



# The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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# EVALUATION GUIDELINES FOR ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES

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*A number of issues critical to Aboriginal Studies Courses are extrapolated from the literature. These issues are expressed as questions important for evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses to ask. They may also be seen as guidelines for the construction of Aboriginal Studies Courses.*

*In conclusion, a summary of the developed guidelines is presented.*

The Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1975:183) reported of Aborigines and Islanders:

... they stand in stark contrast to the general Australian society, and also to other ethnic groups whether defined on the basis of race, nationality, birthplace, language or religion. They probably have the highest death rate, the worst legal status of any identifiable section of the Australian population.

The National Aboriginal Education Committee (1980:4) notes that the Australian Schools Commission Report (1975) adds that *they also have the least schooling*. With this in mind the NAEC, in its policy statement on Aboriginal Education (1980:3), says:

Since 1788 the Aborigines of Australia have been subjected in varying degrees to an authoritarian system which has rationalised their dispossession from the land, and deprecated their cultures. This dispossession forced indigenous people from their land and from the source of their own rich cultural background and uniqueness.

From these sources comes the justification for Aboriginal Studies Courses in Australian schools. In 1978, at the National Aboriginal Studies Seminar (NASS) held in Alice Springs, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon. I. Viner,

put the government's view on Aboriginal Studies Courses in his opening address:

As I see it, the *raison d'etre* of Aboriginal Studies Courses is to promote cross-cultural understanding *today*; and the involvement of Aboriginal people in them provides an important means by which Aborigines may play the central role in determining their own identity (NASS, 1978:8).

Thus Aboriginal Studies Courses can be seen to have a twofold role:

- a) to contribute towards the elimination of racism and oppression in Australian society, via cross-cultural understanding, and
- b) to promote the development of pride in Aboriginality.

It is important, therefore, that these two directions are examined closely by those developing Aboriginal Studies Courses and/or kit materials, and those evaluating them. How can evaluators translate these two central concerns into relevant criteria for the evaluation of Aboriginal Studies Courses and kit materials related to them?

Any school environment contains people and curricula, and any learning outcomes are the result of interaction between the two, influenced

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by multiple variables. It is important that any evaluation considers this interaction. Consequently, the following is an attempt to develop guidelines for the evaluation of Aboriginal Studies Courses in the light of the twofold role of Aboriginal Studies delineated above, by asking a number of critical questions relating to:

- The aims of Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The people who develop, teach and evaluate Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The selection of content of Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The methodology of Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The organisation of Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The resources used in Aboriginal Studies Courses
- The recipients of Aboriginal Studies Courses

It will become obvious in the course of discussion that all these questions are closely related and interdependent.

Discussion of each of the above factors will be confined to questions of specific importance for Aboriginal Studies Courses. Other questions of general importance to curriculum will need to be asked, though these are not within the scope of this exercise.

## THE AIMS OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES

From statements by various bodies including, National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC); Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (AIAS); Curriculum Development Centre (CDC); state Aboriginal consultative groups; state education department curriculum branches; various seminars, national and local; individuals, a number of aims can be extrapolated as being of major concern in Aboriginal Studies Courses (see Hughes, 1980:27).

- a) *To preserve Australia's heritage* - The NAEC (1980:5) states:

Aboriginal Studies must become an integral part of the education of every Australian. It must be taught with a high degree of respect and understanding to develop an *accurate* knowledge of Australian history, Aboriginal cultures and lifestyles.

Similar sentiments are echoed by Williams (NASS, 1978:35) of the CDC, the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Consultative Committee (QATSICC) (1980:8) and many others too numerous to cite.

- b) *To attack racial prejudice* by breaking stereotypes about Aborigines and modifying ethnocentricity (Hughes, 1980:28); Tatz, 1978:5; Hill and Barlow, 1978:iii, etc.).
- c) *To assert the right of Aboriginal people to their own heritage* as the original inhabitants of this country. (BAEC, 1980:5; QATSICC, 1980; Fidock, 1978:41 etc.).
- d) *To develop the bases of modern Australian society* through promoting the understanding and acceptance of other cultures and lifestyles in schools (Fidock, 1978:40; Hughes, 1980:26; NAEC, 1980:5 etc.).

In the developing discussion of Aboriginal Studies in educational circles, these four directions consistently appear. Consequently, because of the pervasive nature of prejudice and because of widely held stereotypical, ethnocentric notions which non-Aborigines hold about Aborigines (see Catchpole, 1980), it will be necessary for evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses to look critically at the expressed aims and the assumptions on which they are based.

