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# ABORIGINAL STUDIES TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT DOES IT CHANGE ATTITUDES ?

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Vince Mulkerin

## Background

Since mid 1990 I have been part of the Eastern Area Aboriginal Studies team. The "team" comprises two people, myself and an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW), Mrs. Shirley Gollan. The role of the Aboriginal Studies team is to provide training and development in Aboriginal Studies for school communities across the Education Department Eastern Area.

After initial contact with schools the team "contract" to run a series of training and development workshops that will lead to all school staff, and parents (where possible) being familiar with and able to teach Aboriginal Studies. Two early sessions address awareness raising regarding Aboriginal history, both local and Australia wide. From then much of the workshops concentrate on the content and teaching methodologies that teachers could use to teach Aboriginal Studies. However, if a teacher is to teach Aboriginal Studies effectively there needs to be a positive attitude towards Aboriginal society not just knowledge of content and methods. Alan Rogers (1986) states:

*we can learn new skills and new knowledge and new understandings without necessarily changing our attitudes, the learning of attitudes is a distinct sphere of learning. (p 44)*

## Introduction

This paper outlines a small research project based on the training and development sessions run by the Aboriginal Studies team. The original question to be examined was "Do the Aboriginal Studies workshops have any effect in bringing about teacher attitude change?" Across the length of the project I have come to realise how difficult a question this is! Most of the difficulties arise from the whole notion of "attitude". This area needs to be addressed first.

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## What is an attitude?

Oppenheim (1966) states:

*Most definitions seem to agree that an attitude is a state of readiness to act or react in a certain manner when confronted with certain stimuli. Thus, the individual's attitudes are present but dormant most of the time; they become expressed in speech or other behaviour only when the object of the attitude is perceived. (p 106)*

This state of readiness is comprised of three components. **Thoughts, feelings and behaviours** or as Edwards states:

"One knows or believes something, has some emotional reaction to it and, therefore, may be assumed to act on this basis".(1985:139) In many respects reactions are responses which have been learned as a result of previous rewards and punishments. The responses are therefore deeply embedded in each individual's consciousness. Brown (1981) outlines this in some detail.

*all attitudes arise in one or other (or more) of the following ways and have their origin in these sources:*

- (1) *in the child rearing experiences of the first five or six years of life from the parent child relationship;*
- (2) *by association between individuals or the formal and informal groups met with in later life;*
- (3) *from unique and isolated experiences or similar experiences repeated throughout life. And it must be remembered that forming a background to them all lies the society and its culture or way of life to which the individual belongs. (p 39)*

Throughout an individual's life there are people who deal intimately with them, significant others, and those who influence and place various social expectations on them; generalized others. From these interactions within social settings identity is formed. (Berger 1979:117) Attitudes are formed from these relationships within the process of socialisation. It is therefore difficult to devise an educational program that is going to affect an individual's attitude. To become a "significant other" is impossible and to provide a "generalised other" is, at the very least, difficult.

For the purposes of this project it is useful then to distinguish other attributes that an individual brings to an issue like Aboriginal Studies. Two closely related attributes are opinions and beliefs.

## **Opinions, beliefs and outlook.**

*Opinions are briefly held and likely to reflect current public feeling; in many cases they reflect rather what the individual thinks he should feel than what, in fact, he does feel. They are readily changed and may be susceptible either to propaganda or to reasoned argument. (Brown 1981:55)*

An individual's beliefs are based on their opinions. A person may hold specific beliefs that may predispose them in a certain way toward new attitudes and experiences. To many the experiences and activities in Aboriginal Studies sessions are new and each individual brings their opinions, beliefs and attitudes to the sessions. There seems very little chance of affecting attitude formation at these early levels but there is a reasonable chance of affecting change at the opinions and beliefs level. For example, it may not be too difficult to convince a person with strong anti-Aboriginal views that they are wrong in their belief that Aborigines have a low imprisonment rate, but the underlying anti-Aboriginal attitude remains unaltered, and they may soon find some other belief with which to bolster their hostile attitude. With a continued Aboriginal Studies presence in the school and with continued challenges and new positive experiences to counter these hostile views, the beginnings of attitude change may take shape.

What this project examines is an early stage of possible attitude change formation. The research will not point out whether there has been attitude change, for as we've seen this is virtually impossible in a study of this type, and possibly in study of any type. What I have examined, then, is what I have termed a change in "outlook". By outlook I mean the beliefs and opinions one brings to an Aboriginal Studies training and development in-service.

