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AN OVERVIEW OF SOME ABORIGINAL TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES IN TRADITIONALLY ORIENTED COMMUNITIES

and their implications for NSW Aboriginal adults and children

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Fortunately, many recent researchers who apply sociological or anthropological inquiry methods have studied Aboriginal communities outside of the classroom as well as inside it, and have taken account of the constellation of causes and modifying influences on Aboriginal learning styles (Harris 1977, Christie 1986, Davidson 1977). Indeed it is possible to observe a continuing recognition in Australian educational literature that influences outside of the classroom or school are amongst the most important and crucial aspects of Aboriginal learners successfully participating in education (Watts 1982, Berndt 1968a, 1968b, Bell 1970, Grey 1974).

1. MILINGIMBI, NORTH-EAST ARNHAM LAND

Harris has documented the learning strategies of adults and children at Milingimbi in the Northern Territory in 1975-76. This research, presented as a doctoral thesis to the University of New Mexico in 1977, was later published under the title: *Culture and Learning: Tradition and Education in North-East Arnhem Land* (1984).

Harris researched the following: learning in a traditionally-oriented Aboriginal society, the effects of social change, the achievements of Western schooling, the relationship between education, communication and culture, Aboriginal epistemology and learning strategies, sociolinguistics, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speech styles in comparison with each other and Aboriginal psychology and culture.

Noting the absence of the institutionalised office of teacher in the Milingimbi community, Harris discusses approaches to problem-solving. Euro-Australian teachers noted an absence of questioning among the Yolngu children which has given rise to the interpretation that they lack curiosity. As the children are being observed in the alien environment of the classroom, however, there is reason to

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Boomer (1982) makes :

...responsible and powerful teachers must win over children, at least at the overt level of what is said and done in the classrooms.

...through their own enthusiasm and interpersonal skills they move off into a new territory with a happy and compliant class. Yet, unwittingly, through the use of powerful motivators teachers may be sapping or turning off the learning power of children.

(Boomer 1982, p.3)

This comment focused my thoughts on how and why the children respond to my particular style of teaching and the methods I use to encourage them to learn. Perhaps my "powerful motivators" were "turning off the learning power" of those tuned-out children and, perhaps, the others were just striving to please me for no better reason than that is what is expected of them.

I realised that I wanted them to learn for their own sakes, not mine, and I wanted them to have the opportunity of showing me what they were capable of without my assuming responsibility and directing the course of their learning. I felt sure many of them were capable of exhibiting hidden abilities given the opportunity. I wanted the children to learn how to be learners, to learn a process of learning that they could apply to other situations. I also realised that the process the children would go through would enable many of them to extend themselves and would provide the impetus to learn more advanced skills to achieve their end result.

To achieve this seemingly ambitious goal I realised I had to relinquish responsibility, stop pre-programming 'teaching/learning' activities and let the children negotiate with me their own contracts. At this stage what I meant by 'negotiation' was that the children would offer their own ideas which would sometimes be supported, sometimes challenged, but all the while the child would be edging towards a shared goal.

This paper will first explain exactly what the children and I did and the processes we went through, and then will reflect on what happened and what the children gained from the experience.

We started with a measurement lesson on arbitrary measure for length. The children were to use streamers to find out and compare the lengths of classroom objects. First, we brainstormed a list of objects which was displayed on the blackboard. I decided that they would work in groups and we discussed that everyone had

novel, and they asked relatively few 'why' questions in either the Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal domains.

Up to three years of age, exploratory behaviour is severely curtailed, but this does not satisfactorily explain later behaviour when these same children are given an incredible amount of freedom to explore in the company of their own peer group. There is no praise for being creative or clever, which Harris thinks operates as a disincentive to inquiry. Religious beliefs provide most of the answers about topics that refer to the nature of existence and this acts to repress curiosity somewhat. Harris believes that curiosity does not blossom in the classroom because the proportion of the 'unknown' is too great.

