

THE EMU HUNTING KIT
AN ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides an analysis and evaluation of *The Emu Hunting Kit*. It looks at the background to the production of the materials and the problem which arose in deciding in which language to publish. Then the kit is discussed under five clusters of issues which relate to the production of a kit of Aboriginal Studies: the preparation, presentation, content, cultural attitudes and the teaching of the unit.

While the kit is of excellent quality and will no doubt appeal to some Aboriginal students, care must be taken in its presentation to non-Aboriginal students. The teacher needs to do some homework.

RESOURCE KIT EVALUATION

- Name: *The Emu Hunting Kit*
- Published: 1988, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney.
- Producers: The Kit is a joint project between a group of Aboriginal men at Fremantle Prison, Clare Mann an education officer at Fremantle Prison, and Glenys Letchford from Aboriginal Education in the Western Australian Ministry of Education.
- Price: \$49.50
- Age group: Primary School or Adult Aboriginal Literacy classes.
- Contents: 1. Three story books:
- Emu Hunting*, written by Olly Cameron and illustrated by Jack McArthur.
- The Fastest Bird*, written by Wally Juboy and illustrated by Geoffery Lindsay.
- The Lost Pup*, written and illustrated by Johnny Lurda.

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The author would like to acknowledge the suggestions of Lyn Riley-Mundine in the preparation of this paper.

2. 5 sequencing cards for Emu Hunting Story.
3. 3 discussion photographs - travelling through the bush in a ute; finding tracks at a waterhole; cooking food in the coals.
4. Track game on a story board.
5. The children's story booklet.

AIMS OF THE KIT

1. To provide reading material for Aboriginal children.
2. To increase knowledge of and develop a better understanding of Aboriginal culture and identity. Aboriginal written literature ensures that Aboriginal people and their culture are presented accurately and without cultural bias to a reader.
3. To provide positive images of Aboriginal people.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

1. To promote language development through using appropriate material for Aboriginal children.
2. To develop competency in written and spoken Standard English while maintaining competency and pride in his/her cultural heritage.
3. To provide models of Aboriginal writing for the students.

The aim of providing Aboriginal children with reading that is culturally appropriate is commendable. If the program continues it will have a great influence on the quantity and quality of such material available for Aboriginal children. To date there have been no further booklets. The second aim of increasing knowledge of and developing a better understanding of Aboriginal culture is only part of the picture, as the books represent only a part of Aboriginal culture. A lot of urban and even some country Aboriginal children would relate no better to the stories than their non-Aboriginal counterparts. In remote areas, however, where children enjoy hunting of the type described in the booklets, I believe they would stimulate language development as outlined in the specific objectives. The books could provide positive images of Aboriginal people if the reader was open to the types of activities described, for example, hunting and killing kangaroo.

While the stated aims and objectives of the kit refer mainly to the children, there is also an understanding that the project will be an ongoing one for the prisoners, providing the opportunity for more books to be written and developed as a series. Profits from the sale of this kit will go to establishing a fund held by the Institute of Applied Aboriginal Studies at the Western Australian College of Advanced Education, to help in the development of further materials. Some of the unwritten aims and objectives that the prisoners had in writing these booklets was to give something back to the communities from which they came (Mann, 1988b). I believe that the prisoners took great pride in the presentation of the books. The superior quality publishing also gave the prisoners a reason to believe that they had achieved their aim.

BACKGROUND

In Western Australia, Aboriginal people make up 2.7% of the total population, yet they constitute over one-third of the prison population (Mukherjee, S. and Scandia, A., 1988). There is a large educational industry catering to those prisoners, much of it in the field of initial literacy. The three booklets in the kit were written and illustrated by Aboriginal men in 'Fremantle', a maximum security prison near Perth, W.A.

THE PROCESS

The kit came about when an education officer, Clare Mann, discussed the program with the men and found out that "they doubted the relevance of work achieved in the literacy and art classes" (Mann, 1988a). The men expressed a strong desire to learn and use English for a purpose. They believed that they could achieve this by producing reading material of a high quality for both Aboriginal children and their communities. If such a project were approved the men believed that:

- a) they would gain purposeful skills in English and art;
- b) they would have some input into their own communities;
- c) as the focus was on children, the material would be 'open', thus avoiding problems of unintentional exposure of 'sacred-secret' knowledge.

