

## **BEYOND ABORIGINALISM AND CULTURALISM IN BUILDING AN INDIGENOUS-TEACHER LIFELONG-LEARNING COMMUNITY: LESSONS FROM A TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER DISTANCE INSERVICE TEACHER-EDUCATION PROGRAM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses a distance, inservice, teacher-education program for six Torres Strait Islander teachers. The paper records successes and challenges in moving beyond Aboriginalism and culturalism to more meaningful experiences for teachers and program providers. The paper also considers the implications for building an Indigenous-teacher lifelong-learning community.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Despite decades of efforts to construct education 'in the image of' Indigenous Australians, and to transform it from its colonialist and patriarchal traditions (McConaghy, 1996, 1997), those traditions have proved remarkably resilient. From systemic and provider perspectives, the result has been academic 'success' for some determined Indigenous Australians, and 'failure' for others – as shown by Arizmendi (2001) in respect of male Indigenous undergraduate retention rates.

This 'mixed educational report card' is evident in the conception, implementation, and outcomes of a distance, inservice, teacher-education program for six Torres Strait Islander teachers. The program was developed in consultation with Education Queensland and is operated by Central Queensland University's Faculty of Education and Creative Arts, and Nulloo Yumbah, the Indigenous student support unit. The program intends to provide the teachers – all successful primary teachers from various Torres Strait islands – with a qualification to teach in secondary schools. The program combines several strategies and technologies, including print materials, audioconferences, videoconferences, residential schools in Rockhampton, and visits by university staff members to Thursday Island. All six teachers have progressed through several courses; rates of progression have varied and course offerings have been modified to suit teachers' changing circumstances.

This paper deploys the concepts of Aboriginalism (Attwood, 1992; Hodge, 1990) and culturalism (Nakata, 1995) to explore some challenges and opportunities revealed by the program's operation. The authors, all members of a larger team of academics and support

personnel, present individual and shared perspectives on the program's design and implementation. Those perspectives have in common a desire to move beyond the colonialist and patriarchal shackles of Aboriginalism and culturalism to a set of meaningful and empowering experiences for teachers and program providers, centred on the notion of recognising and promoting 'voice'. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of these lessons from the Torres Strait Islander program for building and sustaining an Indigenous-teacher lifelong-learning community by means of a distance, inservice, teacher-education program.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Our analysis of the program is informed by two concepts drawn from cultural studies: Aboriginalism (Attwood, 1992; Hodge, 1990) and culturalism (Nakata, 1995). Both concepts are integral to the postcolonialist view that formal Western education is a product of colonialism. Such an approach rejects the Enlightenment assumption that education is automatically and inherently rational in design and civilising in effect. On the contrary, postcolonialism assumes that formal education is ideologically framed and all too often complicit in perpetuating the marginalisation of ethnic and other minorities.

McConaghy (1997) has provided a useful overview of Aboriginalism:

"Aboriginalism is...the process by which Indigenous Australians are constructed as 'others' in relation to [the] privileged perspective of the colonial masters.... One of the central projects of Aboriginalism is the construction of normative and prescriptive statements of what it means to be a 'real Aborigine' or 'real Torres Strait Islander'. These

constructions of indigenous identity and subjectivity contain and limit the possibilities for indigenous people to be self-determining and self-representing and allow the production of cultural stereotypes to remain deeply embedded in colonial structures" (p. 39).

As we discuss below, a key goal of the teacher education program reported here is to assist the Torres Strait Islander teachers "to be self-determining and self-representing", while a challenge has been to resist the resilience of "the production of cultural stereotypes [that] remain deeply embedded" in educational and institutional structures that can still be perceived as "colonial". Similarly, McConaghy (1997) also noted that "patriarchy others women, and in colonial contexts indigenous women are particularly objectified" (p. 39). The fact that five of the six teachers in the program are women is noteworthy in this context.

McConaghy (1997) also provided a useful overview of culturalism:

"...culturalism...refers to the notion that all issues in relation to indigenous people, whether they concern social policy, education, adult literacy and so on, are primarily issues of culture, specifically indigenous culture and a notion of indigenous culture which is framed within the logics of Aboriginalism. Culturalism...portrays education as a cultural event. Educational reform is framed in cultural terms, and as a consequence, the institutions and structures of colonial education remain intact" (p. 39).

