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ABORIGINAL STUDIES AT AN ABORIGINAL COLLEGE?

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One of the criticisms voiced against Aboriginal Residential Colleges such as Yirara is that we "take the students away from their culture". I don't necessarily agree with this comment for a number of reasons.

Aspects of life at Yirara suggest to me that male and female students who attend could in fact be exposed to more traditional Aboriginal culture than they would normally experience at home. This, of course, applies to some communities more than to others.

Yirara College is in its second year of conducting an Aboriginal Studies course for its students. During this course students have the opportunity of

- a) Learning to read and write their own language.
- b) Learning traditional and contemporary Aboriginal skills.
- c) Learning about other non-Centralian Aboriginal groups and native peoples from other cultures.

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We are bringing as many aspects of Aboriginal life to the students as possible, regardless of language groups, tribal boundaries and distance. Over three years at Yirara any student could have experienced demonstrations, lessons and activities in more traditional Aboriginal life, apart from sacred ceremonies, than if he or she had stayed at home.

It is the topic of teaching traditional and contemporary Aboriginal skills that I would like to explain in more detail.

CULTURAL WEEKS

We put aside two weeks per term during which interested Aboriginal adults become instructors for our students and staff. Initially, letters are sent to communities requesting assistance from capable adults in such activities as wood and stone tool making, spear and boomerang throwing, traditional dance and story telling, painting and food gathering. A community which shows interest is then visited and the adults are given details of what their teaching role at Yirara will be, how much they will be paid and what their living conditions will be. At a later date the adults are collected and transported to Yirara, usually by the staff members responsible for supervising their instruction. Thus a working and social rapport is established well before the adults commence their work in the new environment.

The College has had three particularly successful "Cultural Weeks" in the last two years, involving excellent instruction from various adults from Wave Hill, Ernabella and Papunya.

The Gurindji men from Wave Hill (Libanangu) showed our lads dances which could be performed by any tribal group. The men and lads practised these dances after school in a secluded creek-bed. Eventually the group was sufficiently confident and capable to perform these dances at schools around Adelaide as part of the "Education Through the Arts" program. During the program our students witnessed the dancing skills of Maoris and "Top End" Aboriginals.

The men and women from Ernabella (S.A.) came to demonstrate seed collecting, grinding, contemporary artefact making, spear making, spinifex gum making and the collection of stone implements. Each class would visit the group of adults, who had made camp under a shady tree. Teachers were told in advance of the activities and classroom lesson preparation allowed for some very interesting and relevant questioning by the students. Follow up activities were then arranged.

One of these follow-up activities involved some of our male students collecting flint from old camp sites and attempting to fashion the flint into blades and spear points. We found that even the adults had forgotten this ancient skill and so our next "Cultural Week" will involve Alyawarri men who still possess the skills of stone tool making. Our students are intensely interested in these old skills.

The most recent visit came from a group of Papunya men. Their task was to demonstrate the technique of painting their exquisite "Papunya Dreaming Designs". They would also tell the story of what they were painting and then, to our pleasant surprise, allow boys and girls to assist them with the original paintings. Not only did our students see various painting techniques, hear half a dozen traditional stories (in English) and have a hand in painting with the men, they were then encouraged by the men to go into the Art Room and have an attempt at using the techniques demonstrated by the men.

TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED ART FORMS

The role of Art at the College has changed with the introduction of Aboriginal Studies and taken a new direction. Some emphasis has been placed upon traditional materials and techniques. Art experiences have changed and the teacher has become the facilitator. The Papunya visit was interesting because it facilitated the new change. It was also interesting to see the individual approaches from the students. They changed designs to suit specific needs and where the men used four basic colours (white, black, ochre, brown), some students added bright colours (yellow, red, blue). What emerged were some fine examples of colour, line and pattern relationships.

The traditional nature and basis of the designs were subjected to subtle changes and became extended to one of a contemporary nature. As the traditional designs were not sacred, the men encouraged girls as well as boys to participate. This was a totally new experience for the girls. This in itself was an innovation instigated by the old men. The students then extended the experience to its logical conclusion.

Along with the participation, the old men told stories about the paintings so the students experienced a feeling of purpose in the traditional designs. This participation was significant as it broke down the barrier between the old men and the students. The traditional design became accessible and evolved into a new art form.

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