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TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS IN TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED COMMUNITIES

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As a prospective teacher who had lived in towns where white Australians, essentially teachers, were the minority groups, the reality of a posting to Aurukun was weighing on my mind. I began to wonder what school for Aboriginal Australians was like and what it should be like.

What was it like for two traditionally antithetical cultures - the Aboriginal Australian and the white Australian - to meet head-on in a learning environment? If I were confronted by the possibility of teaching within a very different culture from my own, how would I cope?

I approach this issue from the viewpoint of Aboriginal Education as being best achieved by the development of bicultural schooling. Harris (1978:83) defined a bicultural person as having

the ability to shift into and operate in two cultures with relative ease and comfort.

Such a person has access to, and is able to empathise with, the points of view of both cultures without losing identity with the primary reference group.

Bicultural education then, in its broadest sense is the teaching of two ways of life. A bicultural Aboriginal school would be one which at all levels represents equally both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures.

This paper is concerned with outlining a set of implications for teachers and teaching strategies that would be effective in traditionally oriented Aboriginal communities. That is, communities where the people have the greatest geographical and social separation from the rest of Australian society. I consider this to be the greatest challenge for a teacher from the white Australian culture.

In order to do this the traditional learning styles of Aboriginal people must firstly be explored in comparison with those of white Australians. This will then form the basis for developing

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teaching strategies and identifying implications for teachers. Many other factors also affect Aboriginal learning and are important when determining teaching strategies, such as: cognitive style, self-concept, motivation, social and/or cultural behaviours, socio-linguistic interference and cultural conservatism. However, for this paper these factors are by far too far-reaching to be discussed adequately.

ISSUE ANALYSIS

1. LEARNING

An educational or learning experience is a mixture of the content to be learned and the process the child goes through in the learning experience.

Davis 1982:54.

The content is really the information which we expect the child to learn. The processes are the things that happen to the child in the learning activity. In all learning situations some information or content must be present to be learned. Similarly no person can learn without something happening to him/her.

In traditional Aboriginal learning situations, learning information or content is emphasised more than developing learning processes. The development of learning processes is mainly limited to the very basic skills of observing, recalling, classifying, comparing and contrasting. These basic skills can be learned by imitating, duplicating and repeating. It is not until late adolescence and adulthood that the higher skills of generalising, inferring and predicting are developed. The emphasis on learning content remains as Aboriginal children grow older and develop these higher-order skills.

Although various degrees of social change have taken place in Aboriginal communities they are still very much more 'Aboriginal' than they are 'Western', claims Harris (1978:78). Aboriginal society has experienced so little change that their knowledge has remained largely the same from generation to generation. European society has been constantly changing with even faster changes in knowledge. The creation of new information has meant that no one would think they could learn even a small part of all the information. Therefore, non-Aboriginal learning has been based on developing learning processes to cope.

The following table summarises the major contrasts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal systems of learning:

Non-Aboriginal	Aboriginal
Most non-Aboriginal learning in Australia is formal, i.e. conducted as follows:-	Most Aboriginal learning in Australia is informal, i.e. conducted as follows:-
*in specifically educational institutions - buildings.	*without specifically arranged educational institutions and buildings.
*by trained teachers who have specific office of 'teacher'.	*by various relatives.
*with the content having little immediate application to everyday life and survival.	*with content having immediate relevance to, and arising out of everyday life and survival.
*largely through verbal instruction and explanation.	*largely through non-verbal means - learn by doing, little explanation.
*often imparted in compact highly organised courses which take comparatively little time.	*in most cases is time consuming with most skills being learned over many years.
*learning often highly conscious process.	*learning often not highly conscious process.
*expected to learn by themselves - individual.	*learn in groups - co-operative - from older, wiser people.
*learn for the future.	*learn for the present.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ABORIGINAL TRADITIONAL LEARNING STRATEGIES AND NON-ABORIGINAL LEARNING STRATEGIES

A) Learning by observation and imitation versus verbal instruction.

