



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

In 2022 *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* transitioned to fully Open Access and this article is available for use under the license conditions below.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

ABORIGINAL STUDIES

FOR ABORIGINAL ADULTS

D.V. Goldsworthy

In recent years full-time bridging or 'continuing' education programs for Aboriginal adults have been developed in technical colleges throughout Western Australia. These programs, known as TAFE Aboriginal Access Courses, have expanded rapidly and in 1981 were catering for over 200 Aboriginal students in seven technical colleges. Among the findings of a recent evaluation of these courses (Goldsworthy *et al*, 1981) was that a large number of students wanted an increased Aboriginal component within their courses.

While issues of specific interest to Aboriginal students permeate the entire Aboriginal Access programs, it was felt that the development of a unit of Aboriginal Studies for inclusion in the Access Courses would be the most pragmatic way of meeting this student need. A steering committee was formed to develop this unit comprising two educators of Aboriginal descent, an Aboriginal Access Curriculum Officer and a lecturer from one of the TAFE Aboriginal Access Courses.

CURRICULUM CONSIDERATIONS

Prior to starting work on this project a literature review was undertaken. This revealed that while many groups have talked about the need for Aboriginal Studies Units for Aboriginal adults few, if any, such units have been developed, implemented or documented. While this meant that the group was unable to learn from the mistakes of others, the review provided further stimulus for the project. In addition, the literature review helped the group identify and focus on the following curriculum constraints.

TEACHERS

An Aboriginal Studies Unit should be taught by an Aboriginal person. As one of the aims of Aboriginal Access Courses is to increase students' pride in their Aboriginal identity it would be

* Mr David Goldsworthy, Education Officer, Technical Education Div.
Education Department, Western Australia.

paradoxical to teach Aboriginal Studies using predominantly non-Aboriginal staff. As one Aboriginal student commented during the evaluation of the TAFE Aboriginal Access Course (Goldsworthy *et al*, 1981), "It seemed funny, you know, hearing about these things from a white person".

While, undoubtedly, there is much Aboriginal people can learn about their own cultural heritage from non-Aboriginal people skilled in areas of archaeology, art, anthropology, language and history, Aboriginal people may be resistant to learning from non-Aborigines unless they have already learned to value their own culture. If people feel proud and sure of their cultural heritage they are likely to appreciate and value the insights and ideas of outsiders. If they are uncertain about the value of this heritage, comments by outsiders are likely to be seen as further examples of cultural imperialism. As Colin Bourke (1979) argues

at the moment, to have non-Aboriginal people teaching Aboriginal culture would be the final step in ensuring total white domination over all that is Aboriginal in this country.

(C. Bourke, 1979, p.63)

TIMETABLE

The TAFE Aboriginal Access Courses are organised such that the mornings are devoted to the acquisition of academic skills in the areas of Mathematics and Communication and the afternoon to social, vocational and developmental activities. The Aboriginal Studies would function as one of the afternoon subjects and so occupy a 2-hour time slot. As students enter the Aboriginal Access Courses at the beginning of each term and stay an average two terms, the time span on which any unit is based is the term, i.e. from 12 to 14 weeks. The Aboriginal Studies Unit had, therefore, to be designed as a one afternoon a week, one-term course.

VENUES

Although TAFE Aboriginal Access Courses first began functioning in metropolitan technical colleges, the demand from Aboriginal people living in country areas has resulted in courses starting up in several country technical colleges. These country colleges do not have access to the same resources, such as libraries and museums, as metropolitan courses. As a result, an Aboriginal Studies Unit, if it was to be useable in these country centres, had to be fairly self-contained and provide most of the reference materials needed.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Although the vast majority of Aboriginal students enrolling in Aboriginal Access Courses are from the southern half of Western Australia, the groups are exceedingly varied in ages, abilities and interest. Some students are only able to read at about a mid-primary level, others are potential Tertiary Admittance Examination students. Some have been out of school for only a year, whilst others are grandparents who have had no schooling for over thirty years. Some consider that learning about Aboriginal issues is a waste of time. Others want to become immersed in studies of their culture. These educational and attitudinal differences mean that the course had to be able to be tackled by Aboriginal students at a variety of different academic levels. In addition, it had to be capable of stimulating the interest of those students who were reluctant to study their own culture.

VALUING KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned previously, an aim of the TAFE Aboriginal Access Course is to foster students' pride in their Aboriginal identity. In order to do this, the Aboriginal Studies Course had to avoid a top-down view of knowledge, i.e. knowledge provided by 'experts'. Students, as members of the Aboriginal community, already have a great deal of knowledge about their culture. Albeit much of this knowledge would rarely have been articulated and thought about. Nevertheless, by their life experiences and through their contact with older Aboriginal people, students have acquired much information and many ideas which form the basis for future learning. Within the Aboriginal Studies Course teaching strategies had to be adopted which allowed students the opportunity to realise that their own 'knowledge' is of value.

