



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.

TO A TEACHER NEW TO ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

*M. Sharpe

Whenever I revisit an Aboriginal community where I am known (and there are several), despite the awkwardness of language and culture difference, I find a sense of relief. Here, while I re-adjust to Aboriginal English, Kriol or another language, I don't *have* to make conversation to fill up the silences. Silence is *allowed*.

I look back and realise I have come to this discovery instinctively and did not always feel at ease with silence. When in 1967 I camped by a billabong on a cattle station and a very shy 16 year old (now my 'younger sister') was sent to keep me company at night, I found it an imposition and awkward. I didn't know what to talk about and she didn't talk to me much. I would have been less lonely by myself! A teacher recently in the same area spoke of a woman who would call on him after school, and sit and have a cup of tea while he needed to get work done. Gradually he began to do his work while she sat, and realised in time that this was quite acceptable in her culture that he do so.

It is very seldom in our society that we are happy with silence in company with others. (Older married couples often don't talk as much to each other; while in some cases this indicates their being at ease with one another, it is not always so!). Not only do we avoid silences (especially so for women! - *some* men are more tactiurn), but we expect very prompt responses to questions and comments. I like a little longer to respond than many others; consequently in discussions someone else usually gets in first. But occasionally I find someone slower to respond than I find comfortable. If I get myself to wait just that little bit longer for a response, it is well worth it.

Aboriginal people, on the whole, like to think over what has been said for longer before replying. If there is also a language or dialect difference the response can take even longer. Often people from white society are not prepared to wait that extra time, and then we brand Aboriginal people as passive, shy, unresponsive or whatever. Extra *time* must be allowed. When it is, you can be amazed at the insights.

* Dr Margaret Sharpe, Lecturer, Armidale C.A.E.

In our society direct questions are used frequently in social situations. "Where do you come from?" "Oh yes, and what's your job?" "Do you know anything about that hill over there?" "What do you usually eat when you're out on the land?" "Do you use any of the traditional medicines?"

Direct questions in Aboriginal society are generally a no-no. To get information you must offer some. You need to indicate you know a little before asking for more. And our pedagogical device of asking questions to see if our students know what *they* know *we* know is very foreign.

How do we elicit information? If we want to know more about another person, we share information about ourselves, or we reframe general questions to include statements about what we already know: "You come from further west I think?" "I see Jack Gibbs has a job with Council - is that where you work?" "Old Mrs Ferguson told me there was a clever cave behind that hill." "The X people get goanna and lots of seeds on their land. (Is there goanna on yours?)" "Mrs Smith told me they used to make a tea drink with one of the plants up their way. They drank it for colds." Or, if we want information about child rearing practices, tell about your own, and your parents' and your grandparents'.

There has been an increasing amount of research of late on how different cultural groups use their languages. We know now that even when a group exchanges its traditional language for another, the group maintains many features of language style and use. We cannot assume that because an Aboriginal or migrant speaks good or passable English, that all communication problems will be easily solved. Diana Eades (1981, 1982) has done research on the use of English among Aboriginal people in south-east Queensland. It fits well with what I and others, working in various types of traditional language and in pidgins and creoles, have also discovered, and when we comment on it we find vigorous Aboriginal agreement. We also have research on differing communication styles in different ethnic groups - Tannen (1979) on Americans of Greek origin, Kochman (1974) on 'oral' and 'literate' communities in the U.S., and Kaplan (1972) on differing logic organisation in essays from tertiary students of different ethnic and language background.

But don't stereotype your clients, or yourself. Strangely, I find direct questioning as foreign to *my* nature as it is to many Aboriginal people. I tend to offer information and hope for some in exchange. I feel I'm intruding by using direct questions. So some

people in our society can categorise me as self-centred, talking of my own experience. On the other hand I *did* meet one 10-year-old Aboriginal girl in Alice Springs who was full of direct questions.

One last point, and I have finished. I have a feeling, in interacting with Aboriginal or working class and 'less schooled' people that, whereas we intelligentsia tend to discuss issues in the abstract, these groups deal with concrete manifestations of the abstractions. Intuitively I avoid abstractions in conversation with Aboriginal 'relations' or working class friends and relations, and I tell a number of concrete incidents to make the point I wish to emphasise. Of course, if there is also a language difference to battle with, it is also *easier* to talk about concrete events than abstract ideas. This applies as much between my middle class English acquired at home over 40 years ago, and working class English, Aboriginal forms of English (similar to working class English) or Kriol, or even (if I were fluent enough) in a traditional Aboriginal language.

So take time to think and listen to your new clients, even if your job is to *teach* them. If *you* are prepared to learn from *them*, they will be more prepared to learn from you.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Eades, D., 1981: That's our way of talking - Aborigines in south-east Queensland. *Black and White: Aboriginal Alternatives in Australia*. Special issue of *Social Alternatives*, 1,10, 1981.
- Eades, D., 1982: You gotta know how to talk...information seeking in south-east Queensland Aboriginal society. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 2:61-82.
- Eades, D., 1982: English as an Aboriginal language. Aboriginal Languages Association, *Papers Presented at the 2nd Meeting of the A.L.A.*, April 1982, pp.14-17.
- Kaplan, R.B., 1972: Cultural thoughts patterns in intercultural education. In K.Croft (Ed.): *Readings in English as a Second Language*. Cambridge, Mass., Winthrop.
- Kochman, T., 1974: Orality and literacy as factors of 'black' and 'white' communicative behavior. In J.Fishman (Gen.Ed), R.Cooper (Ed.) : *Language Attitudes 1. International Journal of Language* 3. Mouton, The Hague, pp.91-115.
- Nathan, Pam and Japanangka, Dick Leichleitner, 1983. *Health Business*. Heineman Education, Sydney.

Sharpe, M.C., 1982: Logic, style and emotion: a look at ethnic differences in language usages. Paper presented to TASAME, Hobart, 1982.

Tannen, D., 1979: Ethnicity as conversational style. Sociolinguistic Working Paper No.55, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, Austin, Texas.

von Sturmer, J., 1981: Talking with Aborigines. *A.I.A.S. Newsletter New Series* No.15, March 1981, pp.13.30.

.....

THE ABORIGINAL CHILD AT SCHOOL
A National Journal for Teachers of Aborigines

5 issues per year

Annual Subscription rates -

Within Australia (Individuals, Institutions, Libraries etc)...\$10.00
(Teacher Aides) \$ 5.00

Overseas rate\$12.50

Cheques etc payable to -

The Aboriginal Child at School
Aboriginal Education (Munro Street)
University of Queensland
ST LUCIA 4067

.....