Learning by observation, imitation and by rote are included together because they have a number of features in common;

- a) They do not involve highly conscious processes of learning as verbal instruction does.
- b) Learning is time-consuming, often spread over many years. It is not programmed as formal instruction normally is. That is, it is not a discreet, curricula based mastery system.

- c) Initiative lies with the learner, whereas in formal learning timing and initiations are generally the teacher's responsibility.

Harris (1980:78), claims that the teachers of traditional Aboriginal children

should be prepared for the fact that their expectations about learning come from social experiences and are probably held unconsciously. Thus, they will learn more through observation and imitation than through verbalisation.

Virtually all survival skills, social skills and artistic skills such as painting and dancing are learned through observation and imitation. Aboriginal people learn by looking, not through talk. Even though Aboriginal people are highly verbal, their talk is more of a social nature than of a teaching function.

Learning by Observation

Learning by observation often involves a gap in time between when learning commences and when the skill is exercised. Opportunities for learning by observation continually arise in an Aboriginal society with parents living out their lives in front of younger generations. Everything an Aboriginal child does in his/her life will be performed many times before he/she is fully responsible for having to perform the activity on his/her own.

This emphasis on learning by observation often is carried over when learning Western technological skills, when the Yolngu capacity for visual memory is utilised at the expense of analysis. Fanshawe (1976:23) states that

when the visual memory fails Yolngu are often unable to analyse the situation although they may be fully experienced in manipulating particular equipment.

Learning by Imitation

Learning by imitation presupposes observation, but in imitation learning observations are immediately applied. Learning in this case is by identification with someone who is admired as a person. For example, frequently six or eight boys of ages ten to twelve are seen making spears, following an older brother. Very similar mannerisms will be exhibited among all boys.

Rarely though is the yolngu learner forced out of his passive role as the observer to take any initiative. In Western learning situations, one person consciously takes the role of the 'teacher' while another is recognised as the 'learner'.

Dramatic-mime plays a central role in yolngu ceremonial life. Yolngu are familiar with the idea of role-playing. Although spontaneous role playing is not nearly as central to learning as observation and imitation, it does sometimes occur naturally where children role-play characters in circumstances which are significant or have recently occurred.

Teaching and learning in Western school settings is done by verbal means - usually by the teacher and student asking questions, evaluating answers and by several forms of reading and writing. Even learning through visual media such as films, places strong dependence on verbal commentaries.

Aboriginal Learning by Verbalisation

A relatively small amount of yolngu learning results from verbalisation.

When new situations arise verbal means of teaching predominate due to the nature of the skills needed to be learned. However, verbal instructions are accompanied by a commentary on real-life actions. Never on their own are verbal instructions used in isolated settings from exercises/skills. Tasks of ritual significance in the process of maturation or tasks which are too difficult to be learned by personal trial-and-error sometimes are verbalised. Similarly, rituals and story-telling involve verbal instruction. When elders teach yolngu history or dreamings, the speaker considers himself a 'teacher'. Children in this case are prepared to learn by rote. Such rote learning is always done

in a meaningful, observable context and is supported by observation and imitation and there is a time gap between learning and use of what is learned.

Harris 1980:25

B. Learning by Personal Trial-and Error versus Verbal Instruction and Demonstration

Most learning that yolngu people experience comes from a combination of observation and personal trial-and-error involving numerous repetitions.

A boy learns to spear a fish not only through observation of older men fishing, but by throwing spears a great many times at a great number of fish.

Catchpole 1983:77

Of course, there may be many casual observations of a skill or social behaviour interspersed with casual attempts on the part of the learner to repeat a similar act.

This method is markedly different from non-Aboriginal schooling which is -

- a) essentially through a teacher
- b) through verbal means, and
- c) through demonstration followed by compulsory practice in a situation initially simplified to ensure success.

