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ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER TERTIARY STUDENTS AS CREATORS OF CULTURE

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James Cook University of North Queensland currently offers an affirmative action program enabling Aboriginal and Islander people to enter teacher education programs. This program - the Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program (AITEP) - began in 1977 at Townsville College of Advanced Education, now amalgamated with the university. In July 1987, there were about 130 undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education programs, having entered the university through AITEP. A similar program in community welfare now operates with over 20 students enrolled. Currently there are possibly around seven Aboriginal or Islander undergraduates who gained direct entry to university and four graduate students, including three who began their undergraduate studies through AITEP.

Students entering the university through AITEP come from a wide range of backgrounds, from remote islands of the Torres Strait or from urban centres such as Cairns and Townsville. For some students, English is a second, or third, language. Others may speak as their first language an Aboriginal dialect of English. Students who enter the university through AITEP do not have the academic qualifications to gain direct entry to the university. Some have completed secondary school but did not gain a school score that permitted entry. Others are mature age people who may not have completed secondary school.

Although we have just celebrated the tenth anniversary of AITEP, the majority of Aboriginal and Islander students commencing university studies are "firsts" - first in their family, first in their community to undertake tertiary education and, so, university education is not yet integrated into their home culture. University education is seen to be important by the Aboriginal and Islander community as represented by the National Aboriginal Education Committee (N.A.E.C.) who have made the training of Aboriginal and Islander teachers a major priority area (NAEC, 1985, p.23). However, the Aboriginal and Islander community firmly states that all

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education should "be a process that builds on our cultural heritage and world views" (p.3). Further, they argue that institutions that encourage Aboriginal and Islander enrolment should include Aboriginal and Islander components in education studies and introduce subjects in Aboriginal and Islander studies (p.25).

Most affirmative action programs for indigenous minorities operate within a framework of respect for the students' culture and the establishment and enhancement of cultural identity is an integral part of the program offered to students (Wright, 1985; Archibald, 1986; Watsford, 1986). Many students come into programs such as AITEP with an already well established sense of identity. Mature-aged students particularly are motivated to study through their strong sense of identity and sense of duty to their people. The task is to extend that identity to incorporate being a student within the university context. This is not merely for purposes of idealism. Student identity within the university is a significant factor in university success (Wright, 1982).

The establishment of such an identity is achieved in several ways. At James Cook University possibly the most significant way is through the presence of a large body of Aboriginal and Islander students on campus. This body of students provides new students with an array of role models, of a variety of experiences and backgrounds, and the older students see helping new students come to terms with the institution as a responsibility they willingly accept. The inclusion of Aboriginal and Islander studies is also seen as a significant way of enabling students to maintain and strengthen their cultural identity within the university. At James Cook University, students within education programs can undertake a selection from among the following:

- Introduction to Anthropology
- Introduction to Aboriginal and Islander Languages
- Applications of Linguistics to Aboriginal and Islander Education
- Aboriginal and Islander Education
- Education in the Torres Straits
- Cultural Diversity and the Teacher
- Australian Minorities Today
- The Impact of European Colonisation: Challenge and Response
- Aboriginal and Islander Cultural Studies

In this paper I will focus on two specific areas designed to allow students to develop their identity as Aboriginal and Islander, within the university environment. One is through a

specific subject "Aboriginal and Islander Cultural Studies". The second is through the journal *Black Voices*.

ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CULTURE STUDIES

This two unit subject aims at providing the opportunity for students to actively participate in and contribute to the Aboriginal and Islander creative experience. It is through such participation that people, both individually and as a distinct cultural group, expand their world view, develop and maintain group identity, express and communicate common characteristics of particular groups, and challenge both their own and others' insular views by exploring and presenting the universal preoccupations and achievements of humans.

The subject is essentially experiential in nature. The students are exposed to the wide variety of Aboriginal and Islander arts, and are encouraged to respond to these arts in their own expressive modes. Thus a response to literature may be through drama, music, or painting; a response to painting may be through music, poetry, or painting. Responses may be in Standard Australian English or in the student's home language, depending on student purposes. Responses may be geared to communicating to other adults and/or to children.

Since I began working in these subjects, I have been overwhelmed by the amount, quality and range of art being produced by Aboriginal and Islander people, and the students are also excited and stimulated by the scope of the work of people from their own culture. We enjoy the poems of Kath Walker, Jack Davis, Lionel Fogarty, Kevin Gilbert - and share their anger. We discuss the novels of Colin Johnson. *Wild Cat Falling* provides us with hours of intense debate. We admire the painting of the Papunya Artists. We read the plays of Jack Davis, particularly *Kullark* in which one of the characters, Jamie, is also a student teacher. Our bodies move with the music of Kuckles, Warumpi, Coloured Stones, Joey Geia and Les Collins. The tears fall as we watch Aboriginal actors interpreting the plays of Hyllus Maris in the *Women of the Sun* series. The homesickness becomes intense as we hear music of the Torres Strait. Dreams grow as we watch Robert Merrit's *Euro Corroboree*. The pain and the understanding deepens as we read the stories of people living under unjust acts, of life on reserves, of children being taken from their families, of racism, and of triumph.

