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An Interview Conducted by

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INTERVIEW: Benjamin J. Broome

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HOUPT: Hello, and welcome to an oral history interview with Professor Benjamin Broome. Today is February 3, 2009. My name is David Houpt, a Special Collections and Archives assistant at George Mason University's Fenwick Library. On behalf of everyone here at Special Collections, I'd like to thank Professor Broome for agreeing to take part in this oral history interview.

Professor Broome, if you could, would you talk a little bit about how and when did you first meet Dr. Warfield?

BROOME: Thank you, David, for inviting me to be part of this Archives project. Over the past 40 years, Dr. Warfield has made many extremely important contributions in the area of systems design, and it's a privilege to be able to talk with you about it. I first had the opportunity to meet Dr. Warfield in 1984, when he moved to George Mason University – from the University of Virginia, if I remember correctly. He came as Director of a new research and practice unit, the Institute for Advanced Study in the Integrative Sciences (IASIS). Within that institute was

housed the Center for Interactive Management (CIM). From it's earliest days I worked closely with CIM, which was directed by Dr. Aleco Christakis, with Dr. David Keever as Associate Director. During the eighties I had limited contact with Dr. Warfield - he was involved in all the work of CIM, of course, as director of the institute that housed the center, but most of my contact was with Aleco and David.

This changed when CIM moved off-campus in the late eighties. At that point I started working more closely with Dr. Warfield, particularly on a couple of extended projects. One of these projects was with the Defense Systems Management College (DSMC) at Fort Belvoir, where initially we were conducting Interactive Management sessions for DOD program managers, and then eventually we were training some of the faculty at the Defense College to conduct IM sessions. In the early nineties, we worked together on a multi-year project at Ford Motor Company. Dr. Warfield was the project director, and I was the primary facilitator and session organizer. During a two-year period we trained an IM facilitation team at Ford, and we continued to work with them over the years as they conducted sessions within Ford. The initial work was concentrated on helping a team of systems engineers develop a process for designing the powertrain component of the automobile. Later we

were re-engaged for other projects, usually on a shorter-term basis.

Although these were the two main extended projects in which I worked with Dr. Warfield, we also completed a few smaller projects in the latter part of the nineties. For example, Dr. Warfield organized seminars and training sessions for those interested in IM facilitation and generic design science, and I worked with him with some of those projects, including one with the faculty of the Instituto Tecnológico Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (ITESM) in Mexico. Continuing into this millennium there were a couple of facilitated sessions that John organized and designed, and he asked me to facilitate them. So the relationship extends over nearly a 20-year period, although it was concentrated in the very end of the eighties and into the early to mid nineties in terms of the time I was able to work closely with Dr. Warfield.

HOUPT: Well, great. Thank you. So with your experience working with Interactive Management, how would you characterize its development?

BROOME: Well, that's a long story of course, and I won't go into all of the history of it and its development, since that's

pretty well documented, I believe, in the Warfield Collection. But, yes, in characterizing IM, I would say that it's both an application and a theoretical system, which had its start in the late seventies, as one can see from the records in the Warfield Collection. Interactive Management became the practice arm of the generic design process and theory that Dr. Warfield developed. It was a way of implementing Warfield's theoretical principles in working with groups of experts facing complex problem situations. Its initial core of idea generation and structuring developed through practice and research into a holistic system of problem-solving and design.

Unfortunately it has never become a highly popularized management tool, as has happened with some of the other approaches to management such as Peter Senge's work. It developed a niche - and still today, I think, maintains that niche - as an approach that is appropriate for those organizations facing complex problem situations which are willing to commit the resources and the people appropriate for dealing with these situations. IM is an approach that demands a significant investment from an organization, both in terms of human resources and time. It has been my experience that many organizations are not willing to make the time commitment that is necessary to engage in IM sessions, even if they recognize

the need for it and are willing to bring together the people. Unfortunately, it is too often the case that people want to find solutions to their situation without the necessary investment of resources, often willing to take shortcuts. They don't always see the need for careful analysis and identification of a set of options that match the complexity of the situation. Perhaps, as part of our individualistic American culture, we'd like to find the person who can provide "the answer" to our problems. And IM doesn't give "the" answer. It brings together the people who are capable of identifying options and designing potential courses of action that can ameliorate the situation. But the actual answer itself has to come from the group.

So it's a different kind of consulting model than you often find organizations are used to. It takes a leader and an organization with vision willing to say: "I don't have the answer. No individual in our organization has the answer. It's more complex than that. So we need to bring together the people who can deal with the complexity. We need to have a system in place that can help us deal with that complexity."

So IM is a system of problem-solving and of design which is capable of bringing people together and working with them in such a way that their ideas emerge without limitations; it facilitates the structuring of these ideas so that the

participants can make sense of the situation. Options are generated for dealing with the situation, and those ideas are structured in such a way that the group can select from these options the choices which are most appropriate. And from the options they've selected, they're able to put in place a plan of action which can address the selected options.

So I think that in characterizing IM over time, you can say that it developed to a point where it became a powerful approach for helping organizations deal with complex situations. And leaders with the necessary vision were able to utilize it. But I wouldn't say that ever became a popularized management tool. However, on the other hand, it was not a fad that rose quickly and then lost its relevance. It's maintained a pretty level set of applications over time.

