

# Warming Up to Spontaneity and Creativity: Developing the School Leader

by Tony Densley

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In education, as in life, there is a constant challenge to relate the cultural conserve with new and contemporary ways of being in the world. This paper describes a workshop I co-led with Margie Abbott, using action-based methods with a group of twenty five educators as a way to develop their spontaneity and creativity and extend their leadership capacity.

Leaders in all schools face huge challenges in meeting the many and varied expectations of those involved in education. They are required to be contemporary and at the same time to be faithful to all the best the past has to offer. They know the importance of being true to their own insights and to an appreciation of the values and purposes of education.

The greatest challenge for school leaders is to work with tradition, the cultural conserve, and to create moment by moment new and more adequate ways of leading the whole school community

in creative directions. This is true in both 'secular' state schools and in religiously-based schools. In Australian schools there is much overlap in values and ideals between state, private and religious schools. There are also clear differences. Each school does relate to central symbols that grow out of a tradition. At its most basic level, education in any setting has a focus on the value of learning and the importance of the world that students live in.

The work described here is with the Catholic tradition and leaders from Catholic schools. My own school and teaching background includes State, Catholic, private and other higher education settings. I can readily imagine working in all these settings with a similar process and with similar aims in view.

Catholic school leaders work within a tradition and context of religious faith and this provides unique opportunities and

challenges. Leaders take on the educational task of integrating a cultural conserve with contemporary modes of religious and spiritual expression. To do this well takes practice, and one powerful form of practice is participation in an action methods group focusing on developing new roles and developing greater spontaneity. I am indebted to Jacob Moreno (1971, original ed 1941) who calls this form of education "spontaneity training," becoming co-creators with God, "becoming God."

For people moving into leadership positions in Catholic schools there is the added challenge of being part of an organization that publicly addresses issues of faith and belief in a particular tradition. One possible response is simply to accommodate to existing practices that are no longer adequate in a changing culture. But to simply repeat the past, to keep alive a static conserve is to neglect the effort necessary to bring alive the ancient traditions in this new setting as Jesus did in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. (J. L. Moreno, 1971, p 205)

As people move from teaching to leading in schools, they need to warm up to roles that are adequate to the demands of contemporary school leadership. This warm-up involves recognizing and claiming the appropriateness of existing roles in new leadership situations. There needs to be an appreciation of the roles they have in embryonic form as well as support and commitment to strengthen these. There is also a need to develop an adequate spirituality, and an ability to negotiate the many educational, political and religious dimensions of the complex context of contemporary schools.

In the workshop three main themes emerged. The first theme is the use of the rock as a

symbol for tradition. Secondly, the story of the Church comes to life as characters from the history of Christianity enter the workshop. The third theme is that of the group entering into the life and dilemmas of a contemporary Catholic school.

### **The Rock As The Central Symbol**

As group leaders we have a central focus on making the theology, the sources of tradition, the core meanings of education in the Catholic tradition present at all times. To do this we choose "the rock" to concretise this complex of meanings, some positive and some negative. At the beginning of the workshop, we carry in a large rock and place it in the centre of the room and surround it with pieces of cloth and place a number of small rocks beside it.

This concretisation has a powerful effect. It carries aspects of the group purpose and offers challenges to us in our leadership development. The rock stands for "the substance of the faith," which is re-expressed in every age. Like Jesus, Christians can spontaneously re-work the tradition to be, in Moreno's words, like Jesus and act with "full, spontaneous inspiration". However at other times, the rock becomes an immovable, crushing expression of a frozen, conserved religion that has lost contact with meaning and with people. The Second Vatican Council (W. Abbott, 1966) in 1963-5 stated that the biggest challenge for the Church was to re-connect faith or religious practices and everyday life. In a number of stories told during the workshop (see below) it is evident that the rock is a symbol for blind conserved stultification.

There were different meanings ascribed to the rock at different stages in the workshop. These meanings included the "rock" as a

symbol of the underlying school philosophy, of the cultural conserve of the Catholic Church and schools. A group member asked “what would you do with the rock now?” after a vignette that focused on Church authority. One of the group members said, “This reminds me of Uluru.”

At another stage in the workshop, the participants were invited to choose a small rock from the pile sitting near the centrally placed big rock and to place this rock somewhere in a circle around the larger central rock to reflect their current regard for this symbol. At the end of the workshop, participants took home with them the small symbolic rock as a reminder of the workshop and their growing appreciation of symbols in leadership.

