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ABORIGINALISATION IMPLIES EMPOWERMENT AND DISEMPOWERMENT

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ABORIGINALISATION DOES NOT MEAN 'BOTH WAYS' EDUCATION

In some people's minds, the Aboriginalisation of education means placing Aboriginal teachers in community schools and training these Aboriginal teachers to teach and to conduct the school in the ways Westerners once did. That objective is as wrong-headed as it is racist.

The Aboriginalisation of education in each community can only mean the development of an *Aboriginal pedagogy* if it is to address the perennially documented failings (for example, McConnochie and Harker, 1985; Folds, 1987; Lanhupuy, 1987) of Western schools in the education of Aboriginal people. In this view, Aboriginal people will determine appropriate subject matters for curriculum, ways of teaching, ways of organising the social context of learning, and ways of structuring the relationship between school, community, and the State. That is, the institutionalisation of education will be contested primarily among *Aboriginal* views of the ways in which education can be coopted for Aboriginal purposes. Anything short of Aboriginalisation of pedagogy in this manifold sense runs the risk of enshrining forever the roles Western education has consistently and persistently used for the practices of cultural imperialism, political domination, and territorial colonisation.

As I have argued elsewhere (McTaggart, 1988), even the apparently innocuous idea of 'both ways' education has sometimes conveniently been interpreted by Westerners as a way of ensuring permanent roles for themselves in Aboriginal education. The appealing rubric used by Aboriginal teachers to crack the Western monoculturalism of Aboriginal community schools has been cruelly turned against them in arguments for continued involvement by Westerners -- usually encapsulated as the 'two domains' theory. This theory assumes that there are two domains of knowledge -- Aboriginal and Western -- and suggests that it is Westerners who will always be the final arbiters of what will count as knowledge in the Western domain. That is, access for Aboriginal people to

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the dominant cultural capital of Westernism will always be subject to the authority of Westerners. That Aboriginal people should be the final arbiters of the authenticity of Western knowledge in the service of Aboriginal people's interests¹ is not allowed in the so-called 'two domains' and 'dual-authority' conceptions of Aboriginal education. The idea of the 'bicultural person' is a related Western construct which is used cynically by Westerners to maintain the privileges of access and influence in Aboriginal communities.

In complete contrast to these dualisms, what Aboriginal people have usually meant by 'both ways' education is a distinctively Aboriginal pedagogy which coopted Western institutions and the instrumentality of some Western knowledge for the realisation of Aboriginal goals. In Aboriginal people's views, it has always been a case of 'Aboriginal pedagogy versus colonisation of the mind'² (McTaggart, 1988).

THE 'INSTITUTIONALISATION' OF ABORIGINAL PEDAGOGIES

In a Western interpretation, the institutionalisation of education finds expression through contestation in the three registers of language, activities, social relationships which are formalised as the discourse, practice and particular patterns of social organisation which make a 'school' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988a):

SOCIAL MEDIUM	INSTITUTIONAL FORM	
Language	INSTITUTIONALISATION CONTESTATION	Discourse
Activities		Practice
Social relationships		Organisation

It is easy to imagine a similar kind of dialectical process occurring as Aboriginal community life distinctively influences Aboriginal pedagogical practice as it constitutes the Aboriginal school. Though in an Aboriginal view of education and schooling

¹ For a highly sophisticated account of the view that all knowledge is constituted in terms of some particular political interest, see Habermas (1972, 1974) and for the relevance of this thesis in education and educational enquiry see Carr and Kemmis (1986).

² I owe the phrase 'colonisation of the mind' to African writer wa Thiongo Ngugi (1986).

these particular registers may not be dominant, an Aboriginal pedagogy will draw upon the deep structure and substance of Aboriginal knowledge³ to constitute these or similar all-encompassing aspects. That is, everything about the school will be constituted in deeply distinctive Aboriginal ways. Because only Aboriginal people will have recourse to the deep structure and substance of Aboriginal knowledge, a redistribution of understanding will be accomplished. Along with that will emerge a dramatic redistribution of power. Aboriginal teachers will be empowered, and Western teachers will be disempowered.⁴

