Understanding the ‘Understanding’

Some reflections on Aboriginal engagement

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1. **Significance of the research:**

Calls for governments to **engage** with Aboriginal people have been hot news recently in the Top End. On one hand it is seen as essential to removing Indigenous disadvantage and protecting children. On the other, as Marcia Langton put it two weeks ago, it is simply ‘touchy feely’ nonsense. So far the evidence suggests, however, that Aboriginal people are only marginally engaged in the programs that are supposed to benefit them.

After almost 30 years spent being involved in ‘touchy-feely’ nonsense across much of South East Asia and the Pacific, I came to the NT to look at how Aboriginal people engage around the issues and initiatives that affect them, and what they say about the conditions under which they engage. While my findings are still preliminary, today I am hoping to reflect Aboriginal perspectives and experience in relation to an important feature of engagement – understanding.

2. **The research approach**

The study has taken an ethnographic approach to looking at Aboriginal engagement in programs and events involving outstation residents serviced by the Tjuwanpa Outstation Resource Centre. The research aims to understand people’s lived experience as the basis for recommending more effective approaches and processes for working with Aboriginal people in remote settlements (Denzin 1989).

The Intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory became a critical backdrop to the study. It was the experience of people’s engagement with these changes, however, that has been the focus of my work.

Field work has taken place over a two year period from July 2006 to July 2008. I have spent approximately 150 days at the Tjuwanpa office and with people on their outstations. Throughout this time I had ongoing interviews and discussions with a core group of six but also recorded discussions with an additional 25 people, most of whom were Aboriginal residents. I also observed or participated in numerous community meetings and kept a detailed field journal of events as they unfolded.
3. So what do Aboriginal people in the bush have to say about the factors and conditions within which they engage?

“\textit{We just gotta really try to understand it – what they’re saying. Some people don’t understand what you are asking or telling them about. This is like a question to them…gotta come up with an answer to explain…..what meanings….see even for lease and permits on Aboriginal lands.}

“\textit{Some people can understand English, the easy part, but not the one down under. Otherwise you gotta come out with the dictionary. You might have an educated person but they still don’t understand what’s happening. See, it’s just that you gotta understand the understanding!}

This comment came from a man in his 40’s as he struggled to understand what it was that he was being asked to agree to under changes to the Aboriginal Lands Rights Act and Emergency Response legislation. These reforms promised Aboriginal people greater wealth, better housing and protection for their families. Peter has worked at the Resource Centre for many years. He is a grandfather, father and uncle to many and with this status comes enormous responsibility to maintain and foster the links to the land of his ancestors and through this, to ensure his family’s welfare and identity.

Peter’s statement encapsulates the difficulties for Aboriginal people as they struggle not only to understand what is being said, but also to grasp how the government reforms and initiatives, that they are expected to agree to, will impact on their lives.

4. What is engagement?

In the Australian policy arena, engagement has as its essence a desire to work with, to partner with, or to capture the interest or involvement of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal understanding of government intentions and government understanding of Aboriginal aspirations, is therefore a prerequisite if we are to reach an ‘understanding’ – or agreement regarding the way forward. Understanding essentially assumes that people understand what it is that they are being asked to participate in. It has a number of elements:

- First is that people are able to hear and understand the language spoken;
- Second, it implies the ability to communicate and the right to speak out;
• It also assumes that what is proposed fits with what people feel is important in their lives;

• It assumes an understanding of the concepts that sit behind the language, and that these are appropriate to local conditions;

• And to fully engage, there is an assumption that people will agree – or reach an ‘understanding’ about what is to take place. This in turn implies that people understand or can assess the implications of what they are agreeing to.

5. Hearing and Understanding Language

I will only touch briefly on understanding in relation to language. At Tjuwanpa most outstation residents speak Western Aranda with English spoken as a second or third language. In the context of the Intervention a plethora of new words and acronyms entered the bush, most of which were incomprehensible to Aboriginal people. Scattered liberally throughout the documents and presentations that government used to explain the Intervention and key program reforms, the absence of interpreters, poor literacy skills, and the ‘arrive, talk and depart’ pattern of government teams left outstation residents little the wiser about what was happening and what it meant for their lives.

Compounding this was difficulty most people had hearing what was said. In order to accommodate ‘avoidance’ relationships, meetings were held outside and many people sat on the ground some distance from the presenters. As no amplification was provided, only those nearest the government presenters could actually hear the proceedings.
It isn’t just words, however, that are part of the problem. The research shows that 
*shame* compromises people’s ability to speak. Even when people understand the 
language used, there can be a reluctance to offer opinion or seek clarification as this 
involves *shame*. What became evident at Tjuwanpa was that opinion was seldom 
voiced in public meetings or in situations involving strangers. Few sought 
clarification about what was said, and questions from government staff were generally 
met with silence from all but one or two people.

For outsiders, these events compromised efforts to communicate with outstation 
residents. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people struggled uncomfortably with the relentless 
stream of strangers who just wanted to talk with them.

People’s failure to understand what was required of them became evident on the first 
Centrelink pay date in November 2007. Up to 100 people found they had no money 
for the next fortnight because they had failed to understand the requirements for 
registering on the system. For some this situation continued for months.

6. **The right to speak**

Non-Aboriginal people assume individual freedom to express an opinion. In the 
Tjuwanpa context, the right to speak is governed by age, gender and status in a family 
or clan group and determines who one may speak for, and what one may talk about.

Analysis of the failure of community governance initiatives in Hermannsburg in the 
early 1970s shows that the Mission, in attempting to foster local decision, making did 
not understand the structure of local clan authority and the critical role it played in 
decision making processes. This continues today. There is strong resistance when a 
representative of one group lays claim to speaking on behalf of other families or clans 
in the area. When Brough hand picked Aboriginal advisors from the area, the move 
was met by some with derision and anger. Participation and representation therefore 
becomes a vexed issue for Aboriginal people and government alike.

