# The Australian Journal of
# INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

# *the* INTERFACE BETWEEN INDIGENOUS *and* NON-INDIGENOUS SYSTEMS *of* KNOWING *and* LEARNING: *a* REPORT *on a* DHARUG LANGUAGE PROGRAMME

# RICHARD (RICKY) GREEN & AMANDA OPPLIGER

Chifley College, Dunheved Campus, Mapel Road North, St Mary's, New South Wales, 2204, Australia

## ◼ Abstract

This paper reports on the processes experienced in the development of a language programme in a high school in the western suburbs of Sydney in 2006 and represents the ideas and views of the two key participants. We consider the different perspectives held by the key participants on the project and how these need to be worked through in order to come to a place where the two (or more) systems of knowing and learning can be symbiotic rather than pushing against one another. The two systems being referred to are, in brief, a Western academic position, held by the linguist on the project, and an Indigenous intuitive position, held by the language tutor on the project. We report on the steps forward and backward in this process and how the participants felt and dealt with the emotional and intellectual demands incurred throughout the process. Much of this "two steps forward, one step back" process has resulted from the struggle for the non-Indigenous linguist to understand the Indigenous tutor's knowledge, input and feelings. Likewise the tutor had to come to understand the linguist's knowledge base and what she was trying to do. We hope that this paper will open up many issues for consideration and discussion such as collaborative research, teaching and learning and working as a partnership.

## ◼ Introduction

In order to place the language programme which forms the basis of this research into some context, the following information describes the language, the school and the key participants in brief. "Dharug" is the name for the language of the Sydney region and "Chifley College Dunheved Campus" is the school in Sydney's western suburbs which is currently running the Dharug Language Program. The two key participants on the programme are Richard (Ricky) Green – Dharug song man and language custodian – and Amanda Oppliger – teacher/linguist. Chifley College, Dunheved Campus, is a "Priority Action School" and receives government funding under the "Priority Schools Funding Program" (PSFP). The following information is taken from the School's Strategic Management Plan document:

> Our School is a comprehensive middle school (years 7 to 10), situated in the Mt. Druitt District. The school currently has an enrolment of approximately 420 students and includes a Support Unit for IM and IO students with an enrolment of 70 students (IM and IO stand for "mild intellectual disability" and "moderate intellectual disability" respectively). The school acknowledges that it is located on Aboriginal land of the Dharug tribe. The school has a significant number of students who identify as Aboriginal (22%) (Chifley College, n.d., n. p.).

Richard Green's explanation of his history is as follows:

> My path has led me into tracing the whereabouts of my father "bianga", Walter William Green. From the age of 14, I had searched for him. Locating him in my 20s I'd already rediscovered much of the language of my ancestors. I have been given permission from all our surviving relatives to continue with its reclamation. It has taken many years of study, study, study. I detest the word "expert". I am an exponent of "Darug Yuin Gurik".

To tell my story in full would take a novel; I can't wait to speak with the Murrahs of Queensland (personal communication, n. d.).

This paper seeks to define the Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews which come together, essentially in the persons of the participants, at Dunheved High School in the Dharug Language Program. We also examine to what degree and in what way the key participants are able to make the dual systems of knowing work together. A third element of the paper is to consider examples of Indigenous knowledge in language classes. Finally, we attempt to present recommendations for teaching methodologies and practice.

Both Green and Oppliger acknowledge that it has taken a long time to arrive at their present place of understanding and knowledge about learning and teaching Aboriginal languages. Why should it have taken so long to arrive here? In the first instance, neither participant was raising any of the questions that are now being asked. For example: How does the land teach people and speak to people? What is the place of stories in Law and learning? Do the ancestors teach people today? Oppliger acknowledges that she was not asking these questions because, as a non-Indigenous person, they were not within her worldview and Green explains that he was being cautious about what he could say and what he could not say. Additionally, Green explains that these questions and their underlying epistemology (i.e., philosophy of knowledge) were intuitive for him and he did not realise the need to verbalise them. The existence of these cultural elements was known conceptually by the participants; that is, Dreamtime stories, the importance of the land and the centrality of familial relations, including ancestors. Also their potency was predicted, however, it was unclear how they would impact the learning and teaching of Dharug.

Secondly, both participants came to the project bound by strong (and largely unconscious) cultural expectations of responsibilities, as well as firm notions and intellectual constraints. Oppliger, as teacher/ linguist, approached the development of learning materials from a linguistic and pedagogical position derived from an education in an Australian, non-Indigenous tradition. This included a communicative approach to language learning. Green also had to grapple with posing and understanding questions throughout the planning and development of teaching lessons and materials. His worldview, he acknowledges, is different from that of the teacher/ linguist and as a result he did not always have easy access to the ideas and notions being presented, which meant lengthy discussions and the need to revisit central notions and plans to clarify and consolidate teaching programmes, activities and

linguistic decisions regarding the Dharug language, for example the writing system and grammar.