At one level, viewing education as a cultural event resonates with many of the rich learning experiences that the teachers provide for their students in the Torres Strait, such as dancing and language classes. At another level, this approach constructs Indigenous people as 'exotics' and ignores the ideological and political dimensions of education. That is, education is as much about power as it is about culture: power to set the curriculum, shape the pedagogies, and decide the assessment practices, as well as power to determine the images and assumed needs of students and teachers.

A brief theoretical framework having been outlined, we turn now to examine the program's contribution to lifelong learning for the participants through the lens of three specific program elements: supporting learning, recognising prior learning, and promoting literacies. We argue that the notion of 'voice' is common to these elements and is central to our project of moving beyond Aboriginalism and culturalism. We conclude by considering briefly

the program's implications for constructing an Indigenous-teacher lifelong-learning community.

## SUPPORTING LEARNING

The first author of the paper has been particularly concerned with supporting the teachers' learning in the program. A key prerequisite to providing such support is the development of trust. Lack of perceived trust can often present a significant barrier to effective communication, even when groups of people share a common goal. Establishing trust with the teachers in this situation was no different. Through establishing a high level of trust, a close working relationship has developed that has contributed much to the successful completion of program goals. Much of that contribution derives from the point that mutual trust implies attentiveness to and respect for the other's 'voice'.

However, some obstacles have developed over time that have required some response:

- Varying levels of computer and electronic mail experience have impacted greatly on communication between program staff members and teachers. With some students, faxes and telephone calls were more appropriate. This has contributed to delays in organizing intensive workshops and finalising assessment pieces.
- Cultural and social factors (including age, gender, familiarity with one another and family and work commitments) have also shaped the personal and professional relationship between the program providers and the teachers. These factors, while creating some delays, have also enhanced the program, as the teachers have been able to create for themselves interesting and experiential assessment pieces. Indeed, we see this last point as strong evidence that the teachers' 'voices' are being heard and are feeding directly into the program's ongoing refinement.

Many of the support needs of the students were addressed via a residential school, several audioconferences, a series of intensive workshops, and individual follow-ups. The intensive workshops, conducted on Thursday Island, proved to be the most productive, with the program staff members acting as editors, counsellors, and motivators. The workshops provided a dual benefit, by allowing the teachers an opportunity to concentrate on their

assessment without having to remove them completely from their home environments – as would have occurred where Aboriginalist and culturalist assumptions about the separation between 'home' and 'work' or 'study' held sway.

The distance, communication issues, technological problems (particularly in relation to the audioconferences), and teaching and work and family commitments created 'hiccups' that were resolved with much patience. Accepting and understanding these obstacles has encouraged flexibility in the program. Also, owing to these issues, individual expectations are constantly evolving in line with the student's progress and this has contributed to necessary flexibility in meeting assessment deadlines, while still insisting on the completion of all work requirements before a course is passed.

### RECOGNISING PRIOR LEARNING

The second author of the paper, among other contributions to the program, was responsible for conducting a process whereby the teachers' prior learning was recognised – thus enabling them to gain credit against one of the eight courses in the program. This process was a particular incarnation of a broader set of changes centred on challenges to the traditional assumption that 'true knowledge' is formed only within the hallowed portals of institutions of higher education. By contrast, the challenges derive from the view that valid and valuable learning occurs in all kinds of formal and informal settings, and that the traditional assumption was elitist because it denied authorised knowledge to all but the few who could afford to attend university. Indeed, the relatively recent focus on lifelong learning is a reflection of the success of these challenges.

In formulating a policy on recognising the teachers' prior learning, we were well aware that that learning was enduring and extensive. We knew, for example, that one teacher regularly took an Islander dancing troupe overseas, where they performed to a very high standard. Another teacher brought to her school-based activities highly developed skills as a sporting coach. Another teacher had considerable experience of leading colleagues through professional-development activities. Another teacher had left the school to take on administrative responsibilities in another school. Another teacher brought to bear on her reflections on school events her intimate knowledge of traditional *ailan kastom*. Yet another teacher was highly committed to promoting peace

studies in her classes, drawing on her own interpersonal skills.

We were aware of these varied formal and not-so-formal sets of learning. We acknowledged the potential gap between them and the officially-authorised forms of knowledge within a university program. Our challenge was to close the gap and to develop a process to recognise the teachers' prior learning within the context of that program. In doing so, we sought to move beyond Aboriginalism and culturalism – which would have discounted that prior learning as outside official university discourses – by means of giving 'voice' to the teachers' lived experiences.