It was decided that stories and illustrations would be developed in twice weekly classes (Mann, 1988a). (See article by C. Mann, p. 26 for details of the process by which the kit was prepared and published.

One of the most remarkable aspects of race relations in Australia is the minimal degree of contact and interaction between white and black Australians.

(Houston 1981, 81)

The Emu Hunting Kit was written by Aboriginal people for Aboriginal children. The offer of their use to the wider community by the Aboriginal Education Branch of the W.A. Education Ministry, has meant some adaptation to their original plan. The books could not be produced in Aboriginal English, they had to be conferenced to Standard Australian English (SAE), while the illustrations, with minimal changes, met publishing standards (Mann, 1988b). How much this has impinged on the basic style of the men is hard to know. The message that SAE is the only acceptable medium in W.A. schools has been strongly supported by certain sectors of the Aboriginal community who are SAE speakers themselves (Mann, 1988b).

If the books had been written in Kriol or some form of Aboriginal English, they may have been of use to the men and their immediate communities. However, with a commercial publication, it is uneconomical and limits sales. The issue of whether it is better for a child to learn to read initially in the mother tongue has been well documented (Brandl, M. 1976; Tryon, D.T., 1975; Russo, C.P., 1977; Murtagh, E.J. and Harris, S.G., 1979; Malcolm, I., 1982, and Fesl, E., 1981). Perhaps the most recent argument for Kriol as a language in its own right is presented by Joyce Hudson in her M.A. thesis *Grammatical and Semantic Aspects of Fitzroy Valley Kriol*, 1983. Hudson argues that the grammar and semantics of this language have developed to a stage where Kriol satisfies the requirements to stand as a language in its own right. Further problems arise for literacy teachers when there are few, if any, materials printed in the language.

The compromise of using SAE, with space at the bottom of each page for the insertion of a local language text, was the decision of the men and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (Mann, 1988b). Some Aboriginal words have been retained in the script, but it seems a watering down of the full flavour of Aboriginal English, where the nuances and syntax say as much as the words. It would also appear to denigrate Kriol as a language, if it is believed that Kriol is a language at all!

If literacy means cultural genocide it can
only compound the problems of Aboriginal people.

(Fesl, 1981, 75)

The debate on the use of Kriol or Non Standard English is a long one and cannot be argued in full here. It is worth noting, however, that the conflict did arise in the production of these books. The decision to leave space at the bottom of each page for another language seems a good compromise.

From lists of questions which other writers suggest should be asked of such material as this (Houston, 1981; Fidock, 1985; Budby, 1982a; Binnion, 1983; Riley-Mundine, 1988) the following clusters of issues seem to provide an appropriate and fruitful basis for discussing this kit.

1. *Issues relating to the preparation of the materials - the authors and their expertise, the degree and quality of Aboriginal consultation, the use and/or misuse of sources.*

The Commonwealth Aboriginal Studies Working Group (Budby, Report, 1982b) stressed the need for Aboriginal involvement, "together with other concerned groups" (p.55) in the preparation of Aboriginal Studies. The fact that these books were written by Aboriginal people speaks for itself. The men's expertise lies in their life experiences. The quality of Aboriginal consultation throughout the production of the kit is high. In the Teacher's Notes there are a few areas that need highlighting and clarification. One is the issue of 'masks'. It was initially planned to include cut-out masks as part of the kit, but on advice from Clare Mann, the masks were dropped from the kit, but retained as a suggested activity, because, in some communities masks are only connected with ceremonies. There is a suggestion in the Teacher's Notes:

Use of masks has special significance within Aboriginal culture and it is suggested that teachers approach the members of their local Aboriginal community to discuss their masks use. Contact may be made through the Aboriginal Education worker in your school or the Regional Aboriginal Education advisor.

(Teacher's Notes p.3)

There is also a poem in the Notes which may cause problems in communities who consider talking about the dead as taboo.

