and culture.

Across the table are two local People's Deputies from the local government. They are both ethnically Khmer. Tra Vinh is close to the Cambodian border and many of the people around here are Khmer. In Vietnam, Khmer people are treated as an 'Ethnic Minority' and that's why we have come to talk to them...but it also makes them quite shy and a little hesitant. They seem a bit intrigued by me and at first they demand to hear my stories about who I am and am I married and how old I am. Eventually, I try to steer the conversation back towards getting them to tell us about their daily work as a People's Deputy and what are they trying to do...and what are the sort of areas where they might benefit from training and support. I ask them if they have faced any particular issues representing a mostly Khmer population. Em Van translates my stories and questions and suddenly they are silent. They say nothing and look away from us or cast their eyes down at the floor. I fear we may have asked the questions in way that has offended them or they have not understood, so I quickly go to re-phrase my questions.

Lam quickly grabs my wrist to silence me. "No", he says softly but firmly, "be quiet for now...they are just getting ready...to tell you their stories".

*February 2009*



## References

- Agar, Michael, *Speaking of Ethnography*, Sage, Newbury Park CA, 1986
- Agar, Michael, *The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*. Academic Press, 1996.
- Agyris, C. & Schon, D., *Organisational learning: A theory of Action Perspective*, Addison-Wesley, Mass, 1978
- Atkinson, P. and Hammersley, M., "Ethnography and Participant Observation", in Denzin and Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1994
- Amabile, T.M. "A Model of Creativity and Innovation in Organizations", in Straw and Cummings (eds) *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 10, JAI Press, Greenwich CN, 1988.
- Amabile, T, Conti, R., "Assessing the Work Environment for Creativity", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol 39, No 5, 1996.
- Amabile, T., Barsade, S., Mueller, J., and Staw, B., "Affect and Creativity at Work", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50, p.p. 367-403, 2005
- Anderson, B., "Do We Have Better Local Government?", *The Accountants Journal*, 72(10) 65-67
- Ashkanasy, N.M., Gardner, J. Letts, M. & Plowman, I., *Innovation in rural Queensland: Why some thrive while others languish*, Queensland Department of Primary Industries, 2003.
- Aucoin, P., *New Public Management and the Quality of Government; Coping with the New Political Governance in Canada*, Paper to the "New Public Management and the Quality of Government" conference, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, (13-15 November) 2008
- Aulich, C. *The Impact of Compulsory Competitive Tendering on the Organisational Culture of Local Government in Victoria*, Doctoral Thesis, University of NSW, 1999
- Bakhtin, M. M. 1990. *Art and Answerability*. Edited by Michael Holquist & Vadim Liapunov. Translation and Notes by Vadim Liapunov; supplement translated by

Kenneth Brostrom. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. From Bakhtin's first published article and his early 1920s notebooks

Balmer, C., Local Government in the Federal System in *The Australian Local Government Handbook*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1989

Bennington, J., *In Search of Public Value – Beyond Private Choice*, Palgrave, 2007

Best, D., "Creativity: education in the spirit of enquiry", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, XXXIX(3), 1991

Best, J., "Supporting the Public Library Entrepreneur", *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, Vol 14, Number 3, MCB University Press, 2001.

Birchard, M, "Creativity, Leadership and Change", in *Public Money and Management*, April-June 2000.

Blair, T. (1998), as quoted in Stoker, G., *What is Local Government For?: Refocusing Local Government To Meet Its Challenges Of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New Local Government Network, 200date.

Boje, D., "The Storytelling Organization: a Study of Story Performance in an Office-Supply Firm", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, p.p 106-126, 1991

Boje, D. "The Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as Tamara-Land", *Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), p.p 997-1035, 1995.

Boje, D., *Narrative Methods for Organizational and Communication Research*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2001

Boje, D. Breaking Out of Narratives Prison: Improper Storytelling in Storytelling Organizations, accepted in *Story, Self and Society Journal*, Jan 2006, accessed from <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/>

Boje, D. *Once upon a Time* (learning materials) accessed from <http://cbae.nmsu.edu/~dboje/>, February 2009

Bonina, C., and Cordella, A., The New Public Management, e-government and Public Value, *Proceedings of SIG GlobDev's First Annual Workshop*, Paris, France, December 13<sup>th</sup> 2008

Borins,S, "Loose Cannons and Rule Breakers, or Enterprising Leaders? Some Evidence About Innovative Public Managers", *Public Administration Review*, Vol 60, No 6. ,November/December 2000.

