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THE UNIQUENESS OF THE CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL STUDIES IN MUSIC

*Ben L. Yengi

The University of Adelaide has taken a unique step in Aboriginal relations by establishing a Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music (C.A.S.M.) in which Tribal Elders have been given the status of visiting lecturers. (Uni. of Adelaide, 1975) A Committee, headed by the Deputy Vice Chancellor, in 1976 summarised the results of their discussions on the position of the C.A.S.M. program in the University of Adelaide as follows:

1. There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Centre provides a unique service not only for University students in their academic studies by enabling them to gain insights into the Australian Aboriginal culture...but also in the undertaking and development of teaching methods through the opportunities offered by first hand contact with the Aboriginal Elders as well as urbanized Aborigines. It is felt that this program provides a very real means of assisting the establishment of an Aboriginal identity and that there are increasing signs of enthusiasm for the work of the Centre and a growing awareness of its importance for both Aborigines and whites. Its progress is apparently being watched very carefully throughout Australia and its success or failure could have far-reaching implications.
2. The recognition by the University of the Tribal Elders as teachers is said to play a very vital role in the success of the Centre's activities. This is described as a real break-through in cross-cultural communication and it is said that the music program provides great hope for the Aboriginal community. Again the Aboriginal students are attracted to the Centre, not only by the presence of the Tribal Elders but also by the atmosphere of the Centre where students are allowed to develop at their own rate. This is contrasted with the situation at Flinders Street School of Music where it is said that there is a clear element of competitiveness.

(Provins *et al*, 1976, p. 1)

* Mr Ben L. Yengi, Administrator, Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, University of Adelaide, G.P.O.Box 498, Adelaide, 5001

The Chairman of C.A.S.M.'s main committee also contended in his position paper that:

The input into a unique ethnomusicological programme by acknowledged traditional experts in the particular field is a rare occurrence. Aboriginal Tribal Elders directly contributing to studies for a degree of Bachelor of Music is not experienced anywhere else in Australia or the world.
(Gillissen, 1978, p.4)

The recognition of Aboriginal Elders as academics in their own right, as well as the use of their methods of teaching, would certainly make one claim that C.A.S.M. is a unique educational establishment within the traditional 'conservative' elements of the University. However, the position of C.A.S.M. within the University is still being questioned, especially by those academics who perhaps are more interested in their own personal goals rather than the 'fringe' activities of the University and its community.

THE ACADEMIC MERIT OF C.A.S.M.

The chairman of C.A.S.M.'s main committee, in his position paper of 1978, claimed that:

There are continued hints that the programme, or at least part of it, is not academic. It seems therefore necessary to point out that the programme should be evaluated against the perhaps somewhat unusual background of the realities of the Centre, as approved by the University.

(Gillissen, 1978, p.4)

On many occasions the studies carried out by urban Aborigines at C.A.S.M. have been criticized as having no academic merit. I feel, however, that those who criticize in this way are either (a) not prepared to see the valuable research work which has been done by the students from other institutions who work with the urban blacks at C.A.S.M., or (b) prefer to see urban Aborigines used simply as research subjects. Most of this type of research bears little positive fruit for the Aboriginal community, because the Aborigines are not directly involved in discussions concerning the substance and purpose of the research, as is the case at C.A.S.M. Gillissen offers a clear picture of the academic merit of C.A.S.M. activities, especially the urban component of the Centre, when he says that:

...it is also necessary to see the urban Aboriginal musical activities - in particular through the orchestra - as an identifiable sub-cultural entity in its own right. They provide further input into the academic cross-cultural programme in addition to contributing to their own socio/educational advancement. Consequently, neither the Tribal Elders, nor the Aboriginal community, nor the ethnomusicological part of the degree of Bachelor of Music should be considered in isolation. There is thus a finely balanced educational eco-system. (Gillissen, 1978, p.5)

The academic merit of C.A.S.M. in the University has been further confirmed by the former Chairman of the Music Department, who claimed in his letter to Gillissen that:

The provision of Aboriginal singing in Practical Studies and of projects in Ethnomusicological areas has been of the greatest value to our degree students. There can be no doubt about the merit of these activities or of their worth to the students who have benefitted from them.