HOUPT: Excellent. Well, thank you. In the John N. Warfield Collection here at Fenwick Library, we have a number of the videos of the IM sessions. It appears that you often played the role of the facilitator. If you could, could you describe and talk a little bit about the facilitator's job and what qualities make for a successful IM facilitator?

BROOME: I'll preface my remarks by saying that in a graduate course on facilitation that I've offered dozens of times at both George Mason University and Arizona State University, in which we use Interactive Management as a way to learn about the role of the facilitator, participants have identified literally hundreds of characteristics of the facilitator role. So to talk about what qualities make for a successful IM facilitator would probably take longer than we have today. But I can offer a way of looking at IM facilitation that differentiates it from some other methods: In many approaches to facilitation a lot rests on the shoulders of a facilitator, because the facilitator is constantly trying to read what's going on in an unstructured conversation and make decisions about when and how to make appropriate interventions. If you've every tried to facilitate even a relatively straightforward group discussion, you will probably agree that one cannot always know what are the correct interventions or even when to intervene. The Interactive Management approach relieves some of the burden from the facilitator because it has a set of structured methodologies which have an identified set of steps that are implemented with the group. And the primary job of the facilitator in the session itself is to implement those steps appropriately. Obviously it will also involve some moment-to-moment decisions about

appropriate interventions and so on. But the burden for making such interventions is much less than it tends to be within a typical facilitation approach where most of the responsibility rests with the facilitator. In a complex problem situation involving a variety of stakeholders, a person playing the role of facilitator faces a nearly impossible task unless he or she can rely on proven methodologies. In such situations, the possibility of failure is high, with negative consequences for both the facilitator and for the group's productivity and effectiveness. In IM most the burden is actually on the methodologies themselves. The methodologies for idea generation, idea structuring, and idea selection have been tested over time in hundreds, if not thousands, of different situations. And so there's some confidence that they work.

By viewing a primary component of her or his job to be implementing the steps of the methodologies that have been selected for implementation, rather than trying to make so many moment-by-moment decisions about how best to summarize, move the group forward, manage the conversation, etc., the IM facilitator can focus on other tasks and remove some of the uncertainty that haunts many facilitation situations. Of course, some of the moment-to-moment interventions still take place, so an IM facilitator has to be constantly monitoring the group's

interaction and progress in light of the objectives that have been established for that particular session, and in light of the methodologies that have chosen for implementation. As the session progresses, the facilitator may choose to implement, for example, a methodology that was not originally part of the plan if the progress of the group necessitates it. But most of the time, if you've planned correctly, the actual implementation of the plan often takes place in a fairly straightforward manner.

The job of an IM facilitator is still a very difficult one. The group looks to you for a lot of things that you won't be able to provide. Groups tend to want the facilitator to solve things for them, which he or she can't do. But at the same time, as the facilitator you have to maintain your role and your position as the one who implements the plan and the methodology.

HOUPT: To apply some of those qualities, would you discuss one IM session in particular that you felt was successful and what made it successful, whether it was the facilitator, the group, or some combination of them?

BROOME: Well, definitely it's always some combination of many factors that determines if an IM session is successful. In many cases, when a group decides to use IM, I think it's because

they've reached a point where they've tried a lot of other approaches, and these simply haven't worked. They realize that they have to devote the time for IM in order to deal with their situation. And we have, of course, hundreds of examples of IM facilitation situations. I don't know how many sessions I've facilitated myself since the mid-eighties, but I'm fairly sure it is at least a hundred. It's difficult to go back and pick out just one. But let me give you an example of what I think was a successful session that pointed to the combination of many factors: the context in which it was occurring, the status of the group, the state of the group at that time, what they had tried over time, and where they were now. Additionally, it was influenced by the dynamics that took developed within the group.

What I'll describe is one of the earlier sessions that I helped facilitate, in this case in the late eighties, with the Winnebago Tribe in Nebraska, whose Chairman was Ruben Snake, one of the great visionary leaders in the Native American community. He's no longer with us, but he had the vision to bring the Center for Interactive Management, Aleco, David, myself, to the reservation in Nebraska where the tribe is located. The tribe had experienced a lot of internal strife during the previous years. The internal tribal dynamics were not positive, with a great deal of division and dissension between various factions.

Chairman Snake had the wisdom to bring all of the people to the table, not just the people who agreed with him. His intent was to organize this session in order to examine a self-sufficiency plan for the tribe that, in working over several years with outside consultants and people in the tribe, he had developed, but for various reasons had never been implemented.

During the session - which included around the table people who had negative relations with each other -- we actually changed the focus from implementing "the plan" that Chairman Snake had developed, instead opening it up to developing a plan that the tribe could create in the session itself. In making this change, it opened up people's willingness to participate. As they became involved in the discussion, they began to examine the difficulties that they faced in the tribe, including the grievances, and really got that all out on the table -- or up on the wall and in front of the people, so they could talk about it honestly. Their discussion really opened up their creativity and their sense of hope for the future. They were able to generate a set of options and then make some very specific selections from those options that eventually helped move the tribe away from division toward a common set of purposes and greater cooperation in accomplishing them. That session helped turned the tribe toward a much more positive direction.

