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BOTH-WAYS: LEARNING *from* YESTERDAY, CELEBRATING TODAY, STRENGTHENING TOMORROW

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■ Abstract

This paper will discuss “both-ways” as the philosophy which underpins course programs and operations at Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, the only tertiary institution in Australia that caters exclusively to Indigenous students. This paper draws on recent research undertaken by the author focusing on the following questions: What is both-ways philosophy? How is it being implemented as a teaching methodology at an Indigenous tertiary institution? What innovative practices, processes and activities can be celebrated as exemplary teaching practice? The notion of both-ways will be explored to ascertain how it is being translated into an effective teaching methodology that incorporates and embraces Indigenous knowledge into course curriculum, planning, delivery and evaluation.

■ Introduction

Both-ways philosophy is a term that has long been used in Indigenous education contexts both in Australia and overseas. There are many different interpretations and meanings associated with this term, depending on the social, cultural, and educational context. I would like to draw on recent research undertaken by myself and Bat, a work colleague at Batchelor Institute. This research looked at the philosophy of both-ways education and how this philosophy is implemented into practice in the course programs at Batchelor Institute. An historical journey of both-ways in the context of Northern Territory Indigenous tertiary education will also be presented (Ober & Bat, 2008, pp. 64-86; Ober & Bat, 2007, pp. 56-79).

At Batchelor Institute both-ways is defined in the following:

Both-ways is a philosophy of education that brings together Indigenous Australian traditions of knowledge and Western academic disciplinary positions and cultural contexts, and embraces values of respect, tolerance and diversity (Batchelor Institute, 2007, p. 4).

The Batchelor Institute vision statement states:

Batchelor Institute is a site of national significance in Indigenous Education – strengthening identity, achieving successes and transforming lives (Batchelor Institute, 2007, p. 4).

■ What do educators say about both-ways?

Over the years people involved in Indigenous education have had their own views and opinions on the notion of both-ways teaching and learning. The following four statements highlight the wide and varied perspectives that show the complexity and diversity of both-ways through the eyes of the practitioner and students:

In many ways, giving a definition is itself anomalous, as “both-ways” is a continuous question rather than a definitive answer. And yet it is this dilemma that is the dynamic of

the College, that continually throws up the questions that have to be faced and answered, that challenge all preconceptions about teaching styles, content and philosophy (Ober & Bat, 2007, p. 69).

“Both-ways” informs the work that we do and is a state of mind as much as it is a philosophy of education. It’s also much more than just an education philosophy, because it frames all the administrative and support work as well. Who we are is as important as what we know in “both-ways”. Relationships underpin all learning and strengthening identity is an integral aim of the Institute (Ober & Bat, 2007, p. 70).

Rob McCormack states that:

Both-ways is a term that can only be defined in terms of what is happening around, what has happened before, what is possible, and who is available to act or help. Both-ways is an ethical term: wise people have more insight into it; practical people have more insight into it; and finally as an Indigenous term, Indigenous people have more insight into it (McCormack, 2003, p. 2).

Dana Ober, an Indigenous linguist, argues that:

This concept of both-ways is an injunction to redress the imbalance and find a new balance that enables students to appropriate white knowledge whilst keeping strong in “Indigenous mind” and being careful not to drift unwittingly or unthinkingly into “white mind” (quoted in McCormack, 2003, p. 3).

As you can see both-ways is viewed differently depending on people’s own social, cultural and educational positioning. This is but a few of the many voices describing the different facets of both-ways through their own knowledge base and experiences. These voices create a rich and colourful tapestry of both-ways drawing on and weaving the threads of experience, conceptual understandings and knowledge.

From this metaphor, we could say that both-ways is a continual question. It informs our work, it is more than a philosophy, it is a state of mind. Both-ways is about relationships, ethics, justice and really being true to oneself.

■ Historical journey

To talk about the philosophy of both-ways at Batchelor Institute we need to present an historical journey of this institution. This will help put things into context and show growth, development and the journey of

both-ways over a 30 year period. Previous work on the history of both-ways at Batchelor Institute will be used as the basis for this section (Ober, 2004).

Batchelor Institute first began in the mid 1960’s when the Northern Territory Department of Education began running short intensive courses for teacher assistants at Kormilda College in Darwin. These training sessions were designed to give teacher assistants the basic skills in classroom management, planning and programming and teaching strategies.

