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SELF-RECOGNITION *and* WELL-BEING: SPEAKING ABORIGINAL ENGLISH *in* HEALTHY CLASSROOMS

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■ Abstract

This paper applies the findings of doctoral research undertaken in the Northern Territory. It draws on extended interviews with nine Indigenous students studying at university to produce four findings for classroom learning and teaching, one of which highlights the need to recognise Aboriginal English as a focal point of the curriculum for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. I take the position that this recognition in schools depends to a significant degree on universities training their preservice teachers to recognise Aboriginal English as necessary to Aboriginal student learning and therefore as a legitimate dialect of the classroom, and this in turn requires universities to recognise the importance of Aboriginal English in their own curricula. Towards the end of the paper, I draw on some literature to suggest ways in which Aboriginal English could be incorporated into the classroom.

■ Introduction: Theory into practice

A teacher colleague and I were talking at the gym late one evening when she asked me about my doctoral research. I mentioned that it was about Indigenous education and she immediately wanted to know what I had discovered so that she could use it in her classroom. While I had avoided doing research which provided a framework for teachers, I realised that evening that my friend wanted a structure to help her interpret how the Indigenous students in her classroom were responding to her teaching. While I had the luxury of theory to rely on, she wanted to know how to improve the results of her students. What could I tell her about what I had found through doing my PhD? I initially had difficulty in summarising my findings in a way that were meaningful and purposeful for her teaching, but the paper that follows brings together the threads of this research for both teachers and lecturers in schools and universities. It is not so much a question of how to include Indigenous students in an appropriate curriculum nor how to adapt the curriculum for different students, but rather how to provide discursive opportunities that allow students to see themselves outside those classroom discourses that standardise difference. This is an old question in Indigenous education and unfortunately one that is becoming increasingly subsumed by an environment of cognitive accountability where the numerical results of non-Indigenous students are again constructed as the standard to be attained by Indigenous students. This research reveals how nine Indigenous students attempt to produce themselves outside the usual discourses of the university classroom, and they do this through Aboriginal English. In this paper I initially identify four key findings of the research, and then subsequently examine the significance of these for Indigenous students and their teachers (see Harrison, 2004a).

■ The methodology

The research was conducted with Indigenous students studying at the Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University). I interviewed nine students ranging in age between 22 and 47 years about their experiences of learning and teaching at school and at university. Three extended interviews were conducted with each student, with each interview lasting on average two hours and 20 minutes. The four key findings below were interpreted from the data.

■ Summary of findings

- The Indigenous students of this research are motivated by their relationship to the teacher. They work for the teacher not because he or she is an authority but because they respect him or her.
- These students had the feeling at school that they were constantly being judged by the teacher and other students, and this constant gaze, together with their histories, taught them to be suspicious of White people.
- Education is not the most important aspect in the lives of these students. Some have obligations to family that could override their commitment to study while others are not convinced by what the university has to offer them.
- These students want to recognise themselves outside the usual discourses of the classroom and one way in which they can do this is through the use of Aboriginal English.

I will now address each of these four findings below while focusing on the importance of Aboriginal English in learning and teaching for Aboriginal students. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers sometimes think that Aboriginal English is similar to Standard Australian English (SAE), and that Aboriginal people are just speaking some form of “bad English” (Eades, 1995, p. 3). There has been a reluctance, historically to recognise that Aboriginal English, like any Indigenous language, has its own grammar and its own special ways of thinking and talking, and that the various dialects of Aboriginal English are linked to particular regions around Australia (Eades, 1995; Konigsberg & Collard, 2002). Malcolm et al. (2003, p. 107) state that Aboriginal English “is the only form of language used by Aboriginal people Australia-wide within Aboriginal contexts, to express Aboriginal meanings”. It would be a mistake to assume that just because we hear Aboriginal students speaking Standard Australian English in the classroom that they are not speakers of Aboriginal English. Like any language or dialect, Aboriginal English is used to suit the situation, and we will find in this research that Aboriginal students at university use Aboriginal English in the classroom to relax and to negotiate a place in relation to the lecturer outside an historical position of authority. Aboriginal English is, therefore, not something to be denigrated but something that mirrors and performs the identity of Aboriginal students. Here I want to suggest that teachers can play a strong role in supporting Aboriginal English and therefore supporting Aboriginal students in the classroom.

Some people take the position that the use of Aboriginal English in schools is inappropriate because it is already stigmatised among many students and teachers, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and therefore its inclusion will not assist its growth and acceptance.