## **The Project background.**

Learning that embraces new skills and new knowledge will have an effect on both individual and group outlook. In many regards we hope the workshops will assist school staff in forming new attitudes but as Rogers noted earlier "the learning of attitudes is a distinct sphere of learning." (1986:44). Attitude formation is not treated as such in the training and

development workshops. Much of the workshops concentrate on passing on new skills and knowledge both in the performance and cognitive domains. This project was undertaken to see if the sessions do have any effect on teacher outlook so that from an evaluative point of view there can be some reworking to include more affective skill formation than currently exists.

There is more to understanding another cultural group than just knowing facts about that group. For too long in Australian schools we have been passing on "facts" about Aboriginal societies based on racist or at least ethnocentric assumptions of "white" racial superiority. Schools continue to teach Australian history from the "colonial" perspective with scant regard to an Aboriginal perspective. Jones (1987) Snelson (1988) and Poad West and Miller (1985). The question now arises given the discussion to date: "Do we run the workshops and hope that through the awareness raising sessions and activities and the exposure to some Aboriginal people and issues that there will be some positive effect on a teacher's individual outlook?"

The aim of this project was to see if training and development sessions run by the Aboriginal Studies team have any effect on participant and specifically teacher outlook. The Aboriginal Studies R-12 Guidelines states:

*The teaching of Aboriginal studies requires sensitivity and awareness and teachers often express concern at their own lack of knowledge and confidence in the subject.*  
(S.A. Education Dept. 1988:10)

The aim of the early stages of the training and development process is to build awareness and through that encourage sensitivity in handling the program at a classroom level. As the guidelines state many teachers often express concern over a lack of knowledge in this area. So the training and development must provide some of the knowledge and skills input. However that alone is not enough to build sensitivity. For many teachers to be able to build all three aspects, knowledge, skills and sensitivity, there needs to be an attitude change towards a more positive view of Aboriginal culture.

Whilst we were quite happy with the content and the skills formation in the training and development sessions it was not readily possible to see if our process was having any effect on teacher attitude, and in fact bringing about any attitude change.

## **The Project methodology.**

In term two 1991 we began training and development with two schools in the Riverland. Through early communication with the school principals we were able to use the sessions for some basic research to see if we could detect any measure of attitude change from pre our involvement to post our involvement.

Two measures were to be used: a Likert scale survey and a recorded discussion. The survey scale was based on the format from Contact. An Australian history. (Poad, West and Miller 1985:1). The Likert scale (a linear scale that is divided into sections ranging from certainly true to certainly false i.e. agree to disagree) was scored from 1 to 6. A sample question is :

**A treaty or some form of reconciliation with Aborigines is important ?**

0	1	2	3	4	5
Certainly true					Certainly false

**The survey had 12 questions.** (Appendix 1.)

The discussion focused on a 5 minute section of the Four Corners television show on Aboriginal health. The video segment was shown to the group as a stimulus for discussion and the discussion recorded. The discussion group was led by me.

Both the survey and the discussion groups were held on the mornings of our first involvement with the training and development sessions. In total this meant the discussion was held four times (twice at each school) and the survey was completed by 21 teachers. These sessions were held in weeks 7 and 8 of term 2.

Owing to commitments through working in another district I enlisted the services of the school principals and contact teachers to follow up the survey and discussion in term three. The same survey sheet and another five minute segment from the same video were forwarded to the schools and in week six of term three the same staff completed the survey forms and recorded a discussion based around the video segment. All completed recordings and survey forms were returned by the end of term three.

While this process had been continuing we had continued to provide training and development sessions and we kept participant feedback responses to these sessions in order to see if there was a correlation with the two "research" schools.

## The Findings.

### The survey.

The Likert scale was scored numerically. The highest possible score, 72 represents a positive outlook towards Aboriginal issues in both Australian history and contemporary society. The minimum score of 12 represents a negative view. The scale scoring method is quite detailed and beyond the scope of this paper. The method is outlined in Oppenheim 1966 pages 133-142.

Table 1 shows the pre survey score range and the number of participants at each score level.

### Pre training and development survey.

Table 1.

Item score	Total Score Range					
	12-21.	22-31.	32-41.	42-51.	52-61.	62-72.
1						
2			2		1	
3			2	2		
4			2	2		
5			1	3	3	
6				1	1	1

### Number of participants

Thus 7 participants scored between 32 and 41 whilst only 5 scored in the 52 - 61 range. The average score for the pre survey was 46.4.

Table 2 shows the same analysis for the post survey. The post survey was held 11 weeks after the initial survey.

