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ABORIGINALIZING POST PRIMARY CURRICULUM

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When we talk about Aboriginalizing education, we have to find ways of describing or analyzing what happens in education, which will help us to understand what needs to be done. For me, one of the most useful ways of thinking about education is to make a clear distinction between *what* is taught (the content, or message of education), and *how* it is taught (the methods, or processes or the medium of education). In traditional white education, both the content and the process of education reflect the white ways of looking at the world. In traditional Aboriginal education, the process and content of education are both Aboriginal.

When we think about Aboriginalizing the curriculum, or writing an Aboriginal curriculum, we can easily make the mistake of thinking that it is only the content of the curriculum which needs to be changed and not the process. This is a serious and dangerous error because, if all we do is change the content from white content to Aboriginal content, and we still leave the white methods and processes the same, then we can actually be helping along the processes of assimilation.

How is it that the methods and processes of education do more to change children's minds than the content of education? It is because the *medium* of education, for example the unbending structure of the timetable, the relentless forward planning of the curriculum, the learning always taken out of its context, the teachers who do not belong to the group, all these things (and many others) are actually speaking much louder to the learners than the content is. It is very important to remember, as Marshall McLuhan said, that the medium *is* the message.

In many places in Australia, people are talking about Aboriginal curriculum. But often we think only in terms of the content of Aboriginal curriculum. It seems to me that we might get into trouble if we try to change the message without changing the medium because, in an important sense, the medium is actually the message. A curriculum with Aboriginal content and a white structure can be like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

In the following pages there are a few ideas about the structure of Aboriginal learning, which may help us to start thinking about an appropriate structure for Aboriginal curriculum. These are only a few principles which come from my impressions of what Aboriginal people find most problematic about white schooling. These impressions are discussed at length in another paper (Christie, 1988).

1. ABORIGINAL LEARNING PRINCIPLE: LEARNING UNITY: LEARNING THOUGH UNITY

At the very heart of Aboriginal learning is unity, not individuality. Unity is the fundamental medium and the message of Aboriginal learning. In the Aboriginal way, learning takes place in an activity which involves people working together on a group activity for a period of time. Input and involvement from the whole group is important to the wholeness of learning. The group usually contains all age groups. The idea and goal of unity is the beginning and end of traditional Aboriginal learning, because there is unity in the group, unity in the ideas they are sharing, unity through the time they are spending interacting

together, and equal give-and-take between the teachers and learners.

PROBLEMS WITH THE OLD CURRICULUM

In traditional school curriculum, all the unity is broken up: students are divided up by age or intelligence or achievement. They study English for maybe an hour, then maths for one hour, then cooking or manual training for one hour. There is no opportunity for the whole group to get interested together and work through something together, looking at what is happening from a variety of angles.

In traditional school curriculum, the content of the activity is important, and who is involved is unimportant. In Aboriginal learning it is the other way around. The people are important, the information is only important as it relates to the people and their unity.

Traditional curriculum doesn't need to have unity at its core. Therefore, traditional curriculum breaks down Aboriginal unity because:

- The children have not much guidance from older Aboriginal people.
- They are told when to change from one activity to another, so they don't get much freedom to follow their own Aboriginal ways of learning.
- The timetable, which is cut up into timed pieces, doesn't help Aboriginal people learn at their own speed.
- The teachers are on a different level from the students. The teachers never learn anything from the students. The students never get a chance to teach.
- Everything about the system breaks down the traditional unity of the group of learners.