Yolngu community life provides highly competitive situations and these are guided by a value system that decrees what is worthy of competition and in what contexts it is appropriate to be competitive. Competition for a spouse, for example, is expressed only within traditionally defined bounds.

Egalitarianism is used as an anti-competitive mechanism, levelling the young until they show socially acceptable behaviours. A cultural imperative is that one should not rise too high above one's fellows. Where trying hard relates to school learning, it is not perceived in terms of a need to survive because most Yolngu do not need Western skills to survive at Mililingimbi. Until the Yolngu value system changes the motivation for school learning will continue to be low.

Co-operative behaviour has become a stereotype frequently applied to Aboriginal people. When there was intercourse with colonial authority there was little choice but to be co-operative. Harris notes that Arnhem Land Aborigines were much more co-operative before independence in 1973.

In a traditional learning situation, co-operation occurs with those with whom one is closely related or who have a traditional responsibility to teach. Shared experiences over time seem to be the best way of developing a relationship cross-culturally.

Lack of innovation supposedly ensuing from a conservative tradition is another stereotype often applied to Aborigines. Harris declares that Yolngu culture does not allow for flexibility and innovation and that when the current rapid social change period is over and the people have thrown off their 'restricted' culture they will be open to learning new ways. This is erroneous in

some ways as social change is accelerating and unending according to Toffler (1970). If an indigenous culture was totally restricted and inflexible it would not adapt to Western culture and technology in the ways that the Yolngu have. The degree to which people are willing to learn new ways depends on their value system and world views.

Another difference between Arnhem Land groups and New South Wales ones is the social climate. Openness to new ways of doing things is not going to be exhibited on an individual or community level if the group is in conflict with a dominant culture. Since Harris writes of an island community that did not experience the mining controversies of the rest of Arnhem Land, he is observing a culture that is in a different state of culture contact and interracial relations. The duration of culture contact in the north is different compared with New South Wales. Both of these facts imply that Harris's findings at Milingimbi may not generalise to other Arnhem Land communities and that one should exercise caution in applying them to communities in other states. Of course, Harris did not suggest that they applied unilaterally, although some who have quoted him have applied them to all Aboriginal people.

FIVE MAJOR TRADITIONAL INFORMAL LEARNING STRATEGIES AT MILINGIMBI

(a) Learning by Observation and Imitation v. Verbal Instruction

This is not as highly a conscious strategy as learning by verbal instruction or by a formally structured demonstration. It is also spread out over many years. What Harris does not mention is the possibility that the local language or the Kriol may lack the lexical items and syntax to describe complicated tasks such as plucking an ibis or carving up a turtle. He also does not suggest that the ranks within this largely traditional society may make learning by observation and imitation a ritualised necessity because the learner may be inferior in status to the skillful.

There was a large gap in time between the commencement of learning and the time of application of the skill in Harris's example of the woman who prepared a bark painting in an identical style to her father long after his death. This may be due to respect procedures in relation to death. Harris finds this example of the successful transfer of knowledge of a traditional Aboriginal skill is a considerable contrast to the lack of transfer of knowledge about Westernised skills. (More examples of the transfer of learning and its time span are included in Harris's unabridged thesis.) He infers that a superior visual memory is demonstrated by the Yolngu but other factors, such as a deep love of traditional lore and a desire to preserve it may be pertinent.

Parents live out their lives in front of the younger generation. It is rare that an adult performs any skill on his or her own, therefore a multiplicity of observation opportunities are available and a multiplicity of role models is presented to the young observer. The natural context of day-do-day living makes learning much easier for the young when compared with the formal schooling situation. One of the virtues of cultural transmission in a traditional community is that it is relevant for today. Yesterday's curriculum is being taught today in Western systems (Toffler 1970).

Harris believes that the Yolngu capacity for visual memory is sometimes utilised at the expense of analysis, citing the instance of young men who dismantled the brakes of a late model Toyota in the same manner as the earlier model. The example reveals that analytic skills were not demonstrated on that occasion, it does not prove that analytic skills were non-existent.