## Post training and development survey.

**Table 2.**

Item score	Total Score Range					
	12-21.	22-31.	32-41.	42-51.	52-61.	62-72.
1						
2						
3				1		
4				5		
5				1	5	
6			1	2	4	2

### Number of participants

There is now only 1 in the 32 - 41 range and 9 in the 52 to 61 range.

The average score for post surveys is 52.3. In the pre survey there were only 3, 6 value scores. In the post survey there were 9, 6 value scores.

This shift in score range is best illustrated in figures 1 and 2 on page 42. The upward shift in scores is quite marked.

Taken question by question another pattern emerges. Figure 3, on page 43, shows the pre and post average scores for each question. There was an improvement in value on every question. Some improvement was small, namely questions 8, 9 and 12 whilst others, especially questions 1, 5 and 7 showed almost one whole point positive movement. A closer look at these specific questions may point up why these measures occurred.

Samples of questions showing minimal movement.

### Question 8.

Aboriginal society was in the decline in the late 1800s and into 1900s

For evaluative purposes this question was too ambiguous. The words 'in decline' are too broad and many participants marked on the survey that this was not understood. In any further surveys this question would be discounted.



### **Question 9.**

Aborigines are showing they can solve their own problems ?

The average pre survey score of 3.8 represents an outlook of not too sure. The post survey result of 3.9 shows that the training and development sessions may not have given participants enough knowledge of current day practices and Aboriginal enterprises for a shift in outlook in this area. This points to an area where training and development sessions may need to focus, in some part, on Aboriginal Australia today. Much of the early workshop sessions do centre around supplying participants with historical information and background.

### **Question 12.**

Aboriginal Land Rights is a restriction on the rights of other Australians ?

Again the pre and post scores of 3.57 and 3.76 reflect a "not too sure" outlook. This could also point to the predominance of historical background provided in early sessions. None of the Eastern Area awareness sessions look at the current Land Rights legislation and whilst awareness may have been built up that provides a background for why land rights is desirable, the actual "nuts and bolts" of the Act are not clear to participants. This aspect is important for training and development for teachers of Australian Studies where Land Rights may be taught in the S. A. C. E. Some further input in this area will be required for these teachers.

### **Samples of questions showing substantial movement ?**

#### **Question 1.**

Writers of books about Australian history have avoided being biased. We would not find blatant or extreme bias ?

Even though there was a positive move of 0.95 the pre survey score indicates a measure of disagreement with this statement before training and development. Within the training and development process there is a session on resources and resource selection. In this time some resources culled from school libraries are looked at and resource guidelines established. Some historical texts are used to highlight how writers have been and continue to be, biased in their information presentation.

## **Question 5.**

Since the arrival of Europeans Aboriginal health has improved ?

The discussion groups focused heavily on health issues and there was quite a difference in debate as I will discuss further on. This may be reflected in the score movement from 4.33 to 5.33.

## **Question 7.**

Some Christian missions have been good for Aborigines.

Whilst this question is badly worded, and I would not use it again because of the too general nature of the question, the score movement of 0.81 may reflect the sentiment from the awareness raising session. Shirley spends a deal of time talking about her early life and experiences, both happy and sad, of growing up on a mission. This section has the most profound effect of any session in the training and development process. This is evidenced by the high number of participants that comment on that session as most worthwhile. This may be reflected in the score movement.

## **Discussion Groups.**

Discussion groups, like the survey, showed an increased knowledge and concern for both the health issue and wider social issues. In follow up discussions there was more talk about positive Aboriginal enterprises, land rights and education than was in the first discussion. To me this indicates that more participants were able to see the connections between health and wider issues. The first discussions quite frequently returned to "the drinking problem" and "handouts". Some comments from those sessions relating to that are:

- "Drinking is a big problem and because many don't live in sanitary environments they get sick."
- "There's always lots of wasted money on settlements. There's money spent on building roads while kids are dying."
- "All we ever hear about is the money and the new houses that end up wrecked."

The follow up discussion, when it turned to these points was different.

- "People are making steps forward both helping themselves and by putting social security money into projects."
- "On drinking", the only comment was: "We've taken everything away so what have they got left?"

While all points made are relevant and are judgements made from certain perspectives the fact that follow up discussion groups did not "dwell" on the "problems" and turned attention to positive moves is very encouraging. Some other quotes from follow up discussions are:

- "To me Kaurna Plains school seems a positive step. It's not segregation but accounting for differences."
- "We must be prepared to listen and take it at their pace."
- "It's great to see Aboriginal people with their own councils and radio and T.V. stations."
- "Decisions taken must involve Aboriginal people."
- "Aboriginal people have been treated like animals. The difference with us was we wanted to change. They were forced."  
(A Greek teacher)

From the recorded discussions it is too short and too contrived a situation to discuss attitude change. However if we can talk in terms of, positive outlook then I feel there is evidence to suggest that the sessions did achieve that. With these teachers continuing with Aboriginal Studies and further involvement with Aboriginal people then maybe those that needed that extra "push" will turn positive outlook into positive attitude change.