NEW CURRICULUM IDEA: LEARNING AS A GROUP EXPERIENCE THROUGH 'WORKSHOPS'

- If we start to break down all the restrictions of the timetable, we can still work in all the subject areas but we can work in bigger blocks of time. We should stop switching from one teaching subject to another every hour or two hours, and work on one centre of group interest for several days or a week. These workshops or activity-based time blocks could be centred around academic work like literacy or maths, or be developed from an excursion to go hunting or look at parts of the land, or maybe centre around learning a craft or working on traditional stories or languages. Anything from a white school curriculum could be explored in a unifying way by a group who had ongoing control of the direction of learning.
- Workshops would make it easier to hold the students' interest, to let them choose what to do, plan together, follow things through together, teach and learn together, and let the way they work together as a group help their learning too.
- This way we could also make it easier for older people who have already finished school, to join in any workshop they were interested in. They could come to school just for a week, for a workshop, and go back to work or to their life in the community.
- This would also make it easier for parents and grandparents to help out in school activities for a few days. They could help guide a school activity through from beginning to end in a truly Aboriginal way, free of the strictures of the timetable.

2. ABORIGINAL LEARNING

PRINCIPLE: LEARNING TO RESPOND, RESPONDING TO LEARN

Real Aboriginal learning is not planned out ahead in a curriculum. It is only **activities** which are planned out ahead, not learning. Activities are planned as meaningful, unifying, fulfilling and identity building experiences for the group, not as specific learning experiences. Aboriginal learning takes place as a by-product of any meaningful activity which a group works on together. It is not general, abstract learning. It is a specific response to the whole complex of factors involved in the situation - the people, the place, the time, etc. When Aboriginal children learn, the most important thing they learn is to measure up the situation they are in, to see all the different concrete factors that are at work, and to **respond** intelligently to what is happening around them.

PROBLEMS WITH THE OLD CURRICULUM

In the old curriculum, the focus was on planning in advance what knowledge should be taught. This blocks out the Aboriginal way of learning, because it gives no chance for learning through responding intelligently to the world around them, and no chance for learning how to respond intelligently.

Sometimes the content of the old curriculum was relevant to the immediate needs and interests of the children, sometimes it wasn't. When it wasn't relevant, no one could change it. It always prevented Aboriginal children from learning to respond to the total world around them. This is one reason why Aboriginal teachers find it very difficult to use curriculum documents. They tell people what they must learn and when they must learn it and who is to teach it, and they ignore the factors which are important in Aboriginal learning - who is involved, where we are, how the people relate to the place, the time

when the activity is taking place, the personal histories of the people involved, etc. White curriculum documents can never tell us how the information comes from the specific learning situation to give unity and meaning to the lives of the individual teachers and learners.

If we start our planning with white curriculum documents, our teaching cannot be properly in response to Aboriginal ways of doing things, or to the needs and interests of the community.

NEW CURRICULUM IDEA: CURRICULUM WHICH RESPONDS, AND DOESN'T CONTROL

- We have to develop ways of teaching which give Aboriginal learners maximum chance to learn through responding to a socially meaningful situation. This means our attention would be first on the situation (and not on learning goals). Our attentions should be second, on the learning possibilities of each situation (for ourselves and our students), and third, we need to develop much better ways of reflecting on our experiences together and recording and evaluating our learning.
- In curriculum, we should start by planning a particular learning experience, or a workshop together based on our intuitive understandings of what is happening in the community, where the students' interests lie, the expectations of parents and students, without worrying too much about the details of learning goals. (We need to develop sound principles and ideas to help us with this activity-based planning.)
- *The important curriculum documents should be books and charts etc., about learning activities which have already happened. They should tell about who took part, how it was organised, what*

went well, what went wrong, and what everyone (including the teachers) learnt. These books are always interesting to children and teachers, because they are written by students and teachers *together*, and because they are a *response* to what happened, not a *plan* for what might happen in the future. They give us continuity with the past and ideas for the future, without taking away local control of learning.

- Maybe curriculum documents should have two parts -

1. NOTES - suggestions and views for how to organise worthwhile learning experiences, including people who can help, rules about excursions, etc.

2. BOOKLETS - which are full of pictures and information which have been made as *reports* from workshops or other learning together experiences which have been explored and worked through by the group. (I have found these books to be very important and valuable to Aboriginal students and teachers, whereas future-oriented curriculum plans are seldom seen to be of interest or of use by Aboriginal teachers.)