Konigsberg and Collard (2002, p. 131) observe how the status of minority-language speakers and their language or dialect is determined by the attitudes held by members of the dominant society, while Cummins (1986) adds that the success of language-minority students is an effect of the degree to which the historical power relations in a society can be changed. I will suggest below that the use of Aboriginal English in the classroom holds the potential to change the student’s historical relation to the teacher as an authority (see Harrison 2004b). Furthermore, Malcolm et al. (2003) offset a fear over mixing Aboriginal English and Standard Australian English by observing that switching between the two is not a problem so long as both are identified and used in appropriate contexts. These contexts need to be clearly defined for students (see Harris 1990 for discussion of domain separation theory in an Aboriginal education context).

■ The relationship to the teacher

Christie (1987, p. 118) observed long ago that “if you are obeyed and respected by Aboriginal students it is not because of your role as a teacher but because the children consider you worthy of respect”. In a similar vein, Hudspith (1997, p. 99) reports on the observations of an Aboriginal parent:

Sometimes I pop into the classroom and I see her with each child and she’s always talking to them and there’s a difference because not many teachers talk in that way. She’ll only talk with a child nice and kindly and real calmly and that makes the child feel really relaxing and the child will do as they’re told ... You look at her and her class and they respect her because she’s their teacher, but they respect her because she’s like their mother or someone older than them that they respect. You don’t hear her screaming out. Like when she talks to Duffy [my son] she says “Duffy” [very gently], you know, not really loud and the children listen and they’ve got respect.

This teacher does not demand respect; she earns it through the ways in which she talks with the students. Cahill (1999, pp. 42-43) supports this position through her own observations that many Aboriginal students at school value a “quiet and calm demeanour” in the teacher. My research found that success for both the student and teacher is not a consequence of a good theory or methodology but the product of an unconscious influence of the teacher’s speaking style upon the student. While the student is expected to learn from the teacher, the crucial factor that brings the two together in the classroom is *how the teacher talks*. A speaking style is identified through how the teacher is positioned unconsciously through his or her way of talking, for example, as an authority, as defensive, arrogant, quiet or aggressive and so on, and it is this style

that governs both the teacher's relation to the student and the student's desire to learn. This insight brought me to conclude that, through this style, the teacher has another opportunity to renegotiate and produce a relation to the student outside the unequal historical relations that have developed in Australia over the last 200 years. This opportunity is provided through how the teacher talks (Harrison, 2004a).

But, of course, things are never this easy in classrooms with Indigenous students. While the students of this study are motivated by the teacher's unconscious style of talking, they have learned from history to fear the teacher. The teacher is positioned as an authority, like the police, and the research found that this authority is perpetuated through the teacher's particular ways of talking about knowledge. For example, when the teacher talks about knowledge as already stored in the textbook, this then perpetuates the student's historical relation to authority, where the teacher is positioned as the one who manages and controls this knowledge (Harrison, 2004b). It is then up to the student to learn the knowledge that is inside the teacher's head or in the textbook and so schools and universities are conceptualised as places where knowledge is transmitted through a conduit from teacher to student. Students are therefore positioned with the responsibility to decipher what the teacher is teaching.

One of the ways in which the teacher can avoid being positioned as the gatekeeper and custodian of knowledge is to conceive of it as produced through the discourses of the classroom rather than as something that is already there in the curriculum and must be transmitted to, and learned by students. Transmission-based models of education continue to disempower those students who like to articulate and produce themselves through self-narrativisations, rather than through the objectification of scientific knowledge. One of the problems for those teachers who choose to act like authorities in the classroom and to talk about knowledge as if it has always been there as an objective fact in our lives is that they are often positioned by students as judgmental people. How can the teacher avoid this positioning by students?

■ The teacher's judgments

Each student who participated in this research had the feeling at school that he or she was being judged constantly by the teacher and other students. This is understandable, given that they hear so many stories from their parents and other relatives about how they were judged in the past. Nathan commented:

In the latter part of the fifties and early sixties the Aboriginal voice was still basically unheard. You didn't go around making waves. The Land Rights issue didn't come up in a big way until the next couple of decades. Being a minority, and not long

coming off the missions as well, people were quite wary of going into the townships and making waves. What was said and told to you, you basically took it as gospel. Basically, that's how it happened on the missions anyway, I think. So you just believe what people said. If you want to look at the negative aspects of it, they would say "you're black and stupid", you know. You could dispute it with your knuckles, if you were of the mind to. The biggest barrier was the way people looked at you in the streets. You could pick up the body language really easily, "what are you doing in this town". In those early days because Aboriginal people didn't have a lot of money, they used to book up a lot at the local stores and the storekeeper would rip them off left, right and centre and if you, people, would dispute it with the storekeeper, but that was as far as it would go. You certainly wouldn't make waves. You'd never take it to the police. People were brought up with authority nearly all their lives. Even on the missions they had the police there, if they had the mind to use them. You come away with a mentality like that where you just can't get away from it (Harrison, 2004a, p. 42).