## **Conclusion.**

The survey and first discussions were held on the morning of the training and development sessions and this influenced the way people were feeling towards Aboriginal issues. Schools had known for some time that we were coming and were doing a form of research. Thus Aboriginal issues were possibly being more "highlighted" than would normally be. This, together with the fact that the Aboriginal Studies team were conducting the research would lead some responses towards being more positive than might have been expected.

The survey questions were not "field" tested and as has been pointed out some questions, with the benefit of hindsight, would be reworded or discarded.

The discussion group time was limited because a slice of time was taken from session time. Thus full exploration of topics was not possible. Also with discussion groups there was lack of continuity with discussion leaders. The pre workshop discussions were led by myself, but the follow

up discussion groups were led by volunteers, using reference questions and discussion points supplied by me. Whilst all discussion groups were productive the lack of continuity could contribute to differing responses.

Neither the survey nor the discussions tested people's attitudes. Rather they looked more at beliefs based on knowledge. The survey, in particular showed that the training and development had a positive effect in that it helped participants, either confirm some beliefs they had but were not sure of, or provided them with some previously unknown information on which they could base a new or revised belief. In order to change attitudes however we must begin to create a climate where each individual feels they are part of a group conforming to the generally held expectations of the wider system. To do this teachers must believe that what they are doing in their classes is the norm.

So we must start with changing beliefs and to that end I feel from the limited evidence in this project that the training and development sessions are a step in the direction of achieving that. There is still a long way to go though.

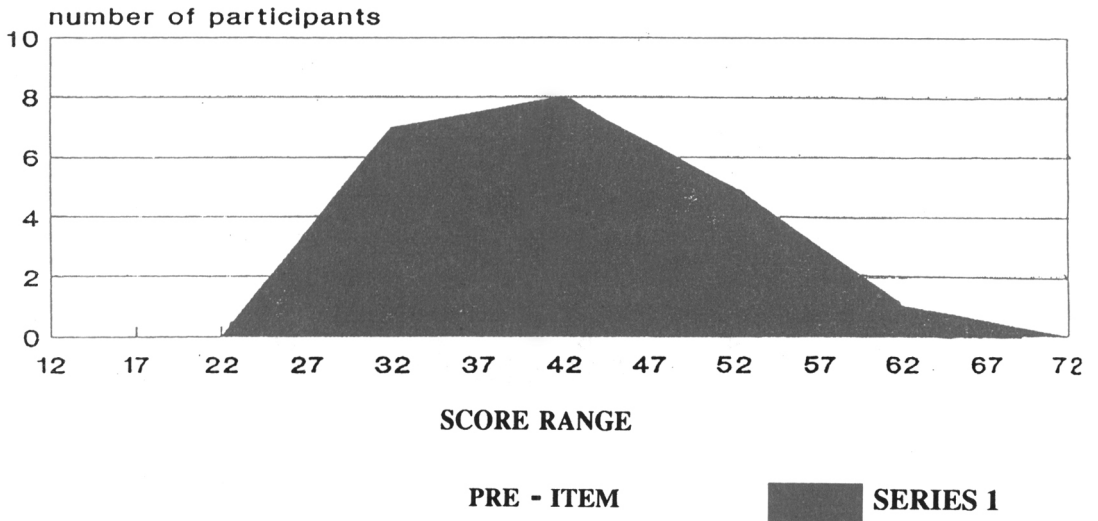
By far the session that most participants comment favourably on is the awareness raising session. This is confirmed by participant feedback sheets in the other schools we worked in while this project was developing. Of the 30 workshop evaluation sheets filled in by participants 16 nominated the discussion led by Shirley to be most useful. In terms of achieving a move towards positive attitude change this is a vital step. Aboriginal people acting locally while professing system wide change will have more impact than non-Aboriginal teachers professing change based on research and "hard facts". Both are good ingredients for successful training and development.