Activity 1: Group writes a 'step poem' - e.g.

My dog was old
My red dog was old
My dog was hairy and old
My dog is dead

A dead dog may be regarded as part of the kinship system and therefore to talk about him/her would be forbidden.

Some general advice at the beginning of the kit, to seek the local Community's involvement in the presentation of the unit, would help to avoid this sort of problem.

The updating of resource material can be a problem. Kits should be either re-written or discarded after 10 years. The value of this kit is that it was produced in 1988, and the materials suggested for use in conjunction with the kit are current. The kit had the approval and involvement of the WA Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. "Consultation must be real and not token" (Lyn Riley-Mundine, 1988). This is not always easy, especially when two groups of Aboriginal people have varying views on issues, e.g., the men wanting the books in Aboriginal English and the Ministry wanting them in SAE.

2. Issues relating to presentation - suitability of, quality of, usefulness for the classroom, educational outcomes predicted, range of materials, adaptability.

The kit is packaged in a 40 x 48cms clear plastic bag. It is a high quality production and the decision to have the books published commercially (a decision taken by the men, (Mann, 1988b)) ensured wide distribution through the publisher's network.

The Teacher's Notes are extensive and give many suggestions as to usage. Part A (3 pages) contains practical activities applicable in all classrooms, while Part B (13 pages) is devoted particularly to schools with a high proportion of Aboriginal students.

The fact that they are now in SAE means that they are now available to the non-Aboriginal community as well. It could be seen as an attempt to communicate to the wider Australian community some of the fun and excitement of hunting. The acceptance of this experience as such may vary from school to school. Some may see it as stereotypical of Aboriginal behaviour and assume that this is how all Aboriginal people live, or find their food. Careful presentation as shown in the teacher's notes will help to avoid this sort of situation.

Many of the factual inaccuracies which underlie the growth of stereotypes about the Aborigines have been perpetuated from generation to generation by a false presentation in school materials.

(Houston 1981, 99)

Some key concepts such as discrimination, ethnocentrism, a homogenous society and cultural pluralism can all be reinforced or destroyed by a teacher's attitude.

The kit is advertised as a "Language/Cultural Resource for all classrooms" (the flyer that accompanies the kit). The materials are not meant to be a full compendium of Aboriginal history or life, but an 'experience of Aboriginal culture' (the flyer).

Classroom teaching and syllabus content (prior knowledge, concepts, attitudes) are often based on the assumptions that the student is a competent user of SAE and that the student has an Anglo-Australian cultural background. For many Aboriginal students this situation created 'invisible barriers' to language development. The kit was designed to try and overcome some of the following problems:

- * the cultural distance the Aboriginal student may experience between the teacher, the non-Aboriginal student and self;
- * a teacher's limited knowledge of the student's cultural experiences and the utilisation of these in a learning program;
- * established classroom teaching practices which limit effective learning for Aboriginal students;
- * the students' reluctance to share their cultural experiences in the classroom.

The materials in the kit should:

- create a learning context familiar to the Aboriginal student and one which utilises the student's prior knowledge and experiences;
- provide a catalyst so the Aboriginal student will want to participate in language activities;
- encourage the sharing of one's cultural experiences in order to develop understanding between the non-Aboriginal student, the teacher and the Aboriginal student;
- form a bridge for students between their oral language and the SAE of commercial books.

(Teacher's Notes, p.3)

The books were piloted at Wiluna and Mt Margaret Schools where there is a 95% Aboriginal student enrolment, and they were enthusiastically received (Mann, 1988a). However, in urban schools I'm not sure that this would be so, as some Aboriginal students would not relate to the stories and may feel embarrassed that their class-mates would think that this was the way all Aboriginal people got their food. This could be avoided, if the teacher were sensitive to and knowledgeable about urban Aboriginal culture.

3. Issues relating to content - viewpoints presented, truthfulness of statements, sensitivity of selection, depth of dealing with issues.