The research found that these students have been trained through history to feel as if they are constantly under the gaze of others, a position which has been reproduced through stories from family and friends. Furthermore, these students say that, after a while, judgments can become internalised to the point where they think that people are judging them irrespective of whether this is the case. For example, Kiara demonstrates how the gaze internalises this historical relation in the classroom at university:

I'm the only coloured one, there's two Indian women there [in the tutorial]. I'm the only blackfella in there. This doesn't bother me any more. It did at the beginning of the year. I've noticed ... that people always stare at you because they think you shouldn't be there because you don't see many coloured people there [at university]. It's only for themselves; that you're not smart enough because you're Aboriginal. This was at the start of the year cause now I know a lot of people who are coloured ... I still feel a bit uncomfortable when I'm on my own. I'm probably a bit paranoid ... I'll grow out of it. I don't think it will bother me next year.

As these students think about what other people think about them, they position themselves as objects of what other people say and do, and therefore as objects of non-Indigenous knowledge. These objectifications often constitute the foundation of the anthropological method (Clifford, 1988; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and Ellie provided the following critique:

When [the lecturer] was painting this wonderful picture about Utopia in Aboriginal society, about sharing and caring, I don't want to sound cynical, I'm being honest. He was painting this beautiful picture of the Aboriginal race. I was totally confused and I thought, am I looking at this from a White perspective? And that's what I found scary and I had to really question myself about that ... It was a picture of they've got it so much together that you can't even question any aspect of Aboriginal family life. He told us that they don't fight, they share everything, they help each other. I said to [the other Aboriginal students in the tutorial]: you know any of these blackfellas and we just all laughed. He lives in the Dreamtime that mulliga [man].

The anthropological gaze is represented to these students as a science where knowledge is discovered, rather than produced through language and grounded in the position of the lecturer or the student. A consciousness of the effects of their own language could therefore help both lecturers and teachers to defer those judgements which perpetuate the historical relations that have traditionally disempowered Indigenous students in the classroom. Of course, one of the easiest ways of deferring these judgments is through "narrativising" one's own experiences as they relate to the aims and outcomes of the classroom rather than constantly privileging the (Western) genres of argument and explanation. A sense of being judged is reinforced further when students are asked at university to give opinions and make judgments about others, despite the fact that they might see these interpretations as premature and unwarranted. And yet these judgements are often encouraged and are seen to be a mark of the student's ability to engage in critical thinking. Furthermore, students quickly learn that the teacher is assessing and judging their academic and personal skills in the classroom (Gore, 1993). They know that records are kept and passed from one teacher to the next, even if the next teacher does not know the child. While some teachers often wonder why Indigenous students can be so quiet, the students themselves have learned that one of the best options is to keep quiet to avoid the judgments of others in the classroom.

Stories about the old school days from parents come to sound just like the new stories from their children. The students of this research learn about education from the stories that they hear from their family and friends. History is repeated in many ways in the contemporary classroom, in terms of discipline and behaviour, the exclusion of the student's home language, an ignorance of what is happening at home and the assumption of a discourse of progress and enlightenment where teachers may assume that school is and should be the priority in a student's life. But not all students and their families privilege education.

■ Obligations to family rather than to oneself

Indigenous students sometimes have obligations to family that may override their commitment to school. For example, Hudspith (1996, p. 184) reports on the observations of an Aboriginal mother:

[My son] talked a lot about school then, and he never wanted to come shopping with me because he was doing something at school and he was really excited about it. It was the same when I asked him to stay at home and look after the baby. He did it but he never wanted to. But now [he's not in Mrs Banks' class] he wants to stay home and look after the baby and he's glad to do it because he'd rather do that than go to school.

As teachers, we should not necessarily assume that education comes first for all students, rather obligations at home to look after the siblings may be their first priority. This is illustrated by Trudy in the following reflection:

Had my family been in Darwin I would have had to compromise university with their problems because I'm the oldest and I'm expected to deal with every problem in the family. Had I been in Townsville, I would have found it very difficult to have a lot of time to myself. That's the immediate family, brothers and sisters and mother. But with my relatives it was worse. They would consider that I think that I was too good for them and they would treat me that way. They would actually put me down and say that I wanted to be White. An enormous pressure from the family.