It was a session in which success was made possible by several factors. First, the vision and wisdom of Chairman Snake played a crucial role, as discussed earlier. Additionally, Interactive Management was able to provide a structure within which the participants could identify and address the issues they faced. Also, our facilitation team -- Aleco, myself, David Keever, and others who were there as part of the facilitation team -- were able to implement IM in a way that was sensitive to the culture of the Winnebago, as well as to the needs of the people at that time. So I think all these things came together to provide a really powerful experience for the people...and for us as facilitators. Over 20 years later, it is a session that is still clearly embedded in my mind, and one from which I learned a lot that I was able to apply in later work, with Native American communities as well as work in Cyprus and elsewhere.

Oh yes, one more success factor I want to point out about that particular session. As I noted earlier, it was important that Ruben Snake, as a leader of the tribe, was able to move beyond his original intent and make a change in the focus of the session, moving from looking at *his* plan to opening it up to the tribe developing *their own* plan. But perhaps even more important was the larger vision for Indian Country of LaDonna Harris,

director of Americans for Indian Opportunity ... you probably have in the Archives many references to the work of LaDonna.

HOUPT: That's true, yes.

BROOME: Ladonna was dealing with governance issues more broadly across the U.S. and now internationally as well. And I believe that the success of the Winnebago session, and many others that followed, was due to the vision of Ladonna, and her many years of hard work and risk-taking, in which constantly pushed both the U.S. Federal Government, and also the individual tribes, beyond their comfort zone, convincing them to adopt and implement the principles of Interactive Management as a way of dealing with issues faced by tribes, particularly issues related to governance. So in my opinion, the success of the Winnebago session can be attributed to a combination of local leadership (Ruben Snake), national vision (Ladonna Harris), an effective system of design (Interactive Management), and a facilitation team that was able to implement this system in a culturally sensitive and appropriate way.

HOUPT: Alright. Great. You mentioned some of your later work, and I know this is a very broad question. But if you could,

could you just discuss a little bit about your time in Cyprus and what your goals were there and whether you were successful?

BROOME: First, I want to say that it is not a question of whether I was successful; rather, did the work have a significant impact? The IM applications in Cyprus started in the mid-nineties, when I went to Cyprus as a senior Fulbright Scholar. At that time I worked with members of the bi-communal peacebuilding community in Cyprus: both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. As you probably know, Cyprus is a divided island, with a buffer zone that runs across the length of the island separating the two communities. As a third party, I functioned as a link between two peacebuilding groups that were not able to meet or communicate directly -- although we were able to meet together on some occasions, when we obtained the necessary permissions. Not all the occasions we wanted, certainly, but we did obtain permission to meet many times.

I met primarily with individuals in Cyprus at the level of civil society, not at the official level. In our groups we had doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, university professors, business persons, shop owners, a pharmacist, a psychologist -- people who were working in various capacities in Cyprus in both communities. We decided to use Interactive Management as a way

of both analyzing the situation faced by those in civil society who want to move the peace process forward -- who want to bring together people across that buffer zone, who want to establish channels of communication --- and as a way of designing an agenda for civil-society peacebuilding efforts. In our sessions we identified the obstacles that the group faced in trying to build peace, constructed the vision of peace that would carry their work forward, and generated a set of projects to help them accomplish their vision.

We worked together over a nine-month period, initially, starting with a group of 15 Greek Cypriots and 15 Turkish Cypriots. Sometimes working separately, but often able to meet together, the group developed a plan of action which was implemented over the next two years. It involved a set of 12 projects that included a number of different activities. Some of those activities involved implementing Interactive Management design sessions with targeted groups - young business leaders, youth leaders, educators, women activists, and others. Over the course of a two-year period, the civil-society peacebuilding group grew from the initial 30 individuals to approximately 300, as new groups developed and became involved in carrying out various projects. By the third year approximately two thousand people were involved in various bicomunal activities. Only a

few of them were Interactive Management sessions, but the initial IM design sessions and the projects they spawned led to a large number of people becoming involved in bi-communal peace-building activities at the civil society level.

HOUPT: Well, great. Well, I want to thank you very much for being willing to do this interview. It's been very helpful. And on behalf of everybody at Special Collections, I thank you again for taking the time with us this morning.

BROOME: Well, it's certainly been a pleasure. As I said in the beginning, I believe that the work that John Warfield started is extremely important...it may never have had what one might call a "heyday," but it has maintained a persistent presence over time with a host of applications in a wide variety of settings. And I believe that its best years might be yet to come. As our society faces a larger number of complex situations, we will have to find ways to address them meaningfully. We are facing issues in our global, interconnected, interdependent world that could benefit from the applications of processes such as Interactive Management. So let's hope that there are enough leaders in our society who have the vision to commit the resources, both human resources and time resources, that will

allow IM to play this role and make a positive impact on some of the problematic situations that we have to confront if we want to survive as a planet.

HOUPT: Absolutely. Thank you.

[End of Interview]