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There are other aims, such as locally-based aims for skill-directed aims, which are appropriate for Aboriginal Studies Courses. I have chosen to articulate the ones which I consider to be central to *all* Aboriginal Studies Courses.

Evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses thus need to ask:

Does this course direct its aims to:

- attacking racial prejudice and developing understanding and tolerance of other cultures?
- preserving Australia's Aboriginal heritage?
- promoting the development of pride in Aboriginality?

## **THE PEOPLE WHO DEVELOP, TEACH AND EVALUATE ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES**

This factor is undoubtedly the most critical one of all, for it is on the mediators, the 'translators into classroom practice', that the success of any Aboriginal Studies Course depends.

Overwhelmingly, Aboriginal people state that it is *their right* to take part in the presentation of their cultures and the exposition of their lifestyles. There are a number of reasons for this assertion. Firstly, in the past, and in the present, non-Aboriginal teachers have reinforced ethnocentric, stereotypical ideas about Aborigines by concentrating on particular aspects of Aboriginal cultures/lifestyles (more about this later). Secondly, incorrect information is often taught (QATSICC, 1980:2ff). Thirdly, in relation to the previous two factors, there are aspects of Aboriginal cultures which quite simply are too complex for any non-Aborigines to deal with in the classroom.

Traditional Aboriginal life was, and still is, rich, spiritual, complex and meaningful. It was not merely an inheritance of myth and ritual that gave order and value to the Aboriginal existence, but rather an interpretation of the environment and a consciousness of the interdependence, the relatedness of things in the world. The patterns of the relationships are central to Aboriginal spirituality and the study of Aboriginal spiritual life reveals a deep sensitivity and subtlety which is beyond the knowledge of most non-Aborigines (NAEC, 1980).

Studies about Aborigines should be taught wherever possible by Aborigines. Materials and kits used in schools should have prior approval of Aboriginal people (QATSICC, 1980:4).

Aborigines are best able to understand and communicate their experience of their cultural heritage and history. The teaching of Aboriginal Studies should be carried out wherever possible by teamwork between Aboriginal persons and teachers (NASS, 1978:133).

If Aboriginal Studies Courses are to assert the right of Aboriginal people to their own heritage, if they are to promote the development of Aboriginal children's pride in their Aboriginality, if they are to be credible to non-Aboriginal children, it follows that the presence of Aborigines in their development and teaching is mandatory (cf. Williams, 1978:79).

Thus evaluators of an Aboriginal Studies Course need to ask:

- Were Aboriginal people involved in the development and teaching of the course?

They must also go further and ask:

- Are Aboriginal people involved in the evaluation?

If, as the NAEC maintain, all Australian children should participate in Aboriginal Studies Courses,

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it would be impossible to have only Aboriginal people teaching them. This brings us to another critical issue for Aboriginal Studies Courses and their evaluators - the non-Aboriginal teacher of Aboriginal Studies Courses. Evaluators will need to ask such questions as:

- What attitudes do the teachers of this course have towards Aborigines?
- Do they have the expertise, the knowledge, the sensitivity, to teach an Aboriginal Studies Course?

Morrison (1980:6), in her description of an Aboriginal Studies Course, notes that only two out of the ten teachers teaching the course dealt with the Race Relations section. The rest omitted this section because it was 'controversial' and adhered to the 'safe' tribal, traditional content concentrating on exotica such as boomerangs and witchetty grubs.

Kotsep (1980:4), in her description of the operation of *The People of the Western Desert* kit in a school, records that most teachers avoided doing sections related to the complex kinship systems and spiritual life and dealt superficially with myths and legends.

Both Morrison (1980) and Kotsep (1980) cite the lack of teacher expertise as a critical factor in the failure of these courses in the particular schools they describe.

The NAEC conference (1980:50) and the QATSICC (1980:31) recommend that Aboriginal Studies Courses be compulsory for all student teachers as necessary prerequisites for teaching about Aborigines in schools. Consequently, in relation to the last question, an evaluator needs to ask:

- Have the teachers had the training to successfully present a course and contribute significantly to the achievement of the central aims expressed previously?

Other important questions relating to non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginal Studies Courses will appear in later discussion.

## THE SELECTION OF CONTENT IN ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES

Efficient selection of content, it must be noted, is heavily dependent on the sensitivity and expertise of teachers and other developers of Aboriginal Studies Courses. It is also dependent on the quality of the resources available in schools (discussed later). QATSICC states:

When teaching Studies about Aborigines, teachers must ensure that they concentrate not only on traditional ways of life but also on the contemporary urban lifestyles of the Aborigine.  
(1980:10)

To this may be added studies of rural Aboriginal lifestyles.