Bowers, K.S., as cited in Kilbourne, L.M., Woodman, R.W. (1999), "Barriers to Organizational Creativity", in Purser, R.E., Montuori, A. (Eds),*Social Creativity*, Hampton Press, NJ, Vol. Vol. II pp.125-50, 1973.

Boyle, M., and Parry, K., 'Telling the Whole Story: The Case for Organizational Autoethnography, *Culture and organization*, Vol. 13(3), September, 2007.

Broadbent, J, "New Public Management and Issues of Policy: So Where do We Go from Here ?", in *Global Warming: International Financial Management Changes*, Guthrie, J., Humphrey, C., and Olsen O. (eds), Cappelen Askademisk Forlag, Oslo, 1998.

Broadbent, J and Laughlin, R., "Public Service Professionals and the New Public Management", in *New Public Management- Current Trends and Prospects*, McLaughlin et al (eds), Routledge,New York, 2002.

Cardow, A, *The construction of entrepreneurship in publicly-owned utilities in New Zealand: local and translocal discourses, 1999-2001*, Doctoral thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2005.

Cardow, A., 2005, "Reclaiming the Public Manager", *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*,19 E/2007, pp. 36-50

Chang, H., *Autoethnothgraphy as Method*, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, CA, (2008)

Clegg, Brian, *Creativity and Innovation for Managers*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford , 1999.

Clegg, Brian, *The Chameleon Manager*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford: Boston, 1998.

Clough, P., *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*, Buckingham Open University Press, 2002.

Cohen, Michael D., James G. March, Johan P. Olsen *A Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice* *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 1. (Mar., 1972), pp. 1-25.

Colebatch, H. and Degeling, P., *Understanding Local Government: Action-Linkage – Outcome*, Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986.

Commonwealth of Australia - Commonwealth Grants Commission, Review of the Operation of the Local Government (Financial Assistance) Act 1995, June 2001, (p.52-53), as cited in *Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government – Report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration*, Canberra, October, 2003.

Commonwealth of Australia - House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, Finance and Public Administration, *Rates and Taxes: A Fair Share for Responsible Local Government*, Canberra, October 2003.

Commonwealth of Australia, *One Nation*, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992.

Cox, E., *A Truly Civil Society – 1995 Boyer Lectures*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1995.

Creswell, John, W, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design- Choosing Among Five Traditions*, Sage Publications, Seven Oaks CA, 1998.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Harper, New York, 1990.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., *Creativity: Flow and The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, Harper, New York, 1996.

Czarniawaska- Joerges, B., *Exploring Complex Organizations: a Cultural Perspective*, Sage, Newbury, 1992

Czarniawaska, B., “ Management She Wrote: Organization Studies and Detective Stories”, *Culture and Organizations*, 5(1), p.p. 13-41, 1999.

Czarniawaska, B. (and Gagliardi eds), *Narratives We Organize By*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2003.

Czarniawaska- Joerges, B., *Narratives in Social Science Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2004

Dacey, John.S, *Creative Thinking*, Lexington Books, Massachusetts, 1989.

Dahlen, M. , *Creativity Unlimited*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 2006.

Damanpour, F., *Organisational innovation: A meta-analysis of effects of determinants and moderators*, *Academy of Management Journal*, 34 (3), 555-590, 1991.

Davis, P., and West, K., "What Do Public Values Mean for Public Action? Putting Public values in the Plural Place.", *American Review of Public Administration*, December, 2008.

DeBono, E., *Six Thinking Hats (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1999

De Sousa, Fernando, *Creativity and Effectiveness in Teaching: perceptions of Students and Lecturers of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute (Doctoral Dissertation)*, Lisbon, Spain 1999

DeLeon, L. and Denhardt, R., "The Political Theory of Reinvention", *Public Administration Review*, 60/2/, p.p. 89-97, 2000

Denhardt, Janet V and Robert. B, *The New Public Service – Serving not Steering*, Armonk, New York, 2003.

Denning, S, "Telling Tales", *Harvard Business Review*, May, 2004.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y., *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials*, Sage , Thousand Oaks CA, 2003

Dollery, B., Wallis, J. and Allan, P, "The Debate that Had to Happen But Never Did: The Changing Role of Australian Local Government", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Vol 41, No 4, December, 2006.

Dougherty, D. and Heller, T., "The Illegitimacy of successful product innovation in established firms", *Organization Science* 5(2), 200-218, 1994

Easterby-Smith, M and Arujo, L (eds) "Current Debates and Opportunities", in *Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization*, Sage, London 1999

Ekvall, G., "The Organizational Culture of Idea-Management: a creative climate for the management of ideas", in Henry, J. and Walker, D. (eds), *Managing Innovation*, Sage, 1991.