It is incorrect to state that learning by observation is a typical *Aboriginal* learning strategy, because all learning in all cultures in all contexts is preceded by observation. That is probably why Harris uses the term Yolngu rather than Aboriginal to refer to his population. It is easy to speak of one community but by using the term 'Aboriginal' an inference is made that all Aborigines are similar.

The Aboriginal student who learned to use the offset printer better than his white co-learners was acknowledged as an analytical thinker, as well as adept at observation and imitation, and so did not serve as the best example of visual memory (as Harris himself states).

b) Learning by Imitation

The difference between learning by imitation and learning by observation is that, in imitation, what is observed is immediately applied. Learning by imitation is also accomplished by identifying with someone who is admired as a person. Learning by identification is very strong between sons and fathers or other male relatives, according to Harris. Possibly he spent more time with men. The male researcher can have difficulties researching female cultures. There are also more photographs of males than females accompanying his text, which gives the impression that he speaks of male instruction in the community more than female.

It is rare for the Yolngu to be forced out of the passive role while learning, except where verbal instruction by a person in a

conscious teacher role takes place. Aboriginal instructors at Milingimbi avoid forcing the learner to perform the skill after striking a problem. The answer is usually given or the skill is performed for the learner. Non-Aboriginal teaching method has the notion that a little struggle is profitable for the learner. Such a teaching method would certainly alienate the learner in this community. This different teaching approach is one of the most distinctive differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal instructors.

Self-doubt is avoided and self-esteem is strengthened by this excellent approach to teaching the Aboriginal child. If the child expects that answers, information and demonstration will be supplied as needed, with no emphasis on testing for acquisition of knowledge, then the learning situation lacks tension and is totally co-operative. Such a method recognises the right of the learners to proceed at their own pace and to demonstrate the attainment of knowledge when the learner is ready. This is not available in the context of Western schooling where self-paced learning in a context free of anxiety is not possible.

c) Learning from Role Playing

The most enthusiastic responses to oral English lessons involved role play. There is a tendency to prefer stock phrases out of old movies but adolescents all over the world have this in common.

There is relatively little verbal instruction involved in Yolngu learning. It occurs when in new situations or environments, when the task has some ritual significance in the process of maturation, when it is too difficult to learn by personal trial-and-error or observation and in ritual story-telling. Yolngu are therefore conditioned by their life-style to be very keen observers of behaviour and of the environment. This implies that how a teacher performs is equally as important as what is taught. As Yolngu imitate those they love or admire, the personality of the teacher becomes most important.

In New South Wales communities the observation of behaviour may be just as great but stem from different causes. In towns where Aboriginal people have been thrust to the margins of life and racial prejudice is high, observation of behaviour takes on a new meaning.

As dramatic mime plays such a central role in the ceremonies of traditional communities and such ceremonies have mostly ceased

in New South Wales, the use of role play in the more Western acculturated communities remains to be evaluated as a teaching method.

d) Personal Trial and Error v. Verbal Instruction and Demonstration

Harris divides this into two classes:

TRIAL AND ERROR AND IMITATION: This is closely linked in time between the observation and the participation in the learning.

TRIAL AND ERROR WITHOUT IMITATION: The observation skill is separated from the participation by years or weeks. The skill may be internalised by years of passive observation and allowed to mature very rapidly over a few days of doing it. This is an extremely common practice in Arnhem Land.

Learning by doing is the only effective way that some difficult manual skills can be learned. Some are so fast that they are more like muscle memory than the results of conscious logical thought. There is no modern verbalised substitute for that kind of ability.