In consideration of these factors Tjuwanpa residents highlighted the need for time in 
decision making processes so that families can talk and reach a position. This may 
require considerable effort when mobility, poor communications infrastructure, and 
family illness form part of the picture of people’s everyday lives.
7. Understanding purpose

Across the range of government programs implemented under the Intervention, there was little understanding on the ground of what the emergency measures sought to achieve. At the same time Aboriginal residents felt the reforms showed that government had little understanding of what Aboriginal families themselves are trying to achieve.

My research shows that concerns about family safety and children’s welfare feature prominently in resident’s decision to live on their outstation. Women talked about choosing to live on outstations to protect children from violence, alcohol and petrol sniffing in Hermannsburg. For men and women, living on the outstations is also a strategy they use to avoid ‘trouble’ for themselves in town.

The irony of the suite of measures introduced under the Intervention is that from an Aboriginal perspective, rather than protecting children, government actions were in fact dismantling the very strategies people used to keep their children and families safe. Income management compromised their ability to live on their outstations. The closure of CDEP in November last year threatened to shut the Resource Centre and sever services to the outstations. Lease arrangements threatened links to land and in turn, the strategies that Aboriginal families use to meet obligations to family and country.

The Intervention failed to engage people at Tjuwanpa because it failed to listen to, understand and harness Aboriginal aspirations regarding their futures. We ignored and continue to ignore local conditions and the drivers that underpin Aboriginal decision making.

The response was inevitable. Yes it was good if some people spent more money on good food for their children. Yes it was good if there was less noise and trouble from people drinking. But if I have no children, or if I behave responsibly and take care of my children and take them to the clinic when they get sick, why am I being punished? Why are they controlling my money? How am I supposed to get to my outstation with no fuel? Cars eat money too you know! And why is government taking the land as well? What do they want to do with it? Build parliament houses or skyscrapers or what! And why does government want us to buy our houses? We’ve already got houses! And if somebody built a humpy beside the house is someone gonna buy that
as well? What was the point of a lease if you lived on an outstation? If an Aboriginal person is living on their land then where would they go if they got kicked off? More jobs would be good and more training would be good. But what jobs are there! The only jobs are in Alice Springs and people there want Aboriginal people to stay out bush!

For most people at Tjuwanpa the Intervention failed to engage people because in the context of their lives it just didn’t make sense.

8. Understanding the concept

Outstation residents also struggled to grasp conceptually what was taking place. I will give just two examples of this.

- When CDEP was reintroduced at Tjuwanpa under the new Labor Government, the immediate response was, “Oh; that means I can go back and live on my outstation.” CDEP at Tjuwanpa has always been understood as an outstation development program, supported by government to help people work on and develop their outstations. This continues to remain central to people’s understanding, despite ongoing government efforts to reformulate CDEP as a training and work preparation program.

- The Federal Government’s push to introduce work participation requirements through Work for the Dole also met with different interpretations. Under CDEP, work obligations were always clearly understood. Once CDEP at Tjuwanpa closed in November 2007, efforts to engage Centrelink clients in transitional work activities met with stiff resistance and non compliance. This was dole money. Dole money was *sit-down* money. And *sit-down* money was interpreted as just that. Work participation rates at Tjuwanpa plummeted.

These instances highlight the difficulties for Aboriginal people in understanding changing government requirements and arrangements. Events are interpreted against known experience and there is significant confusion in the bush when new requirements are applied, and bewilderment or blame in Canberra when they are resisted.
9. Understanding Implications

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges illustrated by the Intervention is the difficulty that families have in assessing what implications changes in programs and legislation have for their lives.

At Tjuwanpa, people were deeply concerned about reforms affecting Aboriginal ownership of land. Male leaders in particular, spoke of needing to understand the consequences of making any agreements that would impact on the ability of their children and grandchildren to continue as custodians of the land. Consequently there was deep distrust of government intentions, expressed as fear of hidden agendas or long term consequences that they were as yet unable to see.

This represents a fundamental failure of governments to treat Aboriginal people with respect and to understand and value the significance that land and family have for desert people.

10. Implications for Government

Understanding the ‘understanding’ is central to Aboriginal efforts to comprehend and make sense of the world of government reforms and programs. For Aboriginal people it means hearing the language, understanding its intent, and comprehending the consequences of any agreements and changes on family obligations and connection to country.

At a minimum, governments must accommodate language differences and work within behaviours that are culturally prescribed. But more than this, governments must begin to understand and work with people’s aspirations and the day-to-day realities of Aboriginal lives in remote settlements. To do this, we must begin to value the critical role that long-term relationships, flexibility and time play in creating the environment for Aboriginal people to engage.

Real engagement, however, will ultimately require a fundamental restructuring of program delivery processes and contracting procedures within governments to create the conditions in which local responsiveness, flexibility, time and working relationships are present. Internationally there are numerous examples of how this is being done in remote areas. Without these conditions it will be impossible to reach
‘understandings’ or agreements about the way forward. The question is, however, whether we are willing to embrace this ‘touchy-feely nonsense’ called engagement and take it seriously.

Peter summed up the reality for Aboriginal people in trying to understand the changes taking place at Tjuwanpa.

*Sometimes these people in government don’t communicate. People live in a dark corner here lookin’ for the light. Where is the light? Just feeling their way. At the moment it’s like a ...I dunno...just like a big whirl of water.....you know if you stir that water round it’s just like it’s goin’ round in circles! You got circles and you just got bits and pieces comin’ out!”*