



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

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Non-Indigenous Academic and Indigenous Autonomy

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Introduction

One of the many fascinating problems raised in recent issues of the *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education (AJIE)* is that of Indigenous autonomy in education. Although opinions differed about the extent to which Indigenous people currently exercise educational autonomy in various situations, there was wide agreement that there ought to be Indigenous control or 'ownership' of all knowledge relating to Indigenous life and culture, past and present. Sister Anne Gardner, then Principal of Murrupurtyanuwu Catholic School in NT, explained (1996: 20) how she decided to 'let go, to move away from the dominant role as Principal', in order that Indigenous persons could take control. She had been helped to this conclusion by reading Paulo Freire, Martin Buber and Hedley Beare, and, within the NT itself, 'people of that educational calibre, such as Beth Graham, Sr Teresa Ward, Fran Murray, Stephen Harris, all pleading with us to allow education to be owned by Aboriginal people'. Sr Gardner held that 'Aboriginal people never act as "leader", a view shared by her designated Indigenous successor, Teresita Puruntayemeri, then Principal-in-Training of Murrupurtyanuwu

Catholic School, who wrote (1996: 24-25) that 'for a Tiwi person it is too difficult to stand alone in leadership'. One way to share the burdens of leadership is, she suggests, to 'perform different dances in the Milmaka ring, sometimes in pairs or in a group'.

However, few contributors who shared Sr Gardner's belief that Indigenous Australians should direct Indigenous education seem to have followed her example and departed from the scene. Professor Johann Le Roux (1997: 43) was shocked that 'about 80 per cent of available published manuscripts concerning Australian Indigenous education have been written by non-Aboriginals'. He urged that the 'world views' of Aborigines and the rest of us are 'so different that each is excluded from a full understanding and appreciation of the other'. Yet he added to the number of non-Indigenous publications, and cited approvingly numerous other non-Aborigines who write about Aborigines. Hillary Colman-Dimon demanded (2000: 35) that non-Aborigines no longer intrude into Indigenous education and supported an Indigenous challenge of 'why should those people talk about our business?' Yet she also cited several non-Aborigines whose views she took to be authoritative, such as Michael Christie, H.C. Coombs, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, Stephen Harris, Rob McTaggart and Edward Said. R.G. Smith also cited the works of many non-Indigenous authors, such as Habermas, Coombs, Foucault, Muecke, Sheridan, Eckermann, Christie, Said,

Frow and many more, but he concluded (1996: 40) that:

interventionist policy might assist in making equitable and accessible appropriate areas of education and cultural understanding.

Smith's unstated assumption seemed to be that non-Indigenes such as himself would influence any such interventionist policy.

Frances Develin-Glass explained (1999: 25) that she 'sought to teach an exclusively Aboriginal-authored literature course', but she was presumably compelled to teach it herself in default of available Aboriginal lecturers or authors. The delicate problem of 'cultural ownership' was raised in this article in respect to the Internet: it is vitally important to let the whole world know about Aboriginal traditional thought, yet equally necessary to confine its secrets to proper custodians. Jan Stewart also expressed (1999: 34) the wish that Indigenous Australians should take control of their own education, and the rest of their lives as well, but she considered it necessary that she herself should take a directing role, in order that matters can receive adequate 'assessment', and so that she could propel 'the process of empowerment'.

Arthur Smith (1997: 25-26) maintained that:

the important thing is that the time has passed when non-Indigenous researchers could even presume to speak on behalf of Indigenous Australians or speculate for one moment about whether their research is different and what the current priorities are, or will be.

This dictum might exclude non-Indigenous persons, such as Arthur Smith, from engaging in independent research into Indigenous matters, but he offered as well a more inclusive definition of Indigenous research as:

that which the stakeholders together, collegially and collaboratively, decide is morally good, appropriate, honourable, just and fair.

Any dissentients from such an envisaged consensus would presumably not be regarded as legitimate 'stakeholders'. Indeed, Arthur Smith almost immediately added that:

the challenge and perhaps an ongoing crisis in Indigenous higher education will be to develop policy and codes of practice that are culturally and morally/ethically appropriate for everyone.

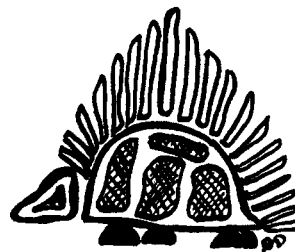
There could be little challenge, let alone crisis, if agreement between 'stakeholders' were easy to achieve. In any case, consensus is not usually expected prior to research being undertaken: research is often undertaken precisely because of a need to establish more clearly which of several contending explanations is the best available.

Arthur Smith (1997: 27) noted that 'increasing numbers of Indigenous academics' wish to have exclusive control of research into Indigenous matter and are:

without too much sympathy for those whose careers have been built on what is perceived as an Indigenous research and development industry.

But with admirable abnegation, he conceded that 'Indigenous participants should essentially own the process' and that 'power of veto and ownership' of all research into Indigenous matters should 'unambiguously be vested in the community or organisation in which the research is being done'. He indicated delicately some possible problems in Indigenous control over projected research, but grasped the nettle and declared that:

researchers who are unable to understand and respect Indigenous time frame or research should not be involved.