The verbal explanation of a learning procedure is difficult for those who have learned through non-verbal means. They are not able to explain verbally what they know.

e) Learning in Real-life Activities v. Practice in Contrived Settings

The traditional community has a present-time orientation rather than a future one. Most Yolngu activities are ends in themselves and not means to future ends because of this. Western education is a means to a future end, involving practice of skills in artificial settings which are a great distance from the Yolngu's real life experience in the present but which will prepare the student for the future. Many children are not aware of the nature of Western schooling and this lack of expectation influences their motivation for learning. Harris notes also that Yolngu do not draw a distinction between practice and the real event.

f) Context-specific Learning v. Generalisable Principles

When the skill is learned in real life context it is not freely generalised into an abstract body of principles that can be applied to other situations. In the 60s, when the Yolngu went to the Central Training Establishment in Darwin, many came back and took up a different occupation, ignoring the training they had received.

Person orientation rather than information orientation results in context-specific learning. A learner will only be open to that

body of knowledge that comes within his defined rights of inheritance.

The failure to transfer principles or skills learned in one context to another means that one should try to teach processes rather than merely content. The teacher should endeavour to have a close personal relationship with the learner.

g) Person Orientation rather than Information Orientation: Absence of the Institutionalised Office of 'teacher'

Knowledge is valued because of who gives it. The objective value of information is prized in Western schooling. No matter how specialist a person is, newcomers will not be accepted in the Yolngu community until a year has passed.

Person orientation occurs because of the shared experience that is the basis of community life. Generally, fathers teach sons, mothers teach daughters, and learning instruction from relatives proceeds over many years.

Although semi-formal instruction from a teaching figure in the community occurs, its role is minimal compared with other modes such as learning by observation and by trial-and-error. Verbal instruction is rarely used as the sole means of giving and receiving knowledge. Learners are always taught by relatives who have authority to teach through ceremonial seniority or kinship. The activity rather than the teaching of it is primary.

Every one of these learning strategies admirably suits this communal life style where each person is integrated into a finely tuned mosaic of communal roles and functions. Every one of them is out of place in the Western instructional system. The inevitable conclusion is that the Western system has to be modified to include such learning strategies. Studies of less traditional communities should be examined to see if such learning strategies are employed in areas where culture has changed and culture contact has been longer established.

TESTS OF LEARNING STRATEGIES: Milingimbi compared with Darwin

A Test of Visual Memory was made of nine to thirteen year old students at Milingimbi and Darwin and white school children with a considerable amount of country living in their background. It had an inconclusive result, although there was a superior capacity for Milingimbi people in visual memory for the shapes of objects and their spatial arrangement in relation to each other.

A Test of Classification (after Luria 1971,1976) was given to the same students. The schooling at Milingimbi did not influence the development of 'white' abstract classification systems. The combined effects of schooling and living in Darwin influenced the town Aboriginal students. Most white 'country' students classified objects in a real life functional way like the Milingimbi Aboriginal students. The effects of age and years of schooling influenced the Milingimbi people more than the country white students.

A Test of Verbal Logical Problem Solving (after Luria 1971, 1976) was given to the same students. Country white students answered on a verbal logical basis, but Darwin town-bred Aborigines scored much lower. Although the schooling of Yolngu influenced them to solve problems similarly to whites, for most, the experience of growing up in a traditionally oriented community is a much more salient feature and influence on their learning systems. The findings confirm Harris's natural observations that Milingimbi Aborigines are more Aboriginal than Western in their mental processes.

Answering the charge that Aboriginal society has experienced so much social change that cross cultural learning style comparisons are no longer valid, Harris (1984) observes that isolated Aboriginal communities have not been significantly affected and their learning strategies remain the same. In a later article (1984) he states that observations made as far apart as Bathurst Island, Ernabella, Yuendumu and Aurukun indicate that traditionally oriented Aboriginal people from all over Australia are similar in learning style.

Other authors who have written about traditional Aboriginal learning styles, such as Goodluck (1928), O'Brien, Plooi and Whitelaw (1975), Davidson (1977), Brandl (1980,1982), Ungunmerr (1981), Walton (1981), McGrath (1983), McVeigh (1983), Russo (1983) and Allen (1985), unanimously agree that significant learning style differences exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and should be catered for in the classroom. Of these, only Harris (1981) and Moeckl (1985) specify a combination of Aboriginal *and* Western teaching strategies to accommodate these learning styles.