This long journey has brought the participants to a place where they can begin to expect and seek out from each other unique views and input for this programme. Green and Oppliger report that they are listening more intently to one another, to the land and to the spiritual dimension of the task. Some of the students and other staff members are also listening in the same ways! The participants are learning to integrate two (and in the future possibly more) worldviews and incorporate differing intellectual notions and strategies – including cultural/spiritual as well as academic/scientific ways of knowing and learning.

## Background information

The teaching of Dharug at Dunheved began in Term 1, 2006. This was preceded by several years of consultation with language and community elders, Aboriginal parents and students, and the consultative process is ongoing. Dharug language lessons are currently taught to Stage 4 students (Years 7 and 8) in two, 50 minute periods, over two days each week (Monday and Friday). The students are involved in the project for one term only and then a different class group begins the same unit in the following term. The Stage 4 students also complete 100 mandatory hours of Japanese and French (i.e., 100 hours of French in Year 7 and 100 hours of Japanese in Year 8). Thus, the Dharug language learning hours are in addition to the mandatory languages hours in the school and, although Dharug is not as yet part of the 100 mandatory hours, the K-10 Aboriginal Languages Syllabus forms the basis for the development of the programme documents. This, as well as so many other supportive structures, is indicative of the strong will in the school, led by the Principal, to enable students at Dunheved to learn the Dharug language. The lessons are taught to all Year 7 and 8 students – Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

The objectives of the Dharug Language Program for the current year are:

* To introduce the language and its people to the students.
* For students to be able to converse with each other at a basic level in Dharug.
* To introduce and impart Indigenous knowledge in the Dharug language classes and potentially in other curriculum areas.
* To improve learning outcomes and self-esteem of Aboriginal students in the school.

Green sees a longer-term goal of the language programme as:

• Enabling the Dharug language to become the language used in parliament and other areas of government.

Several authors and participants in language revitalisation efforts in other countries maintain that language revitalisation will not be successful if it only takes place in the school system. Some even suggest that the school system itself can be detrimental to such efforts (Fishman, 1999; Hinton & Ahlers, 1999). In contrast, the experiences and outcomes of the Dharug Language Program to date suggest that the school's formal acknowledgement of the Dharug language has provided the language, the community and the Aboriginal students of the school with status and pride.

Fishman (1999), in his discussion of the "9 stages of reversing language shift", correctly claims that to ensure success language learning must take place in all areas of life, not the school only. The strong connections between Dunheved High School and the Indigenous community allows for the future possibility of introducing language activities in the community, and even in the home, and the school has the ability to facilitate and support such efforts. Also, it has been made explicit that community members and/or parents of Dunheved students are welcome to join in with Dharug lessons at the high school. Therefore, the decision to begin Dharug language revitalisation efforts in a school situation has proven to be positive in that there is a strong sense of pride growing in the school, a true engagement of students, an increasing understanding of an Aboriginal Australian worldview in the school community and a quality language programme developed with the resources of the New South Wales Department of Education.

## Authority and authenticity

Green is recognised by his community as a songman and storyteller. He has been given authority to undertake the task of language revitalisation on behalf of the Dharug people. Additionally, ongoing permission has always been sought where needed and negotiation has been a key element of the process. Green acts as a bridge between the community and the school and listens to both the suggestions about grammar and orthographic conventions from the linguist as well as the community views on which language items to choose. Consequently, a functioning "two-way street" has arisen, which is fostering the teaching of the language in the school. Another interesting phenomenon has been that the two key participants represent and advocate for each other in their representative communities.

The issue of authenticity is important here also. Green's reflections on the interaction of the two ways of knowing in the Dharug classes is that there is a

symbiosis in that the "spirit of the land" is teaching the children through the Dharug knowledge holder and would not do so if the language being taught were not linguistically authentic. Green acknowledges that this linguistic authenticity and credibility is achieved as a result of the knowledge system brought to the project by the linguist.

The way in which new lexical items are to be coined is another example of authenticity and will best be achieved by the input offered by Indigenous knowledge of tradition, land and the environment, relationships and ways of being as well as linguistic knowledge and the scientific tradition of learning from the analysis of other languages. The experiences from participants on language revitalisation projects in America provide further insight on this issue (Hinton & Ahlers, 1999).