- Input into school learning from the total universe of Aboriginal meaning is only possible if the content of learning is left or ongoing negotiation. This sounds very difficult, but it is only difficult because white education traditionally has been very strong on planning and very weak on reflecting and evaluating. If we relax our future orientation, and pay more respect to our past and what we could learn from it, we will develop strong methods of recording our learning experiences which will provide excellent bases for ongoing and negotiated planning.

3. ABORIGINAL LEARNING PRINCIPLE: LEARNING THROUGH HARMONY AND CONTINUITY

True Aboriginal responsiveness leads to a skilful intuition of the future. Plans are brought to fruition slowly, as the whole group contributes and skilfully ties together all the developing threads from their social and physical worlds. When specific learning is planned ahead by teachers, Aboriginal students are prevented from learning in their traditional way, which cooperatively builds up meaning, understanding and identity. One underlying assumption of meaningful Aboriginal education is that our history, our land, and our people have given us life and meaning. All these things are relevant as we plan identity-building group experiences; they are a crucial input into our learning, and these are the criteria by which we evaluate our learning. Education means learning to faithfully retain what we know is precious from the past as we move into the future. Even when we learn Western skills like science and mathematics, we are learning them because they will help us to keep strong our Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal learning is not general, abstract learning. It is learning which is deeply rooted in the unity of where, when and who is involved in the activity.

PROBLEMS WITH THE OLD CURRICULUM

The white schooling curriculum takes abstract learning content, like maths, literacy, science, etc. and combines these with a philosophy which projects into the future. This philosophy says, "If we learn these ideas thoroughly and carefully, we will create a good future for ourselves". The Aboriginal way is the opposite. It retains concrete experience from the past. Its philosophy says: "If we remember and understand how these experiences give us harmony and unity with each other, our land and our past, we will know where to go in our struggle to preserve our Aboriginal way of life in the future".

The white curriculum takes a whole range of situations and looks at them from one particular angle (e.g., maths, writing, reading). Aboriginal learning is the opposite. It takes one specific situation (e.g., a hunting trip), and looks at it from a whole variety of interrelated angles (e.g. the land, and who it belongs to, the relations of the people with the land, creation stories, the hunting techniques, previous trips to the same place, etc.). This interrelatedness is essential to the wholeness of Aboriginal learning, and it is lost in a structured white curriculum.

White curriculum based planning makes no room for the rhythms and cycles of Aboriginal life. Sometimes there are only a few kids at school. We need to learn ways of using this situation productively. Sometimes there are important events or trouble in the community. We need a way of planning which will make teachers more able to respond to what is happening in the lives of their pupils.

Sometimes the white curriculum acts strongly against Aboriginal identity:

- it can make them believe that they can learn what is important to their lives without learning to negotiate planning together, without carrying out activities in unity and without reflecting upon them through input from older (and other) Aboriginal people.
- It can make them believe that their future is a personal, individual future, and has nothing to do with their history, their land, their friends and their families (in other words, their Aboriginal identity).
- It can make them believe that there is no continuity between their Dreaming and their modern lives.

NEW CURRICULUM IDEA: ONGOING RESPONSIVE PLANNING

- We must give up the idea of the curriculum stretching unchanging and unresponsive into the future. We should plan our programs together, Aboriginal and white teachers, in loose *blocks* of, say, one term. All the different ideas and activities we hope to work on in the short term are small planned blocks in the term program.
- Then we need to constantly revise our planning according to our sensitivity to what is happening in the classroom, the school and the community. If we don't have a planning system that allows us to respond to this, we all get upset and depressed. White educators have to learn more about the way Aboriginal lives are controlled, by responding rather than planning, before we can learn to negotiate curriculum properly.
- We always need to be looking for ways to involve the families and other Aboriginal community members in school activities. We need to learn to make them feel welcome and comfortable without expecting them to do any teaching or supervision they would not normally do outside the classroom. If there is a class excursion somewhere, and it takes an extra hour of driving around or waiting to enable some family or grandmothers to come along just for the ride, then that hour is very well spent because it contributes in an unseen way to the total unity and continuity of the children's learning experience. When teachers complain of lack of parental or community support, they are complaining that the parents are failing to respond to the structures and organization of the white schooling system. It should be the other way around. It is the school which should

be responding and supporting the structures and organization of Aboriginal community life.