2. BAMYILI, NORTHERN TERRITORY

Davidson (1977) researched teaching and learning strategies at Bamyili, focusing on teacher-child, parent-child interactions, as well as an assessment of the parents' traditional and modern orientations and participation. The study is not quite as extensive as Harris's but is of value for its internal contrast.

The diversity between the Aboriginal home and school setting in terms of what is taught, how the child is taught and the child's perceptions of his mentors was quite marked. The school's emphasis on the learning of information was very different from the home's emphasis on directing and restricting the child in non-punitive ways. Parents tended to give negative evaluations of the child while questioning him or talking to him as a mechanism of control, trying to 'shame' him into compliance. They never punished children who failed to answer; to hit the child might make him sick. The question and answer method was the main part of the school's approach.

Only boys were observed in this study and as they grew older they interacted less frequently with white or black authority figures. During their traditional ceremonies an emphasis on observation and repetition was made by their elders (male). This is similar to Harris's findings. All children learned the new concepts by repeating what their fathers had told them. The teaching always took place in a natural learning environment. The same was noticed of women from traditional societies in the north by Brandl (1982).

The observation of Aboriginal teacher aides was an interesting study of a bicultural dualism in methods used for teaching. The aides performed like white teachers in the classroom but like fathers in the natural setting, exhibiting two different teaching styles. They spoke English in the classroom but Kriol in the bush. Jernudd (1969) at Roper River, Bamyili and Bagot reported language alternation in different social settings, and Williams (1976) also reported different teaching behaviours in different settings.

Different teaching styles from the same person in two different settings means that students will be required to have two different learning styles. Davidson reports that Bamyili children develop two codes of behaviour when the school/home contexts differ greatly. This situation is an adaptation to new methods of teaching and learning brought in by Western schooling.

Many Aboriginal children master the school language of Standard English and then speak Aboriginal English or an Aboriginal language in the home. Even non-Aboriginal children learn to exhibit different behaviours in school and home. These are the results of the language of the school and its curriculum content diverging more and more from the social reality of multicultural communities composed of different ethnic backgrounds and social classes. Kimball and

Burnett (1979) speaking of the USA, noted -

The environment of formal schooling may be, in its organisations and culture, at greater or lesser variance with that from which the student comes, and if so, we may expect tensions and the need for adaptations which can take on the form of rejection.¹

Toffler (1970) was speaking in a similar vein -

Tens of millions of children today are forced by law to spend precious hours of their lives grinding away at material whose future utility is highly questionable.²

Such a situation is a recipe for failure for children of all backgrounds, but the learner with a different language background and cultural understanding has additional stress induced by the requirement to learn in a foreign mode and language.

At Bamyili, the more 'modern' fathers became the less contact they had with sons. This was a side effect of being away at work, according to Davidson. The more 'modern' the Bamyili mothers became, on the other hand, the more contact they had with their sons, taking over some of the fathers' roles. Davidson reports that the father's role has changed from caretaker of sons to that of the family bread-winner. As this is a study of the first generation of Aboriginal children in Bamyili who are experiencing the social change from a traditional Aboriginal family life to the 'new' working class way of life, the study is documenting social change at a critical time and is a view of the effects of Westernisation on Aboriginal communities.

Davidson opines that Aboriginal teaching styles may have worked well on such tasks as naming objects, or where the time for revision was not limited to that of one or two lessons. They may not have much success where the task requires the children to solve problems that vary each time and where there is a limited time for instruction and revision.

It may be profitable to remember that the Aboriginal teaching styles in traditional times developed from a social context that was far wider in its range than that of teaching and learning.

¹ S.T.Kimball & J.H.Burnett: *Learning and Culture, Proceedings of the 1972 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, p.xiv.

² A.Toffler (1970): *Future Shock*, p.370.

