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TEACHING AND LEARNING IN FOCUS AT YALATA COMMUNITY SCHOOL

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This article seeks to formalise and link my perception of the Yalata Aboriginal community's expressed values and objectives with their relationship to practice at Yalata Aboriginal School.

The values expressed here are those outlined by the Aboriginal community; they reflect the community's felt needs. The process of establishing such needs is open-ended and dynamic, not static. Those needs are expressed through opinions based on experience and resulting legitimate emotion. The community consciousness is now grounded in an emotional strength of purpose that demands the skill to *survive well*, built on years of frustration and degradation.

The stipulated values can be translated into realisable objectives achievable through appropriate teaching/learning practices.

This article seeks to identify those expressed community values (principles of worth), as related to the Yalata Community School, develop them as a series of attainable objectives, and discuss ways those objectives may be met. Further, it asks the questions, "What are the values/felt needs of the community" and "How does the school try to reflect these values?"

The core concept running through this article is that of taking control of one's life with authority.

The Yalata community was established in the 1950s as a direct result of atomic testing at Maralinga and Emu Junction, in South Australia's far west. The people were moved from Ooldea and placed, with prejudice, on a barren outcrop of limestone - with prejudice, because the need for a British atom bomb testing site took precedence over a people's ancestral home. The uninhabited, indeed virtually uninhabitable, land mass to which they were taken was subsequently called Yalata. It is a dry, dusty limestone area 200 km west of Ceduna, a short step removed from the Nullarbor Plain. Water is provided by a desalination plant and a pump/pipe system from a bore 8 km away.

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As a consequence of this action, feelings of disorientation, alienation, hopelessness, powerlessness and despair were cultivated over a period of 30 years. Further adding to this pattern of anomie, paternalism fostered regression into cultural anonymity. Over this period of time, basic tenets of Aboriginality such as self-worth, identity and power to make and enforce decisions were questioned by the Aboriginal people and gradually eroded.

For traditional people at Yalata, oral language is the prime method of cultural transmission. Art, music and dance do not have the same impact. Pitjantjatjara is the primary language; indeed, apart from the school situation, it is usually the only language used. The Yalata Pitjantjatjara language tradition is oral. Adequacy in reading and writing in Pitjantjatjara is non-existent but could readily be developed in adults and children. In so doing, second and subsequent language acquisition would, I believe, be fostered and accelerated.

Yalata Aboriginal School is a community school which places major emphasis on parent/school interrelationships. The teachers act as facilitators, working with Aboriginal education workers in a mutual teaching/learning relationship and focusing on the needs of children reflected in the needs of the community. Community school development means being sensitive to and understanding community values, attitudes and aspirations, giving them form and developing the means of satisfying felt needs in the curriculum.

The school attempts to reflect the community's aspirations for modern Aboriginal youth. Its policies are aimed at developing the following values and practices in an effort to improve the quality of life. The following are definitions used in the specific context and setting of Yalata. They attempt to clarify and expand the theoretical framework and relate theory to practice.

We believe the following statements reflect basic elements of the teaching/learning process at Yalata if it is to be successful.

Successful learning necessitates the provision of effective facilitators for Aboriginal children. The emphasis is on assisting children to help themselves, not helping them into helplessness.

The school has, as its primary function, the incorporation of the following elements into a holistic, practicable program centred on human development encapsulated in the following belief/position statements which try to show the relationship amongst values, objectives and practices. By 'values', I mean those principles of worth the community believes ought to be taught. In turn, 'objectives'

focus on realisable ends, while the 'practices' outline the means of accomplishing these ends.

The community values expressed through school objectives and practices have been categorised under the following headings:

- Aboriginality
- Self-awareness
- Empowering
- Problem solving
- Adaptability
- Individuality
- Communication skills

These categories provide a bonding for discussion of the school's objectives and for the teaching/learning framework. What follows is an outline of the relationship between values, objectives and practices.

ABORIGINALITY

Aboriginality emphasises that it is necessary to develop strategies that place major emphasis on the fact that being black is good. By that I mean Aboriginal culture and history are something to be proud of and a process not to be devalued. Further, it is of value to promote oneself and one's race in positive ways. Aboriginality incorporates the values of identity, self-worth and self-awareness. In turn, self-awareness harnesses the ability to recognise and meet one's needs in order to exercise independence.

EMPOWERING

This process provides a link between identity and action; it is the ability to take control of one's life through knowledge of a variety of cultural systems and how they operate. Empowering returns the authority and means to impose that authority to enable one to make legitimate decisions concerning one's welfare. We empower by imparting knowledge about the western cultural system which currently exercises the real decision-making power. Knowledge is power. It is fundamental to the empowering process in that it provides the link between self-awareness and communication skills.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Problem solving needs to incorporate strategies that develop an active component in the process of unravelling the intricacies of the task in hand, with strategies that develop active participation in the process of improving the quality of life.

Clear thinking is the ability to clear away non-essential information and confounding emotions from the factual elements upon which a rational conclusion depends.

Decision making underlines the encouragement of the active participation in the shaping of one's life.

Self-management includes the knowledge, skills, power and authority to enable one to make legitimate decisions concerning one's welfare.

Choice necessitates being able to recognise, disentangle and act with authority in a series of multiple incidents.

