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COLLEGE OF ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

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HISTORICAL NOTE *

The College of Aboriginal Education was set up in March 1973 within the Torrens College of Advanced Education, Adelaide, to provide an opportunity for adult Aboriginal people to continue their education in areas meaningful to them. It offers a highly individualized twelve month course which emphasizes the development of positive self concepts, an understanding of society and the development of positive attitudes to it, and the finding of satisfying employment.

The students come from a wide range of backgrounds and include both tribal and non-tribal people. At present 45 students are enrolled. The staff includes both Aboriginals and Euro-Australians. The College makes use of a large number of part-time teachers, many of whom are Aboriginal, while other people, including both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals expert in their own field, are brought in from time to time.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Ken**- (after some weeks in the College) :

"Up to a few weeks ago I'd always been ashamed I was black. I'm not now I'm usually first at College; but if I sleep in and I'm late I still come. When I was working, if I was twenty minutes late I didn't go in that day."

* A recently released film, *Unseen Journey*, describes the educational processes set up within the College, and is available from the Head of the College. (On sale at \$300).

** The names used are fictitious, the anecdotes are factual.

Martin - A part-Aboriginal, born in a tribal situation, brought up in institutions and with foster-parents, had identified with whites all his life and had had little to do with other Aboriginals: (After two weeks in the College):

"The College is great. When I'm outside in the street, standing at the bus stop, I'm the only black there and it seems all eyes are looking at me. I get on the bus and there's no other black and all the eyes seem to be looking at me. I come into the College and everyone is black and I feel at home and lose the inhibitions I have everywhere else."

(After six weeks):

"I've had enough. I'm leaving. I can't stand them (Aboriginals) any more. I'd done all the other trips and in coming in here I thought I'd do the Aboriginal trip, but it's no good. I've nothing in common with them."

(After twelve weeks):

"I'm not white and I have to find my Aboriginal identity. I have seen my mother only once in sixteen years. I want to go and meet her again in the holidays and meet my brother and sister on the reserve too."

David - (after a couple of months) :

"Maybe I'm wasting my time in the College. It's not like a school and I'm not doing anything."

Jim - (after some months in the College) :

"When I was in primary school they told me what to do. I went to high school and they told me what to do. I joined the army and they told me what to do. I got a job and they told me what to do. I came into the College and I begin to think for myself."

These anecdotes suggest the major goals, the learning process and its implementation, and the major problems of the College.

The events of the last two hundred years in Australia have not only led to the near destruction of Aboriginal society - they also went

a long way towards the destruction of the individual, at least so far as the integration of each individual personality is concerned. Low expectations of life, a sense of alienation from the total community, marital and social problems, a general sense of dissatisfaction and a low self-image tend to be the norm - the manifestation in each individual of the pathology of a dominant society that has not yet learnt that the western way is neither the natural nor necessarily the best way and that to be different is not necessarily to be inferior.

I want then, in this article, to look very briefly at the major "content" goals of the College (that is, what has to be learnt); to then examine certain aspects of how this learning takes place, and of the role of the staff; and then to develop the description of the manner of learning a little further by looking at some of the problems involved in instituting this kind of educational process.

WHAT HAS TO BE LEARNT

Certainly the first and most important thing for the majority of the students to do is to modify their attitudes to themselves and to society in general. They must develop self-respect and pride in being Aboriginal members of the Australian community, and hence a strong sense of identity as an Aboriginal. In doing this, they need to gain confidence in their own abilities and to believe that it is worth making an effort because they can be successful. These are important elements in the "sorting out" process that all students go through.

Another essential element in the "sorting out" process is the development of short and long term goals, particularly finding what jobs one might be interested in and what other opportunities society has to offer for satisfying involvement, and to identify which of these one wants to concentrate on. And then, having appreciated that there are real opportunities for satisfying work that one can attain to, to begin to obtain them: to begin to open the doors that one has found to exist. Hence opportunities in the College are created for job experience and gaining a greater knowledge of society, and for acquiring basic skills associated with job goals and special interests.