In 1974, cyclone Tracey destroyed Darwin forcing the training facility to be moved to Batchelor at the old Rum Jungle mining quarters. The training facility was then known as VTC – Vocational Training Centre, with a new name change to ATEC (Aboriginal Teacher Education Centre). Aboriginal people now had the opportunity to become qualified teachers in Aboriginal schools as well as teacher assistants if they wished. Keep in mind that Batchelor College graduates could only teach in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory and to become fully qualified to teach in any school in Australia, graduates needed to enrol in other mainstream universities.

In 1982, ATEC moved to the current facilities with another name change – Batchelor College. In 1999, Batchelor College gained its independence as an educational institution governed by its own council, the majority being Aboriginal people and is now known as the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

Batchelor Institute was first originated as a teacher training facility catering mainly for people from remote community schools. There was a three-year teacher training course on site at Batchelor campus only, as well as community based programs depending on the needs and staff available on remote communities. These were known as RATE programs (Remote Aboriginal Teacher Education programs). On completion of this three-year teaching program, students were awarded the Associate Diploma of Teaching (Aboriginal schools).

It was during the mid 1980’s that the whole move of self-determination and self management began to take place. Terms like “community development” and “community-driven programs” began to emerge as the new buzz words. Aboriginal people seemed to be more empowered to take over their own affairs, hold key positions in various organisations and make important decisions about how they wanted their communities run. This was also the era of the homeland movement, where many families moved away from the large communities, back to their own traditional countries. This meant that in community schools and homeland schools, Aboriginal teachers began looking at alternative methods of education for children. Aboriginal teachers began to explore culturally appropriate pedagogy, curriculum content, delivery methods as well as put strategies in place to

increase the number of qualified Aboriginal teachers on staff.

By this time bilingual education was well-established in approximately 22 schools in Northern Territory. Bilingual education is a program where two languages are used as the medium of instruction in schools. It was introduced in 1974 by the Whitlam government, unfortunately many programs were axed in 1999 under the Northern Territory Government of that time, and today only nine programs exist in the Northern Territory under the two-way learning schools.

Although bilingual education was supported by Aboriginal people, many Aboriginal educators still saw the programs as being dominated and controlled by the white bureaucratic system. It really was a one size fits all program and individual community needs and issues were not seriously taken into consideration. At this time, it is important to acknowledge and honour the work undertaken on both-ways education by the late Dr Marika. In her quiet, unassuming humble way, she with other Indigenous educators began breaking new ground in developing school curriculum based on the Indigenous knowledge system. Dr Marika made some powerful and profound statements that impacted and influenced the way educators thought about and interpreted both-ways in their own teaching/learning context.

On the issue of bilingual education, she stated that:

Both ways education means more than just having print literacy in two languages, it means having a strong emphasis on Yolngu knowledge as well. In doing this we were trying to get a way from the "Three Little Pigs in Gumatj" idea and bring proper cultural knowledge into the school (Marika, 1999, p. 112).

By using the "Three Little Pigs in Gumatj" idea, Yolngu educators were actually saying that the school curriculum during this time was really based on Western ideas, stories, concepts and values. The proper cultural knowledge signified it was time for Yolngu language and cultural understandings to become the basis and foundation of the curriculum, gradually transferring onto new Western academic skills through the schooling system.

In 1986 people like Mandawuy Yunupingu from Yirrikala, along with Ober and the late Mrs Joshua from Ngukurr began exploring the concept of both-ways education, through the "Bachelor of Arts in Education" course through Deakin University.

As part of their studies they began to explore the whole notion of both-ways teaching/learning from their own cultural and language positioning. After intense consultation with elders, community members and school staff, Yunupingu and other Yolngu educators came up with the following metaphor of Ganma to explain both-ways education in their own cultural context:

Ganma is firstly a place. It is an area within the mangroves where the saltwater (non-Aboriginal knowledge) coming in from the sea meets the stream of fresh water (Yolngu Knowledge) coming down from the land. Ganma is a still lagoon. The water circulates silently underneath and there are lines of foam circulating across the surface. The swelling and retreating of the tides and the wet season floods can be seen in the two bodies of water. Water is often taken to represent knowledge in Yolngu philosophy. What we see happening in the school is a process of knowledge production where we have two different cultures, Balanda and Yolngu working together. Both cultures need to be presented in a way where each one is preserved and respected (Marika, 1999, p. 112-113).

Balance is a key concept in both-ways philosophy and this conceptual understanding is shown through the fresh and salt water swirling together, more like a marbling affect and not just a total ugly brew. This represents complimenting bodies of knowledge so that both knowledge systems are still distinguishable not hidden or dominated by the other, both are respected and preserved in their own right.