Planning demands that the facilitator be fully conscious of the learning process. Planning ought to reflect what we are doing and for what end, coupled with an effective evaluation component. For example, in our planning for a partial or totally integrated day approach, we need to combine formal learning with informal learning if the development of creative use of skills is to be successful. Further, planning demands two essential ingredients if teachers are to teach well. They need a thorough understanding of both western education theory and Aboriginal learning styles (which means knowing each child well). Planning means recognising that informal learning based on an activity-centred approach does not negate group teaching of specific skills. It involves a high degree of planning to know where children are going. Teachers need to evaluate consistently to know where the children are in their development. Children need to be taught skills in order to use them creatively. To suggest that children pick up required skills through the medium of play is a gross over-simplification. They may or may not. To suggest the teacher will always observe a child's readiness for a particular skill is fanciful.

ADAPTABILITY

This is the ability to recognise conditions and modify behaviour in keeping with technological diversity and the satisfaction of one's needs.

Surviving well demands strategies designed to develop and encourage one's well-being in a rapidly changing environment and to develop survival skills that are at the centre of changing societal patterns.

Plurality decrees a policy designed to provide a context for teaching that is embedded in a multidimensional value system. We need to encourage values of plurality in order for Aboriginal children to function, adapt and survive well in a technologically different world. Modern Aboriginal children, while retaining their self-image which is the cultural bequest of their ancestors, need to function in a modern technological society. It is a fact in Aboriginal society as well as in the wider social groupings. Children need to understand their own historical culture and recognise its value and similarity to that of other cultural groups.

The school attempts to reflect these values in its practice, emphasising *functional learning*, which is learning that develops the ability to survive effectively in Yalata and to choose to relate to communities beyond. It involves the acquisition of abilities that result in usefulness and demands usefulness in and through action. The Yalata school uses a functional learning approach, one that combines features of informal, traditional Aboriginal learning styles with modern, Western formal learning styles. Emphasis is placed on each in turn at different stages of school learning. Aboriginal and Western learning styles are not mutually exclusive. They are incorporated, but the emphasis is different.

Functional learning is the use of learning styles that effectively and efficiently help learners to adapt to their situation and to survive well. It builds on the skills and knowledge they have and adds different skills tailored to meet different situations. The responsibility for failure lies more with the teacher and the school than with the children.

The use of informal structures facilitates the initial development of the 3Rs, ensures "that what children are learning is truly meaningful in the social context", (Harris, p. 7) builds up rapport with the children, and develops understanding with Aboriginal staff. Teaching children how to think in challenging situations involves developing permanent, generalisable strategies which complement the focus that children learn to read by reading and to write by writing. Teaching well involves knowing how children learn and developing strategies that assist the process of facilitation. These strategies need to propagate and facilitate effective, need-based, experiential learning. These teaching practices must focus on child-centred learning. Indeed, all children learn effectively by child-centred

methods (non-verbal) while all adults learn, to some degree, by verbal methods (oracy; reading - to make decisions - to understand; and writing).

The point of effectively using different learning styles is to encourage the development of individual, innate human potential and to assist the process of equality of outcomes.

SOME ASPECTS OF INFORMAL
LEARNING (Harris p.2)

SOME ASPECTS OF FORMAL
LEARNING (Harris p.3)

(Traditional/non-verbal)*

(Western/verbal)

1. Observation and imitation
2. Trial and error
3. Real-life performance
4. Content-specific skills
5. People-oriented
6. Persistence and repetition

1. Decontextualised
2. Abstract
3. Verbal
4. Conscious process
5. Sequencing of parts
6. Purposeful:
 - goal
 - internal
 - judgement

*Severe limitations for classroom use as well as much value (Harris p.1)

INDIVIDUALITY

Individuality demands the provision of many and varied opportunities for each individual to develop an expanding perceptual field to encourage creative expression. Creative development begs contexts within which people can learn varied skills and have access to a multiplicity of ideas directed towards a unique organisation and expression that reflects the individual.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

These skills focus on the need to encourage active participation in the process of bilingualism and to distinguish and implement complementary learning styles that facilitate acquisition of English as a second language. These are central to conceptualising Aboriginality and individuality.

Further, communication skills are the tools of taking control. This process involves recognising the problem, unravelling variables, selecting points of action, conceptualising and expression.

The school emphasises the development of communication skills as they form the basis of abstract conceptualisation. Understanding the symbolism of words and numerals enables children to think in the abstract about situations and events that they have not experienced and to understand them. Further, we strive to help students reason from particular facts to a general conclusion. Students are also encouraged to apply scientific/technical knowledge to as yet unmet circumstances.

SUMMARY

The focus of the teaching/learning process at Yalata Community School is the child. Children are encouraged to take control of their own learning. The process moves from what they already know to how they can usefully function in a multidimensional society; it involves developing the skills to survive well in the society of one's choice. This may be achieved by building onto familiar Aboriginal ways of learning through the teacher taking a facilitator's role and enriching the means of communication.

To be an effective teacher of Aboriginal children, teachers must be well grounded in education and pedagogical theory, must know and understand Aboriginal school staff, and must be able to critically analyse effective teaching learning strategies in the light of all this knowledge.

(Harris, p.22)

NOTE: My apologies to Stephen Harris for any inadvertent misuse of his material.

REFERENCE

Harris, Stephen: Aboriginal Learning Styles and Formal Schooling.
Unpublished paper (draft).

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