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'What matters is the girth of its belly. Can it swallow us or not?' — Shifting Values Towards New Models of Teaching in Aboriginal Schools

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At a maths workshop we were discussing measurement as a cultural concept. One of the balanda staff asked an Aboriginal colleague how he might depict the length of a crocodile. Another Aboriginal teacher laughed. 'You balanda always think length is important. What matters to us is the girth of the belly. Can it swallow us or not!'

Introduction: The Setting

Territory-wide the government, through its Department of Education, has the unenviably difficult task of maintaining and providing education which is both equitable and accessible to a cohort of students who represent a third of its student population. While their common qualifier is that these students are 'Indigenous,' their disparate worldviews often only share some common features. It seems that in recent years, rather than meet these diverse needs the department has determined that the only way around the difficulty is to apply a relatively prescriptive curriculum to its remote Indigenous schools. This is evidenced by the Intensive English, Foundation and General Studies programs now in place for secondary aged students. Many (including Indigenous) educators argue that perhaps this is the only pragmatic answer.

Typically an Indigenous community education centre will provide education as directed by the

Northern Territory's Department of Education, from pre-school through post-primary age. One with which this writer is familiar draws its students from a community formerly established as a trading post but now housing Indigenous people from fifteen different language groups and a significant number of 'mainstream' Australians ('balanda'). The parents of these latter are employed to maintain its mainstream infrastructure and technology. In the school's pre-school and primary departments three streams of classes operate, one for the landowners' language group, another for the second large language group and a third for the several other language groups and for English speaking students. So the school is described as 'bi-lingual' when, in effect, it teaches in three languages. Balanda ('mainstream') teachers working in ESL classes are assisted by Aboriginal teacher-assistants able to converse with students in the appropriate vernacular.

Students at the school, primarily local Indigenous children, do not appear to see balanda-style education as a priority in their scheme of things. If what happens there does not stimulate or excite them, or seem appropriate, they are likely to stay at home or go elsewhere. Many strategies have been tried but attendance is almost impossible to enforce.

That they stay away is not difficult to understand. Instruction in government schools operating in traditional settings, is made sporadic, often impossible by the many, usually unpredictable, events such as ceremonies, shopping days, visits, and deaths which punctuate almost every week of the school year. Despite intensive efforts by dedicated Indigenous and balanda staff, literacy rates rarely achieve the equivalent of Year 4 by secondary age and school graduates rarely qualify for work outside the community.

Community members may also appear ambivalent about their school's role. Feppi, the education group which lobbies on behalf of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, insists that Indigenous parents want their children to engage with mainstream education so that they can in future function effectively in mainstream settings, recognising at the same time that this may bring with it the ultimate demise of their own culture. Languages, the vehicles for cultural continuance, are seen here as critical players balancing and accommodating vocabulary for the sorts of everyday mainstream understandings which community members need to interface with contemporary mainstream Australia, against traditional ways of perceiving the world, traditional technologies and the like.

Because traditional education happens informally and implicitly, through participation in events and observation of everyday activities, there is an assumption present among parents that mainstream education also operates by a kind of 'osmosis'; that simply by being there one learns. Irregular attendance within the four walls of a classroom is perceived as sufficient exposure to absorb 'balanda' knowledge.

There is another lobby group which must be considered here, whose influence in very recent times has been considerable, some towards positive educational outcomes, but others which may be embedded in assimilationist mainstream perceptions of where they believe education should lead. Earlier this decade groups of often newly graduated balanda teachers were recruited to community schools from the south-eastern States. Many were young teachers bringing with them their energy, enthusiasm, excitement and recently acquired updated understandings of education, but in a mostly balanda context.

The advent of these recruits has certainly supported the successful retention of students who might otherwise not attend, raised numeracy and literacy levels across schools and the application of structure and organisation to programming and instructional process. Of course all of these attributes should be and are valued but there still needs to be recognition that some balanda protocols which may be appropriate to south-eastern west-centric States are inadvertently inappropriate in an Indigenous setting.

For example there are many ways in which one group of people may exclude another from conversance. Because, in mainstream society at least, education is very open to scrutiny by the community, teachers are increasingly resistant to the extra work, and attacks they perceive are being directed towards diminishing their professionalism. As Capper (1994: 37) says, 'Out of these fears parental participation is either resisted or hijacked' — by strategies, often unconscious, such as the use of exclusive language and jargon.