For Aboriginal teachers this might be an uncomfortable process. One of the corner-stones of the colonisation of the mind is making people believe that they are not entitled to power, that there is some moral imperative not to rock the boat of dependence on which Westerners serve their passage through commitments to God, humanity, competence and wisdom as they are realised in Western education. Another corner-stone of colonisation of the mind is the nurturance of the lie that Aboriginal people are not competent or ready to manage their own affairs, and that efforts to do so will result in even greater misery than cultural oppression. These beliefs may not be easy to shake off, but an increased sense of control of one's own life and culture brings obvious, immediate and synergistic rewards. A sense of purpose and direction for action burgeons as soon as the real obstacles are recognised as Western conceptions of what is and what ought to be happening.

Western teachers may feel uncomfortable with the development of Aboriginal pedagogies for several reasons, and it is important for them to understand and document the forced withdrawal of Westernism. The phrase 'forced withdrawal' brings us to the first source of discomfort. Power is not something which can be given away -- it must always be taken. That taking will not always follow the rates and patterns expected by Westerners, and even where there is supportive intent, there will be and should be painful surprises.

³ Referred to, for example, in North-East Arnhem Land as *djalkiri* and *Yolngu rom*.

⁴ This disempowerment is obviously a highly localised phenomenon. Western educators in this position are enormously empowered in terms of their understanding of their own culture -- few people are so pressed to an objectification, justification and adjustment of their own ways of seeing the world.

The most subtle and important sources of discomfort for Westerners will be those which in their consistent manifestations are familiar to all oppressed peoples. The effects emerge first as an uneasy feeling of not knowing what to do and being unable to cope, and lead ultimately to alienation and anomy. The cause is a reversal of the traditional cultural dominance of Westernism. Instead, Aboriginal culture begins to dominate, and Western teachers experience a complementary disconnectedness from the real Aboriginal cultural capital which is beginning to invest the institution of schooling with new and unfamiliar forms of life and work. Just as Aboriginal people felt estranged in an educational world where the dominant cultural capital was Western, so Western teachers will naturally feel less and less comfortable in an educational world gradually (or suddenly) assuming Aboriginality.

STRATEGIES FOR WESTERN EDUCATORS

As I have suggested, the problem for Western teachers does not simply stem from a decline in power, but is based in a diminished substantive understanding of what is happening. Some Westerners will be able to sustain forms of involvement meaningful to them longer than others. Two kinds of strategy will work temporarily, but both will succumb eventually. A third approach may succeed, but requires an extraordinarily informed and dialectical view of the relationship between Aboriginal and Western knowledge, a painfully introspective study of the role of the Westerner, and a studied, unsentimental commitment to Aboriginal self-determination.

The first strategy is to cling on to power. This can be put into effect in several ways. For example: by asserting expert knowledge about the teaching of English language and Western mathematics; by continuing to assume dominant roles and nurturing dependence; by *demonstrating* how things should be done instead of supporting Aboriginal people as they actually do things themselves; and by asserting and acting as if Aboriginal people are not and will not be ready or competent to take substantive control. This strategy is being overtaken by policy initiatives, by the healthy politicisation of Aboriginal teachers, and by defensible theories of the roles Western educators can play in supporting the educational action research of Aboriginal people (White, 1988; McTaggart, 1988).

The second strategy is more constructive, but it too has a finite life span. This strategy is to work to understand the

Aboriginal world, to teach and organise empathetically in the light of that understanding, and to act to support Aboriginalisation in substantive ways. This strategy is valued by Aboriginal people, but this attribution of value can easily be misunderstood by Westerners to imply certain entitlements. Some Western educators assume the continued and inevitable relevance of their own teaching, consultancy and administration. But there are no long term entitlements for Western teachers, consultants or administrators in a community school situation where an Aboriginal pedagogy is in place, though it may be that some empathetic Westerners will always be welcome in other roles -- by invitation, and for stated, contained purposes. Aboriginal pedagogy can only be realised as authentic educational work by *Aboriginal educators*. Accordingly, Western teachers and administrators are confronted with several moral, social and psychological dilemmas -- what to do, how to help, and when to leave.