Cram raises the issue of authority in a discussion about knowledge management in the educational setting. She explains that the Aboriginal Australian knowledge management system is one in which knowledge is shared in a community and between communities but is always owned by the individual who is recognised and authorised to be the knowledge holder and the one who passes such knowledge onto chosen individuals. She rightly highlights the need to "foster a culture of respect for the inseparability of knowledge and the knowing individual" (Cram, 2004, n. p.). The respect, acknowledgement and dependence on the cultural/spiritual system of knowing as well as the scientific/academic way of knowing is leading to authentic and authoritative decisions regarding the revitalisation of the Dharug language at Dunheved.

## Examples of Indigenous knowledge in the Dharug language classroom

### *The Land*

It has often been said that "the land speaks to us". Others have said "If we stay/spend time on the land it will teach us" (Green often says this and Oppliger has heard this elsewhere in casual conversation). What does this mean to urban students in a school in the western suburbs of Sydney? How do the students and staff learn from the land at Dunheved?

Green explains that for centuries Dharug people have walked the land – have established walking lines and songlines. These lines are interconnected with language and lore. As the language is brought up once again (revitalised and spoken) the energy of the land is being brought back up. Green reports that he was told in 2000 by Isabel Coe (Wiradjuri activist): "Richard, you have no choice. The Land has chosen you as the representative of your people" (personal communication, 2000).

Aboriginal people and the land are one. Life, meaning, guidance, teaching all come from the land and environment. As our students listen to this Aboriginal truth they are quietening themselves and learning more effectively. This is not yet true for all our students but it is an emerging trend. For example, the school counsellor, on a visit to one of the Dharug language classes, remarked that it was the most engaged, quiet and respectful class he had witnessed in his time at Dunheved (personal communication, 2006). Also, recently some Year 7 boys came into the Culture Room, where Dharug language lessons are conducted, and went directly to look out the window to see which birds had come to join and confirm us. These students were listening to the land. They were expecting the land and the animals on it to speak to them. The children are leading the way in their openness to embrace an Indigenous worldview and way of learning.

Aikenhead (2001, n. p.) reports on the experiences of developing science units for high school students wherein "Western science content is taught in the context of the local community's Aboriginal knowledge of nature, a context that creates an Aboriginal point of view for each unit". Students learning from these units learn about alternative worldviews and learn via these varying epistemologies. This same richness of perspective is developing at Dunheved amongst staff members and students alike and over time we believe will permeate the wider school curriculum.

*Lore in the language class*

As a Dharug songman and lore man Richard Green integrates Dreamtime stories, his own stories, poems and songs into our language classes. He has the children mesmerised and they respond warmly to his input. Green is acutely aware of which stories are appropriate for the age of our students as well as a mixed student body – that is, male/female; Indigenous/ non-Indigenous students – and he chooses the stories accordingly. It is also his opinion that he should create contemporary stories that will teach law and morality in the way Aboriginal lore seeks to do.

These elements are not an example of "tokenism". They are not a "bit of culture" thrown in to fill the gaps. Rather, they form the topic and lead the discussion in the classroom. For example, in a recent series of lessons, where we were attempting to teach the students the names of local animals and then use these names for the students themselves for further communicative activities, Green explained how traditional Dharug people indicated the numbers of people using an area so as to guard against over hunting by others. He used poetry to introduce this concept and then explained and illustrated the practice. This centred and grounded the learning of the animals and their names and significance to the Dharug people. The students were very eager to learn these language items.

Similarly, in the book, *Mao's last dancer*, the author includes many Chinese fables in his text (Li Cunxin, 2003). These stories are often relayed without commentary. They seemed merely "plonked" into the narrative, and yet they are extremely potent devices in the book. Another example of the importance of storytelling as a cultural linguistic device comes in Rhydwen (1996, pp. 170-171) where the author relates a situation where an Indigenous principal told a story of a previous non-Indigenous researcher in an attempt to convey her displeasure without directly attacking the author. The principal used storytelling in order to make a point obliquely (and in a way that indicated bush politeness) and in a way typical of Aboriginal discourse.

Clearly, stories, as narratives, songs, poems or myths, are powerful and need to be given an important position in our classroom setting and in our lesson planning. The teacher in this setting must bring his/ her skills in to play. He/she needs to plan the lesson so that the students are enabled to understand and then build on the concepts being presented. This is another example of the symbiotic nature of the teacher/tutor relationship. At Dunheved the development of a lesson is approached in the following way:

* Consider the topic to be taught.
* Write down the language to be covered.
* Discuss the cultural/spiritual/moral content inherent in this topic.
* Plan how best to deliver this complex information – what learning steps to build into the lesson.

