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TEACHING ABORIGINAL STUDIES

*G. Woolmer

Aboriginal Studies is becoming increasingly popular in schools. Here are some South Australian findings and thoughts on how to teach it.

SOME FIRST CONSIDERATIONS

1. ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

It is of fundamental importance that teacher and students have some interaction with Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people can be involved as consultants and culture teachers. They can come to the school or the class can go to them or perhaps with them on an excursion. If necessary, the Aboriginal Studies Unit of the Education Department can arrange initial contacts.

2. SENSITIVITY

Dealing as it does with Aboriginal people and their affairs, Aboriginal Studies is a sensitive field. Be prudent in any approach to Aboriginal people, pay for any professional service asked for, be responsive to Aboriginal signals and treat the whole field in a thoroughly responsible and sensitive manner.

3. PERSPECTIVES

It is crucial to remember that almost all thinking and writing in the field has been from a European perspective, which is different from and in many areas opposite to the Aboriginal perspective. Try to gain that perspective. In addition, it is suggested that from a sociological approach the conflict perspective be made use of as opposed to the functional.

4. INTO THE UNKNOWN

Wherever possible, begin from and relate to what the student knows. Treat the local people and scene as a starting point for dealing with generalities or matters further afield. Work from the simple to the complex.

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Illustrator, Anne Best, has been engaged by the S.A. Aboriginal Education Resource Unit to illustrate Aboriginal Studies materials.*

5. STUDENTS

Students need to be involved in the course, to adopt and adapt its aims as their own. They need to actively participate in the choosing of options and emphases and be involved in decision making generally, including organizational such as structures, timings and approaches to specific learning areas. If problems arise they need to know of them at once and be involved in their solving. The teacher must retain the lead but the student must own the study.

WHAT STUDENTS NEED TO EXPERIENCE

1. LEARNING THROUGH ACTION

Students of Aboriginal Studies need to experience as much of their learning as is possible, as opposed to reading or being told. They should be encouraged to participate actively in the learning going on and they should be given the opportunity to experience a considerable amount of learning through activity. They should deal where possible with real situations. There should be an emphasis on the need for each student to apply his or her knowledge as it is gained.

2. LEARNING THROUGH INTERACTION

This includes gaining skills in communication both amongst themselves and with people outside the class. It also includes the sharing of information along with the ability to be able to articulate knowledge, ideas and feelings. They need opportunities to express, discuss and debate.

3. EMPATHY

Non-Aboriginal students need to gain enough information and ideas to enable them to try to gain outlooks akin to Aboriginal ones. They need to experience both intellectually and emotionally, for example, the Aboriginal perspective of being a free agent within his or her own law, of being a conquered and dispossessed person, of being a member of a small and badly stereotyped minority and of being a person finding a new identity and working for a positive future. That is, they should be encouraged to imagine themselves as the various people they are studying.

4. THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Students of Aboriginal Studies need to be encouraged to be original, to be curious, to question and to experiment. They need to be encouraged to use logical reasoning processes, to evaluate, to make judgments, to find alternative answers and to reflect. Opportunities should be structured into the course to allow research, critical analysis and individual and group problem solving to occur.

WAYS

Aboriginal Studies lends itself to presentation in a broad range of ways, a wide and balanced selection of which should be used.

Wherever relevant, students must be actively involved; field experience is a typical area. This will both enhance student skills and help to make the year's learning more relevant, interesting and enjoyable.

RELEVANCY

- 1) *Aboriginal people* - contact and involve Aboriginal people; ascertain their viewpoints.
- 2) *Current Aboriginal affairs and events* - follow and interpret.

LISTENING

- 1) Listening to Aboriginal people and others.
- 2) Listening to audio material - news and other reports, music.

VERBAL

- 1) Student presentation of talks, reports.
- 2) Student forums, discussions, debates.

VIEWING

- 1) Directed viewing, analysis, of real phenomena.
- 2) Controlled viewing, analysis, of pictures, videos, films, slides, diagrams.

GRAPHICS

- 1) Art work, sketching, drawing.
- 2) Making of collages, posters.
- 3) Photograph.

CONSTRUCTING

- 1) Models, dioramas.
- 2) Games .
- 3) Craftwork.

DISPLAY

- 1) Displays of commercial, teacher and student materials.
- 2) Display pictures, posters, collages and similar.
- 3) Exhibit artifacts, documents, projects, models and other materials.

MOVEMENT

- 1) Re-enactments, role-playing, tableaux, simulation.
- 2) Drama.

READING

Reading, analysis and commentary of

- Texts, documents, statistics, newspapers, magazines.
- Biographical accounts, statutes, contemporary diaries, letters.

WRITING

- 1) Records and exercises - notes, summaries, comprehension exercises, response sheets, short answers.
- 2) Productive writing - tutorials, essays, reports, analyses, commentaries, case studies.
- 3) Creative writing - imaginative reconstructions, scripts, stories

FIGURING

- 1) Calculating, tabling, graphing, representing.
- 2) Charting, mapping, scheduling, timelining.

FIELD EXPERIENCES

- 1) Visits to Aboriginal communities and/or Aboriginal managed establishments.
- 2) Excursion to Aboriginal sites; avoid those open to vandalism; use care with all.

RESEARCH

- 1) Inquiry - of people, groupings; media treatments.
- 2) Surveying - collection of opinion, information, statistics.
- 3) Research essay - dealing with one topic or issue.
- 4) Research report - in-depth study.

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