There is ambiguity in this symbol and in the life it represents. As we explore the many dimensions of “the rock” it becomes a living symbol for us. This symbol represents an “unchanging series of truths,” and reminds them of the song ‘My God is a fortress and a rock’. Group members warm up as *ardent admirers* and *engaged followers* mirroring spiritual ancestors like Oscar Romero and Mary Magdalene who draw inspiration from the heroic tradition ‘the rock’ represents. The group is warming up to progressive roles and moving away from seeing the only possible faith-related roles as *dependent client* and *obedient worshipper*.

We repeatedly work with the question of how we are to engage with ‘the rock’ to draw inspiration for becoming *creative generative leaders*. Creative leaders need a dynamic theology at the personal, the group and the institutional levels. (Haight, 1990) Part of the art of leadership is focusing on and displaying symbols in a way that

keeps them as a centre of unity (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The rock is certainly central. Jesus too is a central symbol (Haight, 1999). There are many points of intersection and interest between our experience here with this symbol and the struggle of theologians and teachers to express traditional beliefs in contemporary forms. (Jacob L. Moreno, undated)

### **Touching Our Ancestors: The Story Of The Church**

In the workshop we are interested in finding new and lively approaches to strengthen connections with the tradition of which we are a part. In an action-based session, we warm up the group to take on roles of important historical figures from the Christian faith. Margie has written the original of this ritual and published it in *Sparks of the Cosmos*. (M. Abbott, 2001, p 161-165). Each group member takes a card with important key information and a brief description of a leader, of someone who made a difference to the Christian tradition in the last two thousand years. They then warm themselves up to this role and in role create a time line that begins in the first century and extends to the twentieth.

The twenty-five key figures come to life in historical sequence. From the first century, the friend and companion of Paul the Apostle, Priscilla, stands forthrightly before the whole lineage of Christian heroes. She addresses us today saying; “*For all of our work with Paul and the women of the first century you Christians still don’t appreciate the place of women in the Catholic Church*”.

From the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas, suitably ponderous and brilliant, slowly states, “*Of course you can integrate the*

*philosophy of the time with faith today. Look at how I used Greek philosophy to teach my students."*

Oscar Romero excites and engages the group with his passion for life ignited in the face of death and persecution. With eyes flashing, he confronts the Church, loudly demanding, "You must see the Church has to be on the side of the poor, the oppressed and the persecuted today and always".

Eventually even the initially hesitant group members warm up to the character of the "ancestor" assigned to them and in a structured sociodrama all twenty-five historical characters speak to the group. The group participants find themselves rapidly changing roles – each person presents as an historical character while the other members of the group become present-day witnesses to the stories of the ancestors. As this happens, the drama of the history of the Christian Church becomes a living reality in the room.

The ancestors are then invited to begin a conversation across the ages. Priscilla and Paul rather whimsically share stories of painful persecution. Initially there is a "Monty Python *Life of Brian*" quality to this interaction. Slowly the group warm-up deepens and Thomas Aquinas and Matteo Ricci fascinate us with their capacity to translate the Christian message to new culture and times. They both have a quiet sad word about "authorities in high places who don't get the point". When Oscar Romero enters the room, people become deeply involved and moved by his presence and message.

In the sharing after the enactments, the group comments include: "Women did

have a greater role in the early church." "I realize now that what we are trying to do in religious education is just as hard as what Matteo Ricci was trying to do in China." "Our students do live in a very different culture." "I didn't know much of this history." "Isn't it sad that leaders in the Church so often block good things?"

There are new roles emerging in the group. The roles of *the discerning lover of tradition, the engaged integrating explorer, the perceptive intelligent critic, and the creative imaginer of possibilities* are awake and present. Subsequently in the sharing further progressive roles such as *open engaged thinker* and *critical reflective thinker* are evident.

