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LITERATURE STUDY FOR ABORIGINES :
RATIONALE FOR A PROGRAM OF STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE
INVOLVING ABORIGINES AS MAIN CHARACTERS

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The purpose of this article is to show that, through a study of available literature featuring Aborigines as main characters, it should be possible to initiate discussions to develop the following:

- a) An increased sensitivity to the fact that the way many people 'see' Aborigines may be the result of what they have read about them in stories written by non-Aborigines. For example, how would non-Aborigines view Aborigines after reading "Coonardoo" as compared with "The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith"?
- b) A realization that others have a 'life struggle' too. For example, Hugh's love for Coonardoo in the book of the same name.
- c) A realization that there is more than one solution to a problem. For example, how would they (your Aboriginal students) have acted if they had been in Jimmy Blacksmith's position?
- d) An increased ability to use literature for a variety of purposes. For example, leisure reading, an aid to self-concept development, development of skills in critical reading, etc.

Another purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways in which traditional Aboriginal educational strategies may be used to achieve points a) - d).

Non Aboriginal teachers should be fully aware of the fact that, culture impinges upon the curriculum in many different ways. The teacher, unavoidably and inescapably, is a bearer of meanings and values, and these he mediates through his teaching. The pupils, too, live in a cultural

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world both outside and inside school. Even within the school, important differences of perception, values and actions may be observed when comparing classroom behaviour with behaviour in the playground, in school outings and so on. (Brash, 1972)

Hopefully, one of the consequences of a sensitive presentation of this unit of work would be that some of the participants in the discussions would decide to present their own attitudes, reactions and aspirations in 'literary' form.

Smith (1960) says that a literature program is one of the important ways in which the pupils can learn to relive the experience of others and broaden and deepen their own personal experience, and Reed (1976) states that -

When a reading program omits the exploration of literature that reflects the varying segments of society, the pupils are deprived of a complete and fully rounded education.

In many cases the book studies present life as many of our Aboriginal students actually 'know' it. For example, the camp at Verona in "The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith" depicts accurately the depressing squalor of many fringe camps. Thus the in-depth study of 'stark realities' may help the students to postulate ways of overcoming these 'problems'. N.B. Remember that what we see as a problem may not be regarded in the same way by Aborigines - our eyes are coloured by *our* culture as much as any other ethnic group.

I am not suggesting that our students should be fed solely on a diet of realistic literature; many authors feel that fantasy in reasonable amounts may be essential for the full realisation of a reader's intellectual potential. Wafer, (1977) writing in *Meanjin*, says that -

In societies which have only recently acquired a written language, it seems important to write down the oral repertoire (of myths, chants, epics, etc) which is in danger of being lost, before making any serious efforts to foster a modern literature.

Our students and the adults need specific guidance if they are to develop a sense of literature as enjoyment or as a means of understanding the world. When we are planning our literature program, we should make provision for the students to develop strategies of -

1. Knowing what kind of book they are reading, that is, whether it is a fictional novel, play, epic or lyric - whether it is factual.
2. Knowing and recognising the elements of the author's style, that is, becoming familiar with the characters and living through the events.
3. Recognising the mood, feeling or tone of a story or poem, that is, "the spirit of the work noted in the author's attitude towards its content." (Parker, 1969, p.16)
4. Recognising and understanding 'figurative language'. Much thought will need to go into helping students interpret such language. It should be noted that for most tribal Aboriginal students and adults, English will be their second language and the majority will certainly not be as familiar with the 'nuances of sound and meaning' as a 'first language' reader of a similar age.
5. Recognising the different forms of fiction - teachers should stimulate readers to use their reading abilities thoughtfully by asking questions that provoke recognition and insight into the implications of a story. (Parker, 1969, p.130)

Before embarking on a study of the suggested (or similar) Australian literature, it would be wise to consider that -

books are dynamic and have the potential to change the attitudes, habits and skills of the individuals who read them. (Shepherd and Iles, 1976, pp. 569-71)

Do we want to change attitudes? In what way do we want to change them? What effect will it have on the people and their culture? Is it part of our role (as the community sees it) to be the catalyst? It can be seen that teaching such literature to 'culturally different' readers is not merely a matter of working up an interesting set of lessons. There are far deeper implications which we will need to weigh up before we begin reading books of this type with the students and adults.