Observation and repetition are an outgrowth of the fact that the Elders were highly respected teachers of Law, Philosophy, Religion and much else besides, and that a critical questioning of the teacher was not practised:

The important distinctions were sex, age and knowledge; of these, knowledge was the most important. Aboriginal society was ruled by the elders, select old people who had passed through all stages of initiation. Their power was based on their knowledge of the ceremonies of the Law, and through them the rule of the Law in Aboriginal life was absolute.³

Such reverence for teachers would inevitably produce a learning style of respectful imitation when the teacher has such an elevated status.

Davidson believes that a high degree of similarity between the school and the home would inevitably assist learning in the school. Where the child has grown up in the minimal control of a 'traditional' home, he may regress if he is given close supervision in the school. This is an argument for radical culture change from traditional patterns to Westernised ones and in the process, much that is uniquely Aboriginal will become distorted or lost. Even if this could be achieved it might not be appropriate for Bamyili, where there are few jobs. Rather than change the culture as Davidson argues, it would be better to adjust the school, as Watts (1982)⁴ and De Lacey and Taylor (1975)⁵ argue.

It is significant that when Davidson widens his focus to social aspects, he discusses child rearing practice which is usually discussed in connection with the 'deficit' theory. His argument is in direct contrast to Brandl (1982) who argues that new knowledge and skills can endanger Aboriginal heritage if culture is not respected. Her field-work was conducted among the Tiwi (Bathurst and Melville Islands) the Yolngu, the Larrakaia and the Wagaidj of Northern Australia. Harris (1981), Knapp (1981) and McVeigh (1983) all argue that there is a need to capitalise on the cultural differences of Aboriginal people when designing educational programs. O'Brien *et al.* (1975) in their excellent training manual for teachers in Aboriginal communities, emphasise the value of consulting the Pitjantjatjara and respecting the cultural knowledge of these

³ N.Parbury (1986): *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in NSW*, p.17

⁴ B.H.Watts (1982): *Determinants of School Success*, p.281

⁵ P.R.De Lacey & L.J.Taylor, *Environment & Models of Thinking*, p.203

Western Desert people. Perhaps these writers, who publish a little later than Davidson, are reflecting the Aboriginal lobby for self-determination that became much stronger in the eighties.

A group of cognitive psychologists present the opposite view, that is, that improved performance occurs from increased exposure to Western influences, particularly through schooling - for example, McElwain (1969), Craddock (1971), Douglas & Miller (1971), Dasen (1974) and Keats (1975). These are the researchers who have measured cognitive abilities and who describe a need for educational 'intervention' for Aboriginal children in order to equip them to survive in modern times. Such views, espoused in the 70s, have to be revised in reference to the achievements of Aboriginal people who have established homeland centres in the desert environments and have administered cattle stations and land councils, demonstrating no cognitive disadvantage at all in the performance of these activities.

Cibrowski (1976) gave what is probably the most accurate opinion. In his view, no single factor explains improved performance by some people over those with none. His study reveals the difficulties of controlling all moderating variables in two different samples.

Davidson revealed the flexibility of both students and Aboriginal teacher aides in mastering the learning styles demanded of Western schooling so their learning styles are not so fixed as is sometimes implied. Although ten years old, studies such as Harris's and Davidson's have enduring value, because they documented social change and its impact on traditional communities at a crucial period. Follow-up studies should be done to ascertain the current situation.

THE APPLICATION OF LEARNING STRATEGIES RESEARCH:

Watts (1971) has spoken of disadvantages of Aboriginal people as minority groups, and the statistics of unemployment remain high, but apathy and insecurity are not present in all Aboriginal communities.

Writers who describe the education of minority groups agree that it makes good sense to ask the learner to master tasks through the use of his or her own cognitive style: Reissman (1967), Watts (1971), and Smith (1982), but it is sometimes not feasible for larger institutions to do this. The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Policy states :

3.2.3. Where the home teaching learning methods are markedly non-verbal in nature, there may be a consequent need for teachers to modify and adapt their teaching strategies accordingly.