(Gillissen, 1978, p.6)

From the above claims concerning the merits of the C.A.S.M. program, Gillissen concluded in his position paper that:

...the University, with its professed commitment to the community, cannot withdraw from this programme. In addition, the eyes of the community in Australia and abroad are focused on the rapid evolving nature of Aboriginal identity. The University is in a unique position, at this crucial stage of the moral and intellectual re-assessment of the relationships between the two cultures, to contribute and lead the way. For this to happen things cannot be left alone with a 'business as usual' attitude. Commitment, both financially and structurally, must back up this potential.

(Gillissen, 1978, p.6)

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND LEARNING

The Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music is unique in two special ways. Firstly, it utilizes traditional Aboriginal methods of learning; this approach is now a firmly established practice. Secondly, it gives priority to the process of developing open communication and rapport between students and teachers. Consequently, the students grow in confidence and maturity, and at the same time

are increasingly able to avoid feelings of worthlessness, frustration and failure.

In the past, life for most of the students who come to the Centre has been an infinite process of frustration, pain and intimidation from teachers, parents, authority figures and peers. Even the materials they work with, such as books, can serve to emphasize their sense of failure. Eventually much of this process of frustration, pain and intimidation becomes internalised, so that the student perpetually feels incompetent and in most cases develops behaviours directed toward avoidance of learning, that is, absenteeism, truancy, trouble in the classroom, etc. Marked internal and external bodily changes occur when an organism undergoes pain. Solomon and Wynne (1954), in their extensive investigation of avoidance learning in dogs under severely painful shock, report that reactions to pain are characterized by automatic-nervous-system discharge, skeletal motor discharge, neuroendocrine discharge, and higher central-nervous-system activity. Pain is thought to arouse or drive the individual to activity (Birch & Veroff, 1966). Worthwhile and meaningful learning cannot take place while the student is hurting, depressed, frightened, embarrassed, ashamed, angry, confused or bored. Such feelings do not foster a positive self-image, confidence or a healthy mind to learn. C.A.S.M.'s community spirit and relaxed atmosphere helps to generate in its students a sense of competence and security, which is essential for effective and fruitful learning. Tutors are encouraged to utilize the traditional Aboriginal method of learning whereby hurtful criticism is minimised, and material to be learnt is presented in small quantities for thorough evaluation.

In effect, learning takes place through a process of identification and assimilation whereby the new experiences to be learnt are linked with the old experiences of the first initiation into the customs and traditions of the tribe. Thus the students are more able to avoid feelings of boredom, frustration, anxiety and despair which often occur when they are forced to 'learn' without direct reference to familiar experiences and knowledge.

BEGIN AT THE KNOWN REFERENCE POINT

The method of teaching at C.A.S.M. is not based on 'conditioning' or 'remedial concepts'. Often material learned through conditioning is remembered in too rigid a form to be useful, and is easily forgotten as 'irrelevant' to new situations. To avoid conditioned learning, and to ensure that intended communication occurs, important ideas need to be repeated in several different ways. With each repetition new reference points for the information are established,

and the learner has another chance to relate the new idea to previously understood material. In order to work most effectively with the students on this, C.A.S.M. tutors need to spend much more time in understanding the context from which a student reasons, even though this may take a whole term or more. For example, Carter, a former tutor at C.A.S.M., made this claim in his teaching experience article:

Learning notation is a secondary consideration. Students are directed to watch carefully and play what they can hear going on around them. After a while, as long as two years in some cases, reading notes becomes relevant. Prior to this, any pressure to make the student begin to read seemed to do more harm than good. We lost many students in the early days because of doing just this. Once they discover for themselves the joy of playing, then they respond spontaneously to the idea of reading. Once a child has had the first meaningful musical experience, the change in his general behaviour is quite marked. Children with the general appearance of an injured or frightened dog become more outgoing. One girl, previously a complete failure at school, topped her class. Another child, began to talk for the first time to the volunteer driver who brought him to his lesson Carter, 1975, p.2)

It is important at the Centre that all new learning builds on the *strengths* that the students already possess. Tutors at C.A.S.M. are encouraged to be aware of both the strengths and weaknesses of all students, and to build strong patterns of success upon the material the students already know well. The material which is known to the students gives them ammunition to meet and master new challenges.

The success of the teaching methods practised at C.A.S.M. are manifested especially when working with individuals or small groups.

MOTIVATION

Learning is basically a pleasurable process, even though it requires consistent discipline. People initially have an innate eagerness to learn, and are curious to obtain new ideas, experiences and skills. Passivity is more a characteristic of non-living matter than of human beings.

Often in conferences, meetings, seminars and educational institutions, it is claimed that Aboriginal students lack motivation. Those who make such claims, however, do not always explore the reasons

which lie behind this apparent lack of motivation. Because of the apparent lack of motivation. Because of the strain and distress and lack of encouragement and understanding shown in other educational institutions, their innate eagerness to learn is squashed.

From the standpoint of motivation theory, it is important to find the positive or negative incentive value of various consequences under various conditions. Food, water, sexual mates, interesting stimuli, success, social interaction, etc., are goals thought to have positive incentive value. Physical hurts, failure, social isolation and inadequate reward can be limited as events generally having negative incentive value. (Birch & Veroff, 1966, p.8)

When a student is not angry, frightened, embarrassed, or feeling guilty, his innate curiosity is readily apparent. C.A.S.M. endeavours to foster conditions which minimize strain or distress by using Auntie Leila's mothering skills and disciplines which make students take a closer look at their problem. The tutors are also flexible and reassuring in both their lessons and assessment procedures.

INTIMACY AND INFORMALITY AT C.A.S.M.

C.A.S.M. endeavours to encourage students to communicate freely in joint staff and student meetings. The students are also encouraged to consider staff as their 'peers': all in the same 'learning' boat endeavouring to search for a hidden treasure of knowledge. The use of surnames is discouraged in order to minimize feelings of superiority and inferiority. It has been found that this intimacy and informality tends to generate a healthy spirit of co-operation, learning, security and a strong desire to achieve a set goal.

As stated earlier, the teaching methods at C.A.S.M. have their roots in the methods used by tribal Aboriginal Elders. Because they can be modified to suit a wide variety of situations which may occur at C.A.S.M., its uniqueness as an educational institution is clearly marked.

CONCLUSION

The C.A.S.M. program is not only unique in its teaching methods, which are based on traditional Aboriginal methods of teaching, but also unique in the sense that no other program exists in Australian universities with such a cross-cultural emphasis which

draws benefits from both academic and non-academic learning experiences.

The Aboriginal community stands to gain from having open access to University resources through C.A.S.M., and similarly, the University deserves a high reputation for its pioneering work in such a unique program. As yet, the University still needs to establish a real commitment to the program, both financially and structurally. It is a program which strongly challenges the deep feelings of intellectuals towards minority groups who are on the low ladder of educational achievement. It presents a real challenge to the intellectuals to elevate the low educational status of the Black Australian, since the schools seem to have failed in their role.

The Australian community at large stands to benefit from C.A.S.M. because of the learning experiences of the black and white students at the Centre. These experiences may lead to a better understanding and appreciation of the Australian Aboriginal culture. C.A.S.M. music students acquire their music knowledge partly to share their experiences and feelings with the Australian community at large and to gain personal satisfaction and some monetary gains.

C.A.S.M. could also benefit student teachers by presenting teaching methods which can be used in a multi-cultural society, especially for those students who desire to work among the Australian Aborigines.

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