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The Relevance of the 'Learning Styles Debate' for Australian Indigenous Students in Mainstream Education

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Introduction

While there has been much debate (Christie *et al.*, 1987; Eckermann, 1988; Kleinfield and Nelson, 1991; Gibson, 1993; Ulstrup, 1994; Guild, 1994; Nicholls *et al.*,1995) on the inappropriateness of applying culturally descriptive 'learning styles' in meeting the educational needs of Indigenous students, the reality of the existence of individual life experiences of Indigenous Australians has often been overlooked. That omission diminishes the dominant role which socio-cultural considerations have taken in past colonising practices with the effects of those practices often having become transgenerational among individuals today. This paper attempts to move on from that debate, questioning the validity of a canon that could be accused of merely perpetuating colonial paradigms and failing to acknowledge the integrity of the individual. The importance of determining and establishing effective communication is the key in understanding, and catering for, *differing educational approaches*, in the past labelled teaching and learning 'styles'. Consequently, cultural awareness which is inclusive of the diversity of Indigenous Australians is still necessary in opening and maintaining that communication between educational stakeholders in the school community.

Where established, and often unchallenged, anthropological descriptions of Indigenous peoples have dominated educational thinking concerning life experiences, it is now time to adopt a different perspective on the use of cultural discourse and how it affects individual students. Rather than segregating individuals on an intellectual, social and even racial basis, awareness should be used to further the understanding of the needs of students in more holistic terms of how they place themselves in mainstream education. A discussion of Australian Indigenous approaches to learning and teaching in relation to the appropriateness of how it is used in mainstream education could therefore be justified in this sense. Likewise, while an inclusion of the issues in the debate may seem contradictory at this point, it is necessary to recount those issues to relate their relevance to pedagogy today. The role of culture remains relevant when discussing specifically the issue of effective communication between teachers and learners which will directly or indirectly influence the character and atmosphere of a positive educational environment.

Culture and 'Learning Styles'

Many general assumptions are made by mainstream Australian society which stereotype groups of people, principally minority groups who hold little power in being able to counteract those ideas. This is also true for Indigenous Australians; for example, the concept of *Aboriginality* for Aboriginal people is embedded with complexity and contradiction. A dichotomy exists whereby, on the one hand, Indigenous people often feel obligated to support a single identity in the name of political solidarity, yet at the same time wish to strongly defend their cultural individualities, which may contradict or fragment that solidarity. This situation of stereotyping Indigenous people is pertinent in the area of mainstream education and its institutional paradigms, which have historically categorised groups in terms of race, class and gender. Indigenous people have been either excluded, marginalised or, at best, suffered a typecast inclusion within the Australian education system. While many minority identities have been welcomed and incorporated into Australian society, Indigenous people have remained segregated by their supposed exoticism. Somewhere between exclusion and inclusion lies the unique position which Indigenous Australians hold as First Nation people.

It must be continually stressed that there is a danger in offering descriptions of 'difference' between cultural groups in that they can be used to reinforce stereotypes, and this in turn can lead to discrimination in social attitudes and public policy. Non-Indigenous stakeholders within the school community must therefore be aware of this and use information concerning students of any cultural background appropriately. Any descriptions of learning and teaching practices must refer to specific Indigenous cultural groups, which may or may not be located within urban situations. One example is a study of teaching and learning practices within an urban Nunga (South Australian) family conducted by Malin *et al.* (1996). The authors sought to validate the findings of their qualitative research by consulting

the participants about proposed interpretations to be placed in the descriptive report. The perceptual preferences for the interpretation of information can be influenced by differing worldviews of Indigenous Australians. The transmission of this diversity of perceptions of knowledge and its acquisition then becomes vital in the communication process for all stakeholders in the educational environment.

