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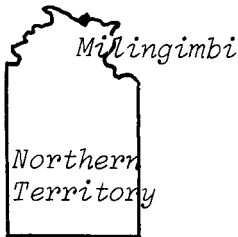


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FROM MANUAL TRAINING TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT:

SEEKING RELEVANCE IN MANUAL TRAINING

FOR ABORIGINAL TEENAGERS



Gary McClelland and
Stephen Harris,
Milingimbi, N.T.

Teenagers in the Western world are increasingly vocal in their demands for "relevance" in their school experience. Young Aboriginal men in their teens (although perhaps not fully conscious of what they are doing, or able to verbalize their feelings) are also "demanding" relevance in their school experience by several kinds of passive resistance. Two examples of this resistance are, that attendance at some Northern Territory schools is extremely low, and that young men trained in various trade courses are generally working in other trades. The educational system, of course, is not solely responsible for this situation, but we should respond to this new "post colonial" mood in Aboriginal communities. Examples of the "post colonial" era are: that Aboriginals know they are free to resist white pressures to work or attend school, or in fact to do anything "white"; that local Aboriginal councils are assuming much more responsibility for local management; that local Aboriginals cherish their new found power to say which white people can or cannot live in their community, and so on. Our prediction is that if schools don't move with the times we will find that schools in Aboriginal communities will soon begin to appear to Aboriginals as the last "white strongholds" in these communities; that is "white" in terms of initiatives, in terms of ultimate authority, in terms of environmental setting, materials used, times at which things are done and content of what is taught.

For the white teacher to say, "But I'm open to Aboriginals taking more initiative", is hardly practical because the Aboriginal teenager has not learned to be sufficiently aggressive or expressive to take initiatives in the face of the technologically dominant white teacher; therefore the first initiative-to-allow-initiative must be taken by the white teacher.

We have begun with a strong statement in favour of developing Aboriginal initiative. However, for initiative to produce

profitable long term results, it must be within limits set by realities in the outside world. In this case we are mainly referring to economic realities. With this dual emphasis on *initiative* and *economic realities*, we are obviously implying that Manual Training classes in Aboriginal schools should be more in the area of community development practice, than in classroom teaching theory.

This paper seeks to do two things: to offer some assistance to teachers for thinking about such things as *relevance* and *initiative* in Aboriginal education, and to offer some examples from recent experience of efforts to put some of these guidelines into practice in Manual Training classes at Milingimbi.

I. Manual Training Teachers need to re-assess their own philosophy of "education."

A basic approach to social change in the Northern Territory has been to stake many of our hopes on the capacity of the very young, whose knowledge has been largely gained in a classroom context, to be agents of change within the wider Aboriginal community. When such an approach has a high failure rate, it is hardly profitable to redouble efforts in the same direction. Some of us do this. The following quotations (sometimes containing sweeping and highly debatable statements) are chosen, not because we are sure they are right, or because we think they express awareness of all the factors involved, but because they are sufficiently controversial to have stimulated our own thinking about relevance and initiative.

From a paper by Robert Capp, *Penetrating the Grass Roots*, delivered at the Aboriginal Outstations Conference, Gove, Northern Territory, June 1975:

"No one who has ever been in a settlement school for any length of time could seriously pretend that the overall impact of the school has been either good or considerable. The gospel of salvation through education was a snare and a delusion. Or was it that we have become so used to the trappings of our educational ceremonial, the chants and incantations and the stained-glass windows, forgetting the dogma [that is, basic purposes] that started it in the first place?

I think schools were totally unnecessary in Aboriginal settlements. If they already have one it should be

rendered absolutely invisible as soon as possible - dragging the parents in the communities back into the act, consigning the "teachers" back into the community where they came from. Heresy perhaps...."

and

"The big-settlement school has to brew up a solution strong enough to dissolve the school entirely If the troops have involved themselves in community activities and involved parents in school activities the alien institution will disappear. It is necessary to retreat, re-assess the enemy, re-arm and regroup our forces and rethink our strategies. Then we may be able to enjoy some of the thrill of victory."

And from Jonetani Rika at the same conference:

"People who work among Aboriginal people do not really understand them, their culture, their language, the way they think, the things that they are interested in. People are not really interested enough to learn and to find out from the Aboriginal people themselves all these things so that they can understand their needs and be able to help them with something or find somewhere to start from and then build up slowly from then on.