Where do we go for guidance in this delicate matter? To the best of my knowledge no tribal Aborigine has commented in writing on this issue. Brash's (1972) article is written by a white man for

white readers, and although it highlights many related aspects it does not, and cannot, comment on the impact of these stories on tribal Aboriginal people. Perhaps it would be wise to approach the elders of your own tribal community and see how they feel about your plan; this could be done through the adult-educator, or any other sensitive person who is trusted by the Aborigines. You must be prepared to:

- . explain explicitly to the mediator what your plans are (and what your misgivings are also as regards impact on culture, etc);
- . give the Aborigines plenty of time to consider your proposal; and
- . accept their decision or modification to your scheme when they have considered it.

I would not attempt this sort of study with a group of students or adults until I had established a good rapport with them. Any noticeable reluctance on the students' part to participate in these sessions should be heeded. Advice, as to the possible reasons, should be sought from teacher aides who are 'close' to you. I would tread warily in this area. I have already done much soul searching before sitting down to write these suggestions.

ABORIGINAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

Once you have come to terms with the above issues it is now time to look at aspects of Aboriginal learning which may aid you (or frustrate you) in your planned approach. Harris (1980) has documented how learning is achieved in a fairly traditionally oriented Aboriginal society: the findings of his study are probably applicable to most traditionally oriented Aborigines in Australia.

Some of the factors which may affect your approach and teaching methods may be:

- a) "Yolngu (Aboriginal) society is an authoritative, conservative structure, and young people are not motivated to take initiatives to learn as much as they can as soon as they can."
(Harris, 1978)

There are many implications here for the teacher when considering motivational strategies. Harris says that:

- i) Aboriginal languages have "why" words for questions that are asking "for what purpose?", but not for questions that are asking "for what reason?"

- ii) Aborigines also often resist answering questions that require "if.....then" analysis, or hypothesising about other people's motives for doing things, although straight information questions are usually acceptable.
 - iii) A major methodology in verbal teaching in Western schools is the question-and-answer technique. Aboriginal people are extremely pragmatic and see no sense in teachers asking questions when it is obvious that they already know the answer.
- b) Most learning takes place in the Aboriginal environment through the following processes:
- i) Observation and imitation, rather than through verbal instruction - either oral or written. Aboriginal people are highly verbal but talk has more of a social than a teaching function.

One approach which could fit in with this learning strategy might be to select an event in the story and dramatise it through a puppet show. The students could construct the puppets to represent the characters in the story. Dialogue could be taken from the story or ad-libbed.

- ii) Aboriginal learning involves orientation to persons rather than information - this is one reason why the teacher presenting these lessons needs to be 'accepted' by his/her students first.

Students and/or adults could perhaps study one particular character in the story - divide class into groups and each group studies a different character.

- iii) Aborigines are more oriented to the present time (and past-continuous) than the future, which means learning experiences need to have some immediate satisfaction in order to be maintained.

Each section of the story studied should be a complete learning experience in itself. For example, reading of a chapter which relates a complete incident - and relating it to past/present experiences.

No doubt there are many other differences which could affect the ways in which the teacher should approach this task. Each teacher

should be constantly looking for methods of teaching which are compatible with Aboriginal learning strategies.

The study of this type of literature should have a place in a curriculum which purports to develop bicultural schooling.

A bicultural person is a person who has the ability to shift into and operate in two cultures with relative ease and comfort. Such a person has access to, and is able to empathise with, the points of view of both cultures, without losing identity with the primary reference group. (Harris, 1978)

CHOICE OF MATERIAL

I have deliberately restricted my source material to stories and poems found in two books. If this approach does not prove successful then the school won't be left with a lot of useless, expensive resources as has happened in the past. The two books, which cost less than \$20, are:

Rorabacher, Louise E. (Ed.): *Aliens in Their Land - The Aborigine in the Australian Short Story*. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968.