The second author of the paper duly included in one of his visits to the Torres Strait an explanation of the process to the teachers, after which they gathered their respective documentary and oral evidence. Then he interviewed each of them and made detailed notes of their conversations with him. The questions focused on what they had done, and why and with what effect. The course against which the prior learning was credited dealt with education and globalisation, so the questions prompted the teachers to reflect on the particular challenges and opportunities that they faced in engaging with globalisation and postcolonialism while teaching to a curriculum that retained several features of colonialism. The author's rapport with the teachers was such that these interactions, while considered 'interviews' for the formal purposes of the University, also enabled the teachers to give 'voice' to their widely-ranging lived experiences. Such experiences feed into their teaching in any case; this process gave official sanction to that fact.

### PROMOTING LITERACIES

The third author of the paper has been responsible for overseeing and implementing the literacy dimension of the teacher-education program reported here. For five years before she began working in the program, she worked periodically as a literacy consultant at Thursday Island State High School. On request, she conducted week-long, interactive, subject-specific workshops for teaching staff that focused on how to integrate English literacy teaching strategies into content-driven units of work. Principal issues addressed related to students' vocabulary development, levels of comprehension, and understanding of how written text can be organized, as well as students' propensity to copy 'chunks' from texts

that they did not understand to complete written assessment tasks in English.

Apart from two long-term non-Indigenous teachers, workshop participants consisted of either beginning or promoted teachers who would be at the school for no more than three years (staff turnover, including that of the school administration, being very high). No Indigenous teachers were present at those workshops: there was not one on staff in the early and mid-1990s. Further, the handful of Indigenous teacher aides employed at the school were not invited to share collaborative learning activities, although they would be expected to support non-Indigenous teachers as the latter effected the English literacy strategies in the classroom.

This situation contrasted with the practice of conducting a language induction program for all new teachers at the beginning of each new school year. Indigenous teachers from the Thursday Island State School, as well as high school teacher aides, presented challenging workshops in the principal languages of the region: Torres Strait Creole, also known as 'Broken English' (all districts); Kalaw Kawaw Ya (Top Western District); Kala Lagaw Ya (Western and Central Districts); and Meriam Mer (Eastern District) (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, nd, p. 4). Although these were the languages spoken by ninety-seven percent of the high-school student population, only two teachers spoke even one fluently.

This relatively lengthy preamble to the following account of promoting literacies in the program is significant in at least three respects. Firstly, it emphasises the lack of linguistic understanding between the teachers on the one hand and the students and their parents on the other. This in turn highlights the ease with which such a situation could "contain and limit the possibilities for indigenous people to be self-determining and self-representing" (McConaghy, 1997, p. 39) – one of the key attributes of Aboriginalism. How could it be otherwise, when the students and their families do not speak English, the 'language of power' necessary as a passport to other kinds of "possibilities"?

Secondly, this situation indicates how easy it would be to regard issues such as literacy as "primarily issues of culture", and to portray literacy education "as a cultural event" (McConaghy, 1997, p. 39). After all, the various

Torres Strait Islander languages are clearly both products and transmitters of cultural history and change. However, like education, language is as much about power as it is about culture, and the fact remains that English teachers at the school have been faced with the dilemma of whether to teach their students to be literate in the Torres Strait or in the wider Australian community. Unlike Victoria, Queensland has no history of providing a separate English as a Second Language curriculum; instead, requiring all non-English speaking background students, irrespective of their linguistic heritage and home or community literacy practices, to receive instruction and to demonstrate their language facility in Standard Australian English.

Thirdly, and more broadly, this reference to language as power recalls the theoretical understanding of this issue that was contributed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1991), (see also Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002; and Gale & Densmore, 2000). Bourdieu's analyses of cultural, political, and social life have demonstrated how language is an agent of both dominating and dominated positions within society, and how acquiring the discourses attached to particular positions is the key to acquiring cultural capital. Furthermore, this political dimension of language use is largely invisible and unconscious, so that it is mostly accepted as natural and inevitable. This relates to Bourdieu's concept of the habitus, which is the set of individual and collective dispositions that each of us carries and uses to engage with the world. Thus language is simultaneously an individual's means of practising her or his habitus and a society's means of keeping that individual 'in order' by structuring her or his habitus.