In an Indigenous community not only parents but also local teachers may feel excluded from the process of running their school. Often, for example, Indigenous teachers avoid attending professional development workshops or meetings because their experience is that these will be dominated by balandas. While balanda teachers may be aware of this they often give only lip service to strategies to encourage their Aboriginal colleagues to take part. Consequently, without their presence to resist it, any decision made by balanda staff is likely to be implemented. Recent moves to encourage the formation of school councils for community schools may address this by providing opportunities for increased effective dialogue between the school and all those with a vested interest in its operation and outcomes.

Wider education and training for others in a community may come from a number of sources, offering courses ranging from shopkeeping, driving, first aid, horticulture and other 'relevant' vocations. Because most local people have community and ceremonial responsibilities which do not guarantee their sustained attendance, courses tend to be of short duration, often of only two to three days at a time. Typically the community school will be urged to provide venues for many of these courses. In the development and implementation of teaching models appropriate to these settings staff need to consider new timeframes for operation, given that a balanda 'semester', 'term' or even a 'week' may have little relevance in an Aboriginal timeline.

Recently the writer asked staff in one community school to identify those attributes of teachers which they most valued. Frequently local Indigenous teachers seemed unimpressed by teachers they themselves had had at school (balanda in most instances), saying they wanted to create new role models, based on their own traditional teachers,

people who took their time, allowed everybody to move at their own pace, encouraged observation, saw and respected individuals in the context of their families and saw education as a process for life. The anecdotal stories in Appendix 1 identify everyday assumptions of balanda teachers which Indigenous teachers believe they need to address.

Anecdotal stories such as these begin to illustrate how many, often inappropriate, assumptions teachers make about teachers from other cultural settings with whom they work. While an Aboriginal worldview may have commonalities with a west-centric worldview, some aspects which impact on activities such as education, and in this context teaching models, may be diametrically opposed. However, as Christie and Young (1995) observe, not only do they need to be reflected on as critical incidents but also to be acted upon for change. When new Models of Teaching are identified as appropriate to this setting their capacity for addressing such assumptions will need to be considered.

Balanda teachers were reflective in a quite contrasted analytical way. Their responses to the same informal question, 'What attributes do you most value in a teacher you had at school?' are recorded in Appendix 2.

Models of Teaching

Bruner *et al.* (1967) described education as 'a process, not a product,' implying that the sequence of events which lead to the acquisition of skills and knowledge is more significant to teaching than the end product of the skills and knowledge themselves. Models of teaching identify sets of teaching procedures, by which particular outcomes may be achieved, 'provid[ing] definite ideas for creating an environment from which students are likely to learn certain kinds of things' (Joyce *et al.*, 1992). Joyce *et al.* further define a model of teaching as a plan to shape curriculum, design instructional materials and to guide instruction.

Teaching models, as 'flexible fluid' instruments, should not be employed rigidly, but should vary in form according to their use in any new setting. Bassett *et al.* (1990) note that teachers in the field accept models more readily than pre-service

trainees probably because they are able to match models with those they already apply within their own experiences. It is from the refining and processing of new models added to their repertoire, that Joyce *et al.* (1992) believe teachers improve their own teaching competencies and their abilities to tailor their own methodological flexibility. As they master new models and learn to apply them appropriately, they increasingly should begin to combine, to expand, to embellish, to move between and to adapt them to suit and to support their own roles within their classrooms. The sensitivity they have to individual differences and their flexibility in adjusting their teaching styles towards these through the use of teaching models is the 'art of teaching' described by Gage (1978: 17). Teachers' individual differences and needs determine their choices.

Some models of teaching will be distinctly teacher-centred, some student-oriented, while others will be located between these two limits. Whatever their orientation, both teachers and their students should, with use, increasingly adapt to models as part of their quest 'to learn to learn' (Joyce *et al.*, 1992). While a variety of models for teaching have been proposed, for example cognitive strategies by Gagné *et al.* (1988), Kohlberg and Mayer's (1972) based on Piagetian theory, or Roger's non-directive model (1969), it is the models proposed by Weil *et al.* (1978) which are given particular attention in this paper (see Table 1).