Ekvall, G., "Organizational Conditions and Levels of Creativity", in *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Vol 6 No.4, December 1997

Ellis, C., and Bochner, A (eds) *Composing Ethnography: alternative forms of Qualitative writing*, AltaMira press, Walnut Creek, CA, 1996

Ellis, C., and Bochner, A ,“Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity Reflexivity”, in Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y., (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000

Finger, M., and Brand, S., “The Concept of the Learning Organisation Applied to the Transformation of the Public Sector: Conceptual Contributions for Theory Development”, in *Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization*, Sage, London, 1999.

Florida, R. “The Economic Geography of Talent”, in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 92(4), 2002.

Florida, R., *The Rise Of The Creative Class: And How It Is Transforming Work, Leisure And Everyday Life*, Basic Books, New York, 2002.

Florida, R., “When Social Capital Stifles Innovation”, *Harvard Business Review*, August, 2002.

Florida, R., *The Flight Of The Creative Class: The New Global Competition For Talent*, Harper Business, New York, 2005.

Florida, R., *Cities and the Creative Class*, Routledge, New York, 2005.

Fritz, R., *The Path of Least Resistance: Learning to Become a Creative Force in Your Own Life*, Fawcett Columbine, New York, 1979.

Gabriel. Y., “The Unmanaged Organization: Stories, Fantasies and Subjectivity”, *Organization Studies*,16, 3, p.p. 477-501, 1995

Gabriel. Y., *Storytelling in Organizations – Facts, Fictions and Fantasies*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000

Galton (1979 – original 1879) as cited in De Sousa, Fernando, *Creativity and Effectiveness in Teaching: perceptions of Students and Lecturers of the Lisbon Polytechnic Institute (Doctoral Dissertation)*, Lisbon, Spain 1999

Geertz, C., "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture". In *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, Basic Books, New York, 1973.

Geertz, C.,. *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1988

Ghiselin, B. (1963), as cited in Ekvall, G., "Organizational Conditions and Levels of Creativity", in *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Vol 6 No.4, December 1997.

Gore, A., *Report of the National Performance Review: Creating a Government that Works Better and Costs Less*, US Government Printing Office, Washington DC, 1993

Guilford, J.P. "Creativity", *American Psychologist*, 5, 444-454, 1950.

Gutkind, L., *The Best Creative Non-Fiction, Vol 1.*, W.W.Norton. New York (1997)

Goleman, D., *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Bloomsbury, London, 1998.

Gonczi, A. Hager, P. & Oliver L., *Establishing Competency Based Standards for the Professions*, NOOSR, DETYA , 1999

Goodsell, C., "Reinvent Government or Rediscover It?", *Public Administration Review*, 69/1, 1993

Government of South Australia, *South Australian Strategic Plan*, 2007.

Grudin, R., (1990), *The Grace of Great Things : Creativity and Innovation*, Ticknor & Fields, New York.

Hall, P., "The Roots Of Urban Innovation: Culture, Technology, And The Urban Order", *Urban Futures*, 19, p41-52, 1995.

Hall, P and Landry, C. *Innovative and Sustainable Cities*, European Foundation, Luxembourg. 1997.

Hall, P. *Cities in Civilisation*, Wiedenfeld, London, 1998.

Halligan, J. and Wettenhall, R., "The Evolution of Local Government" in *The Australian Local Government Handbook*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, 1989.

Hambleton, R., *Beyond New Public Management - City Leadership, Democratic Renewal and the Politics of Place*, Paper to The City Futures Conference, Chicago, Illinois, USA 98-10 July), 2004

Herrmann, N., *The Creative Brain*, Brain Books, Lake Lure, North Carolina, 1990

Higgins, M and Morgan, J., "The Role of Creativity in Planning: the 'Creative Practitioner'", *Planning Practice and Research*, Vol. 15 issue 1 / 2, p.p. 117, Feb-May 2000.

Holt, N., "Representation, legitimation and autoethnography: an autoethnographic writing story", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2 (1), 2003

Hood, C. "A Public Management for All Seasons?", *Public Administration*, 69 Spring, p.3-19, 1991.

Humphreys, M., Brown, A., and Hatch, M, "Is Ethnography Jazz?", *Organization*, 2003, 10/5

Jackson and Messick (1965), cited in Dacey, John.S, *Creative Thinking*, Lexington Books, Massachusetts, 1989

Johnson,E., and Wolfe, T., *The New Journalism*, Pan Books, London, (1975)

Jones , M.A., *Managing Local Government –Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Hargreen Publishing, Melbourne, 1989.