Fidock (1985), Riley-Mundine (1988) and Houston (1981) are all concerned about the superficiality of what has passed for Aboriginal Studies in the past. Real issues of Aboriginal life and culture have been passed over for the more exotic and more comfortable aspects. These materials are contemporary and deal with an event that some Aboriginal people enjoy today, hunting. To some people in the city, this may appear barbaric and the eating of emu, repulsive. However, if related to something that the children are already familiar with, connections are more easily made.

For example, the ABC series *Bush Tucker Man* could be shown in conjunction with the reading of the story *Emu Hunting*. Children see the Army Major, Hiddins, hunting for Bush Tucker so that he can catalogue it for use by the Army, should they ever be stranded in the bush. He acknowledges that most of what he has learnt has come from Aboriginal people.

The books avoid controversial issues in themselves as they are stories. But issues of kinship, love and caring are raised in *The Lost Pup*. Mythology can be taught using *The Fastest Bird*. The depth of the issues raised will depend on the teacher's background knowledge and his/her access to Aboriginal people in the community to be involved in the teaching of the materials (remuneration must also be considered here). The fact that these materials have been written by Aboriginal people eliminates a lot of the human and cultural developmental bias of some materials. They are, of course, written purposely with an Aboriginal bias.

4. Issues relating to cultural attitudes - prejudice, bias, stereotyping, paternalism, ethnocentrism and negative stressing.

To make students aware of their own ethnocentrism is a feat in itself. The activities which accompany this kit are all designed to give Aboriginal children a sense of identity, and the

non-Aboriginal students a chance to participate in a cultural experience. The game, which is part of the kit, draws on the skills of Aboriginal children with regard to observation. They have to look for different tracks and things like rockholes, ant hills, etc. To an Aboriginal child from a traditionally oriented community, this comes as second nature and is an easy task. However, when presenting this game to some trainee teachers in September 1988, some of them found difficulty in locating the sites suggested on the cards. This indicated to me that the game was culturally appropriate for children from remote areas and that the observation skills of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children living in remote areas, that I had seen use the game, were superior to those of the trainee teachers!

The importance of the use of the Teacher's Notes in conjunction with the kit cannot be stressed enough. The nature of the material in the kit is full of Aboriginal cultural attitudes, but its presentation in the classroom may just be reinforcing prejudice and ethnocentrism if it is not used properly. This will occur if the teacher has a negative attitude to Aboriginal people, is paternalistic or tends to look at Aboriginal issues as 'problems', treats the stories as fairy tales, or in isolation from a unit of study.

5. Issues relating to the teaching of the unit.

Fidock (1985) stresses the importance of Aboriginal Studies being local studies and Binnion (1983) is emphatic that the program should be teacher devised and class oriented. All teachers should have some background in Aboriginal Studies so that they have some knowledge of Aboriginal issues, and that they are aware of their own ethnocentrism. Budby's recommendations relating to this should be adopted (Budby, Report, 1982b: 122).

Probably most importantly, the Kit provides models of Aboriginal writing for students.

This will encourage students, teachers and community members to provide their own books, and will promote the transmission of Aboriginal culture to a range of readers.

(Teacher's Notes, p.3)

It is also a very good opportunity to encourage the involvement of local Aboriginal people in the presentation of the different

activities suggested. Better still, if local people come up with other activities or excursions suited to the area.

Other issues relating to the teaching of this kit have been dealt with in different sections of this essay.

CONCLUSION

This essay has provided an analysis and evaluation of the *Emu Hunting Kit*. In looking at the background to the publication, I have developed a discussion on the issues involved in the use of Aboriginal English. The compromise arrived at by the men in deciding to publish in SAE leaving space at the bottom of each page for the insertion of another language, seemed the best solution.

The preparation, presentation, content, cultural attitudes and the teaching of the unit are discussed in detail, with examples from the kit on each issue.

The kit is of excellent quality and will no doubt appeal to Aboriginal children from remote areas. As usual, the teacher must take care to prepare well, and to use the local Aboriginal community to enrich the topics taught. Care must be taken in its presentation to non-Aboriginal and urban Aboriginal students if stereotypes and ethnocentric views are to be avoided. It is an opportunity for non-Aboriginal people to be enriched by an Aboriginal cultural experience, provided by Aboriginal people who wanted to contribute something to their own communities.

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