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DISTANCE EDUCATION *and the* ISSUE of EQUITY ONLINE: EXPLORING *the* PERSPECTIVES of RURAL ABORIGINAL STUDENTS

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■ Abstract

This paper explores Aboriginal perspectives of tertiary education "online" from rural and remote community locations in New South Wales. It does so within a frame of enquiry as to how neo-liberal educational policy reforms are impacting on equity issues in distance education "online". Accounts from Aboriginal university students in health point to a range of tensions between changes brought about by the reform in relation to student subjectivity and university governance, and culturally preferred ways of learning for many Aboriginal people. The paper offers suggestions for how these forms of educational governance can be reconciled with educational support needs of remote Aboriginal learners.

■ Introduction: Changing understandings of learning

Amidst the recent shift of much of tertiary education to distance education "online" (Marginson, 1999), strong arguments have been mounted for reinstating education as a social activity every bit as much as an individual learning endeavour. Kilpatrick and Bound (2003, p. 9) remind us that learning is "a socially situated activity, where the relationship between what the individual learns and the situation and context in which knowledge is acquired and used, shape individual and collective understanding and practice". Flexible online delivery of education has introduced opportunities for an unprecedented expansion of educational access for people living outside the metropolitan location of most institutions of higher education (Kilpatrick & Bound, 2003; McGivney, 2002). However, this increased access has introduced new challenges into the pedagogical practice of educating, if, as Kilpatrick and Bound argue, the medium of learning directly impacts on quality of acquisition of knowledge.

Research has gone some way towards making online learning more interactive and hence a source of social support (see Bonk & Cummings, 1998; Bonk & Dennen, 1999; Lake, 1999). However, educational governance in Australia (similarly to educational systems in other Western countries (see Shore & Wright, 1999; Spencer, 2001; Tikly, 2003)) seems to be steering further away from an interest in socially contextualised learning, to a form of learning that individualises and isolates the learner (Edwards, 2002). As a case in point, this paper introduces recent research findings with Aboriginal distance education students (Gibb, 2003), in order to describe growing tensions between preferred Indigenous learning practices and current online distance educational processes. The concern expressed in this discussion is that the cultural tensions created by the political pressures shaping online learning modality may eclipse the pragmatic intentions of universal access to education for Aboriginal students. Our research suggests that these findings also apply to rural non-Aboriginal students (see Gibb, Hamilton & Haley, 2004). The following discussion explores the wider political

context of educational reform in which the shift to flexible or online distance education is taking place. What lies beyond the appearance of a simple pragmatic expansion of educational opportunity is an emerging neo-liberal rationality of educational governance, which seeks to reshape student subjectivity as well as governance of the university sector in Australia (see Edwards, 2002; Tikly, 2003).

■ Neo-liberal strategies of educational governance

Neo-liberal governmentality has reformed educational discursive practice in two major ways. First, students are increasingly required to become self-entrepreneurial, taking individual responsibility for their own life-long learning, being flexible in adapting to various forms of delivery, and managing their own adaptation to the technologies of learning delivery (Edwards, 2002; Fairclough, 1992). Second, universities are governed by organisational policy that requires faculties to be malleable, more entrepreneurial and operate in accordance with market rationality, rather than their traditional disciplinary focus (Blackmore & Sachs, 2003; House, 2003). These changes are occurring alongside a changing labour market (Kivinen & Rinne, 1998) across the Western world. A work force is emerging that is conditioned to short-term contract work and casualisation of jobs, with periods of unemployment between positions of employment. These patterns of employment normalise the self-expectation of workers, to retrain or continually upgrade skills and qualifications – ensuring one's labour is competitive (Pringle & Mallan, 2003; Thite, 2001).

The trend towards distance education – vocationally-directed knowledge being modularised and packaged for flexible delivery – complements and often facilitates this trend towards life-long learning, especially for learners who are geographically remote. The context of online learning fits the ethos of individuals being responsible for their own learning (see also Kilpatrick & Bound, 2003). As Edwards (2002) describes, a stance towards life-long learning is characterised more by individuals undertaking study in isolation, usually by flexible delivery and less with face-to-face classroom style learning. Edwards (2002, p. 359) names these learners as “deterritorialised, individualised and flexible consumers of learning opportunities”. The notion of endless learning is highlighted by this description. The need for being self-responsible and self-motivated becomes more immediate as a learner under these conditions. Some aspects of this new ethos fit well with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of learning (Whap, 2001). Self-responsibility for acquiring knowledge and life-long learning are familiar ways of gaining cultural knowledge through instruction and one's lived experience. What is unfamiliar to

most learners is the social decontextualisation and technologisation of learning.