However, a quick perusal of such expression may not be pleasant for Anglo-Australians. Generally the work speaks of hatred and anger towards whites, and tells of the depressing oppression of Black life

since European occupation. Many whites find such expression offensive or, at least, uncomfortable. However, if this is how Aboriginal and Islander people see the world, then it is important that such expression is promoted and accepted.

As an introductory activity we always study the place of art in traditional culture and look at examples of traditional art and craft. The students are then asked to write a poem based on their reactions to specific examples of traditional art. Although few of the students are from traditional backgrounds, they experience an intensely personal reaction to the art. As a general theme, the poems reflect regret for traditions lost but, at the same time, demonstrate a determination to maintain their cultural past.

FOR ALL THE WORLD TO SEE

I see their writing on the wall,
figures standing silent, proud and tall.
Portraying their lives of an ancient time,
living through the centuries like the echoes of a chime.

And still those sound waves reach out,
carressing me without a doubt.
For I will pass those stories on,
And so those traditions live on and on.

Our media today, like the writing on the wall,
Will reach out and touch us one and all.
Echoes of time, spreading far and wide,
Telling the story we're not about to hide.

The story of our people, our struggle, our land,
A claim for every last grain of sand,
This is the writing on the wall.
Read it! Read it, one and all.

Dargan, in press.

In both subjects, students negotiate with the lecturer to determine the shape and form of their major piece of assessment. This allows the students the opportunity to develop the talents that they particularly value. For some of the Torres Strait Islander students the assessment has taken the form of Island dancing for specific audiences. In this, the students from Western, Central and Eastern Islands have learnt each other's songs and dances and put them together to create an overall act. Other students have developed new

skills such as screen printing and photography. Some students have focused on the visual arts. Yet others have chosen writing as the means of expressing themselves. These students frequently see the writing down of the experiences of their family as an important means of maintaining cultural traditions as this extract, from Cynthia Edwards' work indicates.

Today he is known as Roley Gilbert. He is one of the last remaining elders of the Kurtjar tribe in Normanton. The people look upon him almost with reverent awe and respect. Most of the old people are now all gone. Therefore Roley is determined to pass on cultural values to Aborigines from the local area. Each holiday, when possible, Roley talks to me about cultural things. Because he can speak the language fluently and converse with other people in the native tongue, Roley often teaches me Kurtjar language. When I've collected enough information, I would like to have a book published about Roley and his cultural background. This will ensure that some of the history and heritage of my tribe will be remembered and not lost.

Edwards, in press

Students also negotiate the language in which they wish to work. Lela Ara used her first language, Torres Strait Creole, as the language of her poetry.

THE HOME I PRAPA MISS

I sit down ya lo verandah
I look towards the younda point
I see ole big ore curries kum insite
I sit an lessen por them birds sing out
I sit ya an smell da freshness blo flowers
from mama's gardin.
Oh, my home dat I prapa miss.

Teck e me across da dusty plain
Teck e me por dat burramundi doman
Teck e me por dat place were belly damper remain
Teck e me were albatross roam
Oh, my home I prapa miss.

Ara, 1986, p.11

Students frequently write stories reflecting the more tragic aspects of their experience - stories of the death of a close friend or family member, of family violence and breakup.

While we use the work of Aboriginal and Islander people exclusively in the subjects, there is no compulsion for the students to focus specifically on Aboriginal and Islander themes. It is important that the students are free to choose for themselves what they wish to express. It is also important that their expressions are accepted as expressions of Aboriginal and Islander experience. Students in one of the currently enrolled groups are enthusiastic about expressing their own religious views and the link between religion and art has become an underlying theme for these students. As Christians, they have composed songs, produced paintings and sketches and written poems all reflecting their Christian beliefs. Gata Alfred's poem expresses such beliefs.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Like a bird in the sky
Or a fish in the sea.
Is there enough time...
For you and for me?

The bird is one of many.
Free is the spirit
Striving on it's way
To reach the promised land.

Soon they'll be gone
No pain, no sorrow,
Nor problems nor condemnation.
But *Please* wait ... I' coming too.

Oh! how I wish
For you to accompany me.
As you too are entitled
To inherit the will.

But what can I say?
For the choice is yours.
Is there enough time ...
For you and for me?

Alfred, in press.

Tracey Hill's poem reflects a different approach to religion.

BUSHFIRES

The destruction and burning of the old,
making way for the creation of the new.
Brown is the land all barren and dry,
Yellow is the flames engulfing the dry, dead land,
Red signifying the end,
Grey the ashes spread for miles,
Black is the stumps that showed what was once,
Silver is the rain that will come,
bringing forth the beginning of new life.

Hill, 1987, p.31.

One of the most rewarding aspects of working in these subjects has been sharing the students' delight at finding their own talents. We have been amazed at the quality of the poems written. We have been overcome by the symbolism created by our peers. We have enjoyed the acting talents of other students and we have been moved by the stories told. More importantly, students discover that they each have experiences, ideas, and emotions that are uniquely important and are worthy of expression.

