Two Way Pedagogy

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples believe very strongly in the positives of formal education for developing children. However, the education system has kept Aboriginal people out of its objectives. This is the foundation for this paper. The aim is to provide a framework for including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of learning into the schools’ ethos where doing so would lead to obtainable goals in education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In the 1967 Constitutional Referendum, Australian people voted overwhelmingly in favour of providing Aboriginal people with the same social rights as other Australians. In the 42 years since, there are signs of some improvements in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children across all age groups. For instance, there has been a significant improvement in retention rates. However, the dominant and long-term generational perception by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is that the educational system is failing them.

The perception of failure of the educational system centres around lost opportunity on its part in creating a generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are healthy, functional, happy in their contribution to Australian society including education, equitably rewarded for it, and desirous of their own children participating fully in learning and being as Australians. On all contemporary social indicators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are performing poorly. Intergenerational poverty, poor health, poor parenting, poor welfare, poor psychological development, and low educational outcomes are endemic. The compounding effect has been authenticated many times. Measures confirm the over-representation of youth in the criminal justice system, high suicide rates for adults and youths, low life expectancies, foetal mortalities, drug and alcohol abuse, and low self esteem. It is suggested that some of the main causes of these continuing problems are due to poor educational outcomes and consequent economic disadvantages. For instance, there is substantial research showing that there are significant gaps between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in formative learning in the areas of reading, writing and numeracy.

Queensland was 54.3% compared to the 80.2% for non Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and with the national average at 40.1% (Census 2006 Bulletin 4:5). While there is still a big gap of in comparison with mainstream students (Census 2006 Bulletin 4:5), the overall participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at school has increased significantly since 1969.

Second, Aboriginal and Torres peoples see education as a link to strong social development and community participation. In this sense school is just one part of the learning experience amongst other social and cultural influences. However, if school-based learning is to be of value to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and if institutions, government and service providers are going to be fair-dinkum in helping this happen, then educators and policy makers need to place a high priority to develop mechanisms that include Aboriginal pedagogy into their systems.

To capitalise on the aspirations that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents have in wanting their children to succeed in the dominant educational setting, it is suggested that a two-way educative process might be installed. Successful education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children should be envisaged for its parallel in enhanced education for non-ATSI children. How might this work?

First, it will need those who design, critique or lead Australia’s education systems to revisit current views of good teaching and learning with a deliberate, careful and informed attention to the concept of Aboriginal pedagogy. These people and systems will need to be open to considering, trying and studying in an action-learning/action-research framework (Bartlett & Piggot-Irvine, 2008) a blending of what it has now and what ATSI tradition has to offer. Good teaching and good schools value differences in ways of knowing and being that are aligned with the many cultures that constitute “Australia”. Good leadership by Ministers for
Education would ensure the will and resourcing for this to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

Second, educators and policy makers need to identify common goals involving a consideration of Aboriginal terms of reference and knowledge, in order to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander appreciation for all Australians’ history, knowledge of geography and landscape, cultural heritage, and languages across all areas of curriculum. An inclusive curriculum would need more than token gestures. Occasional mention of aborigines such as Jacky Jacky or indigienity in a Year 5 SOSE unit of work, or even in a Year 11 and 12 Senior Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies program, will not suffice. Then we might see an improvement in retention and educational outcomes.

Therefore, any framework for the future must consider Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and epistemologies for what they offer to educators, educational settings and those who are being educated. Aboriginal learning styles include tradition where mnemonics and rote learning are associated with oracy and song. Mnemonics and rote learning have assisted with remembering large amounts of information in a lifelong learning environment. They were used also for orientation to landscape signals of where one is when travelling, relying on a traveller to recall ideas and experiences that have been imprinted through social memory. Carter (1978) suggested that 'recollection is not passive imitation inspired by antiquarian zeal. It is active recreation that living space in which places have histories and implements are put to use. For Aborigines, to travel country it is to "tell it, to represent it to oneself" (Carter, p. 346).

In engaging curricula on Australian history, Australian children currently learn about Cook and Flinders, Ned Kelly and Sister Kenny, Peter Lalor and Edward Barton and others of the non Aboriginal heroes who collectively have given our nation something to remember. But, they don't get to tell and share about the Aboriginal men and women who also have contributed to nation building across the past two centuries. Thus, what they encounter is not truly representative of Australian history. Nor is it creating a sense of belonging and contribution for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who sit as members of our learner community in Australian schools. And, nor does it alert those who sit alongside them to the part played by ATSIs peoples in their nation's history.

Essentially, Aboriginal pedagogy is not much different to the dominant teaching styles. Simply put, they involve demonstration, observation, instruction and practice as the fundamentals. For example, the making of a spear involves a learner in a holistic learning experience. Students would learn a spear song in language to position the item and process of their work within such issues as its purpose, its characteristics of sharpness and length, throwing property, weight, balance, flight and durability. They would learn about its cultural meaning and how to use cultural measuring systems to aid in the processes of design and production. They would learn also about bushcraft, identification of timber species, physical education, and experiment with spatial awareness by throwing the spear (Menary, 1981).

This example illustrates how communication modalities are used strategically in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learning to strengthen the whole while attending to the particular. It shows also the incorporation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage in a lesson, a utility for passing along the codes of time into the meaningful tasks of the present. I consider this may be a utility that would serve the 'two-way' process well.

In this short paper, a framework has been outlined for concepts of two way learning and teaching in the areas of, common schooling for all Australians. It is argued that curriculum areas should embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges for all children. Two-way pedagogies need to be developed in order for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to have access to non-Indigenous knowledge; and for the dominant culture to have access to Indigenous knowledge, history and culture. That is, contrary to common belief, Aboriginal education is not the domain only of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, but also should be seen to embrace all people.

References