In requiring the university to manage a particularising education which disciplines students towards being self-enterprising, neo-liberal educational policy has mobilised technologies of learning instruction, ensuring the cultural transformation of its citizenry towards engaging a market rationality (Edwards, 2002; Rose, 1999). Distance, online or “e (electronic) learners” at university are expected to be highly self-resourced. They are required to be computer literate even to the point of enrolling online. They are expected to know how to navigate their way around the virtual campus online and they must know how to manage administrative processes online that are associated with academic progression throughout their course. Rural students studying as isolated learners whom we surveyed (Gibb, Hamilton & Haley, 2004), did not have these skills but had expected to acquire computer literacy as needed during their time of study, as part of the course. Logically, university study will constitute a successful, enjoyable experience, to the degree students are technically resourced at enrolment.

Within the isolated medium of online learning, rural Aboriginal students are doubly isolated. As well as needing to study on their own, they are culturally isolated from the flexible learning scene. Within the organisational culture of tertiary education, mainstream learners (White, generally middle class Australians) begin their tertiary studies equipped with “a system of shared values defining what is important, and norms defining appropriate attitudes and behaviours” (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996, cited in Kilpatrick & Bound, 2003, p.15). Rural Aboriginal students do not commence their studies with a cultural orientation that equips them to intuitively understand the discursive practices of the university. However, they report how they come with a preparedness to gain this understanding, through interacting with academic staff, during their time as students of the university.

Alongside the technologies of cultural transformation shaping learners to being highly resourced individuals, information technologies are expanding exponentially, providing a confusing range of telecommunications software for isolated learners to choose from to support multimode knowledge dissemination. Educational institutions are expected to provide such an expanded range of softwares in the anticipation that its “customers” (the students) will be technologically savvy and discerning, hence will be requiring a range of sophisticated technological services to choose from (Tikly, 2003).

Responsibility for achieving entrepreneurial outcomes in universities lies with peripheral sites such as campuses and faculties. Notably, there is little organisational input from the central university administration at the local level to manage discrete enterprise activity. Tikly (2003, p. 164) refers to