Kao, J. *Jamming: The Art and Discipline Of Business Creativity*, Harper Collins, 1996

Kelsey, J. *The New Zealand Experiment: a world model for structural adjustment*. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1997.

Kerka, L., "The Learning Organization; Myths and Realities" accessed from ERIC Clearinghouse ([www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content\\_storage\\_01/000019b](http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/000019b)), 1995

Kilbourne, L.M., Woodman, R.W. "Barriers to Organizational Creativity", in Purser, R.E., Montuori, A. (Eds), *Social Creativity*, Hampton Press, NJ, Vol. Vol. II pp.125-50, 1999

Kirton, M.J., (1987) as cited in Ekvall, G. Organizational Conditions and Levels of Creativity, in *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Vol 6 No.4, December 1997

Kotter, John, P., *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston , Massachusetts,1996.

Landry, C. and Bianchini, F. *The Creative City*, Demos, London, 1995.

Landry, Charles, *Helsinki: Towards a Creative City*, Report for the City of Helsinki, 1998

Landry, Charles, *The Creative City*, Earthscan, London, 2000.



Legge, J. and Hindle, K., *Entrepreneurship – How Innovators Create the Future*, Commonwealth Department of Industry, Science and Tourism, Canberra, Australia, 1997.

Local Government and Shires Associations of NSW (LGSA), *Are Councils Sustainable? - Final Report of the Independent Inquiry into the Financial Sustainability of NSW Local Government*, Sydney, 2006.

Martin, J., “Economic and Community Development through Innovative local Government”, in *Sustaining Regions*, ed. Andrew Beer, Commonwealth Government of Australia. 2002.

Martin, J., *Innovation Strategies in Australian Local Government*, AHURI, 2001

Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M., *Qualitative Data Analysis: an expanded sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Sage, Thousand Oaks CA, 1994

Moore, M., “Creating Public Value”, presentation at Masterclass, *Debating and Delivering Public Value*, Warwick University, Coventry , 24<sup>th</sup>-26<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

Moore, M., ‘Managing for Value: Organizational Strategy in For-Profit, Non-Profit and Governmental Organizations’, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol 29(1), 2000.

Moore, M., *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1995

Moore, M., *On Creating Public Value: what Business might Learn from Government about Strategic Management*, A working paper – the Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative, Harvard University, 2004.

Morgan, G., *Riding the Waves of Change: Managerial Competencies for the Turbulent World*, Jossey-Bass, San Fransisco , 1988.

Mouly, G., *Psychology for Effective Teaching*, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1968.

Mulgan, G., *Innovation in the Public Sector* (Discussion Paper), Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, London UK, 2003 .

Mulgan, G., The Process of Social Innovation, in *Innovations*, Spring 2006, Vol 1 (2) p145-162, 2006.

Myers, Isabel Briggs; Mary H. McCaulley. *Manual: A Guide to the Development and Use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (2nd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1985

Newman.J., Raine.J, and Skelcher.C, "Transforming Local Government: Innovation and Modernization", in *Public Money and Management*, April-June 2001.  
NSW Government Commission of Enquiry (Professor Kevin Sproats Commissioner), *Inquiry into the Structure of Local Government in Eight Council areas in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney*, April 2001.

Osborne, David, E. and Gaebler, T., *Reinventing Government: How The Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming The Public Sector*, Addison-Wesley, Reading MA, 1992.

Osborne, S.P. and Mclaughlin, K., "The New Public Management in Context" in *New Public Management - Current Trends and Prospects*, McLaughlin et al (eds), Routledge, New York, 2002.

Parnes, S.J., "Marketing and the Creative Problem-Solving Process" in *Journal of Marketing Education*, Volume 22: 225-235, 2000

Pintard-Newry, Yvette. and Palma, Alejandra. "What Is the Role of the World Bank in Exporting the New Public Management (NPM) Ideology and Affecting Public Administration Globally?" *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the The Law and Society Association*, July 6, 2006.

Polkinghorne, D., *Narrative knowing and the Human Sciences*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1988.

Pollock, Shaoul, Rowland and Player, *Public Services and the Private Sect'*, Catalyst Working Paper, Catalyst Trust, London, 2001.

Pollitt, C., *Managerialism and the Public Service: The Anglo-American Experience*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA, 1990.

Pollitt, C., and Bouckaert, G., *Public Management Reform: a Comparative Analysis*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000.