Bassett *et al.* (1990) suggest that the selection of models is best accomplished by careful analysis of the desired learning outcomes. On the one hand models chosen must accommodate aspirations and outcomes which the local community believes will allow them both to embrace essential aspects of west-centric understanding and to maintain their own traditions. On the other, the school must fulfil requirements laid down by the Department of Education. Considering that, in many instances, these may be diametrically opposed, this may be no mean expectation of formal education in the community. Satisfactory achievement which embraces both perspectives will require sensitive and empathetic negotiation by both 'camps.'

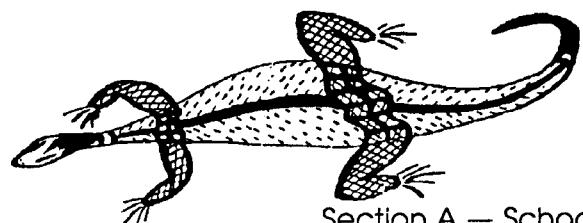


Table 1: A selection of models of teaching, after Weil *et al.* (1978a, 1978b)

Family	Model	Major Theorist	Summary of Mission
Information Processing	Inductive Thinking Inquiry Scientific Inquiry	Hilda Taba Richard Suchman Joseph J. Schwab	Development of inductive mental processes and theory building. To teach research systems of discipline but affecting other domains
	Concept Attainment	Jerome Bruner	Develop inductive reasoning, concept development and analysis
	Cognitive Growth	Jean Piaget Irving Sigel Edmund Sullivan Lawrence Kohlberg	Increase general intellectual development, logical reasoning, applicable social and moral development
	Advance Organiser	David Ausubel	Increase efficiency of information-processing capacities to absorb and relate bodies of knowledge
	Memory	Harry Lorayne Jerry Lucas	Increase capacity to memorise
Personal	Non-directive Teaching	Carl Rogers	Building capacity for personal development; self-awareness, understanding, autonomy, self-concept
	Awareness Training	Fritz Perls William Schutz	Increasing own capacity for self-exploration and awareness
	Synectics	William Gordon David Hunt	Personal development of creativity and creative problem solving Increase personal complexity and flexibility
	Conceptual Systems Classroom Meeting	William Glasser	Development of self-understanding and responsibility to self and social peers
Social Interaction	Group Investigation	Herbert Thelen John Dewey	Development of skills for participation in democratic social processes through interpersonal group skills and academic inquiry skills
	Social Inquiry	Byron Massialas Benjamin Cox	Social problem solving through academic inquiry and logical reasoning
	Laboratory Method	National Training Laboratory Bethel, Maine	Development of interpersonal and group skills and thus personal awareness and flexibility
	Jurisprudential	Donald Oliver James P. Shaver	Teach jurisprudential frame of reference – resolving social issues
	Role Playing	Fannie Shaftel George Shaftel	Induce students to inquire into personal and social values on own behaviour and values
	Social Simulation	Sarene Boocock Harold Guetzkow	Help students experience various social processes and realities and examine own reactions to them. Decision-making skills.
Behavioural	Contingency Management	B.F. Skinner B.F. Skinner	Facts, concepts, skills Social behaviour/skills
	Self Control Relaxation	Rimm and Masters, Wolpe	Personal goals
	Stress Reduction	Rimm and Masters, Wolpe	Substitution of relaxation for anxiety in social situations
	Assertiveness Training	Wolpe, Lazarus, Salter	Direct, spontaneous expression of feelings in social situations
	Desensitisation	Gagne, Smith and Smith	Pattern of behaviours, skills

Issues: Considerations and Hesitations

The literature and the writer's own experience suggest that a number of principles particular to Aboriginal teaching need to be considered before the choice of existing models can be resolved. Writing of teaching methods for Aboriginal languages, Harris (1994: 136-138) lists broad principles he believes important as context and purpose, culture content, learning through and of language, 'complement' not 'compete,' and that getting the context working well is more important than arguments for and against code mixing. Harris further identifies five major Aboriginal learning processes which he characterises as observation and initiation, personal trial and error, learning in real life rather than in artificial settings, learning context specific skills, and person-oriented rather than information-oriented learning (Harris, 1992).