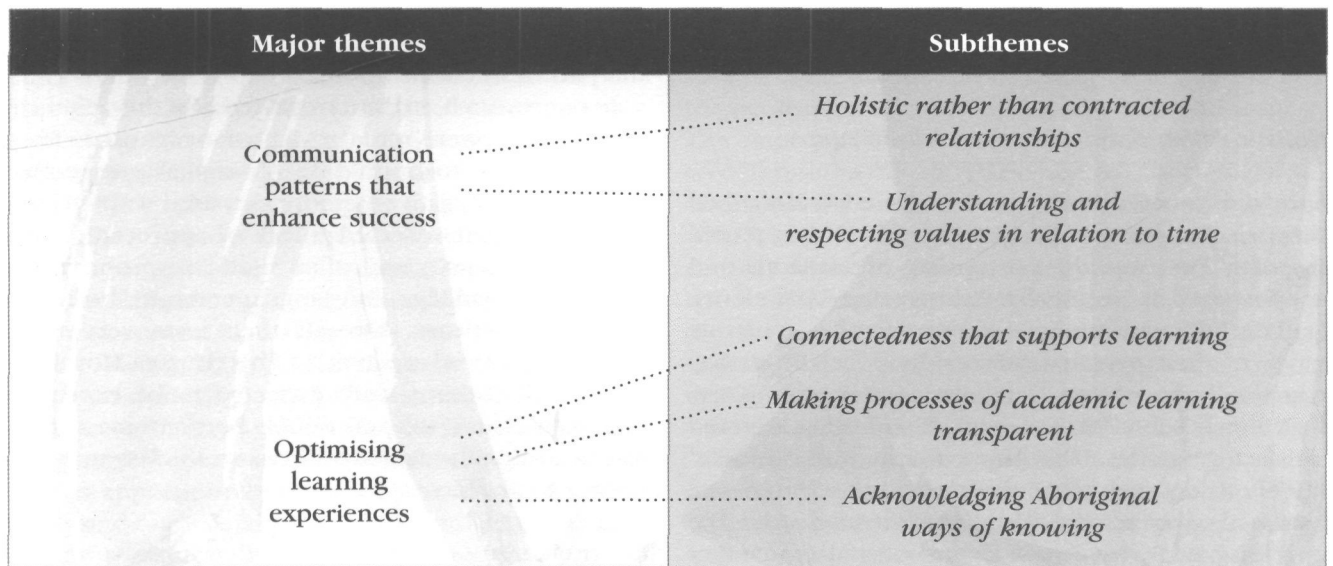


Figure 1. Major themes and subthemes from Aboriginal student interviews.

strategies of government for regulating performance in the peripheral units, as “technologies of performance”. These take the form of devolution of budgets to local units along with performance indicators, performance-based funding and benchmarking for purposes of comparison, all aimed at self-regulation. For example, the Australian government’s policy on increasing higher educational access is being enacted through performance-based funding (Department of Science, Education and Training, 2004). This account of local governance in distance education is important to the discussion later in this paper on the nature of support to isolated Aboriginal learners.

Aboriginal learners in the neo-liberal educational environment

The following discussion draws on results from a study that involved interviewing remote Aboriginal students studying online. The research results have been reported more fully elsewhere (Gibb, 2003). This current discussion takes the form of a dialogue with relevant literature, in order to further explore the range of experiences reflected in the students’ accounts. Each student seemed to express frustration, some confusion and certainly concern about their own study success. The question directing this further exploration is whether these negative experiences reflect less on the individual’s own academic ability and more on tensions between preferred learning practices and political and pragmatic forces reshaping educational delivery.

Method

Following ethical clearance for the study (ethics committees included those of the university, the

mainstream health service, as well as the New South Wales Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council), eight mature age Aboriginal women (all mothers) voluntarily took part in unstructured interviews. Most were currently undertaking degrees in nursing or public health and a few had recently graduated. Interviews were conducted at a place of their choice – either in their home, at work, or on campus during residential school. Interviews prompted the women to talk about their experience of studying by distance education, in particular, experiences of what they found helped them and what was not so helpful. During the interview, the interviewer would sometimes ask a question that sought more detail on a particular issue, or to encourage them to elaborate. Most participants agreed to have their transcripts returned to them for validation, which included the opportunity to change or delete anything they chose to.

Analysis and discussion

In the interviews students indicated that they welcomed the concept of being an independent learner and saw its logical consistency with the learning path Aboriginal people generally consider they are on. They also contributed ideas on how particular university academics communicate with learners from Aboriginal communities, as well as how university educational delivery can differentially enhance or impede the success of Aboriginal people wishing to study by distance. A thematic tree with two levels was generated and is presented in Figure 1.

These themes are elaborated and discussed in relation to relevant literature, in the following section of the discussion.

 Major theme 1: Communication patterns that enhance success
Holistic rather than contracted relationships

Aboriginal women in this student interview described themselves as being in positions of exclusion in several respects. First was the positioning of academic and support staff as personally disinterested in students. Staff dealings with students were confined to a narrow range of their personal information – whether they complied with university regulations for attendance, their timely submission of work, their having achieved satisfactory grades. This is consistent with Giddens' (1990) observation of the contracted and instrumental nature of organisational relations in late modernity. The only knowledge that can be accommodated about other people is that required to get the immediate job done.

Being connected was central to the students' anticipation of the relationship they would have with staff. Clearly staff anticipated the characteristics of the relationship differently. Wanting to know where you are from in Aboriginal culture represents a priority on gaining social connectedness and to be connected requires personal knowing – knowing some level of detail about the person's life situation. This also aligns with the holistic outlook that the Aboriginal students preferred to adopt in approaching learning and knowledge. Learning in this perspective is a system that takes account of other life commitments and connections – the fuller life narrative.

