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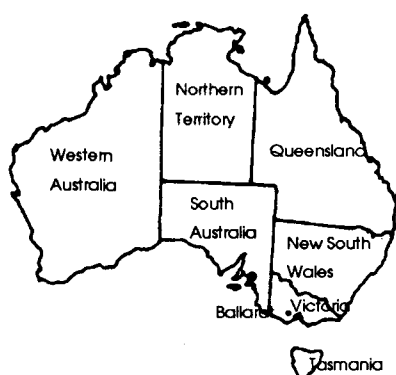
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Section B: Teacher Education

Another Country: Non-Aboriginal Tertiary Students' Perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

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Even though Aboriginal people are from Australia it does not mean they speak the English language (non-Aboriginal tertiary student).

Introduction

Jo Lampert's (1996) research discussed in her article *Indigenous Australian perspectives in teaching at the University of Queensland* speaks volumes about the challenges of attempting to make university curricula inclusive of Indigenous Australian perspectives. She documents the often ambivalent attitudes of academics towards opening up the curriculum to Indigenous Australians. The research discussed here seeks to add to our understanding of this process, focussing this time on the response of students to the introduction of Australian Indigenous perspectives into a single unit within a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Teaching program. The impetus to reflect on the process came with the shock of reading student papers, written at the end of the unit, and finding that effective communication about the educational needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not seem to have taken place, making a closer analysis of the teaching/learning process

imperative. This investigation will address questions about how universities can communicate effectively about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The context was a small rural campus of a multi-campus institution. The campus is largely devoted to preparing students for careers in teaching and nursing, and the subjects in the research were education students who were about mid-way through completing their qualifications. The unit, in the English Education area, explored the teaching of reading and writing to children and raised the issue of a possible mismatch for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children between the culture of home and that of school. Materials (Kale and Luke, 1991; Trouw, 1993) were chosen with the aim of seeing Aboriginal students as culturally distinctive to try to provide students with some knowledge of these cultural patterns. Evidence of students' responses to the course emerged when they wrote on the exam question: *Teachers need to understand the language and cultural backgrounds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Discuss some of the language and cultural experiences these students bring to school. What are some ways teachers can begin to meet these students' needs?* Close reading of students' writing revealed much about both their consciously held views and some of their less obvious attitudes and values. From their writing it is clear that there were distinctive patterns in their ideas. To explore these patterns is to discover

something about the place Australian Indigenous people have in the minds of some non-Indigenous Australians.

The Patterns

The initial most striking pattern was the tendency to see Aboriginal cultures as foreign — from ‘another country’. Discussing the issue of Australian Indigenous education, one student wrote:

Not all students in the education system are of Australian nationality and this is important for teachers to understand so they can make adjustments to the teaching program to cater for the needs of the students.

Some of the language and cultural experiences these children bring to school are rather different to us but important to them.

This student’s use of ‘us’ and ‘them’ reveals much about her vision of Australia. She, along with other students, did not see Australia’s Indigenous people as fitting her definition of what an Australian is. Another student wrote:

Even though Aboriginal people are from Australia it does not mean they speak the English language. Every tribe within Australia has their own language. What we English speaking people call a ‘door’ may be called something else in a tribal language. The whole language structure of speaking and writing may be different to what many of us have learnt.

The tendency to speak of Indigenous cultures from a very removed position was prevalent and allowed students to make breathtakingly unreflective generalisations at times. For example, one student wrote: ‘The aboriginal [sic] language and culture [sic] has very little two-way interaction.’ (This comment arose out of discussion about Aboriginal learning styles tending to rely more on imitation than verbal instruction.) Another said:

Children grow up in their family environment which becomes second nature to them. In many cases for Aboriginal children this also means speaking a language which is not ‘English’. They learn their native tongue. There are a very few who learn the english [sic] language in their culture so those who do are considered to be very lucky.

Here, as well as ignorance about Aboriginal peoples, we see another striking feature of students’ ideas. Implicit in the last comment about the ‘lucky’ Aboriginal children who learn English (and the

many ‘unlucky’ ones who don’t) is a deficit view of Australia’s Indigenous cultures:

When a child first enters school they bring along ‘baggage’ which they have learnt from parents, relatives — people around them and for [the] Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander such baggage continues to affect their learning. Many of these children do not have the luxuries of their parents listening to them read at an early age. You may find that such children learn to hunt for food, learn tribal rituals, dances as the parents may see that as more beneficial and more important.