We work in the opposite way. We are always in a position to tell them what to do. We feel that we know all of the answers to their problems. We tell them to do what we feel is good for them. We don't listen from them and learn from them, etc. We create confusion among ourselves and among them and we take too much power away from their elders causing them to rely on us too much.

...People don't see any need for education or training when they are not given freedom to control things in their own community because somebody else will do it for them. This somebody else is usually you and me. We control the whole thing too long, too much, and so they rely on us too much too long. It is about time to operate in the right and effective way before it's too late and it will be too hard to do anything.

For the Adult Education or any other department to work and operate successfully here at Yirrkala, and I believe in other Aboriginal communities, what I have already mentioned in the first part of this report and also in this part, could be a great help. *It is important to start in a small way and build up slowly, but it should be in the things that the people are interested in.*"

II. TEACHERS NEED TO BE AWARE OF SOME BROAD DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE NATURE OF INFORMAL EDUCATION AND ITS METHODS IN ABORIGINAL SOCIETY, AND THE NATURE OF FORMAL SCHOOL EDUCATION IN WESTERN SOCIETY.

The following generalizations seem to hold for most hunting and gathering societies in contrast to Western technological societies. However, it should be emphasized that this subject has not yet been closely studied in any Aboriginal group in particular, although one of the authors is presently engaged in such a research project. Provided, however, that (a) we talk in broad enough terms; and (b) that it is realized that we are comparing societies in terms of what is *emphasized* in that society, without claiming that what is emphasized in one society does not occur at all in the other, it is probably safe to say that naturally occurring education in Aboriginal society has the following emphases:

1. *It is conservative in values.* Aboriginal socialization (total education for living) does not encourage innovation except within limited areas. For example, young men are permitted to ride motorbikes and play electric guitars, but if they flout Aboriginal religion or marriage laws too blatantly, there will be social repercussions. This principle should make us hesitant about expecting too much influence from the school as a socialization force towards white ways. The vast majority of an Aboriginal child's time - both in terms of volume and emotional salience - is still spent in an Aboriginal environment. Perhaps a major example of the Aboriginals' "conservative" nature is that in spite of all the "white" examples of materialism and respect for material objects (machines, etc.) that Aboriginals have been exposed to, and in spite of all the actual consumption of material goods that Aboriginals experience these days (for example, the outboard motors, motorbikes, etc.) social relationships and obligations remain more salient realities in their lives than material goods.

2. *Aboriginal learning is learning by doing.* Aboriginal learning is situation specific; that is, where the reason or meaning for what is learned is built in and obvious to the immediate real life survival situation. In other words, the actual context provides the meaning and explanation of the activity, whereas Western learning seeks to teach "principles" which are free of any specific context, so that, ideally, these "principles" can be widely applied to any new circumstance in a problem-solving manner. Problems are solved one at a time as they arise. Aboriginals thus don't like trying to handle hypothetical and "if...then" theoretical problems.

3. *More naturally occurring Aboriginal learning is by observation than by verbalization.* In other words, apart from instruction in ritual knowledge, verbal explanations and directions play a relatively small role in teaching; whereas in formal white schools verbalization (either spoken or written) is the major means of transmitting knowledge. Aboriginals enjoy talk - but *social* talk not talk which provides highly unfamiliar information from outside. One of the local Aboriginal school teachers said a few days ago, "We can't take too much talk" - in this case about all the different ways to power a boat - "we just shut our ears".

4. *Fewer "why" questions and less encouragement of analytical thinking.* In Western society, school children are regularly exposed to the process of asking "why" and "how" questions, and there is a strong emphasis on the structuring of thought verbally and logically (for example, "No, that's not right. Think it out again carefully, then tell me.") Thus, much Western learning involves a more conscious type of thinking, that is, one that can be talked about as a series of logical steps, and one that responds more easily to verbal questioning. In Aboriginal society, although the analytical thought process is often used (for example in analysing all the factors involved in stalking a kangaroo), probably a higher proportion of learning involves the intuitive, or trained reaction responses (or "muscle memory" to borrow a term from musicology). It is probably fair to say that a high proportion of Aboriginal learning is passed on without the medium of consciously verbalizing the why's and how's and thus without fostering such questions from the learner. This contrast might be illustrated by the Aboriginal attitude that when a young Aboriginal learns something, that is enough in itself. If he hasn't learned it, he will tomorrow or the next day. By comparison, when a Western child learns something in school that is not enough; he has then to give back verbally (spoken or written) to the teacher what he has learned, as proof

that he really has learned it. It is our view that the effect of these contrasting processes (except perhaps in the area of Aboriginal learning of ritual knowledge) is that the Western child's mastery of skills is at a more conscious level. By saying this, we are not raising any issue of intelligence, quality of skills or capacity for wisdom, etc. How this predomination in Aboriginal learning comes about is partly explained in (2) and (3) above. It may be worth pointing out that each culture's adaptation to environment has probably given rise to the differing emphases in methods of learning.