Trainee Aboriginal D-BATE students also describe strategies in the development of an Aboriginal pedagogy. They recommend the negotiation of topics and content with Elders, and the involvement of Elders and community as observers, teachers and models, as resource 'texts'. However, they also recognise as inherent in the employment of 'untrained' teachers (at least in a west-centric sense!) the need for sensitive intervention when lessons proceed along potentially awkward paths. Other strategies they recommend include drawing on kinship to make sense of the teaching setting, teaching by demonstration, teaching by planning and responding on the job, communicating in the community vernacular, teaching in appropriate settings, helping make sense of the curriculum for the community, learning with the children (particularly where the teacher may not have local knowledge, and encouraging cooperative learning (D-BATE, 1988).

In all of this discussion we need constantly to be reminded that school is a west-centric construct and aspects of it, which are outcomes of a west-centric worldview, are not necessarily appropriate to Aboriginal settings. As Teasdale (1992) recommends, models designed for Indigenous settings will need to incorporate a synthesis of informal Aboriginal and the more formal west-centric styles.

Joyce *et al.* (1992) categorise four families of models as Information Processing, Personal Development,

Social Interaction and Behaviour Modification. Careful examination of these in the light of cultural implications suggests varying degrees of suitability, depending on whose outcomes are considered more important. Where the missions of particular models clearly have assimilationist potential the choice of whether to employ them needs to be carefully balanced between their usefulness in dealing with mainstream skills and knowledge and their potential to disempower local students.

The Case for Change

What is evident from this writer's discussions with teaching staff throughout the school is their natural and commendable concern for political correctness, and for the safety and security which comes from running programs which do not challenge or conflict with established or perceived cultural conventions and protocols. Current teaching within the school probably favours models from within the Information Processing family more than it does other families, presumably because models here appear less overtly west-centric or at least culturally 'safer' than do models from within the other three families.

While the domains of the remaining three families of models are probably those discerned as the responsibility of community education and their inclusion involves negotiation already alluded to, they might encourage one attribute missed from 'lists' of valued characteristics of teachers by both Aboriginal and balanda teaching staff, that of 'risk-taking.' However, this writer believes that carrying Aboriginal education across the threshold of hesitations which seem currently to impede much of its effectiveness to both address maintenance of an Aboriginal worldview and introduce pertinent skills and knowledge needed to deal with the mainstream must involve calculated risk-taking.

In the mainstream the responsibilities of teachers are probably best summarised as encouraging the personal growth, social development, preparation for national and world citizenship, and mastery of academic subjects for their students. And yet even here, as Bruner (1983) argues:

The complementary nature of intuitive and analytical thinking should ... be recognized. ... In

a culture such as ours, where there is so much pressure towards uniformity of taste in our mass media of communication, so much fear of idiosyncratic style, indeed a certain suspicion of the idea of style all together, it becomes the more important to nurture confident intuition in the realm of literature and the arts.

Making the Changes: Professional Development

Montero-Sieburth (1992:192) distinguishes key issues related to assisting learning in developing settings, as access to enriched curriculum, student background and perceptions of how learning affects achievement, teachers' decision-making capacity regarding material and instructional processes, needs in teacher training for reflection on practice, connecting curriculum to actual learning, and the curriculum as an interface between policy issues and actual classroom experiences.

Three models of teaching appropriate to this setting which might be introduced to teachers through current Professional Development workshops, suggest themselves. Each, in its own way, introduces an element of risk to education in such a culturally diverse setting, yet represents a mission which is fundamentally synchronous with accepted protocols. These are outlined below.

I. Jurisprudential Inquiry

Jurisprudential Inquiry acknowledges difference and encourages dialogue through the exploration of issues through three competencies: first the values framework based on, for example, the Constitution; second a 'set of skills for clarifying and resolving issues' as conflict resolution; and third a knowledge of contemporary political, social, economic and other public issues.

II. Inductive Thinking

Clearly a problem all students must master if they are to access and participate fully in formal education, is the collection, organisation and manipulation of data into what is here termed the Inductive Thinking Model. Hilda Taba (1966) identified three postulates regarding thinking: that it can be taught; that it is an active transaction between individual and data; and that processes of thought evolve by a 'lawful' sequence. Edward de Bono's (1990) *Six Thinking Hats* might be a useful vehicle for developing this with teachers.