COURSE CONTENT

An investigation of Aboriginal Studies Courses created for the non-Aboriginal community indicated a tendency to start with Traditional Aboriginal Culture and progress forward historically into the contemporary scene. For example, the South Australian Aboriginal Studies Curriculum Committee (1980) claims that every child in the State should be aware of:

- Traditional tribal life: the Australia-wide similarities of its religious, ethical, social, physical and technological aspects, and the variations on the theme as a result of the particular ecological niche of each group.

- . The extent and nature of Aboriginal occupation of Australia.
- . The nature of the culture clash arising from white conquest and the results of this.
- . The variety of experiences of lifestyle within the Aboriginal community today.

However, while this approach may be an appropriate one to use with non-Aboriginal people, it was not felt to be suitable for Aboriginal groups.

For students in the Access Courses traditional Aboriginal culture appeared to be almost as remote and alien as it is to non-Aboriginal students. It seemed more logical and more likely to stimulate interest if issues of central relevance to the Aboriginal student today, for example the recent history of his people and the changing contemporary world, provided the basis for the curriculum. Undoubtedly some students would choose to learn more about traditional lifestyles and the world of the first Australians. However, this was more likely to emerge out of a growing interest in, and expanding knowledge of, their current position as Aborigines within the wider Australian society.

CURRICULUM ORIENTATION

In order to accommodate these factors the course was designed so that students would be encouraged to negotiate their own curriculum.

TEACHING STRATEGY

The teacher conducting the unit is generally expected to act as a catalyst or facilitator rather than as a traditional lecturer. For many students this approach will be a relatively new one and it is recommended that, at least initially, teachers provide students with a fairly systematic introduction to the approach.

A potentially useful framework in which students can negotiate their own curriculum is one proposed by Boomer (1979).

Step 1 - Student group and lecturer negotiate areas of interest.

Step 2 - Tasks are defined and goals set.

Step 3 - Student collects information.

- Step 4 - Information clarified and checked for accuracy.
- Step 5 - Information organised.
- Step 6 - Report produced and delivered to student group.
- Step 7 - After discussion project reviewed.
- Step 8 - Student critically reflects on what he/she has learned.

This approach offers a different mode of learning from other parts of the Aboriginal Access Course and provides an opportunity for combining a wider variety of skills. Thus, in a project a student may be involved in practising research skills, communication, art and even, through using statistics and graphs, mathematical skills. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with research findings which suggest that adults learn best when they can be actively involved in work which they can relate to their own experiences (Rodgers 1971, MacDonald 1979, Knox 1979). Additionally, it is a democratic process and is consistent with the course philosophy of valuing student input.

CONTENT AREAS

The unit focuses initially on recent Aboriginal history and then, during the second half of a term, on contemporary Aboriginal activities.

Recent Aboriginal History

Since little Western Australian Aboriginal history has been recorded, the approach adopted for studying recent Aboriginal history is based on a use of local and/or oral history techniques. This approach encourages students to collect local historical paraphernalia (e.g. photographs, bottles, cards, letters), to conduct interviews with older inhabitants and to carry out research through State archives, local newspapers and magazines. Through these approaches it is expected that students will gain a greater insight into how history is collected, and recorded, and also an increased awareness of the problematic in history. Students will begin to perceive of history as something tenuous and man-made and not as something fixed and objective. For, as Marshall (1979) points out, through collecting local history

students are able to use illustrative local examples to facilitate understanding of the local culture and environment and to place the local area into perspective within the totality of human history.

Also in this section of the course the lecturers devote part of each session to providing students with an overview of one different aspect of contemporary Aboriginal activities, for example, Aboriginal Radio, Bilingual Education, Aboriginal Art.

Additionally, through research projects in these areas, it is envisaged that students will gain further opportunities to plan their own learning schedules and to meet academic deadlines. In this way the course will provide those students who wish to go on to further study with additional preparation for their continuing education.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

A teacher's guide has been produced for the course containing

- . a detailed description of aims and objectives
- . assessment procedures
- . content suggestion
- . pre-tests and post tests
- . resource lists.

IMPLEMENTATION

The unit was trialed in two metropolitan Aboriginal Access courses during term three 1981, using Aboriginal instructors, and a brief formative evaluation conducted.

The course received a mixed reception from students. This seemed, in general, to relate not to the course content but to individual student's perceptions of the value of studying Aboriginal issues.