Because of the suppression of the race and of individuals, Aboriginal people feel many frustrations and feel inhibited in self-expression. And because of the considerable attitudinal changes that take place while in the College, conflicts occur and have to be resolved.

In fact, the resolution of these frustrations and conflicts is essential to the integration of personalities, the understanding of oneself, the whole "standing up straight as a person" process, and hence to the possibility of one's taking a positive place in the general community. Important in this are the expressional activities (Art, Drama, Dance, Music, Creative Writing etc.) within the College as a means of release and of objectivizing the frustrations and inhibitions.

All Aboriginal people active in the total community are involved in the business of changing attitudes whether they like it or not: their own attempts at successful activity are contrary to the popular image held by the non-Aboriginal community.

And for Australia to become a genuinely multi-racial society, great changes in attitudes are still necessary. Any Aboriginal working amongst other people will be confronted by scepticism, racial ignorance, distrust and even hostility. Hence it is important that the students of the College, looking to take an active part in the community, appreciate how changes can be brought about in individual people and society generally.

All of these things are vital to the people finding satisfaction and self-fulfillment from life. But these things having been done, since most people have failed to gain much from their school experiences, there is a need to develop the general academic or vocational skills level of many of the students in order that they will not only be as good as other people in the community, but that they will also be able to compete on their own terms. But this follows the rest of the process and can only effectively take place afterwards - and at present the College is doing little about it.

Hence, primarily the College is concerned with developing positive attitudes to self and to society, a greater awareness of the opportunities society offers for satisfying involvement, and only secondarily with formal academic or vocational training.

HOW THE LEARNING TAKES PLACE

Essentially the process arises from respect for what people are and can be, and trust in their own innate ability. Being given that trust and respect and knowing it is there, the students are free to develop their own abilities and interests along their own lines,

and they can thus move in directions meaningful to themselves.

So there is not in the College any preconceived, predetermined notion of what is essential learning to be had; i.e. we do not believe we have the light to be given to these poor deprived people. There are broad areas of experience and activity, as outlined above, within which most people will work. But there is no predetermined prescriptive syllabus. To a large extent, it is believed that the students have the potential for knowledge and the suppressed desire to experience certain things or move in certain directions, and that they can be given experience that will help them to know what they want to find out or experience further. Hence they can largely define their own learning program, with their own experiences supplemented and rationalized through a process of constant consultation between themselves and the staff. But, given this, ultimately what the student wants to do himself is what he does and he pursues a course that is designed by himself.

This feature of self-management is crucial and carries over to many of the general management and organizational decisions within the College (including, for example, student discipline; records and enforcement of attendance; control of library and equipment). It is vital in letting people feel, often for the first time in their lives, that they can think for themselves, they can make decisions, they can determine their own destiny.

One or two other points could be mentioned in considering how learning takes place. As far as possible the approach is experiential rather than academic or theoretical: it is better to go out and see or take part in an activity than to talk about it. A question often asked is if, say, a man comes in with only a basic primary education and says he wants to be an electrician or a social worker, how can you let him go ahead and try to do it when he may have no chance of ever qualifying?

So far our experience has shown that given the right experiences he will very quickly decide for himself he cannot do it and look to something else. But it will be his own decision based on real knowledge of what is needed and why it is needed and not one he may feel imposed upon him by a well-meaning Counsellor.

The best learning seems to take place when there is activity and when people and things are involved rather than ideas. For example, an important principle to be learnt in the search for unity in the Aboriginal community concerns the sublimation of individual goals to

group goals. This is learnt not through theorizing but through co-operative effort in group projects ranging from large art works to maintaining the cleanliness of the classroom. Another example is the active application of ideas of modifying community attitudes in real attempts to do so through the College's Community Education Program.

So the learning process rests largely on respect and self-determination. In so doing, the College creates hope by opening doors that seemed closed and thus giving the possibility to fulfilling these hopes.