Ramus, C.A. and Steger, U. (2000) as cited in "The roles of supervisory support behaviours and environmental policy in employee ecoinitiatives at leading-edge European companies", *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 43(4), pp. 605-626

Reich, R.B., *The Future of Success*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 2000.

Rhodes, C and Pullen, A., "Narrative, Organizations and Research", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 7/3, 2005

Richards, Chris. and Canberra College of Advanced Education. *Innovation in Local Government Management / edited by Chris Richards* Canberra College of Advanced Education (1987).

Richardson, L. and St.Pierre, E.A., "Writing: a Method of Enquiry" in Denzin and Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* , Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994

Richardson, L., "Writing a Method of Enquiry", in Denzin, N., and Lincoln, Y., (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2000

Rickards, Tudor; et al, "Implementation as a Form of Institutional Innovation: Theory Development from Empirical Investigations of Eight IT Projects". *HICSS* (4),1996.

Robson, C., *Real World Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Blackwell, Oxford, 2002.

Rosen, M., "Breakfast at Spiroo's: Dramaturgy and Dominance", *Journal of Management*, 11:2, p.p. 31-48, 1985.

Rosen, M., "You asked for it: Christmas at the Bosses Expense", *Journal of Management Studies*, 25,5, September, 1988.

SA Government, *Creativity Targets ; Discussion Paper*, Department of the Premier and the Cabinet, April, 2006.

Schachter, H.L., *Reinventing Government Or Reinventing Ourselves : The Role Of The Citizen Owners In Making Better Government*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1997.

Schoepflin,T., "On being Degraded in a Public Space: An Autoethography", *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 14(2), June, 2009.

Schon, D. *The Reflective Practitioner*, Basic Books, New York, 1983.

Scott, G. ., *Change Matters: Making a Difference in Education & Training*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

Scott, G., *Tracking and Profiling Successful Graduates* (unpublished), UTS, Sydney, 2001.

Scott, G. & Yates, W. "Using Successful Graduates to Improve the Quality of Undergraduate Engineering Programs", *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 27, 4, 363-78, 2002.

Scott, G. & Wilson, D. N. Tracking and Profiling Successful IT Graduates: An Exploratory Study in Wenn, A., McGrath, M. & Burstein, F. (eds): *Enabling Organisations and Society through Information Systems - Proceedings of the 13th Australasian Conference on Information Systems*, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, December 2002., pp. 1185-1195.

Senge, P., *The Fifth Discipline* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Currency Press, New York, 2006.

Sharkey, F. in "Capitalising on Creativity", Special Supplement in *New Statesman*, Issue 10, October 2005.

Smith, K., "The Learning Organization", from *the Encyclopedia of Informal Education* ([www.infed.org/biblio/learning-organization](http://www.infed.org/biblio/learning-organization)), 2001.

Smolenski, E., and Kleiner, B., "How to train people to think more creatively", *Management Development Review*, 8(6) 1995.

Soderberg, Anne-Marie, "Sense-giving and Sense-making: a Narrative Approach to the Study of an International Acquisition", in *Narratives we Organize By*, Czarniawska and Gagliardi (eds), John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2003.

Sproats, K., in "NSW Government -Report of the Inquiry into the Structure of Local Government in Eight Council Areas in the Inner City and Eastern Suburbs of Sydney" (K. Sproats Commissioner), NSW Government Printer, 2001.

Sternberg, R., and Lubart, T., "An Investment Theory of Creativity and its Development", *Human Development*, (34) 1991.

Stoker, G., *What is Local Government For?: Refocusing Local Government To Meet Its Challenges Of The 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, New Local Government Network, London, 2005.

Torrance, E.P. *Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking*. Scholastic Testing Service, Inc., 1974.

Tyler, J., and Rosen, G., "The Story Holds its Heart: Living Expression in Reflexive Storytelling". *Storytelling, Self, Society*, Vol 4/2, 2008.

Van Maanen, J. *Tales of the Field - On Writing Ethnography*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988.

Wadsworth, Y., *Do- It-Yourself Social Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997.

Weick., K, E, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1995.

White, M., and Epston D., *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Norton, New York, 1990.

Wolcott,H.F., *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis and Interpretation*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1994.

Wolcott,H.F., *Ethnography – a Way of Seeing*, Alta Mira, Oxford, 1999.

Wolcott H.F. (1992) as cited in Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M., *Qualitative Data Analysis: an Expanded Sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Sage, Thousand Oaks CA, 1994.