5. *The giver of the information is often valued more than the information as such.* It has been observed that an Aboriginal teenager will be willing to learn humbly (for example, turtle hunting or tracking) under his father, but will not take similar instruction from a stranger, Aboriginal or white. This means the new white teacher has to earn the right as a *person* (not as a certificated teacher) to teach, and that takes time. *There are no specialists whose trade is "teacher"*. Rather, if a child is to learn from any specialists, it will be from someone who is especially good at a skill, but still not a "teacher". Any teacher must be respected, according to Aboriginal values, as a whole person. In white society we have developed a certain informal tradition that allows a teacher to be a "good teacher" even though aspects of his personal character are not liked by the pupil. It would probably sound inconsistent to an Aboriginal to say, "He's weird man, but a good teacher"; or "What he does in his private life is none of our business, so long as he does his job as a teacher." Put another way, Aboriginal education tends to fuse the emotional and intellectual domains. Education is not delivered in compartments as it often is in formal schools in Western society. There is an emotional or relationship charge to much Aboriginal learning, whereas a white child is taught to be "objective" about information and to try to keep his subjectivity to private life.

6. *Education in traditional societies promotes group solidarity rather than individual superiority - or co-operation with relatives rather than competition.* This suggests that we should put considerable emphasis on working in groups formed along lines supported by Aboriginal social realities - that is, relations or language groups.

Apart from emphasizing again the tentative nature of these generalizations for traditional Aboriginal society, another factor that we wish to emphasize about these six generalizations is that

they should not be thought of as either "good" or "bad" in educational terms. Their value is that they might explain some Aboriginal behaviour and help teachers - Aboriginal and white - to work from the known to the unknown. The challenge is not necessarily to "teach the Aboriginal way" in the school. That may be impossible for any white person to do, or it may not be what the parents want, and it may not be the most efficient way to help an Aboriginal child become bicultural. In one study of a traditional society in Liberia, Africa, for example, it was found that among other things, rote memorization was an important method of traditional learning. The writer concluded that in helping the children fulfil their wish to improve in arithmetical skills, a reliance on rote memorization had to be guarded against, not encouraged.

III. SOME PROJECTS AT MILINGIMBI.

In the statement of educational philosophy for the Post Primary boys at Milingimbi for 1974, appears this idea:

"Aboriginal communities are still developing in a different way than Western communities. In Western society an important aim of education is to increase the pace of technological development and train a work force for our competitive technological business complex. The position in an Aboriginal area is reversed. The main direction in these communities is on social development of the Aborigines' own kind, and technology plays a very minor role. The Aboriginal works to meet survival needs and spends the rest of the time socializing. Whether we agree with this or not is hardly relevant. We must work from the known to the unknown. And we teachers are guests in the Aboriginal community, so as outsiders must respect where he stands, and become *opportunists*, that is, to advance Aborigines technologically when social realities provide the opportunity (for example, Aboriginal initiative, interests, felt needs, and when groups want to work together, etc.). The white man can only program in advance in very broad terms - he must be ready to *respond* to Aboriginal initiatives and *extend* knowledge from that initiative in a sensitive non-pushy way - teaching through helping when the need arises. This is the "hidden curriculum". (McClelland, 1974, MS)"

The following are offered to illustrate some of the principles

expressed above. (*The projects discussed below involve only part of the students' time. Formal classes in arithmetic, language development and library periods, etc., are still held).

