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YES, IT ISN'T - NO, IT IS

*Carol Reid &
Helen Velissaris

During 1990 the Disadvantaged Schools Program (D.S.P.) funded an Urban Literacies Project in New South Wales. There were two strands; one was investigating English as used by children from Multicultural backgrounds; the second was researching the incidence and use of Aboriginal English in the classroom. Redfern Primary School was invited to participate as part of the Aboriginal English strand. The following is a reflection on the processes by Carol Reid and Helen Velissaris. There are some findings that may be useful to teachers regardless of the childrens' backgrounds but we found them especially relevant for the Aboriginal children we teach in an urban school.

Action research has been defined as "a systematic process whereby practitioners voluntarily engage in a spiral of reflection, documentation and action in order to understand more fully the nature and/or consequences of aspects of their practice with a view to shaping further action or changing their situation, preferably in collaboration with colleagues." (Aboriginal Child at School, Vol. 18., No. 5, p. 12). Since action research is practitioner-based and therefore not carried out by 'experts', we did have some initial difficulty in formulating a framework in which to work. Our immediate problem was to reduce our field of enquiry to complete the research within the time-frame of six months.

To enable us to do this we had to spend many hours reflecting on our practices. During these reflections we found it difficult to isolate what knowledge was specific to our particular project. What knowledge did we already hold? What knowledge was of use to others? It was *everything* about *everything we did* with the kids - talking, attitudes, playground relationships, excursions, sport and the odd quiet chat.

Discussion of these school experiences was a starting point and an integral aspect in analysing the uses of

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Aboriginal humour (the topic we chose to research). By doing action research we drew on an accumulation of experiences. Slowly, we could pinpoint changes in our own teaching practices during the period of time we had been at Redfern. Within these we found specific practices were more successful than others, particularly when the teacher was forced to confront her values and adapt or change.

The collaborative nature of this research meant we had comparative positions from which to draw conclusions. In practice, this meant questioning each other and imparting observations about the others teaching practices. In addition to our collaborative efforts we participated in workshops with D.S.P. consultants and Diana Eades, a linguist who has been working in the area of Aboriginal English for many years.

'A BIT FURTHER DOWN THE TRACK'

To begin with we asked some basic questions:-

- * How is humour used?
- * When is humour used?
- * Why is humour used?
- * Do all teachers see it as humour?
- * How can teachers utilise humour in the classroom?
- * Are we interpreting the humour in the right way?
- * How can we get teachers to recognise humour?
- * How are we going to utilise this information in the classroom?

To answer these questions we used the method of observing children in their classrooms, hoping to note particular uses of humour and their contexts. However, the method of observation became fraught with difficulties. As is often the case with this particular methodology we became participant-observers, so consequently found it difficult to write down what was being said. The curiosity of the younger children made observation almost impossible, so these sessions tended to be useful discussion starters. They enabled us to isolate common factors such as when and how humour was being used and indeed we could sometimes even anticipate it!

Our analysis centred on a lesson with a Year 5/6 Reading group that was 90% Aboriginal. They knew staff very well, were relaxed and interacted with each other all the time. Teachers present were the support teacher, the observer/recorder (Helen) and class teacher (Carol). The success of these observations, was in part due to the fact that all teachers in the room were involved in many team-teaching situations with these children. Hence, they were not too bothered about any of the members of staff present in the room. It was only at the end that one student commented, "You bin writin' bout us, eh?"

The lesson began with the usual movement into reading groups. There was always a lot of jostling, good-natured bumping, joking and exchanging of greetings with each other and the teachers. This period of re-establishing group contacts and catching up on the latest news was an accepted part of the routine. That is, these interactions were considered essential to the smooth running of the lesson. Many of the kids were resistant to reading and it was felt that this atmosphere was less threatening and therefore more conducive to a supportive learning environment.

A discussion of the water cycle proceeded while referring to an over-head. The discussion was not formalised in the sense that 'hands up' was not a strict rule. It helps when there are only fourteen in the group! The whole group discussion was a joke riddled commentary on the topic at hand. There was no question about their involvement however - they were focussed on the task.

A short time later the class is drawing and labelling the water cycle. As they are doing this there is a constant tapping of pencils by Blake. He wasn't ready to work, just yet. The others are working however, so the teacher says to Blake:-

"A bit further down the track". (?)