While studies of traditional/tribal cultures, such as the *People of the Western Desert*, are valuable in themselves, they must be accompanied by the study of contemporary Aboriginal life. As discussed in Catchpole (1980), a feature of non-Aboriginal attitudes towards Aborigines is stereotypical notions about 'primitive' tribal life. Thus, while studies about traditional life are valuable, if this is the *only* aspect of Aboriginal life studies stereotypical notions will be reinforced (cf. Williams, 1978:76). Consequently, an evaluator must ask of the content of an Aboriginal Studies Course:

- Does it cover a wide spectrum of Aboriginal cultures/lifestyles? Does it deal with traditional and contemporary life?

In relation to traditional societies, there is some information which is restricted. It is not available

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to children (Aboriginal or white) or perhaps to women, and in no way available to non-Aboriginal teachers (cf. Barlow, 1978:96). QATSICC states clearly:

Although teachers should refer to the fact that there are important sacred ceremonies, they must not teach about such ceremonies. Informing children of sacred rites is the responsibility of the Aboriginal people. (1980:11)

Therefore, to the previous question must be added:

- Does the course contain sacred/secret information? If it does, who has revealed this information? Has the revealing of this information been sanctioned by Aboriginal people?

The problems associated with studying only tribal/traditional society in Aboriginal Studies Courses are often compounded by lack of teacher expertise in the selection of content in this area. Often, teachers will select content which is superficial and peripheral to the study of traditional society. For instance, myths and legends will often be dealt with, without reference to the complexities of spiritual life in the tribal societies. Similarly corroborees, dances, hunting and food gathering are often dealt with, without reference to their interrelationships with social organisation, including kinship systems and religious life.

The relationships between the values and principles underlying traditional society and their influence on contemporary Aboriginal cultures are often ignored (cf. Viner, 1978:8), and certainly are ignored if no accompanying study of contemporary Aboriginal life is done.

Consequently, it is far too easy for non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginal Studies Courses to concentrate on exotica and physical manifestations of cultural difference without an

understanding of the complexities beyond the differences, thus perpetuating 'primitive' exotic stereotypes. This is a powerful argument for the involvement of Aboriginal people in the development and teaching of Aboriginal Studies Courses, and for pre-service and in-service training for non-Aboriginal teachers (QATSICC, 1980). So it becomes important for evaluators to ask in relation to content:

- Is the information being presented correct? Are the concepts being taught related to the understanding of traditional society?

As noted earlier, Morrison (198) observed that a number of teachers omitted the 'race relations' section of the Aboriginal Studies Course they were teaching on the basis that the issue was too controversial. Central to any Aboriginal Studies Course, and related to the necessity to include contemporary studies of Aborigines, is an examination of culture-contact. If race relations and culture-contact are ignored, the only thing left is traditional society and the pitfalls associated with dealing with this in isolation. Consequently evaluators, in looking at the content of Aboriginal Studies Courses, need to go further and ask:

- Does content include examination of culture-contact?
- Does content include an examination of race relations and associated concepts?

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES**

Various groups (cited previously), both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who may be said to possess expertise in the field of Aboriginal Studies curricula, have stated that Aboriginal Studies Courses should seek to develop positive attitudes towards Aborigines and eliminate negative, stereotypical attitudes. These groups have also stated that Aboriginal Studies Courses

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should be aimed at developing a pride in Aboriginality for Aboriginal students.

Both of these expressed aims involve attitude change.

It is reasonably established that information alone will not change attitudes (see Katz, 1976:220).

To attempt to change a person's attitudes by direct instruction is likely to fail because the instruction is implying that the individual is wrong. The individual will interpret this either consciously or unconsciously as an attack, and thus feel impelled to defend his attitudes. (Brown cited by Catchpole, 1980:20)

Lippmann (1977) also supports this, but adds that information is nevertheless necessary and can be used as a structure on which attitude change strategies can be built. Chambers (1978) maintains that the appeal to the cognitive components of attitudes (see Triandis, 1971:3 and Catchpole, 1980:1ff for discussion of component attitudes), that is the idea, the thinking component of attitudes, is not enough to effect attitude change and that attitude change strategies must involve feelings, values and emotions (affective component) and also work on behaviour change (behavioural component). (For further discussion, see Catchpole, 1980).