Obligations to family and friends may also take precedence over the individual's desire to take personal control over his or her own learning. Furthermore, some Aboriginal students do not want to be seen to be pursuing individual or personal goals in case they are deemed to be acting White, and so they are often caught between the demands and expectations of others and what they want for themselves (Hughes et al., 2004). This is the dilemma for July who commented, "Trouble with me is I try to please people. I've just gotta be me. I'm still learning that, to be myself. I can't change. Heaps of times I tried to change for the kids ... but you just can't". Study at university can obscure the boundaries between what students want for themselves and what they think other people (family, friends and teachers) want from them. There is even a division between the linguistic shifters in July's words above where she oscillates between "I" and "you", between a self and another, so that she becomes objectified in her own speech (see Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Nevertheless, the students in this study attempt to recognise some sense of self as they constantly negotiate between these two

sets of demands, and they can do this through speaking Aboriginal English in the classroom.

■ Self-recognition and well-being

Recent research in Aboriginal education has often been directed towards deciphering how to fit Aboriginal students into a curriculum, that is, into Western cognitive-behavioural models, in order to improve their results in numeracy and literacy, and therefore to bring Aboriginal students up to the standard of non-Aboriginal students in basic skills tests (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 1999, 2002; Education Queensland, 1999). However, the Indigenous students of this research are trying to recognise how they can learn outside transmission-based education. Furthermore, Harris (1990, p. 137) observed long ago that Aboriginal parents want their children to learn the three R's and to grow up Aboriginal. It is within this context that McConaghy (2000) is searching for other ways of conceptualising Indigenous education outside the discourse of cultural mismatch. I found that while these nine students come to university because they want qualifications, the thing that really makes the difference, and encourages them to stay, is something outside this credentialising process. They are motivated by the opportunity to learn outside the transmission of facts and skills and one of the ways in which they can do this is through the inclusion of Aboriginal English in the curriculum. Speaking Aboriginal English helps these students to recognise themselves outside the disciplinary procedures of the classroom as the following conversation between them reveals:

Trudy: I speak differently [at university]. I'm more relaxed [at home]. I crack more jokes. I'm not very serious when I speak to my family.

Willy: The only time I break loose is when there's a bit of humour going on and I let rip a bit.

Kiara: I use Aboriginal English when I'm being stupid, when you're laughing and joking; socially more than seriously. [Aboriginal English] does relax people, you're not so serious, you get along better when you're not like that. [At uni] you've got to act straight.

Kiara: With them mob, you talk stupid. Half English or whatever you call it ... Because I know I'm being interviewed and that I won't talk like that [Aboriginal English]. Because it's not ... but if I'm with my family, I'll talk like that. If you didn't talk like that they would think you're trying to act White or something. I talk like this in a tutorial and I talk like this to other people too. It depends on who it is.

Kiara: I think it [formality] will grow on you. More straighter. Sometimes, now with my friends, I won't muck around. It won't come naturally. I have to get with it. I think, shit, I'm just sitting here. Everyone else is enjoying themselves.

Aboriginal English allows these students to escape the discipline of the classroom, while providing them with a sense of well-being where they are able to relax and to be less formal. Well-being for these students is about the opportunity to speak and to recognise themselves in the discourses of the university, and one of the ways in which this can be achieved is through speaking Aboriginal English. I suggested above that one of the difficulties for these students is a sense of historical objectification experienced both inside and outside the classroom. But speaking in their home language provides these students with the opportunity to manage how they position themselves, and how they are positioned by others in the discourses of the classroom. They are positioned as subjects in Aboriginal English rather than as objects of Standard Australian English. For example, Kiara suggests above that this positioning of self is more difficult to achieve when speaking in SAE, but Aboriginal English helps her to relax and to engage in a humour which would not be produced otherwise. In the context of research conducted with Wiradjuri students in New South Wales, Simpson et al. (1999) explain how Aboriginal English can help students to feel comfortable with the teacher.

It has been suggested that when only SAE is spoken in the classroom, it not only alienates Aboriginal students from themselves and their peers, it also prohibits them from experiencing the joy that sometimes goes hand-in-hand with learning and teaching. The use of the student's home language encourages him or her to interact with others, and to negotiate and produce a relation to the teacher outside a position of authority. It also takes away some of the threat that schooling poses to the way in which many students want to see themselves (Malcolm et al., 2003, p. 106), as opposed to how the teacher or the schools want to view the student; for example, as Aboriginal students who have achieved comparatively high scores in literacy and numeracy. There is constant tension between what the Indigenous students themselves want from education and what others want for them, and Aboriginal English is usually perceived as peripheral to the important work of teaching maths and SAE. But my interpretation of this research data suggests that incorporating Aboriginal English in the classroom can help these students to learn both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge and skills. Furthermore, training preservice teachers and teachers in schools to recognise how Aboriginal English can be used across the curriculum would demonstrate to all students that the dialect is authorised by the teacher and the school, and therefore occupies a legitimate and well-founded place in the curriculum (see Craven et al., in press).