Aboriginal Studies teams are having a significant effect on the communities that they work with. They are building the foundations for attitude change by providing school staff with new knowledge, and skills on which they can form new beliefs. They are providing a "face" to the system wide policies of the Education Department to both teachers and parents. The active Aboriginal participation is providing evidence to counteract time held stereotypes. With Government and Departmental support there is a growing network of change taking place and that teachers are, as a whole, supportive. This needs to be a beginning so that individuals don't feel they are doing it alone. It is from this beginning that positive growth comes.

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**FIGURE 1**

**WHOLE GROUP SCORE ANALYSIS  
PRE - SURVEY**



**FIGURE 2**

**WHOLE GROUP ANALYSIS  
POST - SURVEY**

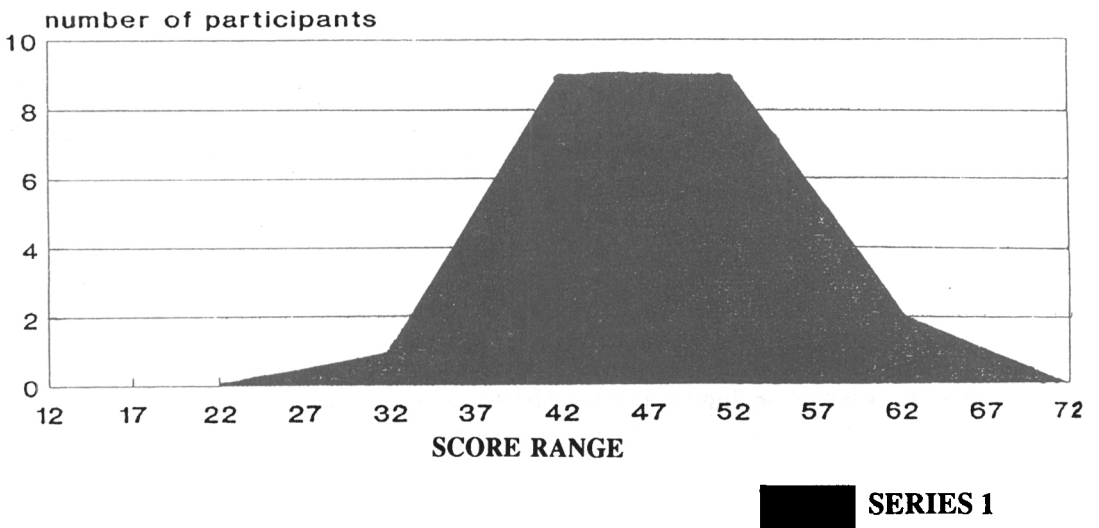
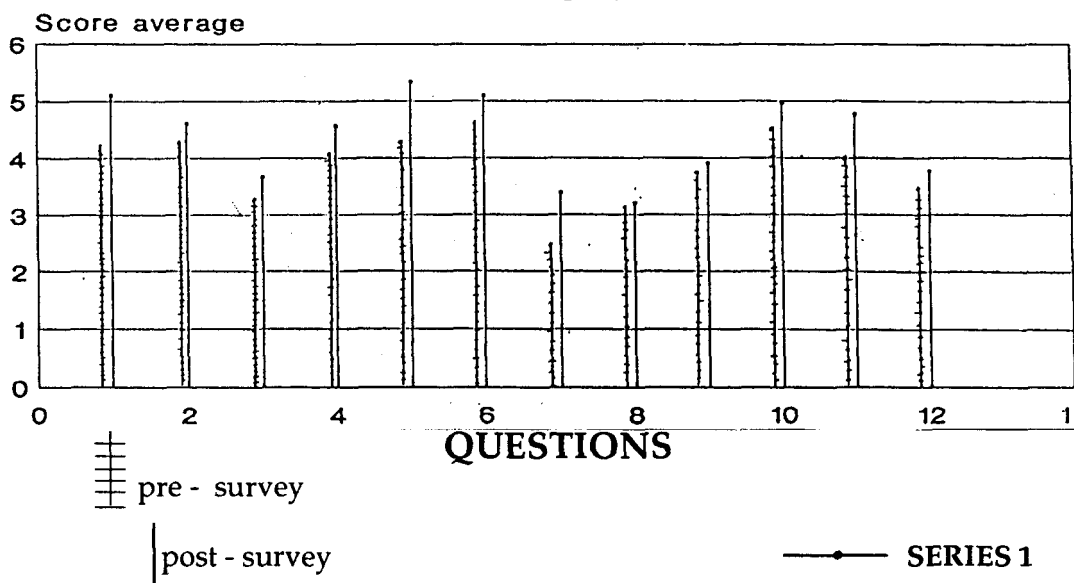


FIGURE 3

### PRE and POST ANALYSIS QUESTION by QUESTION



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