The teaching of Aboriginal children needs to recognise that the frequency of learning-by-doing means that a large proportion of learning is accomplished in concrete meaningful contexts, with the learner being physically active. However, learning-by-doing is often the only effective means of learning difficult skills. Similarly, some activities when learned by non-verbal means cannot be easily explained verbally on successive occasions.

C. Learning in Real-Life Situations versus Practice in Contrived Settings

Formal school settings seek to prepare students to cope with situations they may encounter in the future. When learning is a means to a future end, it often involves practice of skills in artificial settings which are a great distance from the students' real-life experience in the present.

Whether or not learning is part of an ongoing activity, or a means to a future end, is related to a number of other factors. Such factors include: a present or future orientation, complexity of technology and the amount of specialisation in the society.

When Aboriginal people led a totally traditional life, before contact with Europeans, they were familiar with most of the problems which they faced in their daily lives and the solutions to these problems. So people were not really concerned too much with the

future, but rather with daily life and things of the past as older, wiser family members directed the approaches to new situations. Hence, learning took place as part of the daily activities. So, rather than listen to an explanation of how something occurred, Aboriginal children watched it happen and often participated in the activity as part of normal daily happenings. Very little explanation was given and if sufficient understanding was not reached by watching the first time, then the child would wait for it to occur again. Sometimes children would go away and practise things they had seen adults doing, out of interest and curiosity.

Harris (1978:68) reasons that a teacher of Aboriginal children needs to know that children do not come to a classroom prepared for the fact that many classroom activities are 'artificial' and are preparation for future needs, whose usefulness becomes apparent as time goes by.

This expectation (or absence of expectation) influences motivation for learning. Classroom activities should be as meaningful as possible and, wherever possible, tied to real-life activities.

Ceremonial dancing is a highly skilful art which would require a great deal of 'practice' before the skill could be highly developed. However, Fanshawe (1975:29) points out that

virtually no practice that is recognised as such is undertaken.

Rather, people learn to dance by doing a great deal of dancing as opportunities arise in daily life.

By social convention, balanda students accept a school learning situation for ten to twenty years of their life. This means that they accept what Binnion (1973:71) defines as "practice sessions - means to later ends".

One of the greatest problems of school learning for yolngu children is that they tend to accept all the school activities as ends in themselves. Consequently, to them playing ball, learning arithmetic or sitting in the playground tend to be perceived as of equal value. This places on the teacher the burden of motivating students on the basis of immediate interest or authority, without much aid from the students' awareness of any future values of lessons.

D. Person-orientation rather than Information Orientation

Yolngu language has no traditional equivalent of a single-root word for 'teacher', however, two compound words meaning 'knowledge-give' and 'make-knowing' were developed after contact with white culture and are "infrequently used in purely yolngu contexts" (Harris 1975:21). This is consistent with the fact that knowledge is, in yolngu society, valued because of *who* gives it, rather than for the objective value of the information. In the case of yolngu ritual knowledge, the giver of the knowledge is thought of more in his role of appropriate relation or ritual leader, than as 'teacher'.

The person of the teacher, as opposed to the office or the ability to 'knowledge-give' is the necessary catalyst to activity. Thus, the yolngu person is likely to absorb information from someone who is within a limited circle of very close and particular relationships.

Yolngu roles closest to that of a semi-institutionalised office of 'teacher' are:- roles of ceremonially and ritually senior men in training younger men; roles of fathers teaching sons in their late teens the more difficult hunting skills; and the role of older relatives in passing on important knowledge of kinship to younger relations.

Person-orientation rather than information-orientation results in context specific learning.

E. Context Specific Learning versus Generalised Principles

Informal education systems usually involve context specific learning skills, meaning that a skill is learned in one real-life context but the same skill is not fully generalised into an abstracted body of theoretical 'principles' which can be later applied to other situations. For example, when an Aboriginal person learns to spear fish or wallabies, there will be no lessons given on the principles of physics involved. That is, the cause of parallax error or the need to use a steeper trajectory in order to propel a missile a longer distance is not explained. Fishing will be learned in the context of others and himself fishing.