Walker, Kath: *My People*. Jacaranda Press, Brisbane, 1970.

One reason for limiting the number of resources used in the initial stage is that I would like teachers to 'tread carefully' and weigh up the advantages/disadvantages of this approach. I am not wholly convinced that the advantages will outweigh the disadvantages. I have always 'been wary' of this type of literature when teaching Aborigines because of a vague fear that it may contribute to the breakdown of their culture, their developing self-concept, and the power-structure hierarchy in Aboriginal society.

Talk to people who are 'close' to Aborigines and who can find out how the Aborigines would feel about the suggested approaches.

Another reason for limiting the resource material is that I feel that between them the two books cover the following teaching objectives as listed by Whitehead (1968):

1. They help the student understand himself and his present problems.
2. They increase knowledge and understanding of the problems of others.

3. They develop an appreciation of the country and its people.
4. In some cases they provide opportunities to escape from reality.
5. In some cases they help the readers discover and develop ethical standards.
6. They utilise literature as a source for further creative endeavour.
7. They promote an appreciation of the English language.

For many years I have been saying that, "I don't care what a student reads as long as he/she reads"; if I were really honest with myself I would admit that this statement does not reflect my feelings. I know how much joy and satisfaction I get from my reading, therefore I feel it is essential that -

the teacher provides experiences that will help each reader to become more selective in his reading, more critical of the type of material he reads, and more sensitive to good writing. (Smith, 1975, p.147)

HOW TO USE THE MATERIAL

- . Storytelling is an art which it would 'pay' all teachers to cultivate. The way in which a story is told will make it 'live' for your students. Remember these students come from a long line of storytellers (probably the world's best still in functioning existence) so teachers will need to develop a high standard of expertise. *Storytelling - Art and Technique*, (Baker, 1977) is a book which gives many ideas which could be adapted and used by a teacher who 'reads' the story as opposed to 'telling' the story.
- . Students will interpret a story in relation to their own experiences and feelings. Teachers can acquaint the students with the way they (i.e. the teacher), 'see' the story. This should not be done until the students have had a chance to voice their own interpretation and impressions, and then it should be emphasised that it is only one person's way of viewing the book. This may provide the opportunity for your Aboriginal students to write their own 'reviews' of the literature being studied. They could submit suitable ones to *Meanjin*, *Northern Perspective*, *Federation Paper*, *Developing Education*, etc. for possible publication. Views of noted

reviewers could also be discussed to gain an overview of the diversity of opinion which exists in the world - it would be opportune to draw the students' attention to the fact that the reviewer's opinions are usually shaped by his/her background of living experiences.

- . I believe that it is our bounden duty to develop a student's 'high expectation of print' through enjoyable, daily literacy experiences. We should remember that 'written' literacy is only a fairly recent element in Aboriginal education; therefore we will need to build up an enjoyable background of the printed word.
- . Hopefully it would help our second language learners to more fully understand the 'depth' of English if teachers drew their attention to words and phrases which make the story more enjoyable - where possible providing concrete examples. Encourage students to use different words which mean the same thing, for example, 'belches smoke'. The teacher's own input in this particular segment of a lesson should be extensive. Always remember that this could be one 'pleasurable' way to help your students to become 'fluent in verbal expression'.
- . Use books frequently to look up further information related to the stories and/or poems being studied - for example, dictionaries, history/social study texts etc.
- . Discuss how the literature studied can help equip a person for living in the 21st century. How important will books be to Aborigines in the future?
- . Encourage the students to share and recommend stories and poems which they have enjoyed.
- . Endeavour to create a love of and for reading.

STORIES

The following suggestions are offered for two of the stories from *Aliens in Their Land* (Rorabacher, 1968).

Come on, Murri! (Xavier Herbert)

Objectives:

To consider the different reactions from Aborigines and non-Aborigines in a 'contest' situation.