For students who seek to teach Aboriginal and Islander children, the ability to create art that reflects Aboriginal and Islander experiences is an important talent that will ensure that Aboriginal and Islander children will have available to them resources that reflect their own culture and life style.

Through the use of expressive arts, students are able to utilise their own personal access to historical and contemporary experiences and provide expression to such experiences. Within this framework, students can explore their own particular experiences in education.

EDUCATION FOR BLACKS

Life at College is to
analyse!
compare!
contrast!
define!
describe!
discuss!
evaluate!
review! and
summarise!

If this procedure involved only assignments
and lectures it would be an easy task.
Instead one finds one doing all these to
others and they in turn to each other.
This is not idle time or pettiness
rather constructive time.
Our tasks in life seem as large as life itself.
It is here the foundations will be laid.
The directions and missions of many will
be determined at this space of time.
Of course, we need to do these to test
ourselves and others to strengthen
our belief for a better tomorrow.
Or break the pretense we shield around us.
The last hurdle to clear is
all the negative emotion which
has been harboured within us since
the invasion of western society.
Time is our healer to understand
and control these emotions.
So there it lies before us to conquer
EDUCATION!

Johnson, 1987, p.32

BLACK VOICES

Black Voices is a journal of writing of Aboriginal and Islander people published by the Department of Social and Cultural Studies in Education at James Cook University. Since the inception of the Aboriginal and Islander Teacher Education Program in 1977, staff working in the program have recognised that the writing of Aboriginal and Islander students has deserved a wider audience. Indeed, much of the writing in assignments and projects has utilised the background and experiences of the students. As such it is unique, and provides insights and understandings previously unavailable to the wider white community.

Students in the AITEP program participating in a needs assessment survey saw that sharing knowledge and experiences as an Aboriginal or Islander with lecturers and fellow students as highly important. Similarly, the survey indicated that there was a strong desire for the recognition of the Aboriginal and Islander experience within the university (McDonald, 1984). Thus, the publication of a journal such as *Black Voices* provides an outlet for such experience. In addition, the opportunity to have work published provides Aboriginal and Islander students with additional incentive to develop their competencies as writers within the academic tradition.

Through the studies specifically related to Aboriginal and Islander issues, students have the opportunity to either interpret their own experiences within the framework of specific subjects or explore aspects of their background with which they are unfamiliar as Wayne Costelloe indicates:

Before writing this essay I never fully understood the effects that the Aboriginal Protection Acts had on the lives of the last generation. When my two brothers and I were young our Grandmother used to tell us how as a child she was kept away from the tribe of local traditionalists, and how she used to sneak away to join them anyway. In my ignorance I thought that she was kept away for her own safety. Now I am shocked to know that it was an actual law stating that half caste children were to be segregated.

Costelloe, in press.

While much of the writing in *Black Voices* is from students at James Cook University, contributions are actively sought from other Aboriginal and Islander people, whether students at tertiary institutions or not. This is to make the journal as representative as possible. Thus, the journal contains articles of an academic nature, particularly within the disciplines of history and education, and also poetry, short stories, and reminiscences, all of which are part of a new body of Aboriginal and Islander literature. The development of a new literature is conceived by the African writer, Fanon (1967, pp. 190-193) as a significant component of the decolonization process as experienced by non Anglo-European people as they redefine their world.

CONCLUSION

For Aboriginal and Islander students, the term culture is a particularly emotive term. While they learn the anthropological and sociological definitions of culture, "culture" means tradition. To those students from traditional background "culture" is the traditional dancing, singing, beliefs, language - those aspects of life that need to be jealously guarded to ensure they are not lost. For those students who come from what could be considered non-traditional backgrounds, the word "culture" symbolises the life that they feel has been taken from them. When asked about culture, the tendency for many urban students is to say "we don't know anything about our culture" or "we've lost our culture". (In my experience, most urban Aboriginal and Islander students underestimate their own knowledge in this area). This clearly reflects the effects of

European colonisation where, through a variety of circumstances, Aboriginal people were displaced from their own cultural group, their land, and their language.

However, students from both traditional and non-traditional backgrounds do bring to university distinctive experiences, values and life-styles and they recognise the importance of Aboriginal and Islander identity within contemporary Australian society of which universities are a part. Universities are firmly entrenched as white institutions, based on white knowledge and white values, serviced almost exclusively by white academics (or academics with white qualifications). As such, they are inappropriate institutions to teach Aboriginal and Islander students their culture. They can, however, provide opportunities where Aboriginal and Islander students, no matter what their background, can see themselves as contributing to a contemporary, dynamic, living culture.

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NOTE:

For those interested in exploring contemporary Aboriginal and Islander literature, music and visual arts, the catalogue from Blackbooks provides an excellent selection of such work. Available from:

Blackbooks
13 Mansfield Street
Glebe, NSW 2037

Black Voices is available from:

Black Voices
Dept of Social and Cultural Studies
School of Education
James Cook University
TOWNSVILLE 4811

It is available free to institutions and groups involved in Aboriginal and Islander education and issues. Copies can also be purchased at \$5.00 per copy, or \$12.00 subscription for three issues.

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