III. Synectics

The third model should encourage the innate creativity of Aboriginal students. Synectics identifies four ideas about creativity: that it is important in everyday activity; that it is not mysterious; that creative invention is similar across fields; and that individual and group creative thinking are very similar. Synectics encourages students to use emotional ('non-rational') as well as rational thinking to encourage open-ended thought, but ultimately to make decisions using rational thought (Gordon, 1961).

Any approach to potentially radical change should proceed through trial and negotiation if it is to be accepted by all parties. Teachers will need some convincing if what presently exists, while offering security, is flawed or limiting as a conceptual approach to teaching. That each is already employing teaching models or elements of them first needs reflecting on and action for change should only proceed after these steps have been acknowledged. Models cannot be selected without all staff having a clear vision of what outcomes the school's programs ought to have, in the context in which education takes place, and which models best deliver these.

Ideally to induce them to shift and expand conceptual approaches, and to extend their own learning repertoires, teachers might be encouraged to collaborate in small groups to first trial and present a selected model then, at a later date, a combination of models of teaching. Professional development workshops might be run once a week over a school term, allowing sufficient time for all participants to trial several models. While democracy needs to be inherent in the approach, the writer would encourage the trialing of the three previously cited models early in the professional development cycle. Of course the more models trialed and presented the greater the opportunities for community consensus over which models or combinations of models best suit the setting.

In summary, workshops need not have a finite sequence. Once introduced, models will need sustained periods of trial and opportunities provided for reflection and, if required, action on that reflection. Models of Teaching generally do not present teachers with skills or knowledge they have not already encountered, but rather, offer a

procedure for most effectively employing their collective accrued understandings of how teaching and learning take place.

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Appendix 1

Two colleagues, Sheila, a balanda (Anglo Australian) teacher and Martin, an Aboriginal teacher, and I were sharing a planning session. I suggested that one aspect of our work might be more easily executed if we approached it through the computer. As we got up to move to the keyboard Martin remarked, with some intensity, that this was 'balanda stuff' and stormed out of the workroom, only returning after he had checked that we were no longer working at the computer.

A week later I happened to meet Martin at his Homeland School. A community meeting was in progress and I had been asked, as an English first

language speaker, to record the proceedings. I dutifully transcribed what took place using a pencil and lined pad paper, and turned it into a letter which members of the community signed, or had signed on their behalf. Martin asked if I intended typing this letter into the computer when I returned to the hub school. My response that this penciled letter was perfectly adequate was greeted by a congenial smile.

In the same week another Aboriginal teacher, Janice, and I were brain-storming an overview of a series of lessons she wanted to run in vernacular, centred around the morning and evening stars, but in the context of her own culture. I remarked that the school now owned a rather sophisticated new telescope. Janice replied that while that sounded interesting she wanted to teach her children Aboriginal science, not balanda astronomy. (Anecdotes recorded during Mentoring workshops, August, 1996).

Appendix 2

Expectations

In terms of his or her expectations of work the effective teacher encourages quality work, expects reciprocal treatment and judges students individually. Because of the effective teacher's expectations of behaviour in his or her classroom, students know where they stand because the teacher is firm but maintains fair control, anticipates difficult situations and has consistent expectations of students. One teacher suggested that the effective teacher made no concessions, but

this was rejected by others. The perceptions in this school appear to be that the expectations of teachers contribute significantly to student motivation.

Relationship and personal qualities

The effective teacher has good communication and rapport, is someone students can relate to, is concerned about individuals' needs, is compassionate and presents a fair face to all students. He or she is prepared and willing to give additional time to students who need it, is trusted and trusting, friendly but professional and, of great significance particularly in this setting, is inclusive. Teachers here believe the effective teacher encourages, and is creative, happy, interested and interesting, enthuses, is exciting but predictable, dedicated, open-minded and 'trendy'. Thus the teacher's personality, character and relationship with students are perceived as the other critical factors motivating students.

Knowledge of content and teaching

Teachers at this school apparently perceive, as the actual pedagogical-methodological items valued in terms of organisation and knowledge of content and teaching, the fact that their knowledge of subjects is recognised by their students, that they are thus able to extend students' skills and understandings. Effective teachers, they agreed, use clear language, expect to move students onwards, and want to know enough about their students to facilitate this. In terms of organisation, effective teachers plan well and, while they operate consistent routines, are able to adapt. (Recorded from informal responses to a survey, August, 1996.)