Blake just smiles and the response comes from Randal who is sitting with another group but has watched the exchange closely. He says:-

"No, a bit further up the track". (laughs)

This form of humour is commonly used and is often interpreted as cheeky. Carter¹ refers to this type of humour as 'cheeky assertiveness'. She claims that parents tease their children so that they will develop coping skills in the face of negative stereotypes. The undermining of authority (perceived authority) is also part of maintaining Aboriginal identity (p.71).

Alternative reactions to these interjections could have been to suppress or dismiss these exchanges. The resulting affect could cause anger, silence or non-compliance. Give and take in verbal interaction gives the kids a chance to participate. It is a more realistic form of interaction that steps outside of what is normally defined as classroom pedagogy.

Back in the room, Blake's lack of attention to work continues. He is highly mobile but eventually settles (10-15 mins.) on the carpet out the front with Thomas. At this point the overhead projector is bumped and this is used as a great opportunity to break routine by all chorusing at the offender. Immediately after, Blake and Thomas roll around on the floor. Teacher asks them what is happening. Thomas, who is annoyed by Blake said,

"Tryin ta make im into a blackfella."

He was drawing marks on Blake who is quite fair. This was a way of diffusing conflict and once again shows how humour revolves around social relationships and the control of them. It also reflects the relationships that the children have with their own parents and kin.

Keeping the lines of communication open is another reason for humour. When there was a remarkable moment of silence the strain proved almost too much for one child (Trevor) who remarked:-

"Ah! Look at 'em all draw." (laughs hysterically)

Trevor always kept the lines of communication open in this way and while at times loud and effusive he was a definite asset in discussions being able to coerce his quieter class-mates into talking by creating a less formal and non-threatening environment.

1. J.Carter, in "Being Black". Ian Keen (Ed.), Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988.

This outburst however, is enough to distract Blake from his work again so the teacher says:-

We had a chat a few days ago.! (?) (they had regarding his recent lack of effort).

Blake:

"No we did."

Here Blake clearly wanted to diffuse potential conflict and maintain control. This particular word play of no we did, yes we didn't is common "only tricking ya" interaction that is prevalent from kindergarten through to Year 6.

These are only a few examples of a constant flow. They happen all the time in different parts of the room. Some are loud so that the whole group is roped in. As a result, the group felt more cohesive and the teacher became part of the group and acted more as a facilitator. Whenever we felt a loss of control we found using jokes ourselves could bring them back on task. Real learning is not passive and harnessing an active learning environment is no doubt challenging and complex. It requires a complete turnaround to the accepted teacher/pupil relationship. As a result the kids have some control over their learning environment and co-opt the teacher into their style of relating.

HUMOUR - LET GO A LITTLE

Aboriginal children have very highly developed verbal skills. They use word play and puns constantly. It's easy to either overlook, downgrade or misinterpret what this humour means. Often, Aboriginal children are seen as cheeky, rude, resistant and difficult to control. We understood this in terms of *cultural clash*. That is, our rules of interaction and values are different to the children.

Humour is also a useful tool for the teachers. Humour (not ridicule) can be used by the teacher as a form of *discipline*. This takes on a more cajoling nature. It is useful for regaining control, resolving conflicts with children and just to be friendly.

Questioning is also an important issue with Aboriginal people in general. In consideration of this we discovered that it was much less threatening to make statements. For example dropping of the auxiliary verb:-

"We had a chat a few days ago".

"A bit further down the track." (?)

Much better than saying "What are you doing?" As a statement it also prompts a reply that is not automatically defensive.

We have demonstrated a number of functions of humour which included send-ups, control, breaking routine, resolving conflict and keeping communication open. Other functions include word play - which could very easily be incorporated into language materials in the classroom - attention seeking and maintaining group cohesion. With respect to group cohesion, it is worth mentioning that we found backing-off from situations where the group was trying to resolve issues was much more effective than if we had intervened. The use of teasing and 'shame' are cultural restraints that the children know more about and can control.

While physical movement and contact occurs a lot in any classroom it appears to be particularly prevalent with Aboriginal children. This, we found wasn't a major issue as long as the children were given an explanation for the structures required. Always letting them know what is going on and why certain styles of interaction are more functional than others at given times will empower them. It has been suggested that one explanation could be "Let's do it white fella way."

From our action research experience then, and in working with Aboriginal children, it would appear that teachers need to reflect on their teaching practices. It helps to be prepared to use different teaching styles and move in and out of them freely. Using humour as part of the daily performance and sharing the floor with the children enables Aboriginal children to respond as they would in their own cultural context (this also frees other children from other cultural backgrounds). Therefore learning becomes something that is negotiated, shared and active. This is an enriching process for the teacher and children.



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