Although the surface of the water maybe calm, there are still strong currents, turmoils underneath, indicating sites of contestation, where debate, struggles, arguments, discussion and finally, hopefully negotiation takes place. We know it is easy to talk about both-ways philosophy, but to actually put it into practice is another story. There is a power struggle, there is misunderstanding and misinterpretation, however this needs to be worked through until a negotiation is reached between key players. It is often difficult for non-Indigenous stakeholders to release the reigns and allow Indigenous educators to lead and teach through Indigenous pedagogies. The white foam rising to the water surface represents the new knowledge and learning that has formed by the two knowledge systems coming together in that particular meeting place. As this new way of thinking was happening in communities it began to influence the work and shift the mindset of academics and students at Batchelor. People could see Batchelor as that meeting place too. Two bodies of knowledge coming together and creating new knowledge in various fields of profession. There were those underlying currents, sites of contestation, where our ways of doing things and learning were often in conflict with non-Aboriginal people and vice-versa. So we recognised there would be struggles and debates but also negotiation and balance, respect and acknowledgement so that those new foams of learning began to emerge to the surface (Ober, 2004, pp. 8-9).

■ What did elders say about both-ways?

We cannot hold back change which will happen whether we like it or not. But as a minority society we can adapt by finding common ground with the majority society. It is through an exchange of meanings that we can produce a “two way” school curriculum. In an exchange of knowledge both sides learn from each other instead of knowledge coming only from the Balanda side. But Yolngu and Balanda knowledge will only come together if there is respect for our knowledge and where Aboriginal people are taking the initiative, where we shape and develop the educational programs and then implement them (Wunungmurra, 1989, p. 12).

■ What did students say about both-ways?

Linda Anderson states:

Everything is interconnected and so the teaching and learning needs to happen in an integrated holistic way. All learning is linked to relationships (Stage 4 Teacher Education Students, 1998, p. 12).

Berna Timaepatua stated:

As the tide comes in and goes out, students' are learning about both ways education and about the wider world. When the stone is dropped in the middle of the water, it makes ripples and these represent the journey (Stage 4 Teacher Education Students, 1998, p. 14).

■ Both-ways as metaphors

Metaphors are powerful tools to communicate abstract ideas and concepts in a meaningful and accessible way. Metaphors can be drawn from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds and knowledge systems. Over the years Indigenous educators have talked in-depth about both-ways through metaphors:

To represent our worlds is ultimately something we can only do for ourselves using our own processes to articulate our experiences, realities, and understanding. Anything else is an imposed view that excludes the existence of our ontology and the interrelationship between our “ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing” (Martin, 2003, p. 206).

The following metaphors have been developed by Indigenous educators. They explain the concept

of both-ways through the stories associated with their metaphors.

The Ganma metaphor which was earlier introduced, represents both-ways from Yolngu people in north-east Arnhem land. This metaphor is fairly well known and often referred to when talking about both-ways education in the Northern Territory.

Brandon Garrnradj is a Bining (Aboriginal) man from Gunbalunya in Western Arnhem land. While studying in the community-based Certificate 2-Indigenous Education Work course, Brandon created a metaphor – knowledge is a journey. This metaphor incorporates both-ways principles which Brandon explains in the following way:

There are two forms of knowledge both Bining and Balanda, both forms of knowledge are equally important. Elders have an important role in our education. They show the way, they pass on knowledge. Kids have an important role as well, they must listen and respect their elders and help their families they must focus on both forms of knowledge, they must share what they learn. They must be supported in their learning. Bining and Balanda teachers have an important role. They must work together, they must learn from each other and they must support each other (Bulliwana et al., 2002).

Berna Timaepatua spoke about the ebb and flow of the tide, representing both-ways. As the tide comes in, it is known knowledge as it goes out it takes new knowledge that is gained to be used and applied to real situations. She spoke about the stone being dropped in the water, which signifies the beginning of the educational learning journey, creating ripple effects back in the community. Taking new knowledge home and applying it in a real life context (Stage 4 Teacher Education Students, 1998, p. 14).