Through ignorance of the alternative way of approaching learning and gathering knowledge, the lecturers appeared to have displayed a form of defensiveness that manifested as "rank pulling". Rank pulling behaviour may be unfamiliar to Aboriginal students because their response was to internalise it as their own stupidity or ignorance. At times, however, seeing the defensive behaviour for what it was, they often adopted a position of contempt towards staff members who were unable to engage the apparent tension as an opportunity for exploration and mutual learning. Similar findings were reported by Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002) in interviews with Aboriginal university students. Power relations, for example, were different and unfamiliar. The lecturer was in charge and there was no room for negotiation. This led students to feel a lack of confidence about how to behave and also to experience a sense of shame. Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002) further observed that Aboriginal students value cultural experience of university as an extension of their own knowledge and perhaps an expansion of cultural identity, but not at the cost of their own cultural identity as Aboriginal. It was clear to them that their own preferred or culturally familiar learning style was different from mainstream students and that lecturers did not understand or cater for

students from other linguistic or cultural backgrounds. They experienced a form of isolation, of being "other" and part of a minority group.

In our research, students reported how they felt their contributions were often trivialised or ignored. They felt compelled to uphold an Aboriginal perspective in the face of negative stereotypes raised within class. Lecture content reflected a lack of appreciation for Aboriginal diversity and often used inappropriate or incorrect knowledge and language about Aboriginal people or culture. Overall there was very little Aboriginal-related content in the course. However, Aboriginal students were expected to be expert in Aboriginal issues; this was doubly burdensome as they had to deal with incidents of racism in class that was undetected by lecturers.

Understanding and respecting values in relation to use of time

A very clear example was the lack of understanding or respect for Aboriginal values around time. Understanding of time marks one of the most pronounced differences between mainstream educators (and other non-Aboriginal students) and Aboriginal students. The following two quotations taken from the work of Aboriginal academics are included to orientate non-Aboriginal readers to some of those differences:

The Aboriginal world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in the "dreaming" ... [this world] is not constrained by time or space ... ceremonies not only re-enact the activities of ancient heroes but also recreate them. English words are inadequate to describe this historic and contemporary world (Hughes & More, 1997, pp. 8-9).

If it was as I argue, that seasons played an important part in traditional time and that patterns of movement in the country were regulated mostly by seasonal changes, then the events such as the cultural practices which were carried out at that time were stopped by the act of invasion (Yalmambirra, 2000, p. 134).

Yalmambirra (2000) compares white time as a period during which an action exists, with Wiradjuri meaning of time as a space in which an event happens. The significance of time here is the relatedness of an event to other significant events – seasons, or the stage of a person's maturity, for example. In the writing of Hughes and More (1997) time gives a shape or space to historic events, events that through being re-enacted in ceremony can recreate the world as we have it now.

This difference in meaning of time between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies can cause tension in relation to priorities and values organised in

and around time. For university staff the expectation is that timelines – deadlines – are respected beyond any other commitment of time. In discussing time in a non-Aboriginal mindset, Willis (2000) refers to time as a source of greatest anxiety and stress in modern Western society. Westerners consider time as a commodity to use that is ever in short supply and always running out. To not run out of time is considered a form of modern day discipline. In organisational settings she sees the ubiquitous setting of deadlines as “a form of social control and always an exercise in power” (Willis, 2000, p. 128). In the academic setting control is exerted through grading assessment work down, or even pronouncing it as having failed, if the deadline is not met. Students in this study described how their time is apportioned first to community – extended family and one’s children – then to individual pursuits such as study. Fulfilling one’s paramount duties and obligations within one’s cultural life places one in a position of exclusion by an unsympathetic or inflexible academic system that disqualifies personal life issues from legitimately competing with academic schedules.

While conformity to deadlines was mentioned by all students as a challenge, ironically the greatest source of tension reported in relation to time was asynchronous communication (for example, email communication). The time lapse – or wastage – added an extra time burden to their struggle to meet regulated timelines for assignments while trying to balance other family commitments, which for them required highest priority. Email communication added a time delay of up to several days during the assignment period, while students waited for responses to their own emails from staff, usually in relation to completing the assignment. Furthermore, from the university’s perspective, asynchronous communication made redundant the face-to-face or “real time” interactions that are considered to be integral to personal connectedness.

■ Major theme 2: Optimising learning experiences

Connectedness was considered central to reassurance, motivation, orientation and facilitation of learning. The idea of connectedness was central to optimising learning experience.