Woodman, R.W. & Schoenfeldt, L.F. as cited in Kilbourne, L.M., Woodman, R.W., "Barriers to Organizational Creativity", in Purser, R.E. and , Montuori, A. (eds),*Social Creativity*, Hampton Press, NJ, Vol. Vol. II pp.125-50, 1999.

## **List of Appendices**

Appendix 1. - Some collated categories and indicators of 'Innovation' used by various Australian Local Government Awards in 2004.

Appendix 2. - Some broad definitions of 'Innovation' from the Literature

Appendix 3. - Criteria for 'Innovative Councils' developed by the Experts from the Case Study Selection Workshop

Appendix 4 - Request Letter Sent to General Managers

Appendix 5. - Executive Team Workshops: Typical Workshop Questions

Appendix 6. - Typical Individual Interview Questions

## **Appendix 1. - Collated categories and indicators of 'Innovation' used by various Australian Local Government Awards 2004.**

- Clear evidence of innovation
- Cost-effective
- Ratepayer satisfaction
- Consistent project delivery
- Consistent service delivery
- Identify key strategic directions and make them happen
- Transferability

## **Appendix 2. - Some Broad Definitions of 'Innovation' from the Literature**

- The way that creative individuals and [their] organisations work together
- A new idea [put into] practice
- Implementation of creative ideas in an organisation
- Adaption of an existing idea
- A discontinuous change
- Usefulness
- Sustainable
- Produce results for the well-being of clients

## **Appendix 3. - Criteria for 'Innovative Councils' developed by the Experts from the Case Study Selection Workshop:**

### **An Organisation and Individuals that Genuinely Embrace Change.**

- Processes – using and exploring new processes
- [Organizations that] encourage the environment of change
- Doing it a different way
- Approach is different every time
- Looking for new ways to do things' rather than just "running with the pack" or 'copying' commonly used practice.

### **Balancing and Managing Appropriate Risk**

- Taking a risk
- There is a "relative allowance of caution" – i.e that the parameters of acceptable/unacceptable risk are clear but also that there is an acceptance/encouragement of 'acceptable' risk-taking

### **A Sustainable Culture of Innovation**

- That there is a "qualitative " change
- Culture – innovation is about a change in "culture"
- "Not just a simple output – [i.e. innovation is about and organizational culture change]
- Sustained achievement [of acceptable/desirable results]
- Incremental [change and/or improvement]
- It 'survives the champion" – i.e. that the idea/notion/process outlasts the efforts of a single "champion" and gets built into the culture.
- Survive the "external factors" – i.e. goes beyond one-off pressures or one-off environmental factors and 'lasts'. Not just 'reactive' but becomes an ongoing process of 'proactive'
- [The innovations are] "Buoyant" – i.e. they can survive
- The 'innovations' are implementable and are implemented.

### **A Learning Organisation**

- [The organizations seek out and encourage] peer learning and development – i.e. they actively seek out new ideas and develop networks from which they can continue to learn
- [Organisations that] communicate (i.e. share) the innovation
- [The organisation] contributes to the broader community and [helps to] share and learn
- "Learning organisations".
- [An innovative council is involved in] sharing and learning things – a "learning organisation".



### **Transferability**

- One test would be “transferability” - i.e. that the ‘innovation’ was robust enough to be shared and used by others]

### **Organisational Relationships**

- “They have the right people in the right roles and they use them properly”
- “Alignment” - the notion that in innovative organizations people s role/position is respected and is fully utilized to achieve the organisational aims
- “People know their roles and play them [properly]”
- [Organisations that] think across silos and disciplines
- The organisation values “creative” people

### **Valuing Creativity and Innovation**

- Recognising/using/valuing “talent”
- “Innovation ‘fits the values’” - i.e. people are given the message that innovation is encouraged
- The organisation values and recognizes innovation [as valuable and desirable]
- [The Organisation is committed to genuine] continuous improvement

### **Usefulness and Value**

- Producing a desirable and valued result and outcome for the community.