This has implications for the training and retraining of teachers to develop cultural sensitivity. It is difficult for those minority children who form a small sub-group in a class, to be encouraged to use strategies that are distinctly different from the rest of the class. Schooling tends to be the great 'leveller' and to stream all children in the same manner because of the demands of the institution and the demands of the learner conflicting with each other. To employ differing teaching strategies that take account of varied learning styles would require a knowledge of all the learning styles exhibited by all minority groups. There are difficulties with this, as no generalisation applies to a particular sub-group and the differences between sub-groups are marginal, rarely more than a fifteen per cent difference from a mean, according to Willing's (1985) research on migrant learning styles.⁶

Despite this finding on diverse migrant groups, much research carried out on cognition in traditional Aboriginal communities has established certain traditional learning strategies linked to ceremonial and daily activities where the society is less influenced by Westernisation. No research has been conducted in the communities that the National Aboriginal Education Committee classifies as "rural non-traditional", "urban dispersed" and "urban" communities (see Appendix). If traditional communities have generalisable learning strategies because of the stability and homogeneity of the social group, there may be a different situation obtaining for the other three categories because of the complexities of urbanisation, rural life and the widely variant lives and statuses of New South Wales Aboriginal people.

There is also a danger that the widely available studies of the more traditional communities in the Northern Territory, Queensland and South Australia are read and implicitly applied to New South Wales Aboriginal groups. There is a tendency for non-Aboriginal people to regard the Aboriginal population as one group with the same characteristics. New South Wales Aboriginal people are not only different from other states, there are also wide variations between them in regard to historical background, acculturation patterns and languages. They are descendants of people

⁶ K.Willing (1985): *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education*, p.100.

with cultures that have evolved from the varied environments of cool tablelands, tropical/subtropical rainforests, temperate forests and deserts.⁷

Another influence, unmentioned in the literature, is that the impact of Western culture has been experienced for longer periods of time in New South Wales compared with other States. The impact varies as one moves westwards from the coast, where some can trace two hundred years of intense culture clash through their family's oral history, to the far west where it has been approximately one hundred years since the Aboriginal people first met the whites. In the far west and north west, due to the uncommercial nature of some lands, there has been an opportunity to maintain some of the old ways, though to what extent is unknown.

Subcultural groupings within the communities, based on socio-economic status, are extant and are sometimes visible in rural towns where some employed people live in town, others live on its edge and others on a reserve several miles out of town.

It is therefore difficult to discuss learning strategies in non-traditional communities, as very little research has been carried out and it is difficult to define who is non-traditional. Articles on other subjects sometimes give circumstantial evidence. For example, Sala (1983) writes of Swan Hill regional library and its Aboriginal users. This provides evidence that some members of this Victorian community are presumably information-oriented in distinction to Harris's person-oriented community at Milingimbi.

In reference to learning strategies, any combination of four possible options may exist in New South Wales country and city areas:

1. Traditional learning strategies exist and are employed.
2. Westernised learning strategies exist and are employed.
3. Both co-exist and are employed (as at Bamyili).
4. No strategies are employed. Alienation exists and formal learning is avoided.

Data from government reports discuss high attrition rates of Aboriginal school students, which may be evidence that students fail to learn because they do not learn the appropriate strategies

⁷ Widders, T. *et al.* (1985): *Australian History: Aboriginal Society and Culture, Certificate Entrance Course, Teacher's Resource Book*, pp.11-59.

or are not willing to. No single cause is likely, yet this may be part of the situation and is one that is given no mention in recent reports. Relatively small numbers of New South Wales Aboriginal students proceed to the non-compulsory years of high school and many have poor attendance patterns prior to these years.

The NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs (1987) commissioned a survey on educational achievement among Aboriginal students. The report chose to focus on the positive factors in the students' home and school environments that contributed to academic success. It did not examine learning strategies, although this was part of the reason for conducting the survey.⁸ The research group was sensitive to the misuse of research that has frequently focused on negative factors in Aboriginal communities and a continuing negative emphasis maintains negative stereotypes.