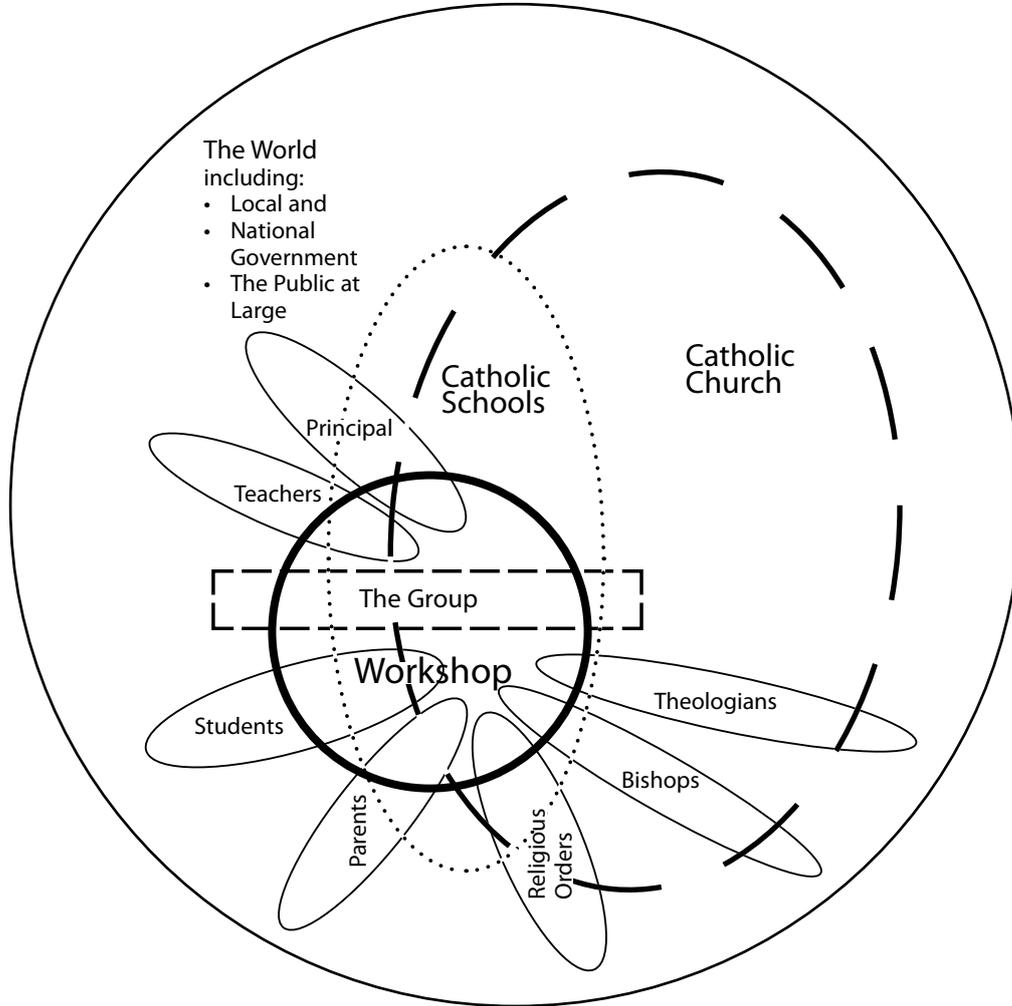
### **The Principal And The Drug-Taking Student Drama**

As the workshop progresses, we decide to work with a more complex drama in order to warm group members up to the whole system and the context with which they are engaged, even in seemingly simple school procedures.

The context for this workshop is the South Australian school system within the Catholic Church and in the larger local context. There are many complex links and interactions between students, teachers, parents, the Church, theologians, religious orders, local and national governments and the public at large. These are set out in Diagram 1 on the following page.

The focus of the drama is the principal's relationship to the school community when faced with a range of reactions to the discovery of a student smoking marijuana. The enactment begins with group members setting out all people involved in the school