A thorough understanding of the substance and allusionary base of Aboriginal knowledge is denied Westerners because of the restrictions placed on access by Aboriginal people. But even if those restrictions are lifted, Westerners could not, by virtue of their own enculturation, understand the world as Aboriginal people do. If Western teachers tried to 'implement' an Aboriginal pedagogy, their educational roles simply could not be fulfilled because they would be defined by substantive knowledge they do not and cannot understand in appropriate ways. In simple terms, the last aspect of this strategy left for Westerner teachers would be to do as they are told. But that raises crucial dilemmas. In any defensible view of education, mere technical implementation of educational ideas invented by others is unsatisfactory. In the practice of education, means cannot be distinguished logically (and therefore morally) from ends. Put bluntly, to be a technician is to act without responsibility for one's own actions -- to act immorally. So, no Western teacher can sensibly pretend to be enacting an authentic Aboriginal pedagogy, even through complete deference to Aboriginal direction.

There is an obvious difference between asserting and acting on the principle that Aboriginal people are best able to judge what is in their interests, and blind obedience. Nevertheless, the commitment to Aboriginalisation carries a commitment to the subordination of Western educators working in Aboriginal education. This subordination moves Westerners out of key roles -- teaching, principalship and conventional kinds of consultancy -- and into a variety of support roles which avowedly and explicitly carry the seeds of their own obsolescence.

THE DOCUMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL WORK

This third approach is dialectical and is a way of resolving some of the dilemmas mentioned -- in the form of another kind of educational work. The approach assumes that Aboriginal teachers will judge it desirable to work with Westerners to compare (in the context of pedagogical practice) Aboriginal and Western ways of knowing the world and of institutionalising education. The purpose of this collaboration is to unravel Western knowledge from an Aboriginal perspective, so that knowledge can be understood in Aboriginal terms, and be co-opted for Aboriginal purposes. In this approach, the role of the Westerner is not technical implementation, but rather responsiveness in unveiling the *politics* of personal interaction and the history of cultural confrontation, in describing Western knowing of the world (*epistemology*), and in giving account of the way things in the Western world exist (*ontology*). This responsiveness treads the fine line between mere technical (and morally unacceptable) service and the constant risk that it is another subtler version of colonisation of the mind. There is a rich literature about the nature of work by cross-cultural researchers treading the same fine line (for example, Fals Borda, 1979; Freire, 1970, 1982; Hall, 1979, 1981; Tax, 1960).

A question remains as to what the *educational work* by Westerners in the service of these aspirations to responsiveness looks like. Many Western teachers in the north of Australia have opted out of classroom teaching, principalship and consultancy to support Aboriginal teachers in the development of Aboriginal pedagogies and Aboriginal forms of schooling. They work in collaborative action research projects with Aboriginal teachers and administrators, and that work sometimes becomes visible through the documentation of Aboriginal pedagogies. As part of the reversal of the historical trend, it is important that Aboriginal educators are dominant in the reporting of the work on Aboriginal pedagogies, but it would be unfortunate if the Western experience of such changes went off the map completely. Exactly how does a Western educator work in this context of diminishing power and restricted understanding of the rationale for the educational work he or she is hoping to support?

The particularities of the newly conceived educational work of Western teachers are not well understood and some are still in the process of invention. What is the changing *language* in which they describe their work; what is the changing nature of the *social relationships and organisation* they share with each other and Aboriginal teachers; and how is the detail and substance of their

own educational *practice* changing?⁵ We have a good understanding from both Aboriginal and Western perspectives of how colonisation works, but we lack understanding of the detailed kind of work which is necessary to reverse that insidious process. That is a task for both Western and Aboriginal educators, and joint reports of the work are important, but they are not enough. Aboriginal teachers know best how to inform others of the progress of their work and understanding (and that obviously does not imply contribution to the journals of Westerners), but it is also important that Western teachers document their educational work to assist each other to objectify their experience and inform their critical self-reflection. Exactly how do the traditions, customs, habits and urges of Western enculturation frustrate and confound (and support) the individual work of Western educators who have elected to walk the fine line?

⁵ A fairly formal statement of a 'theory' of such work in the form of some prescriptive principles for Western educators of Aboriginal teachers can be found in McTaggart (1987), but I do not want to suggest that mode of reporting is the most useful or informative.

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