Another simplistic and inaccurate socio-cultural assumption is often made that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who live in urban areas have lost their cultural identities. Eckermann (1977: 288) noted that Indigenous people living in South-east Queensland in similar socio-economic situations to non-Indigenous people were considered by non-Indigenous people to be 'assimilated' but on further inspection found that 'a strong and positive sense of being Aboriginal' persisted, being reinforced in areas such as child-rearing practices. Cultural continuities among different groups of Indigenous people can remain strong, according to varying life experiences. It is therefore inappropriate to make conjecture about an individual's cultural beliefs and practices on the basis of uninformed observations and value judgments, especially when that expression is designed to disempower and deny existence. Consequently, the need arises to dispel misconceptions by becoming aware of those cultural continuities, as they may exist, to improve our responses to Indigenous students in mainstream education.
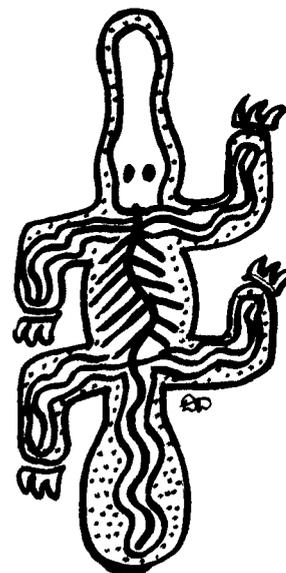
West (1994: 7) proposes that all students, irrespective of cultural origin, bring a set of cultural behaviours to school which they have acquired from their home environment. In relation to the school environment, this behaviour is constituted more in the socio-cultural knowledge of how Indigenous Australians interact with each other rather than traditional knowledge about ceremony, kinship, creation and land. Various factors affect the quality of education for Indigenous students in a school setting and many of these are related to differing expectations by both the Indigenous families concerned and the school community as a whole.

In accepting that differing practices and expectations arise from cultural diversity, then it might also be assumed that Indigenous students have differing learning approaches. This can, in turn, isolate them from the majority body of students in the class or school. Well-meaning educators may believe that people of *difference* need to be *taught differently*. However, in their attempt to rectify inappropriate education delivery, teachers tend to examine curriculum content rather than their own teaching methods and forms of communication. Student-teacher relationships need to be formed at both a personal and pedagogical level in order to make an educational difference (Munns, 1998: 184). Harris (1994) argues that personal relationships between teachers and Indigenous students are a prerequisite for successful learning. A lack of self-examination by teachers can also often result in lower outcome expectations. Where some classrooms may offer many and varied opportunities for learning, teachers may unwittingly narrow that choice for Indigenous students in their attempts to make school an inviting place for those Indigenous students. Fanshawe (1999: 41) advocates that a balanced formula of 'warmth and demandedness' provides for an effective teaching atmosphere for successful outcomes for Indigenous students. The value of perceptive communication creates an awareness that examines closely the needs of individual students and their individual learning approaches.

Whether different cultures have different 'learning styles' has been an issue of speculation and may rest with the varying interpretations of the term itself. This confusion is centred on definitions of 'learning styles' which lack clarity and produce grey areas between the borders of cognitive ability and cultural practice. Bain (1992: 53) attempts to make a cognitive link to cultural 'learning styles' indirectly through Piaget's developmental concepts based on a child's life experiences. She suggests that differing life experiences of a child which are culturally determined can influence the direction of a child's cognitive development. Bennett (cited in Gibson 1993: 44) takes a more benign, less provocative, and perhaps more holistic view by linking 'learning styles' to how a learner perceives, interacts with, and responds to the learning environment.

An example of a generalised description of cultural learning tendencies is Christie's belief that certain cultural groups show a propensity towards either active or passive participation in learning situations. He (Lipscombe and Burnes, 1982: 15) uses his observations of, and experiences with, Yolngu children in the Northern Territory (considered an area of traditional, remote communities) whom he states participate in a passive way in the school learning process in the same way as they participate passively in their day-to-day home lives. He goes as far to say that Yolngu children tend to learn inductively rather than deductively, and find difficulty with learning which requires active, thoughtful, self-conscious participation. He adds that the children in the classroom would be wholly absorbed in a passive activity such as copying, yet when asked to participate actively would exhibit poor concentration, poor understanding and gain poor results. Rather than suggesting that Indigenous students are inefficient learners in the formal school situation, Christie (1985: 17) is trying to point out that cultural practices 'reflect your view of yourself, your world, and the situation you're in'. The danger lies in taking specific examples such as these and applying them as general cultural traits across the diversity of Australian Indigenous peoples and their life experiences in

differing social, economic and geographical situations. Core themes of experience may emerge between differing Indigenous cultural groups as acknowledged by Moreton-Robinson (2000) in her relating of Indigenous women's continuing roles in a contemporary Australian society. She qualifies this view by adding that Indigenous women will have different concrete experiences which will shape their relations to those core themes. Through over-generalisations, there remains the misappropriation of certain cultural practices in what could be considered a giant leap in conceptual deliberation from cultural traits or practices to cultural learning styles that may carry with it connections of cognitive efficiency (Stewart, 2001: 43).