Thus to effect attitude change, teaching strategies in Aboriginal Studies Courses must launch a three-pronged attack on the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects of attitudes (Chambers 1978:59; Catchpole, 1980; Williams, 1978:76).

In relation to the behavioural component of attitudes, Chambers (1980:59) citing Lippmann (1977) says:

If the behaviour can be changed, then attitudes are likely to be altered to bring them into line with that behaviour. It is believed that we sometimes develop

attitudes to justify our behaviour, not behave as we do because of our attitude.

Attitude change is also likely to occur:

If the source of the message or information is viewed as credible by the group. Thus Aboriginal speakers will tend to have more credibility on Aboriginal issues than non-Aborigines. Similarly the peer group has more influence than the 'authority' figure, e.g. teacher (Chambers 1978:59).

Consequently there is further reason for asking - are Aboriginal people involved in the teaching of this course?

What implications do these statements have for evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses? It will mean asking such questions as:

- Are teaching strategies being used which involve the affective and behavioural aspects of attitudes as well as the cognitive?

And more specifically:

- Are such strategies as role-playing, socio-drama, puppet theatre, simulation games, small group discussions, debating (teacher as neutral chairman), films, literature and excursions being used?

## **THE ORGANISATION OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES**

Curriculum designers need to be aware of the fact that the way they organise material will have an impact upon the learners who will tend to conceptualise situations in terms of the framework presented to them (Williams, 1978:77).

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The National Aboriginal Studies Seminar (1978:132) made a number of recommendations in relation to the place of Aboriginal Studies in school programs. They considered Aboriginal Studies should be introduced into schools in depth, at all levels of education, by:

- integrating studies across the curriculum,
- developing separate units or subjects,
- indicating the special position of Aboriginal Studies in general multicultural programmes.

The QATSICC (1980:7) also reflects these concerns, as does the NAEC (1980:51) and the Aboriginal Studies in NSW Seminar Group (1978:64). Thus evaluators need to ask:

- Is Aboriginal Studies integrated across the curriculum?
- Are there separate units or subjects as provisions for in-depth study?
- Do multicultural programs contain Aboriginal Studies components and recognise the special place of Aboriginal Studies within the multicultural framework?

N.B. Many other aspects of organisation are covered in the other sections.

## **THE RESOURCES USED IN ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES**

Catchpole (1980:13) says:

In 1978 the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies published an annotated bibliography called *Black Australia* which surveyed over 600 items commonly found in school libraries and assessed their value as teaching resources for teachers on the subject of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Lippmann notes that only 57 of these items were highly recommended. A further 198

were recommended and the remainder unsuitable for use by teachers and students because of the racist attitudes they exhibited.

A feature of the unsuitable literature was that it treated Aborigines as exotica, thus perpetrating another kind of stereotype. Words commonly used to describe Aborigines and their societies are 'primitive', 'savage', 'stone-age', 'uncivilised', 'uncultured', 'wild', 'untrustworthy', 'backward'. There are many others of a similar nature. Exotic references such as eating witchetty grubs, lizards and snakes, living in gunyahs, wearing no clothes, cutting themselves with sharp knives, doing strange dances, painting themselves, throwing boomerangs etc., are dealt with, totally ignoring the context of traditional Aboriginal societies and their complexities of kinship, religion and social organisation. Lippmann (1978), Spalding (1973), Harris and Smolicz (1972), Windt (1970), McQueen (1974) and McConnochie (1973) provide excellent analyses of the racist attitudes exhibited in children's textbooks in Australia.

The QATSICC (1980:2-4) notes with concern that its surveys of kits, textbooks and teaching materials reveal a number of undesirable biases:

- 1) Aborigines are not always given credit for the specific skills they possess.
- 2) False assumptions are made, e.g. the idea that Aborigines handed over their land without a fight.
- 3) Very little recognition of the positive aspects of Aboriginal life, e.g. media is more interested in the negative actions of Aborigines rather than aspects which promote a pride in Aboriginality, more

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interested in negative stereotyping, and exotica.

