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THE ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

A SIMPLE RESPONSE TO COMPLEX CONDITIONS

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The Aboriginal Community College has been called a simple response to a complex set of conditions. It is perhaps this very simplicity that makes it so difficult for many people used to traditional structures and methods in education to understand. We are often asked something like "Is it a 'white' institution or an Aboriginal one?" In fact, fundamentally it is first of all a human one based on respect for the individual adult person as he is (or, if you prefer the terminology of the academic literature, Carl Rogers' "unconditional positive regard").

In this article, then, I want to consider the simplicity of the response to the conditions presented as the educational problems and the implications of this response for operating an adult education program and for government and management of the institution.

CONDITIONS OF OPPRESSION

The conditions that present as the educational problems for the College to deal with are those typically associated with long-term oppression on a community of people and on the individuals in the community. I won't document these in detail here, but will merely sketch them broadly by way of setting the scene.

The facts of life for any ordinary Aboriginal person include the following:

1. The mainstream school systems do not cater for him (or really for anyone who is culturally or racially different from white middle-class Anglo-Australians). So he has at least three times the chance of anyone else of "dropping out" before he is 16. Only two or three Aboriginal children have completed Year 12 at a matriculation level in South Australia in the past six years.

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2. His chance of being unemployed is at least 50%, even at times of low unemployment in the rest of the community. As a teenager his chances of finding regular work are almost nil, and there is no chance at all that he will see one of his own race in professional roles such as dentists, surveyors, scientists, or medical practitioners - or any role requiring tertiary qualifications (except for a small number of Aboriginal solicitors and qualified teachers, and a few dozen qualified social workers, many of whom are unemployed).
3. His chances of coming in conflict with "the law" and its administrators are very much greater than for other people - and often without knowing the reasons and without knowing how to handle the laws' administrators.
4. The dispossession that took place during the last two hundred years and the manner of it are still real and important in the consciousness of many Aboriginal people - and humiliating.
5. Racism is real, and humiliating experiences with non-Aboriginal people are frequent occurrences.

Alienation is a dominant feature in the lives of most Aboriginal people, especially those who are not part of the traditional lore. Alienation is a complex sense of not belonging and alienation from mainstream Australian society is real and dominant in the consciousness of most Aboriginal people and influences all of their perceptions and behaviour. For most people alienation is a complex set of feelings: a feeling of not being good enough; of not having the opportunities for advancement, self-fulfilment, justice and satisfaction that others have; a feeling of not understanding and not being understood; of not being able to communicate outside of one's own small group and of not being listened to even if one tried to communicate; a feeling or belief that one does not have control of one's own destiny; that others have the control; a feeling of powerlessness and frustration. And somehow all of this is intrinsically related to being Aboriginal.

A SIMPLE RESPONSE

The College's response to this set of conditions is really simple and obvious. It is based on respect for each person as an individual adult human being, as he is at this moment, regardless of his past or his future - in the terms of Carl Rogers, "unconditional positive regard" for the individual person. However, application of

this response becomes a complex process when the situation is created in which the individual can feel this respect, without being humiliated or patronized in any way, and in which he can know his absolute equality with everyone else for no reason other than for being another human being. Having created this situation in which the individual can know he is respectable and respected and can be successful, the program must then allow him to act on the basis of this respect to work towards a future that he establishes for himself.

There is little new in this basic response, except in education and race relations: it is how most of us aspire to treat the fellow human beings in our own group every day of our lives. Yet it is not how education traditionally operates. As teachers we profess to know what our students need if they are to have satisfying lives or if they are to be good citizens, good employees, or whatever: We know - they (the students) don't know. And *we* will give *them* what they need to be better people. This attitude assumes a superiority on the part of the teacher and an inferiority on the part of the student - not the equality as a fellow human being that marks respect for the individual, that in fact liberates him so that he can act as an independent adult. This superior-inferior approach was the one usually taken by European colonials towards racially and culturally different people, and is the approach that pervades Aboriginal-white relationships in Australia even now.