All students were given the option of participating in the course. However, at one venue, the alternative option was sports and several students selected Aboriginal Studies as the lesser of two evils. These students were disruptive and the instructor had to act fairly forcibly to stop them disrupting the whole program. This type of situation is probably unavoidable. It does, however, indicate that among at least some Aboriginal students Aboriginal Studies will prove extremely unpopular. Furthermore, it suggests that caution should be adopted in making such a unit a compulsory part of TAFE courses for Aborigines.

Students were generally interested in the oral history and research components of the unit. However, because of their lack of any detailed knowledge of past events, they indicated an interest in receiving more direct tuition. In particular, they wanted more information on the lives of prominent Aborigines.

The Pre-Test was enjoyed by students and some commented that it had stimulated their interest. More such tests were requested. At one centre students suggested that a synopsis of the unit should be given to each student prior to commencement.

Further units of Aboriginal Studies were requested, especially one focusing on traditional aspects of Aboriginal culture.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Refinement of Existing Unit

From this initial feedback a number of changes have been made and the revised program will be again piloted in 1982. A student synopsis, extra tests and a collection of essays about prominent Aborigines have been produced to accompany the unit. Further feedback on the unit is being currently sought from such organisations as the National Aboriginal Education Committee.

Aboriginal Studies 2 : Tradition Under Pressure

The interest shown by students in Aboriginal Studies suggests that Aboriginal Access should consider developing a further unit of study. This unit could take, as its major focus, the changes occurring in remote Aboriginal communities and the effects these will have on urban groups. However, prior to commencing work on this project, it is recommended that discussions take place with adult students in the TAFE Aboriginal Access Courses to ascertain their areas of interest.

Aboriginal Lecturers

The shortage of qualified Aboriginal teachers makes it difficult to staff an Aboriginal Studies Unit. Those Aborigines who are qualified or are in training, are usually fully occupied during the day. In the metropolitan area it is possible, although still quite difficult, to find suitably trained or experienced Aboriginal people to conduct the course. However, in small country towns staffing such a unit is very difficult. One solution being considered is a residential weekend training course based in Perth. During such a course

a group of Aboriginal people from both Perth and country areas who are interested in part-time teaching, could be given training in basic teaching techniques and oral history recording. It would also provide a useful forum through which those Aboriginal people already involved in the unit could share their thoughts and experiences.

While such a training program would be expensive, its benefits to Aboriginal communities would be enormous and it would then make it possible for Aboriginal groups to run their own Aboriginal Studies Units in a variety of locations throughout the State.

REFERENCES

- Boomer, G., 1979: *Negotiating the Curriculum*. Language and Learning Unit, Education Department of South Australia, 1979.
- Bourke, C.: A clash of values: Aboriginal education. *Youth Policy*, 1979, 3, 59-63.
- Goldsworthy, D., Stafford, A., Dann, G., 1981: *TAFE Aboriginal Access Course: Evaluation Report*. Education Department of Western Australia.
- Knox, A.B., 1978: *Adult Development and Learning*. Josey and Bass, San Francisco.
- MacDonald, C., 1979: *Research Document into Individualised Learning*. Education Department, Technical Education DW, Melbourne, Vic.
- Marshall, J.: Oral history in the classroom. *History Teachers' Association of NSW Newsletter*, 1979, 3, 8-19.
- Rodger, J., 1971: *Adult Learning*. Penguin.
- South Australian Aboriginal Studies Curriculum Committee. *Aboriginal Studies Curriculum Committee*. Unpublished paper, 1980.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Catchpole, M.: Evaluation guidelines for Aboriginal Studies Courses. *The Aboriginal Child at School*, 1981, Vol.9 No.3, 23-29.
- Greenspan, K., & Brady, J.: *Planning Report: An Evaluation of Aboriginal Programmes at Watsonia Technical School, Northcote Technical School, Collingwood Technical School*. Education Dept. of Victoria, Planning Services, Melbourne, 1979.

National Aboriginal Education Committee: National Aboriginal Education Committee Policy. *Educational Innovations*, 1980, Vol.6 No.2, 4-6.

Ontario Ministry of Education, 1977: *People of Native Ancestry*. Ministry of Education, Ontario.

Walsh, P. & Guinness, C.: Aboriginal studies as community development. *National Aboriginal Studies Seminar, Alice Springs, July 24-27, 1978*. Alice Springs High School: Australian Schools Commission, 1978.

Victorian Aboriginal Education Consultative Group: *Aboriginal Studies Curriculum Project*. Monash University, undated.

.....

REPORT

ABORIGINAL FUTURES

A Review of Research and Developments
and Related Policies in the Education
of Aborigines

*A Summary

B.H. Watts

ERDC Report No. 33
AGPS Canberra 1982

Available AGPS Book Stores - \$12.40

*Microfiche of full report - \$11.00

.....