- To discuss whether it is a 'good' or a 'bad' thing for Aborigines to be non-competitive.

- To look at the influence of racial/cultural background on Aboriginal non-competitiveness.

N.B. Aborigines are competitive in some areas. Competitiveness, however, may not be a motivating factor for them in a classroom situation.

Method

- a) Always be sure that the physical conditions for appreciative/ analytical listening are as 'ideal' as possible.
- b) Tell your students a bit of background information about Herbert. There is an interesting article about him in the *Reader's Digest*, (September 1979, pp.87-98). Herbert would probably be a good author for the students to write to, as he has a deep respect and admiration for tribal people.

Try to make this author 'real' to your students because it may be through people like him that you can entice your students into the 'world of books'.
- c) Give your students a 'thumbnail' sketch of the story, then read it to them. Concentrate on making the 'auditory' experience become a 'visual thinking' experience (Aborigines are very good at this).
- d) If you have to explain the meaning of some words to the students, for example, preliminary, barracked, torso etc. make sure that you 'write' the word on the board and/or on a vocabulary chart of new words. Always try to capitalise on your students' superior visual skills.
- e) Perhaps your students could dramatise the actual fight scene to help them build up the atmosphere of the crowd's anticipation.
- f) Stop at the victory celebration 'party' and ask your group to talk about the result of the fight. For example, if they had been writing the story who would have won? Do they think Marty could have won? Why?
- g) Read the rest of the story. Did his mother understand why he had lost? Compare his father's reaction with his mother's. Would his father have reacted differently if he had been sober?

- h) Was Marty right when he asked Carey to fight again? What should Carey have done? If Carey had been an Aborigine what do you think would have happened?
- i) Do Aborigines try and beat white kids in class work? Why/why not?
- j) Is competition a good thing for Aborigines and non-Aborigines?
- k) Could this story have really happened? Describe and/or draw a similar event you've actually seen.
- l) Construct some puppets and re-enact the second fight.

Proudly, My Son (Gollschewsky, E.A.)

Objectives

- To discuss differences in natural ability.
- To look at the sorts of things which account for these differences?
- To discuss - could, would, should the Aborigines teach these 'ability' skills to non-Aborigines?
- To examine ways in which home/parents influence a child's actions.
- To look at ways in which people within a family group communicate with each other.

Method

- a) Read the story to the students.
- b) Discuss -
 - . Why did the men come to the house?
 - . Why didn't they just rely on their own policeman?
 - . Why was Digger (and Phil) so good at tracking -
(1) hereditary reasons (2) environmental reasons?
 - . Is this ability something that the Aborigines could/would/should teach the non-Aborigines? If so, can it be taught in a school, how long will it take, when would be the best age to begin?
 - . Do Aboriginal women learn tracking skills?
 - . If Phil and his Mum and Dad had lived in the city would he have been so good at tracking? Would he have been able to track at all?

. Phil's mother was non-Aboriginal. What tells us in the story that she understood her husband and son? (p.81)

- c) Could you write down a list of all the things Phil would have to know to be a good tracker?
- d) Draw, paint or model the scene when Phil found the child.
- e) Does the author like Aborigines? How do you know?
- f) Write down how you would have felt if Phil had been a friend of yours.

STORIES AND POEMS

Another way of using literature is to select an issue and study a variety of stories/poems which reflect on that issue. Some issues which Aborigines have expressed concern about are: the struggle for a decent life-style in urban/country areas; the struggle to have their own land; the struggle to retain their own identity; the responsibility of the community to the young; the search for peace; the relationships with parents, and friendship.

In the following section I will suggest ways of using stories and poems related to the issues of life-style, land rights and Aboriginal identity.

Objectives

- To discuss these issues when suitable opportunities arise during literature presentations. Undoubtedly a sensitive teacher will recognise the right time to expand on these areas. At times, newspaper items could be used as the basis for discussions: the *National Times* often has suitable articles which could be used to increase interest in reading 'more'.