Connectedness that supports learning

Connection was implied in much of the students’ discussion about how distance learning could be improved. Two notions of connectedness are familiar within Aboriginal learning discourses. The first is that connectedness is enhanced when learning occurs in places of relevance to identity and self-knowing: “Indigenous knowledge is about being connected to ... a specific place ... this special place ... holds all knowledge necessary for daily interaction and is not taught in a classroom setting but rather is ‘passed

on’ in everyday situations” (Whap, 2001, p. 22). A second aspect of connectedness is that the learning is socially contextualised in an authentic and meaningful teacher-learner relationship based on mutual respect. The importance of learning for Aboriginal students is determined by its relevancy to Aboriginal life: Aboriginal people locate learning within meanings of what it is to be Aboriginal in the context of a particular country or land. This meaning comprises spiritual issues of Aboriginality – promoting the real, the whole, the here-and-now-relevant life issues. Where their domain is neglected, or where the teacher/lecturer is not relating in a personally authentic way, he or she will not be respected (Hughes & More, 1997, p. 12).

The students further described connectedness in learning as a friendly environment where questions can be asked and admissions made to not understanding, without students being left feeling stupid. This environment of trust is created through behaviours by staff towards students that unambiguously signal respectful empathy – a readiness to listen and to engage in problem-solving activities with them (see also Russell, 1999). It is especially signalled when a staff member proactively phones when something could be wrong. It takes the intentional “tuning in” to students and anticipating when they may be “stuck” with their study.

These students advocated the formation of a virtual space to gain connectedness, some arrangement whereby a group could meet in “real time”. Real time here means actual direct interaction as against emails or internet forums – recalling the traditional tutorial group – to help these students achieve the connectedness they would have preferred with their lecturer (see also Russell, 1999). A teletutorial is likely to be effective, where students are engaged in real time interaction, by telephone linkup. They felt that this could be supplemented by formal group work or informal gatherings of these same small groups, face-to-face during residential schools.

These kinds of suggestions are also often made by non-Aboriginal students (Gibb, Hamilton & Haley, 2004). However, connectedness as described above lies at the root of Aboriginal pedagogy. Here understanding one’s relatedness rather than one’s individuality or separateness is the goal of learning, orientating the student to his or her own spiritual place and worth. Whap (2001, p. 23) explains that Indigenous knowledge “entails the concept that people ‘belong’ and are part of the land, sea and sky; these spheres are not set apart, but rather are kept in balance and in tune” and Hughes and More (1997, p. 9) further assert:

Aboriginal epistemology is quite different to white Australia. It is based upon the spiritual nature of the universe. The value of things lies in their quality and relatedness. In a world made up of objects related through their spiritual

essences, rather than their physical properties ... Aboriginal society makes an individual's sense of worth depend upon where he or she can fit in it – cooperation rather than competition is valued and fostered.

On this pedagogical basis several features of isolated, online learning stand out as incongruous with students' preferred learning style. First, Aboriginal people do not learn well in a classroom or library situation, at a desk. Second, they do not learn abstract, decontextualised principles easily unless it is supplemented with experiential learning. Aboriginal people are not familiar with learning in simulated classroom settings on the basis of abstract principles, "Most learning is achieved through real-life performance rather than through practice in contrived settings" (Hughes & More, 1997, p. 12).

Isolationist delivery systems may compromise Aboriginal pedagogic objectives, which are to expand the learner's knowledge base of Western society while strengthening his or her identity within Aboriginal society. Further,

The expansion of awareness through new knowledge needs to provide synchronously, an opportunity to strengthen one's Aboriginal identity. This becomes a source for grounding the Aboriginal learner with a sense of inner strength and security wherein the new knowledge better prepares the person for dealing with the Western world. To achieve this the new educational material needs to acknowledge and not contradict what it means to be Aboriginal (Harris, 1990, cited in Hughes & More, 1997, p. 14).

Accounts of students' study experience provide a clearer account of what does and does not work within the online environment. These are summarised under the subtheme of making processes of academic learning transparent.