Intentional and active listening is required from both key participants and what happened in the classroom is reviewed and incorporated into subsequent lessons.

*Spirituality*

Canadian Indigenous writer Willie Ermine (1995) describes Aboriginal epistemology as an "incorporeal knowledge paradigm". He further explains: "The inner space is that universe within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being" (1995, n. p.). A significant element of the journey at Dunheved has been acknowledging and using these Indigenous paradigms which are intangible and intuitive. The linguist attempts to combine the results of linguistic analysis of early written sources of the Dharug language with spiritual/intuitive knowledge offered by Green and other community members, in developing a description of the language for use in the classroom.

Is the spiritual input available only to Indigenous participants in the project? Green is of the opinion

that anyone willing to listen and be open to the spirit of the land can be healed and taught by it. He reports that a light infuses you and confirms you as you write songs and learn language. Green also explains that if one is doing the wrong thing by the language it would manifest itself in aches and pains and worries.

There are other terms that have been coined to explain this spiritual dimension of language learning. They are "genetic memory" and "bush consciousness". Genetic memory is a term used by Green to explain an ancestral passing-on of the language. Green also suggests that Aboriginal students learn Dharug with greater ease than they do other school subjects. This is an indicator of the importance of teaching Dharug in the school setting as it empowers Aboriginal students.

Scollon and Scollon (1981) recognise the concept of bush consciousness; that is, an understanding arising from the land and environment. Additionally, Allan Marett (2006), in a conversation on *Late night live*, an ABC Radio National programme, describes how songmen often got their songs from spirits in dreams and these spirits spoke ghost language which songmen translated into human language, except in some instances when they remained untranslated and sound, to humans, like nonsense words.

### The emotional dimension of the journey

It is important to acknowledge that as human individuals, the participants on the Dharug Language Program have had to work their way through many and varied emotional responses to the processes of the project. Such acknowledgement is vital in that it is at the core of the process and needs consideration when managing such language initiatives.

## Results and recommendations

The foremost result of the Dharug Language Programme so far has been the impact of the embedding of Indigenous knowledge into the school. It has resulted in students being able to construct meaning in a number of ways via at least two systems of knowing. The fact that now the Western and Indigenous worldviews are open to our students encourages broader thinking and is facilitating greater empathy and understanding between the Australian Indigenous world and the world of the dominant Western culture. Students from other cultural traditions are similarly gaining respect in the process.

The experience of cultural contact in South Africa, as described by Tony Balcomb, has passed through "moments of antipathy, sympathy" and is now entering "empathy". Balcomb (2001) asserts that as the Indigenous knowledge base is respected and adopted alongside the Western knowledge base the two cultures move toward reconciliation and

reconstruction. This is a useful description and applies to the Dunheved experience. While it is yet early, it is becoming obvious that the school is engaged in a process of reconciliation. The Aboriginal members of staff and the wider Indigenous communities are gifting our school with their ways of knowing – a true act of reconciliation, and as the school respects and incorporates this worldview the reconciliation process is continued.

A second result has been the definition of two central approaches to the revitalisation process and the teaching of the Dharug language. These approaches are not new, however, they are also not widely talked about. Therefore, the use of these approaches means that they can be further refined and built upon, adding to the field of pedagogical research.

The first of the two approaches is presented in an article entitled: "A Collaborative model for preparing Indigenous curators of a heritage language" by Furbee and Stanley (2002). This approach is a collaborative effort between "curators" of the language, who are referred to as "language custodians" in the Dharug Language Program, and the linguists. This model provides participants with definitions of roles and responsibilities, and the reader is directed to the above mentioned article for more detail.

The second approach deals with the teaching methodology being developed for the language project. Essentially the Dharug Language Program is utilising what Amery (2001) refers to as the "formulaic method". This methodology allows for the significant use of English and introduces well-formed utterances in the Aboriginal language sequentially, beginning with items bearing a high "functional load". Adopting this methodology frees the teachers from unrealistic expectations inherent in other methodologies such as immersion programmes and the like. The teacher and tutor then plan learning experiences, which seek to enable students to use the language communicatively within the boundaries of the language resources.

The recommendations, which flow from these results, are that when planning for the introduction of an Aboriginal language program the following points need to be considered:

• time and resources be allocated to discussions pertaining to worldviews and methodologies;
• equal respect be afforded participants embodying the two key worldviews;
• participants guard against making any assumptions and ask many more questions than might in other circumstances be asked; and
• time be considered an essential resource and be factored into budgets and timetabling.