Elizabeth Mackinlay outlined (1998: 19) the problem, as she sees it, of 'authority' over and 'ownership' of Indigenous music. Mackinlay wants her non-Aboriginal students to have 'recognition of and respect for cultural property rights' or Aboriginal musicians and dancers, in a way she would not demand if her students danced *Swan Lake* or played Percy Grainger or sang a Beatles number. She also believes (1998: 24), with

Colin Johnson, that 'Aboriginal people need to have control of the discourse in order to be in control of their lives', but her own profession is based on engagement in such discourse. She agonised:

how do I as a non-Indigenous person teach Indigenous studies without losing the essence and the integrity of the body of knowledge I am trying to teach?

John Budby and Dennis Foley (1998: 31) held that 'academics have been given knowledge by the Australian Indigenous communities for purposes of research and study'. They ask:

does academic licence apply in these circumstances, or are Elder members of the Australian communities the custodians of knowledge and the ones who should approve its sharing across other cultures?

Johann Le Roux and Myra J. Dunn examined (1997: 7) 'Aboriginal student empowerment' in the University of New England, an institution which seeks to counter the 'racism, systemic bias and structural violence' with which 'Aborigines have been marginalised, disempowered, impoverished and dispossessed'. However, Le Roux and Dunn found (1997: 10) that there are factors unconnected with racism and colonialism which inhibit Aboriginal educational success, such as 'lack of parental encouragement', 'deficient English language skills', peer group influences 'antipathetic to formal education', 'poor attendance', and 'poor academic discipline and motivation'.

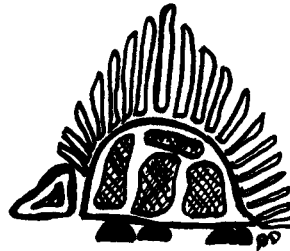
For John Budby and Dennis Foley (1998: 36):

the central feature of any university wishing to improve higher educational outcomes for Australian Indigenous students is the establishment of a cultural identity which releases them from subjugation by the white cultural values.

Release from this subjugation would appear to require total or near total Indigenous faculty. Budby and Foley asserted that 'cultural characteristics from which are derived, validated and practised Aboriginal standards' are uniform and 'applicable for all Indigenous Australians', which would obviate any need to provide Indigenous academic staff from

precisely the same cultural background as the students. However, Foley claimed in a later article (2000: 21-22) that it is often hard for Indigenous people to help other Indigenous people in trouble: for example, for a person from a matriarchal culture to be accepted by patriarchal groups, and *vice versa*; 'salt water' and 'fresh water' groups are suspicious of each other, and so on. Although he concluded that:

it is time for Indigenous researchers to speak out as a common voice, then we can control the ethnocentric academic mistruths that haunt our existence.



Foley is suspicious of the potentially subversive effects of non-Indigenous material.

In a review of Debra Adelaide's *Serpent Dust*, Foley wrote (1998: 43) that 'as an Indigenous Australian who is a descendant of the Eora people, hatred and frustration surged through my veins' on reading Adelaide's account of Aboriginal women who are 'slippery as an eel outside, inside as hot and soft as any man could ask'. He declared that the 'negative stereotyping mixed with culturally unacceptable material of traditional birth is difficult to tolerate', and that it 'should not be a reader for impressionable teenagers'.

In somewhat contradictory vein, Foley stated elsewhere (1996: 54-55) what sort of 'support' he believed was needed by Indigenous students in Australian universities. He feared that few of these students possess, when they go to university, 'housekeeper skills', 'life skills', or 'financial skills'. He was highly critical that academic staff rarely concern themselves with the 'personal or situational problems' of their students. Instead, too many university staff are 'striving for higher degrees and continually on research leave'. Academic staff, in Foley's view, must ensure that Indigenous students understand that 'not arriving punctually to lectures or tutorials is a one-way trip to failure', and 'that inability to study' is likely to hold them back. Personal tutors must keep

Indigenous students out of 'the city, its lights, noise and nightclubs', since otherwise they are 'like lambs to the slaughter'. Foley was surely right to deplore the 'poor attrition rates, broken spirits, destroyed egos and non-existent self-esteem' he perceived among the Indigenous students in Queensland's universities, but he left it uncertain whether he expected these supervising tutors to be exclusively Indigenous or not.

Conclusion

We are unlikely to find commentators on Indigenous education in Australia with greater experience than contributors to *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, but it seems clear that further reflection is needed before any dogmatic position is taken on the degree to which the education of persons identifying themselves as Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders should be autonomous or separate in organisation and direction. It might be helpful if a distinction were made between the aim of personal autonomy and that of collective autonomy. The first seeks to ensure that individuals are helped to acquire the skills and knowledge to make wise decisions and are as free as possible to make such decisions of their own volition. The second seeks to enable identified groups within the larger society to make decisions with little or no reference to any authority external to themselves. It might be wisest to concentrate upon the first, rather than the second aim.

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