If, in education, there is to be respect for the individual adult, then anything that suggests inequality suggests lack of respect and is not congruent with an educational context. At this point it is worth noting that I have been referring to respect for adult human beings on the basis of their adulthood and thus about adult education. It seems that the same equality does not exist between children and adults and the respect of adults for children has a different basis: greater knowledge, experience, and power are assumed of adults by both adults and children and this is intrinsic in adult-child relationships. This has major implications for education and the differences between adult and juvenile education.

BEING ADULT

If our response to the social and psychological conditions of oppression is to start from the basis of respect due to the adult human being, then we need to understand what it means to be an equal adult - especially what differentiates an equal adult from a child or a person without equality.

It seems to me that the most basic need for any human being is to seek greater personal adequacy - or, in the terms of humanist psychology, to seek to maintain and enhance the phenomenal or perceived self. To do this, a person needs to feel that he has power over himself, that he has the power to determine his own destiny, that he can exercise a great deal of control over his immediate environment.

So being an adult implies that a person makes decisions for himself, especially those that determine his life's directions; that he takes responsibility for the decisions he makes and his behaviour and actions on the basis of his decisions even if they are the wrong ones; that he can make mistakes and bear the consequences of them. In brief, an adult does things for himself rather than having things done for him; he takes decisions rather than having decisions taken for him; and he receives the same respect as is due to others simply on the basis of being an adult human being.

IMPLICATIONS

It is one thing to say that we must respect the individual person; but another thing to follow through the logical consequences of this in designing an educational program and the institution in which it operates. For example, it suggests that it is the student who knows best where he wants to go in life and the student who decides what he should be learning in the College. What, though, if his experience is so limited that he cannot know the opportunities that exist for him? And what if he wants to undertake studies that have doubtful relevance to his goals or are too easy or too hard for him? Is there really a role for the professional educator? What if what an individual wants to do conflicts with the interests or welfare of the other students or staff even though it may be in his own interest? And what is the relation between the individual's needs, interests and aspirations and those of the community with which he identifies?

These are the kinds of questions that create complexity in the educational program. But generally they can be resolved, as the management and operations of the Aboriginal Community College demonstrate. I will now look at some of the implications of the basic response to the conditions of oppression and at their effect on the College's management and operations.

1. Respect for the individual implies respect for the race and culture of which he is a part and for the community or group with which he identifies. For Aboriginal people belonging to a group which has been denigrated largely on the basis of

their race and culture this involves a major change. In the College, it often has quite a dramatic and immediate effect: Aboriginality receives absolute respect whereas elsewhere it has often received disrespect. One student said, "Out in the street or in the bus, people stare at us. Here, we're all the same. We're at home". Other students have said, once they have accepted that Aboriginal society and culture can be respected, "For the first time in my life I am proud of my black skin".

2. Ultimately the student must define his own directions in life and thus his own program. This does not remove responsibility from the College and its professional staff in this: quite to the contrary, it imposes a heavy onus on them to stimulate, question, counsel and provide experiences that will enable the student to do this on the basis of real experience and real knowledge and thought, and not on the basis of assumptions, prejudices or hunches. So the College's purpose and aim have been defined in this way:

The College seeks to provide opportunities for Aboriginal people to continue their education in areas that are meaningful to them. In doing this, it has to provide the time, space and resources that will enable them to make discoveries about themselves, their heritage, and their environment, and to move in directions that they establish as relevant to themselves and/or their community.

So the staff have to assist the student to define his directions and then to define a program that will enable him to achieve his goals. In a disagreement between the staff and a student in this, ultimately the student's decision must prevail: what he does can only be acceptable to him if it is congruent with his perceptions of his directions and what will help him along the way. If he makes a mistake in this, he will have to bear the consequences as any adult does in any decision he makes. At least, if he has been able to maintain his adulthood he is more likely to recover from an error made than if he is forced to submit to a program that he believes is irrelevant to him.