**Diagram 1: Context for Workshop Participants**

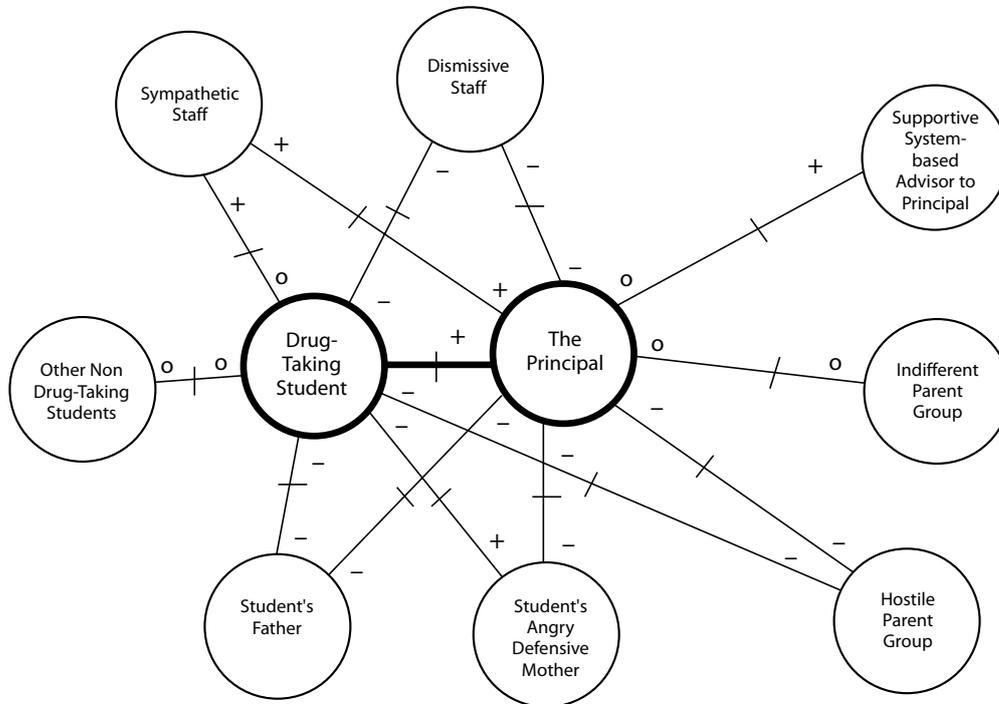


system in relation to the central figure of an unsociable, sad young marijuana smoker in a passive, unresponsive state. The school system erupts around him. Both parents stand before us, visibly distressed and at the same time angry and over-awed by the principal. Among the school staff, some are sympathetic to the student while others overwhelmed by the struggle to maintain goodwill and discipline, want a “one strike and you are out” policy implemented. A belligerent group of parents utterly opposed to drugs of any kind begin to demand that the principal dismiss the student forthwith.

The majority of the parents are detached and indifferent. One of the staff members soliloquises "How does all this mess fit with our previous high-minded discussions about inclusivity and ‘preferential option’ for the poor?" Diagram 2 on the opposite page, shows the major figures and subgroups in the school and their tele relations.

The principal is positive to the student. The student is isolated and at the centre of almost universal negative tele. The central office consultant to the principal is positive to the principal, but much removed from the

**Diagram 2: The Principal and the Drug-Taking Student: Social Context**



situation. The sympathetic staff members focus on the student and are neutral to the principal. Most parents are detached and uninvolved. The hostile parent group relates negatively to the student, the mother and to the principal. The student's mother is positively related to her child and hostile and negative to almost everyone else.

In this situation, the principal has little to rely on except her own inner resources. As the many different tele relationships are explored the group member who is the principal freezes: she is unable to respond to the demands and needs of people in the system and she has warmed up to the role of *overwhelmed isolate*. The whole group also freezes. This is a critical moment in the drama and the workshop.

At this point doubling is a powerful intervention in assisting the principal to

regain a warm up to her spontaneity and creativity. Slowly and hesitantly she warms up to roles to do with listening, facilitating and negotiating. Through thoughtful use of interviewing for a role, role reversal, modelling and coaching, the warm up throughout the whole system moves from hostile rejection and disagreement to open discussion.

As a group, we do not fully resolve all of the many difficult issues that emerge. However we do gain an appreciation for the complex world of the school principal, challenged daily by a complex series of people and situations to become a creative leader. By reversing roles with the principal, group members experience the reality of school leadership in a new way. Participants begin a movement from *stressed passive complainers* to *engaging generous organizers*.

Following this drama, many people comment on the complexity of the situation and on their experience of complexity in school life. In the sharing, care is taken to encourage participants to express fears, regrets and hopes and to assist a warm up to progressive roles.

One group member, who wonders where high-minded values go under stress, reminds us of how difficult it is in practice to live out of the values we all profess so easily. In that split second, I am aware that the best of 'the rock' is present. In retrospect I can see there would have been value in inviting Priscilla and Oscar Romero to be present and inspire us in the drama. When group members role reverse with the principal a practical integration of faith and life takes place in the drama as several group members begin to appreciate the world through the principal's eyes.