In white society, by contrast, a boy at school would learn the principles of magnetism and positive and negative charges in electricity, so that he can use these principles later in one of many possible careers involving electricity.

When Serpell (1976:39) compares traditional informal learning and formal school education, he focuses on two major features:

1. that in school the verbal medium is the major mode of transmitting and gaining knowledge, as opposed to learning by observation and trial-and-error.
2. that in school teaching and learning mostly take place outside of real-life contexts.

The influence of context specific learning becomes obvious in school where an ability learned by yolngu students in one context (say counting shells) appears to be difficult for some of these students to apply to another context (say counting money). The classroom experiences of several balanda teachers teaching arithmetic to yolngu children lends support to the possibility that

yolngu people may be culturally conditioned in a way that makes it difficult for skills to be learned in one context, to be applied in a new context.

Harris, 1982:75

3. ISSUE MANAGEMENT : IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

From the previous analysis of traditional Aboriginal learning processes, implications for teachers and teaching strategies can now be developed.

A step towards bi-cultural teaching in traditional Aboriginal communities would be to accommodate individual differences of students and simultaneously to teach equally from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, without implying one is 'better' or 'right' compared with the other. Teachers should master a wide range of instructional techniques to accomplish this, which could be applied sensitively and appropriately to emerging needs and situations.

Koppe (1975:6) claims that "we must gain an understanding of the children's cultural system and of their out-of-school lives" in order to effectively relate school to their non-school experiences.

Verbal explanation, observation and imitation are learning processes or strategies. They are the 'how' of classroom practice. The materials and objects used are the content. These make up the 'what' of classroom practice.

Traditional Aboriginal learning processes (observation, imitation, personal trial-and-error, rather than talking) are highly efficient for the content that had to be learned traditionally. However, some skills such as mathematical operations and impersonal verbal debate, or posing of hypothetical questions cannot be learned by non-verbal yolngu-type learning methods. These skills are best learned by more appropriate means relative to the skills' nature. Given that enough time was available for learning traditional skills, methods of observation and personal trial-and-error are extremely appropriate.

However, Harris (1978:63) suggests that it may not be appropriate to teach maths via traditional Aboriginal methods today because -

- 1) time may not be available
- 2) the pressure of competing priorities exists
- 3) there is a lack of survival motivation...

The way Europeans cope with pressures of limited time is to speed up understanding through means of detailed verbal explanation along with demonstration and progressive testing. Often tasks set are handled as a practice situation in contrived settings. These require of Aboriginal people a future orientation in a context in which they are not oriented. Aboriginal people are often not able to adapt their teaching methodology to verbal instructions and testing time constraints.

Skills can involve a mixture of avenues of learning (e.g. skill of reading). Those avenues that naturally occur in yolngu learning contexts should be heavily depended on and developed (e.g. learning by observation). For example, the ability to learn a large number of sight words easily. That is, their capacity for visual memory is a cultural bias that can be used to advantage in teaching reading.

Although semi-informal instruction from a teaching figure occurs in yolngu society, its role in comparison to other avenues of learning is minimal. Typically instruction always involves a meaningful real-life context and is supplemented by some other avenue of learning - observation or trial-and-error. The instruction is also given by a close older relative who has the authority, through relationship or ceremonial seniority, to be giving the instruction.

In keeping with strong loyalties in the kinship system, young men are only willing to learn certain skills from particular

relatives. Hence, a boy may simply 'turn off' to anyone else who tries to teach these skills. The philosophy that certain bodies of knowledge are owned, as well as known, must be respected by teachers. A learner will only be open to try to learn that body of knowledge that comes within his defined rights of inheritance. Therefore, a learning context of optional advantage to the yolngu learner depends on who the teacher is and how relevant to himself the student considers the knowledge to be. Thus, a balanda teacher would not be likely to inspire learning by identification/imitation unless he/she stayed a considerable time in the community and shared close contacts through shared experiences.