- We must remember that learning is meaningful to Aboriginal students when it is seen to tie in harmoniously with all the angles and directions of their lives. Abstract knowledge is left behind inside the classroom every afternoon. Meaningful knowledge is taken home and re-explored and evaluated in terms of its usefulness in the ongoing business of Aboriginal life.

4. ABORIGINAL CULTURAL PRINCIPLE: LEARNING BOTH WAYS/TEACHING BOTH WAYS

Many Aboriginal people want their children to learn **two ways** — Aboriginal and White Australian. They want the school to play a part in teaching children about traditional culture. And they want white teachers to understand and respect the Aboriginal way of life. If we are serious about teaching Aboriginal culture properly in the school, and giving it the respect it deserves, we must find a way that we can all work on planning together, working together, and learning together. White teachers have to remember that they always have a lot to learn about themselves and their world from Aboriginal teachers, who can be both children and adults. We also need to remember that we have a lot to learn about the Aboriginal angle on Western ideas like mathematics, history and science.

PROBLEMS WITH THE OLD CURRICULUM

White teachers seldom understand the rhythms and cycles of Aboriginal life. We think we can switch Aboriginal learning on and off like a light, because that is easy to do with balanda learning. Teaching Aboriginal culture cannot be switched on and off.

When white teachers assume they know everything about their subjects, and Aboriginal learners know nothing, they are likely to teach in a way which undermines Aboriginal culture.

White curriculum does not need to be directed towards harmony and unity. An Aboriginal curriculum must be different -

- it requires a group of people working and contributing together. It can't work with just one teacher and with a group of students and a pre-planned curriculum;
- it requires exploring and living out an activity together rather than just talking and listening. Every aspect of the activity has meaning, and the meaning ties into all the different aspects of the past, the land, and the people;
- it requires big blocks of time to explore this properly in the carefully negotiated Aboriginal way;
- it involves organising older Aboriginal people who have the important knowledge and authority;
- it requires fitting in with all the other community business people are involved in;
- it requires *responding* to the feelings and problems in the community. One day this sort of activity might be appropriate and fully supported, the next day it might not be.

Some schools have tried to have Aboriginal culture taught in the school one day per week, but it is too hard for Aboriginal culture to be taught properly this way. Some have tried many times to do it this way but it doesn't work, because it needs everyone working together for a few days, planning together, sharing together, and learning together, and reflecting together.

NEW CURRICULUM IDEA: LEARNING BOTH WAYS FOR EVERYONE

- We need to set aside several days or a week, every so often, when the right people can be organised, a lot of careful preparation done, and everyone in the school can participate in an Aboriginal culture workshop.
- In planning school activities, everyone can be involved, and contribute according to their abilities. White teachers can help in the organisation of Aboriginal culture workshops. Everyone can record what they learn in booklets which will help us remember, and help us and others to plan other workshops.
- If white educators are really serious about Aboriginal curriculum, we need the opportunity and the responsibility to be involved *as learners* in Aboriginal culture workshops. Even three and four year old Aboriginal children can teach white educators a lot about freedom, independence, attachment to the land and kin, attitudes towards the material world, etc. The biggest step is for white educators to admit that they have a lot to learn. We are keen to learn about the *externals* of Aboriginal culture, but are slow to pick up Aboriginal ideas which might question our own assumptions about the world.
- If white teachers assume that Aboriginal people can have no input into teaching Western subjects like science and mathematics, we can fall into the trap of teaching Western values alongside Western ideas. For example, there is a danger that in teaching the 'facts' of mathematics, we will also teach that saving up and accumulating wealth is a value which does not need to be balanced and evaluated against the ethic of distributing all wealth and ensuring that

material possessions and money do not interfere with social unity. When whites assume they have everything to teach and nothing to learn, their teaching can badly undermine white values.