Making processes of academic learning transparent

Students described how they entered university study with a profound lack of confidence and study skill. This lack of confidence was reflected in the requests they would make for very concise feedback as well as seeking the availability of someone who was available during the initial stages, to consult one-on-one, who would provide detailed feedback and help problem solve around learning. It was then spelt out in descriptions of some very inspiring encounters with educators who were able to impart skills and techniques for organising, connecting and retaining ideas. "Little exercises" were the terms used, indicating that students want very practical process skills to make acquisition of academic knowledge a practical

and accessible endeavour. The women in our study emphasised how techniques for "learning how to learn" were unavailable to them at enrolment. Most of them identified as a major problem the kind of language they encountered in the academic learning environment. As a result they found the disciplinary language obscure and administrative processes mystifying. Sequencing the tasks of learning and organising their time was also affected. According to Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002) literacy is a problem because most Aboriginal people are learning through a second dialect, if not a second language. Aboriginal students refer to academic English as a different language. Academic English is, according to Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002), dominated by the use of the "grapholect" – a form of English reflecting most strongly the use of written text. According to Aboriginal students in their study, this language was notably full of "big" words and "longwindedness". It was never "straight to the point". As a result of difficulty in understanding this language, Malcolm and Rochecouste (2002) noted major problems Aboriginal students were having in handling discipline specific registers (this is most likely to manifest in poor written exam performance and essay composition) comprehending lecture content at first hearing, interpreting assignment questions and having their own writing assignments interpreted incorrectly. As they argue, all this indicates why Aboriginal students may do poorly. However, the form of English required for successful tertiary study is not explicitly taught or tutored. It is a point of oversight to most academics that this language form has evolved from an academic tradition originally taught in Latin or Greek. It is very different to casual spoken English.

Hughes and More (1997) have identified principles of a preferred Aboriginal cultural orientation to learning. While they caution that there is wide variation in any group due to individual differences in preferred learning style, cultural orientation gives shape to recurrent or prevalent learning styles. In principle, a learning style that is global, imaginal, concrete/contextual with a mixture of both reflective and trial-and-error learning, is common amongst Aboriginal students (see also Hooley, 2000). It is a cooperative rather than competitive; knowledge being pursued is based on relevance to the group, while learning as a group for the benefit of the group is more important than learning as an individual endeavour (Hughes & More, 1997).

Acknowledging Aboriginal ways of knowing

Students requested that Aboriginal ways of knowing and acquiring knowledge be acknowledged and included as a normative part of classroom dialogue – learning that cuts both ways. When the cultural relativity of knowledge in any particular discipline becomes more widely understood, Aboriginal viewpoints would be

positioned within the field of discourse, not external to it. Aboriginal students would potentially experience less humiliation at the response of academics when they take a non-Western position in class discussion. In the discipline of health, in particular, extending cultural awareness through classroom discussion to acknowledging different perspectives, is likely to facilitate the opening up of mainstream health discourses to accepting alternate definitions of health. Students would have an enhanced understanding of what being healthy entails, within a local Aboriginal cultural context. This dialogue would provide insight into optimum ways that health professionals can support health in that community. It is this learning through dialogue that Yalmambirra is advocating in his discussion of negotiated learning. Yalmambirra (2003) describes how curriculum needs to be dynamic, having had the participation of Indigenous people in its development, whenever Aboriginal issues are likely to be involved. Hooley (2000) pursues a similar argument in advocating "two-way learning"; such a system of teaching is based on learning through enquiry, which allows lecturers not merely to transmit knowledge but to engage students in transforming knowledge on the basis of contestation and fresh insight.

All topics in health are potentially pertinent to Aboriginal community concerns. Both writers argue for teaching in a negotiated style, with Aboriginal participation, continually contributing their perspectives. Without this – and students often described Western academics who set themselves up as experts and resisted student input – the result is inevitable error and offense: "The danger lies in the misinformation that is passed to students about Indigenous people and/or issues and the perpetuation of that misinformation through the broader community" (Yalmambirra, 2003, p.1). The dangers Yalmambirra (2003) refers to are ethical ones in that misinterpretation and misunderstanding are perpetuated from the classroom, through the exclusion of opportunities for other students to gain deeper understandings from the contribution of Aboriginal student perspectives. Aboriginal people bear the brunt of ineptness within educational institutions and consequently in poor health service delivery. There is an ethical injunction, he argues, for teachers to engage culturally appropriate methods wherever possible to maximise educational benefits to all students collectively.