3. Thus the professional staff member's responsibility is to provide experiences, to advise, to counsel, to encourage, to act as a resource for information and, the student having defined his program to help him to work through it without

giving in when the going gets hard and without avoiding key elements that may be unpleasant or difficult. As well, he co-ordinates all of the individual programs so that, for purposes of economy and efficiency, most students operate in small groups rather than solely as individuals, even though each has an individual program. And at times he has to make the hard decision as to whether it can be justified to allow a particular person to hold a full-time place in the program and receive a full-time student's allowance when there are often people waiting to enrol and limited funds available.

4. Though each person is an individual, each is also a member of various social groups, including the student group, the College community of staff and students, the Aboriginal community, and the Australian community. At times the goals and interests of individuals may be in conflict with the goals of one or other of the groups he identifies with. Generally, the relationship between individual and group goals and the need at times to sublimate the former to the latter has to be learnt, and various means are used to do this. For example, all students take part in the Student Body, which makes decisions affecting the students as a group. Field studies and workshops are important where the students and staff live together as a group, not only studying Aboriginal culture, photography, or art etc., but also taking decisions and carrying out actions to maintain the welfare of the group.
5. The education needs presented may not fit into traditional education 'boxes': it is necessary that the College be able to look at what students come to say they need to do, assess this and devise experiences, activities and courses to satisfy these needs. A flexible approach to course definition, programming and timetabling is necessary. For example, in 1980, faced with the inevitability that some students would not be able to proceed to tertiary studies or find suitable employment, the Project Group was established. Students in this group are looking to be involved in community work or self-employment on either a paid employment, voluntary or profit basis. Through taking part in individual projects such as crafts, photography, community organizations, and pre-schools they develop personal businesses or the skills required for work in community groups.

6. Education is one of the major forces determining the directions not only of individuals but also of communities. The respect due to individuals is also due to the communities of which they are members. Just as the individual must have the right to make the decisions that affect himself (with due regard to the effect he will have on the groups of which he is a member) so the community must have the right to make the decisions affecting it, either directly or through its representatives. People outside the community cannot make decisions for it, even if they think they know better than the community members. This is, of course, the essence of the community concept in education. Its implications are wide-ranging in the College:
- a) The College's Management Committee has had an Aboriginal majority since 1973 and the policy was established five years ago that it should have a Council that would be all Aboriginal. By January 1982, this will become a reality, with the College an independent institution under the general 'umbrella' of the Tertiary Education Authority of South Australia; and governed by an incorporated Council that will be all Aboriginal except for a TEASA representative.
 - b) Students are represented on the Management Committee and all of its sub-committees (e.g. for staff and student selection).
 - c) The Student Body is a policy-making body, responsible for all decisions that affect the current students as a group; e.g. any rules needed; attendance and discipline; student functions and facilities; and selection of their representatives on the Management Committee.
 - d) In the College, the students can be seen as one group, and the staff another. As the students identification widens, so each year the College comes to be seen as a single group or community. Thus more and more decisions are made in staff/student meetings, with staff and students in one group as equals determining policies that affect day-to-day operations of the whole College.
 - e) The principal and staff are servants of the Aboriginal community, carrying out its policies, seeking to achieve its aims as expressed through the Management Committee, Student Body, and individual students. Desirably, as many

as possible of the staff will be Aboriginal from the community the College serves, since it is important for a mature community to see itself, and to be seen, as doing things for itself rather than as having things done for it. Recently I gave a talk to a group of middle-class white business and professional men and was surprised to see my reference to four Aboriginal programs working with Aboriginal people reported as four programs "caring for" Aboriginal people - the implications of this error clearly indicated the respect in which Aboriginal people were held!