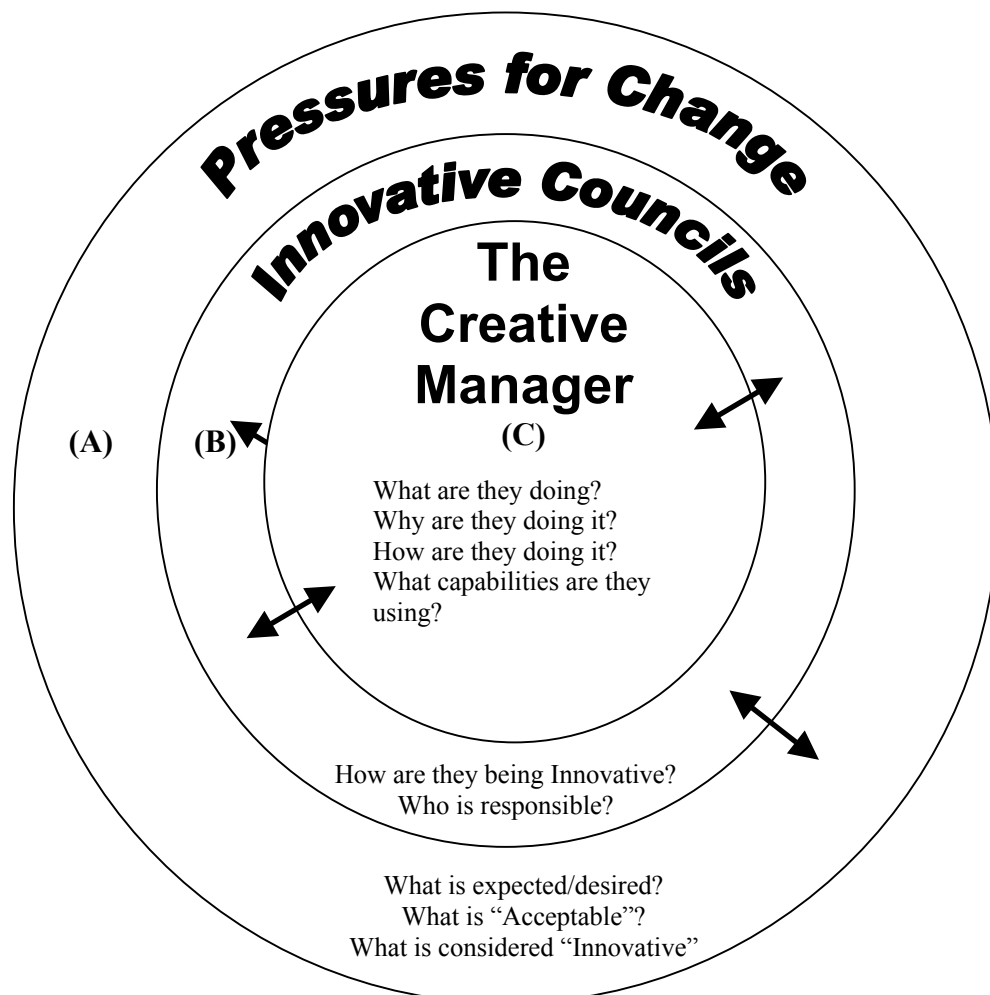
## Appendix 4 – Request Letter Sent to General Managers

**Re: Research Project into Creativity, Innovation and Local government**

Dear *General Manager*

I wrote to you not long ago, to ask whether you and your staff would be able to help me with my research into Creativity, Innovation and local government. At that time you responded favourably, but we agreed that it was sensible to get the local government elections over and done with and get the new Council "settled in".

**1. Project Aims and Objectives** - I realise that I have only spoken to you in broad terms about the project. This is partly as I don't wish to pre-empt the investigative phase with too much material. I have also not yet indicated to you the specific reasons why you were deemed to be "innovative" - I am hoping to be able to discuss this with you in the first workshop. I feel this will be more fruitful, as I am keen to be present and capture your "initial" reaction to the Expert Panel's comments about your organisation. Nevertheless I am including a brief description below of some of the key questions I am looking at. This project has a number of variables to be explored.



At the outset we must recognise the Environmental Pressures for change (A):

- What are the pressures for change acting upon the “average” Local Council in Australia?
- How can they be more ‘innovative’ in a way that is acceptable to their community and “makes things better”? There are societal and legislative constraints on their responses to pressures for change.
- So what is considered an ‘innovative’ way of “making things better”?
- How do we recognise those Councils that are achieving this aim?

Within the identified ‘Innovative’ Councils (B), we need to ask:

- How do they see themselves as being ‘innovative’?
- What do they think they are doing to be ‘innovative’?
- Who do they think are the key individuals behind this ‘innovation’?
- What do they think those individuals are doing to contribute to the ‘innovation’?

Having identified the ‘Creative’ individuals (C) within the ‘innovative’ Councils, we need to find out:

- What are they doing to be ‘creative’ and contribute to the Council’s ‘innovation’?
- How are they doing it? – what activities are they undertaking to be creative and then effectively generate ‘innovation’ in the organisation?
- What Professional Capabilities are they using to be ‘creative’ ?
- How did they learn those capabilities?