Within the realm of academic discussion there has been considerable deliberation over what constitutes an individual's learning style; how it can be identified and the limitations of making general comparisons which can be extrapolated validly to other groups (Eckermann, 1994: 26). Linard (1994: 64) maintains that regardless of students' 'learning styles', most seem to be able to adapt to a variety of instructional modes, even though they may not be preferred ones. The actual impact of a learning style on achievement is limited because no single instructional prescription may be equally influential on all critical variables in learning. With debate also arising as to whether achievement is also (and perhaps separately) influenced by higher-level interactions, cognitive development can enter the debate as distinct from 'learning styles'. A danger of making comparative racial distinctions (historically embedded in Darwinian taxonomy) emerges in any attempt that is made in linking generalisations about learning styles and cognitive development to different cultural groups. Variations in 'learning styles', and their connection to cognitive development, may be so complex that few people learn in the same way, just as few people think exactly alike.

Pedagogically related concepts, such as that of 'multiple intelligences' constructed by Gardner (1983), are a more appropriate means of

observing the modes of learning and teaching preferences of individuals. Within Gardner's ideology choices are made available within learning activities which are planned around seven 'intelligences': linguistic, logical-mathematical, special, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intra-personal. Flexible combinations of learning and teaching approaches allow all students to develop effective ways of gaining positive educational outcomes. Rigid testing of 'learning styles' such as those of Dunn (1999) may only further the danger of inflexible categorisation of students on a basis of race, class or gender. Used as sole indicators, test results can become a substitute for personal interaction between teachers and learners and consequently, stifle effective communication.

Guild (1994: 18) found that research into a connection between culture and 'learning styles' generally agrees on certain points: that students of any particular age will differ in their ways of learning; learning styles are a function of both nature and nurture and are neutral; variations among individuals are as great as their commonalities; and that social/racial conflict influences learning experiences in schools. Guild (1994: 19) concluded by saying that '... [t]he complexity and limitations of learning styles as a diagnostic tool severely restricted the drawing of generalisations'. This situation is highlighted by the variation of contradictory findings which researchers have gathered about assumptions made in the past linking certain 'learning styles' and Indigenous students.

Christie *et al.* (1987) identified learning strategies among Indigenous students living in remote communities where a preference was shown for
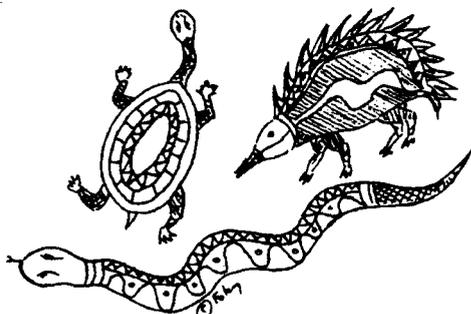
ways of learning such as observation, personal trial and error, real life situations and performance, persistence and repetition. However, Eckermann (1988) evidenced that urban Indigenous students utilised a wide range of learning styles, and did not prefer any one mode over another; for example, they worked comfortably in either collaborative or individual learning situations. Kleinfield and Nelson (1991) agree that there may be distinct Indigenous learning styles, but there is no evidence to suggest that minority students perform more successfully if taught by 'culturally adapted' strategies. Ulstrup (1994) found a range of opinions among Indigenous students as to their preferred classroom environment. The trends however, were towards cohesion, co-operative learning and reduced friction in class. An inference could be made here that with the known social conflict that Indigenous students face in schools (Stewart, 1999), this behaviour could be influenced by a need to avoid further conflict and remain as anonymous as possible within the peer group. In conclusion, Nicholls *et al.* (1995) believe that the concept of distinctive Indigenous 'learning styles' is obsolete and counter-productive to progress in Indigenous education. They argue that it supports a flawed binary construction of Aboriginality and masks issues of power and oppression. The labelling of particular groups, which diminishes the complexity and richness of culture, therefore has also become outdated in an age where education prides itself on catering for the needs of individuals.