Within the constraints imposed by operating within this situation, the literacy element of the program has been designed to:

- acknowledge the need for teachers to accept and respect home and community languages that students bring with them to school;
- value linguistic diversity and;
- help to equip teachers with skills and strategies to assist their students to move confidently and effectively across linguistic terrains, and to deploy literacies appropriate to audience, context, and purpose.

These goals have in common a desire to move beyond the limiting effects of Aboriginalism and culturalism to linguistic practices that are

culturally relevant and potentially politically empowering. This in turn is a crucial element of giving 'voice' to both teachers and students.

Selected examples of how this move is enacted in the program are as follows.

- One course requires teachers to reflect on ways that Torres Strait Islanders use narrative orally, and ways in which Torres Strait Islander children might be represented in instructional texts.
- Another course uses the instructional strategy of reflective dialogue journals to encourage teachers to express their views and have them challenged in a supportive environment by the course coordinator.
- Another course requires teachers to produce an annotated bibliography about adolescent fiction, with a critical commentary on the absence of Indigenous adolescents as role models from such fiction.

Thus the emphasis is on evaluating the current situation while seeking possibilities for extending and changing that situation, partly through giving 'voice' to the students as well as to the teachers.

## CONCLUSION

What does the foregoing account suggest about the construction of an Indigenous teacher lifelong-learning community? We have some suggested points to make, gleaned from our collective and respective experiences in the program. We have also developed some questions that we consider worthy of further investigation.

Our suggested points are as follows.

- There is no, one 'best' way to promote lifelong learning. This distance inservice teacher-education program encourages the teachers to develop the 'tools' to negotiate through the imposed colonial education system while trying not to undermine the individual and collective values of culture, family, and home. This program utilises European learning systems; however, the interaction between teachers and program providers has necessitated that a level of flexibility be introduced that encompasses the individual cultural and contextual learning experiences of all participants within the program. This level of flexibility has become an essential key in enabling the program to move beyond Aboriginalism

and culturalism, as it attempts to create a place and a 'voice' for Torres Strait Islander teachers and the opportunity to 'tell us' how they wish to be represented (see also Anderson, Garbutcheon Singh, Stehbins, & Ryerson, 1998).

- The philosophical principles underpinning the relationships among program participants embrace the values of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility (Anderson, et al., 1998). One example is the point that reciprocity of learning is manifested in the shared learning experiences made more likely by an environment of giving and receiving, not giving and taking. We contend that these values are at the cornerstone of any effective lifelong-learning community, certainly an Indigenous one.
- It is timely to recall the observation that what is true of consultation in the Torres Strait is also true of lifelong learning: "...it is a process and...the process is as important as the outcomes" (Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, nd, p. 15).

With regard to our proposed questions, these are as follows.

- Is lifelong learning a Western concept, or is it a Western name for a naturally-occurring process?
- Which broader conditions influence the eventual success or failure of programs such as this one?
- Which criteria can be used to identify the extent to which 'voice' is present in a lifelong-learning community?

Hopefully these questions signal to the reader that we are tentative and ambivalent in our claims about the extent to which the program under review contributes to constructing such a lifelong-learning community. On the one hand, it is certainly the authors' desire that the program contribute to community enrichment and individual empowerment in the Torres Strait. On the other hand, we recognise that the program is located within, and hence tends to replicate, non-Indigenous university discourses. Thus, the 'room to manoeuvre' of both students and program providers is more restricted than we would like in moving beyond and helping to transform those discourses. When it is recalled, *pace* Bourdieu (1991), that such discourses are complicit with dominant cultural, political, and social forces, our more limited claims (but not

more limited ambitions) for the program as facilitating the expression of multiple 'voices' becomes hopefully more comprehensible.

Space limitations mean that we can acknowledge but not pursue this crucial issue here. Within the perspective of that acknowledgment, therefore, we conclude by observing that this paper represents one set of 'voices' about the program. The teachers and other program providers can be expected to have different stories to tell. Our 'voices' are therefore partial, particular, and perspectival – as are all 'voices'. Yet we believe that, despite its constraints and limitations, the program has contributed significantly to the teachers' professional development and to their lifelong-learning experiences. We know that it has contributed to ours. Furthermore, we contend that the desire to maximise 'voice' while moving beyond Aboriginalism and culturalism constitutes a distinctive dimension of this prospective Indigenous lifelong-learning community.

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