My ultimate aim is to develop some key elements for local government learning programs - i.e. to suggest elements for inclusion in learning programs (either formal or informal) that may help improve people's capacity to be creative and hence contribute to innovation.

**2. Methodology** - I have decided to use a Qualitative methodology that combines:

- **Semi-structured workshop with GM and Senior staff.** This workshop will follow a structured framework using some pre-determined questions and prompts. However, emphasis on particular topics and tasks may vary with each group. One of the outcomes of this workshop will be to nominate some key individuals (between 3-6) who are actively contributing to the innovations in your Council. It is expected that this workshop will take no more than 2½ hours.
- **Semi-structured interviews** with the key individuals. Again, whilst there are a series of questions that I need to pose I have opted for an approach suggested by Csikzentmihaly (1996) *..keep the interview as close to a natural conversation as possible*. However, I will use prompt tools, the interview will be taped and notes taken. I expect that each interview will take no more 2hrs.
- **Observation** of the instruments, symbols and outcomes that surround the Council(s) and the individuals, plus evidence of the innovations that are produced.

**3. Efficient use of Time** -for all of us, it will be important to make an efficient use of time. For this initial site visit, I hope to be in your Council for no more than 4-5 days. Obviously, you don't want me hanging around for ever and ever, and I wish to minimise the amount of disruption I may cause. Also, I have to be realistic about the time and funds available to me for site visits. Follow-up work can be done by phone and email, and any future site visits as required.

So I would hopefully schedule the program as follows:

Day 1

- Arrive at Council
- Initial workshop with GM and Senior Staff
- Nomination of interviewees

Day 2

- Interviews
- Observations

Day 3

- Interviews
- Observations

Day 4

- Interviews
- Observations
- (Possible Departure)

Optional Day 5

- Interviews
- Departure

I am keen to set some time from end of May to end of July, when I could visit and conduct the workshop and the interviews. Could you consult with your staff and suggest a time?

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. M. W.', written in a cursive style.

Robert

**Appendix 5. – Executive Team Workshops: Typical Workshop Questions- Not all may have been asked or they may have been asked in slightly different wording and order**

Why do you think you have been selected as a Creative and Innovative Council
What does creativity mean to you? And what about innovation?
The Expert Panel said that the thought you were: ( reveal selection criteria)...how do you respond to that...what do you think?
What do you think as a Council you do to encourage and support creativity and innovation?
Is there a real culture of innovation here?
But does the organisation send messages that innovation is good?
So is this 'wanting to try and do things a new way'...is that acceptable practice.
What do you think as an Executive Team you do to encourage and support creativity and innovation?
What sorts of things do you think someone would be doing - being creative in their work?
When you think of creativity and innovation at work - does it have to be 'new' or 'revolutionary'
Can you give me an example of something that your Council has done that is innovative?
Where do you get that clear idea of where you're going?
How do you know what is too risky?
Can you nominate some people who you think are being creative in your Council and contributing to innovation?
What are they doing?
How are they being supported?
Why do you do this?
What is the community benefit of all this?

**Appendix 6. – Individual Interview Questions: Typical Interview Questions- Not all may have been asked or they may have been asked in slightly different wording**

What does creativity mean to you? And what about innovation?
What sorts of things do you think someone would be doing - being creative in their work?
When you think of creativity and innovation at work – does it have to be ‘new’ or ‘revolutionary’
Why hadn’t it happened before?
I’m interested in the point at which someone suddenly decides to do something different.
Why do you think the Panel selected this Council... Is it innovative?
Is there a real culture of innovation here?
But does the organisation send messages that innovation is good?
So is this ‘wanting to try and do things a new way’...is that acceptable practice.
Why do you think you have been selected as someone who was creative and helped make innovations ?
Can you give me an example of something that you have done that is innovative?
Where do you get that clear idea of where you’re going?
Do you get a kick out of it?
Why do you do this kind of work?
Are your personal beliefs are very important to you?
How do you know what is too risky?
TALKING ABOUT THE PCF.
Profession-specific skills?
Do you like being good at things?
What about learning about the peculiarity of local government?
Generic skills and knowledge?
Are you interested in learning?
Are you are a lifelong learner?
Are you a reader?
What about “stance”? Do you think you are brave?
Do you think you are problem-seeker as well as a problem-solver?
Do you have different ways of thinking? What about idea generation – in a group or on your own?
Diagnostic maps – Have you built up such tools?
Do you have shortcuts or tricks of the trade?
Why do you do this?
What is the community benefit of all this?