5. ABORIGINAL CULTURAL PRINCIPLE: FREEDOM IN LEARNING/LEARNING FREEDOM

An essential part of growing up for an Aboriginal child is learning independence, and learning to choose when to be involved in activities. Individual freedom is a precious and central part of Aboriginal life. An essential part of learning responsiveness is learning to be independent from the manipulations of other people (even if they are white teachers). Aboriginal people are proud of the way their children learn to be independent from an early age. They encourage their children to be independent of coercion. Aboriginal students will only learn if they are not being pushed by a teacher.

PROBLEMS WITH THE OLD CURRICULUM

In the old balanda curriculum and timetable, all our ways of helping children at school needed to have a teacher standing in front of students telling them what to do and when to do it. The old curriculum does not allow children freedom to learn. The old schooling system assumes that teachers know best. But different Aboriginal people want different things from schooling. So we need to plan education which will free learners from complete teacher control, and free teachers from complete responsibility for teaching. Teachers must be learners too, and Aboriginal learners must have freedom to choose the circumstances of their own learning.

In the old system, teachers always need to be telling children what to do. Teachers have a very hard job to do, because children will not

always cooperate and obey. Aboriginal children are very resistant to teacher pressure because they know their freedom is precious.

Aboriginal parents believe their children should be taught without being pushed around by the teachers. Parents do not want teachers getting angry with the children.

NEW CURRICULUM IDEA: FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

- The curriculum could be changed so that there are *always choices available* to students. Sometimes they can choose to work with a teacher, sometimes they want to work by themselves or with another teacher.
- One choice that is available should always be academically oriented. A lot of students and their parents want good academic education. The students who are interested in other things should have other choices, so the academic students are not held back.
- Curriculum planners need to spend much more time developing activities which are meaningful for students who are not choosing to be involved in teacher-directed work. This way the teachers will not be getting angry or frustrated, and the pupils will have the choice of learning without compromising their important personal freedom. This is a big job, because we haven't learned how to develop classroom learning without constant teacher input and control. We need a lot of work to plan these other activities so that alternatives are genuine learning experiences, responding to students' interests, and not just 'busy' work.

We need to find ways of providing all these sorts of learning experiences:

1. Programs for students who want to study academic work.
2. Programs for students who want to study in groups through activity-based workshops.
3. Programs for students who want to work at their own pace with minimum teacher input.
4. Support for students who wish to leave the community and go to school in other places.
5. Support for older students who want to return to school to study for short periods.
6. Support for T.A.F.E. courses and other set courses originating from outside the community, and running with school facilities.
7. Support for traditional Aboriginal educational activities that have nothing to do with the school (e.g. ceremonies, funerals, trips to traditional land, etc.).

CONCLUSION

The only way in which the invasive and destructive effects of the white structure of education can be changed is for Aboriginal principles of learning to take their place. This does not necessarily mean that all traditional white curriculum based teaching is harmful. But it does mean that curriculum based teaching can be a powerful agent to prevent the sort of learning which will make Aboriginal learners strong to preserve their Aboriginal identity. Much of the white content of education will help Aboriginal people in their struggle, but only if the process of

education is one which helps them build their Aboriginal identity.

'Learning My Way' Conference, WACAE, September 1988.

As a white teacher, I only dimly understand the nature of real Aboriginal education. The most important of the points I have made is that white educators need to start listening, and looking around them to find what it is that Aboriginal people, children and adults, urban and from remote places, are saying about themselves, their world, and their education. As we start to learn, we will only then be able to give them the meaningful control over their own education which belongs to them, and which they are demanding. When we start to learn, we will begin to see how the structure of white schooling is more assimilating than its content.

We all have something different to learn, and a different contribution to make. As there is no one single Aboriginal culture, there can be no one single form of Aboriginal education. Most white educators have a strong feeling that there is something very wrong in the way we go about Aboriginal education. But it is taking us a long time to acknowledge that it is only Aboriginal people themselves who can teach us how to put things right.

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