Participants reflect on the fact that the drug-taking student and the principal are both highly isolated. They are also aware that people moving into positions of leadership often feel totally isolated, particularly when they inadvertently or even consciously move against group norms. People moving into positions of leadership quickly become aware of the isolation of the principal's office, the school deputy is no longer simply "one of us," and religious education coordinators collect the negative and positive transferences of staff members with religious issues. Our drama is a strong and accurate mirror of school life.

### **Implications for Developing Leaders in Catholic, Christian, and Other Forms of Education.**

Jacob Moreno (1993) claims that finally

creators and not robots will survive. He stressed the importance of personal creativity over a robot-like following of some other direction in life. School leaders are under enormous external pressures and are often required to meet formal requirements and it is a challenge to maintain their own vitality and to warm up to creative responses to new situations. When they do this, they move beyond automatic and programmed conformity.

In teaching religion and in cultivating the religious ethos of Catholic schools, the recent emphasis on vision statements and on the reduction of curriculum to behavioural outcomes, serves some powerful needs in the community. However these needs and their solutions may not be in the best interests of students and do not allow for the full and creative expression of new ways of being in the world. They are rather susceptible to becoming a stylised form of social reproduction of the status quo.

In the spirit of Moreno, there is a need for the full and free expression of the deeper sources of values that motivate people to seek leadership positions. This workshop, with its emphasis on contacting the personal experience of participants and encouraging them to express their hopes, fears and dreams in a concrete manner, does warm people up to moving beyond visions of conformity to visions of creativity.

### **Implications for Religious Education in Catholic schools**

The great challenge for religious educators in Catholic schools, and no doubt in all religious schools, is to bring to life the ancient traditions in contemporary settings. This is a concern of the Catholic Church at

the highest level. Day by day, schools and teachers struggle to bring tradition and life together in transformative ways. In the course of this workshop, the group members achieved this kind of integration on many occasions. The participants now have models, roles and access to techniques to continue to warm up to this work.

The hoped-for integration was clearly seen in the creative planning and celebration of rituals, and in the action vignettes followed by sharing. The explicit and positive connection of school leadership tasks with traditional stories and values and life today is now more obvious to all the participants. This workshop is an example of taking elements of the tradition and re-working them in present settings. The warm up to historical figures like Priscilla and Romero in the very context of confronting school discipline in 'the principal drama' involves a living integration far beyond a pious recalling of 'Gospel values' enshrined in policy statements or school codes of conduct. In developing or strengthening progressive roles, such as *enthusiastic leader of ritual*, *discerning lover of tradition and prophetic leader*, the participants have warmed up to progressive roles that will enable them to face old situations in new ways and to bring new-found creativity to present school tasks.

### **Implications for Other Religious and Non-Religious Education**

In a world of instant communication and global culture, religiously based schools are forced to confront the fact that students in schools do not depend solely on religious leaders for information and inspiration. Some religious groups do aim to isolate their adherents from the world around them. For many other religious groups a workshop program such as this, could be adapted to

enhance the value of the different central beliefs, rituals and practices of their schools. The core of the process is the production of situations that require a re-working of the tradition to respond to present challenges.

In State school systems, where religion is not a core curriculum area, the democratic values and ideals of the society take the place of the 'Catholic thing' symbolized by 'the rock'. Educators holding other worldviews do not share the same 'rock', however all educators and schools have values and means of expressing them that could be equivalent to 'the rock' in a workshop of this kind. Participants in this workshop have warmed up to creative ways of developing their leadership capacities and to progressive roles informed by contemporary theology. This way of working together keeps alive a creativity that is faithful to people's best intentions and consistent with valuing a tradition.

### **Conclusion**

In the critical thinking and engaged acting demanded from participants in this workshop something new has come into the world in the face of old questions and deep challenges. This is reminiscent of Moreno's view of the work of Jesus in delivering the Sermon on the Mount, where "prior spontaneous states melt" into new spontaneous states. (J. L. Moreno, 1971 p 205.)

Similarly, school leaders from other traditions and other school systems could benefit from workshops like this one, with due regard for their uniqueness and difference.

The members of this workshop entered into spontaneous states that are now available to them as they energetically engage in Catholic

school leadership, faithful to the tradition and, like God, creating something new.

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