Hence, when a balanda seeks to teach through verbal instruction (Harris, 1980) advises that he/she must consider the following processes:

- a) Be patient enough to wait for shared experiences with students to increase earned authority as a teacher figure.
- b) Pay close attention to the relevant rules of yolngu interpersonal communication, as sufficient rapport is developed to be able to teach students without offence, and
- c) Try to have the learning context meaningful and real-life.

Yolngu people have a keen dramatic sense. In the classroom, if a sufficiently dramatic context can be established, yolngu children will readily participate in role-playing as a means of learning.

Koppe (1975:9) notes that

Balanda teachers should be aware that statements such as "This is good practice for the future", will tend not to stimulate motivation for school activities.

If students do co-operate in such circumstances, it is more likely to be because of teaching authority, or because it is a social activity from which they derive pleasure. Bell (1970:95) supports these two latter strategies with the example of initiation, where strategies involved "sociodrama, repetition, and teaching through authority and fear". Boys were motivated by their awareness that the initiation lessons were preparing them for adulthood, by the fact that they were learning tribal secrets and through the encouragement by 'elders' of revealing special talents.

Motivation clearly is a determinant of whether a child wants to learn and is also an important factor determining whether any strategy will be successful.

Ausubel and Robinson (1969) describe motivation as the "secondary primary factor" in school achievement, and consider three major components:

- 1) Cognitive drive - centres on the need to formulate and solve problems. It is task-oriented with reward adherent to the task.
- 2) Need for ego enhancement - seeking of earned status. Allied are feelings of inadequacy and self-esteem.
- 3) Need for applciation - seeking of derived status. Motivated by the need to be associated with persons who are important to him/her.

Aboriginal people are more frequently motivated in terms of affiliation than the need for achievement and value co-operation more than competition. therefore teaching should stress co-operation in group projects and to create for individuals a sense of belonging to and sharing with the larger group - class.

The basic need for the development of verbal and auditory skills can be achieved by one of two possible strategies.

Traditional rote-learning can be applied. Songs and stories are traditionally learned by rote under the conditions of fairly relaxed, passive or mildly active participation in many repetitions. This is carried out in the company of other people who are participating in a similar manner. Thus an ideal strategy emerges for whole class participation with the teacher.

Simulated settings can be used for learning common types of dialogues. Harris (1980) documents the repeated use of films of dialogues, a tape recorder and an intonation machine -

such that students are able to observe real verbal interactions many times over and simultaneously through mime and continuous attempts at role-playing to gain confidence in speaking practical English. Such learning circumstances are highly social, non-competitive, non-testing and non-embarrassing in context. Failure is not possible as students are able to mime out the dialogue when

the words will not come. This strategy also involves student choice of exactly how and when they respond, although individuals are usually carried along in a group surge of activity.

In conclusion, successful teaching strategies for traditionally oriented Aboriginal communities in my opinion should aim to include the following features (in the light of my aim for bi-cultural schooling) :

- . person orientation;
- . learning sessions are enjoyable ends in themselves and not merely dull practice for future needs;
- . no clear spectator-actor distinction;
- . involves observation, imitation and trial-and-error learning styles;
- . non-threatening content;
- . verbal instruction where relevant is always in a meaningful context and/or real-life circumstance;
- . successful child performance is not heavily dependent upon processing of teacher language;
- . numerous and varied channels of learning, including seeing touching, talking and listening; and
- . use of familiar materials and settings and people to develop relevance and rapport.

The paper concludes by describing the practical application of the teaching methodology derived from the above in the *Aboriginal Science Teachers' Handbook* (1982). N.T. Department of Education (incorporating the Milingimbi Case Study).

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