1. *An experiment in "Open Workshop"*. In second term, 1974, an experiment in "open workshop" (that is, open classroom in Manual Training) was tried, as a proving ground for some educational principles that seemed more promising for Aboriginal teenagers. It had been said that Aboriginals don't like any kinds of change, but changing the curriculum content every month was enjoyed by the boys. It had been noticed in the formal class approach that all demonstrations by the teacher would be eagerly watched in the craft room, but unless these skills were related to everyday life, they were quickly forgotten. This led up to the "open shop" by allowing the teacher to feel his way in trying to adapt more to the needs and interests of the boys, the weather, and community tensions (that is, "on" and "off" days, etc.). The open shop ushered in a frantic outburst of activity - mainly in toymaking and cupboard construction (with only a little interest in metal work). Boys could work at whatever they wished that was constructive, with the teacher's aim being to observe whatever skill was being demonstrated by each boy and to raise it a little bit more. In some ways, however, open shop proved difficult. Some boys could handle the freedom constructively, but others were at a loose end. A couple of very able independent boys were given every scope and were not interfered with unless they asked for help. This experience showed the boys' real abilities in a way that doing isolated exercises (for example, "how to sharpen a plane" or "how to use a spokeshave") could not. A boy will learn the value of a sharp chisel, and therefore try to master the skill of sharpening one, when in a real experience he uses one that won't cut. Open shop also allowed socially meaningful groups to form naturally. This is probably its greatest single achievement.

Two other important issues raised by the open shop experience are the questions of tidiness and of authority. Few Aboriginals are perfectionists about tidiness, and it is felt that to be over-strict about tidiness might place Aboriginals in a context in which they feel reticent to try anything - or at best, lead them to announce loudly that the Manual Training area is "white man's country", and not really an Aboriginal place where the teenagers feel at home. However, open shop did show to some of the more alert boys

**The authors provided further examples of projects; these have not been reproduced because of space demands. I would suggest interested teachers might write to the authors for further details. Ed.*

the value of looking after tools and keeping track of them; otherwise the tools would be so scattered that an annoying amount of time would be wasted looking for them before one could get on with the job. Our feeling is that too much untidiness breeds sloppiness and inefficiency, but that a certain amount of untidiness (or freedom) is highly constructive. Our suggestion is that Manual Training teachers really check their own motives for tidiness. Is it for the sake of the students, or getting the job done, or is it to meet the personal needs of the teacher, or to give the teacher a sense of order or control over the situation when the need to wait a little longer for results seems too much to bear?

On the question of authority, open shop does not mean any kind of vague "free for all". What it does mean in terms of authority is that the teacher can't announce that "it is now time for sharpening chisels", or he can't tell the boys "You will now make a table." The teacher is committed to waiting for pupil initiative. However, this does not mean that when a student *chooses* to make a table and is using a chisel the wrong way, the teacher can't step in. Being an "opportunist" the teacher can at that point say, "That's not the right way to use a chisel - you'll get along a lot better if you use it like this, and like this." (No claim is made that no abuse of tools continues, it does.) Open shop also does not mean that the students are left entirely on their own to think up what to do. For example, in the shop area there are a pile of job cards on which various items are drawn, with a description of what materials are needed and the order to go about making the thing up. If a student is at a loose end he might be directed to those job cards to go through them and choose one of the things to do.

Finally, open shop showed that about 40 per cent of the teenagers could exercise initiative on their own, and although the whole plan had ultimately to be made a little more directive for the remaining 60 per cent, much of the shop activity remains fairly open, because it is felt that more real learning is taking place in that context.

2. *A Boat Building project.* In developing a boat building project, the following factors were kept in mind by the Manual Training teacher: Milingimbi is an island with fishing as one of the best potential industries; boat building potentially provides experience in developing carpentry skills in a real situation contributing directly to survival; an open shop had been tried and the two most valuable things learned were : who made up the naturally formed viable groups, and who had sufficient ability and initiative to handle

a fairly ambitious boat job. It was also realized that the boys might be keen to build a boat without having even the vaguest idea of what might be involved. So, to expose them to some of the problems and materials and processes (as well as to further test interest and initiatives) over an 18 month period a miniature boat building project began with scale model boats from a few inches to six or eight feet. Some were completed to floating stage, including a canoe out of galvanized cladding and several traditional dug-out canoes (*lipalipas*). Then the Djinang language group of boys, chosen on the basis of naturally formed group cohesiveness, as well as skill and reliability, began an 18½ft Hartley design, diesel-powered fishing boat. (This is being built in ply with a Dynel skin and 10 h.p. Yanmar inboard diesel - to be initially the school's boat, but ultimately to be a means of the building group's source of livelihood, if this proves practicable, when they leave school.) So far, the project has gone reasonably well, with this large boat moving to completion with occasional slow periods - the Manual Training teacher stepping in only when the boys are too far off the path.