■ Discussion

The issues these Aboriginal students raised signal a need for greater involvement of the university in providing support to supplement the conventional online modality. Online distance education does contribute the time flexibility students require to arrange personal or family priorities around study.

However, the students' other concerns – greater personal connectedness with teaching staff and other learners, greater relevancy of course content to concerns of Aboriginal communities' health needs, as well as academic learning skills and more negotiated learning through classroom dialogue – cannot be accommodated through traditional methods of distance education. At the "micro" support level within the local faculty, new technologies and uses of online learning technologies are being developed that could be harnessed creatively to achieving greater social contextualisation of learning. Once learning online has achieved social contextualisation (see Bonk & Cummings, 1998; Bonk & Dennen, 1999) the support issues expounded here can begin to be addressed for Aboriginal, as well as other isolated students. A "macro" level of support needs to be added that embeds learning within local community networks that can provide supplementary supports, both social and technical/academic (Kilpatrick & Bound, 2003).

An alternative approach to thinking about creating local supports for distance education students such as those in our study is introduced through the "actor-network" concept of Nespore (1994, cited in Edwards, 2002, p. 360). Actor-network theory considers learning as being interconnected with subjectivity; that is, the growth of identity as a function of acquiring knowledge. Within this theoretical approach learning is considered to be as much about socialisation as it is about individuals acquiring knowledge. Learning then is a socially embedded phenomenon where the physical/environmental and human/relational aspects are complexly intertwined. Applying the actor-network principle to distance education, the learning environment can be made up of whatever local and distant inputs of advice and worldview the student wishes to include. By contrast, the traditional distance learning environment has been presented to learners as exclusively comprising their learning package and the tutor with whom they communicate generally by email or forums. Actor-network theory extends the image of the entrepreneurial learner who mobilises his or her own advice network. The autonomy network theory gives the student responsibility to choose what the major influences are over his or her learning experience. This might appeal to Aboriginal students for two reasons: First, students are able to extend and modify the perspective of the curriculum with knowledge from sources of their own choice; and second, their learning may be more locally contextualised and hence relevant to the requirements of their own local community.

Edwards (2002) describes how actor-networking works in business schools where students are required to build their own informal networks with various companies in the "real world". Learning becomes even more diversified when the knowledge-building network impacting on their formal education includes their own

workplace environment. This opportunity enhances learning practice even more by providing exposure to community bodies and the consumer market first hand. The principles of actor-network theory for rural nursing students has been tried informally in some of our research and has demonstrated the benefit of local cross-sector partnerships between university and rural health facilities, in enriching students' learning experience. A major source of networking has involved developments in workplace learning, in which rural nursing students – as local employees – are mentored by senior staff through their course (Gibb, Anderson & Forsyth, 2004; Gibb, Forsyth & Anderson, in press). Applying these principles to Aboriginal students in our study, a loose knowledge-building network could comprise the Aboriginal community, the local health facility, regional council, TAFE and adult learning colleges, the mainstream neighbouring community and the university. Such networking would extend the possibilities for providing an enriched and content-relevant learning experience to students, beyond what a university alone can offer (Edwards, 2002) and would be available in their own region.

■ Conclusion

The idea of a learning network made up of a diversity of educational inputs, mobilises students in actively choosing the educational influences over their learning. Moreover, these can come from within their community. Financial support is required to match and underwrite the self-enterprising initiatives of the students in making choices about their own educational resources. Strategic government support would involve funding the formal negotiations in formation and maintenance of partner networks of local industry and community, which builds capacity to educate local community members in collaboration with the university. However, this kind of capacity-building would be derailed by government commitment that was exclusively to short-term funding; as a strategy intended to foster "self-determination" it would merely predict a short lifespan of the network. Despondency spawned by financial starvation of successful projects in reality results in erosion of a community's collective faith in self-determination. This is especially the case for small communities with little "start up" wealth and where all effort in developing and maintaining initiatives is from voluntary and already overstretched resources (Fairclough, 1992). On the other hand where the government investment is based on some quarantined continuous funding, the discourse shifts from local self-responsibility to shared responsibility. This represents more direct government investment of intellectual resources as well as capital. While this does not conform to the neo-liberal ideal of government at a distance, it does signal government interest and commitment to Aboriginal community capacity-building and access to higher education.

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