ROLE OF STAFF

The staff, particularly the full-time staff, have sensitive and subtle roles to play in this process. In essence, their role is to create a situation which will facilitate the emergence of Aboriginality both within the College and within the total multi-racial, multi-cultural Australian society.

In doing this they are concerned with the attitudes of Aboriginal people to themselves and to society, and they are also concerned with the attitudes of white society to Aboriginal people.

The latter often at best seems to know little of them as real people, or to ignore them - as one prominent Australian educator in a recent conference did, when he referred to Australia as a mono-cultural society.

Secondly, the staff are a vital part of the resources to be drawn on: they have certain experiences and certain learning that may be passed on and they have certain skills that may be useful to assist people who are seeking certain goals.

But since teachers are teachers and are trained to impart "knowledge", it is essential for them to resist the temptation to teach, at least in the traditional sense. It is vital that they keep their hands off and stop talking long enough to allow real learning, real personal development along lines most personally fulfilling to take place. They have to learn to let people create themselves what they want to be, and not create them in their own image or in their own image of what Aboriginal people are or can be. They have to learn to impart their wisdom only when and where they are asked to,

and that anything else shows disrespect or, at best, paternalism.

PROBLEMS

It is, however, one thing to say that certain kinds of situations are good education; it is another thing to have the clientele accept it. And so we often find ourselves in the situation of having to be consistent with our own policies and so compromise between what is the most desirable form of education and what we believe best meets obvious needs, and what the student understands as education: there is thus often a compromise between what are real gains and what are felt gains. The students tend to think of education as the kind of process they went through in primary and secondary school: a fairly formal traditional academic schooling. So notes written in a book often give a greater sense of learning than a mere discussion, and in some cases are a stimulus to general involvement in a discussion.

Another aspect of this is the demand on the staff to impose discipline, to direct and make decisions for the students. One student argued that because they were Aboriginal people the staff should direct them, tell them what to do, what decisions to make, and enforce discipline. The concept of education as a self-determining, decision-making process is new and not readily accepted. And yet the implementation of a traditional formal process would be destructive and not encourage people to take responsibility and make their own decisions.

Aboriginal people have learnt to be submissive, to put up with things they could see no way of changing. They are used, in an educational situation, to being passive and receptive (or assuming a front of being receptive) and unused to being directive, to initiating activity, to being active and alert in the learning process. Further, they are unused to expressing their own desires and wishes constructively and having them heeded. Consequently there is a constant problem to overcome the scepticism and encourage them to take the responsibility to express their wishes, demands, and doubts and so to design their own program of studies. But ensuring they feel that they can do this and do it successfully is basic to the social and attitudinal changes to take place.

Three other problems could be mentioned: this is a unique institution attempting to cope with unique problems. It requires the staff to have special insights and sensitivity resulting from special experiences that relatively few people have, combined with

normal teaching and academic skills. So the staff are asked to look at the education process with no preconceived notions of what education is and what are absolute standards of excellence. This creates many problems especially as the College has to rely on a large part-time staff to provide the range of activities and experiences necessary to meet individual needs and interests.

Added to this there is as yet inadequate knowledge of how learning takes place, of how the thought processes or problem solving techniques of Aboriginal people differ from those of other cultural groups, and of what are the most effective media for teaching and learning. And, in order to provide the diversity of individualized materials needed, there is a need for extensive sets of programmed learning materials culturally biased towards Aboriginal society, especially in the common core and basic skills courses.

AN ABORIGINAL VIEWPOINT

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The creation of the College of Aboriginal Education, within the Torrens College of Advanced Education, is to me, one of the most meaningful adventures undertaken within Aboriginal society ever. I would place its importance as equal to, if not above, the success of Senator Neville Bonner, the appointment of Charles Perkins, together with the creation and formation of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee.

Almost every other program and plan within the framework of Aboriginality is dogged by the criterion of having a measure of success