■ Both-ways philosophy to practice

In 2007 myself and Bat (Ober & Bat) worked on a research project “Both-ways: Philosophy to Practice”, and identified three principles that are inclusive of both-ways practice. We created a diagram to show both-ways as a teaching/learning methodology at Batchelor Institute (Figure 1). Students come in with both forms of knowledge, the stripes show common ground where links can be made. Sometimes links cannot be made, it may be too difficult, so these are left blank. There is a tightening a coming together, nearing the end of the course, to signify strengthening identity and empowerment in academic professional skills. The three principles identified through this research are the following:

- both-ways is a **shared learning journey**
- both-ways is **student-centred learning**
- both-ways is about **strengthening Indigenous identity**

■ Shared learning journey

Both-ways is seen as a shared learning journey. Students are sharing this journey with other students, their family, community, lecturers, and work colleagues. Shared learning is about drawing knowledge from each other through, talking, discussing, debating, challenging, and reflecting. Learning is not in isolation, or in competition, rather it is collaboration. It is not only gaining new knowledge from text books and other experts, but also from within the student group. Indigenous people hold important knowledge in the forms of stories, songs, histories, and language.

At home, there are people who journey with the students – family and community who support the students to continue their education at home. Students will bring home new learning to share and to be validated with their elders. Students will undertake learning at home that they bring back to Batchelor to share. The learning at home will also include Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge (Ober & Bat, 2007, p.13).

■ Student-centred learning

Traditionally the majority of Batchelor Institute students have been mature-aged people who desired to return to studies in an effort to gain academic qualifications to suit their work, community or personal needs. These people entered studies with vast amounts of cultural knowledge and life experience but often limited literacy and numeracy skills. However in recent years, the trend seems to be changing with an increased number of younger, school leavers who have the academic skills, but limited cultural knowledge and life experience. This can be seen as a great opportunity for young and older students from all walks of life, with different language and cultural backgrounds to work and learn from each other. To talk, yarn, discuss, tell stories of real life experiences, and apply their new academic knowledge to real life situations. Student-centred learning includes focusing, exploring and investigating real issues that impact and influence students lives on a daily basis.

■ Strengthening Indigenous identity

Batchelor Institute students come from diverse cultural backgrounds and it is a great opportunity to learn from other Indigenous people and grow stronger and confident about their identity in the process. From my own experiences, I not only learnt about my mother's and father's people, our languages, our histories, our



Figure 1. Diagram to show both-ways as a teaching/learning methodology at Batchelor Institute (Ober & Bat, 2007, p. 77)

social and cultural connections, but I was also able to gain new knowledge and understandings from other students who were only too willing to share stories with me.

I believe my studies at Batchelor Institute strengthened my identity, the way I see, behave and interact and make meaning of the world I live in. I especially became interested in Indigenous languages, especially my first language which is Aboriginal English or Murri English. I had no knowledge that this language existed prior to my studies. My fascination with this dialect, led me to do further research through the Masters in Applied Linguistic course at Charles Darwin University, which I completed in 2007. I began investigating the way we as Aboriginal people have used, manipulated and shaped the English language to make it our own. I used opportunities to observe and listen to the way we communicate using a language that has been appropriated to suit our social rules, protocols, values, beliefs and processes.

It is true that language and culture do go together, and Aboriginal English is no exception, one cannot do without the other, they are both embedded and intertwined to express meaning in a particular Indigenous social and cultural context. Both-ways is

about strengthening one's identity and in the process becoming more aware that Indigenous people can draw from their own knowledge systems to compliment and strengthen their own professional aspirations.

■ Conclusion

Both-ways education is about drawing on and acknowledging skills, language, knowledge, concepts and understandings from both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems. It's about everything that makes up an Indigenous person's identity, and then finding a bridge from this knowledge to link into new Western academic knowledge that are important to student's chosen field of profession. It is our way of telling our stories, it's about our way of making meaning in our world. Both-ways is about going from the known to the unknown, using current knowledge as a springboard to gain new conceptual academic understandings. Both-ways teaching/learning is being open-minded enough to see that there are alternative methods of reaching a goal, than following a strictly mainstream approach:

Both-ways education is about allowing the students to have the freedom to be who they are, yet at the same time empowering them with essential knowledge, skills and concepts from the western domain, to enable them to make key decisions in their lives, be it professional or personal (Ober, 2004, p. 9).

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■ About the author

Robyn Ober is a Murri woman from North Queensland with cultural connections to the Djirribal people through her mother and KuKu Yalandji people through her father. Robyn is an experienced educator having taught in both primary and tertiary education in both remote and urban contexts. In 2007, Robyn graduated with the Masters in Applied Linguistics through Charles Darwin University, and in 2008 Robyn completed the Graduate Certificate of Indigenous Knowledge through Batchelor Institute. Robyn currently works at Batchelor Institute as a researcher and is involved in a number of projects on Indigenous leadership.