- f) Once the community or its members have defined their needs or have newly differentiated certain needs, it is important that the programs be established to satisfy them. Apart from the implied disrespect if this does not happen ("We know better than you what you need"), the inability to proceed along paths that will lead to greater adequacy eventually leads to frustration and disillusionment. So in the College the four programs described below have now operated for nearly five years without any increase in enrolments and without adding other programs such as a School-leavers Program and an Advanced Studies Program to lead to matriculation, although community demands for those have been increasing. Until recently, indecision on the part of the government and its bureaucracy in determining long-term sources of funds and implementing the agreement to establish the College as an independent, autonomous institution under an Aboriginal Council prevented long-term planning and expansion of current operations to cater for more than the 30% of present applicants for enrolment each year. It has been impossible to establish additional programs to cater for other sections of the community in spite of the demands for them, with the result that the only chance many people see to advance themselves is being denied them.

7. Finally, educational development can take place only in an atmosphere of warmth and relaxed acceptance. This atmosphere creates the freedom in which individuals can more freely express themselves, their aspirations and needs and can go about pursuing them. One role of the staff is to help create this atmosphere by careful attention to interpersonal relationships and, especially early in any program, creating activities and situations where these relationships can develop with mutual concern and respect for each person (student or staff) for what he is at any moment.

CURRENT PROGRAMS

In the final part of this article, I want to outline how the needs and interests of the present students are grouped for purposes of organizing operations. In reading this it is important to bear in mind that because of the heavy demand from Aboriginal people to enrol in the College we only accept people who are unable to enrol elsewhere with any reasonable chance of success. The present needs and interests fall into four main programs. These are:

- a) *The Comprehensive Studies Program* allows people to identify their goals and develop socially and personally to the stage where they can begin to independently pursue them. The program is drawn up in the first instance to meet the individual student's social and personality needs. As his goals and interests develop and become clearer, individual programs are drawn up. The programs usually include cultural and academic studies, expressive activities, basic vocational skill training, work orientation and work experience, and community education.
- b) *The Specific Studies Program* is for those having the social and personality development and the clear knowledge of their goals to go ahead, but requiring certain academic or pre-vocational skills. This program is more formally orientated, with each student pursuing a narrow range of academic or vocational courses, either to gain the prerequisites necessary to enrol in a tertiary or vocational institution or to obtain a vocational qualification that they could not obtain elsewhere. In some cases, students may enrol for courses in the Open College of the Department of Further Education or for a tertiary or other special course in another institution as part of their normal College program. Students in the Project Group described above are in this program also, as are students from traditional communities who come to the College with relatively clearly defined academic or vocational training needs defined by themselves and the Council of their community.
- c) *The Pre-Vocational Training Program*, which aims at enabling young people from 15 to 18 years, whose unsatisfactory school experiences limit their employment opportunities, to compete for apprenticeships or training for other skilled jobs. The program includes opportunities for personal, cultural and social development, and the acquisition of relevant academic and trade-related vocational knowledge and skills. It is the only program in the College with an academic prerequisite for entry: young people are enrolled on the assumption that they

will have a reasonable chance of obtaining an apprenticeship or other skilled training given nine months' intensive academic and vocational training.

- d) The community education program of the *Aboriginal Studies Teaching and Resource Unit* aims principally at developing greater cross-cultural understanding in the general community. This program enables students to participate in the work of the College's Aboriginal Studies Teaching and Resource Unit on its visits to schools, institutions and community groups. Such visits aim at changing attitudes of non-Aborigines towards Aboriginal people, developing a greater knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture and society, and providing students with opportunities to meet and talk with non-Aboriginal people. The Unit is also a resource centre providing information and opinions on Aboriginal matters from Aboriginal people, curriculum information for teachers and students, and guidance to school teachers who are seeking to develop their own Aboriginal Studies programs. It is one of the few places in Australia where this advice can be obtained, not only from the 'white' curriculum expert, but also and at the same time from the Aboriginal person sensitive to the feelings and aspirations of his own people.

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