## ▓ Conclusion

To summarise, the Dunheved experience has shown that the central issue for those involved in introducing Aboriginal language programmes into Australian schools is to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and to be prepared to do this in ways which are often new and possibly not entirely comfortable for many non-Indigenous Australians. Simpson (2001) indicates the pain caused by inappropriate use of traditional Aboriginal knowledge. We must heed her words and ensure that as we work collaboratively to embed Indigenous ways of knowing, learning and teaching, into our educational system that we do so with authority from the custodians and with authenticity. Whereas Simpson is referring essentially to ecological knowledge, and is reporting on the situation in Canada, the same applies to linguistic and cultural knowledge in Australia and therefore bears hearing clearly:

> After years of appropriating, assimilating, ignoring, undermining and degrading our knowledge, it was finally beginning to be acknowledged by members of the dominant society. But outside researchers were not interested in all kinds of knowledge and they remain interested only in knowledge that parallels the western scientific discipline of ecology and the aspects of our knowledge, mainly factual components, which can be easily inserted into existing western scientific research frameworks (Simpson, 2001, pp. 133-134).

She goes on to say that "the appropriate use of Indigenous Knowledge requires indigenous Peoples, not academic researchers or government personnel ... It is about relationships and context ... It requires that Indigenous Peoples drive research agendas not outside interests" (Simpson, 2001, pp. 133-134).

Therefore, full acknowledgement must be given to the language custodians and owners of the languages we seek to teach in our schools, and how and what is to be taught should be decided by these custodians. The non-custodial participants have their knowledge and skills to include and the parties need to work sensitively together. Let us avoid "scientising" Indigenous knowledge to fit a Western academic tradition, where the factual information is emphasised over the spiritual foundations, worldview and values.

## ▓ Acknowledgements

## ▓ References

Aikenhead, G. S. (2001). Rekindling traditions: Cross-cultural science and technology units. In P. Settee (Ed.), *Indigenous knowledge conference 2001* (pp. 1-17). Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division.

Amery, R. (2000). *Warrabarna Kaurna! Reclaiming an Australian language*. Lisse, The Netherlands: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Amery, R. (2001). Language planning and language revival. *Current Issues in Language Planning, 2*, 141-221.

Balcomb, T. (2001). Descartes meets the Isangoma (Diviner): The encounter between modern and Indigenous knowledge systems beyond colonialism and apartheid. In P. Settee (Ed.), *Indigenous knowledge conference 2001* (pp. 18-32). Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division.

Chifley College. (n.d). *School strategic management plan*. Unpublished document.

Cram, J. (2004). Knowledge as map versus knowledge mapping: Translating the business of knowledge management to an educational environment. In J. Bales & K. Bonanno (Eds.), *Constructing communities of learning and literacy (ASLA Online I conference proceedings)* (n. p.). Zillmere, QLD: Australian School Library Association.

Dementi-Leonard, B., & Gilmore, P. (1999). Language revitalisation and identity in social context: A community-based Athabascan language preservation project in Western interior Alaska. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 30*, 37-55.

Ermine, W. (1995). *Aboriginal epistemology, First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

Fishman, J. A. (1999). Comments and reflections. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 30*, 116-124.

Furbee, N. L., & Stanley, L. A. (2002). A collaborative model for preparing Indigenous curators of a heritage language. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language, 154*, 113-128.

Hinton, L., &. Ahlers, J. (1999). The issue of "authenticity" in California language restoration. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 30*, 56-67.

Li Cunxin. (2003). *Mao's last dancer*. Ringwood, VIC: Penguin Books.

Marett, A. (2006, 2 May). *Songs, Dreamings, and ghosts* [Radio broadcast] In Late night live. Sydney, NSW: Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Rhydwen, M. (1996). *Writing on the backs of the Blacks: Voice, literacy and community in Kriol fieldwork*. St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. B. K. (1981). *Narrative, literacy and face in interethnic communication*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Pub. Corp.

Simpson, L. (2001). Traditional ecological knowledge: Marginalisation, appropriation and continued disillusion. In P. Settee (Ed.), *Indigenous knowledge conference 2001* (pp. 132-139). Saskatoon, SK: University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division.

## ▨ About the authors

Richard (Ricky) Green is a Dharug language custodian and songman from the Sydney area. He has a degree in contemporary music. Richard has learnt the Dharug language from older people in and around Sydney. He has also done an incredible amount of work to learn more of the Dharug language and to use it with great fluency (over the past 30 years).

Amanda Oppliger is a teacher/linguist who has taught languages over the past 20 years. She wrote a paper entitled: "The phonology and morphology of Awabakal – A reconstruction from early written sources" as a thesis for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours. Amanda is currently working on the revitalisation of Dharug and the development of the teaching programme for Dharug, being taught at Chifley College, Dunheved Campus.