- 4) Very little mention of hostility and violence by *colonists* - the Aborigines were the *savages*. (My emphasis).
- 5) Negative comments on the physical appearance of Aborigines.
- 6) Little mention of the destruction of Aboriginal society through contact with non-Aborigines and through dispossession of their land and culture.
- 7) Little evidence of success models. There are few Aboriginal heroes and heroines for Aboriginal children to relate to.
- 8) Lack of geographical placement. Stories and legends often have relevance to a particular Aboriginal society and not others. To neglect geographical placement implies that the material is universal and encouraged stereotypical overgeneralised ideas about the nature of Aboriginal myths and legends.
- 9) Absence of the study about contemporary life of Aborigines (mentioned previously). Concentration on tribal/traditional aspects of Aboriginal societies in the literature and materials available to teachers produces similar emphasis in Aboriginal Studies Courses when combined with a lack of teacher expertise in the selection of content (mentioned previously).
- 10) The history of Australia has been recorded through the eyes of Europeans. Only recently has there been any attempt to record Australian history from an Aboriginal viewpoint. Certainly there is little or nothing available which puts the Aboriginal viewpoint for the culture-contact period (see in connection with this, previous points 1-4, 6 and 7). This

represents another reason for evaluators to ask whether Aboriginal people are involved in the development and teaching of Aboriginal Studies Courses.

Thus evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses need to ask:

- Are the textbooks and teaching materials used by teachers appropriate?
- Are teachers aware of the dubious merits of many textbooks and teaching materials about Aborigines?
- Is the material available for use by students in the school library appropriate?

## THE RECIPIENTS OF ABORIGINAL STUDIES COURSES

Aboriginal Studies Courses are directed firstly to the whole school population and secondly to a particular sub-group of this population - Aboriginal children. Examination of school populations in Australia reveals great diversity of population composition. Some schools have an all Aboriginal clientele, e.g. outstation schools; some are multi-ethnic, some mono-ethnic, some have a high proportion of Aborigines, some none at all.

To determine the most suitable areas of content to cover the most appropriate teaching strategies to use requires, initially, a broad examination of the school population and its community setting. Examples best illustrate why this kind of situational analysis needs to be carried out.

In a rural town where relationships between Aborigines and non-Aborigines are strained, it may be best to approach the concepts of tolerance and acceptance of cultural difference via lead-in studies in comparative race relations rather than focusing directly on Aborigines. In an outstation school, emphasis would probably be placed on fostering self-esteem and Aboriginality in the context of European society. The study of tribal

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society would probably be inappropriate, as instruction in traditional lifestyles would be the province of tribal elders. Aboriginal Studies in urban schools will necessarily have different emphases from rural schools, courses being dictated by local requirements.

Given these factors then, evaluators of Aboriginal Studies Courses need to ask:

- Have course developers considered the school clientele and its community setting in the selection of content and methodology?
- Is content and methodology appropriate for the school clientele and its community setting?

## **SUMMARY**

### **AIMS:**

Does this course direct its aims at:

1. Attacking racial prejudice?
2. Developing tolerance and understanding of other cultures?
3. promoting the development of pride in Aboriginality?

### **PEOPLE:**

1. Were Aboriginal people involved in the development and teaching of this course?
2. Are Aboriginal people involved in this evaluation?
3. What attitudes do the teachers of this course have towards the Aborigines?
4. Do teachers have the expertise, the knowledge, the sensitivity to teach an Aboriginal Studies Course?

### **SELECTION OF CONTENT:**

1. Does the course cover a selection of Aboriginal cultures/lifestyles? i.e. does

content include examination of:

- (a) traditional societies,
  - (b) culture-contact period
  - (c) contemporary Aboriginal lifestyles?
2. Does content examine race relations and associated concepts in relation to 1(b) and 1(c) above?
  3. In relation to traditional society, are the concepts and information being taught correct in relation to understanding traditional society?
  4. Does content include sacred/secret information? If it does, who has revealed this information? Has it been sanctioned by Aboriginal people?

### **METHODOLOGY:**

1. Are teaching strategies being used which involve the affective and behavioural aspects of attitudes as well as the cognitive?
2. Are such strategies as role-playing, socio-drama, puppet theatre, simulation games, small group discussions, debating (teacher as neutral chairman), films, literature and excursions being used?

### **ORGANISATION:**

1. Is Aboriginal Studies integrated across the curriculum?
2. Are there separate units or subjects as provisions for in-depth studies?
3. Do multicultural programs contain Aboriginal Studies components and recognise the special place of Aboriginal Studies within the multicultural framework?

### **RESOURCES:**

1. Are the textbooks and teaching materials used by teachers appropriate?
2. Are teachers aware of the dubious merits

- of many textbooks and teaching materials about Aborigines?
3. Is the material available for use by students in the school library appropriate?

### THE RECIPIENTS:

1. Have course developers and teachers considered the school clientele and its community setting in the selection of content and methodology?
2. Is content and methodology appropriate for the school clientele and its community setting?

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*This article originally appeared in Volume 9  
Number 3 (1981) pages 23-38*