A 12ft plank boat was begun two weeks behind the 18½ft boat, with the hope that it would be built completely on their own by the teenagers to reinforce the principles experienced in building the 18½ft boat. This latter 12ft boat project has lapsed through lack of motivation, but undoubtedly the boat building experience overall has been highly significant to the boys, both in terms of building self-confidence and in terms of a functional project.

A lot has been achieved in 18 months, but probably a three to four year period would be needed to really train these teenagers in boat building skills. (This raises the point that Manual Training and Adult Education should perhaps be nearly the same thing.)

3. *Comments on some other projects.* Not all the planned projects have been successful. Some projects have been successful at one time but not at another: for example, a water play area, shade shed and fireplaces used at the Milingimbi school in 1974, are little used in 1975. In other cases, just waiting a while has proved helpful: for example, although a go-kart that was commenced some time ago was put aside by the boys and all interest in it appeared to have died, with the recent resurrection of an old outboard-motor engine, interest has now flourished again and the go-kart is moving toward completion. Other projects drew renewed interest when the approach to them was altered: for example, a 16mm movie film with Post Primary teenage actors.

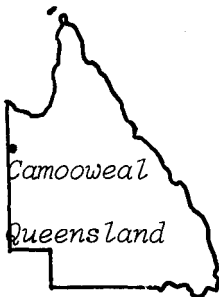
This film project is worth discussing in more detail, because from the teacher's point of view, it was one of the most significant experiences of the school year. Originally, six boys were chosen by the teacher as actors in a Maori legend play that seemed appropriate to acting in a bush setting, and was close in type of content to Aboriginal legends. The teacher chose the six boys because they were those least interested in actual construction projects but most interested in drawing, painting and sculpture. The nature of the project and the amount of work involved was carefully explained and the job started with apparent enthusiasm. Then five of the six boys came to the teacher and said, "We don't want to do this." Because the teacher felt there were some "other" reasons for this decision, he decided to leave the project for some time but not to abandon it. Then later he began gentle discussion and questioning around the project, making clear that freedom was being given for the boys to volunteer or refuse to participate. The final result was the re-commencement of the project with two of the original six boys deciding not to be involved, and with some different volunteers being added. The main achievement in this incident is seen as the fact that this group of teenagers had grown in sufficient confidence to tell the teacher they didn't want to continue with a certain project. It is normally so difficult to get Aboriginals to say what they really think and feel, that such expression in this case may have been an important educational experience.

CONCLUSION

Much of the above may appear to be revolutionary in terms of more standard approaches to Manual Training education. But it is time that we, who work in Aboriginal schools, realized that we live virtually in an age of mild revolution in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. It would obviously be better for the revolution to be quiet, guided and gradual than to be confused and bitter. It would be naive to claim that the approach discussed above is either easy or always successful. (Keeping a balance between teacher and student initiatives; between the teacher being a responder and innovator as well as someone in authority; and integrating the contribution of the Aboriginal teaching assistant into the program, are all extremely difficult.) But compared to the traditional all "white", all formal-classroom approach, the above projects illustrate a very hopeful development. The mild revolution now taking place in Aboriginal communities is called "self-determination". Eventually self-determination will have to become more of a reality than it is at

present (that is, at present it involves the local community's determining how to spend large amounts of outside financial subsidy). Ultimately "self-determination" will surely have to give way to "self dependence", and it is this latter situation to which a Manual Training teacher needs to gear his program.

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"THE LIVING WALLS"

A FOCUS ON SOCIAL STUDIES

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The project I am about to describe was born out of a necessity to encourage children to realize that there are *PEOPLE, PLACES and THINGS* outside Camooweal. To most of us, this statement is obvious, but to some of the children of this insular community such an awareness appears to be neither important nor even necessary.

At the very outset let me assure you that this project was not our only method of teaching Social Studies, but rather an approach which we thought might stimulate the children of this area firstly to accept and then to enjoy learning about the ways of life of other people. Social Studies in a remote area can be uninspiring if initially the only method of gathering knowledge is through books and an occasional out-dated film. Since the children I teach respond to the visual approach, I decided to "paint-out" our Social Studies discussions. The place we chose for such an experiment was under the school where there were available large panels of wall space as well as several cement columns.

THE GROWTH OF AN IDEA

Preparatory to class discussions I was able to engage the voluntary services of a signwriter who painted the two large opposite