Links made between learning style theory and culture remain problematic in that they fail to recognise the diversity both between, and within, different Indigenous groups. Stairs (1994: 65) warns against stereotyping across Indigenous cultures which can lead to an emphasis being placed on cultural compatibility in schools. Consequently, Indigenous students may be offered a relatively narrow and unchallenging education inadequate for strong competence in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous spheres. The concept of learning style theory has been useful in recognising and valuing diversity, and the need for reflection of this in attitudes which help teachers to find ways for all students to be

successful. However, care must be taken in acknowledging that a study of 'learning styles' is merely a means of alerting teachers to alternative modes of human learning. As an alternative, the term teaching and learning *approaches* should be substituted for the now contentious terminology of learning 'styles' in an attempt to detach the concept from the cognitive connotations which often accompany them. Emphasis should therefore be placed more on the communicative processes within the contextual environment of the school community, and how they can either work positively or negatively towards student outcomes.

While it is recognised that approaches to learning are culturally influenced, it must also be acknowledged that social and environmental factors are important in learning development, and that differences in these two factors may ultimately be reflected in a student's learning outcome (Gibson 1993: 46). Gray (1990: 105) interprets 'Aboriginal learning styles' as '[r]epresentations of social learning inter-action[s]'. These need to be negotiated within the often-varying (and usually Westernised) contextual background of the classroom. Different cultures have different ways of using language to communicate meanings and consequently to define and share power and control, and therefore, an understanding must be reached to foster successful relationships between all stakeholders. The significance of the learning context, including the subculture of the classroom, has been under-emphasised in relation to resulting learning attitudes of students.

It is also highlighted that the approaches often appearing in examples consistent with Indigenous practices and beliefs may be found in varying proportions in all cultures. This is particularly apparent with pre-school children from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous backgrounds who may learn in similar ways at home (such as imitating and observing adult behaviour), but variation occurs in *what* they are learning which either penalises or advantages their chances of early success in a formal Westernised school environment.

Although it must be reiterated that generalisations about a group of people can lead to incorrect inferences about the life experiences of individuals in that group, there is little dissension that a relationship does exist between culture and preferred ways of teaching and learning (Guild 1994: 17). Coombs *et al.* (1983) present a generalised foreword to Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning, which take account of:

- involvement in adult activities from an early age

- emphasis on observation and imitation rather than direct instruction or question and answer

- a preference shown for learning by doing, not for learning how to do

- learning in a way which makes use simultaneously of several different mental processes

- the social cost of making a mistake being greater than that of admitting ignorance

- a tendency to reinforce correct behaviour rather than penalising error

- competition directly and primarily outside the kin group; within the kin group there is a strong emphasis on cooperation

- learning tending to be by person-orientation rather than information-orientation

- non-verbal communication used more, and more consciously, than by non-Indigenous Australians

- exploratory behaviour, persistence and repetition being important learning strategies.

These broad categories have specific importance for, and influence on effective communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders in mainstream education. While all these factors may affect a student's learning outcomes, it remains the current situation that the student finds himself or herself in that is of ultimate importance (Stewart 2001: 47). [Such a theme will be taken up in a subsequent paper in a forthcoming publication of this journal.]?

Conclusion

This chapter has raised the importance of educational stakeholders being aware of the role of culture in Indigenous students' lives and the influence this may have in determining the quality of education they receive. It briefly discussed the contentious issue of relating 'learning styles' to cultural traits that is often then used to marginalise and alienate Indigenous students within mainstream education. Instead it highlighted the importance of the recognition of differing learning and teaching approaches as being significant for effective communication between learners and teachers for the successful progress of Indigenous students. The main theme within the content of this paper has been that cultural awareness can be used appropriately to further the effectiveness of communication between all educational stakeholders. This becomes the key to encouraging meaningful and collaborative participation in an inclusive school environment.

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