■ Education policies

Eades stated in 1995 (p. 43) that the “education system still has a long way to go in recognising the home language of Aboriginal children, and in addressing the particular needs of Aboriginal speakers of English”. This is still the case in 2004 although the Department of Education in Western Australia is an exception (see Berry & Hudson, 1997; Cahill, 1999; Konigsberg & Collard, 2002). While education policies from the New South Wales Department of School Education (1996) and Education Queensland (2000) state that teachers need to be aware of Aboriginal English (compare this with Victorian Department of Education, Employment and Training, 2001), their syllabi do little to show teachers how it can be incorporated in the classroom nor how it might assist Aboriginal students to learn (see New South Wales Board of Studies, 2004; Education Queensland 1999, 2000). The available literature focuses on an analysis of the grammatical and semantic structures of Aboriginal English (for example, Eades, 1995; Malcolm et al., 1999), but there is limited discussion of what the recognition of Aboriginal English can actually do for the well-being of its speakers in the classroom. I have attempted to address the performative nature of Aboriginal English in this paper. But what can the non-Indigenous teacher do to incorporate Aboriginal English in the curriculum?

■ What role can Aboriginal English play in producing a healthy classroom?

There are many ways in which Aboriginal English can be incorporated in the classroom and some suggestions are offered below:

- News telling. For an excellent exposition of this, see Malcolm et al. (2003, pp. 94-96) and Simpson et al. (1999). This is an interesting point of discussion for preservice teachers because it can suggest that classrooms need two sets of rules for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in activities like news telling.
- Encourage Aboriginal students to talk about family and community through recalls, oral and written narratives, rather than “correct” them against the standard (SAE). Students could also discuss: How is Standard Australian English a *standard*? What does this mean for relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?
- Identify learning contexts where Aboriginal students are able to speak Aboriginal English. Students should know when they can speak and write in Aboriginal English and when they can speak in SAE. The two contexts need to be clearly defined for Aboriginal students so that they do not mix the two (see Malcolm et al., 1999, 2003).
- Teach about the grammar of both Aboriginal English and SAE in order to compare the differences (see

Berry & Hudson, 1997; Cahill, 1999; Farrell, 1997). Analysing the grammatical features of Aboriginal English and comparing these to SAE could help to disabuse both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and teachers of the notion that there is no real difference between the two dialects or that one is inferior to the other (Eades, 1995; Malcolm et al., 2003). Students and teachers could also discuss the relations of power associated with the general reluctance to recognise Aboriginal English inside and outside the classroom (Konigsberg & Collard, 2002). Teachers could be asking students, and themselves: How does a lack of recognition of Aboriginal English perpetuate historical relations of power in Australia? Students could learn that the status of a language comes from the way we think and talk about it, rather than from any inherent quality. Analysing and comparing the grammatical features of both dialects will assist students and teachers to identify the linguistic interference from the student’s first dialect on speaking, reading and writing in Standard Australian English.

- Recognise and support Aboriginal students when they speak Aboriginal English on excursions, rather than “correct” them against SAE. How the teacher goes about supporting the place and prestige of Aboriginal English in the classroom will be crucial to how it comes to be seen in the eyes of the students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Cummins (1986) pointed out long ago that teachers from the majority culture need to be seen by the students as advocates of the minority language.
- Employ other ways of seeking information from students apart from asking questions (see Malcolm et al., 2003).

■ Conclusion

The place of Aboriginal English in the classroom needs to be addressed in the early stages of primary school so that non-Indigenous students as well as Aboriginal students learn that Aboriginal English is valued by the teacher and the school, and that it is recognised as a separate dialect from SAE. We often hear Aboriginal English being referred to as “not proper English” and if this perception is to change, the teacher needs to know what the grammatical and semantic differences are so that these can be taught to students. Although this campaign started in the early 1990s, it has still not been adopted by departments of education or by schools and universities (Daly, 2004). Although teaching is now largely dedicated to improving the results in numeracy and literacy for Indigenous students, nothing much will change for these students until they are able to speak and recognise themselves in the discourses of the classroom, including Aboriginal English. This in itself depends on universities training their preservice teachers to recognise the

centrality and status of Aboriginal English to learning and teaching, and this in turn requires universities to recognise the importance of Aboriginal English in their own curricula.

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