Method

Methods will vary with the ways in which opportunities present themselves. Care should be taken to ensure that it is the students' reactions, and not the teacher's which become the focal point of the sessions.

Life-styles

From *Aliens in Their Land* -

Arandjera (David Forrest). Discuss how it is possible to have two such opposing views of somebody. Have Aborigines ever tried to explain themselves to others? Should they?

Place of the Throwing Stick (Frank Bryning). Discuss how the big gap in use/knowledge of modern technology has contributed/caused the difference in life-styles. Discuss the advantages/disadvantages of both 'technologies' and life-styles. List things from the non-Aboriginal technology/life-style which you think Aborigines could benefit by. List things from Aboriginal technology and life-style which the non-Aborigine could benefit by.

Black Girl (Judah Waten). Contrast the two life-styles. Were the Samuels succeeding in their battle? Do you think the author tells us which family groups seemed to be the happiest? Are material possessions important?

The Silky Oak (Vance Palmer). What do you think about Aborigines living with Europeans? Is it easier for some than for others? If Bob had kept his hands to himself, what might have been the outcome?

The Rabbiter (Judith Wright). Contrast Willow Green's life with 'the rabbiter', and her life in 'the camp'. What are the important factors of 'life-styles'? Do Aborigines and Europeans consider the same things important?

A Tree on Your Chest (Gordon Spencer). Discuss Darcy's experiences. Why did these events take place?

From My People

White man, Dark man; The Protectors; Intolerance; No More Boomerang; Aboriginal Charter of Rights and many more.

Land Rights

From Aliens in Their Land -

Pilgrimage (Mary Durack). Discuss the change that came over Friday as he "crossed the border between his greater tribal territory and his own 'little country'". Do non-Aborigines feel the same way about their land? (Could Aborigines explain the importance of their land to strangers? Do girls feel the same way about it?)

From *My People* -

We Are Going; Last of His Tribe; Acacia Ridge; Whynot Street; Bora - (related to land); The Food Gatherers; A Song of Hope; The Dawn is at Hand; The Dispossessed; Gooboora, the Silent Pool; Hope; The Past; Time is Running Out.

Not all of the above poems refer directly to the land. They are, however, all bound to a way of thinking, doing and being of which the 'love and need of land' is one part.

There is useful reference material in Dix (1978), which is a discussion of the Aboriginal Heritage Act of 1972.

Aboriginal Identity

Background reference - Chapter 8, "Marginal Australians", by Hans Dagmar, in Howard (1978)

From *Aliens in Their Land* -

Place of the Throwing Stick (Frank Bryning). Discuss ways in which Aborigines can try to maintain elements of their culture which have contributed to the balance between 'man and nature'. For example, the traditional hunting methods. Does non-Aboriginal technology have any place in an Aboriginal society?

Kaijek the Songman (Xavier Herbert). Discuss the things which were of most importance to Kaijek and Ninyul. Could/should Aborigines find things, for example, 'money' which could be of importance

Pilgrimage (Mary Durack). Are the things which were important to Friday and his people still important for Aborigines. If not, why not?

The Only One Who Forgot (TAG Hungerford). Discuss the problems involved when non-Aborigines try to bring up Aborigines.

Conflict (Chris Gardener). Do part-coloured people have the same identity problems as full-bloods? You could compare Darcy's problems in Gordon Spencer's *A Tree on Your Chest*.

From *My People*

Let Us Not Be Bitter; Sounds Assail Me; Dark Unmarried Mothers; Last of His Tribe; Whynot Street; The Unhappy Race; Corroboree; Stone Age; Assimilation - No!; Integration - Yes!

No More Boomerang; Aboriginal Charter of Rights; The Food Gatherers; A Song of Hope; Spinners; The Dawn Is at Hand; Colour Bar; Tribal Justice; Artist Son; Son of Mine; Namatjira; Understand Old One; Gooboora, the Silent Pool; Cookalingee; We Are Going; United We Win; Civilization; Return to Nature; I am Proud.

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