In these comments stereotypes about Indigenous people are rife: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are ‘Stone Age’ people who need help to live in the twentieth century. While these prospective teachers might see it as desirable to take account of Aboriginal cultures, they tend to see this as making allowances for ‘a culture’ that will probably be an impediment at school. ‘Teachers can meet the needs of these children by firstly showing patience and understanding towards a child, showing that you understand and are there to help.’ In a way that seems quite patronizing, students worry about how Aboriginal students are going to adapt to the dominant culture. The process of learning for the Aboriginal child becomes one of assimilation to mainstream ways of acting:

Even though it is essential that a teacher needs to be understanding it is important for the teacher to teach rules to the Aboriginal children so that they become aware of what is expected of them at school. The teacher may need to stress that the rules ‘at home’ are different to the rules ‘at school’, e.g. the wearing of shoes.

As a teacher one must ensure that learning is able to be achieved by the students. ... Over time with encouragement the students will begin to act in a classroom like that of a child from a European background.

Even more disturbingly, some students were concerned about the impact of too much accommodation to Indigenous needs, even going so far as to see Indigenous culture as a ‘danger’ to non-Indigenous Australians:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students can bring an exciting new way of learning into our classroom ... Although we should adapt our curriculum to the ‘new’ students’ needs we cannot forget our general learning techniques. If this is done we put the ‘white Australians’ in danger.

These findings resonate with research about Aboriginal children and their teachers in South Australia done by Merridy Malin (1990). She found that Aboriginal cultural norms such as always supporting peers were consistently discouraged, even punished by the teacher involved. In the end the Aboriginal children withdrew from participation in the classroom. It appears that the subjects in this research might well do the same when in charge of a class. However, in some cases students did attempt to grapple with the idea that the relationships between the cultures could be one of difference rather than deficit:

The teacher may use this child as a positive rather than negative aspect in his/her class. The teacher may introduce Aboriginal Studies to his/her class, letting the Aboriginal child talk about their culture and to teach the class about their different customs. It is important to let the child know that being different or of another culture is something wonderful and they should be proud of it.

The limitation in this refreshing approach tended to be ignorance of what Aboriginal cultures are like, making it difficult for them to be specific about what aspects needed to be explored. Often it was relatively superficial or stereotypical aspects which were emphasized. For instance, Aboriginal artifacts or use of individual Aboriginal words were discussed, rather than students seeing that there might be Indigenous ways of living which are different from the mainstream patterns. Vicki Crowley (1993: 35) in her article 'Teaching Aboriginal studies: some problems of culturalism in an inner city school' called this limited view of Indigenous cultures 'culturalism' and saw it as evidence of not really confronting Aboriginal cultures as they are, but relegating them to the 'remote and exotic' (1993: 36). Her article is instructive in that, like the teachers in her study, the subjects in the research discussed here viewed 'racism as individual prejudice and discrimination,' and saw the solutions as 'understanding', 'tolerance' and 'respecting others' customs' (1993: 42). In some cases students grappled with the idea of there being a distinctive Aboriginal way of learning, but again the comments imply a 'Stone Age' picture of Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal people are constructed as 'different Others', to use Crowley's description (1993: 40).

Aboriginal people teach their children by participating and imitating. One to one

interaction is not very common to the people. They show their children what they want them to learn and the children watch and participate ... Aboriginal people teach their children objectives which they need for every day life such as how to hunt or make a fire.

Because there is very little interaction when Aboriginals are taught by the family, the children find it difficult to talk at school.

Explanations and Lessons Learned

Why were the attempts to familiarise students with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures so remarkably unsuccessful? Evidence of the way students **heard** information provided in the unit (e.g. about Aboriginal English) suggests that accurate information tends to become distorted if it is filtered through unconscious prejudices. Hence, it seems crucial to encourage students to be aware of their own preconceptions and prejudices in this area. An examination of racism must be part of any course in Aboriginal Studies. Many of the courses currently being developed by universities in consultation with Indigenous people begin with this element. For example the document *Teaching the Teachers: Indigenous Australian Studies for Primary Pre-Service Teacher Education* (University of New South Wales Steering Committee, 1995) has a model which has a 'present, past and future perspectives' pattern. It suggests that students need to 'critically analyse any stereotype views or misconceptions they may hold about Indigenous societies ...' (1995: 16).

This process cannot be done quickly. As Groome (1994: 64) in his book *Teaching Aboriginal Studies Effectively* states regarding 'one-off and short-term courses', 'too often they are not related to other learning ... [and] support the perception of Aboriginal people as being a marginal group'. And this 'one-off' pattern is, of course, the pattern which the subjects of this research experienced in the English Education unit discussed here. This experience suggests that Australian Indigenous perspectives need to be offered as an Indigenous Studies unit within any teacher education program, and not simply as isolated parts of units. Such a unit is a requirement for prospective teachers at the Australian Catholic University but unfortunately it comes at the end of the students' course rather than at the beginning, where it would inform their other studies.