Students' age, sex, self-esteem, aspirations and achievement motivation, sources of encouragement and support, locus of control, previous school experiences, participation in sport and extra-curricular activities, peer group influences, health and nutrition were noted. This provided a profile of the successful Aboriginal students who coped well with English and maths and demonstrated a high level of responsibility for their own academic endeavours. Learning strategies are crucial in acquiring such skills and may be related to attitudes and life views.

The report's findings on the school, the communities, and the home and family backgrounds, revealed multiple moderating factors in the achievement of success for the Aboriginal student. It would seem that a high level of acculturation to Westernised lifestyle and values is a crucial factor in New South Wales schooling.

Much has been written of the poverty of Aboriginal people, which is coupled with low self-esteem levels, affecting motivation. The examination of Aboriginal achievement must take account of the social context. It is important that investigations of learning strategies of New South Wales Aboriginal students be made, as they have been of migrants. It would be valuable to understand whether the 'traditional' learning strategies are still being used, and the extent to which they are overlaid by Westernised strategies, and whether these are learned in the home or school.

Overseas research has shown that learning strategies are acquired very early in the home: Mead (1953), Hess & Shipman (1965).

⁸ NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs (1987): *Educational Achievement Among Aboriginal Students*.

The school has rarely taught students how to learn, and this has inspired some to write about the necessity of learning how to learn: Bateson (1942), Smith (1982). Counsellors and teachers have been urged to develop teaching strategies that will appeal to the student's own style (Watts 1975). Teaching methods such as these are in direct contrast to the typical Western school room which, according to Olsen (1971), "suffers from the verbal hangover of the Middle Ages". As a result, children of cultural minority groups may be unresponsive in the class: Watts (1982) writes -

Each child develops, partly as a result of the culture/subculture into which he is socialised, preferred ways of learning and knowing. Some favour a concrete style, some an abstract, conceptual style, some are oriented to the visual aspects of their environment, while others pay more heed to aural cues, some work best in a group setting, others as individuals, some are reflective, while others are impulsive, some are dominated by the totality of the experience, while others are adept in breaking down a problem into its constituent parts.

We therefore have an implicit argument for individualised strategies, their recognition, and the need to cater for them, contrasting with the northern communities that appeared to be much more homogeneous in the seventies, but which may have changed now. It is self evident that one must take account of the kind of community, its stability and acculturation patterns, in conjunction with the assessment of individual children's and adult's learning styles.

We ought to be using the learner's learning style in initial teaching situations to encourage attendance and success. We also ought to be helping learners to develop specific learning strategies that they can use over many years, both inside and outside the classroom, and which will make their learning and living easier (Willing 1985). This is particularly true of adults, who undertake learning mostly for practical reasons (Knowles 1973) - for example, to obtain employment, technical or further education, or to conduct the affairs of Aboriginal organisations.

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APPENDIX

Communities : The NAEC has constructed a model of Aboriginal society in which there are four categories of Aboriginal communities, namely:-

Category 1: Traditionally Oriented Communities: People who have the greatest geographic and social separation from the rest of Australian society (although they will have some degree of economic connection). These people are also the most traditionally oriented.

Category 2: Rural Non-Traditional Communities: This group has considerable social and geographical separation from the rest of Australian society, but is not so highly traditionally oriented as Category 1.

Category 3: Urban Communities: The people are highly geographically and economically embedded in non-indigenous society but, because of their community social organisation, they have considerable social separation. This group is likely to be less traditionally oriented than Category 1 and, to some extent, Category 2.

Category 4: Urban Dispersed: This group is highly socially, economically and geographically embedded in the non-indigenous Australian society. This group would also be expected to exhibit the least traditional orientation.

Source: John Sherwood (Ed.) 1982: *Aboriginal Education: Issues and Innovations*, Vol.2, Perth, Creative Research, p.61.