The study also suggests that there is a pattern among many of the students of seeing teaching as a kind of inculcation of certain immutable skills and ideas ('... we should not forget our general learning techniques ...'). The students had clear ideas about what needed to be taught and saw it as a matter of adapting their methods of instruction to allow Indigenous children to learn this curriculum. Teaching for such students involves 'handling' the Indigenous children appropriately rather than altering the goals. Again, of course, in many ways this was the hierarchical model of learning which was used in the unit involved in this research. Students were lectured about the 'correct' way of seeing things. This did not permit a two-way relationship any more than it might be permitted in the future classrooms of the students. In fact, this paper has embodied a deficit view of the students: that they are empty- or wrong-headed in relation to Indigenous issues. Ways of better valuing students' ideas within the process and content of classes need to be found if change is to happen.

Examining the students' writing suggests too that often they were struggling to articulate ideas. Their struggles were signalled in awkwardness of expression and punctuation. For instance, the student who spoke of the 'baggage' that Aboriginal children bring with them felt uncomfortable enough to put the word in quotation marks, but this was as far as her self-awareness seemed to go. Of course, the exam situation is not particularly conducive to refined writing skills. Even allowing for exam difficulties, talking is a more comfortable medium for them and thorough discussion must be the basis of teaching approaches.

The other factor, which certainly influenced how students perceived what was taught, was that the information and ideas about Indigenous peoples were delivered by a non-Indigenous person. It would be interesting to see a videotape of lectures to see how unconscious racism, similar to that noted in the students, was in evidence. For instance, some of the material given to students (e.g. Trouw, 1993) probably did tend to reinforce the idea that the only way for Aboriginal children is gradual assimilation. Therefore, more important than the

content of the subject, is the premise that in teaching Aboriginal Studies, Indigenous peoples should speak for and about themselves. 'The bottom line is that an Indigenous Australian Studies subject will only be appropriate or effective if there is Indigenous involvement' (The University of New South Wales Steering Committee, 1995: 9).

It is disturbing that, at the time of writing this paper, its recommendations — more Indigenous Studies, more time for discussion with students, more Australian Indigenous lecturers — seem almost Utopian because of the cuts to education and Aboriginal budgets. To balance this pessimism it is useful to note the words of one student in the unit who defined the way forward:

Some teachers are not aware of language and cultural backgrounds of these children. This is a shame as the class may miss out on a valuable learning experience. The learning experience is more than just learning about the 'dreamtime' and what the Aboriginal name for Ayers rock [sic] is. This experience is about learning about a way of life.



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Renewal of the Nation

The Australian Reconciliation Convention, a landmark event in the life of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, will be held at the World Congress Centre in Melbourne from 26-28 May 1997. The theme of the convention is:

Renewal of the nation through building better relationships between indigenous people and the wider community to fulfil the Council's vision of:

A united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all.

The convention is one part of a Council strategy to involve all Australians in the renewal of the nation as we approach the centenary of Federation.

To truly reflect the aspirations and views of all our citizens, participants attending the convention will be drawn from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and many sectors of Australian society, such as sport, youth, faith groups, rural, mining, environment, unions, business and governments at all levels.

The convention will be the culmination of several months of activity around the country, including meetings where individuals, community groups and organisations can express their views to Council members. At these meetings people will be encouraged to talk about issues relevant to them in the reconciliation process, and for communities and groups to have a say about what sort of nation we want to be when we celebrate 100 years of nationhood in 2001.

The convention also commemorates another highly significant event in Australia's history: the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, in which nearly 92% of Australians voted to give the Commonwealth power to make laws specific to Indigenous people, and to allow for Indigenous people to be counted in the census. A 30th Anniversary ceremony will be held on Tuesday 27 May and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation will pay tribute to all those people who gave impetus to the modern-day movement for justice and equity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Another highlight will be the presentation of the Australian Reconciliation Awards at a gala dinner function. The Reconciliation Awards will recognise the effort and work being done today by individuals, organisations and communities throughout Australia to make reconciliation a reality and progress the Council's vision. Nominations are now open for the Australian Reconciliation Awards.

Further information about regional meetings, the Australian Reconciliation Awards, or registration for the convention can be obtained by calling 'The Meeting Planners' on (03) 9819 3700 or Council's toll free number 1800 807 071.

Your voice is important. Community participation is crucial to carry the spirit of reconciliation into the new century and beyond.